

## Change Through Communities: Lessons from District Bureaucrats

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For the last decade, community-led development has been the prevailing operational strategy to steer development interventions and projects, focusing on community mobilization to ensure sustainability. This approach has garnered positive attention from academics and social sector professionals alike. Since the mid-1990s, NGOs, aid organizations, and multilateral development banks have invested in community as a unit of change. This community-led development investment has been largely due to demand from donor agencies and developing countries for large-scale, bottom-up, and demand-driven poverty-reduction projects that increase the capacities of small communities for self-development.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on Nuh block within Nuh district, which figures at the bottom of Niti Aayog's recent list of 101 most "backward" or aspirational districts in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Visits to the District Headquarters in Nuh block and interactions with officers such as the executive engineer at the Public Health Department (Nuh) and district consultant for Health (Nuh) were made to conduct in-depth interviews with officials in order to understand their views on the pressing water issues in the district. The interviews pointed to a larger issue, which is the lack of community motivation to work toward development goals.

Nuh district (earlier officially known as Mewat district) is one of twenty-two districts in the Indian state of Haryana. The district comprises Nuh, Taoru, Nagina, Ferozepur Jhirka, Indri, Punhana, and Pinangwan blocks; 431 villages; and 297 panchayats in an area of 1,860 square kilometers (720 sq mi) with a population of 1.09 million.<sup>3</sup> Nuh block serves as the district headquarters. There are a total of 106 villages in Nuh block.

Data collected to study the level and typology of development in Nuh district on education, health, standard of living, agriculture, livestock, and so on during the last quarter of 2012 suggested that the Nuh district region as a whole consists mostly of Meo Muslims categorized as "backward" castes.<sup>4</sup> Forty-two villages in Nuh district have been examined for the purposes of the study. The average family size in this region is high with 6.4 members per household, and the literacy levels are extremely low with a 36.6 percent literacy rate for women in the district. The majority occupations are farm work and laboring. With a predominance of marginal farmers and extensive fragmentation of land holdings, agriculture is not remunerative. Work participation rates across all blocks ranges from 27 to 31 percent. A considerable number of youngsters drive tractors or trucks, and there are a few contractual laborers.<sup>5</sup> The lack of industries and poor

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<sup>1</sup> Petr Matous, "The making and unmaking of community-based water supplies in Manila," *T & F* online, April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ashok Kumar, "Nuh at bottom of Niti Aayog's 101 most backward districts," *The Hindu*, April 2018

<sup>3</sup> Nuh District.

<sup>4</sup> "Identifying Backwardness of Mewat Region in Haryana: A Block-Level Analysis," NITI Aayog, Government of India, June 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Niti Saxena, "Socio Economic Profile of Select Villages in Mewat, Institute of Rural Research and Development," 2013.

agricultural yield coupled with poor educational standards account for the high rate of unemployment in the region.<sup>6</sup>

According to the district consultant for Public Health (Nuh), the socioeconomic background of Nuh consists of an uneducated, rural, and “backward” population without any positive local influencers to enlarge their worldview. “Neither are there many educational institutions in Nuh block that are of high standard or good quality. The number of students in these very few educational institutions is high. Girls in the villages of Nuh block are limited from pursuing higher education due to lack of public transportation facilities,” said the consultant. Owing to a patriarchal society and unique ethnicity of the population, women are not allowed to step out of their houses. However, this phenomenon is being addressed through the formation of women’s collectives. Micro-level changes can be observed in small pockets across the district.<sup>7</sup> Though literacy has made positive incremental strides in the past decade, the literacy rate of Nuh district is the lowest in comparison to the other districts in Haryana.<sup>8</sup>

Women face critical health issues such as iron deficiency and are in general reported to be physically weak. According to the officials in Nuh district headquarters, “There are hardly any functional health centers, and those that exist are without doctors and paramedical staff. There are no drivers for ambulances.”

Poverty is the major barrier to any kind of development in Nuh, since the financial power of farmers is very low. Nuh lacks educational institutions and infrastructure, has a scarcity of teachers and very few private schools in the region.

Above all the factors detrimental to the development in Nuh block, the major pain point revolves around water scarcity—for irrigation, drinking, and household chores, and so on. People depend on monsoons which have decreased with every passing year. There is no canal-based irrigation and no water supply in Nuh block. Irrigation is attained through tube wells. For the last year, around eighteen villages in Nuh block have been receiving canal water through a scheme that uses Yamuna water disseminated from tube wells.

The gradually depleting groundwater is only available in villages closer to the Aravali mountain ranges. There is water 1,000–2,000 feet under, but most is bitter or sour. The mountain ranges surround a few villages such as Nalhad, Sadai, Badosi, Tapkan, Bai, Rehna, and so on. Villages that are at a distance to the mountains suffer the most with absolutely no water fit for any use. The lack of water for basic necessities exists in a few such villages—Untka, Malab, Khodla, Kamsali, Bai Badoji, Birsika, Gehbar and so on. A canal flows through some villages that are away from the mountains, but the water quality is extremely poor. Villagers use it for irrigation

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<sup>6</sup> Sarita Barara, “Hard Times in Mewat,” *Hindu Business Line*, September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Ellen Schukoske, “Why the secret to village empowerment lies with women,” *DailyO*, September 2015.

<sup>8</sup> “Identifying Backwardness of Mewat Region in Haryana: A Block-Level Analysis,” NITI Aayog, Government of India, June 2015.

out of desperation but cite that the canal water contains sewage and industrial wastes from Delhi, Faridabad, and Noida.

Not only is the available water unfit for consumption, community awareness regarding water usage and conservation is poor. In many villages with functional water taps, water flows incessantly since they are not turned off. Many villagers are fearful of drought and famine so they tend to store as much water as possible. Seventy-eight percent of Nuh district's groundwater is saline, which increases with depth.<sup>9</sup> Even fresh groundwater is underlain with saline groundwater. The minimum content of total dissolved solids (TDS) of water in Nuh block is at least 600 to 700.

According to the executive engineer, Public Health Department, Nuh, few water sources supply Nuh block. A renewal segment is set up about 90 kms away from Nuh. Three Intermediate Boosting stations that supply water to all of Nuh are set up in Chapeda, Sangel, and Sudaka villages. Even with a few reliable water sources, community awareness regarding water conservation is low with a lack of community motivation and collective initiative.

"The community believes that the government is the sole and only actor responsible in resolving their issues, hence they believe they should not take such matters into their hands," cited the district consultant. Lack of community motivation to take issues into their hands is detrimental to the development of one of the most backward districts in India. "Community should participate and attend more village meetings such as gram sabhas. They need to be aware of what government water sources are," he said. He reported that most villagers do not understand government schemes, and there are implementation issues because villagers sometimes do not want to understand government schemes. They believe it to be too complicated to understand and avail government schemes and policies.

The rift between the government and the people is palpable, particularly in Nuh block. The district consultant notes that the thinking capability of people is limited, and they do not want to change their age-old thought processes. He stressed, "People should attend gram sabha meetings and demand what they need. There should be a sense of collective community awareness. Only this can lead to sustainable community development."

Given the wide variety of problems faced by communities from Nuh, it is more than important for community-based development interventions to gain momentum and provide a sense of ownership of issues and resources from the people residing in the region. Governance systems led by the community members in the region can resolve major problems and thereby ensure sustainable solutions. Local governance systems can successfully operate only when community initiative and motivation is ensured. The onus for development needs to shift to the communities for whom the interventions are designed and resources are allocated. Above all, communities must persevere to maintain sustained interest in achieving common goals irrespective of challenges in order to arrive at sustainable development.

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<sup>9</sup> Lalit Mohan Sharma, "Tackling water salinity in Mewat, Haryana," *India Water Portal*, November 2015.