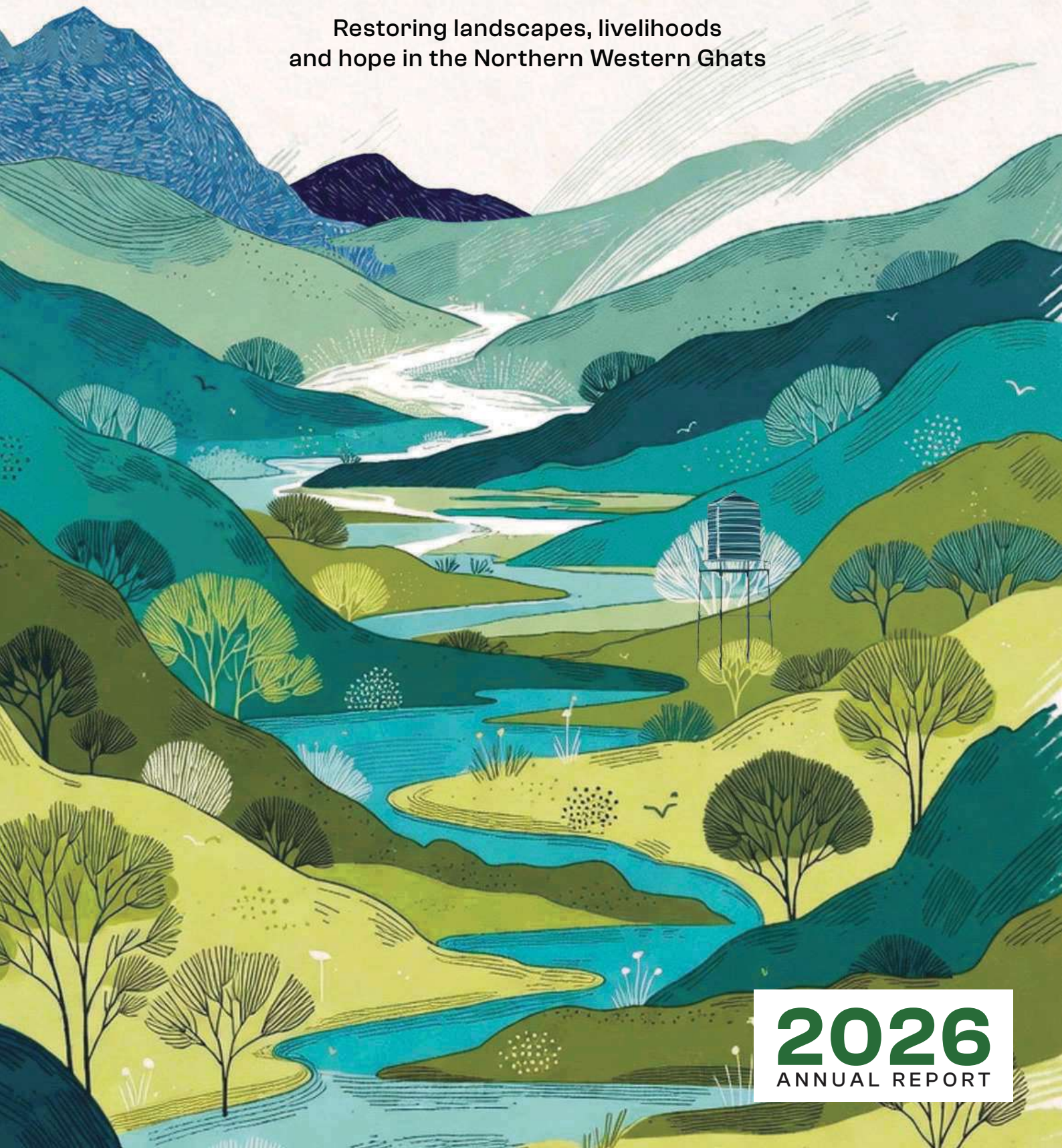
Raah FOUNDATION

WHERE THE WATER BEGINS

RESILIENCE

FOLLOWS

Restoring landscapes, livelihoods
and hope in the Northern Western Ghats



2026
ANNUAL REPORT

Ten Rivers

245

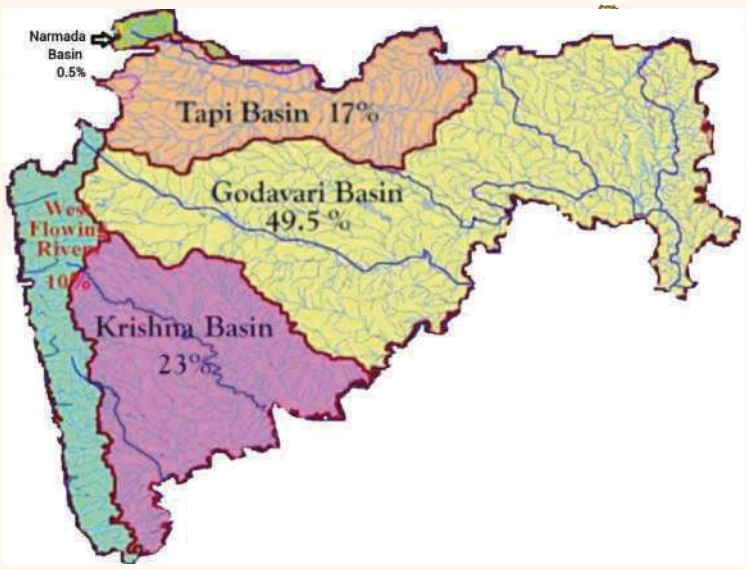
Million People

It all starts here.

Every River has a Beginning. So does Resilience.

Ten rivers that rise in the Northern Western Ghats.

Among them the Godavari, which begins at Trimbakeshwar and travels 1,465 kilometres east to the Bay of Bengal — the longest river of peninsular India. And the Krishna, which begins as a spring near Mahabaleshwar and ends as a delta that feeds a nation. Together these rivers and their tributaries, carry water for more than 245 million people.



All of it starts here.

On these ridges. In this basalt. Under this rain.

And yet, this landscape tells a very different story.

The communities living at the source of these rivers are often the first to experience water scarcity.

Not because rain does not fall.

The windward slopes of the Northern Western Ghats receive abundant monsoon rainfall, while the leeward side lies in the rain shadow and receives significantly less. Yet even where rain falls generously, the land is often unable to hold it. But whether rainfall is abundant or scarce, the health of the landscape determines how much water stays.

Rain falls on these hills in enormous quantities but much of it leaves in a hurry. It rushes down slopes stripped of forests. It flows over soils too thin to absorb it. It carries away fertile topsoil, harvests, and futures. By February, women in the source villages of the Godavari are once again walking in search of water.

This is the paradox that defines our work.

The same mountains, forests, and villages that give peninsular India are often among the first to run dry.
Raah Foundation works where the water begins - on the ridges, slopes, forests, farms and commons where the fate of the whole system is decided. The emphasis is to slow the water down. To help it soak into the earth. To let it stay. And then to see what grows when it does. Two hundred and forty-five million people live downstream of the choices made in these landscapes.

We choose to begin here.

"Commons are collectively owned or managed natural resources such as forests, grazing lands, water bodies, and wetlands that provide essential ecological services and support rural livelihoods."

Letter from the Trustees

What the landscape taught Us

Writing this, with hearts full of gratitude, and humility.

Fifteen years ago, what began as a passion has become an organisation working across six districts and many landscapes of the Northern Western Ghats. These landscapes were the teachers everywhere along the way — the rocks, the hills, the ridges, the soil, the farms. And above all the people, who have shaped not only how the organisation think, but how it listens, how it works, how it scales and what is chosen to measure.

These landscapes were observed by usthe way a tourists observes a new place, captivated by the beauty of the Northern Western Ghats and curious to understand the stories these hills carried. Yet, with every return, the landscape seemed to tell a different story—of disappearing forests, shrinking green cover, and queues for water that grew longer with each passing year.

Eventually we stayed to undo the damage.

Raah found its raah in these very villages and the hills.

Among the many people who shaped Raah's journey, one conversation has stayed for fifteen years.

It happened in Umbervangan, a small village in Jawhar taluka of Palghar district.

We met Rohini while she was waiting beside what appeared to be a dry well. It wasn't dry. Water seeped slowly through the basalt rock, drop by drop. She had been waiting for hours to collect just one pot of water for her family. She had been waiting like this every summer since her childhood.

When we asked how long she had lived like this, she smiled and said,

> "We don't inherit abundance. We inherit scarcity."

She explained that her mother had waited at the same well before her, and unless something changed, her daughter would too.

Those words have never left us.

That afternoon, we discovered another village barely a kilometre away where the well held enough water for people, livestock, and farms.

Same monsoon. Same district. Same sky.

The difference was not the rain. It was the landscape.

That single lesson changed the way we understood water.

Water security is not created at the well. It is created across the landscape that feeds it—through healthy forests, living soils, recharged aquifers, and communities that work together to steward their natural resources.

Everything Raah has built since then has followed that belief.

Over the years, we have restored landscapes, strengthened village institutions, revived water systems, and worked alongside communities to build resilience. Umbervangan itself no longer depends on us. Today, the village manages its own water, farms, and natural resources. We visit not as implementers, but as guests. We often say that we did not give Umbervangan a model; Umbervangan gave us ours.

If our early years were about restoring water, forests and farms, 2025–26 was about transforming the systems that will enable these landscapes to thrive at scale. Healthy landscapes are sustained by healthy institutions. Just as forests, farms and rivers function as interconnected systems, lasting restoration depends on governments, researchers, civil society and communities working together. This year, we deepened partnerships with district administrations, the Maharashtra State Rural Livelihoods Mission (UMED), Krishi Vigyan Kendras, Agricultural Universities and community organisations to build an ecosystem capable of scaling integrated water security, agroecology and ecological restoration across the Northern Western Ghats. Science continued to shape every aspect of our work. During the year, we strengthened our landscape intelligence platform through deeper ecological research, rigorous evidence generation and the integration of emerging technologies that allowed us to understand, monitor and manage landscapes—from soil profiles and groundwater to satellite imagery—with increasing precision and confidence.

This year also reaffirmed that the strength of any organisation lies in its people. Being recognised as a Great Place to Work was a reminder that the trust we strive to build with communities is equally reflected within our own team.

When we think about Mission 2030, we think about Rohini.

Her story reminds us why every watershed restored, every farmer supported, every government partnership forged, and every community institution strengthened matters.

Everything in this report is another step towards ensuring that future generations inherit resilience not scarcity.

We invite you to turn the page and walk this journey with us.

Executive Trustees

The Year in Brief

Water Security

Water structures created (Check dam, Borewell recharge, Rooftop rainwater harvesting, Farm ponds)	2,012
Water capacity created FY25 26 (million litres)	2,716
Drinking Water capacity created (litres)	325,000
Water secured villages	130
Farm ponds in agroecology	219
Ecological restoration	16

Agroecology

Agroecology farmers onboarded	7,700
1AFF women farmers	3,014
Acres of land under cultivation	3,300
Villages covered under agroecology programme	155

Ecological Restoration

Acres of land restored	3,417

Before the River: The Engine

Most people picture the monsoon as something that arrives — a system that sweeps in from the sea and dumps rain on whatever lies below.

In the Northern Western Ghats, that picture is wrong. The escarpment does not receive rain. It manufactures it.

Moist air off the Arabian Sea rises, as it climbs it cools. Cooling forces the vapour to condense. Condensation builds cloud. Cloud releases rain. The mountain is not the backdrop to this process- it is the mechanism. Without these mountains, much of that moisture continue eastward without releasing rain that sustains peninsular India.

These hills do not receive the monsoon. They help make it.

What the Engine does to a Landscape

This process creates one of the sharpest rainfall gradients in India.

Across Nashik district, for example, Igatpuri on the windward side receives an average annual rainfall of over 3,100 mm, while Deola, located in the rain shadow, receives less than 500 mm.

Same district. Same monsoon.

A six-fold difference.

Rainfall here is not a district variable. It is a landscape variable — and a landscape variable cannot be planned with a district number. Whether a village has water through summer depends not only on how much rain falls, but on where that rain falls and how effectively the landscape is able to retain it.

Which is why Raah does not restrict to working by the district. We work by landscape. The six districts we operate in are divided into clusters — mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive — drawn so that every village inside a cluster shares the same hydrogeology, the same rainfall regime, the same soils. Plans made for it will hold. Plans made for an administrative boundary will not.

Rock: The Living Landscape

The Northern Western Ghats rest on basalt formed over 66 million years.

The rock matters because of how it holds water, which is barely at all. Basalt is not a sponge. What water it keeps, it keeps it in the cracks between flows — shallow, compartmentalised pockets rather than one deep reservoir.

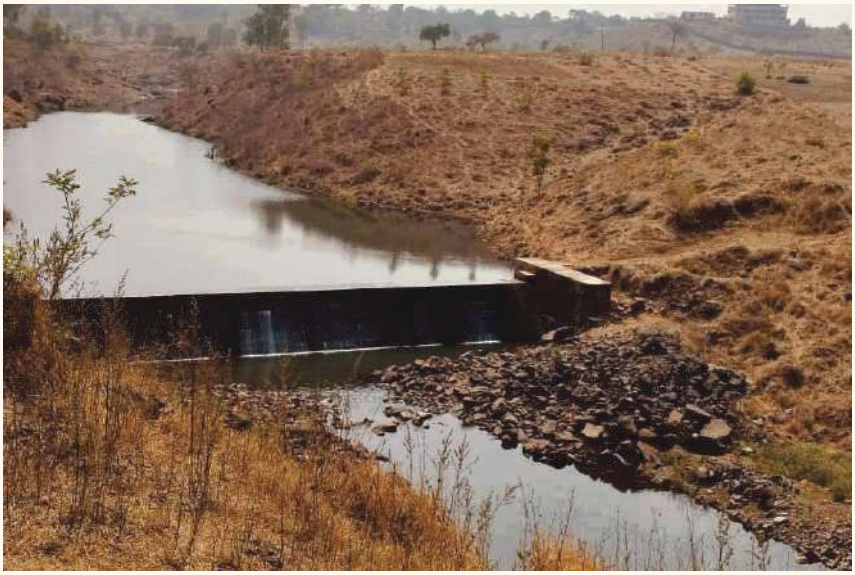
Above the basalt, on the plateau tops, lies laterite — a hard reddish crust that looks like wasteland and is nothing of the kind. It is the sponge. Rain must saturate it before water can move down into the rock below. It is the recharge mechanism for every well and stream downslope.

Whether a village has water in summer depends on what happens between these two layers—and on the health of the forests, soils, and slopes above them.

Sixty-six million years of rock. Four months of rain. And the difference between a village with water in May and one without lies in the landscape that knows how to hold it.

Hard Rock Basalt

Water is held by repairing the check dam



Hold Water and Life Follows

The rainfall gradient across the Northern Western Ghats creates an extraordinary diversity of forests, grasslands, rivers, sacred groves, and plateau ecosystems, making this one of the world's richest biodiversity hotspots. Thousands of endemic plants, wildlife, pollinators, and freshwater ecosystems depend on these landscapes functioning as one interconnected system.

Then there are the sada, the basalt and laterite plateaus. For eight months they look like bare rock. Then the first rain arrives and they bloom: endemic grasses, orchids, balsams, insectivorous plants, amphibians appearing out of nowhere. They are among the most extraordinary ecosystems in the Ghats, and probably among the least studied.

Scattered through all of it are hundreds of Devrai — sacred groves held by village custom for generations. They shelter old-growth trees. They protect springs. They are the proof that conservation in Northern Western Ghats is not a new idea.

The People who live where the Water Begins

For generations, communities such as the Warli, Kokna, Katkari, Koli, and Thakar have lived alongside these forests, farming small rain-fed holdings while relying on commons, livestock, forests, and seasonal livelihoods. Women, in particular, carry deep knowledge of seeds, springs, forests, and local food systems—knowledge that rarely appears in agricultural statistics but is fundamental to landscape resilience.

Healthy forests recharge springs. Springs sustain farms; Farms sustain communities. And communities, in turn protect the landscape that sustain them. That reciprocity is the subject of this report.

Every river begins long before it becomes a river.

The Godavari, Krishna, Bhima, Indrayani, Vaitarna, Ulhas, Surya, Pinjal, Kundalika, Savitri — all begin here. Not as mighty rivers, but as seepage through rock, springs and streams that gather strength as they flow downstream.

They are all made of the same thing.

Rain that a hillside decided to keep.

The Northern Western Ghats became Raah's life's work. We chose depth over breadth, believing that landscapes are transformed through long-term commitment rather than geographic expansion. As we grow, we move into adjoining landscape clusters where ecological systems are continuous, hydrogeology is familiar and, most importantly, relationships already exist. Working in one landscape over many years has taught us something fundamental: nature does not work in programmes.

Water, forests, farms, biodiversity and communities are inseparable parts of the same living system. Water security, ecological restoration and agroecology are therefore not independent interventions. They are interconnected responses to the same landscape, each strengthening the other.

That understanding changed the way we think about water.

A village here can receive more than 3,000 millimetres of rain in a single monsoon—several times what London receives in an entire year—and still depend on tanker water by March.

The problem is not how much rain falls.

It is how little of it stays.

The Northern Western Ghats do not have a rainfall problem. They have an infiltration problem, a runoff problem and a landscape planning problem.

That insight became the foundation of the our work.

When Rain Falls but Water doesn't Stay

Over the years, we have learnt that water insecurity in this landscape is driven by three interconnected challenges.

The landscape stops holding water

As forests degrade and soils lose their structure, rainwater runs off rapidly instead of infiltrating the ground. Groundwater recharge declines, fertile topsoil is lost and springs, streams and wells begin drying.

Rainfall becomes more erratic

Climate change has changed not only how much rain falls, but how it falls. Intense downpours over degraded slopes create erosion and runoff rather than groundwater recharge. The landscape receives abundant rainfall but stores very little of it.

We plan for districts, not landscapes

Water follows ridgelines, geology and watersheds not administrative boundaries. Yet planning is organised around Districts and Blocks, often overlooking the ecological realities that determine water security.

The consequences are visible across the landscape.

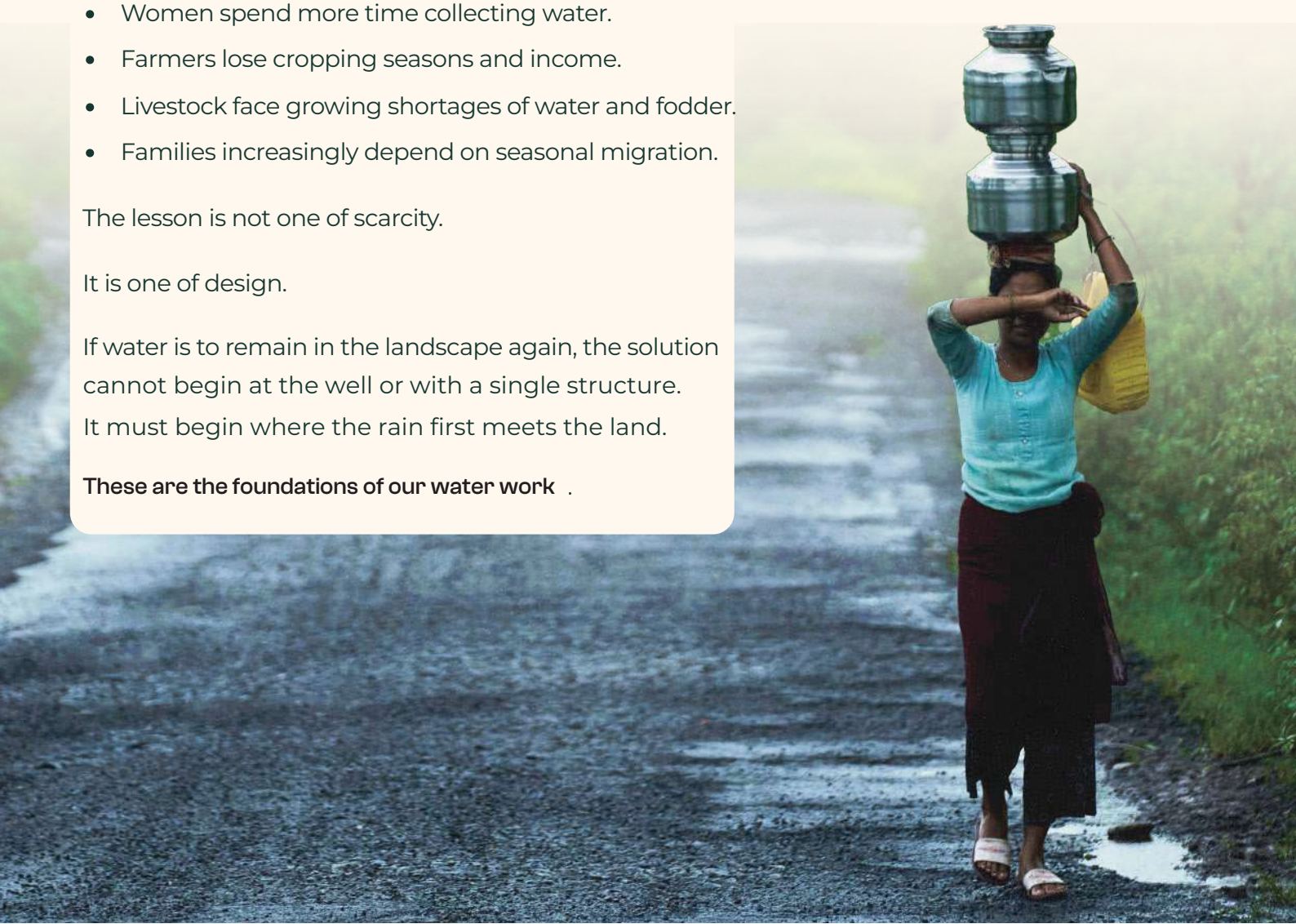
- Women spend more time collecting water.
- Farmers lose cropping seasons and income.
- Livestock face growing shortages of water and fodder.
- Families increasingly depend on seasonal migration.

The lesson is not one of scarcity.

It is one of design.

If water is to remain in the landscape again, the solution cannot begin at the well or with a single structure. It must begin where the rain first meets the land.

These are the foundations of our water work .



How Raah Works: The Raah Method

Every landscape tells its own story.
It reveals where water is held and where it is lost, where ecosystems are thriving or under stress, and how communities have adapted over generations. At Raah Foundation, restoration begins by understanding this landscape before deciding the intervention. Over fifteen years, this understanding has evolved into a set of principles that guide every programme and every partnership. Work begins by listening

Principles that guide every intervention

1. Hydrology first

The work begins by reading the landscape. Where is the water entering? Where is it lost? Where do the fractures run, and where does the laterite cap still hold? What is a genuine recharge zone — and what is merely a convenient place
to put a check dam? This may sound obvious. It is not what usually happens. Across many landscapes, structures are often located based on the availability of schemes or ease of implementation, rather than the science of the landscape. They fail quietly in the very droughts they were meant to prevent. The rock dictates the response. Because groundwater here sits in thin, compartmentalised pockets rather than one deep reservoir. This requires many small, distributed interventions designed around local catchments. And the sequence follows: restore the ridge first, then the valley. Building storage below an untreated catchment does not create a reservoir—it creates a silt trap.

2. Ridgelines, not District lines

Raah works in six districts — Palghar, Thane, Raigad, Nashik, Pune and Ahilyanagar. That is the administrative description of our work. It is not how we see the land.
Districts exist to administer people, revenue and services. Budgets, departments and schemes all run inside those lines. Water does not.
Rain falling a metre to one side of a ridge enters one river system; a metre to the other, an entirely different one. A single catchment can cross several districts, many talukas, dozens of Gram Panchayats and a handful of government departments — each planning for its own jurisdiction, while the landscape goes on functioning as one thing.
Planning follows the landscape.
Implementation works through the districts. The work is in holding the two together — and that assembly appears in no impact metric, though in our experience it is most of the job. We run a gradient-zoned model across a set of catchments. What succeeds in the high-rainfall forests of Jawhar or Trimbakeshwar completely changes for the drier basalt of Chandwad, Deola or eastern Ahilyanagar. Crop choice, waterharvesting design, food forest composition, even the restoration priority.

3. Woman first

This is not a policy position. It is what the economics of this landscape dictate.
The woman in a household is the one who walks for the water — so she knows first when a well is failing. She is the one who feeds the family — so she knows what the acre must produce. She gathers the fuel and the fodder — so she feels the commons degrade before anyone else does.
She holds the most exact knowledge of the system and the largest stake in its repair. A restoration model that routed around her would be strange engineering. So, the acre is hers.

4. Government leverage

Restoring landscapes at scale requires strong public systems. Raah helps communities access government schemes such as MGNREGS and PMKSY through technical planning and convergence. Philanthropic funding acts as a catalyst, unlocking significantly larger public investments for landscape restoration.
The result is stronger community institutions, greater access to public entitlements and restoration that continues long after the project ends.

5. Community before construction

Landscape restoration begins with communities, not infrastructure. Every water structure restored forest and regenerated commons endures only when the people who depend on them become their custodians.
Raah therefore places communities at the centre of every intervention.
Participatory planning, local institutions and community co-investment ensure that restoration is owned, maintained and sustained long after the project is complete.

Staying unless the landscape lead

Restoration is not a project cycle. A slope treated this year will reveal recovery over successive years. Soil-building on basaltic landscape takes time, and a healthy forest cannot be rushed. Programs that chase quick canopy cover without restoring the underlying hydrology risk create short lived outcome.
Therefore, the organisation compels everyone to relook at the timelines, rather been feeling impressive about quick recovery. With a belief Slow the water down, and everything else follows.

What Makes the Water Stay

The Northern Western Ghats receive between 600 and 4,000 mm of rainfall annually, with most of it arriving within four monsoon months. Yet steep slopes, degraded forests and shallow basaltic geology mean much of this water flows away before it can recharge the landscape.
For Raah, water is not a single intervention but a journey. Every intervention is designed to keep more water in the landscape—for longer

1

Slow it

The journey begins at the ridge. Contour trenches, loose boulder structures, contour bunds, gully plugs and vegetative barriers reduce the speed of runoff, prevent soil erosion and allow more rainwater to infiltrate the ground. Every minute the water slows is another opportunity for it enter the ground.

2

Sink it

Slowing water is not the same as recharging an aquifer. In this geology, groundwater sits in weathered and fractured basalt. Water held on the surface does nothing for a village. It has to get down — into the rock, to the aquifers. This is done through percolation ponds, recharge wells, borewell recharge systems and rooftop harvesting structures, each sited by hydrogeological assessment rather than by convenience

3

Store it

The aquifer is the reservoir. It always was. Underground, water loses almost nothing to evaporation, and it keeps feeding springs, wells and streams long after the monsoon has gone. No tank built on the surface can match it. Raah strengthens groundwater storage through many small, distributed interventions across an entire catchment, allowing springs, wells and streams to remain productive long after the monsoon. In a healthy landscape, the largest and most efficient storage system is the one you cannot see

4

Share it

A restored aquifer has to turn into a secure life. At village level we build the systems that put water within everyone's reach — for drinking, for the household, for livestock, for sanitation, for the fields: this is done by reviving the check dams, dug wells, village ponds, farm ponds, and by installing filtration systems. Each is chosen through hydrogeological assessment and village planning, so the infrastructure answers the place rather than a standard design. The goal is simple: reliable water for everyone throughout the year.

5

Stretch it

More water alone does not create water security. What matters is how efficiently every drop is used. Through micro-irrigation, crop planning, diversified farming systems and water budgeting, Raah helps farmers produce more with less. Every drop saved extend the benefits of restoration further, to more people, for longer

One water system, not five projects

No single intervention secures water.
Water security appears only when these work as one system — ridge to valley, rainfall to groundwater, forest to farm.

We do not implement water projects. We restore a water cycle.

Case Study: Ahilyanagar-Restoring Water, Restoring Soil

Ahilyanagar lies on the leeward side which is a rain shadow area of the Northern Western Ghats. Here, scarcity is not an event. It is the condition.

After the catastrophic drought of 1972, the state built hundreds of large percolation ponds across the district. For years, they worked. Then, decade by decade, erosion filled them with the soil washing off the slopes above. By the time Raah started working, many held almost no water at all.

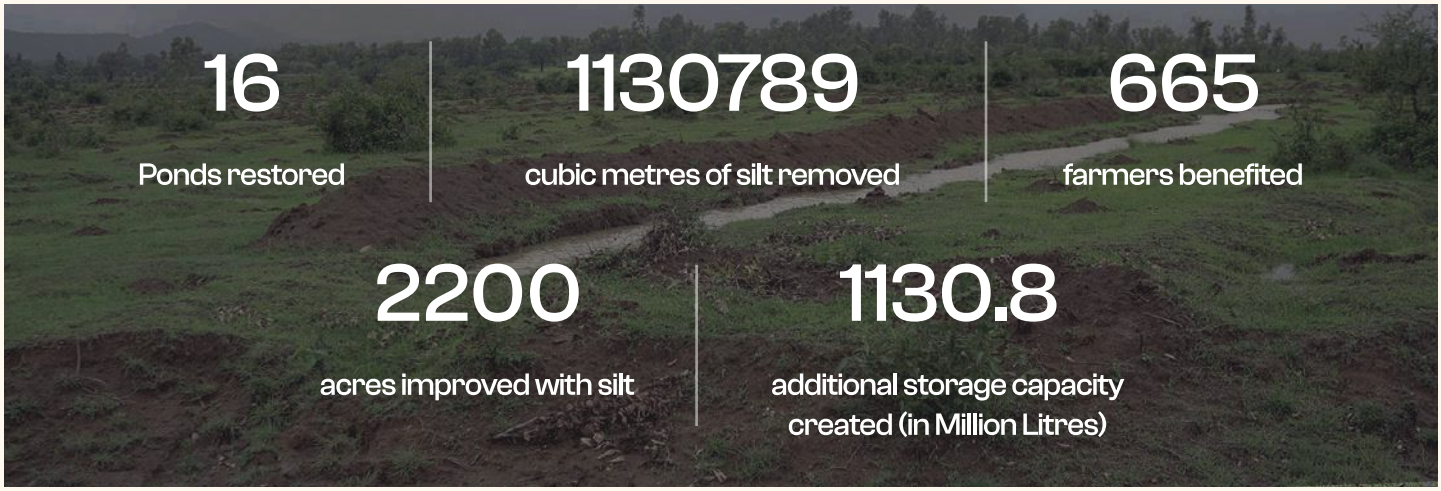
Raah's intervention began with understanding the landscape. Historic satellite imagery and archival records were used to trace the original extent of these water bodies, each water bodies were later verified by ground truthing exercise.

The ponds were far too large to restore one at a time. The work got distributed in modules — phased excavation across several ponds at once, rather than pouring a season's resources into a single site. Several villages gained together, and storage rebuilt across the landscape instead at one point. The excavation revealed an unexpected opportunity. The accumulated silt was not waste—it was fertile topsoil that had gradually eroded from surrounding farmlands over decades. Instead of being discarded, it was reused by farmers on their fields

A single intervention delivered multiple outcomes:

- Restoring the water bodies
- Improving groundwater recharge,
- Rebuilding soil health and
- Enhancing agroecological productivity

A water conservation project had become a soil restoration project



When Water Stays, Restoration Takes Roots

Restoring water is not the objective. It is the precondition.

Once water stays, it will lead to regeneration. The only questions are what, where and who benefits.

The regeneration is witnessed at the farms and the commons.

On private land, women-led One-Acre Food Forests transform small farms into diverse, productive ecosystems that strengthen livelihoods while rebuilding soil health, biodiversity and ecological resilience.

On common land, Raah restores forests, grazing lands and catchments that recharge groundwater and stabilise the landscape.

Neither succeeds without the other. Healthy commons secure the water that sustains farms, while productive farms reduce pressure on shared natural resources, making long-term conservation possible.

The commons make the acre possible: a food forest is only viable if the water table beneath it holds — and that is decided by the slopes above it. Plant a food forest below a bare ridge and you have planted a garden that will die in its third summer.

The acre makes the commons possible: protecting shared land asks a family to graze less, cut less and wait. A household with no water and no income cannot afford to wait, and should not be asked to. The acre is what makes restraint survivable

Restoration of the commons secures the water. Water secures the acre. The acre secures the family. And a secure family can afford to protect the commons.

That loop is the whole chapter.

The Acre: Method in the Madness

Agroecology in these hills is genuinely hard, and it is worth saying why.

The land undulates; flat ground is scarce. The soil is thin and full of rock. Holdings are small. Water is limited and arrives all at once. Animals graze freely across everything. And after years of water poverty, much of the traditional farming knowledge that once matched crops to this place have simply been lost.

Every farm is different. Every farmer is different.

Moisture retention differs field to field, and so does what can be grown in it. Raah's agronomist had one question to grapple with: how do we put some method into this madness?

The answer was not a package. It was a portfolio — a set of proven solutions, each customised to this landscape.

Floriculture

Jasmine and magnolia thrive on shallow soil and broken ground. A cash crop that earns real income from a very small parcel — and collectivisation through Farmer Interest Groups strengthens market access through aggregation.

337 Farmers 120 acres

These farmers will join the strong cohort of 900 + farmers who are part of a thriving Farmers Interest Group that directly sells in the Mumbai flower market.

Compact farming

A multi-cropping system on a tiny parcel: combing vegetables and to generate short, medium and long-term income from the same acre.

190 Farmers 71 Acres

Monsoon farming

When water is abundant, trellis farming is encouraged along with rice and millets which are primarily for self-consumption. The techniques adopted makes the crop tougher against a violent monsoon. SRI 212 farmers(53 acres), SMI 102 Farmers(56 acres) Trellis farming (Bittergourd) 100 farmers

Crop Innovation

New crops such as ginger piloted to diversify income stream. 30 farmers. We had very encouraging results. The next steps will be to scale Ginger farming.

The One-Acre Food Forest

An acre. One family. Woman farmer decision, her labour, her income.

Diversified species are planted in layers — canopy, sub-canopy, shrub, herb, root, climber — so the acre works at every height and in every season. Fruit trees for long term income. Vegetables and greens for the kitchen. Nitrogen fixers for the soil. Native species for the birds and pollinators, all of them support the acre.

It is not a farm with trees on it. It is a young forest.

Why an acre survives where a plantation does not

Restored catchment that are treated above.

Protected by its owner, because she planted it and she eats from it.

It pays early — greens in months, vegetables in the first year, fruit within a few — so no family is asked to wait a decade for a return on land it cannot afford to idle.

And it is hers. That is not a sentiment. It is the mechanism.

This year: 807 food forests established, cumulatively 3014. Total acreage 3014. More than 30 Species per farm. 70 % Survival rate

Case study

Sushila Nagade farms one acre in Vadpada, Jawhar Block, Palghar. A few years ago, the land was considered unproductive. Today, it has been transformed into a living food forest with 42 species growing together across multiple layers.

Trees, shrubs, vegetables, tubers, climbers and ground cover occupy different heights, allowing the same acre to produce food throughout the year while conserving moisture, protecting the soil and supporting biodiversity. Every species serves a purpose, and together they have changed the way the land functions.

Raah introduced the One-Acre Food Forest model, but the acre reflects Sushila's own decisions. She selected species that suited her family's needs, the local market and the landscape she knows best, creating a farm that is both productive and resilient.

> "Every plant has a purpose," she says. "Together they make the acre stronger."

The Commons

Land that belongs to everyone, and therefore to no one — until a village decides otherwise.

Grazed by all, cut by all, and defended by no one in particular, the commons are usually the most degraded land in the landscape. They are also the land that decides the water.

Three kinds of land, three kinds of consent

We restore gram panchayat land, forest land, and land held under Community Forest Rights. From a ridge they look identical. They are not.

Each tenure carries its own approvals, its own institutions, its own history of who was allowed to use it and who was kept out. A CFR parcel is governed by a gram sabha exercising a right it had to fight for. Forest land answers to the department. Panchayat land carries the weight of village politics. The ecology may be common. The compulsions never are.

We take each parcel for five years, with specific activities earmarked year by year, and we hold to that. Since the parcels were taken up in different years, our landscape is at any moment a portfolio at different stages of maturity — one hillside in its first year of rest, another in its fourth year of nurturing, each demanding a different kind of treatment on the same morning.

Restoration at landscape scale is not one process repeated. It is many processes, held in sequence, across a map.

Greatest Act of Restoration: Giving Nature the Chance to Regenerate

Before a single sapling is introduced, the land is allowed to recover. Communities agree to protect it from open grazing and tree felling, giving natural ecological processes the opportunity to return.

The grasses come back first. Matters more than it appears.

Native grasses bind the soil, slow runoff, reduce erosion and help rain enter the ground. They also produce the seeds from which the next generation of vegetation emerges.

The seeds

Work does not begin with a sapling. It begins two years earlier, with a woman walking into the forest at first light, cloth bag in hand, looking for seed.

The women know these forests in a way no map records. Which tree fruits late. Which seed is worth carrying home. Which species has grown so scarce that finding it is an event. Season after season, they have collected native and endangered seeds and brought them back, building a seed bank that now holds more than 1.6 million seeds of the Northern Western Ghats.

That seed does not go into the ground. It goes to a local farmer, who raises it in a nursery on his own land. And then everyone waits. A seed needs at least two years in a nursery before it becomes a sapling strong enough to survive a hillside.

Restoration, an act of patience long before an act of planting.

Water before trees

A landscape must first learn to hold water before it can hold a forest.

Contour trenches and soil-and-moisture conservation structures are established before plantation begins, allowing rainfall to slow, infiltrate and recharge the ground. Only then are native saplings planted.

Planting the hope

The first spell of the monsoon is the moment the landscape has been waiting for.

Only then do the saplings leave the nursery. Each is planted in a carefully prepared pit, layered with soil and mulch to hold moisture, protect the young roots and give them the best chance of survival. As the roots spread, they begin doing the work restoration depends on—holding the soil together, slowing erosion and helping the hillside hold water once again.

And then the land gives back more than it was given. Assisted natural regeneration—the trees, grasses and shrubs that return on their own once grazing, fire and felling are lifted- consistently outstrips everything that was planted. The saplings are the invitation. The forest is the answer.

What Tested Us

1

Turning a right into a plan.

Raah facilitated preparation of Management Plans in 180 CFR villages by innovative use of technology and collaborating with the professors and students from Master of Social Work from a local Nashik college. This was completed in a record time of 90 days The speed matters less than what it proved: the bottleneck was never the community's capacity. It was the support they had never been offered.

2

A climate that no longer keeps its word.

Restoration assumes the rain will come when it always has come. Increasingly it does not. Erratic onset, long dry breaks mid-monsoon, and downpours that arrive all at once have turned every planting season into a gamble — testing sapling survival, nursery schedules and the structures built to hold the water.

3

When the forest comes back, so does everything else.

A restored forest does not only brings back grass and groundwater. It brings back leopards and hyenas. The rejuvenated patches became favoured ground for wildlife not seen near these villages in years — and to the people living alongside them, that was not a conservation success. It was fear. Refused to treat it as somebody else's problem. With an expert partner, the awareness generated across the affected villages and built primary response teams: local people, extensively trained, able to handle an encounter before it becomes an emergency. Coexistence is not a sentiment. It is a capability, and it must be built.

Raah did not set out to plant trees. It sets out to make it possible for a forest to return — and to make sure the village that made it possible is the one that keeps it.

The Arrival

Raah works in one of the world's eighth hottest biodiversity hotspots. The measure of restoration lies not only in what is planted, but in what returns.

Across restored landscapes, nature has begun responding in its own ways. Leopards have returned to their habitat. Peacocks have nested at restoration sites. Vast swathes of the Pink-striped Lily (Crinum latifolium) have reappeared across the landscape. These are encouraging signs that ecological processes are beginning to recover.

Understanding ecological recovery requires more than counting trees. It requires understanding how entire ecosystems respond over time. At Raah, we establish biodiversity baselines through field-based ecological surveys and geospatial analysis, conducted across seasons to capture the natural rhythms and variability of the landscape. These assessments allow us to measure changes in species diversity, habitat quality and ecosystem health, providing scientific evidence of ecological recovery.

The species that return are not a by-product of restoration—they are evidence that the landscape is beginning to function again. Pollinators sustain food forests. Soil organisms rebuild living soils. Native grasses stabilise slopes. Birds, insects and other wildlife reconnect fragmented habitats. Biodiversity is not the decoration of a healthy landscape. It is the machinery that makes the landscape work.

Water that stays in the landscape becomes water that stays on the farm. Restored commons recharge aquifers, rebuild biodiversity and regenerate healthy soils, creating the ecological foundation on which resilient agroecology depends. Agroecological farming then transforms that ecological recovery into healthier diets, stronger livelihoods and greater resilience.

The change is visible in everyday life.

The plate becomes more diverse, with fruits, vegetables, millets, pulses and leafy greens harvested from women-led One-Acre Food Forests, improving household nutrition and reducing dependence on purchased food

The purse grows stronger through diversified farm incomes, Farmer Interest Groups and producer collectives that improve market access, enterprises built around local resources, and wage opportunities created through ecological restoration and programmes such as VB-G RAM G

For us, these are not separate outcomes. They are different expressions of the same healthy landscape.

A restored landscape is one where biodiversity returns to the forest, water returns to the aquifer, food returns to the plate and dignity returns to the household

Where Stewardship Begins

Every restoration programme is eventually asked the same question: What happens when the project ends?

The answer determines whether restoration has truly succeeded.

Structures can be built, saplings can be planted and landscapes can begin to recover. But unless communities continue to protect them, those gains remain temporary. Stewardship is not the last step in restoration. It is what allows restoration to endure.

Women as Stewards

Across Raah's landscapes, women played a central role in restoration. Through Self-Help Groups, they collected native seeds, nurtured nurseries, managed One-Acre Food Forests, strengthened household savings and participated in livelihood activities linked to restoration.

The measure of this work was not simply the number of women engaged, but the responsibilities they undertook in conserving natural resources and managing productive landscapes. From seed collection and nursery development to cultivating food forests and strengthening household livelihoods, women became active custodians of ecological restoration.

Women-led One-Acre Food Forests connected restoration with everyday life—improving household nutrition, strengthening livelihoods and reinforcing the long-term care of the land.

Story of women stewardship

In Kochargaon, stewardship found its strongest expression in local leadership.

As the Sarpanch, Kalpana Tai brought the village together around a shared vision of restoration. Under her leadership, the community participated in restoring degraded commons, protecting natural resources and taking collective responsibility for the landscape they depend upon.

Her leadership demonstrated that restoration is not sustained by projects alone. It is sustained when communities choose to own the work. The decisions taken by the village—to contribute labour, protect restored areas and participate in ecological restoration—were as important as the physical interventions themselves.

> "When the land recovers, everything else begins to recover with it—water, agroecology and our future," she says.

Leaders like Kalpana Tai remind us that stewardship begins within the community. Restoration becomes lasting when local leadership carries it forward, ensuring that the responsibility for the landscape is shared by the people who call it home.

The Institutions that Outlast Us

A restored landscape remained restored because communities continued to care for it. Village institutions became custodians of restored commons, water systems and ecological assets. They supported planning, monitored restoration activities and helped communities collectively manage the natural resources they depended upon.
The strongest evidence of stewardship was often found in the collective decisions communities made for themselves—protecting commons, managing water resources, regulating land use and maintaining restoration assets beyond the project period.

Communities as Co-investors

This is the truest outcome in this report, and it does not look like a number.
A community that sanctions its own member for felling a protected tree has done something no NGO can do for it, and nothing a funder can buy.

One story

The strongest evidence of stewardship was found in the decisions communities made for themselves. Restoration became lasting when villages moved beyond participating in a project to investing in the future of their own landscape.
In Nimon, the community came together around a shared ambition—to restore degraded commons and create a Biodiversity Park for future generations. Led by Swati Deore, the Sarpanch, the Gram Panchayat brought together villagers to discuss how the degraded landscape could once again become an ecological asset for the village. As the discussions evolved, the community recognised that restoring the degraded land was not only about planting trees. It was about rebuilding biodiversity, strengthening the local ecosystem and creating a landscape that would support both nature and people.
The vision soon translated into action. In 2025, the Gram Panchayat committed ₹60,000 from its own funds towards the Biodiversity Park, while community members contributed their labour to plant 11000 native saplings with 45000 + vetiver slips and restore 60+ acres of degraded land.

> "We wanted Nimon to be known for its biodiversity," says Swati Deore. "This was not just a plantation drive. It was our community's commitment to restoring the landscape we depend on."

The Biodiversity Park is still taking shape. But its strongest foundation is already in place—a Gram Panchayat willing to invest public resources and a community willing to contribute its own time and labour to restore a shared landscape.
Raah does not deliver this work to villages. Villages co-invest in it.
A village that has invested its own labour, land and resources in restoring its landscape is far more likely to protect and maintain it for years to come. A village that simply receives the benefits of a project, without investing in it, is less likely to sustain those assets once the project ends.
Every funder understands this. Very few reports about this. And then, to step back Restoration is not an act. It is a relationship, maintained over decades — with a slope, a common, a stream, an acre. Raah cannot hold that relationship. Only the people who live here can.
Raah's job is to make it possible. To bring the hydrology, the species, the finance and the method. To help a village claim what the state already owes it. To put the acre, the decision and the income in the hands of the people who will still be standing on that hillside in thirty years.
And then, slowly, to become unnecessary.
The measure of this work is not what Raah has built but continued afterwards.

Still Learning

Annual reports have a habit of telling only one side of the story. They record what was built, restored and achieved. They say much less about what took longer than expected, what proved more difficult than imagined, or what still remains unfinished. Everything in the preceding chapters is true. It is also incomplete. The work has not unfolded exactly as planned, nor has every intervention produced the outcome we expected. Some assumptions changed. Some ambitions took more time. Some questions remain unanswered. What we expected → what happened → what we are changing in FY 2026–27

The Work That Remains

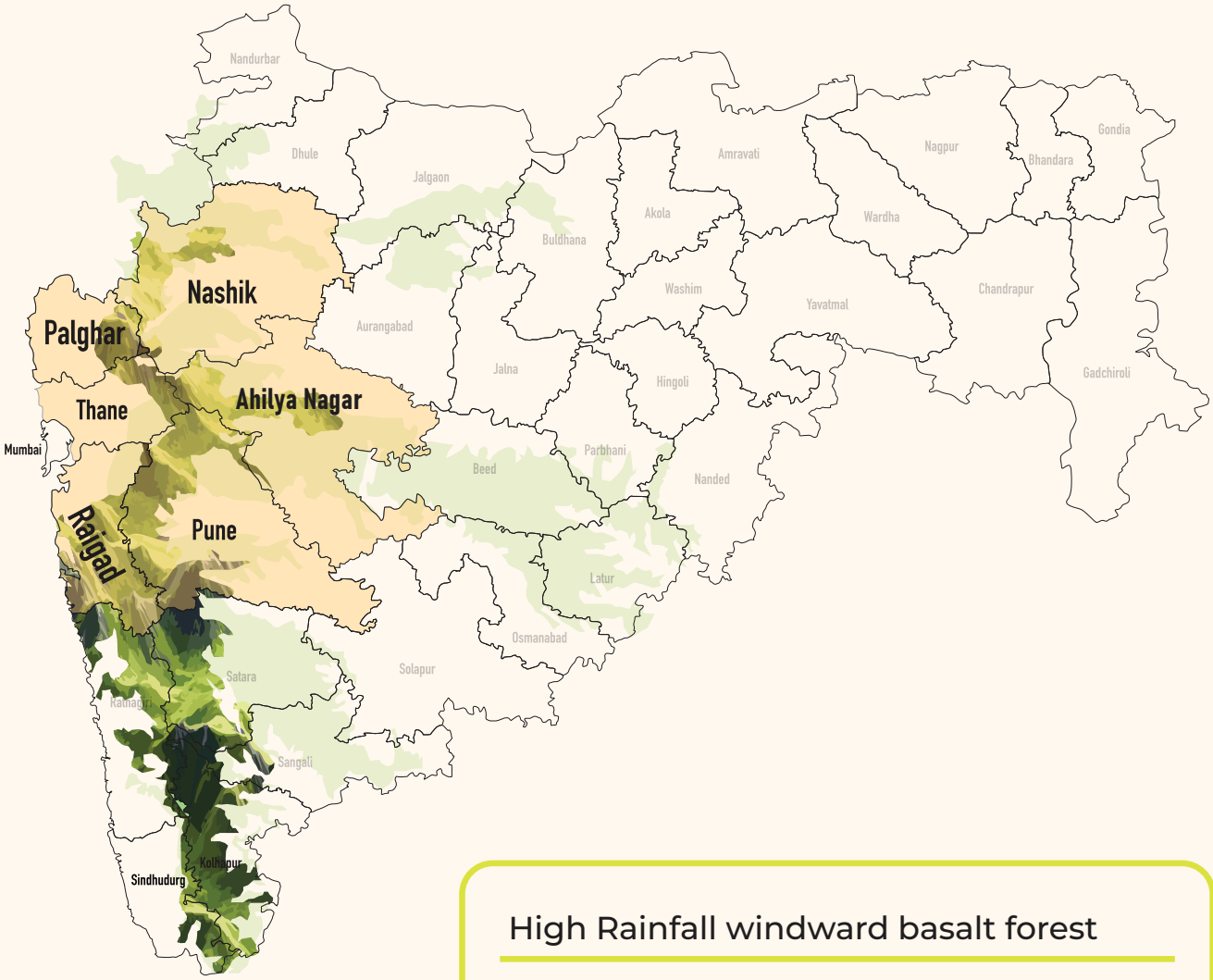
1	**Restoration moves at the pace of institutions.** The most difficult targets were never ecological. They were institutional. Restoring a landscape demanded time for Gram Panchayats, communities and government departments to build consensus before the first intervention could begin. The work reaffirmed that landscapes endure only when institutions choose to steward them. What comes next: Strengthening village institutions and local stewardship will remain as important as restoring hectares.
2	**Science Must Be as important as Stewardship** The return of native species, healthier streams and recovering vegetation are encouraging signs. But restoration cannot rely on observation alone. It must be understood, measured and continuously improved through science. At Raah, stewardship is complemented by rigorous evidence. We establish scientific baselines and monitor groundwater, biodiversity and ecosystem health through field-based ecological assessments, hydrogeological investigations, geospatial analysis and landscape-scale monitoring. These measurements allow us to understand not only whether landscapes are recovering, but how, why and at what pace, ensuring that every restoration decision is guided by evidence as much as by experience.
3	**Water security is measured below the ground, not only above it.** Structures are easy to count. Water security is not. The work reinforced that the real measure of success lies in groundwater recharge, aquifer health and the availability of water across seasons—not simply in the number of assets created. What comes next: Raah is strengthening its scientific capabilities through water accounting, groundwater monitoring and landscape-scale hydrological assessments,enabling us to understand how restored catchments perform and evolve over time.
4	**Climate-resilient agroecology begins with evidence.** Restoring water creates opportunity. It does not determine how that opportunity is used. Water-intensive crops can quickly undo ecological gains if farming systems remain unchanged. The next phase of the work must therefore integrate restoration with data-driven agroecological planning. What comes next: Evidence increasingly shapes our agroecology programme, with greater emphasis on soil health, crop suitability, water-use efficiency and climate-resilient farming systems, complemented by continuous monitoring and farmer-led learning.
5	**Technology should strengthen, not replace, community knowledge.** Communities understand their landscapes in ways that satellite imagery alone cannot reveal. Equally, community observation is strengthened when combined with scientific tools. Neither is sufficient on its own. What comes next: Raah is deepening the use of remote sensing, GIS, drone-based monitoring and digital data systems alongside community knowledge to improve planning, monitoring and adaptivemanagement.
6	**The Scale of restoration lies beyond philanthropy.** The year reinforced that philanthropy can demonstrate what is possible, but it cannot restore landscapes at the scale they demand. India's largest restoration resources already exist within public programmes. The challenge is helping communities access and utilise them effectively. What comes next: Raah continues to deepen convergence with government programmes and district administrations, enabling the integrated watershed and landscape restoration approach to be adopted and scaled across new geographies.
7	**Restoration must generate knowledge, not just outcomes.** Every restored watershed, regenerated forest and food forest offers an opportunity to understand how landscapes recover. Yet much of this knowledge remains undocumented, limiting its potential to influence policy and practice. What comes next: Through the Western Ghats Knowledge Institute (WGKI), Raah is building a strong scientific foundation for landscape restoration in the Northern Western Ghats. By advancing long-term ecological research, landscape monitoring, knowledge partnerships and evidence generation, WGKI bridges science and practice—ensuring that every restoration effort contributes not only to healthier landscapes but also to a deeper understanding of how landscapes recover.

The Big Goal

Raah currently works across 36 landscape clusters in the Northern Western Ghats.

Each cluster represents a distinct ecological archetype, shaped by its hydrogeology, soil, rainfall, ecology and terrain. Understanding these archetypes enables restoration strategies to be tailored to the unique characteristics of each landscape, strengthening scientific planning and improving restoration outcomes at scale.

The five ecological archetypes are



- High Rainfall windward basalt forest
- Upper Godavari headwater escarpment
- Deccan basalt rural mosaic
- Rain shadow, hard water, leeward drought-prone basalt plateau
- Kokan foothill and coastal river transition

Mission 2030: Restore. Regenerate. Reconnect.

Rivers, forests, farms, and communities functioning once again as one interconnected living landscape.

Achieving this ambition will require far more than expanding the pace of current work. It demands a different scale of restoration, deeper partnerships and stronger community institutions. The path ahead cannot be drawn as a straight line, nor should it be.

The ambition is not driven by organisational growth. It is defined by the landscape itself.

But the target is not an ambition. It is an arithmetic that is set by the landscape.

A catchment is not restored one village at a time, indefinitely. It is restored when enough of the landscape begins to function as one interconnected system.

A treated slope below an untreated one still receives runoff from above. A protected common surrounded by degraded land continues to bear the pressure of grazing from neighbouring villages. Below a certain threshold, restoration remains a collection of isolated interventions. Beyond that threshold, it becomes a functioning landscape capable of restoring water, biodiversity and livelihoods together.

So scale, for Raah, is not a growth story. It is a hydrological requirement which needs to be addressed.

A river does not begin at scale. It begins as a spring. But a spring becomes a river only when the entire landscape helps it grow.

How Restoration Gets Paid for

Restoration is expensive at the front and generous at the back.

The trenches, the nurseries, the saplings, the years of protection — all of it is paid for long before the water returns or the fruit sets. That gap is the central financial problem of this work, and no single kind of money can close it.

No single source of funding can sustain that journey. It requires a blend of philanthropic capital, corporate partnerships, government convergence and community co-investment—each playing a distinct role in restoring landscapes at scale.

Philanthropic Capital: the money that waits.

Some investments in restoration cannot produce immediate outcomes. Hydrogeological assessments, ecological baselines, community mobilisation, and the two years it takes for a seed to become a resilient sapling all demand patient capital long before visible change appears.

Philanthropy and CSR make these investments possible. They finance the science, planning and community processes that form the foundation of restoration, allowing the work to be rigorous rather than simply rapid.

It also nudges the rigor to be followed than fast.

Public funds: the money that supports scale.

VB-G RAM G, PMKSY and allied schemes exist to fund precisely this work. It is the largest pool of restoration finance in India — already allocated, legislated, owed to these landscapes — and chronically unclaimed by people, because the technical planning and the paperwork are a wall.

**Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana*

Global Philanthropy: Looking Beyond Borders

Raah also engages with global philanthropy, recognising that the Northern Western Ghats are far more than a regional landscape.

The people who supported the work did not treat the Northern Western Ghats as somebody else's watershed. They saw it for what it is: one of the world's greatest biodiversity hotspots, holding species that exist nowhere else on earth, and the rainfall engine for rivers that carry water to 245 million people.

This is more than a local landscape in India- it is ecological infrastructure of global importance, situated within India's borders.

Biodiversity has no nationality. Neither does a monsoon that has stopped behaving.

As this Report Goes to Press

The FY26–27 monsoon arrived while this report was written.

In June 2026, every one of the six districts was in severe deficit: Thane −75%, Nashik −57%, Ahilyanagar −52%, Raigad −49%, Pune −48%, Palghar −47%. Maharashtra closed the month at half its normal rainfall. Then, in the first week of July, extremely heavy rain hammered the Konkan and the ghat sections. By 10 July, activity had gone quiet again.

Deficit, then deluge, then nothing.

That is not a monsoon. That is a machine running rough.

Everything in this report is an argument for slowing water down. The monsoon, while we wrote it, made the argument better than we could.

Credible Hope

The word 'hope' is on the cover of this report. It should be earned before it is used.

It is not alone an optimism. Optimism is a mood, and a mood is not a strategy for a landscape that has been degrading for a century.

That in Balkapra and Umbervangan villages, this fiscal year, water that used to leave in before March stayed for till June. Woman like Sushila Nagade who have never dreamt of feeling of growing something that they own. That communities are making rules about their commons and enforcing them on one another. That a hillside, given protection and time, does most of the work itself — because the seeds are still in the soil, and the rain still comes.

None of that is hope. All of it is a measurement.

The hope is only this: that what works in thirty clusters can be made to work across the whole landscape — and that the hills which give peninsular India its water might one day be the last places to run dry rather than the first.

That is a large thing to want. It is not a mysterious one.

It is a slope, and then another slope. It is an acre, and then another acre. It is a village deciding something, and the village beside it deciding the same.

It begins small. It always did.




Be Part of Where It Begins

First, to those who already said yes

Before the ask, Raah owes an account to the people who did not wait to be asked twice.

Some of what funded this year was hard-earned personal money, given by individuals who had every other possible use for it. Some came from CSR partners who chose to meet their mission by backing something slow — a hydrogeological survey before a single structure was sited, a two-year wait while a seed became a sapling, a year of village meetings with nothing yet to photograph. And some came from people who have never stood this landscape, still came forward.

None of it was easy money to give. Restoration offers no ribbon to cut in the first quarter. What it produces, it produces in the fourth year, and the fifth, and the tenth.

People waited. That is not a small thing.

Raah is deeply grateful to its partners, including CREDAI Foundation, Cummins India Foundation, Nomura, YES Foundation, Crédit Agricole, Suyash Advisors, Padmini-VNA, LTTS, Worley, DBS, Brembo India, Capri Loans and L&T Prayas. Their investments have helped restore landscapes while laying the foundations for long-term ecological and social resilience.

The organisation also acknowledges the generosity of individual philanthropists, including Sachin Kasera, Mukul Agrawal, and Madhavi & Shrini Ravuri, whose support enabled Raah to address critical gaps that are often under-resourced, yet essential to the success of landscape restoration.

Raah is equally thankful to its global philanthropic partners, including People for Progress of India (PPI), IIT-IIT and the Gates Foundation, whose support reflects a shared commitment to restoring.

Raah also acknowledges its government partners, including UMED (MSRLM), the District Administrations of Nashik and Palghar, and the Block Development Offices, whose partnership has strengthened community institutions, enabled convergence with government programmes.

And to the villages themselves, who co-invested in this work with their own labour, their own land and their own money. Everything that follows is an invitation to join them.

This is Not the Ask You are Expecting

If you live downstream

Ten rivers rise in these hills.

More than 245 million people live downstream of what happens on these slopes.

If you are reading this in Mumbai, Pune, Nashik or Hyderabad, some part of the water you drank this morning began as rain on a hillside in this landscape. Whether it reached you at all depended on whether that hillside held it.

If you live somewhere else

Then the argument is different, and no less direct.

These hills are one of the world's great biodiversity hotspots. Over 4,000 plant species. More than half the tree species found here grow nowhere else on earth.

Some of it may never be.

And this is the one thing in this report that cannot wait.

Everything else here is reversible. That has been the argument from the first page: a stripped slope can be rebuilt, a dead spring can be brought back, a degraded common will recover if it is simply allowed to rest — because the seeds are still in the soil and the rain still comes.

Extinction is the exception. It is the only loss in this landscape that no amount of later money, later attention or later remorse can undo.

Biodiversity has no nationality. Neither does the rain. This is not a local problem that happens to sit in India. It is global ecological infrastructure that happens to sit in India — and it is being lost on a clock that nobody is watching.

A village's water is decided on the slope above it. A city's water is decided in hills it has never visited. A planet's stability is decided in hotspots most of its people will never see.

Somebody is always upstream of you, holding the thing you depend on — or letting it go.

In these hills, that somebody is a woman with an acre, a village committee with a grazing rule, and a hillside that has been waiting a long time for permission to recover.

Come and stand on the ridge.

The invitation for everyone to visit these landscapes. Everything in this report is more persuasive when you are standing in it — when a woman shows you her acre and tells you what it produced last year; when you see a stream running in a month it had no business running in; when a village committee explains the rule it made, and why it enforced it on one of its own.

No report can do what a day in this landscape does.

The People Who Walk the Landscape

It is easy to count villages reached, acres restored, litres of water conserved.

It is much harder to count what made any of it possible.

The walking

Every contour line marked on a hillside. Every spring mapped. Every farmer persuaded to try something his father never tried. Every village meeting that ended in agreement rather than argument. Every hectare of forest still standing because a community decided it would stand.

All of it began with somebody choosing, that morning, to walk the landscape.

Not metaphorically.

Up hillsides before sunrise. Along streams in the hours after heavy rain, when the water will tell you things it refuses to tell you later. Through the hard heat of April, when the wells you have come to measure are the ones that have already failed. Down into valleys steep enough to be genuinely dangerous — and back up them again at the end of the day. Through a monsoon that does not pause for fieldwork.

And then back to the same village, next season, and the season after that. Because trust is not built in one visit, and nobody has ever found a shortcut.

None of this appears in a project plan. It is most of the job.

The team

Raah's team is deliberately multidisciplinary — hydrogeologists, agronomists, ecologists, engineers, social mobilisers, community organisers, programme managers.

They work alongside one another because a landscape does not recognise disciplinary boundaries, and its restoration cannot either. The person who reads the rock and the person who sits through a four-hour gram sabha are working on the same problem, and both of them know it.

Very little of this happens in an office. It happens under a banyan tree with village elders. It happens listening to a woman describe how a spring has changed across thirty years — information, no instrument could show. It happens measuring the water level in an open well, and coming back the next year to measure it again, and the year after that.

What Raah teams carry up those hills is not equipment. It is patience, and a stubborn refusal to be discouraged by a landscape that gives back slowly.

They have chosen work that will not show its results for years, in places that are hard to reach, in weather that is often against them.

They keep choosing it.

Raah's Team

Two hundred people work at Raah. On any given day, most of them are moving within a fifty- to sixty-kilometre radius — on a slope, in a village, or somewhere between the two.

Rahul Aher was the first person to join us. Fifteen years later, he is still here. He has been building this since there was nothing yet to build it with, and he is still walking into the same villages he walked into then. Everything in this report rests on people who did what he did, for as long as he has done it.

Raah is certified a Great Place to Work. A proud moment. But the number behind it is the one that matters: almost nobody leaves.

In the development sector, staff turnover is often an invisible tax on institutional memory. The person who remembers which spring stopped flowing in 2019, which family was hesitant to participate, or why a Gram Sabha chose one solution over another is often no longer there a few years later. When people leave, knowledge leaves with them.

At Raah, we have been fortunate that many of our people have stayed. They have grown alongside the organisation, carrying not only technical expertise but also the stories, relationships and trust that cannot be documented in a manual.

There is no policy that creates this.

People arrive, spend time in the landscape, work alongside communities and gradually make the mission their own.

Yet the deepest knowledge has never belonged to us alone.
It lives with the Krishi Sakhis, village volunteers, Self-Help Group leaders, Malhar Samitis, Forest Rights Committees and hundreds of farmers who have contributed their wisdom, labour and leadership over the years.

They are not participants in restoration. They are its custodians.
They knew this landscape long before we arrived, and they will continue caring for it long after our work is complete.

Thank you to the field teams: who walked in the harsh sun and the lashing rain, up the mountains and down into the valleys, and then went back and did it again the following season. What is reported in these pages is your credit. You made it possible.

To the technical experts, who taught us to read this landscape properly.

To the partners, who made the work stronger than we could have made it alone.

And to the communities, who made it possible at all.

Raah is grateful for their passion, and compassion — and most of all for a determination to protect, preserve, renew and rejuvenate that has never once depended on anyone watching.

> "We don't inherit abundance. We inherit scarcity."

Rohini had said it about her mother, who had waited before her.

And she said it about her daughter, who she was certain would wait after her.

Sayali

Sayali is grown now. She lives in Zap — another village in this landscape, another place where the well has been rejuvenated, farms stabilised with natural farming, slopes above have been treated, the commons rested, the water taught to stay.

The well in Zap holds water all year.

She does not wait at it.

The cycle Rohini described — mother, daughter, and her daughter after her, each standing in front of the same well — stopped.

It stopped because a hillside was allowed to hold its rain, and because the people living on that hillside decided it was worth keeping.

Ten Years

Umbervangan graduated in 2016.

It took three years to get it there. It has now governed its own water, its own farms and commons and its own land for ten years.

That is the only test of this work that means anything, and it is the one often asked: what happens when you leave?

We left. It held.

Rohini was right about scarcity.

She was wrong about her daughter.

That is the work.

That is all the work has ever been.

> ***"Whatever I dig from you, O Earth, may that have quick regeneration again; may we not injure your vitals, or your heart.***
>
> — Prithvi Sukta, Atharva Veda, 12.1.35

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