

**Internship
at
Urmul Setu – Lunkaransar**

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**Post Graduate Diploma in Rural Management
2012-2014**



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Jaipur
2014**

Bikaner district, having a population of 1,673,562 is spread over an area of over 27,244-sq. km. in northwestern Rajasthan bordering Pakistan. The area forms part of the Great Indian Thar.

The Thar Desert has never been hospitable to large permanent settlements due to environmental constraints such as: grossly impoverished soils, seasonal high wind velocity, winds creating acute soil erosion, continuously shifting sand dunes, and very deep and saline water resources (300-500ft).

Lunkaransar and Chhatargarh are one of the backward blocks of Bikaner Districts. Sardarsahar is one of the backward blocks of the churu District. The interior villages of this block still lack access to the basic necessities of education, health, water, communication infrastructure, and employment opportunities. The block comprises 110 revenue villages with a total population of 1,56,382. The revenue villages do not take into consideration the numerous smaller settlements near the agricultural fields/ canal (*Dhanis*) that are so typical of this part of the state. The ranns of Lunkaransar are the major saline depressions.

Urmul Setu – Lunkaransar

Urmul Setu took birth as a result of the decentralisation process of Urmul Trust. It was registered as a separate organisation in the year 1994 under the Society Registration Act. The programmes in the Lunkaransar block were being carried under the name of Trust prior to this. The projects thereby had separate management boards, which had membership from eminent persons at the state and national level as well as from the communities with whom the Trust works. This decentralization brought to the fore enhanced community involvement. URMUL Setu is today led by local people from the region. Lunkaransar and chhatargarh is the most backward block in the district. Saradarsahar is the most backward block in churu districts. The interior villages of

this block still lack access to the basic necessities of education, health, water, communication infrastructure, and employment opportunities. The revenue villages do not take into consideration the numerous smaller settlements near the agricultural fields/ canal (*Dhanis*) that are so typical of this part of the state. Milk production, sheep rearing for wool, and subsistence farming are the primary economic activities of the area. There has been a switch to cash crops, and a disbandment of grazing lands. Severe water logging in many previously fertile areas has displaced a large number of farmers. Additionally, a vicious cycle of indebtedness sets in, given the inability of farmers to sustain their investments from their agricultural income. The allotment of erstwhile grazing lands further deters farmers from considering animal husbandry as a livelihood option. Over a period of time, both lands as well as people's lives have deteriorated. Marginalised, small and middle farmers who are unable to both hold onto and cultivate their lands have been worst affected. With the settlement of farmers into dispersed hamlets, and with the 12 month farming routine, women find themselves increasingly overworked and socially isolated. Some or the other part of the block is always under drought like conditions because of irregular rainfall. This gives rise to large scale migration (almost 30 % of the total population) every year. Though this gives them enough opportunity to survive, it has obvious long-term repercussions in the areas of health and education of the family members, especially child and mother. And if there is a good agricultural harvest in a year, the proceeds are either spent in expensive social rituals (like *Mrityu Bhoj* and marriage), or given to the moneylender as instalments for the debts incurred. As mentioned before, the problems of rain fed and irrigated areas are different. The farmers in the rain fed region remain completely unaware of the latest techniques, research, and applications in the field. They become dependent on seeds, fertilizers and pesticides available in the market on the recommendations of the unscrupulous agents

without being aware of their utility, quality or dosage. This more often lands them in heavy investment without adequate returns. The poor in the region have an altogether different problem. They have been allotted land that requires heavy investment to become fit for irrigation. The farmers resort to loans from moneylenders at usurious rates. One more reason for the small farmers approaching the moneylender is that they are unable to plough in working capital into their fields on a sustained basis. And usually when they are unable to repay the loans taken, sell their land at throw away prices. Unavailability of enough water in the canal has further compounded their problems.

Education at Urmul Setu Sansthan

URMUL Trust was a pioneer in initiating education initiatives in the harsh and interior terrain of Bikaner district. The roots of the education programme as we see now can be traced back to efforts that began almost a decade and a half earlier. The education programme primarily focuses on ensuring that all the children in the age group of 6 to 14 years attend school. The program aims to work in cooperation with Government schools to enhance capacity of the teachers at the primary level. It organises residential literacy camp (balika Shivar) for middle, secondary and high secondary level girls' students. Education still struggles to be a part of mainstream.