



# WATER SEEKERS'

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## FELLOWSHIP 2020

# | About the Fellowship

According to the World Bank, India is one of the most water-stressed countries in the world. If the looming water crisis is left unchecked, around half of the demand for water will be unmet by 2030. India's [per capita availability](#) of water is predicted to decline from 1,544 cubic meters in 2011 to 1,465 cubic meters in 2025. Moreover, the unfolding of the climate crisis - [erratic monsoons, prolonged dry spells and extreme rainfall events](#) - will have an adverse impact on water ecosystems in India. Global warming is further expected to enhance the hydrological cycle, leading to higher rates of evaporation, and an unprecedented rise in liquid precipitation. Such changes in precipitation will not only adversely affect [soil moisture and groundwater reserves](#) but will also exert pressure on India's predominantly agriculture-dependent economy, and in turn, food and nutrition security and livelihoods, especially for the poor, women and marginalised. As competition for water increases, the everyday vulnerabilities of those inhabiting the margins with unequal access to water, productive resources or the institutions and systems that support resilience, will be further accentuated.

To address the growing demand for water for industrial, agricultural and domestic purposes, the first National Policy on Water was introduced in 1987 by the Ministry of Water Resources. Since then, the policy has been amended several times; the latest amendment was approved in 2012 and is currently undergoing another revision steered by a committee of water practitioners and professionals. However, since water is a state subject, a uniform national policy does not take into account the unique geographical and agro-ecological characteristics of different Indian states. This, in turn, poses certain region-specific challenges of inefficient water management which are often left unaddressed in the current water policies. Moreover, given the recent thrust on the economic valuation of water, national policies have failed to learn from traditional or indigenous knowledge systems on decentralised innovative water conservation systems and their management, nor have they been able to mobilise local communities as legitimate stakeholders in water governance. Additionally, the discourse on participation has overlooked the diversity of competing water uses and users, particularly the needs and priorities of women engaged in agriculture, livelihoods and the care economy, as well as the intersection of gender with other socio-economic marginalization based on poverty, caste, class, land ownership, age and ability.

For centuries, embedded in cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems, traditional water harvesting systems have played a critical role in shaping the landscape of water conservation in India. From the Haveli system in Madhya Pradesh to Zing in Ladakh, traditional water systems have demonstrated the efficacy of water management techniques - [of the people, by the people](#). Over the years, with the advent of innovative technologies, there have been several modern adaptations of traditional techniques such as water wheels or [gharats](#) in Uttaranchal. However, as a consequence of an ineffective and disjointed relationship between local communities and formal institutions of local governance, the bureaucratisation of water-wisdom and the subsequent undermining of local water conservation practices, decentralised water technologies have failed to gain any legal recognition. Therefore, such indigenous water-management systems are more often than not, outliers in the water-policy landscape in India.

# | Proposed Research and Storytelling on our Water Heritage

Employing text-based research supported by data visualisation and storytelling, the Social and Political Research Foundation (SPRF), New Delhi and the Living Waters Museum (LWM) at Ahmedabad University seek to bring the significance of diverse decentralised water technology and practices back into the conversation surrounding the future of water-policy in India. By drawing upon a historical trajectory of water conservation policies and the uncertainty posed by climate change, we seek to explore the relevance of our water-wisdom and assess its potential role in re-shaping the water conservation landscape in different parts of the country in the context of the [Jal Jeevan Mission](#) and its objectives to revive 'secondary' water sources. However, we need a nuanced understanding of traditional systems as they were also sites of social exclusion based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity and faith. This research will be used to curate a series of visual narratives on our water heritage for our youth and children as future 'keepers of our waters'. In doing so, we will build on a repository of past work in this area including path-breaking books such as [Dying Wisdom \(1997\)](#) and children's water stories by [Tara Books](#) rooted in mythology, folklore and art.

## | About SPRF

SPRF is a youth-led public policy think-tank headquartered in Delhi, focused on social and political research. At SPRF, we strive to be evidence-based and solutions-oriented, guided by the ideals of democracy that emerged in India post-Independence. Our work engages with and encourages youth to ask relevant questions, with our research falling under five broad umbrella themes: Security, Human Rights, Governance, Environment, and Rural Economy. Through our research, outreach, and events, our organisation seeks to deliberate and discuss the idea of an India where public policy is strengthened by fact, and not steered by opinion.

## | About LWM

The Living Waters Museum, a digital platform, was launched in September 2017, to research, document and curate the rich and diverse traditions of water heritage and practices in India and build a repository of visualized knowledge, which can commemorate the past, inspire the present and be a source of learning for the future. The process of developing the virtual museum is collaborative and interdisciplinary, engaging young people in project-based learning, essentially storytelling, around the many dimensions of water heritage, and its intersection with livelihoods, natural and built environments and the creative arts. LWM is a part of the Global Network of Water Museums, endorsed by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Hydrological Program in 2018, as a special initiative to foster greater awareness of water justice, equity and sustainability towards Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water and sanitation.