WASSAN — The Network That Taught Dryland India to Share Water

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Rayalaseema in southwest Andhra Pradesh averages 270 dry days a year and just 35 days with measurable rainfall. In this landscape, a borewell is not an investment — it is survival. And because it is survival, each farmer drills deeper and pumps faster than his neighbour, creating the groundwater depletion spiral that has made one of India's most agriculturally stressed regions progressively more stressed over decades.

WASSAN — the Watershed Support Services and Activities Network — has spent three decades working in dryland India on the premise that the problem is not the drought and not the borewell, but the absence of institutions through which communities can govern water collectively. Where no institution exists, every farmer's rational individual decision degrades the commons that every farmer depends on. Build the institution, and the rational decision changes.

Who They Are

WASSAN is a support organisation and network founded in 1995 in Hyderabad, working primarily in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and across India's rainfed farming areas — supporting NGOs, government programmes, and farmer communities working on watershed development, sustainable agriculture, and rural livelihoods. They work at the intersection of three functions: direct technical assistance to communities, capacity building for partner NGOs, and policy advocacy for rainfed farming at state

and national levels.

Their specific geography — Andhra Pradesh and Telangana's dryland regions, tribal areas across central India, the Deccan Plateau — overlaps significantly with the conditions facing Odisha's KBK (Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput) districts, which share the characteristics of erratic rainfall, high tribal population, and structural agricultural vulnerability.

The Groundwater Collectivisation Programme

WASSAN's Groundwater Collectivisation Programme in Rayalaseema is documented in a 2025 EDF (Environmental Defense Fund) and WELL Labs research study — one of the most rigorous recent evaluations of a community water governance programme in India.

The results: in 2011, before the programme, only one-third of participating farmers cultivated rabi (winter) crops because groundwater access was too uncertain. By 2023-24, 51 percent of groundwater collective members reported cultivating rabi crops — an 18 percent increase in the ability to grow a second crop per year. Farmers in groundwater collectives also reduced cultivation of water-intensive crops, improving long-term aquifer sustainability. Farm profits showed a slight but measurable increase for collective members compared to non-members.

The mechanism: WASSAN helped farmers form water collectives through formal sharing agreements — replacing competitive individual well drilling with negotiated group access. The institution is simple. The behaviour change it produces is transformational for communities where the difference between one crop per year and two crops per year is the difference between subsistence and surplus.

Tribal Backyard Poultry: The Unexpected Livelihood

WASSAN's work in high-rainfall tribal areas — which face dry spells and droughts alongside overall high rainfall — led to an unexpected livelihood intervention that has been successfully scaled: Tribal Backyard Poultry with Desi (indigenous) breeds. The innovation is specifically about breed choice. Commercial broiler breeds require purchased feed and controlled conditions. Desi breeds thrive on household scraps, insects, and free-ranging in forest-adjacent land — exactly the conditions available to tribal households.

WASSAN documents this as one of their most successfully scaled tribal livelihood programmes. It is low-risk (small capital), nutritionally valuable (protein and eggs for household consumption), and income-generating (surplus birds and eggs for sale) simultaneously.

The Policy Contribution: Millets and ICDS

WASSAN's advocacy for millet inclusion in government nutrition programmes — specifically the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) in Andhra Pradesh's tribal districts — builds on their field evidence that millets are more nutritionally appropriate, more drought-resilient, and more connected to tribal food cultures than the rice and wheat that dominate government feeding programmes. Their pilot initiatives for millet inclusion in ICDS are built on earlier successful experiences and are part of the broader Odisha Millet Mission evidence base.

Why This Matters for Odisha

WASSAN's work in rainfed tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana is directly applicable to Odisha's KBK districts. The groundwater collectivisation model is relevant to Bolangir, Nuapada, and Kalahandi's water-scarce blocks. The millet-ICDS advocacy experience is directly relevant to Odisha's own Millet Mission implementation. The

tribal backyard poultry model has been successfully implemented in Odisha contexts by partner organisations drawing on WASSAN's technical support.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: wassan.org | **Contact:** Hyderabad, Telangana

Key evidence:

- EDF/WELL Labs research study (October 2025): Groundwater Collectivisation Programme — 18% increase in rabi cultivation, farm profit improvements, documented 2011-2024
- WASSAN website: wassan.org — Tribal Backyard Poultry, millet ICDS pilot, tribal areas programme
- CGIAR: Natural farming model assessment conducted in partnership with WASSAN (2023)
