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Assessment Of Check Dams as Sustainable Structures for Groundwater Recharge Enhancement

Dr. Rakesh Kulkarni
Associate Professor
Department of Water Resources Engineering
Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur
Email: rakesh.kulkarni@vnit.ac.in

Ms. Sneha Iyer
M.Tech Student
Department of Civil Engineering
College of Engineering, Pune
Email: sneha.iyer@coep.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Check dams are small, cost-effective hydraulic structures widely used in India to augment groundwater recharge, prevent soil erosion, and improve water availability in drought-prone areas. This study presents a comprehensive evaluation of the performance of check dams based on hydrogeological, structural, and social parameters. Using a combination of field data, infiltration tests, and spatial analysis across three districts in Maharashtra—Pune, Nashik, and Solapur—this study investigates the factors influencing recharge potential and maintenance needs. Key performance indicators such as siltation rates, groundwater rise, and seasonal storage are assessed. The results highlight the importance of catchment characteristics, construction quality, and community participation in ensuring sustainable outcomes. The paper further proposes a decision-support framework using GIS and remote sensing tools for optimal site selection and long-term monitoring. This research contributes valuable insights for *planners, policymakers, and water resource managers striving for integrated rural water management.*

Keywords: *Check Dams, Groundwater Recharge, Infiltration Analysis, Rural Hydrology, GIS, Siltation, Performance Metrics*

1. INTRODUCTION

India faces growing water scarcity due to erratic rainfall, increasing population, and overexploitation of groundwater. In semi-arid and arid regions, small water harvesting structures like check dams play a pivotal role in capturing surface runoff and promoting percolation. Check dams are often built across small streams or natural drains with low discharge to store rainwater temporarily and facilitate infiltration. Despite widespread implementation under government schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), there is limited empirical evidence evaluating their long-term performance.

This paper aims to assess the effectiveness of check dams constructed in diverse agro-climatic regions by focusing on key parameters such as groundwater recharge, siltation accumulation, seasonal storage, and community impact. The results provide a basis for refining design approaches and ensuring better utilization of financial and natural resources.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Site Selection

The study includes 15 check dams across three districts: Pune (Western Maharashtra), Solapur (Southern Maharashtra), and Nashik (Northern Maharashtra). These regions exhibit varying rainfall patterns, geology (basaltic vs. alluvial), and land use. A mix of old (5+ years) and recently constructed check dams was selected to analyze long-term impacts.

2.2 Data Collection

Data collection methods included:

- Groundwater level monitoring via piezometers (pre- and post-monsoon for 3 years)
- Infiltration tests using double-ring infiltrometers
- Soil texture analysis

- Water quality testing (EC, pH)
- Community interviews
- Silt depth measurements using staff gauges

2.3 GIS and Remote Sensing

GIS was used to delineate catchment areas and evaluate land use changes. Remote sensing tools (Sentinel-2A imagery) helped monitor water spread area post-construction.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Groundwater Recharge

The mean rise in groundwater table during the post-monsoon period was found to be **1.1 to 3.5 meters**, depending on soil type and structure longevity. Older check dams with regular maintenance showed better recharge performance.

3.2 Siltation and Storage Reduction

The annual silt deposition ranged from **10–18 cm/year**, significantly reducing storage capacity within 5–7 years post-construction. Structures without silt traps experienced faster degradation.

3.3 Infiltration Performance

Infiltration rates were directly proportional to surrounding soil porosity. Basaltic regions showed lower infiltration (1.8–2.5 mm/hr) compared to sandy alluvial areas (4.3–6.2 mm/hr).

3.4 Socioeconomic Benefits

Farmers near functioning check dams reported:

- **Increase in cropping intensity** (single to double crop annually)
- **Reduced irrigation costs**
- **Improved drinking water availability**

Community-led maintenance programs had higher success and longevity rates.

Table 1: Performance Metrics for Selected Check Dams

Location	Recharge Efficiency (%)	Siltation (cm/year)	Groundwater Rise (m)
Pune (Velhe)	72.5	12.4	2.9
Solapur (Karmala)	65.0	16.1	1.8
Nashik (Trimbak)	81.3	10.5	3.5

Table 1 indicates that check dams in Nashik, with higher rainfall and permeable soils, exhibit better recharge and lesser siltation compared to Solapur.

4. DESIGN AND MAINTENANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Silt Traps and Spillways:** Installation of silt traps upstream significantly reduces deposition within the dam area.
- **Vegetative Buffer Zones:** Plantation along banks stabilizes soil and reduces erosion.
- **Regular Desilting:** Scheduled desilting (every 2 years) maintains effective storage capacity.
- **Community Monitoring:** Engaging local users in data collection and simple monitoring (e.g., water depth markers) improves accountability.
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5. GIS-BASED SITE SUITABILITY ANALYSIS

GIS tools can enhance planning by integrating multiple layers:

- **Slope and Drainage Density**
- **Soil Permeability**
- **Land Use/Land Cover**
- **Proximity to Settlements and Wells**

A weighted overlay analysis can identify high-priority locations. Coupled with DEM data, this method ensures optimum water retention and recharge impact.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

- **Lack of Baseline Data:** Many structures lack initial hydrogeological data, limiting exact quantification.
- **Structural Failures:** Poor construction in some cases led to early breaches.
- **Climate Variability:** Rainfall unpredictability affects performance consistency.

Future research should include:

- **Numerical modeling (e.g., MODFLOW)** for recharge estimation
- **Drone-based surveillance** for maintenance tracking
- **AI-based classification** for remote structure assessment
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7. CONCLUSION

Check dams offer a viable, low-cost method to address groundwater depletion when implemented with proper planning and community involvement. This study demonstrates that hydrogeological factors, coupled with maintenance and monitoring, significantly impact their performance. Integrating modern tools like GIS and remote sensing with participatory approaches can maximize their effectiveness and guide policy formulation for sustainable rural water resource management.

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