March 14. – Can sheep rearing help the drought-hit villagers to come out of the rain and crop failure shock? Well, ask the farmers of 12 villages of Gajner block in Bikaner, who have made possible what state government agencies considered ‘not feasible’ five years ago – at least impossible if the state is facing five consecutive droughts.

The villagers in a joint effort, made a Common Facility Centre for the owner of 25,000 sheep in Gajner to save them from the clutches of middle-men, increased their productivity, and doubled their earnings. To many the calculation is still a wonder – even to the person who introduced the “sheep model of drought proofing for Western Rajasthan”.

“It is just amazing, even I had not thought that it would show such remarkable results in Bikaner. Today the villagers have enough money, do not require financial assistance from government agencies or employment generation schemes to their villages,” says Mr Sunil Ray of Institute of Development Studies, who did a five-year-long intensive research on sheep rearing opportunities in Rajasthan and introduced this model for ‘drought proofing’.

The model is simple to understand, but hard to implement. The villagers formed an association of sheep reapers, approached state veterinary doctors for vaccination of sheep, made a common platform for drinking water and other facilities.

“And what more they sheared their sheep herds jointly, shorted the wool as per its quality, and sold it through an open tender. The result was remarkable. Besides saving their time in going to wool market, the farmers got about 30 per cent more than the normal price,” revealed Mr Upendra K Singh of Centre for Development Communication and Studies, who took the initiative in implementing the ‘model’ in Gajner.

“Only money is not important, you cannot calculate the time we save and the harassment we face through these middlemen. Besides, we now have one window for treatment of our sheep herds. This has reduced our sheep maintenance cost to almost 20 per cent,” said Mr Sugha Ram of Golri village in Gajner. Another change in their lifestyle is that a good number of villagers have stopped migrating during summers. “Normally, we used to migrate during summer in search of water and fodder. In severe drought like this you would hardly find any sheep herds in villages. Now you can see the change”, he explains.

However, for Bhopal Singh of Kotra village in Gajner – money, migration or management of sheep herds is not the remarkable change, “Five years ago there were only 10 students in our school, very few used to send their children to school.

The kids used to spent most of their time in transporting water, or looking after sheep herds. Their parents were mostly busy in earning their bread and butter. Thanks to the CDECS, the parents have realised the importance of education and sending their kids to schools. Today our school attendance have improved more than four times”, said Mr Bhopal Singh proudly.

In 1993, the villagers had over a lakh sheep, but since they were not getting adequate price for the wool, they started selling sheep to get the cash. As a result the number was reduced to mere 25,000 in by 1997. “Ever since we took up this project, the sheep number is increase, though the change is not very high, because it takes time in increasing the strength. We are hopeful that it would attain its 1993 position in another five year’s time”, comments Mr Upendra Singh.

The state government agencies should understand that sheep rearing is the best profession for drought-prone western Rajasthan. Because of low humidity and high temperature, it has the best climate for rearing, comments Mr Sunil Ray adding, “Secondly we get good quality wool here.”

At a time when almost half of our wool requirement is met through import. Promotion of wool in Rajasthan is best to save foreign reserve and generate employment in drought prone areas, Mr Upendra adds – and what the villagers of these drought prone areas need is drinking water and vaccination for their herds, a common facility centre for shearing and storage.