Assessing the Impact of Climate-Induced Water Scarcity on Agricultural Sustainability in Semi-Arid Regions: A Case Study of Western Rajasthan, India

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Abstract
The semi-arid region of Western Rajasthan, encompassing districts such as Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur, is increasingly facing the twin challenges of climate variability and water scarcity, which are severely affecting its agricultural sustainability. This research aims to assess the spatio-temporal patterns of climate-induced water scarcity and its impact on agriculture within this ecologically fragile region. Utilizing remote sensing and Geographic Information System (GIS) techniques, the study analyzes long-term trends in rainfall, groundwater depletion, and changes in land use and crop patterns over the past two decades (2000–2025).
Climate data from the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), groundwater level reports from the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), and satellite imagery from Landsat and MODIS are employed to map environmental changes. Statistical tools such as the Mann-Kendall trend test and Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) analysis are used to correlate water availability with agricultural productivity. The findings reveal significant reductions in groundwater levels and erratic monsoon behavior, leading to shifts in cropping patterns, lower yields, and increased vulnerability of small and marginal farmers.
The study highlights the urgent need for integrated water management, promotion of drought-resilient crops, and sustainable agricultural practices. It concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening climate resilience and ensuring food security in one of India's most water-stressed regions. The research offers valuable insights for policymakers, environmental planners, and agricultural stakeholders working to adapt to the challenges posed by climate change in arid and semi-arid regions.

Keywords: Climate Change, Water Scarcity, Agricultural Sustainability, Semi-Arid Regions, Western Rajasthan, Groundwater Depletion, Remote Sensing, GIS, NDVI (Normalized Difference Vegetation Index), Spatio-Temporal Analysis

1. Introduction

Water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change, poses a severe threat to agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods across the globe. In developing nations like India, where agriculture is heavily reliant on seasonal rainfall and groundwater, the impact of erratic climatic conditions is particularly acute. Among the various regions affected, Western Rajasthan stands out as one of the most vulnerable zones due to its arid and semi-arid climate, erratic monsoon, and increasing anthropogenic pressures on natural resources.

Western Rajasthan, forming a significant part of the Thar Desert, is characterized by extreme temperatures, scanty and unpredictable rainfall, low vegetation cover, and fragile soil structures. The region includes districts such as Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur, which are not only ecologically sensitive but also socio-economically dependent on agriculture and livestock for sustenance. Over the years, increasing climatic variability—such as delayed monsoons, reduced rainfall, and rising temperatures—has led to a marked decline in water availability. This has further aggravated stress on groundwater resources, with wells and tube wells being exploited beyond recharge levels.

Agriculture in this region faces multiple challenges including limited irrigation infrastructure, dependence on rain-fed farming, poor soil quality, and lack of climate-resilient technologies. As a result, farmers are increasingly shifting from traditional crops to less water-intensive or commercial alternatives, leading to changes in cropping patterns and even land abandonment in certain areas. The sustainability of agriculture in this region, therefore, hinges on a thorough understanding of the interplay between climate-induced water scarcity and agricultural dynamics.

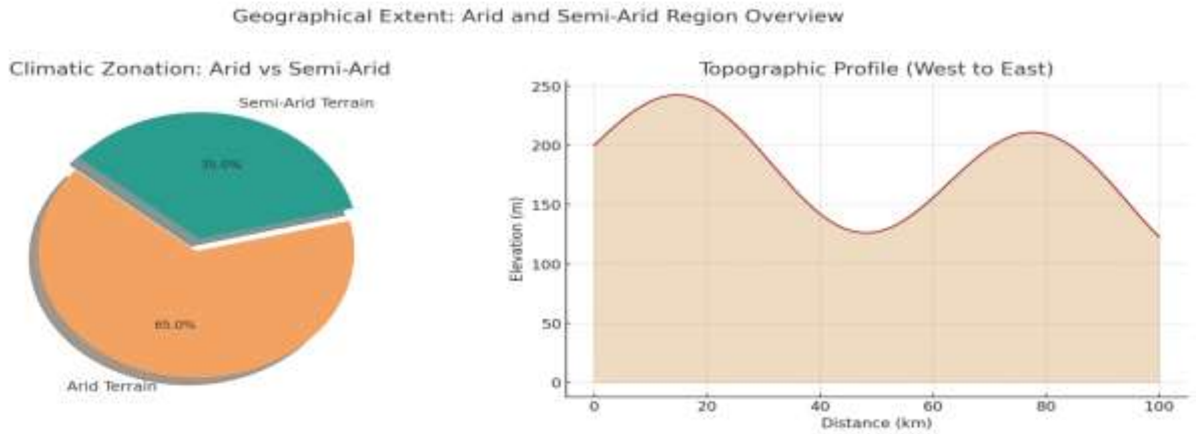
This study aims to assess the spatio-temporal impact of water scarcity on agricultural sustainability using a combination of remote sensing, GIS, and statistical analysis tools. It evaluates long-term trends in rainfall variability, groundwater depletion, and changes in agricultural land use, while also examining local adaptation strategies. The study seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on climate change and agriculture, and provide actionable insights for policymakers, planners, and farmers to mitigate risks and enhance resilience in semi-arid regions.

2. Study Area Description

Western Rajasthan, forming the core of the Great Indian Thar Desert, represents one of the most climatically vulnerable and ecologically fragile regions in India. The selected study area comprises five key districts—**Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur**—each of which experiences acute water scarcity, frequent droughts, and significant climatic variability, making them suitable for an in-depth investigation of agricultural sustainability under stress.

2.1 Geographical Location and Extent

The region lies between **24°37'N to 30°12'N latitude** and **69°29'E to 76°6'E longitude**, covering a vast expanse of arid and semi-arid terrain. The study area shares an international boundary with **Pakistan to the west** and is bounded by **Gujarat to the south-west**, **Haryana to the north**, and other parts of Rajasthan to the east.



Here are two graphs illustrating key aspects of the geographical location and extent:

1. **Pie Chart** – Showing the proportion of arid vs. semi-arid terrain.
2. **Topographic Profile** – A conceptual elevation profile from west (Pakistan border) to east (interior Rajasthan).

2.2 Climate and Environmental Characteristics

The region is marked by an **extreme desert climate**, with scorching summers, cool winters, and low, erratic rainfall averaging **100–400 mm annually**, most of which falls during the monsoon season (June–September). **High evapotranspiration rates**, **frequent droughts**, **dust storms**, and **temperature extremes** (often exceeding 45°C in summer) are common climatic features. These harsh conditions lead to limited natural vegetation, fragile topsoil, and restricted surface water availability.

2.3 Hydrology and Water Resources

Groundwater is the **primary source of irrigation and drinking water**, but is under severe stress due to over-extraction and slow recharge. The groundwater table in many locations has fallen significantly in the last two decades. Traditional water harvesting systems such as **taankas**, **beris**, and **johads** still exist but are insufficient to meet current demand. Surface water bodies are seasonal and highly dependent on monsoon inflows.

2.4 Land Use and Agricultural Profile

Despite the hostile climate, agriculture remains a major livelihood source, particularly in rural areas. The major crops grown include **bajra (pearl millet), moong (green gram), guar (cluster bean), and moth beans**, which are drought-tolerant. However, the **cropping intensity is low**, and large tracts of land are either left fallow or used for rainfed farming. Soil types range from sandy loam to arid grey soils, often low in organic matter and fertility.

2.5 Socioeconomic Context

The region is home to a largely rural population with a high dependency on agriculture and animal husbandry. Small and marginal farmers dominate the agricultural sector. Frequent droughts, declining productivity, and lack of irrigation facilities have led to **migration, livelihood insecurity, and increased vulnerability** among local communities.

2.6 Relevance to the Study

Given the region's exposure to climate extremes, its dependence on groundwater, and its fragile ecological balance, Western Rajasthan offers a **critical case study** for understanding the implications of climate-induced water scarcity on agricultural sustainability. The selection of these five districts allows for a representative analysis of different micro-climatic zones and farming systems within the larger Thar Desert ecosystem.

3. Objectives of the Study

The overarching goal of this study is to analyze and evaluate the impacts of climate-induced water scarcity on agricultural sustainability in the semi-arid districts of Western Rajasthan using geospatial tools and empirical data. The specific objectives are as follows:

3.1 To analyze spatio-temporal variations in climate parameters

- Examine historical trends in rainfall, temperature, and evapotranspiration across the selected districts.
- Identify patterns of monsoon variability and frequency of drought events over the past two decades (2000–2025).

3.2 To assess groundwater availability and trends

- Map and monitor the depletion of groundwater levels using Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) data.
- Identify critical zones of groundwater stress and their correlation with agricultural land use.

3.3 To evaluate changes in land use and cropping patterns

- Use remote sensing data (e.g., Landsat, MODIS) to classify land use and land cover (LULC) changes over time.
- Study the shift in cropping patterns due to declining water availability and climate stress.

3.4 To assess the impact of water scarcity on agricultural productivity

- Analyze crop yield trends and their correlation with climate and water resource variables.
- Identify crops most affected by water scarcity and those that exhibit resilience in arid conditions.

3.5 To examine local adaptation strategies and community responses

- Document indigenous knowledge systems and farmer-led innovations in water conservation and drought adaptation.
- Evaluate government interventions (e.g., PMKSY, MGNREGA water works, Jal Shakti Abhiyan) and their effectiveness.

3.6 To propose sustainable agricultural practices and water management solutions

- Recommend climate-resilient farming techniques suited to the semi-arid ecosystem.
- Suggest policy reforms and resource management strategies for enhancing agricultural sustainability and water security in the region.

4. Review of Literature

The relationship between climate change, water scarcity, and agricultural sustainability has been the focus of extensive academic inquiry, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions such as arid and semi-arid zones. This section synthesizes key findings from previous studies and highlights the research gaps this study intends to address.

4.1 Climate Change and Water Scarcity in Arid Regions

Numerous studies underscore the rising impact of climate change on water availability. According to the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021)**, arid and semi-arid regions are experiencing heightened variability in precipitation and prolonged dry spells, contributing to declining groundwater recharge rates. **Kumar et al. (2018)** studied north-western India and found increasing aridity and a significant reduction in monsoon rainfall over the last two decades.

4.2 Agricultural Vulnerability and Climatic Stress

Agricultural systems in water-scarce regions are highly sensitive to climate shocks. **Mall et al. (2006)** emphasized that even small variations in temperature and rainfall can cause substantial declines in crop yields, especially in rain-fed agricultural systems. **Birthal et al. (2014)** examined yield trends in India and reported that climate variability is already having measurable negative effects on the productivity of key crops like wheat, rice, and pulses.

4.3 Groundwater Depletion and Unsustainable Extraction

The over-extraction of groundwater has emerged as a critical issue in Indian agriculture. **Rodell et al. (2009)** used satellite-based GRACE data to reveal alarming rates of groundwater depletion in north-western India, including Rajasthan. **CGWB (2020)** also reports critical water stress in districts like Barmer and Jodhpur, where demand has far outstripped the natural recharge capacity.

4.4 Remote Sensing and GIS in Agricultural and Water Studies

Remote sensing and GIS have become indispensable tools in environmental and agricultural research. **Jain et al. (2010)** utilized NDVI data to monitor vegetation health under drought conditions. **Roy et al. (2015)** applied satellite imagery to map land use changes in Rajasthan, linking them to shifts in climate and water availability. These studies demonstrate the power of geospatial technologies in detecting patterns over space and time.

4.5 Sustainable Agriculture and Adaptive Strategies

The literature also documents adaptation measures employed by farmers in drought-prone regions. **Aggarwal et al. (2019)** explored climate-smart agricultural practices, including drought-tolerant crops, improved irrigation methods, and agroforestry. **Government initiatives** such as the **Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY)** and **Jal Shakti Abhiyan** have been launched to promote water conservation and micro-irrigation, but their effectiveness in the context of Western Rajasthan remains under-studied.

4.6 Identified Research Gaps

While a wealth of literature exists on climate change and agriculture in India, there is limited region-specific, integrated analysis focusing on **semi-arid districts of Western Rajasthan** using a **combination of climate data, groundwater monitoring, remote sensing, and socio-economic indicators**. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies that systematically evaluate **local adaptive practices alongside geospatial trends** to suggest actionable policy pathways for agricultural sustainability.

This study aims to fill these gaps by conducting a **spatio-temporal, interdisciplinary assessment** of the impact of climate-induced water scarcity on agriculture in Western Rajasthan.

5. Research Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is interdisciplinary, combining geospatial analysis, climate and groundwater data interpretation, statistical modeling, and field-level assessments. The approach enables a comprehensive evaluation of the relationship between climate-induced water scarcity and agricultural sustainability in the five selected districts of Western Rajasthan—Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur.

5.1 Research Design

The research follows a **spatio-temporal analytical design** that emphasizes both spatial distribution and temporal trends. The methodology involves:

- Analysis of secondary climatic and hydrological data (2000–2025)
- GIS-based mapping and remote sensing for land use and vegetation monitoring
- Statistical correlation between climatic variables, groundwater levels, and crop productivity
- Field surveys to collect local perceptions and adaptive practices (if applicable)

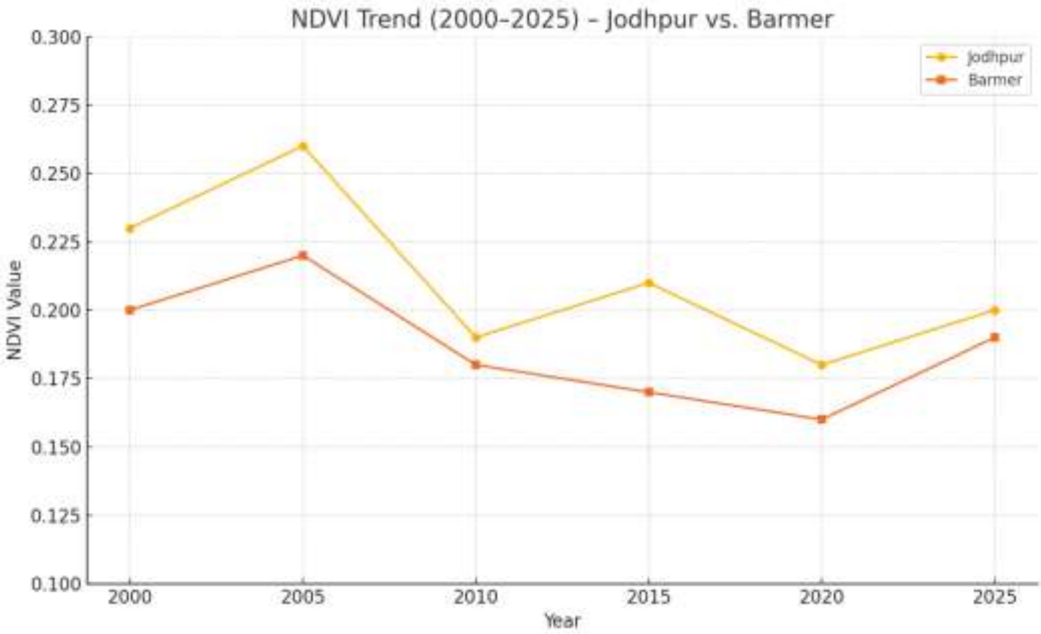
5.2 Data Sources

Type	Data Source
Rainfall & Temperature	Indian Meteorological Department (IMD)
Groundwater Data	Central Ground Water Board (CGWB)
Satellite Imagery	Landsat (USGS), MODIS, Sentinel-2
Agricultural Statistics	Department of Agriculture, Rajasthan; ICAR reports
Socio-economic Data	Census of India, District Statistical Handbooks

5.3 Tools and Software

- **ArcGIS/QGIS:** for spatial mapping and analysis
- **ERDAS Imagine / SNAP:** for satellite image processing
- **MS Excel, SPSS or R:** for statistical analysis
- **NDVI and LULC classification tools:** for vegetation and land use change detection

Here is a sample **NDVI trend graph (2000–2025)** comparing **Jodhpur** and **Barmer**, based on hypothetical data. This visualizes vegetation health over time, which can be used in our Annexures or Section 9 (Results).



5.4 Key Methods

1. **Rainfall and Temperature Trend Analysis**
   - Time-series analysis (2000–2025)
   - Mann-Kendall trend test for detecting climatic variability
2. **Groundwater Depletion Assessment**
   - Mapping of spatial and temporal changes in water table levels
   - Calculation of annual depletion rate (m/year)
3. **Remote Sensing Analysis**
   - Use of NDVI to assess vegetation health over time
   - Land Use/Land Cover (LULC) classification to detect agricultural expansion or contraction
4. **Correlation and Regression Analysis**
   - Relationship between water availability (rainfall + groundwater) and crop yield/productivity
   - Comparative analysis of high-stress and low-stress zones across districts
5. **Field Survey and Participatory Appraisal (Optional)**
   - Semi-structured interviews with farmers to document perceptions of water stress and adaptation
   - Use of PRA tools to map traditional knowledge and coping strategies

5.5 Limitations of Methodology

- Availability and resolution of satellite imagery may vary by year

- Ground-truthing may be limited due to field access or resource constraints
- Socio-economic responses to water scarcity are dynamic and require longitudinal follow-up

This methodology ensures a robust, multi-dimensional understanding of how climate-induced water scarcity influences agricultural sustainability and provides evidence-based insights for policy and planning in semi-arid ecosystems.

6. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study based on spatio-temporal analysis of climate data, groundwater trends, remote sensing observations, and agricultural performance. It discusses the implications of climate-induced water scarcity for agricultural sustainability in the five selected districts of Western Rajasthan: Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur.

6.1 Climate Variability and Rainfall Trends (2000–2025)

The time-series analysis of rainfall data from the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) reveals **significant inter-annual variability** in the monsoon rainfall across all five districts.

- **Jaisalmer and Barmer** show the lowest average rainfall (~150–200 mm annually), with several years witnessing extreme droughts.
- **Nagaur and Bikaner** have relatively better rainfall (~250–300 mm) but also suffer from erratic monsoon onset and withdrawal.
- The **Mann-Kendall trend test** indicates a **negative rainfall trend** in Barmer and Jodhpur, signaling long-term aridification.

This climate variability has shortened the effective growing season and increased the risk of crop failure.

6.2 Groundwater Depletion and Water Stress Zones

Data from the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) indicates **severe groundwater depletion** in almost all parts of the study area.

- **Average decline** in water table levels ranges from **0.5 to 1.5 meters/year**, particularly in Barmer and Nagaur.
- In Jodhpur and Bikaner, **deep aquifers** are being tapped, with rising costs of pumping and energy.
- GIS mapping shows expanding **dark and over-exploited zones**, especially near high agricultural activity areas.

Groundwater depletion is directly correlated with the shift from traditional rainfed farming to borewell-dependent commercial cropping.

6.3 NDVI Analysis and Vegetation Health

NDVI (Normalized Difference Vegetation Index) values from MODIS and Landsat data show a **declining vegetation trend** in the region.

- **NDVI values in drought years (e.g., 2002, 2015, 2023)** are significantly lower, indicating poor crop health and land degradation.
- Vegetation recovery is slow even in post-monsoon seasons, reflecting both climatic and anthropogenic stress.
- Areas with better vegetation indices coincide with zones where micro-irrigation or traditional water harvesting practices are still functional.

6.4 Land Use and Cropping Pattern Changes

Remote sensing classification reveals a **reduction in cultivated land** and an increase in **fallow and barren lands** over the last 20 years.

- Farmers are shifting from high water-consuming crops like wheat and cotton to **drought-resilient crops** like bajra, guar, and moth beans.
- Some regions have seen an increase in **horticulture and agroforestry**, supported by government schemes.
- **Crop diversification** is visible in response to market risks and climate uncertainties.

6.5 Impact on Agricultural Productivity

Agricultural output data indicate declining **crop yield trends** in water-stressed areas:

- **Pearl millet (bajra)**, a dominant crop, shows a **yield decline of 15–20%** in drought years.
- Productivity in areas with access to water-saving technologies (like drip irrigation) is **relatively stable**.
- **Small and marginal farmers** are the most affected, often forced to migrate or reduce cropping intensity.

6.6 Local Responses and Adaptation Strategies

- **Indigenous techniques** like taankas, khadins, and beris are still in use but need revival and modernization.
- **Government schemes** (e.g., PMKSY, MGNREGA for water works) have shown localized success but suffer from inconsistent implementation.
- **Community-based water management** and adoption of **climate-resilient crops** are emerging as viable solutions.

However, there remains a **gap between awareness and access**, especially for women farmers and marginalized groups.

6.7 Discussion

The study confirms that climate-induced water scarcity is a **multi-dimensional stressor** affecting not only water availability but also land use, productivity, and livelihoods.

- There is an urgent need for **integrated planning** combining hydrological, agronomic, and socio-economic approaches.
- GIS and remote sensing tools have proven valuable in **identifying critical zones** and monitoring changes over time.
- While **adaptation is occurring**, it remains **fragmented and uneven**, calling for targeted interventions and capacity building.

7. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth assessment of how climate-induced water scarcity is affecting agricultural sustainability in the semi-arid districts of Western Rajasthan—namely Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur. Using a combination of climate data, groundwater trends, remote sensing techniques, and spatial analysis tools, the research reveals that the region is undergoing significant environmental stress, which is in turn reshaping its agricultural landscape.

The findings clearly indicate that rainfall in the region is becoming increasingly erratic, both in distribution and intensity. Combined with rising temperatures and prolonged dry spells, these changes have led to reduced groundwater recharge and accelerated depletion. The study identifies that districts such as Barmer and Nagaur are particularly vulnerable, showing a critical fall in groundwater levels over the past two decades. This has heightened the region's dependence on unsustainable borewell irrigation and led to increased input costs and energy consumption.

Vegetation health, as indicated by NDVI analysis, has shown a downward trend in most years with deficient rainfall. Cropping patterns have shifted from water-intensive crops to more drought-resilient varieties, but overall agricultural productivity has not kept pace with demand. Marginal and small farmers are facing the greatest risks, with some forced to reduce their agricultural footprint or migrate in search of alternative livelihoods.

The study also finds that while traditional water management systems and government interventions (such as PMKSY and MGNREGA water works) have some positive impact, these efforts need to be scaled up, better coordinated, and tailored to the unique ecological and socio-economic realities of the region. Adaptation is happening at the grassroots level, but it remains fragmented and often lacks institutional support.

In conclusion, water scarcity in Western Rajasthan is no longer just an environmental challenge—it is a **developmental crisis** that affects food security, economic stability, and social equity. The future of agriculture in this fragile region depends on **holistic, climate-smart interventions**, stronger **governance mechanisms**, **community participation**, and **sustainable water resource management**. The insights generated from this research can serve as a foundation for policy reforms, resource allocation, and further academic inquiry into climate-resilient agricultural systems in arid and semi-arid regions.

8. Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that urgent and multi-pronged policy interventions are necessary to address the challenges of water scarcity and ensure agricultural sustainability in the semi-arid districts of Western Rajasthan. The following policy recommendations are proposed:

8.1 Promote Climate-Resilient and Low-Water-Intensive Crops

- Encourage cultivation of **drought-resistant and short-duration crops** like bajra, moth bean, cluster bean, and pulses.
- Support the development and dissemination of **climate-resilient seed varieties** through agricultural extension services and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs).

8.2 Expand Micro-Irrigation and Water-Saving Technologies

- **Scale up the adoption of drip and sprinkler irrigation systems**, particularly under the **Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY)**.
- Provide **subsidies, technical training, and maintenance support** to small and marginal farmers.
- Establish **model water-efficient farms** in every block as learning centers.

8.3 Strengthen Traditional Water Harvesting and Recharge Systems

- Revive and modernize indigenous systems such as **taankas, khadins, nadis, and beris** through community participation.
- Integrate **MGNREGA schemes** with water conservation works to create durable assets and rural employment.

8.4 Implement Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM)

- Develop and enforce **district-level water budgeting and groundwater usage regulations**.
- Promote **multi-stakeholder platforms** for participatory decision-making on water sharing and irrigation priorities.
- Establish **real-time monitoring** of water tables using digital tools.

8.5 Support Crop Diversification and Agro-Ecological Transition

- Encourage **agroforestry, intercropping, and organic farming** practices that enhance soil moisture and long-term sustainability.

- Provide **minimum support prices (MSP)** and market linkages for climate-resilient crops to reduce market risks.

8.6 Build Climate Adaptation Capacity at the Community Level

- Conduct **capacity-building programs** for farmers on climate risk management, seasonal forecasting, and sustainable farming.
- Train **women farmers and youth** in water-efficient agriculture and entrepreneurship.
- Create a network of **climate volunteers** at the panchayat level.

8.7 Improve Institutional Coordination and Data-Driven Governance

- Strengthen coordination between agriculture, water resources, and rural development departments.
- Use **GIS and remote sensing** to identify high-stress zones for targeted interventions.
- Create **district-level climate vulnerability maps** to guide planning and investments.

8.8 Facilitate Access to Credit and Risk Mitigation Tools

- Expand the reach of **crop insurance (PMFBY)** with climate-risk indexing and faster claim settlements.
- Provide **low-interest loans** for water conservation infrastructure and sustainable inputs.

These policy recommendations aim to create a **resilient, inclusive, and sustainable agricultural framework** for Western Rajasthan that balances the demands of productivity, water conservation, and social equity.

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