

Arghyam — The Philanthropy That Became a Water Policy Institution

Most philanthropic foundations follow a predictable trajectory: they identify a cause, make grants to organisations implementing programmes, measure the outcomes of those programmes, and repeat. The relationship between funder and grantee is clear, and the funder's influence is m...

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Published: May 2026 · Last reviewed: May 2026

Arghyam — meaning "offering" in Sanskrit, a foundation established by Rohini Nilekani in 2005 — has followed a different path. Over twenty years, it has evolved from a grant-making foundation for water and sanitation projects into an influential knowledge institution that shapes how India thinks about water governance — bringing governments, civil society, and technical experts together in ways that individual grants never could.

The evolution is instructive for any institution working at the intersection of philanthropy, civil society, and public systems.

Who They Are

Arghyam is a public charitable foundation based in Bengaluru that works exclusively on water — groundwater management, source sustainability, water quality, and community institutions for water governance. Since its founding in 2005, it has made grants to recipients in 22 states of India. It is the only domestic philanthropic organisation focused exclusively on water in India.

Their current mission: to work at the intersection of groundwater science, community governance, and digital technology — helping design institutions where digital tools support science, improve accountability, and make safe, reliable water a lived reality for rural communities.

Arghyam's 2018 strategic pivot is what distinguishes its current approach: they moved from neutral grant-making to explicit stance-taking, prioritising projects that demonstrate scale potential, digital technology integration, and community ownership. They became an advocate, not just a funder.

The Atal Bhujal Yojana Partnership

India's largest groundwater programme — Atal Bhujal Yojana (ABY) — is a Government of India

scheme covering 8,220 Gram Panchayats across seven states, focused on community participation in groundwater management. Arghyam is the long-term knowledge partner of the Department of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation for this programme.

The knowledge partnership means Arghyam is not implementing ABY — the government does that. Arghyam is designing the participatory model, the digital tools, the Community Resource Person capacity building, and the community governance systems that determine whether ABY's community sensitisation produces actual community ownership of groundwater management or merely nominal participation.

This is a specific form of civil society influence: not running programmes in parallel to government but embedding technical expertise and community engagement methodology inside the government's own flagship programme. The leverage is enormous — ABY's 8,220 Gram Panchayats would take any single NGO decades to reach. As a government knowledge partner, Arghyam's methodology reaches them all simultaneously.

The Mazhapolima Model

One of Arghyam's most documented early grants was Rs 60.67 lakh to the Mazhapolima programme in Kerala — a community-based decentralised well recharge programme in Thrissur district. The goal: recharge all open wells in the district ensuring sustainable access to water.

Mazhapolima's specific approach — connecting rooftop rainwater harvesting to open wells through individual household filters — became one of India's most cited community water recharge models. It achieved district-level scale through government-NGO partnership with Arghyam providing the initial catalytic funding and technical knowledge support.

Digital Technology as Governance Infrastructure

Arghyam's current emphasis on digital technology is not about digitising existing water management systems. It is about using technology to change the governance of water — making groundwater levels, water quality, and system performance data available to community institutions in ways that enable accountability.

Their Community Resource Person model empowers CRPs at every Gram Panchayat to support groundwater management as a community-owned exercise. The CRP is given both the science and the social skills to translate groundwater data — water table trends, seasonal variation, depletion patterns — into community decisions about extraction, recharge, and water use.

The "data commons" vision: open-source groundwater data accessible to all actors in the water sector — government, civil society, communities — enabling the kind of transparent, science-based water governance that makes entitlement real rather than theoretical.

Jal Jeevan Mission Integration

Arghyam's current programming specifically integrates with Jal Jeevan Mission — the Government of India's Rs 3.6 lakh crore programme to provide piped water to every rural household by 2024. A consortium of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), Water For People, and Arghyam is operationalising a scalable model of participatory operation and maintenance for around 600 water supply schemes in Muzaffarpur district, Bihar.

The O&M challenge — who maintains piped water systems once they are installed — is where JJM implementation most frequently fails. Communities receive pipes and taps but no institutional infrastructure for maintenance financing and governance. Arghyam's model builds the institutional infrastructure: water committees, tariff systems, technical capacities, and accountability mechanisms that make piped water reliable rather than episodic.

Why This Matters for Odisha

Odisha has significant groundwater challenges: seasonal depletion in drought-prone KBK districts, fluoride contamination in several districts, and the persistent gap between JJM installation and actual reliable supply. Arghyam's grants are open year-round to organisations working on groundwater and sanitation anywhere in India — including Odisha.

For JaBaSu's water-focused NGO partners — including Gram Vikas, which has worked with Arghyam in the past on WASH programming — Arghyam is the most relevant domestic philanthropic funder. Their criteria explicitly value community ownership, last-mile reach, sustainability of outcomes, and digitisation potential — criteria that Odisha's best water NGOs meet.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: arghyam.org | **For grant applications:** grants accepted year-round at arghyam.org | Bengaluru, Karnataka

Key evidence:

- Arghyam website: arghyam.org — current programmes, Atal Bhujal Yojana partnership, Jal Jeevan Mission work
- India Water Portal: Arghyam: A Praxis on Regenerating a Groundwater Civilisation (December 2023) — most comprehensive institutional history
- Devex profile: grants to recipients in 22 states since 2005
- Give.do Arghyam profile: Atal Bhujal Yojana, Muzaffarpur JJM, Village Community Facilitator programme documentation

