

# THE HINDU

## Today's Paper » MISCELLANEOUS

### Door to door, drop by drop

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*Panchayats in Bihar are helping in finding new ways to tackle water issues*



TRIAL RUNS: Experiments to save water.

A new experiment is underway in about 25 panchayats of five flood ravaged districts of Bihar helping the people script a new lifestyle using their intrinsic knowledge and resources. It will also cushion them from the misery the monsoon lets loose year after year.

Megh Pyne Abhiyan (Clouds Water Campaign) has been striving for better understanding of the issues relating to water among the rural folk in these panchayats spread across the five north Bihar districts of Supaul, Saharsa, Khagaria, Madhubani and West Champaran which are crisis crossed by rivers fed by catchment areas located in Nepal.

The objective is to make available safe drinking water throughout the year, including in times of flood, sanitation facilities and a changed agricultural pattern for ensuring self sufficiency in food and a healthy living, stresses MPA activist Eklavya Prasad. MPA brought about behavioural changes through a series of door to door contacts, group discussions, public meetings, dialogue on rainwater harvesting, demonstrations and building association with people especially women underlining how each issue was linked with the other.

The stress is on improving the individual and collective well being and building a congenial social environment and accountability towards shared problems.

The persistent campaign helped evolve a sustainable technology suitable to the local conditions in the five districts for shared and effective management of water. The importance and scope of rainwater harvesting were demonstrated at 20 places in each panchayat focusing also on other water related health, economic and social problems.

Since the locals never explicitly regarded water as a basis of these problems, MPA tested water for various contaminations to create awareness. The practice of open defecation coupled with the floods affect quality of water even when drawn through hand pumps.

The MPA provided alternative water storage systems which were termed Jal Kothi and developed locally with varying raw materials. Each of the five districts developed jal kothis suitable to their conditions and of varying capacities.

Mr. Prasad said about 800 temporary rainwater storages had been set up in these five districts, besides about 250 semi-permanent rainwater storages and four flood resistant permanent rainwater ones. Each jal kothi entails a cost of Rs. 867 with a labour component of 59.65 per cent, raw materials account for the rest. Hence it is labour intensive as well.

To reduce the content of iron found in excess in these districts, the MPA adopted the Supaul model of filtering water

using two earthen pots (matka). The matka filters were modified to remove other contaminants.

About 225 such filters have been installed in five panchayats, benefiting over 35,000 people, Mr. Prasad claimed, stressing that the project too was labour intensive.

The people were also encouraged to revert back to the dug wells and he claimed revival of about 100 dug wells while repairing work was in progress at 41 others. The sanitation model that has been developed, of which 61 units have been set up, suits the flood prone region.

To beat the recurrent floods, the MPA has also developed summer paddy cultivation using the system of rice intensification (SRI) initially covering 36 farmers increasing the average yield from 60 to 90 kg per katha to 120 to 200 kg per katha. MPA's campaign has helped instil capacity in the people to beat food insecurity and poverty and overcome the ravages of floods.