

2 social impact awards



NGOs help with water filters, solar lamps and provide access to alternative resources

For A Better Quality Of Life

TIMES INSIGHT GROUP

In February this year, Krishna Basumatary travelled to Guwahati for the first time in her life from her village Bomazza, abutting the Manas National Park in western Assam. She carried 20 bottles of papaya jelly with her, to be displayed and sold at an exhibition in the city. The jelly was a total sellout. Krishna even got an award.

How is Krishna's success tied with environmental protection? Krishna is a member of a self-help group formed last year, part of a programme by NGO Aaranyak to involve the community in conservation of forests and biodiversity of Manas National Park. The rationale is straightforward: forests in the park were the source of livelihood for tribal families in Bhuayapara area. No amount of barbed wires or guards could keep them out. The situation of conflict was damaging to both wildlife and the forest.

The vicious cycle was broken by Aaranyak, which provided the villagers an alternative source of livelihood. After being trained, they make and sell processed food products such as jam, jelly, processed indigenous food items and handloom products.

"We choose villages on three criteria: proximity of village to forest, dependence on forest resources and population below poverty line," explains Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar, Aaranyak's programme secretary.

Aaranyak has also trained poachers who have surrendered and unemployed youths in identification of trees, wildlife, insects and birds. An



Photos: KM Sharma

A HEALTHY BALANCE

Contaminated groundwater is a major environmental concern. In Bihar, an NGO designed a simple water filter for villagers. Megh Pyne Abhiyan's matka filter (below)

often bring people in conflict with authorities as they try to protect wetlands, forests, rivers, lakes and mountains from being used for infrastructure or industry. Conversely, making wildlife areas and forests out-of-bounds for villagers intrudes upon their lives, leading to their eviction.

NGOs are playing a crucial role in mediating this conflict and evolving new ways of resolving the thorny issues involved.

Environment is not just forests and wild animals. That's just a niche, experienced by a few. For most, environment is air, water, land. And striking a balance between human population and its demands on these three key resources is all-important.

Bihar suffers annually from ravaging floods, leaving enormous tracts of agricultural land — source of life for millions — submerged for months. There is a flipside to this also. Safe drinking water is a precious commodity in most Bihar villages. It is not just water-borne diseases that are rampant but in large

tracts of land the water is contaminated with arsenic and iron.

The effects of this poisoning can be seen on septuagenarian Bodhan Paswan. He lives in a Dalit-dominated village, Bari Madarpur in Khagaria district. His skin is spotted and he suffers from painful lesions. His en-

tire family is suffering from chronic arsenic poisoning. Recent water testing results indicated that most of the villages in four blocks of the district with a population of nearly 50,000 depended on contaminated groundwater with traces of arsenic. Many villagers suffer from water-borne diseases such as gastroenteritis and jaundice. This contamination is taking a heavy toll on lives because of steep medical costs.

Sarita, a middle-aged daily wage earner has spent a lot on medical treatment. "I used to regularly visit doctors at Begusarai for treatment of skin and gastroenteritis," she says.

It was in this dire situation that Megh Pyne Abhiyan (MPA) stepped in. Their solution was simple: the matka filter. It consists of an earthen pot (matka) half-filled with sand and a hole at the bottom, kept on top of another matka. Water filters



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through the sand and collects in the bottom matka, leaving behind most impurities in the sand. It may not be 100% effective, but the villagers are satisfied. "The days of complaining are over," says Sarita, who has her own filter in her home.

Megh Pyne Abhiyan means cloud-water campaign. Set up by Eklavya Prasad in 2005, it is active in 22 panchayats across five districts of North Bihar — Supaul, Saharsa, Khagaria, Madhubani and West Champaran — with the help of five separate grassroots organizations. It is attempting to introduce a more inclusive water management system with professional help. A cadre of *jal doots* (water ambassadors) has been formed to encourage rainwater harvesting from temporary structures using polythene sheets.

One of the biggest environmental challenges today is that of global warming due to emission of greenhouse gases. Though India's emissions per person are low, the danger of spiralling emissions is hovering over the world and many NGOs are attempting to introduce mitigation techniques, including renewable en-

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ergy sources like solar energy.

A pioneer of solar energy in India is the NGO Barefoot College located at Tilonia Rajasthan. Till date it has fabricated, installed, repaired and maintained more than 14,800 fixed solar units and 8,585 solar lanterns across 751 villages including 628 in India and 123 in 17 other countries. They train villagers to repair and maintain installations, so that villages do not depend on outside engineers for help. This work has a cascading effect in ensuring the running of night schools, pumping water for drinking and enhancing income-generating activities.

Reports by Naresh Mitra in Guwahati and Pranava K Chaudhary in Khagaria

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ecotourism destination, these youth now work as guides in the Manas Tiger Reserve area, which includes Ullapani, famed for having the highest diversity of butterflies in Asia.

Aaranyak's work in the remote forests of Assam shows up the tightrope that all environmentalists have to walk. It is a choice between development — often life itself — on the one hand, and protection of the environment on the other. Across the country, development programmes