

Little Paani, Less Panchayat – I

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Nuagon, Angul (Orissa), October 2002 - WE stopped Pala Majhi in front of the Apex Building of the Aunli pani panchayat. "What is this building?" we asked the marginal farmer. "That," he said, in all seriousness, "is the World Bank office." Nuagon being a remote village in Angul district of rural Orissa that was startling. By this time, more people had stopped to look at the five journalists with cameras. We asked Prahlad Pradhan, another small farmer, about the building. "It's the World Bank office," he said.

But isn't it really a sarkari building, we pressed. Pala Majhi broke in. "Our sarkar has left and there is another there, now," he said in innocence. Majhi seems to believe that the bank now runs taxes in his village as well.

"Are all of you members of the pani panchayat here?" we ask. A babble of voices breaks out. "We've paid our Rs.10," says Prahlad Pradhan. "But it's meaningless for us. I've never been called for a single meeting. The big people here have captured all the water." Some of the others say they have no clue what the pani panchayat is about. But they gather it is not for them.

A day earlier, I had spoken to Jahnabi Pradhan. She's secretary of the now famous all-women water users' association, or Pani Panchayat, of this area. "Who organised your pani panchayat, Jahnabi?" I asked. "First the World Bank people came," she began cheerfully. "They set us up and" "No, no," the Irrigation Department official present hastily interrupted. "There was also the NGO. Tell them about the NGO."

"Well," she rephrased her line. "An NGO came from Angul and did some surveys. But then the World Bank and the Americans came and they got active. That's how we got organised." The non-governmental organisation involved was the Youth Service

Centre (YSC), Angul. Its chief, Vijay Mahapatra, takes no credit for the big idea. "It was all," he says, "the World Bank's concept. Neither the Orissa Government's, nor ours. Only the all-women panchayat was our idea."

Welcome to the Aunli Irrigation Project in Angul district. The four "Water Users Associations" covering eight villages here are Orissa's pride. They are held up as the State's "model" Pani Panchayats. One of these is Jahnabi's all-women outfit. Astonishingly, officials of the World Bank seem to have been directly involved right at the village level, in organising things here. This is even though Mahapatra clarifies that there was no direct funding of the bank "either to our NGO or to the pani panchayats". But he says: "Many officials of the World Bank have visited these panchayats since 1996. More than 10. And totally more than 15 to 20 visits."

The YSC pioneered the bank's entry into the area. "We mobilised the farmers. We started the pani panchayats. And we opened their bank accounts." But, adds Mahapatra of the whole exercise now: "It's not sustainable. It doesn't work. People have been misled on the aims and realities." The YSC's links with the project came to an end in 1998. The canal system of the Aunli project was handed over to the "water users' associations". This, says an official document, was done on the World Bank's orders. "This concept of handing over canals to farmers," it says, "is now termed as Pani Panchayat."

Aunli, say the Irrigation Department officials who joined me during my first visit, is the success story. Assistant engineer S.K. Pradhan makes a compelling case for the panchayats. They have brought much prosperity, he says. For instance, "Bank deposits shot up from Rs. 30 lakhs to Rs. 108 lakhs in just one year. Water is more efficiently shared. Pani panchayat membership is rising fast. It now stands at 77 per cent of all farmers. The women are taking major decisions."

There has certainly been some prosperity. Almost all of it is cornered by the largest landlords and contractors of the region. On the ground, there is sharp distress. "Over 150 heads of cattle were sold in Nuagon in the past two days," says Balakrishna Pradhan. He heads what is likely the largest land owning family here. "They were sold at prices as low as Rs.50 to Rs.400." His son, Manas Ranjan is the chairperson

of the apex body of Aunli's four Pani Panchayats. His family owns more than 140 acres of land.

Those prices indicate a severe distress sale in themselves. But the timing is also very significant. "This is the period of Gahmapurnima," says Abhoy Singh, editor of the Oriya magazine Pravaha, who was travelling with me. "That's when people celebrate the sacredness of the cow. It's when they are least likely to part with their cattle. On this day, in other States, people tie raakhis on the hands of other people. But here in Orissa, they tie raakhis to their cows. Those who sell their cattle in this period must be truly desperate."

They are. The way water is "distributed" by this panchayat means that poor farmers will get it only every alternate year during the rabi season.

There are seven canals serving the eight villages in the Aunli belt. "There is less flow in the rabi season," say Balakrishna and Manas. "So one year, we operate four canals on one side of Aunli. In the next year, these four are kept idle and we operate the other three. So there is rotation of water use."

There's a catch to it. Big landowners like Manas have land on all sides of Aunli. So they get water every year, regardless. But if you're a small farmer like Jaiya Raoul with one acre at one spot, you have no rabi crop at all every second year. Even Jahnabi of the women panchayat went without a rabi crop last season due to the "rotation". On the other hand, all the big landowners will have a crop every rabi season as some part of their fields will get water. The system is structured to favour the big farmer. It's crushing the small ones. "How am I going to feed my family?" asks Jaiya Raoul. Did anyone ever consult him on the system before it was put in place? "Big people come to the village and speak to the big people here. No one tells us anything. To begin with, my land is in the tail region and got less water. Now there's no water at all for people like us."

Marginal farmers like him are the vast majority here. Then where did that prosperity - the huge rise in bank deposits - come from? Meet Khristian Mahanandia. He's the manager of the State Bank of India here in Aunli. And his dynamism is the main

reason behind the rapid rise in bank deposits. His story of where the money came from, though, is startling.

"The deposits have risen from Rs.77 lakhs to Rs.101 lakhs. That's the correct figure. But much of that has come from outside the Aunli service area. Most of it is from non-pani panchayat villages like Bagadia. And the bulk of the rise has come from the personal segment savings sector. From school teachers. From people in service. Retired government servants. Not from agriculture." When Mahanandia became manager, he focussed on raising deposits from Bagadia. It is outside his branch's service area. "But I know this village. I know the people here. So I pushed very hard. And deposits from Bagadia went up from zero to Rs.6.5 lakhs."

That seems to be more than the money that came in from agriculture from all the eight Pani Panchayat villages of Aunli. The biggest increase in those villages came from Marudip - Rs.3.5 lakhs. "Most of that came from personal savings. There are lots of school teachers there. Little came from agriculture. There were also lots of other villages where deposits came from." In short, the rise in deposits in no way reflects a growth of prosperity in the Pani Panchayat region. The deposits have come from nearly 30 villages. Less than one-eighth of the rise has come from these eight villages. And much of that from outside of agriculture.

"Oh, but there is prosperity," says marginal farmer Goutham Pradhan. "It's just that it is all for the benefit of the great people here. The rest of us, the small kisans, are doing very badly. With no rabi, with huge cost increases, we are in trouble. Even if the child falls ill, I cannot afford any treatment or medicines. But the big people are doing very well." The first time I went to Aunli with Abhoi Singh, we were joined by Irrigation Department officers. We met Manas, Jahnabi. All the key figures of the local establishment. It was when I returned a second time - with four young Oriya journalists - that things began to happen.

Seeing us come back, people decided they wanted to talk to us. The village of Nuagon now felt we had not bought into the miracle. Frustrations poured out. There were more people wanting to complain than we were able to talk to. And the picture was no different in other parts of the Pani Panchayat area.

It was odd how many people brought in the "World Bank". But there are reasons why they believe everything happens because of the bank. For one, as Mahapatra points out, bank officials have made many visits here. Further, people have seen the cringing servility of the local bureaucracy towards visiting bank officials. From that, they seem to conclude who the real boss in this show is. An astonishing amount of propaganda has also been at work. People were told the "Vishwa Bank" would bring huge loans. They were led to believe that even the standard government programmes of their villages - same as anywhere else - were there because of the bank. So today many believe that the Apex body building is a World Bank office.

What they were not told was that the water they had always had access to would pass out of their control. That the big farmers who anyway dominate the village would grab control of this vital resource. That they would find their always fragile economies now slipping fully beyond their control. "The concept of panchayat is meant to be a democratic one," says ex-MLA Nabaghana Nayak. "But there is no fairness in it at all. People do not participate in the scheme. Nor can they. Some big farmers have captured the whole thing. This pani panchayat idea has failed totally here. And so too in all of Orissa. Water is becoming private property."