

## **Little Paani, Less Panchayat – II**

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Nuagon, Angul (Orissa), October 2002 - "WHAT sharing?" asks marginal farmer Goutham Pradhan. "Who gave these people control anyway?" He's talking about those who run Orissa's "model" Pani Panchayats in Aunli, Angul district. A handful of powerful landowners who have cornered Aunli's most vital resource. Water.

Aunli's Pani Panchayats have never seen an election. To any post whatsoever. The men who control Aunli's water cannot claim to represent any interests but their own. Indeed, it is true of Pani Panchayats across Orissa. They are all unelected bodies. "It was done by consensus," says Irrigation Department assistant engineer S.K. Pradhan. That's a phrase echoed by the big landowners of the region.

"The Government appointed electoral officers," laughs Vijay Mahapatra. "But it never held any elections." He heads the Youth Service Centre in Angul. An NGO that helped build these pani panchayats. The "consensus" merely reflects the will of Aunli's biggest landlords. The rest just have to toe their line.

The "democratic" structure favours the landlords in more ways, too. They all have multiple votes in the pani panchayats.

There are four Pani Panchayats across eight villages in the Aunli region. Any farmer with land in any of these zones can become a member by paying Rs.10. For the vast majority of farmers with two acres or less, this means they can be members in their own villages. But for someone like Manas Ranjan Pradhan - his family owns over 140 acres - democracy, Aunli-style, works better. He has land across the entire area. By paying Rs.40 he can be a member of all the pani panchayats in the area. He also has the right then, to vote in all of them. That's if a vote should ever be needed. Most often, the writ of Manas and other large farmers runs unquestioned.

Marginal farmers out in the cold. Apart from no say in the pani panchayats, every alternate year, they have no rabi crop because of a discriminatory system of rotation.

There are some 1,700 farmers in the area. Just a few of these, each with 100 acres or more, are in command of the whole process. Aunli's water resources have steadily moved into their tight control. Manas also owns a rice mill and is a wholesaler of rice. "I'm getting into the cattle feed business," he told me at his house in Nuagon. A large house that "we actually built for the State Bank of India branch here. But for some reason, they haven't yet taken it from us." His father, Balakrishna Pradhan, is a retired headmaster and inspector of schools. He is promoting hybrid seed "which I am exhorting my neighbours to convert to". He aims to deal in cattle as well. "We need Jersey cows here," he says. "It was I who told the Americans to adopt this village," he says with some pride on the arrival of the World Bank in Aunli. "I went up to them when they came here and told them what the village needed."

They must have listened. Balakrishna is very articulate and the most educated person in Nuagon; also, the one man the bank officials met who could speak fluent English. How do the water users' associations or Pani Panchayats work? Each of the four here has a president, a secretary and treasurer. Not one of them is elected. Each sends these three office bearers to the apex body of the pani panchayats; that meets once on the ninth of each month. Oddly, the apex committee meets far more often than the pani panchayats themselves. Power is concentrated in this body.

Manas is chairman of the apex body. Unelected, he and the 11 members - all unelected - decide the schedule of irrigation. With them on the body are a large number of Government officials. There were at least nine of them at the last meeting. And the Government can co-opt still more to sit in on the show. The collector is the chairman of the district-level pani panchayat. It's unlikely these panchayats will ever be representative. But if they do become so, there are ways of scuttling them. Just pile on more officials. Also, in battles over water within the big farmers, the more powerful ones can enlist official muscle. The Oriya daily Sambad reports that apex body members of 13 pani panchayats resigned en masse last month. This was in the Derenjeng project area. One official had swung the water battle in favour of a single pani panchayat, in which, allege the farmers, he has a vested interest.

The rest resigned in protest (Sambad, August 19). Similar actions were being planned in Nuapada district. The pani panchayats we saw there were in no better

shape. Some of those who resigned were themselves large landowners. What if you're a small farmer? You are anyway out of the decision-making. But what about the economics of it?

Jahnabi Pradhan is secretary of the now famous all-women pani panchayat of this region. A model that has never had any power or say at all. No one from her panchayat is or has been an office bearer in the apex body. It controls the smallest area. Just 288 hectares of nearly 1,750 hectares. And just one canal comes under its control.

Jahnabi and her husband work on their three acres. "We cannot afford to hire labour," she says. Jahnabi may not have understood it yet, but pretty soon there will be a lot more that she cannot afford. No one has explained to the poor farmers here the time bomb of hidden costs ticking away in the whole scheme. Running the old canal system has many expenses.

"The total expenditure on Aunli," says Mahapatra of YSC, "must have been over Rs.3 crores roughly." That includes Rs.23 lakhs on the apex building people know as the "World Bank office". Then there's "the costs that went into the canal system repairs. Well over Rs.1 crore. And there's a bridge that's been built twice. The first time for Rs.19 lakhs. Then Rs.88 lakhs to rebuild it after it collapsed." "The Government gave us Rs.35 per hectare towards maintenance," says Jahnabi. And she and many others believe that this official grant in aid will soon go up to Rs.100 per hectare. Indeed, that should have happened this January.

It didn't. And the Government is in fact working itself out of any such obligation. The real costs of maintenance could be as high as Rs.750 per hectare. That's apart from the water charges that the revenue department collects, which could soon touch Rs. 250 per hectare against Rs.100 right now. Irrigation officials say the World Bank had wanted a charge of Rs.400 per hectare. "But we knew the explosions that would follow," says one. "So we didn't agree to do it at one time." It's now being phased out over a year or so.

Aunli's farmers will soon find all these costs transferred to them. It would wreck the small farmer. And even these costs are misleading. This is a flow irrigation region.

Where lift irrigation is required, the power and other costs would shoot up much further. Predictably, Pani Panchayats in lift irrigation zones have been a non-starter. For large numbers of farmers in Aunli, even the present costs are not bearable. Jahnabi says as much while worrying about why the Government's grant-in-aid has not come this year.

By the time the smoke clears, the smallest farmers will be paying several hundreds of rupees a month, more than they ever have for water. "And in this place," says Balakrishna Pradhan, "you are very lucky to earn Rs. 3,000 per acre in a whole year." Simply put, you're out of the game. The damage would be even quicker in a lift irrigation zone. There's something else many of the farmers do not know. A while from now, those who are not members of the pani panchayats will not be entitled to water. The big farmers who control these are clear on that. The rest are totally in the dark about it.

"That will happen when full transference of management takes place," says an Irrigation Department engineer. Translated, that means when the canal system, with all its costs, is solely the responsibility of the pani panchayat.

In Nuagon village, Manas Ranjan Pradhan is worried. He has five pesky journalists asking people questions. And people are talking despite their obvious fear of him. He drags me away to show me the great work the pani panchayat has done in restoring a tank. "The tank covers 40 acres," he says. "Of that, 14 acres is public land, the rest is mine. We spent Rs. 60,000 putting up a bathing ghat here."

In short, a good sum of Pani Panchayat money has been spent on upgrading Manas' private property. And in many ways, that tells the story.

Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's stand on water is quite positive. "We are not for water privatisation," he told me in Bhubaneswar. "We want to hand over control to the community. To the farmers themselves." He also favours smaller, localised irrigation systems. "Not big dams." Those are good intentions and worthy of support. But not quite the way things are working out on the ground. In the real world, "community control" is now a cover for private control.

Public interest is the guise in which water is being privatised here. Expenses will be borne by the public. Profits will be made by a few big landlords. With huge costs being passed on to them, many small farmers will go bankrupt in the near future. It's being done through the pani panchayat. A supposedly democratic form. But, very simply, Aunli's water resources are passing swiftly into private control. That includes water bodies that were never private.

And there's more to follow. As the small farmers lose control over this vital resource, they will be unable to hold on to their land. Land consolidation in the hands of a few big owners must be the inevitable result. That's an outcome the authors of the scheme could not have been unaware of. Aunli is Orissa's "model" of what Pani Panchayats should be. What happens here will be replicated in other parts of the State. Orissa's farmers have already been hit by policies they can't cope with. Policies they never asked for nor had a role in shaping. Now they face their newest threat: the privatisation of water through the backdoor.