

The water warrior of North Bihar

Eklavya Prasad

Megh Pyne Abhiyan

“The biggest satisfaction in my life is coming to a place that I call my own, of my own choice. I am happy that we created a space that did not exist. What really gives me strength and enthusiasm to move forward is the kind of people I work with, I interact with and the people that I work for,” said Eklavya Prasad. Eklavya, recognised as a leader in water management, spent time with us during a fascinating visit to the hinterland of Paschim Champaran district in North Bihar.

Discourses in North Bihar traditionally revolved around flood mitigation, embankment construction and relief distribution. Eklavya has been able to promote a new discourse on water management, first as the linchpin of a campaign and then through the organisation Megh Pyne Abhiyan. Eklavya has been able to bring a few organisations, experts and institutions together and design interventions for sustainable management of water – a neglected and abused resource on which we depend.

Gaining a professional foothold

Eklavya’s engagement with rural water issues dates back to the 90s when he worked for Seva Mandir, in Udaipur, Rajasthan. He had joined Seva Mandir in 1995, after graduating from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He was assigned to work with an experienced staff, as per the practice of pairing fresh graduates with people with a lot of field experience. To work in such a partnership was always a challenge and it was no different for Eklavya. But he relished the challenge and over a period of time gained the confidence of the experienced field personnel.

The field stint proved to be a great learning experience for Eklavya. It was while working in Seva Mandir that he came in contact with Narayan Ameta, who was the lead field person in the block in which Eklavya was posted. He refers to Ameta as the ‘guru who taught me water’. From him Eklavya learnt the importance of planning, clarity and being strategic at work. “You don’t have to be good to do well in the field, but strategic,” he said.

After three years in Seva Mandir, Eklavya joined HelpAge India in Delhi. He became the deputy director and was in charge of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) cell and the mobile medicare unit. It was quite a leap from a field level position to a national level position. Eklavya wanted to be at the field and hence developed systems that would take him frequently to the field. But he found it hard to fit into the work environment of the organisation and quit.

He then joined the water unit of Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), where he learnt a lot. One important lesson from Anil Agarwal, the founder of CSE, under whose guidance he worked was, “If you are working in a team, one thing that you should get rid of is insecurity.” A lesson that would stand Eklavya in good stead later, when he chose to work with many people.

Bihar – a calling

Eklavya’s passion was always to work in rural areas. But the focus of CSE after Anil Agarwal’s demise in 2002 was slowly shifting to urban issues. To quote Eklavya, “The more I was exposed to the field the more the field called to me.”

As early as in 1995, on learning that he was from Bihar, people in Seva Mandir would say, “You should work in Bihar. The state requires more of your help than Rajasthan.” Also his yearning to work in Bihar kept increasing. So in 2004 Eklavya quit CSE.

Eklavya became a consultant for the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation in Rajasthan and the N M Sadguru Water and Development Foundation in Gujarat. For a brief period he did consultancy work for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) too. While consultancy made him financially secure, his role as a consultant was limited to giving recommendations. Acceptance and implementation of what he recommended rested firmly with the client organisation. Often fine recommendations prepared with a lot of effort were ignored or given a mechanistic hearing. Hence Eklavya became apprehensive about taking up consultancy as a full-time profession.

But the consultancy work often took him to rural areas, where again he was confronted with the question of why he was not working in Bihar. To quote Eklavya, “The idea of working in Bihar kept playing in my mind.” A chance meeting with a development expert gave a push to his idea.

Stepping into Bihar

Around 2005 Eklavya wrote a chapter in a book, *Water Conflicts in India – A Million Revolts in the Making*, which was a compendium of case studies on water conflicts in India. Eklavya’s chapter was a case study on the water conflict in Udaipur. A discussion on the book was held in Hyderabad where he met Dr Dinesh Mishra, founder of Barh Mukti Abhiyan, a network of organisations working in Bihar. Eklavya asked Mishra about the floods in Bihar and Mishra replied, “If you want to know about the floods in Bihar come to Bihar.”

While at CSE, Anil Agarwal had told him that if one wanted to work on an issue, the issue should be studied so well that one could write a long piece on it. Eklavya had to study the issue in detail. Till 2005 his work had mostly been in the arid western states of Rajasthan

and Gujarat, where the problem was water scarcity. He had to learn about problems associated with the overabundance of water. Hence he decided to travel in Bihar to get a first-hand knowledge of the issues.

In 2005, Eklavya travelled to North Bihar for the first time. He met Mishra, fondly called guruji in Bihar. Mishra put him in touch with various organisations associated with Barh Mukti Abhiyan and working in the Kosi river belt. Eklavya visited organisations in Khagaria, Saharasa, Supaul and Madhubani districts.

Scarcity amidst abundance

He was deeply moved by the abject poverty in Supaul. To quote Eklavya, “In Supaul, standing on Kosi’s embankment, I almost choked when I saw naked kids running around.” He wanted to do something but was not sure of what. However, he was clear that he did not want to work for anyone. “But how to start? Where to begin?” It took time for Eklavya to find answers. During this period he visited the area multiple times and interacted repeatedly with representatives of the local organisations.

The immediate outcome of the travel was a story on water issues in Bihar for *Civil Society* magazine. It was featured as the cover story. Eklavya highlighted issues pertaining to flood governance in Bihar and warned about an imminent disaster that might result from an embankment breach. In 2008 when the disaster did happen in North Bihar, the old article was much in demand.

By 2005, after writing the story for *Civil Society*, Eklavya had made up his mind to go beyond mere documentation of the problems and to make an effort to change the existing condition.

The choice of thematic intervention to address the issue was rainwater harvesting. During his earlier stint with CSE, Eklavya had travelled extensively in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and had observed how people in arid regions were harvesting rainwater on a large scale to tackle water scarcity.

To Eklavya, if people in arid areas could harvest rainwater, North Bihar with its higher annual mean rainfall had a better scope. So he decided to promote rainwater harvesting in the flood-prone areas, a concept that was unheard of.

A collective to campaign

Eklavya felt that it would not be possible for him to establish a new organisation. His idea was to use the capacity and outreach of existing local organisations in North Bihar. He thought of bringing a change in their mode of operation, equip them with the necessary know-how and then carry out the work in flood-prone areas through them.

Working through local organisations was easier said than done. Initially it was a long and tedious process of bringing them on board. Most of the local organisations in North Bihar had been working for a long time from the perspective of flood. For them both Eklavya and rainwater harvesting were new. Hence it was pretty hard for Eklavya to make the organisations buy his ideas.

He was still an outsider. Some presumed that he would aid them in raising funds. "Once around 30 local organisations came for a meeting that I arranged in Saharsa. My plan was to propose that the organisations take up rainwater harvesting. Before I explained this, I told them that I did not have any funding support and that my family supported me. Seeing no funding opportunity many of the participant organisations left the meeting. That was an eye-opener for me. I became very cautious," Eklavya reminisced.

Presumptions had to be changed, mutual trust had to be established and a rapport based on trust and shared perspective had to be developed. Towards these objectives and to get a first-hand understanding of the problems, every month Eklavya visited the flood-prone areas of North Bihar, specifically the Kosi-Bagmati belt that suffered the brunt then.

Megh Pyne Abhiyan

Repeated engagement with the organisations allowed Eklavya to understand if they were genuinely interested in an idea or not. Through this iterated process, over a period of one-and-a-half years, Eklavya zeroed in on four organisations: Gramyasheel in Supaul, Ghoghardiha Prakhand Swarajya Vikash Sangh (GPSVS) in Madhubani, Kosi Seva Sadan in Saharsa and Samta in Khagaria.

He visited the villages along with representatives of the four local organisations that he had decided to work with. The result of his constant interactions was two-fold.

One was that Eklavya developed the broad theory of scarcity in abundance. While there was abundance of water, particularly during floods, there was severe scarcity in terms of access to safe drinking water. It was not the quantity aspect, but the quality aspect that contributed to water scarcity. So his aim was to facilitate access to safe drinking water in the flood-prone regions of North Bihar, especially the ones north of Ganga that are more prone to recurrent floods.

The second was, the four organisations would work together on a campaign mode on the above agenda, in their respective districts. Later, Water Action – an organisation from Paschim Champaran –also joined the campaign.

The campaign, to be led by Eklavya, was named Megh Pyne Abhiyan (MPA) by Ramesh Kumar of GPSVS. Megh in a few vernacular languages means cloud and pyne in Maithili means rain. When MPA was started, the interventions were planned for the four districts where Maithili is the dominant language and hence the choice of Maithili words.

Maiden intervention

In October 2005, at a meeting on rainwater harvesting in Delhi, Eklavya met Viswanath. S, a senior advisor with Arghyam Trust, an agency that funds projects related to water and sanitation. They had first met when CSE conducted the first *paani yatra* in 2001. In that meeting, Viswanath came to know about Eklavya's engagements in North Bihar and he put Eklavya in contact with the CEO of the Arghyam Trust. Eklavya briefed the CEO about the work that he was doing to ensure safe drinking water during floods.

Arghyam funded MPA's initiative in 2006. In the initial phase, pilot projects to harvest rainwater were planned in four panchayats across four districts. MPA and the partner organisations started interacting with villagers. But the intervention faced two challenges: one behavioural and the other natural.

Rainwater harvesting depended on rainfall. But in 2006 the monsoon failed. Districts that were traditionally flood-prone were about to be declared drought-affected. Finally it started raining in the month of September. Hence the actual work of collecting and storing rainwater had to be done in a short duration of about 15 days. "We tried to take advantage of the rains as much as we could. I was running from one district to another, showing people how to harvest rainwater," Eklavya reminisced.

Rainwater harvesting – busting myths

The second challenge in the intervention was the community's beliefs. Among the villagers, there was a myth that drinking rainwater would result in goitre. This was a behavioural challenge that had to be overcome. He used various behaviour change communication (BCC) strategies to address the issue. Eklavya drank rainwater to prove that it was not harmful.

Eklavya also used a common practice in the villages to indicate the implicit faith people had in rainwater. During hails, people would collect the ice pellets and store them. In case of a burn injury they would mix the hail water with soil and apply on the burnt skin. Eklavya told people that rainwater was used to heal injuries as it was seen as pure and hence drinking rainwater could not be harmful.

In one of the meetings in Khagaria, a serendipitous support came from migrant workers who had come home on a short visit. They told the villagers that in the places where they worked they depended on rainwater for everything. That was the first instance when someone

other than an NGO representative spoke about the utilities of rainwater. That people from the community spoke in favour of rainwater harvesting helped the villagers accept it. MPA often referred to this incident while meeting residents in other villages to help them understand the importance of rainwater harvesting.

Storing rainwater

When the initial project was coming to a close by the end of 2006, partner organisations had convinced the community so well that the villagers were considering the utility of rainwater for their annual water requirement. MPA certainly faced a higher order challenge in terms of storage.

According to Eklavya, they had to think of new storage methods, as the tradition of storing water in the house had become obsolete with the advent of hand pumps. To store rainwater, Eklavya wished to construct a low-cost, minimal maintenance structure using local resources.

During his frequent visits to the villages, Eklavya had observed people storing grains in cylindrical storage bins made of cane, bamboo and earth. He thought of using a similar structure to store water. The structure had to be leak-proof, robust, lightweight, durable and at the same time ensure that the water quality did not suffer. After a few trials and based on villagers' feedback, a storage structure called *jal kothi* was developed.

Use of groundwater

It was the community that had drawn MPA's attention to work on groundwater – the major source in the non-monsoon months. At the end of the programme supported by Arghyam, MPA organised a Jal Samvad Yatra in 2006, moving from one village to another, engaging with the community on the problems related to water to explore possible solutions. During the yatra, the community suggested exploring groundwater resources, on which people anyway depended on during the pre-monsoon and post-monsoon months.

As a first step, MPA tested the quality of groundwater in various project villages. The contamination was found to be high. Some places showed presence of heavy metals like arsenic. MPA found that contamination was lower in water extraction methods such as from dug wells that drew water from shallow aquifers compared to hand pumps that went deeper.

By then Arghyam was willing to partner with MPA for a longer term and the second phase of the project started in 2007. The scale of work during the second phase increased from four panchayats to 21 panchayats; and MPA moved beyond the Kosi area to include Paschim Champaran with Water Action acting as the district level implementing partner.

During this phase, Luisa Cortesi, a developmental anthropologist, associated herself with MPA. She effected a change in the manner in which MPA generated, recorded, assessed and shared knowledge. With her contribution, knowledge management, problem comprehension and related localised alternatives got streamlined.

MPA decided on a two-prong action to address the groundwater challenge – revival of dug wells and use of water filters.

Revival of dug wells

Revival of dug wells also needed a lot of effort. The villagers had become dependent on hand pumps and dug wells had become garbage dumps. As part of BCC activities and community deliberation, MPA asked the elders in the village to recollect the past when they had only dug wells as the source. Comparing the ease and visible results of cleaning a dug well to that of a hand pump, the villagers understood the importance of reviving existing dug wells.

MPA and the community cleaned the dug wells and performed a puja, distributing the well water as *prasad*, the offertory to the deity distributed after the puja. Traditional *paani toodna*, where dipping and swirling the bucket in the water increased oxidation, leaving heavy metal deposits at the bottom, practised while extracting water from dug wells were linked to the favourable change in the chemical properties of the groundwater brought by the activity. The work done by Cortesi on inter-generational transfer of knowledge on water management also contributed to the revival process.

MPA's partners Chandrashekhar of Gramyasheel and Rajendra Jha from Kosi Seva Sadan followed the same strategy in Supaul and in Saharsa districts respectively. The other emerging leaders in the sector – Prem Kumar Verma of Samta, working in Khagaria district, Ramesh Kumar of GPSVS working in Madhubani district and Vinay Kumar of Water Action working in Paschim Champaran added to MPA's efforts in their respective districts.

With the interventions the villagers have come to depend on dug wells in summer and post-monsoon period and on stored rainwater during monsoon.

Promotion of cost-effective filters

Water pollution had to be addressed next and MPA sought a solution in line with its twin philosophy of low-cost and localised technology. Some people were already using sand filters but the extraction process was prone to secondary contamination. MPA decided to develop a system to reduce the secondary contamination.

MPA designed a filtration system that consists of three *matka* or clay pots. Water to be purified is poured into the top most pot. The middle pot has a filter, consisting of sand, clay and saw dust or hay, that removes iron, the most prevalent problem in the region. The

purified water gets collected in the bottom most pot that is fitted with a tap. Local potters produce the matkafilters, with technical help from MPA.

Promotion of eco-sanitation toilets

Water quality tests showed high bacterial contamination in shallow aquifers. Since MPA was promoting use of dug wells for drinking water Eklavya set out to find possible reasons for bacterial contamination. Open defecation and open-pit toilets, called Gandhi toilets locally, close to the habitation turned out to be the cause for the contamination.

MPA decided to work on sanitation to remedy the bacterial contamination in groundwater. In the Jal Manthan Shivir, a participatory planning process involving the community that MPA organised in 2007, Viswanath suggested that eco-sanitation could be a possible intervention. Initially MPA tried out mobile eco-san units and then improvised them; by 2008 it had developed some standard eco-san units.

Convincing the community was not easy. To quote Eklavya, "It was difficult to push for eco-sanitation, but we were persistent." Eklavya's strategy was to focus on a village, bring change in the mindset of the people through BCC, install a unit and demonstrate it. With help from Stockholm Environment Institute, MPA and Water Action promoted multiple eco-san units in the district of Paschim Champaran. The eco-san units are colloquially termed as *phyadaman shauchalaya*, literally translating as profitable toilet, as it results in a win-win situation. It reduces bacterial contamination; excreta mixed with ash over a period of time gets converted into manure that can be used in the farm or sold in the market. The eco-san units are tailor-made for flood-prone areas by elevating the base above the highest flood level the village has experienced.

The base has two seats. There are two chambers for excreta collection, one over each seat. The second chamber is used when the first gets filled. By the time the second chamber gets filled the first ones contents become manure. The toilet could be a bamboo structure with thatched roof or a brick construction with concrete roof. The cost depends on the type of superstructure. Part of the cost is mobilised through Swachh Bharat Mission, the central government's campaign towards a clean India.

System of rice intensification

From his field visits through villages, Eklavya had found out that the kharif crop, otherwise an assured crop because of availability of water, was the most risky crop in the region. Hence to enhance the livelihoods of farmers in the village, most of whom are small and marginal farmers, it was necessary to ensure some food grain cultivation in the non-monsoon months.

During this time Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a Delhi-based NGO promoting system of rice intensification (SRI) in south Bihar asked Eklavya to document the same. Eklavya was excited by the potential of SRI in improving food security and income enhancement in the area. But SRI cultivation required controlled environment. In North Bihar controlled environment is possible only in summer months. The summer crop, it was hoped, would benefit farmers who lose their kharif crop, to make up for the kharif loss and perhaps enhance income and ensure food security.

In 2008 MPA promoted SRI in North Bihar with technical guidance from Anil Verma of Preservation and Proliferation of Rural Resources and Nature (PRAN), who had introduced SRI successfully in central Bihar.

After about 18 months, the project faced a big challenge. SRI in summer would need some irrigation. But using diesel pumps, the dominant method of irrigation in North Bihar, resulted in high irrigation cost and hence high cultivation cost. Also funding support was proving to be difficult. Hence MPA decided not to proceed with the SRI intervention.

Participatory groundwater management

In 2013, MPA and Arghyam collaborated again on a programme titled Participatory Groundwater Management (PGWM) with Advanced Centre for Water Resources Development and Management (ACWADAM), Pune as the technical partner. Siddharth Patil of ACWADAM brought in a new perspective to MPA's work. PGWM programme's aim was to equip users with a thorough geohydrological understanding of their area, the link between people and groundwater i.e. users and the resource and how each affected the other, and help them design methods for sustainable management of groundwater. Taking many factors into consideration, Eklavya scaled down the intervention from the originally planned 22 panchayats, to five habitations. The programme has equipped the leaders of the five partner organisations in PGWM, enabling them to work in their respective regions.

Megh Pyne Abhiyan – a new identity

After deciding to work in Bihar, it was a strategic decision by Eklavya not to establish a new organisation; rather he wanted a network of local organisations to function as an institution. Eklavya intended to work with smaller organisations as he believed that they would be more willing to accept, own and implement new ideas.

The onus was on Eklavya to ensure that all the five organisations were taken along in the journey, despite each being of a different stature. He had to ensure that the inter-organisational relationship did not strain, as funding agencies preferred to work with entities that had better organisational structure.

With respect to the partner organisations, Eklavya said, “We never discussed money as I did not know where I would get money from.” At that point of time, though Eklavya had been fairly successful as a consultant and was a known figure among developmental experts, he had no experience in fundraising.

In 2012, once MPA got registered as a separate organisation, there was apprehension among the partner organisations. To quote Eklavya, “There was some scepticism whether the spirit and the way of working will remain the same and if MPA would get the bulk of funding. They had their own concerns.”

Eklavya addressed their concerns by clearly communicating that there would be two aspects within the MPA ecosystem. The first one was that MPA as an organisation would continue doing programmes like PGWM, moderate flood study and HI-AWARE – a programme that MPA has recently initiated with International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Nepal.

The second aspect was that the partner organisations would continue the campaigns with or without MPA the organisation. Before the elections in Bihar, in 2014, the partner organisations did run a campaign titled Jal Swaraj in various districts. The objective was to put water within the political discourse by highlighting water-related problems in certain constituencies. The campaign took place through the network where the role of MPA as an organisation was limited to feeding the campaign with relevant technical information. According to Eklavya, “For all of us, including the funding partner, it was the first time that MPA was involved as an organisation. The campaign did create – I won’t say it created a wave, it created a ripple.”

According to Himanshu Kulkarni, a leading water expert who has collaborated with Eklavya for long, “Now MPA is an organisation. When it started it was a network with Eklavya as the anchor. Because of his high level of commitment and his ability to overcome interpersonal hurdles he could bring five different organisations to work together.”

Scaling up

Usually organisations scale up their operations over a period of time. MPA started with four panchayats, went up to 22 panchayats and then in PGWM reduced the scale of operation to five habitations – one in each of the five districts where it still works.

According to Eklavya, “You scale up only when you clearly know what you’re doing. Just increasing reach using the money given by a donor is not scaling up. Now at least five more people are talking about participatory groundwater management without being a part of the programme. That is scaling up for me. I see the demands coming in after the training (PGWM includes training people in basic geohydrology to help them make decisions) from different levels across Bihar. For me that is scaling up.”

According to Eklavya, the knowledge base that MPA and its partners are building of a resource (water) on which the entire population is dependent on for their basic needs and

livelihoods is important. Bringing water management techniques such as rainwater harvesting and PGWM to Bihar and prompting discussions at the governmental level are more important to Eklavya than scaling up the project to more number of villages.

Principles governing MPA

Eklavya understood quite early that for something to be acceptable to the rural population in Bihar, it had to be localised and cost-effective. So when MPA developed the matka filter, jal kothi and phyadaman shauchalaya, Eklavya ensured that each was a low-cost, low-tech model, not expensive or technologically complicated to make and operate.

He also ensured that the interventions were modifications or improvements of existing practices, made from locally available resources by local people and taking local conditions into consideration. Eklavya prefers to have local human resources in MPA's work and building their capacity, rather than hiring experts from outside. Another principle that Eklavya diligently tries to follow is transparency. This is also a necessary trait as Eklavya always had to take along multiple organisations. "It puts people ill at ease sometimes. But I am transparent in all my activities and interactions," said Eklavya.

Influences

Eklavya's principles at work and his attributes are the influence of people and literature that have come into Eklavya's life. The Jataka tales and the Panchatantra stories, portrayed an idyllic Indian village that created a deep impression in the mind of young Eklavya. They have remained with him, taking him away from the hustle of the city from time to time.

His passion for photography, a passion that has provided him with the fuel to carry on with his work, despite the frequent ups and downs of life, is something that Eklavya got from his father. He has inherited his perseverance from his mother.

In his profession, Eklavya has been deeply influenced by three individuals: Narayan Ameta, Anil Agarwal and Dinesh Mishra. According to Eklavya, "I was a blob, Narayan Ameta from Seva Mandir moulded me. He is the one who created in me, an interest in water."

With respect to the late Anil Agarwal of CSE, Eklavya reminisced, "He brought a lot of meaning into my life. He gave me values that I was lacking in. He taught me that there is immense potential in everyone and that you just need to tap it to bring it out."

The third person from whom Eklavya draws inspiration is Dinesh Mishra. "He taught me how to work in a public space." Dinesh's words, "Do your best and keep moving ahead. Don't stand, waiting for appreciation. Getting appreciated should not be the cause. If you get it, respect it. If you don't, don't get disheartened," continue to influence Eklavya.

On the personal front

Eklavya comes from a family of doctors – his grandfather, father, uncles and cousins are physicians. Eklavya's father, a renowned ENT surgeon, had quit a flourishing career in England when his father passed away and had settled in Dhanbad. Eklavya grew up in Dhanbad, originally in Bihar and presently in the state of Jharkhand. The family expected Eklavya also to make a career in medicine. But he could not clear the medical entrance exam. According to Eklavya that was in a sense the first failure in his life, not living up to his family's expectation. At the same time he was unwilling to join a private medical college by paying capitation fee.

A year was lost and Eklavya moved to Delhi to be with his brother, a person who has been a source of inspiration for Eklavya. His brother was doing his M Phil in the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). According to Eklavya, "Exposure to JNU changed my life a lot. I learnt that students had power and they could voice their concerns in an organised manner."

Eklavya enrolled for social work in Jamia Millia Islamia University. In the second year he was attached to a vocational school for the hearing and speech impaired as part of the curriculum. To quote Eklavya, "I realised that they were in their own world. I did not understand sign language and so there was no place for me." Eklavya took this assignment as a challenge. He learnt sign language and through theatre helped people understand the challenges of the hearing and speech impaired.

"I did innumerable plays in Delhi, with them as the actors. When I started the theatre work, my aim was to initiate communication between the hearing and the speech impaired and the so-called able-bodied. I could do that through the same people who were feeling the pain. That was one defining moment in my life. That's when I understood social work to be a good profession and decided to pursue it. Till then I was not sure what I wanted to do," Eklavya reminisced.

After a small academic setback, he joined the urban and rural community development course in Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai. At last Eklavya saw approval in the eyes of his family and relatives. "I was considered a loser since I could not qualify for medicine. I was carrying that baggage of failure. So when I got admission in a premier institute, it was a big achievement."

When his desire to work in Bihar finally materialised, it came at a huge cost – a personal loss had to painfully make way for the professional fulfilment of working in Bihar. The abject poverty that he observed in Bihar left a deep impression in him. The impact was overwhelming, affecting his normal functioning and his social life as he remained 'drunk on Bihar', as he put it.

Recollecting this phase Eklavya said, "The poverty that I saw in Bihar was very depressing. This went to the extent that whenever I went home, I couldn't eat in a restaurant, I couldn't

buy anything expensive. I was judging people who were spending money because I saw so much of naked poverty in Bihar.” As his personal life suffered, Eklavya immersed himself deeper in Bihar.

His passion and emotion that was at an extreme level earlier have evolved over the last decade. According to Eklavya, “At that point of time, I was trying to explore, and I was getting awed by the newness around me. That’s why I was getting sucked into it.” The change has been possible by the unconditional support of his wife. Nidhi Jamwal, a long-term associate of Eklavya said, “He’s working against so many odds that he wouldn’t want to waste his time in meaningless discussions. Somewhere, he’s become short-tempered. At the same time he really wants his people going to the field to be safe. This kind of work has affected his personal life. How many of us can put our personal life at stake for a cause we believe in? Not many. But that’s what he has done.”

Back in Dhanbad with the gang-of-twenty

In recent years, Eklavya has gone back to Dhanbad and has initiated an interesting work, pertaining to the condition of groundwater in the town. According to Eklavya, “Despite Dhanbad being an old coal mining town, people have no clue about the aspects of water and its quality. They didn’t know if it was good, potable. So I told myself that I would work among the locals and create an understanding about groundwater.”

For this, Eklavya has formed a group, gang-of-twenty as he calls them. The gang is a group of 20 girls studying in Class VIII to X in Carmel School in Dhanbad. The broad mandate of the gang-of-twenty is to come out with a groundwater report of Dhanbad by 2018. According to Eklavya, “They have already made two international online presentations of their work, they have undertaken a photo assignment on water in Dhanbad, have done a survey of about 750 houses to find out the extent of dependency on groundwater and surface water. Now we’re planning a survey to see the city’s volume of water consumption.” The work has been entirely self-driven with moral support from his mother and friends from Dhanbad, besides the working space from the school principal, cooperation of two teachers and the students. Yet the idea has not attracted any external funding support.

Photography – passionate pastime

With a passion for photography, he has been recording glimpses of the rural landscape and life through his lenses, during his numerous rural journeys. Eklavya’s photographs have been featured in public exhibitions. He has captured the various facets of floods in North Bihar. At a conference on natural disaster held in TISS in 2016, the scholarly audience appreciated his photo presentation.

His photographs have been exhibited internationally too – in the Loyola University School of Arts in Chicago and in the Michigan State University. Eklavya plans to publish a book of photographs on Bihar, highlighting the immense resilience of people in North Bihar, with Luisa Cortesi as co-author.

Photography has given an additional meaning to his life. He said, “I was able to deal with stress because of photography. If I didn’t have a camera I would have gone crazy. I wouldn’t have been able to cope. That’s why camera is more than an instrument to me. One good frame a day adds some more years to my journey.”

Looking back

Over a period of time, the constituents of MPA have started getting noticed as thought leaders in the domain of water in Bihar.

MPA as a campaign and as an organisation has evolved over the years. It has transitioned from rainwater to groundwater and now is working on participatory groundwater management. It is among those rare organisations that unravels the complex connect of the society with groundwater, merging local insights and the science behind it, with Eklavya Prasad as the mastermind.

Himanshu Kulkarni’s words summed up Eklavya’s work, “He has been able to overcome adversities because of his extreme commitment to work. Eklavya has been able to bring in an interdisciplinary facet to the work. There is one type who is driven by the heart and there is another driven by the mind. I think Eklavya falls under the former category. His heart always rules over his mind. There is lot of emotive element in his action, infusing passion into his work in North Bihar.”

Looking ahead

Eklavya has been the face of MPA so far. But he is now delegating more work to his staff and the heads of partner organisations. In recent years, he has encouraged the latter to move beyond their respective districts to and work on individual themes. To this effect, he has made each of them responsible for training, for the work on MGNREGA, PGWM in Paschim Champaran, and so on. Eklavya is mentoring Kumud, a staff with MPA, to take up more responsibilities. He plans to see Kumud as a second-in-line in due course of time.

MPA and its associates have always worked in the flood-prone districts of North Bihar. MPA plans to work in south Bihar, in Jamui district to start with. MPA intends to work on issues affecting the quality of water, particularly excess fluoride, that has resulted in dental and skeletal fluorosis among inhabitants, to address the health issues linked to the quality of ground water.

About Eklavya Prasad

- A leader in water management, Eklavya Prasad successfully solved the problem of water scarcity that prevailed in North Bihar in spite of abundance
- Megh Pyne Abhiyan was run innovatively, as a network of small non-profit organisations, instead of as an independent institution
- Ensuring safe drinking water to the rural population has resulted in finding easy, scalable solutions to sanitation issues
- Strongly advocates interventions using local, low-cost technology
- Ensures interventions are modifications or improvements of existing practices that take local wisdom and conditions into consideration

Eklavya Prasad

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