

Site visit report for Ashis' Fellowship

Date: 4th -7th June, 2009

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Background:

Ashis Panda's fellowship application was nominated by Bablu, Timbaktu and submitted to Asha a few months back. The Fellowship group has discussed this over multiple meetings and have voted to recommend this fellowship for support by Asha chapters.

Proposal:

<http://data.ashanet.org/files/Focusgroups/Fellowships/Proposals/Approved/AshisPanda/AshisAppForm.pdf>

Nomination:

<http://data.ashanet.org/files/Focusgroups/Fellowships/Proposals/Approved/AshisPanda/AshisNomForm.pdf>

Resume:

<http://data.ashanet.org/files/Focusgroups/Fellowships/Proposals/Approved/AshisPanda/AshisResume.pdf>

The objective of this visit was to understand more about Ashis' plans and current work. I arrived at Ahmedabad on the 4th morning and took a bus to Dungarpur from the City bus stand. The journey to Dungarpur town is about 4 hours long. Ashis and his wife, Madhu live in the Dungarpur town. We had a brief discussion and charted the plans for the next few days. Ashis gave a general overview of his background and plans (For detailed information on Ashis' previous experiences and background, please refer the proposal document). It was clear that Ashis wanted to work with the community as a whole and viewed himself as being a part of the community. At this point in time, he perceives four major areas in which his active involvement would be required, namely -

1. Developing a relationship with the community and organising, building a community based institution to take up work on various activities
2. Soil and Water conservation / harvesting
3. Soil, sustainable agriculture practices
4. Forming a cooperative to facilitate collective bargaining in the market

Meeting with Vagad Mazdoor Kisan Sangatan (VMKS):

Reading material:

1. Article on the Forest Rights Act written by Ashis Panda -
<http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/Transforming%20India.pdf>
2. VMKS Annual reports (2003-2007)

When I arrived at Dungarpur, I reached the collectorate and found the VMKS volunteers , leaders, members finishing with the last speeches of the day to wind up a rally. Mansingh ji and other coordinators had gone in to submit the petitions. The rally was organised to place demands of the members towards forest land rights, increased wages and days under NREGA, better education / health facilities. After freshening up and resting at Ashis' home we walked down to the town's talab, where there was a public resting place for everyone. Ashis is reaching out to the village communities through VMKS. He volunteers for VMKS and has helped them with various activities - he has written an article on their efforts related to the Forest rights (<http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/Transforming%20India.pdf>).

While doing work for VMKS, Ashis has also been keenly observing the current state of affairs related to water, soil and agriculture. Almost all of the sanghatan members identify Ashis as a volunteer associated with the Sangatan who is understanding the situation in order to work with them towards some mutually benefiting solutions. Mansingh ji gave a brief overview of the organization and the area - Dungarpur area is a completely adivasi belt with majority Bhils in this region. The people's organization was formed in 1998 by the adivasis themselves when the forest department claimed and evicted them from their homesteads. Slowly other issues like Adivasi Self Rule, employment, credit issues, migration, women's empowerment etc. also took prominence in their meetings. All the problems of the people in the 'Vagad' region were taken up by the organization.

'Vagad' in the vagadi language means jungle. This region was rich in forests and natural resources. But, over the years - firstly the british and later other laws and policies of the Government, these resources were destroyed and this became one of the reasons for people to migrate to Gujarat or neighboring states for their livelihoods. This condition led to a livelihood pattern of small marginal farming, collection and sale of minor forest produce and daily wage labor. This balance requires wages from each of the three areas. (On further discussion with Ashis, here is a note on this topic - The process of migration started much earlier, when the adivasis were driven to the hills (which had forests) by the dominant castes from the plains (which had the best fertile land for agriculture and income). Even if their forest resources remained intact, in time this would give way to agriculture, as needs of food and money from forest cannot match agriculture and two, because of the inherent poor productivity of these hilly slopes for agriculture (high erosion, poor soil depth, lower water availability etc) returns of these forest / hill dwelling families is lower compared to farmers in fertile plains. The plundering of forest wealth by British and the Forest department / State and marginalisation of the forest dwelling adivasis around this of course has accentuated immiserisation and led to increased migration. To this extent, if lets say we do positive work on agriculture, water, marketing etc, we can certainly improve overall incomes, but control migration, perhaps not fully, as we would need to generate so much more income to retain / absorb all the labour within the area, which will be quite a challenge given the constraints / limits of the resources / community situation.

When in 1998, the forest land issue emerged (Jan Jungle Aandolan - please refer to Ashis' article for detailed info on the struggle) people from here approached Astha (a non-profit social organization) to help. Mansingh ji was appointed to help them out, to organize and form a union called the Vagad laborers and farmers organization. Mansingh ji has more than 25 years of experience, started as a worker (cook) with Astha in Kotra block in Udaipur district, and set out start work in Dungarpur in 1997. He belongs to the local region (home village is in Kherwara district about 40km from Dungarpur). The organization now works in 4 blocks of Dungarpur district and in 3 blocks of Banswara district. They are getting active in one more block (Aspur) of Dungarpur district. At present there are about 16,000 members in the organization. There is a minimal one time membership fee of Rs. 51. Any person (not necessarily a adivasi) can be part of the organization, if they belong to that region and are going through problems they need help with and where the Sangathan can provide support.

Mansingh Ji explained that today's rally was about four major issues they have been addressing for a long time -

- a. Jan Jungle aandolan - Though the Central govt passed a landmark legislation (Forest Rights Act), the state government has ensured that nothing changed in the ground. Almost no one have got legal rights to their land back after the Central government legislation was passed in 2006. More about this act and history of the struggle is in great detail in Ashis' article.
- b. NREGA - The work involved here is focussed on getting the gaon samitis / sabhas (refer PESA - Panchayat Extension Act) to have more rights in deciding what work is allotted to them and demanding the correct disbursement of wages etc. There is corruption that needs to be addressed.
- c. Education - Teachers are not being accountable and when they do turn up, they are assigned some other work - like cooking midday meals etc. No teaching happens and kids drop out of schools a lot, ending up in menial labor.
- d. Development in general - Dungarpur is the most backward district in Rajasthan and incidentally is made up of the highest adivasi population. Infrastructure, government supported facilities are either non-existent or lack in quality.



You can know more about the Sangathan and their work in the attached annual reports (a zipped folder with reports from 4 years). [(Mansingh ji (Founder-Advisor, VMKS) and Ashis Panda at the meeting)]

Just as we finished our discussion on the rally, everyone got ready for an announcement and gathering. After the rally everyone had gathered here to assess and come up with a future course of action. One important aspect related to this was to strengthen the people's organization and sign up more members. All of them formed smaller groups to brainstorm on what could be then the strategy / plan for this. After the brainstorming session, one representative from each group came forward with their suggestions, goals and plans. Others, asked more questions to resolve loose ends in the group's plans. A few announcements were made at the end of the meeting regarding a women's literacy meet to be held in Udaipur and an upcoming youth meet in Dungarpur.



(The VMKS members engage in smaller group (block-wise) discussions)

After their general meeting of all members, we had a separate meeting with the team members (karyakarthas) and sangathan leaders. There were about 12 of them representing various areas within the Vagad region (mostly Dungarpur only, Banswara group had a separate meeting). Mohan ji, one of the coordinators gave an introduction from their perspective. He mentioned that before the 'sangathan' came into existence there was a severe lack of information and resources. There were several occurrences of harassment by forest department officials - bribes were very common in the area. Now, they are more organized and each village has a 'gaon samiti' where all members of the village gather in a regular basis. One of the core objectives of VMKS is to give legitimacy to the gaon samitis as prescribed in the law (PESA act). Each village has also formed a sub committee called the forest rights committee to be vigilant of any injustices that might happen to any inhabitant in the village. The forest rights committee is mandated under the forest rights act, here the sangathan has helped in the formation of FRCs.

We then discussed the issue of Bank loans. Most farmers in the region take up loans to dig up wells, place water pumps, buy tractors etc. The interest rates accorded by the banks were discriminatory and even when the government had waived off loans in many cases, the banks refused to acknowledge or sanction the waivers. There were instances when remittances were collected from people even after they paid off their loans. The major banks involved in these scams were Bank of Baroda, Bank of Rajasthan, SBI, State Bank of Bikaner and Jaipur etc. The waivers passed for farmers were from NABARD and RBI. This being a adivasi area, loans were supposed to be accorded at lower interest rates as well.

With regards to the NREGA work, the sangathan has been involved in the 'Rozgar Guarantee struggle' even before the act came into place. They had gone on dharnas and hunger strikes demanding work especially because of drought conditions. They had even presented letters to the CM, PM about how there was impending danger and hunger deaths possible in the region. All this happened in the 2002/03 time frame after which the NREGA act was passed. Even in the current implementation there are problems. Gaon samitis have little role or any decision making authority. They submit recommendations and suggestions to the panchayat for work in their own village and these are not accorded any importance by the Panchayat.

The underlying issue is that of the non-implementation of PESA act. The panchayat is not willing to divest its powers to smaller units of gaon samitis (each gaon samiti is a adivasi basti or village). There needs to be considerable awareness and a people's movement for the PESA act to be truly implemented. This will be a bigger challenge for VMKS than any other issue as its not a direct personal gain for the members (as is the case of an individual family losing their homestead or their land) and people need to be motivated by the larger common good.

The organization is structured in such a way so as to maintain accountability to the people in each level. The 'aam' sabha or general body meetings happens every month on the 6th, it has been the most regular meeting and since the last twelve years the date and place of the meeting has not changed and has all members (across every village in all areas of the organization) participating in the meetings. This happens at the Zilla or district level. Then there is the sanchalak meetings or organising/managing committee meetings. The committee is constituted of 29 ppl (Dungarpur region) from various villages in the district which meets once in 2-3 months. We have shetriya parishads (clusters) whose members are nominated by the village committees which meet once in 1-2 months. Each village has a committee (which is also the gaon samiti) made up of all members of the village. They meet every month.



(Some of the leaders, team members and volunteers of VMKS)

Meeting with Farhad Contractor (Sambhaav):

Reading Material:

1. "Aaj bhi Khare hai Talab" - The book that inspired Farhad - <http://indiawaterportal.org/tt/wbr/case/Aaj%20Bhi%20Khare%20hain%20Talab.pdf>
2. Sambhaav Annual Report 2007-08
3. Interview with India Water Portal: http://indiawaterportal.org/Network/interview/ngos/Farhad_eng.html
4. Interview with Civil Society Magazine: <http://www.civilsocietyonline.com/Sept07/sep072.asp>
5. Photos of Sambhaav's work on India Water Portal's Flickr site: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/indiawaterportal/collections/72157603993369454/>
6. 'Transfer of Power to Rural Communities' is an article on one of the various models that Sambhaav has helped build.

Farhad started the organization called 'Sambhaav' meaning 'with same equity'. Ashis plans to work with Farhad closely in learning his work and getting his help as a mentor especially in working on the area of water. Given the dry region Dungarpur is, there is a lot of need to do sustainable means of water harvesting and use. This is critical for the empowerment and a sustainable lifestyle of the community. Farhad drove down from Ahmedabad (where he is based, but he keeps travelling across many states and districts to work with various folks) to meet with Ashis and me. He gave me an introduction of his work and himself.

Farhad Contractor is an awardee of the prestigious Sanskriti award for Outstanding Social Work-Water harvesting in arid areas of Rajasthan. Farhad works with communities across the deserts of Western Rajasthan and Eastern Rajasthan on simple revival of traditional knowledge in the driest parts. After he was inspired by the book written by his mentor, Anupam Mishra, he moved to Barmer and extensively toured the desert villages. He found the echoes of the principles of water harvesting, which the book had already articulated so well, spread across the desert. And he realized he had nothing new to share with the native people. Be it a hydrological scientist or a civil engineer, the local people had never required anything. Their indigenous methods have performed miracles for thousands of years. At first, it establishes that "new technology" has little relevance in the desert. That native knowledge is more detailed and scientific. Local people could identify the exact spots of potable water amidst the sprawling saline areas. You get a team of geologists and hydrologists and yet may not locate the water easily. But native people know where exactly the potable water lies. Interestingly, all around a well of potable water lies salt, salinity, sand and sand dunes.

Farhad believes his role is simply to motivate people to revive their own wells (and other water harvesting systems) so that they do not remain dependent on the government. Notably, government has not even provided two percent of their drinking water requirements, not to mention irrigation and other uses. Government installed hand-pumps are dried up. They spend more than a lakh rupees on a single structure, and all get dried soon. He challenges to know, if even a drop of water is left in the government structures. Indira canal was a failure. Narmada dam is bringing water to Rann areas of Gujarat. Farhad believes that such projects can provide water only for few hours in a day. Their long term viability is still to be seen. A canal is not suited to the desert topography. A well runs round the clock and lasts for centuries. A well constructed for mere 50000/- runs at least for a hundred years.

(Note: The above two paras are based on the interview of Farhad on India Water Portal.)

Farhad believes in the philosophy of working 'with' the community rather than 'for' the community. He believes the community already has most answers in their traditional knowledge for the problems they face. The approach espoused is not like a consultant who has ready made solutions for problems that the community might have. The first step is to actually be a part of the community and understand the various needs, dynamics, strengths etc. The idea is not to address a particular problem, but act in the holistic interest of the community. All issues are very closely interlinked and addressing a small aspect can create a sea change in other issues that the community might face. For e.g. The issue of water could be related to migration patterns in the village.

We discussed a little bit about caste dynamics and how working together for a village common good, actually can bring about changes in perceptions and prejudices imbibed in people. We can't envision a complete transformation in the near future, but working together as a community to be able to solve their own problems does bring the community together and empowers them.

Ashis and Farhad discussed briefly on the status of work in Dungarpur area. The way Farhad had guided Ashis and Ashis had been going about giving updates (by email) to him reflected the philosophy of their approach. Ashis has taken a good deal of time attending village festivities, meetings and being part of every aspect of the village's life in many ways. It was tough for him to travel and come back in a single day, so he decided to spend a few days at a stretch every week at the village. After being a part of the community, there is a lot of effort in gathering information on local resources, history (history from a very long time back that's not been recorded on paper), to brainstorm with people on current issues and approaches to problem solving etc. (Note: Please refer the document 'Transfer of Power to Rural Communities'. Farhad provided this reference reading to Ashis and me to understand Sambhaav's model in detail)

We had a very informative discussion with Farhad on examples of his work - Some of the notable experiences were the revival of the Isawal well and the Nanduwali river. A good part of the funds raised for these efforts were from the community itself and the whole budget was so low (less than Rs. 50,000 for the well and pales in comparison to the mega projects run by the government. In the case of Nanduwali river, the total budget was about 30 lakhs spent over 5 years, 13 lakhs was from the community. Farhad's work has reached out to 7 districts of Rajasthan both working directly and through

partners, ranging from working with the community on reviving tanks (tankas), wells (beris, kuans), small lakes (naadi/johads), taalab (lakes) and nadi (rivers). He has worked on close to 5000 structures across the area.

Visit to Manatgaon:

On the morning of the 6th, we packed some roti-sabzi and a small bag to go to Manatgaon village. The plan was to stay the night and return next day morning. Ashis had to take a few printouts of photos he had taken of Devilal and Shantilal ji's family. We took a bus from Dungarpur bus stand and got down at Bicchiwada, which is about an hour's journey. After getting down at Bicchiwada, we walked across the town to get on a jeep to Chundawad. The jeep ride was adventurous as even the driver seemed to be hanging on to the vehicle and barely able to drive - we were about 20+ ppl packed in that jeep! When in Chundawad, Ashis showed me the panchayat office. All decisions regarding NREGA implementation and other government programs are made in this panchayat and Manatgaon also falls under it. Incidentally, the sarpanch (who is a lady) belongs to Manatgaon.



We then started walking towards Manatgaon from Chundawad. It is about 3-4 kms from Chundawad and there is no public or private transportation (no motorable roads exist) available to the village. As we walked towards Manatgaon, Ashis pointed to the flat fields at the bottom of the hills and explained that adivasis not just here, but in many places across India were forced to move up the hills under pressure from other dominant castes and sects. These flat fields were once the Bhils', but now are owned by Patels and other upper castes. The soil in low lying field is also more fertile because the rains deposit a good amount of silt instead of washing it away like in the mountains. We then walked through Lamba Bhatda hamlet which is 2 kms from Manatgaon. The middle/high school for this region is situated here.

As we walked along the trail we came across a Bhil farmer tilling his land and preparing for the next season. This farmer got a head start, because most of the others have not started farming yet and were waiting for the rains. This is mainly because he has water for irrigation. Ashis knew the farmer and we spoke to him briefly, got some water and Ashis took his permission to show me his fields. Ashis pointed out and explained the Bt cotton seed production. There were small Bt cotton seed plants sprouted in the field. The production technique is actually laborious and precise. Only 2 seeds (both female) are placed together and each pair is separated by fixed distances (about 4 feet), organized as rows and columns. The reason they plant two seeds is if in case one of them does not germinate, there is no wastage of farm space. This is a practice that they don't do for other crops, there they just broadcast or sow, not thinking so much about possible loss due to poor germination. The male plants are planted separately, in this farm it was in an adjacent plot. Once the plants grow up, pollination of the male and female flowers is done manually and involves labor.

We then walked through a brick kiln owned by one of the farmers. They were making an extra income by making bricks from the soil in their land. This land is the paddy field land in low lying flat areas, and the soil generates after the rains quickly because of silt deposits. We also saw a manure pile - basically all the

refuse from the cow, goats and poultry piled up along with other bio mass together. Ashis mentioned that many farmers place this pile in the sun inadvertently, thereby killing the life in the manure and one of the areas of work was to try and build a shade for the manure heap/pit or simply get it put under a tree. As we went up the hills, we noticed a tractor-trailer taking water. This is a supply tanker from the Panchayat, but supplies only along the road, and not inside the villages. Only those houses near the road therefore benefit. The distance from there to let's say the last house in Manatgaon is about 1.5-2 km and over the hills.



We then reached the village. From the entrance we got a beautiful view of all the hilly terrain. Ashis mentioned that it's summer now and hence the terrain looked barren. It becomes all green and beautiful during the rains. But cotton seed, maize and pulses are grown in the slopes and paddy rice is grown in the small flat valleys portion between the hills where water starts to collect a month or so after the first rains. As we saw a transformer, Ashis mentioned that electricity has reached only half of the village. We then observed a road being made under the NREGA implementation. All roads that are done under NREGA are typically kutchra and all work is equated to amount of digging (volume based) involved in the work. Based on assumptions of average productivity of a worker and a minimum wage of Rs. 100, the task rates (Rs/m³) has been worked out for 8 hrs of work a day. Here they were piling up more soil on the road and would later flatten it out.

We then came across the government primary school. As we were taking photos, an elderly person greeted us and enquired Ashis about his whereabouts. The person also asked him for some kodo millet seeds that Ashis had promised them. Ashis had samples of foxtail millet (from Timbaktu) with him and by chance discovered that the village used to grow kodo millets in the past. Many farmers were interested in trying it out, especially because it wouldn't involve any extra effort and can be grown in the in-between area of the maize fields and because it was considered very nutritious food. He was planning to source the kodo seeds from another part of dungarpur district where some farmers still grow it. The person also mentioned that the old run down building was the old primary school, made from contributions from the villagers themselves. They had struggled as a village to get the new primary school. The village makes an effort to ensure that the teachers come on time and classes do happen. Despite their effort, teachers don't come regularly and are also assigned various other duties by the government.

We came across a lot of borewells in the region, which are a recent phenomena. There was cement like dust around the dug up borewells. This was drilled underground rock dust and most of India's peninsular region, including Manatgaon, has rock sub strata. We then reached Shantilal ji's home and were greeted by his mother. Later, everyone in the house greeted us and were excited to have us home. Shantilalji and Devilalji, cousins from the village were very active in the Sangathan and represented the village. They are good friends of Ashis and it's through them that Ashis has developed a relationship and become a part of the village community. Ashis gave them some printouts of photos that he had taken in his previous visit. Ashis jokingly said that he has been made the unofficial photographer for the village, as folks know he has a camera and he is present in all social occasions. The family was excited about the photos and they quickly sorted out photos for each household. We later joined Eashwar, Shantilal ji's brother inside the

home for lunch. We opened our own box and also shared some maize rotis with them. Eashwar mentioned that there was a festival/pooja at a Hanuman temple just outside the village (near chundawad), to invoke the gods to send enough rains and on time. We were invited to join them.



We later went down to the youngest brother's house (Shantilal's father and Devilal's father were one of many brothers). It is customary in the village that parents live with their youngest son. As each son gets married, they move away to a different home, leaving the youngest son who doesn't move out of the home after marriage. We met the seniormost person of the village here. He is about 118 years old. He is hard of hearing and his wife is not able to comprehend conversations as she seems to have some mental disorder. After distributing the photos for the families here, the seniormost person was eager to share stories with us, but he spoke a dialect of vagadi (the language here, a mix of gujarati and mewari) that Ashis couldn't understand. Others in the household also mentioned that they don't comprehend much of his talk and only Devilal ji understands him the most, as he was his favourite (eldest) grandson. Ashis mentioned that this person would be very important in understanding the history and traditional practices of the village. We later met with one of the youth (Jeevatram) in the home who is also a NREGA mate (panchayat assigned work supervisor). He showed us an example of a job card and explained how attendance is tracked on it. Hundred days of work is guaranteed for the family as such.

We then joined a gang of Eashwar and his friends to head out for the festival at the Hanuman temple. On the way one of the young boys, Dinesh (about 18-19 years of age) mentioned that he was a migrant laborer in Gujarat. He works in an ice cream factory and had started this when he was about 11-12 years old after he dropped out of school. We reached the temple and as folks were waiting for the pooja to begin, we had an inadvertent discussion on NREGA works in the village. Many folks were disgruntled that the kind of work that's chosen is usually a road or tank for the personal benefit of the panchayat leaders and their relatives rather than for other smaller hamlets. Though their village has submitted many suggestions and proposals, they have been repeatedly turned down. They all agreed that water is a pressing need in Manatgaon and work should be done in this area - making talaabs, check dams, etc. But, the current stress is more on road works.

We later met Devilal ji at the temple festival. He had finished his day's work for the Sangathan and joined us there. We decided to leave early in order to go around the village with Devilalji. Devilalji gave us a brief history about the temple and its mythology. A rival king had stolen the statue and immersed it in water, resulting in an epidemic in the village and finally the villagers found the statue after a prediction was made by the holy spirit entering a priest. The pooja here was a prediction on rainfall made in similar lines by a holy man who had travelled from far. The prediction was made that rains would come around the 20th of June.

Devilal ji explained about his own story and how he got inspired to join the sangatan. After an incident in the village when the youth were beaten up by forest officials for entering their own land, the village became active in the Jan Jungle Aandolan. He discussed with us on major issues in the area that included

water, sustainable income generating activities, education, encroachment by forest officials, the non-implementation of the PESA act etc. Devilal ji mentioned that there was a good bit of recorded history of the village from the british times, as in the names of members in families etc. For information related to incidents and also for time periods before the british, it was only possible to rely on history passed through word of mouth through the generations. He recognized that a lot of rich traditional knowledge lies in such history.

As we walked to the village, Ashis mentioned that Selvam and a farmer from Tamilnadu were going to make a trip to Manatgaon (They are from an organization called OFFER). The objective of this trip is to demonstrate some sustainable agricultural practices and organic farming techniques. Ashis wanted to have some cow urine ready when they come to demonstrate these techniques. So, as we trudged along Devilal ji also stopped at houses requesting them to collect the same in separate containers. The villagers were not making use of the cow urine for any of their agricultural practices. Ashis and Devilal ji also briefly discussed on some long term plans to be able to collect cow urine, for e.g. a sloping floor in the cowshed where urine can be collected in a pot every morning etc. Almost every house has a neem tree and the fruit from this tree is another important ingredient for organic farming. All the dry fruit that fell was just swept away instead of being used in manure or organic pest repellent preparations.



Devilal ji later explained how they do their paddy cultivation by collecting standing water in the valley sections (they do grow varieties that don't need as much standing water). Ashis plans to take the help of OFFER in doing workshops and trainings on SRI, a proven sustainable technique to intensify production of paddy rice. There were small bunds on the intersection of slopes and he mentioned these stone bunds were made to prevent soil erosion during the rains. The rains could potentially wash away the rich top soil if not for these stone bunds on the slopes that prevent gully formations.

We then started walking on the stream bed and decided to follow it through to Shantilal ji's house. As we walked along the stream bed we observed more stone and rock bunds constructed to save the soil from being eroded, but this was built on flat lands. Along the stream we saw a well. Wells are the traditional source of drinking water, located on stream beds and usually not more than 30-50 ft deep. But, they are losing out to hand pumps and tubewells. The borewells are not exactly near the main stream. They are normally made on the top of the hill. The wells are adjacent to the main stream since they are of shallow depth. Ashis explained how borewells worked in rocky terrains, water comes from the crevices in the rocks of the sidewalls rather than from a water table at the bottom. So, this means a deeper borewell need not necessarily give more water. We later saw a failed attempt by the irrigation department to build a huge check dam. It was not really completed fully, only the foundation was done and the rest was covered up with mud. The other reason it broke down was a poor weir design, because of which the water crashed through and broke the dam.



(We are standing in the breached portion, and bits of the left over bund are visible on both sides.)

We then came across couple of smaller check dams built by the villagers themselves under NREGA. Devilal ji mentioned that these check dams didn't serve their purpose and they had no knowledge on where to position them and maybe that was why it didn't work. Ashis explained that a check dam randomly placed wouldn't be of much help and it should be planned as a series starting right from the top of the stream and should done in all the small streams right upto the main stream. Ashis explained the course of the stream through the village and where it exits the village. In this stream subsection from top to bottom, they discussed various points where check dams should be made in order to harness the water and maintain flow of the stream as well.

We then walked along till we reached Shantilal ji's home. There Shantilal ji's father was working on a plough and showed it to Devilal ji. Devilal ji mentioned to us that these skills are now slowly being lost in the village and very few people do carpentry work like this to do ploughs, cots etc. As the sun came down (It was 8 P.M by then), we reached Devilal ji's residence. I was introduced to the family members and had a hearty dinner of maize rotis, lotus stalk sabzi, kadhi etc. Devilal ji's typical day starts very early in the morning and goes on till late in the night when he returns home. On an average he walks about 20+ kms a day.

We had a good night's sleep under the sky and woke up early in the morning in order to catch the bus to Ahmedabad. In the morning we had to go the jungle for our morning ablutions and it was quite an adventurous experience. Ashis mentioned how it was initially a bit tough for him to get used to this and I realized how accustomed we are to aspects in our lifestyle that its become tougher to live in the village, for e.g. women in this village climb long distances normally every day for water. Though Devilal ji has a handpump near his home, it doesn't work. Before we left Devilal ji showed us samples of the foundation seeds used in Bt-Cotton seed production. The come as a pair of packets. Both are of one variety and will generate one variety only, and will be used to grow male and female plants. The male flowers will be plucked and pollinated on the flowers of the female plant manually (in order to maintain its purity).



Ashis explained how the seeds are not sold separately and it all comes as part of a 'package deal'. The fertilisers, pesticides, buyback arrangement etc. are all controlled by the trader. The price for the output is fixed prior to start of production. All the inputs are controlled by the trader and the output price fixed by the trader again. Thus, the farmers are reduced to contracted labor. We finally took a photo with Devilal ji's family and left for Dungarpur. Along the way, Devilal ji stopped at many houses explaining what's going to happen during the visit by resource persons from Tamilnadu (Selvam from OFFER) and how they had to save neem fruits, cow urine etc. We reached Chundawad in time to get a direct bus to Dungarpur. I had just enough time to pack some kichdi for lunch and take the bus back to Ahmedabad.



Addendum:

There were lot more concepts on water, soil and sustainable agricultural practices that Ashis had mentioned in the trip. Many of this information resides in the extensive reference material he has collected. He also has networks with various collectives and resource groups. He will be building an online repository of information to make this organized and easy to peruse. This site visit report has not completely covered all his work or plans due to time constraints (only 3 days) and given a longer time period, more extensive information could have been collected.

There were lot more photos and the photos also explain a lot of detail about the work and situation in the village. I have created a photo album with specific information and explanation given for each photo. This can be accessed at -

http://picasaweb.google.co.in/santhosh.padmanabhan/Site_visit_dungarpur?authkey=Gv1sRgCNH6_PC9zevxUg#

After I came back to Bangalore and before I finished this report, Selvam and Gunasekaran from OFFER had already made the visit to Manatgaon. This visit was completely supported by Ashis with his own funds. Here are some photos from the visit and other photos collected by Ashis on miscellaneous aspects of his work and of the partners involved -

http://picasaweb.google.co.in/ashis.panda/PhotosForSanthosh?authkey=Gv1sRgCMCFpbyh_puIeA#