

Field Report

Meeting with Ashish Panda



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Arrived in Dugarpur via a taxi in-route to Ahmedabad around 2:45PM. I met Ashish near the collector's office and we left for the Konadhari hamlet, Bharatpur village, where Ashish has been working for past few years. The ride took us roughly 15 min and Ashish used that time to give an overview of his work from past 8 years. This discussion helped me build a deeper understanding of the local issues, as well as learn about interventions Ashish has been engaged with.



Ashish's work is broadly focussed on natural resource, particularly water management, and specifically improving surface and ground water availability that directly links to fertility and agrarian viability. Ashis came to Dungarpur with intent to work on water [and land] issues with small scale farmers in a constrained area. Dungarpur is now home to Ashish and his family that includes his wife Madhu, who works on tribal rights as well, and their 3-year old daughter. During this time Ashis has been an Asha Fellow between 2009-2011 and 2014-2015 and has done important work in water conservation, rejuvenation and revitalization of ground water. Madhu, is also associated with *Sangathan* and has deep interest in tribal rights and advocacy.

We got off the road and took a walk on unpaved road towards Konadhari *phalan* (फलां - hamlet in Vagadi and Mewadi). Konadhari, in Malota panchayet, is a hamlet of 16 families where a rain-water fed water pond is under construction. This pond is a result of direct and persistent intervention by Ashish and is one of many that Ashish has been able to help build over the years. This like many other ponds, will act as a source of irrigation besides improving the water level, recharging of water wells and reducing reliance on bore wells that are quickly becoming a commonplace even in this far flung area. We arrived at the construction at Konadhari, roughly 1/2 km from the main road. There were about 10-15 people at the construction site working on building the barrier wall of the catchment area. Ashish quickly walked me through the terrain and described both the dimensions of the pond under construction, as well as the qualities they looked for while making the selection of the catchment area. I met Khatra ji, Jayanti ji, Devchand from the village who are all working on the construction site along with the families. In my conversation with Khatra ji, he spoke highly of Ashish as well as *Sangathan*.

Vagad Mazdoor Kisan Sangathan, more commonly referred to as *Sangathan*, is a grassroots NGO in Dungarpur that works on tribal issues, particularly on forest and land rights of adivasis (आदीवासी - tribal, predominantly Bheel tribe). It was through *Sangathan's* work that most tribals were able to get patta for their land granting them legal right over land, and making them eligible for seeking Government subsidies for embankments, leveling and digging. *Sangathan* has a well connected and large network that originally united tribals on land issues [rising out of 1963 Rajasthan Land Reforms & Acquisition of Land Owners' Estate Act]. *Sangathan* was started by Mansinghji who came to Dungarpur from Udaipur over

two decades back and has worked tirelessly in organizing tribals into a collective voice. *Sangathan's* vast network has been important to Ashish's work, and instrumental in its success.

It was quite apparent that the families were building the pond out of conviction, and believed in its the benefits - something that Ahish had stressed upon earlier. An



identified portion of higher elevation land that sits between at the base of two seasonal rain-fed [water] streams is being developed into a water reservoir. This waterbody will not only supply water for significant portion of the year but will recharge and improve water level in the four water wells. This will also improve the general ground water levels, and soil quality by limiting

erosion due to water runoff.. Whilst the region is traditionally known for rain-fed farming practices there is an increased pillaging of ground water through bore wells resulting in steadily declining water levels.

At this point I must note that construction of anicuts and development of catchment areas is not a new concept, per-se. Much work has ben done through variety of Government schemes and/or NGO projects to development anicuts etc. Unfortunately, such development has taken little cognizance of the terrain and area selection, thus rendering many of them useless. There is a reviewed focus now to make sure that MNREGA funds be utilized for construction of water ponds. This will not only accelerate the development of water bodies but also ensure better utilization of MNREGA funds. I was told that they are in discussions with a Village

sarpanch, erstwhile member of Sangathan to allocate funds for water pond in their village through MNREGA funds.

Khatri ji offered to walk us to the water well across the farm, down from site of construction. While we negotiated the bedding of the freshly sown wheat field, Khatri ji told me about commonly harvested crops, and multi cropping vegetables.



Unsurprisingly, the average land holding is rather small, and surface soil quality is materially important for its viability. Construction of such ponds, that creates a barrier for run-off rain water therefore is an important benefit for the farmers. We came back to the site of construction where Devchand's daughter got tea for all of us.

Shortly thereafter, we were joined by Mohan Raut, a field worker with *Sangathan*, who has been working with Ashish and is overseeing the construction work in Konadhari. We walked across the farm and, Ashish showed me another potential, site of a pond, between two hillocks a pair of converging dry streams. We touched upon the issues arising out of overuse of bore wells, and also levelling of hillocks using JCBs and earth moving equipment that is easily available on rentals and are quickly transforming the terrain and its character.

After spending little over an hour in beautiful landscape of Konadhari, Ashish and I left for Dungarput town. Our next stop was to meet Mansingh ji a veteran founder of *Sangathan*. Ashish's work in Dungarpur has occurred in close concert with *Sangathan* and its grassroots workers, and it was important for me to hear their narrative. Mansingh ji spoke about his journey, its current work and issues, as well as their interactions with Ashish. Overall Mansingh ji spoke positively of Ashish's work and noted on many issues related to construction work being sanctioned

under MNREGA that can be channeled to accelerate waterbodies rejuvenation and pond construction activities.

I personally felt a similarity in the two narratives, Ashish came to Dungarpur after his work with Timbaktu Collective to work with people in a small rural setting, while Mansinghji arrived in Dungarpur from Udaipur after his many years of work with Astha [a Udaipur based NGO] with an intent to work with Bheels in Dungarpur. Whilst *Sangathan* has organized and united tribals on critical issues of their survival and sustenance, Ashish has catalyzed a movement on water conservation and resource management.

After a brief conversation we left for my onward journey to Ahmedabad. Ashish joined me on my way to Kherwada where we discussed his work with Sambhaav, and how his expanded role in Sambhaav will allow him to work beyond local issues and on broader level. At around 5:30 PM local time, I concluded by brief site visit after spending about 3 hours with Ashish.

Notes:

1. Asha Fellowship has been pivotal to Ashish's journey, supporting him initially during his transition into Dungarpur. The support has been patchy ever since, marred by lack of communication largely attributed to Asha for Education.
2. Ashish has been able to establish strong ground relationships, engaging Sangathan and leveraging its reach to achieve tangible results. And it's my recommendation to continue fellowship support for Ashish to complete his mission of building total of 10 ponds in the area.
3. Ashish has accepted a position with Sambhaav expanding his work on water issues behind Dungarpur. Whilst this will mean splitting time between Dungarpur and other parts of Rajasthan, overall this is an encouraging move. I must note that his work with Sambhaav will be pro-bono for now, and fellowship will remain a source of sustenance.

4. On a larger level, it might be worthwhile to explore how this knowledge about waterbodies, water related issues can be distilled down into reading and learning material for children. I believe its important to learn about make water and land, and issues related to it a part of “curriculum.” It’s important for children to learn about or natural resources not in abstract sense but in their own context. I also believe that water and land issues are of as relevance, if not more, to an urban situation as they are to a village. And we should explore distilling this down to make it both interesting and relevant for children.