

# stories from grassroots

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## Well Refreshed

*Villagers found an answer, to address drinking water risk, in an abandoned well and revived that.*

In a tube-well dependent drinking water supply system, an initiative by people of Padiabdmal, a tribal inhabited village in Western Orissa, has come as a refreshing fresh water splash. Driven by declining trust in tube wells, the villagers decided to clean up an abused and abandoned well. It is not that their village has no tube wells. But, they have less faith in the abilities of tube wells to address their drinking water emergencies. As a consequence, after almost two decades, a well has again thronged back to its role as a life sustaining source.

### "Over dependence on tube wells- a Risk"

Reviving the well was not a reactive initiative by the villagers. Rather it was a most calculated one planned in advance to create a contingency buffer to mitigate vulnerabilities. It had its genesis in a comprehensive Community Contingency Plan (CCP), floated by *Manav Adhikar Seva Samiti*, an Orissa based NGO. CCP is nothing exceptional. "This is an action plan to reduce risk of disasters, based on assessments of Assets and Liabilities, Resources and Vulnerabilities, Capacities and Constraints and Problems and Prospects," informs Ms Puspashree Nayak who is leading the initiative from the NGO.

The problem with us is that we get carried away by an easy life style and ignore some basic managements and precautions," she adds. In that manner villagers of Padiabdmal became overly dependent on tube wells for their drinking water and other water requirements. Their throats stayed parched at times when tube wells became defunct. But they had no options left as; wells which were a most reliable source of safe drinking water had lost their relevance in the face of acute neglect. Facing hardship during non-functioning of tube well was thus accepted as part of the system. "In such situation CCP shows you

**A Community Contingency Plan to create buffers to reduce risks.**



Upward vision: Cleaning the well

the way and where you presently stand," says social worker TB Dash.

The situation analysis of Padiabdmal village, as a part of preparing a CC Plan, identified many issues and strategised plans for risk management. Water shortage came out as a prime risk for them. The village name itself suggests the harsh topography, high and upland where water retention capacity of the soil is extremely low. Water was always a problem for the villagers till recently. But then, water meant irrigation supplements. That problem is being more or less addressed by a series of MASS supported traditional water harvesting structures which also included a *kata*, a large water harvesting structure. Now water problem for them means drinking water problem.

Apart from tube wells Padiabdmal village has 18 dug wells. For years many of them were used to dry up completely in summer months and thereby rendering them useless in the most important period of requirement. Naturally when tube well culture started the villagers were



**Futile Exercise: Defunct tube-wells a threat to water security**

exhilarated and embraced them. But now things have significantly changed. Courtesy a series of surface water harvesting structures, mostly due to the *kata*, ground water level of the village has considerably raised. A well planned land-water treatment has helped augment ground water recharge. No village well is now drying up completely. The villagers even have started summer vegetable cultivation using well water. Their trust and stake in open wells has increased.

### Focus into the deep

Thus when drinking water was identified as a 'risk' by the villagers - during preparation of the CCP - their attention focused towards the government community well. The well was their lifeline for many years. Its water, being sweet and cool, was the most popular drinking water source for the villagers. But since the 1980s, drought became a regular phenomenon and ground water started dipping. Installation of tube wells added to the problems and ensured a burial for the well. Worse was still to come. The well being a common property no one spared any thought for its maintenance. On the contrary, the well turned a burial ground of debris and a community dump yard. A place where villagers were passing important hours earlier became a taboo place. Filth and unhygienic conditions made it sure that the well is not frequented for other uses except dumping discards and domestic wastes.

"Another reason for turning our eyes on the well is to plug un-necessary and wasteful water use in tube wells. As tube wells are easy to access everybody including children waste a lot of water. We understand the value of water," claims Shanti

Dharua. Incidentally, there village school is a model of roof top water harvesting where school children, teachers and village education committee members raised vegetable cultivation which supplemented mid-day meals of the students till the summer vacation.

### Ensuring Elimination Of 'Earned Risk'

Managing a tube well is too complex and technical affair where as open well is simple and reliable to manage and use. "We were unanimous that we 'earned drinking water risk' by ignoring the most precious drinking water source that was available to us free and independent of any other external influences," says an introspective Krushna Chandra Majhi , a villager. "By being dependent on tube wells we lost that resource and inherent freedom. Many factors, like hand pump defects, was not in our control and we were totally dependent on government agencies," he clarifies further. The villagers were

**"Over dependence on tube well has made us vulnerable to drinking water risks."**

determined to get their freedom back and risks reduced. Reviving the well fit the bill to address that risk. "When we have a well which gives us clean and tasty water why should we depend on unreliable tube wells," candidly said Ms. Kumudini Dharua. Village ground water at level higher than ever before further ensured stamping on the proposal to revive the beleaguered well. That was the beginning of the abandoned well's journey towards regaining its past glory.

### Youth power to the initiative

The plan for revival of the well as part of drinking water risk reduction was listed last winter. Action started during the peak summer with initiatives from two very young people. Ironically,



**Deep Focus: Faith in the well**





### Filth? Not a deterrent for them

being born and brought up in a post tube well age neither of them had ever drunk a drop of water from that well previously. "It didn't matter. We had heard how sweet the water of this well was," says a happy Chulamani Majhi. "We were anxious to execute a plan which we value precious. Worsening drinking water situation with progressing summer added to that. We just reminded our fellow villagers that we have a task in our hand to start action on our plans," says an exuberant Golbadan Majhi. Almost all of the village youths, sixteen of them most actively, joined the bandwagon. "It was no easy task. The well was full of filth and hazardous wastes. Foul smell was un-bearable. We worked by burning packets of incense," says Bala Majhi. It took three days of intense effort for the young brigade, constantly supported and encouraged by other villagers.

Two days later the 35 feet deep well - which had only dregs left earlier - had 7 feet of sparklingly clean water. No other village well had that much of a storage. The water was then treated and cleaned. With that the well regained a glory which it had lost for about two decades.

There may be advantages with tube well sourced drinking water but disadvantages outweigh them. "Incidence of quality contaminations, like excess iron contents, are far higher in tube wells than in bore wells. And tube wells need mechanical expertise which are not easily available at the village level during emergency situation," says Bimal Pandia, a social researcher. "A Well can augment ground water which a tube well can't, thus it has an added environmental value," adds Nrusighacharan Nayak, also the president of the farmers' club of the village.

### A teaching for the future

This initiative has generated considerable enthusiasm among neighboring villages. "Replications are expected to follow. Almost every villages have at least one such well which at one time was providing drinking water but have been either defunct, derelict or made a dump yard now," says a hopeful Mr Chittaranjan Hota, senior programme officer of MASS.

"A tube well does not always provide clean water, neither water of an open well can be discarded as unclean," says social worker Sukanti Parwar. "Focus only on tube wells as drinking water sources make people and environment more vulnerable," sums up Mr. Hota.

The revived well is centre of all's attraction now. Farmers with land near the well are being poured in with requests to share a portion of land for vegetable cultivation from other villagers. By reviving the well, the villagers have averred a risk and earned an avenue to garner some profit. And importantly they did not have to depend on government for this. Time has probably come when successes like the one in Padiabadmal should again make us rethink and re-look our water supply policy and implementation. ■■

Community initiatives, like the above, reassure us that we may indeed be successful in our difficult mission TO MAKE LIFE, LIVELIHOOD & ENVIRONMENT SIMPLE AND SUSTAINABLE.

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