

When the Ravaging Flood Waters Recede

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Hearing about floods and actually experiencing the death and destruction it wreaks are totally different; the PRADAN team realizes this as it struggles to find solutions to counter the devastating effects that the receding waters leave behind for the villagers

AS INDIA TURNED 70 ON 15 August 2017, the people of Araria district had little to celebrate. Araria has Nepal in the north, Kishanganj in the east and Supoul in the south-west. Kosi, Suwara, Kali, Koli, Panar are the major rivers that flow through this district besides a few small rivers. Three days earlier, heavy rain pounded the area that adjoins Nepal. The rain intensified over the next two days. By the evening of 13 August, the Bihar government's disaster management department had categorized Araria district as "entirely affected by floods", alongside

adjoining Purnea and Kishanganj districts. On 13th and 14th of August, Araria and the whole northeast Bihar experienced the most devastating floods of the decade, killing at least 514 people and affecting 1.72 crore people across the state, according to the state's disaster management department. Over 8.5 lakh people have lost their homes, with Araria district alone accounting for almost 2.2 lakh homeless people. In Araria, 9 blocks entirely and 149 *panchayats* were flood-affected. Whereas these figures convey the scale of the disaster, they do not reveal the extent to which the floods upturned people's lives and the fact that its repercussions will be felt for months to come.

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PRADAN is currently working in 3 blocks; this includes 20 *panchayats*.

It was a nightmare. The water rose so quickly that nobody got the time to gather their belongings or prepare for the exigency; everyone ran to the highway for safety. As water rushed into houses and farms across villages and towns in Araria, people fled for their lives, most unable to carry anything with them. They spent days on elevated highways and along railway tracks, often with nothing to eat, even as the rain continued till the third week of August.

Our team took shelter in a nearby hotel because our houses were under water. For four days, we could not come back to our homes or the office. We could only conjecture how badly our homes and office were affected. There was no mobile network and we had no way of connecting with the women we work with in the villages. The entire road was damaged and all means of connectivity lost. In the villages, flood waters uprooted and swept away ancient trees, sometimes carrying them kilometers downstream. Bridges and roads were washed away as embankments of canals caved in. A video showing a woman and

two children on a bridge across Bakra river being swept away and drowning became viral on social media and in the news. The video was so disturbing it increased our fears and stress more than ever. The collapse of the bridge destroyed communication completely because it was the only mode by which we reached those villages. We felt helpless and consumed by fear.

A few days later, we managed to reach some of the villages by crossing different flooded streams, muddy passages and damaged roads. It took almost 6 hours to reach these villages. The roads were full of people taking shelter under torn plastic tents. We were relieved to see some of the women we work with. In Rahariya village, Fatima *didi* spoke about her experience of the floods and how they had starved for two days, how they survived and saved their families. Madni *didi*, aged 50, said that she saw her all the grain and her savings going into the water and she could not do anything, “*Mera sabhi kuch dub gaya mere aankho ke samne* (Everything sank in front of my eyes)” she said with grief. The water had entered the villages so suddenly that all the grain and utensils were washed away; the water damaged their

entire stock of grain that would have sustained the households over the coming year. Bimla *didi* shared if the level of water had risen by even one more inch, her whole family might have drowned. “*Do bacho ko kandhe me le lie, soche dubenge to pehle hum hi dube* (I carried my two children on my shoulders, if anyone has to get drowned then it would be me first).” Her voice was shaking, “*Do din sirf do packet biscuit khake rahe* (For two days, we just survived on two packets of biscuits).” She added agitatedly, “*Bhukha rehne ke siwa hum logon ke paas koi upai nahi tha* (We had no option but to stay hungry).” Rekha *didi* added, “*Baad ka pani ko hi piye didi, dur tak pine ka pani nahi tha* (We drank the flood waters *didi*; there was no drinking water available for miles).” Some drank flood waters or contaminated water from small hand pumps in the upper levels because all other drinking water supply resources were submerged. Some drank rain water. It was unimaginable how hundreds of people spent days and nights on the roof-tops of schools or *pucca* houses. Thus they survived the devastation. An SHG member from Rampur suffered for days. She was eight months pregnant and was not able to even sit for a minute because of over-crowding. She could not stop

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her tears when asked how she was. They spent the night in the rain and wind. Some got stuck in their houses. Some shared how they joined their beds and spent two nights on it without food and water. One villager recalled that they staved off their hunger by eating biscuits and puffed rice. At such a time, we assumed that the villagers' prime need would be food; however, to our surprise, it included a long list. When my colleague Santosh asked Masliuddin from Gamharia village about her immediate issues. "*Do din bhuke rehna pada, par uske baad sukha naasta kha pa rahe hai, masla to roshni ka hai, bijli to gul hai aur tel bhi nahi hai dhibri jalane ko* (After two days of staying hungry, we have dry food; the main problem, however, is that there is no electricity, and there is no oil to light the lamp)." After the sun set, the windy darkness descended on them. That was frightening; people could not sleep for fear of snakes and reptiles. The lack of firewood made them more vulnerable.

Moreover, they said, "*Insaan to apna gujara kar le raha hai, par maal mavesi ke liye to kuch bhi nahi bacha, bahut samsya hai, kya khilaye unko* (We humans can still survive but what do we do for our animals? It's a big problem, what

will we feed them)?" Some could not save their livestock. Sama *didi* shared how the water washed away her cow, a goat, 4 chickens, and almost all her household belongings. It was similar for all the other women, and even worse for some.

When Sangeeta *didi* returned home after the waters receded, she found that everything in her house, barring a couple of trunks and the bed had been swept away. The flood waters had taken everything that could pass through broken walls and doorways. All the *kuchcha* houses were damaged, some completely and some partially. Sakeba *didi*, an SHG woman from Pecchaili village, had gone to the adjacent village to see her sister, leaving behind her three children at home. As the water rose, she turned back to go to her home. She almost got drowned in the rising flood waters; luckily some people nearby rescued her. She rushed to her home and saw her children crying on the bed. The mud walls of her home collapsed. When recounting her experience, she got goose bumps, "*Didi agar us din kuch ho jata baccho ko, to pata nahi hum kya karte?* (I don't what I would have done if something had happened to my children that day)."

In another incident, three men of a family and their two kids were stuck on a tree in Pecchaili village for almost 20 hours. They had gone to bring a gas cylinder from the market; while returning, the rising water level stopped them from reaching home. A family in Rampur took shelter in their auto and saved their lives. Many others went up to temple's roof.

An SHG member from the same village said, "*Humne apne pure pariwar ko kaha ki koi bhi kahi nahi jayega, jo koi gaya to uske chinta me hum maare jayenge, hum sab hath pakad ke road pe khade ho gaye.* (I told our family that nobody will go anywhere because if someone goes we will die of worry; so, we all stood on the road holding each other's hands)." She was convinced that we can fight with anything if we are together and courageous enough. Many people went on to *pucca* houses in the village where food for more than 200 people at the time of crisis was arranged by the house owners, in a demonstration of what true humanity is all about.

Not all people, however, were blessed and for some their suffering would be lifelong. A 25-year-old SHG woman from Balua village lost her life partner and is now alone with two kids, both under the age of six. She

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and her family had shifted to safe place early enough; however, her husband went back to their home to save their important papers, including their Aadhaar Card. She went in search of him when he did not come back for three hours. She felt something brush against her in the fast flowing water. She shouted loudly and people came to her help and raised that thing with the help of a bamboo. She fainted to see the body wearing a black-and-white checked shirt. It was her husband. She lost the only earning member of her family. She has been crying since then, and our colleague Tarannum has no clue what should be done besides consoling her.

Another mother bore the pain of seeing her young adult son's dead body, which she kept at her place for two days because there was no place to bury it and no firewood for cremation. There are many untold stories of severe pain; for the government, however, it was just a number of casualties.

The situation was grim. People had no money and puffed rice cost Rs 80 per kg, a packet of biscuit that cost Rs 10 was available for Rs 30, and there was no vegetables available. The roads were packed with over-loaded autos, causing huge

traffic jams and minor accidents. Those who had migrated from their homes were returning, tense and terrified of seeing their own places destroyed. The migrants got to know of the latest condition by the media; however, they could not connect to any of their family; this frightened them more and many pushed themselves to walk miles and miles and to swim through many streams after which they reached their beloved ones. Those who returned felt relieved to see their people alive but there were people, who could not make it to Araria for different reasons. The condition of those families was worse than ever. A woman whose son, daughter-in-law, daughter and son-in-law, working outside the state was crying. Her house was completely washed away and her old husband was suffering from fever. She managed to keep her husband in a half-wet bed at the roadside but had no money and food for both of them. She cried a lot and she was unable to share her pain.

Migration and agriculture are two major sources of income in Araria. Those who migrated returned to find their fields severely damaged by the speed and the depth of the flood waters. The floods destroyed the standing crops. Afsana *didi*, an SHG member from Suksaina

village, said, "*Aisa laga ki ye badh ke pani me acid bhi tha, mera pura khet jal sa gaya hai.* (It seems the flood waters also had acid in it; my whole field looks as if it has been burnt)." Landless people who lived on shared cropping were more vulnerable. An old farmer said, "*Bhaiya jitna nuksaan hua hai kheti me, isse accha hum hi khatam ho jate* (There is so much damage of crops, it would have been better if we had died)." The other standing crop, jute, a commercial crop was entirely affected by the floods, which completely broke the backbone of agriculture. A villager from Bagdehra village said, "*Hum log dus saal piche chale gaye hai* (We have moved ten years back)."

The government initiated relief measures albeit late. However, some villages could not be reached. It also arranged air relief, distributing packets of dry eatables in many areas. 'Survival of the fittest' was in evidence when we saw people fighting over for a packet of food. One or two families collected the packets of food that were thrown to them, and they were not willing to share it with the needy. Many organizations from all over the country came forward but still many needy were not benefited because the demand was high; lakhs of people were starving.

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We went to the market yard in Araria town where the packaging of dry eatables was going on. The yard inside was full of dry packets. Many villagers were waiting outside the yard for their turn to get packets. They had tractors on which they were supposed to take the packets to their own villages. Most of them had been waiting there for two days. We thought that the food packets would reach the vulnerable but that did not happen as was told to us by many villagers.

The print media claimed the success of another initiative called 'Community Kitchen'. In this, the ward members of all the *panchayats* were ordered to arrange cooked food for their people till the families began cooking for themselves. A ward member, Ravindar, said, "*Sarkar ne hume keh diya khana khilao, humare zila me har ek ward me lagbhag 1000 se zyada voter hai, hume 10,000 rupay milne hai, aap bataiye kitne din main khila paunga unhe* (The government had ordered us to feed the families; we have 1000 families in each ward of our district and we were given only Rs 10,000. Tell us for how many days could we feed them)?" We saw that at many places only 4-5 children had food from the

community kitchen. Seeing this, we felt annoyed and disturbed and tried to come up with solutions to help the community.

The floods resulted in long-term trauma for the affected families. They, especially the children, have been deeply impacted by the loss of their loved ones. Displacement, loss of property and disruption to business and social affairs are causing continuing stress. For some people the psychological impact will be long-lasting.

A week after the floods, we discussed about the immediate problems and long-term issues in a team meeting. We decided the first priority was to be with the villagers and to support the community emotionally. We discussed how to engage with the community. Health was increasingly deteriorating within the community. Farhana *didi* said "*Hum baadh ki vajah se apni swasthya meeting ke liye nahi baith paye jo 12 tareek ko honi thi* (We were not able to have our health meeting, scheduled on the 12th of this month due to the floods)." The women in Rahariya would meet every 15 days to discuss health issues such as BMI, nutrition and hygiene. Everyone in Rahariya was suffering from different diseases; the flood waters were toxic and resulted in

itching and in inflammation of their bodies. "*Hum logon ka abhi sabse jaroori swasthya hai* (For us, health is the most important issue now)," Shehnaz *didi* said and Madni *didi* added, "*Hum logon ka abhi sabhi ka bukhar nahi to pet ka bimari ho raha hai* (Each one of us is either suffering from fever or having stomach problems)."

All the staff of the health department in Araria was on field, distributing lime and bleaching powder. They provided halogen tablets to purify the drinking water and organized health camps. They wanted to reach more and more villages as ordered by the District Health Officer. However, in our area, they were missing; so we went to the respective Public Health Centres (PHCs) at the block level. The block-level officials said they had limited stock and could organize health camps for roadside villages. Our villages were in the interior; therefore, we decided to make the community aware of the steps the health department was taking. We discussed with the community about-after the effects of flood on health. People realized that water-borne diseases had begun to spread in their areas. We had the community access PHCs, with the help of their *panchayat* representative.

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We held discussions with the PHCs again and spoke to them about the condition of the interior villages. They supported us and decided to organize a health camp in Rahariya village. Women in Rahariya joined hands to arrange health camps in area. On 26 September 2017, the first camp was organized in the village with the help of the SHG women, who took the lead and set up the venue at Rahariya High School and spread the news of health camp. Almost 200 members attended the camp and got medical treatment. The PHC also distributed bleaching powder, lime and halogen tablets to SHG members. It appreciated the idea of such camps and we planned to organize such camps in different villages. The block manager of Care India, an NGO working in health in Araria, also attended the event. He counselled the pregnant women. Together, we planned to work on hygiene, nutrition and women's health for upcoming health meetings in Rahariya.

Although the department had distributed lime and halogen to the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), it was impossible for her to take it to the village. She said that if the PRI members helped her, it would be possible for her to distribute these essential items.

Our colleague Rounak and the *mukhiya*, a ward member and the ANM of Pakri *panchayat* went to the PHC and discussed how together we could ensure the distribution of such material in the villages. The *mukhiya* took responsibility for the distribution, with the ANM, the ward members and the PHC committing to ensure stock availability.

In the meanwhile, in every village, the one thing in common was that even 10 days after the floods, families were struggling for fuel. Ghotni didi from Sherlanga village pulled our colleague, Santosh, to her kitchen and said with tears in her eyes, "*Bhaiya, jalawan pura gila ho gaya hai, aur phukte phukte aankh phul jaata hai* (All the fuelwood is wet, and I get tired of blowing on it to keep the fire alive)." The other SHG members present there said, "*Jiske ghar gas hai, wahi achhe se khana paka raha hai* (Only those who use gas (liquid petroleum gas) stoves in their homes can cook food)." The need for gas connections came up and brought up many stories of the challenges they face and the corruption in the village. The community members further voiced the many difficulties they encounter, including their ignorance of processes, documentation and

dealing with gas agencies and corruption.

We met with the different officials at the nodal points for execution of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojna. We gave the community information about the system and processes. Because the community had identified it as its foremost need, members took interest and prepared themselves by understanding the processes involved. Many SHG women shared that it gave them hope that, collectively, they could take steps to eradicate corruption from the area. However, it was just a first tiny step, and corruption is whirlpool.

VO members wanted the huge loss to be compensated for. The government declared that a flood relief compensation of Rs 6000 per household be given. This amount will be channelized through PRI members, yet again opening up the scope for corruption. The villagers said that the *mukhiya* asks them to pay Rs 500–2000 first, and then they will get Rs 6000. People succumb to this demand because they know the complexities of power that the *mukhiya* wields. Often, therefore, they too become part of the web of corruption. For now, people are rebelling and

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identify it as a very burning issue in this time of crisis. “*Hum mere adhikar ka paisa apko kyun denge* (Why would I give the money which is due to me)?” Soni *didi* agitatedly told the *upmukhiya* of Gerki *panchayat*. The SHG women held lengthy discussions on this and took an oath not to become part of corruption, this time collectively.

Unfortunately, the amount suggested will not compensate the huge losses the villagers suffered. Several members of the area are daily and seasonal wage laborers and have been unemployed for a month. They have very little savings in the bank and have not able to withdraw even that much because all the banks in the area were waterlogged and were closed for weeks. “*Humlog bar bar bank jake wapas aa rahe hai* (We have been to the bank many times and return empty-handed),” Bijiya *didi* said very angrily “*Abhi jarrorat ke samay koi paisa nahi* (Now, in the time of crisis, we don’t have any money);” she wanted to withdraw the money her son had sent for her from Delhi from the bank.

Two weeks passed; the villages still reeked of rotting grain. The villagers tried to dry their grain on the roads, in the hope of saving some of it. Emotionally, physically, economically, the people were greatly affected. They need to rebuild their houses. They need to invest for the upcoming agriculture season; they had lost all their savings, be it in form of grains or money. Their monetary demands have increased and most of the SHGs are planning to get credit from their respective banks. We are helping them complete the processes.

We now have an experience of how it is to be in the midst of the floods, which is very different from hearing about floods from a distance. The strength of the community to survive such crises is wonderful to see. The rapid action within the community post-floods and the efforts to normalize the situation, collectively or individually, makes this area different—how people helped each other, gave food, shelter and support to each other; how they managed to construct *chachri* (bamboo bridges), which

helped provide relief in interior areas.

We had an ‘aha’ moment when an SHG woman came with a paper and pen and asked us to write the poem, *Sune sune ge bahin hamar*. This is a motivational poem for women collectives, which she had heard in the last training by PRADAN that she attended. She believed that it would give the women the strength to deal with the current situation. It was time to celebrate that we are alive, said Farhana *didi*. If we are alive, we can build everything again, she added. They have started to re-build their houses. The community is getting back to their daily routine. A *didi* innocently asked us, “*Bhaiya aapke desh me badh se tabahi hua* (Have floods ever destroyed the area you live in)?” For them, floods are natural, casual, usual and happens in all the places of the Earth. Floods have become a part of their lives. This was the most destructive flood ever; yet, somehow, it strengthened the bond between the villages.

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Trishagnee Boruah and Anup Das are based in Araria, Bihar