

A BRIEF REPORT OF MAJULI AND TITABAR VISIT

19th May to 23rd May, 2017



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BACKGROUND

The underground water in the flood plains of Assam and its adjoining areas has long been claimed to be laced with contaminants like Arsenic and Fluoride beyond its permissible limits. The grievousness of the situation can be understood from the recent declaration by the Government of Assam that barring 4 all other districts in Assam are either affected by Arsenic or Fluoride or both. The Members of Arsenic Knowledge and Action Network (AKAN) recently met in Patna to brainstorm on finding possible solutions for different regions. As part of the plan, the members from team Assam decided to primarily conduct a health assessment cum disease burden study in three different pockets of the state during the next one year. The areas chosen based on consensus of the group were Titabar block in Jorhat, Majuli district and Fakiragram in Dhubri. Accordingly Churamoni Saikia, Nilutpal Das from SWACHA, together with Dr. R. L. Goswami and Dr. Lakhi Saikia, Scientists from CSIR-NEIST visited Arsenic affected areas of the newly created Majuli district and Titabar block in Jorhat districts of Assam during 19th May to 23rd May, 2017.

Majuli, now the world's third largest river island, is known for its unique cultural landscape and long cherished vaishnavite history. Every year tourist from world over throngs the island in quest of its uniqueness and serenity. But Majuli is also known for some not so good reason. The ground water of parts of Majuli has now been confirmed to be Arsenic laden beyond permissible limit. With the objective to first informally look into the prevailing situation the team along with Kanta Medhi from PHED visited different arsenic affected parts of Majuli. The Arsenic pockets for the visit were chosen based on suggestions given by local administration and existing available reports/ studies. The cordial behaviour of the bureaucracy and the line departments helped us in getting a brief idea about the depth of the problem.

MAJULI VISIT (20TH-21ST MAY):

The highlights of the Majuli Visit were the following;

- **INTERACT WITH THE PHED OFFICIAL OF MAJULI:** The team members met PHED officials and brief them about the activities of SWACHA and AKAN. Mr Prabin Handique, Assit Executive Engineer, PHED together with other officials took note of the efforts of the network and assured us of all possible support to jointly fight the menace.

- **VISIT TO BALIJAN, MAJULI:** The ground water in Balijan village of Majuli is claimed to contain Arsenic way above the permissible limits. The members interacted with the locals who have no other source to drink water from. According to a report published by NERIWALM Balijan village of Sri Luit gaon panchyat is one of the worst arsenic affected village. The concentration level of arsenic was found to be as high as 468mg/l . The team during the interaction with the community found that they have been suffering from ailments like gastric, stomach pain, keratosis of palm and feet, white/ black patches at the chest and back, fungal infections etc. Since the team did not have any doctors, it was difficult to reach to any conclusion about the disease.
- **MEETING WITH THE DC OF MAJULI:** During the visit the team also met the DC of majuli and shared the details about the activities of the Network. Details about the proposed health camp, training program of medical staffs and diseases burden survey were also discussed. The DC offered all possible support for conducting the camp apart from the rest of the activities .

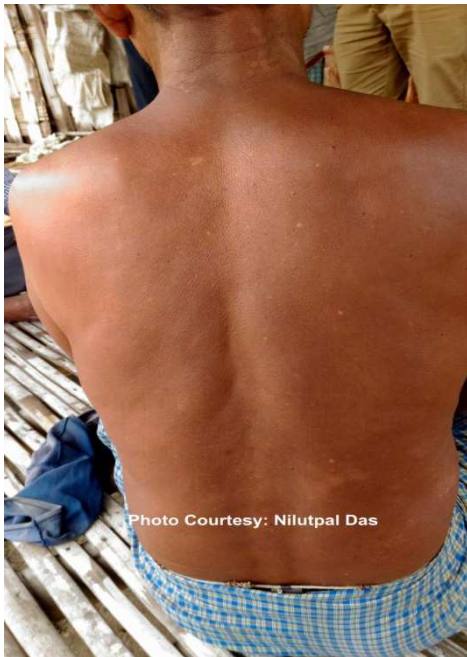


Fig. 5. Photograph of family members of Ganapati Pegu and neighbors from Balijan village of Sri luit GP, who were drinking water from a tube-well which had As concentration of 468 µg/L.

- Apart from the meetings cited above we met journalist Mitu Khataniar who reports from the region. Medical officer of Garamur Civil Hospital Mr Saikia, during an informal conversation also reiterated the need for a concerted effort to tackle the problem. He promised support for the health-camp and wanted the Network to keep him in the loop of Developments. CSR of Hindustan Latex has significant presence in Majuli. They currently monitor the health of people of Majuli with the help of team of Doctors and 4 mobile medical Units. The concerned representative from the organisation expressed his desire to be a part of the event and explore possible ways to work in tandem.

➤ OBSERVATIONS:

1. It was observed that even though the ground water of Majuli had evidences of the presence of high level of Arsenic, but its physical manifestations among the inhabitants were very less. There is a need for a deeper study about their food habits. Unconfirmed reports suggest that regular intake of nutritious locally grown vegetables and animal protein mainly in the form of fish might be helping the villagers to fight the disease.
2. The government official and community people are supportive and co-operative.
3. Most of the families consume water from tube well without platform. Even at a shallow depth like 25 ft the water has a strong iron like smell.



4. Government water supply is available only in parts.

➤ TITABAR (JORHAT visit) - 22nd May, 2017:

Titabar block in Jorhat district is also one of the highly arsenic affected areas of Assam. Over the last 3 years the team AKAN together with district administration, CSIR-NEIST and community have undertaken several measures to educate people about the problem. In Titabar the team met the key community people associated with various activities of the Network. During the discussion it was highlighted that most people of that area depend on community pond for the drinking water. The team member also shared the future plan of action and discussed the idea of volunteer development. Already an army of volunteers have taken on themselves the responsibility to disseminate information's on the need for safe drinking water. Under the new plan the volunteers would be formally recognised by giving them I Cards and they will be known as Jaladoots. A training sessions for volunteers and fellows for both Jorhat and Majuli will be conducted on 4th june 2017. In the meeting all the participants decided to release a handbook about the Arsenic and their health

problems.



The team members also met the SDO (civil) of Titabar, Mr Kamaljit Saikia and briefed him about the ongoing efforts of SWACHA and AKAN. In the meeting the SDO (civil) appreciated the efforts of the organisation and suggested some points to consider:

- a. To take care about the sludge disposal system and make people aware about the health hazards from it.
- b. To choose volunteer carefully.

➤ **OBSERVATIONS:**

1. Most of the community people used pond for drinking water purpose and they also use traditional bio-sand filter.
2. Some of the family members also accepted the technology of rain water harvesting including the school run by Ananta Khanikar.
3. The drinking water supply is functioning properly (in Melamati area, Titabar).

The team member of SWACHA visited Sahporia water supply scheme of Jorhat and also interacted with the President of the users committee. The scheme has been run properly due to activeness of users committee. The World Bank has adopted that scheme as a model water supply scheme for the state.