

Breaking their shells

IN THE northern plains of Bihar, which are so used to being part of a flood economy that the railway stations have permanent stalls for flood relief personnel, we at Arghyam are supporting a small, yet bold, initiative in the districts of Madhubani, Saharsa, Supaul and Khagaria.

A small, but committed group of five NGOs have come under the banner Maegh Pyne Abhiyan to work with the left-over people who live on the embankments of canals during the flood season. These are usually women, their very young children and the aged. These women spend a large part of the four-month monsoon living on mud strips that lie above their flooded homes, to keep their heads out of water and their families alive. The lives of these women can only be imagined. Like many

of the millions of women in this country living without sanitation, whether in urban slums or in other places, and without privacy, they skip meals in order that nature's call comes only in the dark of night. These women need all kinds of help but neither many development agencies nor the state seem to have found a foothold in their lives so far.

The volunteers of Maegh Pyne Abhiyan have made a modest beginning – by helping the women householders construct a temporary plastic shield over their little mud huts. This simple contraption serves two important purposes. It reinforces the mud roof and prevents the flood refugees from being soaked. But it also, critically, is designed to capture rain so that they can access the only water that is safe for drinking and cooking.

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A modest beginning by an NGO grouping in Bihar is making a big difference to poor women

Slowly, but surely, the grit and determination of women like those in the Maegh Pyne Abhiyan is making a difference in this country. We are seeing a tentative feminisation of political power at the grassroots, we are watching emergent women in self-help groups everywhere. Aided admirably by voluntary organisations, these women are bringing new questions and creative answers to the issues of economic and social development. Very importantly, they are sending their children – their sons and also increasingly, their daughters – to school. Enrolment numbers are showing this upward trend. The next generations will not be so illiterate and backward. That is the unspoken promise being made by Indian mothers, themselves often illiterate, but not willing to be kept behind. We can salute them. Surely we can also help them.

