

Community-based natural resource management in the villages of Alwar district of Rajasthan

Women of Rajourgarh village in Alwar district of the north Indian state of Rajasthan will always cherish the events of Year 2000 when they successfully took on the might of the local government.

Made fun of by men for forming self-help groups and holding meetings rather than involving themselves in practical work, the women decided to find solutions to village problems. In the dry and arid Rajasthan, water has always been an issue.

Taking on the local administration

The villagers found out that the government had decided to dig a well in their village, but due to manipulation by local officials, the well was being dug elsewhere. Led by Kajouri Mai, a middle-aged grandmother, the women decided to block the road and sought an explanation from the officials for shifting the construction of the well from their village.

Dissatisfied with the explanation, the women sat on the road, *gheraoed* (surrounded) the officials and prevented them from leaving the village. The siege continued for nearly three days, and senior police officials had to intervene. Finally, the administration gave in and decided to rightfully dig the well in the parched village of Rajourgarh.

Agitation against liquor shops

Having tasted victory and earned the appreciation of the men, the women groups decided upon a more direct action. Kajouri Mai says: "We called a meeting of women from other villages and act upon liquor shops in the areas. Women from nearly 10 - 12 villages met and decided to serve notice to all the three liquor shops. The owner of the shops knew that we meant business. He therefore decided to close the shops."

Encouraged by the success of these two initiatives, the women decided that they should try and alleviate their sufferings further. Village women are responsible for three important elements that sustain rural life - water, fodder and fuel wood. And they spend a major portion of their working day in looking for these three.

Understanding water management

The women realised that water, fodder and fuel wood are natural resources and therefore related to each other. If they have enough water, they will have enough to eat (food grain) and their animals will have enough (fodder). They decided upon harvesting rain water in a nearby drain and explained their plans to the men folk. Once the site for harvesting was selected, women groups collected money for tractors and diesel. Along with men, they also provided *shram daan* (voluntary labour) in digging and transporting the earth for a medium-sized mud dam.

Protecting forests

Even as work on the dam went on, the women of Rajourgarh village along with women from other villages decided to impose a ban on cutting of forests. Once again, they took the lead and spread the word in surrounding villages that forests in and around the

villages have to be protected. But, it was not easy. Things about conservation and sustainable use of resources had to be explained to people. And the need for protecting *jal, jungle aur zamin* (water, forests and land) - the very foundation of rural life - came up.

The successes of Rajourgarh village have been replicated in dozens of other villages. The village *panchayats* (elected village bodies) have even levied fines on people who are caught chopping trees. Such measures have been more successful than those of the forest department in the conservation of forests. Kajouri Mai says that in many areas these self-imposed regulations have provided stronger protection to the forests than government laws.

A fallout of forest protection has been that people who used to bribe officials for letting them cut trees do not do so now. Community control has been so strong that in a few exceptional cases of breach, offenders have been ostracised from the community. The villagers have also realised one more thing, that, a forest need not be grown again through plantation. Protection from man and domestic animals will regenerate it in a couple of years.

The Tarun Bharat Sangh

The success story of Rajourgarh village has been replicated in numerous neighbouring villages with the help of a local, non-governmental organisation, Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS). Established in 1975 by teachers working in Jaipur, the capital city of Rajasthan, TBS moved its headquarters in 1985 to villages Kishori-Bhikampura in Alwar.

It has succeeded in bringing about a change in the lives of people by empowering people through the education of girls, ridding the area of water shortages, starting women's banks and reviving traditional methods of water harvesting.

Empowering people

Magsaysay award winner Rajinder Singh says: "Though most of our work has been in the area of water harvesting, we have also tried to empower people so that they can sustain themselves and fight for their rights without our intervention."

Explaining the concept of community-driven water harvesting, Singh says, "Our organisation provides aid in the form of financial assistance to the extent of 67 per cent. The rest, 33 per cent, is provided by the people in the form of *shram daan* (voluntary labour). Earlier we used to provide help to the extent of 75 per cent, which we have reduced so that people's initiative can be strengthened further."

TBS has helped people construct nearly 7,500 water harvesting structures in 11 districts of Rajasthan. Of these, nearly 1,500 are in the villages of Alwar in the form of mud dams, concrete dams and ponds. Communities have made most of these with help from the TBS over a period of 17 years and women have played a major role in these.

Strengthening women through natural resources management

Singh says water management should not be looked at in isolation. He says that wherever harvesting has been done and forests have been regenerated, women have been the first beneficiaries.

Singh says, "It saves them time in collecting fuel, fodder and water. The result has been that they have the time to look after their children and send the daughters to school. Earlier, not a single girl used to be educated as mothers would spend the entire day collecting the three necessities and the girls would take care of their siblings and help in household chores."

The concept of women's banking also has been introduced in the villages. Women's groups now collect money and give it to families in times of need, without charging interest. Men who were earlier sceptical of the women's groups and their activities have started appreciating their work. They have been converted to an extent that they do not hesitate in passing on their extra earnings to the womenfolk.

TBS started strengthening its women-centered activities after intervention by the UNDP. In many villages, women started taking direct interest in water harvesting, management and control over forests. As the integral relationship between *jal, jungle aur zamin* (water, forests and land) dawned, women became more assertive in protecting the forests. They did this by persuading and preventing people from chopping down forests not only from their own village but from other villages as well.

Villagers also took a decision not to let their animals graze on the coppice so that the undergrowth and small plants could take root in the common village lands. In many villages, new forests have started emerging.

Women's groups post success

Professor at the Jaipur-based Institute of Development Studies, MS Rathore, made a startling revelation. He said, "Whereas men's groups have either broken up or become non-functional, women's self help groups still continue to work efficiently."

Rathore explains this by saying that men's groups broke up because of petty politics while women groups could sustain their activities as they feel the greater common good emerging out of collective efforts. Rathore adds, "Women also realised that if they remain united they save on time and can devote extra time for their health and the welfare of their children."

It is not that women's groups sprang up suddenly and started asserting themselves over issues related to water and forest. Even with significant contribution to the rural economy, women never received recognition for their work. According to TBS volunteer, Narendra Singh, the organisation faced an uphill task in setting up women groups. He says, "Establishing a women's group meant that the men had to be persuaded to let women participate. Once this was overcome and women started meeting, they realised

that they had to play a bigger role in managing natural resources than merely collecting water, fodder and fuel."

Water and wild animals

People have not only built new structures, but have also restructured the old ones. In Madlawaas village last year, people scooped out the silt and increased the height of the stone dam which had been constructed nearly a decade ago. The dam had been built on a drain where a lot of wild animals would converge for water. Once it got silted and the water flowed away, wild animals either started crossing over to the villages for water or they moved away from the hills.

A farmer and a cattleherd, Saudan, says that after restructuring the dam, the roar of wild animals can be heard again. Saudan says, "But, now these do not cross over to our village. Animals like panthers, sambhars and jackals come to this place to quench their thirst." Wild animals are as integral a part of the villager's lives as water and fields. The villages in Alwar are located in the foothills of the Aravallis ranges - the oldest mountain range in the world. The forests in the Aravallis are teeming with wildlife.

Community management of structures

Even though Alwar district has more than 1,500 water harvesting structures, new ones continue to come up. At village Kishori, nearly 40 families from three different villages are hard at work, digging and carting away earth to make yet another dam in a huge catchment area. Most of the workers are women as the men have gone away to the fields. Women of all ages work feverishly to complete the mud dam before the onset of monsoon in July.

Each family has been given a plot of 10 square feet to dig. On one such plot, 65-year-old Surji is digging the earth while her daughter-in-law and grandsons carry head loads. Underlining the importance of water, she says, "We harvest water and we eat water (*hum to paani ugatain hain aur paani khatain hain*).

Women and children working at water sites do not need supervision. Water conservation and management has penetrated the psyche of people so deeply that they know how to select a suitable site and what kind of a structure to build. It is only once in a few days that the head of the women's group might come to the site to take a look.

Surji's daughter in law Shanti says, "The work is done so contentiously that a family will dig the amount of earth allotted to it as voluntary work, whenever it gets the time. But as children are in the school and the men in the fields, it is mostly women who will be working at the rainwater harvesting sites. Which ever family member gets the time will come here and dig according to his/her convenience."

Reviving traditional water harvesting methods

The intervention by TBS has not only resulted in digging of ponds, recharging of ground water aquifers and reviving of dying rivers, but has also breathed life into traditional water harvesting systems. The people of Bhaonta village are testimony to this. At a ripe

old age of 70, Dhanna baba heads the Bhaonta *gram sabha* (local village body).

Nearly three decades back, people in his village had made a mud dam in the Arvari catchment area but it gave way under the fury of water. Undeterred, the people made a stone dam and cemented it with lime. This dam too gave way. People from this village, including Dhanna baba used to work as labourers in the Indian capital city of Delhi and very few people were farmers.

Finally, they approached TBS for help and constructed a stone and cement dam ten years back. With additional water at their disposal, many labourers turned farmers. And now they are constructing another small dam just half-a km downstream.

The TBS chief says, "Our work has led to a revival of traditional water harvesting systems. Being an arid land, Rajasthan had very good water harvesting systems and people gathered enough water during rains, which lasted them during the summer. But we lost these over a period of time, particularly during the colonial rule."

A long way to go

It is not that every thing is bright and rosy in the villages. People sometimes come up against unforeseen hiccups. Mining the Aravalli ranges for marble continues to be a big problem. Mining has devastated forests, ravaged pastures and rendered large tracts unfit for cultivation. In many mines people have been crushed to death under huge boulders. In some areas, the water level has fallen because mining leads to enormous amounts of wastage of ground water.

A big shock lay in store for people in the Lawa Ka Bas village when a local newspaper reported that a huge mud dam they built on the catchment of the Arvari river in year 2001 was unsafe. Following the publication of the newspaper report, the local administration decided to bulldoze the dam.

Recalling the events which unfolded in Year 2002, Prahlad Gujjar from the Lawa Ka Bas village said, "People from five villages pitched their tents on the dam and confronted the government. Even Rajinder Singh along with volunteers from TBS had to spend quite a few days here. But we eventually won."

Three to four years of successive failure of rains has left land dry and parched in many areas of Rajasthan. In fact corporates are distributing food grain to people to fend off starvation. Though villagers in Alwar are smiling because of massive community water and forest conservation schemes, many still feel deprived.

A taxi driver from Samra village, which is situated on the left bank of the Arvari river, Hazari Lal Sharma, says, "Though a lot of fields are green here, the fact also is that drought in Rajasthan has left many with little to eat. This year my family did not till the land as there was no water. Despite water in the Arvari river, only those people could irrigate their fields who had the money to deepen their wells."

Finally...

The bottomline is that work done by people with help from TBS and UNDP has prevented a majority from leaving their villages to work as labourers in New Delhi and Jaipur. They live close to nature, animals and remain proud farmers.

Villagers have brought more land under cultivation and they also have grown crops other than barley and wheat. This is something which they could not have thought of a few years back.

Rivers like Arvari and Ruparel (another nearby river) contain water after being dry for nearly two decades. In fact, enthused by successful water harvesting schemes, the villagers have just finished building another dam on the river with help from the UNDP.

And, for thousands of women, the fruits of empowerment have become visible in the form of education for girls, having a say in the selection of water harvesting sites and a control over the family's finances. And if Kajouri Mai's daughter-in-law Lali, can give her three-month-old baby girl an urban name, Ritu, it means that empowerment for women has definitely arrived in the rural areas of Rajasthan.