

Paryavaran Pathshalas

Education in the Desert

A joint forest management programme in Rajasthan has achieved success by linking afforestation to a priority need of the local communities – primary education. The paryavaran pathshalas set up by the forest department in several villages in Jaisalmer district point to a possible integrated development approach and also help foster an enduring partnership between stakeholders and resources of a region.

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Paryavaran Pathshala is an innovation. It is a unique concept, operationalisation of which has made the forest department of Rajasthan proud of being an agency which has been responsible for imparting education, far from their mandate, to the poorest of the poor, positioned in the farthest and unreachable areas while simultaneously maintaining and securing the health and safety of the eco-frontiers of our country. Simultaneously, this endeavour, which is

so different from the normally understood role of foresters, has aptly revealed the sensitivity as well as the potential of the forest department in relation to the crucial aspects of 'development' and 'public good' when it comes to caring for those citizens of our country who are socially as well as physically distanced from civil society.

Jaisalmer, a district in Rajasthan, is one of the largest districts in the country. It is almost as large as Kerala in geographical area but in contrast to its population density of 746 persons per sq km, Jaisalmer has only six persons. The entire district of

Jaisalmer is an integral part of the Great Indian Desert which is also known as the Thar desert. The average annual rainfall of the district is only 100-200 mm, the lowest in the country, and the number of rainy days in a year generally remains less than five days. Recurring drought, thus, is a common feature. In summers, the mercury touches nearly 50 degree celsius while in winters it reaches freezing point. Strong westerly winds blow in summer months at more than 125 kms per hour causing enormous drift of sand particles. Moving sand dunes, as a result, are a common occurrence. Live-stock rearing is the major occupation of the local inhabitants who are basically nomadic pastoralists moving with large herds of small ruminants like sheep and goats that are more adapted to an arid climate.

However, this naturally existing arid landscape has seen a significant transformation ever since the water of perennial Himalayan rivers was brought to this parched and sandy land through the ambitious Indira Gandhi Nahar Pariyojana (IGNP) from Harrika barrage in Punjab. With this project, not only was the problem of drinking water shortage been permanently solved but the hope was also generated that the nomadic pastoralist would settle into agriculture and a sedentary lifestyle like their counterparts elsewhere in the country. People of adjoining arid districts and neighbouring states of Punjab and Haryana are now purchasing lands in the command area of IGNP to start intensive agriculture, a vocation hitherto unknown to its local inhabitants.

The people in the area have settled in widely scattered hamlets which, truly speaking, are not revenue villages. The ongoing rural development programmes do not reach them because of their scattered location, lack of infrastructure, and the thin spread of governmental organisations in the area. It is a fact that except the irrigation, colonisation, and forest departments, no other government agencies have a continued presence in such remote areas. The education department of the government finds outreaching difficult in a district where population density is so low and scattered.

Initiative and Strategy

The forest department started an ambitious afforestation drive in this tract as without proper shelter-belt plantations, infrastructure like canals, roads and habitations could not be saved from the drifting sands, agriculture and allied activities could

also be affected. More than 50,000 ha of command area in this district were successfully brought under tree cover with monumental effort. Joint forest management (JFM) was initiated to involve the local population in maintaining these assets and to also ensure that peoples' stakes in the sustenance of these forests were duly understood and established. JFM in this area thus had to include an innovative approach with an uncommon essence that was developed as a site-specific strategy under the guidance of one of the authors who was then chief conservator of forests (IGNP), Bikaner.

JFM is not successful unless the trust of local people is won and they are taken into confidence. The process of bringing out the 'trust building measure' to be adopted by the forest department included an effective technique called participative rural appraisal (PRA). When an effective dialogue started between the personnel of the forest department and the early settlers of this region, it was found that people wanted to lead a settled life in this land with their family and children but the greatest impediment in their way was the lack of essential facilities that relate to the basic needs of all civil societies, viz, primary health care, education, veterinary care, communication linkages, etc. All these were absolutely essential needs of the local populace. The general perception amongst foresters was that people of the area would perhaps fail to prioritise these basic amenities, but contrary to this belief, the settlers pointed out that a primary school for their children was their priority number one. It could be a matter of socio-anthropological study as to why these people attached more weightage to the security of their progeny's future rather than seeking to ensure present day security of their own health and communications. Prima facie, however, it appears that parental obligation was their primary concern and other basic needs like food, shelter, health, clothes, etc, for themselves followed it. In order to win the confidence of people, so essential for the functioning of joint forest management programme, committed forest officials accepted the challenge of bringing primary education to the masses and decided to run a primary school for their children.

Banjaron-ki-Dhani – the First Step

The paryavaran pathshala, the first one of its kind, was started in a small hamlet called Banjaron-ki-dhani five km away

from the desert township of Ramgarh. The inhabitants of this hamlet are from a nomadic clan but they now lead a settled life in this hamlet as they are assured of regular employment in agriculture and forestry activities. These people are amongst the poorest of the poor and 'development' has practically remained elusive as far as their lives are concerned. The decision of the forest department to run a paryavaran pathshala, which was their first priority demand, was welcomed by these people and particularly the women. As an incentive, each student who turned up on the first day was given books, a slate, pencils and notebooks worth Rs 50 from the community mobilisation fund under the joint forest management programme. Curious mothers gathered on the first day and one could see tears of gratification in their eyes. They told the foresters, "you take care of our children and we will look after yours" (they were obviously referring to the seedlings already planted by forest department).

A number of primary education centres are now operative in very remote areas through this unique initiative and sustained effort of the forest department. These primary schools are functioning in temporary huts of forest department near plantations and have rightly been designated as paryavaran schools. Forest guards or work charge employees of the department were given responsibility of teaching which

they took up after receiving a short-term training on the issue. The district administration as well as the education department of the state government, surprisingly, are not fully aware of this effort. The alertness, responsiveness, and perseverance shown by the officers and staff of the forest department resulting in the initiation of the paryavaran pathshala, however, remains a source of inspiration for all JFM practitioners. It is also clear that through such timely and location specific innovations, community involvement and participation in forestry programmes can be ensured and mutual benefits secured both for the stakeholders and the resource base. Such initiatives also bring to the fore the fact of the need to develop single window models for integrated development of areas that are remote and for populations that are scattered. Today 47 forest protection committees are operational in the forest divisions of Jaisalmer and 20 paryavaran pathshalas are running successfully. To ensure continuity in education of the children, however, a dialogue is going on between the forest department and the district administration to secure recognition to these schools. Institutionalisation of the system with proper inputs from the government, both in terms of monetary as well as human resources, is essential for the ultimate success of this initiative and to sustain the results of this unique endeavour. **EPW**

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