

Pastoralists protect forest landscapes

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'Siliserh *Chhind*', is a landscape located in buffer area of the Sariska Tiger Reserve, one of India's iconic tiger reserves, in Alwar district of Rajasthan. '*Chhind*' in local dialect means a landscape used largely for grazing. Covering about 30 villages, Siliserh *Chhind* is home to a large number of agro-pastoralist communities. 'Gujjars' are the predominant pastoralist community, comprising about 75% of the total population. The main source of livelihood of the people in the *Chhind* is animal husbandry and agriculture. Communities in these villages depend on forest land, popularly called as 'Orans', for livestock grazing, firewood, and also for collecting minor produce (e.g. wild herbs, nuts and fruits; medicinal plants; thatch, timber and stone for building; clay, leaves and grasses etc). Orans with a number of ponds serve as a source of drinking water for the livestock.

While traditionally Orans were managed by the local communities, over years, gradually the ownership shifted to the Forest Department. Local communities were denied rights over the use of forests. They were not allowed to graze their livestock freely or collect minor forest produce. And if they were found using the forests, either for grazing or for collecting minor forest produce, the local communities were made to pay heavy fines to the forest authorities.

Communities manage their landscapes

Under such situations, KRPAVIS started working with the local communities in the Siliserh *Chhind*, about two decades ago. Communities started working on three aspects - natural resource management particularly in 'Orans' (community forests); livestock development and sustainable agriculture promotion. Local communities with adequate training took up a number of activities in conserving Orans. They campaigned for community



Pastoralist communities depend on Orans for meeting various needs

management of Orans. They formed committees at the village level. Water harvesting structures were built, *Oran talabs* were repaired, a 'seed bank' was set up and nurseries were grown for tree plantation. Orans were planted with species appropriate for fodder, fuel, timber etc.

The diversity of the vegetation in the Orans has deteriorated. For example, species that were useful for pasture have become fewer, and some reportedly have altogether disappeared. In response to these, communities identified the species appropriate to the livestock in the area and started planting them. Fodder trees were planted taking the advice of elders in the community, who identified the trees that were grown in and around Orans. Priority was given to grow plant species like *Bamboo*, *Kala Khair*, *Googal*, *Dhok*, etc, which were declining rapidly in these Orans. Species planted and/or protected in most of the Orans are *Ber* (*Zizyphus mauritiana*) and *Pilu* (*Salvadora Oleoides*), *Dhok* (*Anogeissus pendula*), *Kair* (*Capparis deciduas*), *Hingota* (*Balanites gyptiaca*), *Abalakanta* and *Sadahari* (a creeper), *Neem* (*Azardirachta indica*), *Peepal* (*Ficus religiosa*), *Bargad* (*Ficus bengalensis*), *Gular* (*Ficus glomerata*), *Salar* (*Boswellia serrata*), *Babul* (*Acacia nilotica*), *Dhak/Khakhra* (*Butea monosperma*), *Jamun* (*Syzygium cuminii*), *Shisham* and *Aonla*. Communities have developed seedling orchards and seed production areas of ethno-silvicultural species in and around Orans, thus preserving endemic, endangered or threatened species.

Species within Orans serve several purposes to local communities. Some of the plant species that have been preserved or reintroduced in Orans have great medicinal value. Other species, notably the *jharber*, *satavari*, *kuri*, *saava* and certain other wild grains, are valuable for home consumption and market sale. In addition, these species, along with minor forest produce such as honey, pottery

(from Oran clay) and baskets (from grasses), are a source of income, providing an invaluable supplement to household income.

Most Orans have sources of water, either small springs or rivulets running through them or a variety of ponds *e.g. johad* and *nadis*, *tank*, *baori*, *well*, *tanka*, *kund* etc. Indeed, from a water conservation standpoint, Orans are hugely important for a community. Combining traditional water-harvesting techniques with modern scientific expertise (i.e. watershed approach, hydro-techniques, etc.), communities recreated water storage structures, named as '*Oran Talab*' using local materials like clay, stone/ rock, grasses and buffalo dung - which make them affordable and replicable. *Talab* is constructed at a place, which can receive maximum run-off. In some cases, for irrigating crop lands, pipelines are laid from the *Talab*. Mustard, onions, wheat and millet are just a few of the agricultural products that are grown in large quantity in the Siliserh *Chhind*.

Governance mechanisms

The village committee has rules governing the Oran—for example, one can only take leaves from the Oran; no one can cut even a piece of wood; no outsiders can take anything from the Oran. If anyone breaks the rules, they are imposed with fine. Also, there is a strong social control mechanism which enables effective sanctions to be imposed on the violators. Orans generally have a well defined boundary and are governed by an egalitarian system, with respect to all users. Normally, every Oran has a mechanism for conflict resolution among its resource users with simple and clear rules for all users, with significant commitment from all resource users (for example, annual contributions for maintaining the Oran). Also the strong religious beliefs of communities associated with Orans helps in conserving them with respect.

Need for recognition of rights of local communities

Orans have regained their lost significance and value not only in Alwar but also in other parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. As many as 125 *Orans* have been restored. Local communities have been central to this Oran conservation. Their involvement in selection and planting of species based on present day livestock needs is an example of co-adaptation between social system and ecosystem. Engagement of the local community in natural resources management has made a tangible difference to awareness on biodiversity, has instilled respect for the land and its multiple uses, and has improved local eco-systems across the Siliserh *Chhind*.

In spite of local communities protecting and conserving Orans over years, they have no legal rights on the use of forests. Until recently, there has been no recognition of rights of local inhabitants on forest resources in India. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), enacted in 2008, is a means to correct the 'historic injustice done to forest-dwelling communities' with a clear purpose of providing tenurial security to traditional forest dwellers vested with forest rights. However, various hurdles prevent the implementation of FRA such as - denial of existence of the Act and lack of awareness, capacity and interest; lack of awareness among the pastoralist groups; mobility requirements of migratory pastoralists for grazing not being taken

into consideration; extraction of penalties and bribes from the community members; proliferation of invasive species and procedural difficulties.

Thus, communities with the help of KRAPAVIS planned to pilot FRA implementation. Initially in five selected contiguous villages in the Siliserh *Chhind*, meetings were organised to raise awareness and sensitise communities on existing rights of pastoralists. Forest Resource Committees (FRC) were formed, members were trained, and village resource mapping done. Policy briefs were developed, for the use of FRC members, volunteers, villagers and concerning stakeholders. Alliances were built with other pastoralist organisations, movements, neighboring villages, NGOs and their respective networks, potential government allies and others.

While these efforts are ongoing, governments actions seem to be in tandem with the interests of local communities. In one case where the villages are in the core Sariska Tiger Reserve area, it was informed that the local communities will be given the rights for grazing in a limited area in the forests, only if the communities prove that they have been living in that area since 75 years. On one hand, while the communities are trying to prove that they have been residing for the past 75 years, which in itself is challenging, on the other hand, the Forest Department is trying to resettle villages by giving each family a compensation of around 10 lakh rupees, a clear effort by the government to displace local communities, affecting their livelihoods.

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