



Members of a pastoralist organisation in Alwar

# Networking for their rights

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Alienation of local communities from the forests and their management has resulted in resource degradation and loss of livelihoods. *Rajasthan Charwaha Vikas Sanghathan*, a people's network is a platform to help tribal communities regain their traditional rights over the forest resources.

Rajasthan has rich pastoralists' heritage and its contribution to the society is immense. They not only rear but maintain excellent indigenous animal genetic resources that adapt very well to drought conditions. These include different breeds of cows, camels and sheep. Communities like the *Raikas*, *Rebaris* and the *Gujjars* are the pastoralists in Rajasthan. While the *Gujjars* are famous for rearing cows and buffaloes, the *Raikas*, *Rebaris* and *Dewasis* are known for raising camels. All these groups in varying degree are directly dependent on local community forests for feed, fuel wood, leaves, honey etc.

The Sariska Tiger Reserve, in Alwar district of Rajasthan is surrounded by more than 300 villages. The reserve is a collection of *Orans* that together has formed a substantial forest tract. Also known as *Devbanis*, these *Orans* or local forests vary in size, from

a hundred to five hundred bighas (about hundred hectares). *Orans* are community conserved forests. Many of these forests have been managed successfully through traditional, religious and cultural practices, safeguarding collective access to a common resource base. The practice of nature conservation as an ancient religious tradition evolved in order to sustain the lives and livelihoods of rural people of Rajasthan.

Increasingly, the local communities have been excluded from the management of their resources. At will, the Forest Department has been enclosing it for plantation, or declaring it as a reserve. In recent years, *Orans* have suffered widespread degeneration. Most importantly, this has also resulted in alienation of local people from the forests.

## Rajasthan Charwaha Vikas Sanghathan

### The Genesis

KRAPAVIS (Krishi Avam Parishitiki Vikas Sansthan), an NGO in the region piloted a partnership with pastoralists to assist them in legitimising and securing their pastoralist rights in and around Sariska Tiger Reserve.

On 12–13 June 2005, about 40 pastoralists met at the KRAPAVIS centre in Bakhtpura near Alwar to discuss their situation and how to make their voice heard. The meeting can be called historical: it was probably the first ever such meeting to transgress the traditional social boundaries of caste and gender, and was attended by both men and women from different pastoralists groups from Rajasthan. Throughout the meeting, there were calls for unity among Rajasthan's diverse pastoralists communities, and the need for creating a state-level *Sanghathan* (Association). Such a *Sanghathan* would have multiple functions: raising the voice of pastoralists, pressurizing the government to consult pastoralists in policy development, marketing products, protecting local livestock breeds, saving the pastoralists' culture, fighting corruption, developing leadership, saving the environment, and gaining self-confidence.

The meeting culminated in the emergence of a network of the pastoralist community known as the "*Rajasthan Charwaha Vikas Sanghathan*". It is a network, which is primarily owned by the pastoralists for their own development and strengthening of their livelihood systems. Under the guidance of pastoralist leaders, a detailed roadmap was also chalked out for building the association.

### Process

The membership to the network is open to all pastoralists. A membership fee of Rs. 20 is collected from each member. There is

an advisory board at state level that includes voluntary organisations. Presently, there are more than 1000 pastoralists as members of the Association. *Rajasthan Charwaha Vikas Sanghathan* is still an unregistered association and has its district level chapters. Each Chapter has different set of activities to deal with their very local concerns, agendas and issues.

### Bringing about a change

The focus of the *Sanghathan* has been on restoration of traditional rights of the pastoralists. These include access to grazing rights and access to water resources on village commons and forest lands. Their main agenda has been promoting sustainable pastoralism in Sariska, through conservation of forest ecosystem by local communities.

The members have been actively raising and reaffirming consciousness of other pastoralists on the fact that there are no more frontier areas to move on. Community discussion on carrying capacity of the forests have been facilitated. They have been building a movement and facilitating exchange of experiences to enhance sustainable use in around the 300 villages of Sariska Tiger Reserve.

Most of the members of the *Sanghathan* are aware of forest plants used for treating various ailments. To safeguard this age-old wisdom for future generations of Gujjar communities, ethno-veterinary practices and indigenous healing techniques are being recorded and preserved.

The members are actively participating in lobbying with the government. These include pressurizing the government to consult pastoralists in policy development, organising *dharna* (non-violently sitting at the entrance) and organising meetings to bring about multi-village coalition. Meetings with concerned government officials (forest, livestock and agriculture departments) are also organised for helping them understand the communities' problems and rights. Frequent meetings are conducted involving other civil society supporters, NGOs and members from the district chapters of the *Sanghathan*.

The members also utilize *melas and dharnas* as a means to disseminate information and mobilise other communities. In one of the *dharnas* by *Gujjars* at the entry gate of Sariska Reserve, entry of tourists' into the Reserve was restricted. Even the entrance to prominent hotels in Sariska were blocked as a means to make the government take notice of their demands – one of them being suspension of relocation process. The pastoralist leaders were successful in getting the attention of the government on some of the issues.

An annual 'unity day' is organised. Pastoralists and forest dwelling communities from different districts in Rajasthan come together and plan how to move in a coordinated way. Also, current high profile discussions on Gujjar issue is being used as a means to raise the pastoralist agenda, including tapping political force to advocate pastoralist rights. Recently, members of the *Sanghathan* filed a petition under section 7, 8 of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, 2006. This petition was

Restoring traditional rights of tribal communities will help regulate the forest resources. Involving local people and institutions can form the basis of more 'people-led' forest management systems.



## National pastoralists exchange

A three day pastoralist meeting was organised at Alwar by KRPAVIS (Krishi Avam Paristhitiki Vikas Sansthan) during 16 - 18 December 2011. Pastoralists from various states including Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh were present. Communities represented here were *Gujjars, Raikas, Kurmas, Gollas, Dalits, Maldharis and Dhangars*. NGOs working with these pastoral communities like Anthra, LPPS, MARAG, and KRPAVIS also were part of the discussion.

The three day meeting highlighted some key points. It was unanimously stated that:

- The grazing land has been shrinking, and in many cases access has been denied due to diversion of common and grazing lands for various purposes by the Government.
  - Traditional grazing lands used by the pastoralists are still out of bounds for pastoralists, despite the existence of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).
  - The governmental livestock policies and programmes promoting cross-breeding for local animals for higher milk yield and stall-feeding are not in sync with the traditional way of pastoralism. Traditional breeds that are suitable to local environment have to be conserved.
- The relocation procedures mentioned in the FRA have been flouted by the Government. The *Gujjars* in the Sariska Tiger Reserve have been denied their rights at every step, in the name of tiger conservation. The demand for basic amenities like schools and electricity supplies and hospitals should be provided in the Reserve Forest.
  - The pastoralists, who have been traditionally using the forests, are being constantly harassed by the field staff in the Forest Department.

The pastoralist communities sat together to discuss strategies towards collective action. Some of the suggestions that came up in this session were a consensus on marking a day as 'Pastoralists Day' which would be a forum to discuss issues of concern. It was also suggested that frequent meetings should be conducted at the national level. Women from Andhra Pradesh strongly felt the need for women to take the lead and a necessity was felt for each pastoralist community to come out in support of the other, in times of need.

filed for Umri village in Sariska which was recently relocated to Maujpur rondh without giving due recognition to the rights of pastoralists.

All these measures have finally succeeded in bringing about policy amendments that saw pastoralists included in the Scheduled Tribe and Forest Dwellers Act 2006. The *Sanghathan's* passionate lobbying effort has been crucial in achieving this.

### Challenges

The Sanghathan has been able to develop sufficient and good linkages between the various pastoral groups. Also, it has been able to influence some policy level decisions of the Government. Government also recognizes the relevance and importance of pastoralists' organizations. Lately, through the Department of Animal Husbandry and the Department of Social Welfare, the "Rajasthan State Pashu Palak Kalyan Board" has been set-up as a first step towards promoting the interests of the pastoralist community.

However, there are certain challenges and limitations that need to be overcome. Firstly, the association still remains as an unregistered group. Linkages with government departments and agencies are limited. Financial sustainability is yet another challenge.

NGOs will continue to play an important advisory and organisational role in these networks. In fact, their involvement remains essential in the near future to nurture and strengthen these marginal and multi-lingual groups, to facilitate their interaction

with each other, and build their capacity to negotiate with the government and make use of the legal system to fight for their rights. Till then, dependency on NGOs cannot be wished away.

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