

Bringing Balance to the Ecosystem Restoring Degraded Wildlife Habitats

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Restoring wildlife habitat around Shivnagari, Ajmer, Rajasthan has ensured that domestic animals of the village are no longer under threat. This has also meant better pastureland for the cattle with plenty of water from a restored river. In Bhaduka, villagers are now setting rules for use of common land that had been closed to them. These case study reports are part of a series collected from villages in the area through FES's interventions, underlining people's initiatives after adequate availability of relevant information and training.

Prakriti Karyashala which translates to 'Rural College', was started in 2012 to respond to the rising needs of the rural communities, village institutions, panchayats along with government and non-government officials, to steer processes at the village level. This body enhances the knowledge and skills of individuals and community institutions to play an active role in governing their common resources and enables them to access and implement relevant schemes. Prakriti Karyashala trains a cadre of field trainers who in turn provide training to stakeholders closest to their location. The various strategies employed include facilitating interactions with district administration for district-level implementation design, building collaborations with Milk Unions and NGOs for handholding support in natural resource management for Panchayats and village institutions, and conducting training programmes.¹

SHIVNAGARI

“Work done in small parts can be done much faster and better.”

--Member of the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti

Shivnagari is a village which has had wild animals entering its private properties and killing its cattle for years. The villagers believed that this happened because of the lack of dense forest cover in the area, caused by deforestation. They were struggling to get sanctions for the restoration of their commons through MGNREGA, handicapped as they were because of the lack of information and knowledge about how to process paperwork. The bigger the amount they were claiming, the higher the official needed to sign the sanctions for work and disbursement of funds. This ended up stalling the progress of work in the village.

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In 2015-16, FES's Prakriti Karyashala empowered and trained Jorawar Singh who came to Shivanagari to create awareness amongst the villagers by training villagers on how to capacitate local self-governance to manage and govern natural resources, sustainably. He introduced them to an order sent by the Government of Rajasthan in 2012, where the Gram Sabha needed to pass a resolution to make a comprehensive plan for the development and management of pasture lands. This would be incorporated in the action plans made under MGNREGA. This information ensured that they prepared detailed pasture development plans which were incorporated in the Gram Sabha resolutions. They also learnt that when they could list out work to be done with more accuracy and asked for smaller amounts to be sanctioned, the funds were disbursed much faster, the smaller amounts only needing the signature of the Sarpanch. They collect money from people to visit the common lands and maintain a receipt book for the money that is collected.

In addition to this, some villagers decided to undergo the MATE training inspired by the information provided by Jorawar Singh in the training. They feel that their work productivity and efficiency has increased considerably since then. Their development plans for the village are more precise, and their ability to estimate and decide on the amount of funds to ask for has also become more accurate. This has led to faster disbursements and faster work completion as they had envisaged.

The trainer helped them form the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti, which would represent their villagers in protecting and developing their commons. Through the training and interactions with Jorawar, the villagers soon realized that they had a lot of unprotected pasturelands, which had the potential to be restored ecologically. They worked hard, with their whole heart and began to feel responsible for the development of their commons. To ensure that there was no encroachment done by the villagers themselves by getting their cattle to graze on this land, they made a decision to appoint a pasture land guard (*chowkidaar*) to protect it. They created a fund and spent their own money to fund his employment.

There was resistance from a few of the villagers and it took the committee members close to six months to convince them that the idea was to secure the land and ensure that they got employment through MGNREGA and get paid on time. They explained how this land would be developed for five years, after which they would all be given the agency to make a choice as to what would be done further. They also agreed that once in two weeks, everybody would pitch in and do some manual labour on the commons.

Octogenarian Pastureland Guard

Rima Katha was over 75-years-old when he was given this responsibility and he did this work for four years, before he passed the baton to a youth in the village. Rima Katha is a retired military officer, who took it upon himself to dedicate his time, money and efforts to the development of his village common pasturelands. Even today, at the age of 80, he is agile and climbs the hilly terrain of the land to chase away stray animals that graze here. He remains the unofficial guard who

ensures that there is no encroachment from any of the villagers. Some 25 villagers underwent Composite Landscape Restoration Assessment and Treatment Tool (CLART), where they learnt how to plan soil and water conservation measures. The youth stepped up and took responsibility. A few learned people including Rima Katha drew a plan for the village and how they would improve the work. They figured out how much work needed to be done and how much money would be earned by the villagers. Some 300 job cards were issued. They ensured that every job card holder worked to earn Rs. 19000/- annually.



80-year-old Rima Katha offering wild berries grown in the Charagah Bhoomi



A water trench created by Rima Katha for the village cattle to quench their thirst, in the Charagah Bhoomi

Impact

The existing canal was treated so the water level in the whole village improved, their land had improved. In the four years, their common lands have changed considerably which is now lush with tall grass, plants and trees. The wild animals have found their dense vegetation to create their habitat, not disturbing the cattle in the villagers' fields. The villagers said, "There is more grazing area for our animals now. There is less destruction to our crops because wild animals come into the private properties less (frequently) now. The pastureland which we have ecologically restored is enough for them to roam and hunt. Our cattle are also happy because they have separate grazing lands now. Our cows and buffalos are taken care of.



The untouched and secured Charagah Bhoomi which is home to a wide variety of plants and a few wild animals

Steps Forward

The plan for the coming years is to increase and improve the rest of their common pasturelands. The committee has submitted a plan to the panchayat and the Zilla Parishad seeking sanction. The villagers of Shivnagari are aware of the benefits of ecologically restoring their commons and are eager to see what else can be done to make their lands richer.

BHADUKA

Bhaduka is a village which has about 600 bighas of common pasture lands. In 2000, there was a part of the commons which was blocked from public access. This was a decision made by all the villagers to ensure that their cattle did not encroach this land and destroy the land. The villagers weren't very concerned because there were other common pasture lands which was left open for their cattle to graze on.

In 2015-16, Jorawar Singh, from FES's Prakriti Karyashala began talking about the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Rules, 1996 rule 170(1), where there was a provision made for the formation of a five member committee called the 'Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti' at the village level for the management of the Pasture Land, a few of the villagers were inspired and motivated to form this village institution and develop their common lands. The rule also had a provision for planting of the appropriate type of grasses, shrubs and trees as well as protecting it from encroachments.

Kuman Singh was one of the chosen members who became the *adyaksh* of the *Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti*. He has been instrumental in developing the commons for the village of Bhaduka. On return to his village after years of service to the country, he has dedicated his free time in giving back to his community. After the *Samiti* was formed, the first step on their agenda was to get the boundary demarcation done of the commons in their village. Post this, they decided that it was in the villagers' best interest to create a physical boundary of their common lands to stop encroachment. They worked on an application and sent this to the panchayat. Work began soon after. There was a training for MATEs which was conducted in the village after PK's intervention and they were successful in doing the work as per the development plan.

As part of the training provided by FES, the villagers were also made aware of byelaws and how to plan for the common lands development, with a long-term vision. There were a lot of old laws already present for them to follow and they decided to discuss with each other and add to this list. The whole village follows these rules to this date.

A few of the villagers began to protest because thinking long-term is a challenge when they could barely make ends meet with cattle rearing and farming. There were two meetings held, when members from the FES team were also present. The villagers felt that they were all educated about the benefits of developing the common land and as they all belonged to the same community, it helped them all come to a decision together. The Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti made a decision only after everybody agreed. The Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti strategized and decided to open up the common lands which had been closed for 17 years. Seventeen years of no trespassing on this land had made it into a rich and luxurious forest, with a lot of vegetation for the cattle to graze on. There are rules in place in the new common lands where cutting is prohibited and a penalty is

taken from them if they don't abide by the rules. When there is an issue of someone breaking the law, the whole village comes together and decides what penalty will be given.

For the past three years, the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti set up a boundary for their common lands and set it up so that it could be accessible for the villagers. In 2018, there was a land estimation done, when people were cutting or using certain pieces of land/trees from the common land, they had to pay a price. Rs.10000 was taken from them and the payment went back into the panchayat treasury. The people themselves take care of the payment of the pastureland guard and the maintenance of the committee.



The wall demarcates the Charagah Bhoomi which has been protected and made inaccessible to the communities as opposed to the other side which is open to the cattle for grazing. These are the benefits of restoring degraded ecosystems.

Steps Forward

They hope to get some plantation done in the coming year, for which a development plan is being made. There will be a training done with them on what species of plantation is to be done. 2 kachhi nadis have been made and applications sent for the construction of anicuts and more nadis.

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i Training Modules for Restoration and Governance of Commons

