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Rural Action Component

ARVARI:

A people's movement

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ARVARI: a people's movement

The river Arvari has its origin in the Kakara ki dhani, Bhavta village of Thannaganzi tehsil. It flows through 70 villages in the Alwar district. Traditionally the food security of the Arvari basin depended on forests, grasslands and wildlife, which had status of common property. Rainfall in this region was quite low and the arid slopes of Aravalli were not suitable for intensive cultivation. Over a period of time, the thick forest cover declined and the denuded hills could not hold rainwater. Run-off washed away the fertile topsoil and brought pebbles to agricultural land. In this way the groundwater was not getting recharged. Subsequently the water table levels dropped significantly and the irrigation department declared Thanagaji tehsil a "Dark Zone".

The impact of this was felt soon when people started migrating to the nearby towns and cities in search for employment.

This was the time when Tarun Bharat Sangh made its intervention in the area. It has actively encouraged the development and empowerment of village councils to facilitate conservation of water and natural resources. Active participation of village community has led to water being used as a regenerative input of both socio-economic and ecological development. Each village has its own self-

regulatory system (Gram Sabha) to promote decentralized water management systems. Gram Sabha takes community based initiatives through consensus of its members keeping in mind the stakes of the people involved.

CONSTRUCTION OF WATER STRUCTURES (Johads)

Since water became a serious issue, Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) and the local villagers started building water harvesting structures through their traditional knowledge for conservation of rainwater. The contribution by the community was 33% that came mainly in the form of *shramdaan* (labour), which in turn helped in creating a sense of ownership among the villagers. This sensitized the masses.

In 1986, when the villagers of Bhoanta -koylala built a huge johad to catch a gush of water from the surrounding hill slopes, hardly anybody knew that it was origin of the river and by conserving rainwater; they were injecting life into the river. Since 1986, 238 water-harvesting structures have come up in 70 villages the Arvari's watershed.

"After seeing the benefits of the dam in bhavta, we contributed 50% to build the johad at the source of the river, which in 1987 itself got filled up with water" says Manwa of village Kaled, downstream of Bhavta- Koylala. This johad, like the one in Bhaota-Kyolala, recharged the natural drainage of the river at source.

These small efforts of constructing johads to catch and allow water to percolate under ground brought river Arvari back to life.

Beginning with the Jogiwala johad in Hamirpur on a monsoon stream flowing into Arvari in the valley, many smaller johads were constructed by villagers. These structures were collectively recharging groundwater, as was noticeable the water tables of the wells. Some 70 villages were harvesting water and checking runoff in the catchment area along the river's course. Each and every monsoon stream was dammed and virtually all hill slopes were treated to stop runoff and soil erosion.

Thus the **impact of these structures** were seen in:

- 1) Increased agricultural production made possible by growing two crops a season instead of one earlier.
- 2) Women now saved their time that was earlier spent in getting water from far off wells, which helped them engage in other productive activities.
- 3) Water was available for livestock for drinking.
- 4) The groundwater table has increased which has recharged many wells.
- 5) Migration has come down and people have started cultivating their fallow land.

ARVARI MIRACLE

Along with many small johads on the tributary streams, a key decision was taken to construct few large dams, on the main watercourse of the Arvari River. One of the sites was at the point where the Naharwala nallah draining along the western slopes of the village met the rivulet. This concave shaped johad has a catchment area of about 1103 sq. kmm.

The work continued for two years until the monsoons of 1997 but the effect of rising paal was felt within the first year. The dead, dry watercourse of Arvari had now full water throughout the year. This outcome was unimaginable to the people of Hamirpur and soon this miracle started creating ripples, inspiring people downstream to enliven the river.

A Dark Day for the villagers

The access and control over water in Jabbar Sagar Dam became a major issue of dispute. Control over water takes place at two levels: one is the legal control of water which takes place through government and the second is at the community level where the control and ownership of water is with the localities.

Moreover surface water is legally owned and controlled by state whereas groundwater is directly owned and controlled by individuals and community. But in this case the villagers claimed the right over the water of the dam and thus the fish as they constructed the dam without any government intervention or assistance.

As the Jabbar Sagar dam started gushing with water, it also brought many varieties of fish into it. As the government authorities became aware about it this, they issued fishing right to a large private contractor of Jaipur. The local people who are vegetarians soon realized that this step would lead to intrusion of the government into the community's domain. Since they had developed water resource through their sheer hard work, they wanted their right to utilize it.

Thus when this fishermen or the contractor named Latif faced opposition in Hamirpur, he went downstream to Samara. Latif put his boats in water, but people gathered around and seized the boats.

Then Latif went to Alwar and lodged a complaint before the officers of Rajasthan Government's Fishing department. On December 25 1996, a meeting was held at Hamirpur between the people of village and the officers where they insisted that they would not allow any fisherman to fish in their waters, as the river is theirs.

The tehsildar came to the village and threatened the villagers about legal steps, that would be taken against any person who will stop the fisherman from fishing.

The people of Hamirpur were prepared of any eventuality more so because they had organized themselves since November 22, 1996.

Thus on January 1997, a huge meeting was organized at Hamirpur where they declared satyagrah against Rajasthan government. Since March 1997, the struggle that was based on satyagrah has brought results and the people of Hamirpur have won. The government had finally withdrawn and canceled the project of fishing.

ARAVARI PARLIAMENT (SANSAD)

The issues raised by the revival of the river caused much debate within the surrounding villages. The government called into question the ownership of water structures. In such a scenario TBS recognized that there were fundamental

issues at stake that were to be discussed and resolved. This led to a need of forming a parliament to protect the rights of people who brought the river back to life. There would also be various discussions, group meetings and exposure to mobilize the villages for the same cause. Thus on 18th December 1998, a public hearing was organized by TBS where people from different departments of the government, NGO's and the localities gathered.

The Arvari Parliament (Sansad) was officially formed on Republic Day, 26th January 1999 in Hamirpur with representatives from 72 villages. Its key objective was "to manage the river and its water judiciously". The other objectives were-

- 1) Sustainable management of natural resources.
- 2) Control usage of water by treating it as a scarce resource.
- 3) Constructing anicuts, medhbandi and johads for managing the soil fertility and checking land erosion.
- 4) Stop illegal mining activities negatively affecting the land, water and vegetation.
- 5) Sensitizing and building awareness among women groups on water related issues.
- 6) Generating self-employment and livelihood options through better management of NDM
- 7) Increase agricultural productivity by growing water saving crops with local seeds and manure.

There are 142 members nominated by the respective village assemblies. For every 500 hectares a village appoints one member. The coordination committee comprising of members

selected by the parliament operates and ensures that the following rules are observed:

- 1) Ban on sale of fish produced in water stored by Anicuts or Johads to contractors.
- 2) Ban on use of pumps to lift water from Anicuts.
- 3) Not to sell land for mining, quarrying or industrial activities.
- 4) Encouraging people for water saving crops.
- 5) Restriction imposed on the use of chemical fertilizer.
- 6) Limiting production of cotton and sugar cane crop except for self-consumption.
- 7) To check free flow of rainwater by construction of Anicuts, Jhad and Medhbandhi
- 8) Check degradation of farmlands by construction of Medhbandhi.
- 9) The issues related to land, water and vegetation to be dealt with combined efforts of village community by ensuring maximum participation in village.

The Arvari parliament was successful in bringing together people from all sections of the society, from every corner of the catchment area. Participation of women in all activities has empowered groups in the area. This parliament has its own regulatory mechanism to resolve conflicts arising in management of land, water and vegetation in the basin. It is to be noted that the people based on their desire to manage natural resources created this institution.

The basin level institution created by TBS is expected to perform several roles such as:

- a) To conserve water resources and emphasis on demand side management
- b) To ensure community control and management over water resources.
- c) Equitable distribution of resources
- d) Provide equal access for all sections of the society.
- e) Ensure sustainable use of water resource to protect interest of future generation
- f) To resolve conflict if any around water resources, and
- g) Organize and empower people through natural resource management.

A JOURNEY FROM "MAJDOOR" TO "MANAGER"

Different stakeholders take a lot of time in understanding the concept of a river parliament and put it in practice. People gradually understand the benefit of coming together in managing natural resources. So far they were having all the freedom to use land, water and forests resources to meet not only domestic requirement but derive livelihood at the cost of complete degradation of natural resources. Through river parliament they are trying to regulate their behavior.

Thus we can categorize their managerial skills at two levels:

Individual level (personally)

Community level (professionally)

At the individual level an average villager who has worked as a 'Maidoor' now started managing his schedule and time for himself and community. He also established a strong relationship with the nature so that he can protect the natural resources for his future generations. In this way he became futuristic and understood the need of having an integrated approach towards land, water and forest management. During this process few of the villagers emerged as heroes who were pioneer in mobilizing the rural masses and strengthening the community for a common cause.

Roodahmal Meena of Hamirpur village demonstrated extraordinary leadership quality by personally sacrificing five bhigas of land (12541 sq. m) for the construction of Jabbar Sagar Dam, one of the biggest water harvesting structures in his village. In such a way he became an inspiration for others to create and conserve a common resource like the Arvari.

At the community level, due to absence of an active government the people unanimously decided to work for the community. In construction of johads, villagers contributed up to 70% to the total cost and also toiled for days and months voluntarily for creating various water harvesting structures. The poor villagers with little water had the heart to think about the water needs of the villages down stream. This understanding of the needs of others went a long way in nourishing the watershed of Arvari. Through Gram Sabhas the representatives of people did the task of convincing the surrounding villages to save the river and to repair old johads through voluntary labour. In this way they showed their managerial skills by convincing the people of other villages that requires high commitment and conviction. They managed the assets of the community in a

judicious way so as to make it available for the future generations.

IMPACT OF ARVARI PARLIAMENT

Arvari parliament has provided people a platform to address their needs, prioritize them and provides local leaders an opportunity to come up and safe guard the interest of the community. The discussion and meetings of the Aravri Parliament is quiet open and it provides both men and women an equal opportunity to express their views. In Hamirpur village, people have shed their apprehensions and insecurity about the availability of water. Women in the village are free from the struggle for water. People here strongly feel that the society and the village would prosper if water is conserved and made available for all.

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