

Communities manage Orans for protecting their livelihoods

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Pastoralists are actively contributing to a sustainable use of the forests and of the biodiversity in Rajasthan, India. Communities are now more aware of their responsibilities in managing the local resources. Having realised the benefits that networking can bring about, communities are collectively addressing issues concerning them, and also asserting their rights, wherever necessary.

Pastoralism is a key element in the livelihood strategies of the people living in the villages of the Alwar, Jaipur or Dausa districts, in the Indian state of Rajasthan. Orans, or the forests adjoining these villages, provide the necessary pastures for all animals. In addition to pastures, Orans are also a source of water during the whole year, and a source of fuel wood. Traditionally, Orans were managed by the local communities, the responsibility lying with the village institution called thain. These, however, have gradually lost power, and as a result, the local population has lost the responsibility and the possibility of managing their resources. This is having a serious impact in terms of production and incomes, and also in terms of the local biodiversity.

Krishi Avam Paristhitiki Vikas Sansthan, or KRAPAVIS, is a voluntary organisation (NGO) based in Rajasthan which, since 1992, has been working at three levels: at the individual level by addressing the population's livelihood issues; at the community level, by helping restore Orans; and at the policy level, influencing the development of people friendly policies. During the last two decades, KRAPAVIS has been working with communities in approximately 100 villages.

Our way of working

As part of its work, KRAPAVIS has been helping communities understand the need for managing Orans, considering the many benefits that these bring. We have helped communities get organised into committees or samithies; we have trained women and youth to disseminate information; and we have also ran awareness-raising campaigns, highlighting the importance of local management processes. In different ways, we have tried to get more and more people involved in these campaigns. The approach we were following, and the results we could see, gave us the impression that KRAPAVIS was practising a people-centered and participatory process.

Hoping to increase the availability of fodder, in 2006 we started promoting the cultivation of an exotic fodder species called *deenanath* (*Pennisetum* sps.). This was expected to produce high yields, and thus help villagers have adequate feed for their livestock. The results of these efforts, however, were not what we expected. We rapidly realised that this grass requires irrigation, and that it is more suited for cut and carry systems. But livestock in this region is used to grazing, so villagers were not interested in growing *deenanath*. For the first time, we started thinking that perhaps we were not on the right path.

Deeper reflections enabled KRAPAVIS to understand what was going wrong. We saw that our programmes were based on what we could offer, and not really on the needs of the community. What we saw as consultation, in fact meant that our staff was telling people what they needed to do. Participation was limited to attending meetings and contributing money and labour towards certain activities. Most of our time was spent negotiating financial contributions from the community for physical work (for example, establishing nurseries and plantations, the construction of check dams, land bunding, etc.), and not in understanding the villagers' concerns and priorities. Programme implementation was based on the strict and detailed log-frames formulated at the beginning of the project.

Realising what this all meant in terms of participation, we became very interested in the people-led development process (PLDP) which MISEREOR and some of its partner organisations in India were talking about - and gladly accepted the invitation we received to participate in meetings and to try it out.

Preparing for a new approach

During 2008 we organised a series of internal discussions in order to understand what a people-led development process meant. These were shaped by the examples presented by MISEREOR, and also by a series of consultations with other organisations and communities (with meetings taking place for several days, every three months). We then organised a number of field visits. Staff members visited 5 Orans in different villages (in Jugrawar Rundh, Meena-ki-Dhani, Kerwawal, Bera, and Gujjarwas) and had long conversations with the pastoralists. These discussions helped us all get a clearer understanding of the way Orans were being managed, and of the knowledge people have and use to manage their resources. We learnt, for example, that villagers were well aware of the ecological consequences of over-grazing. Visits to other regions were also organised in order to see how other

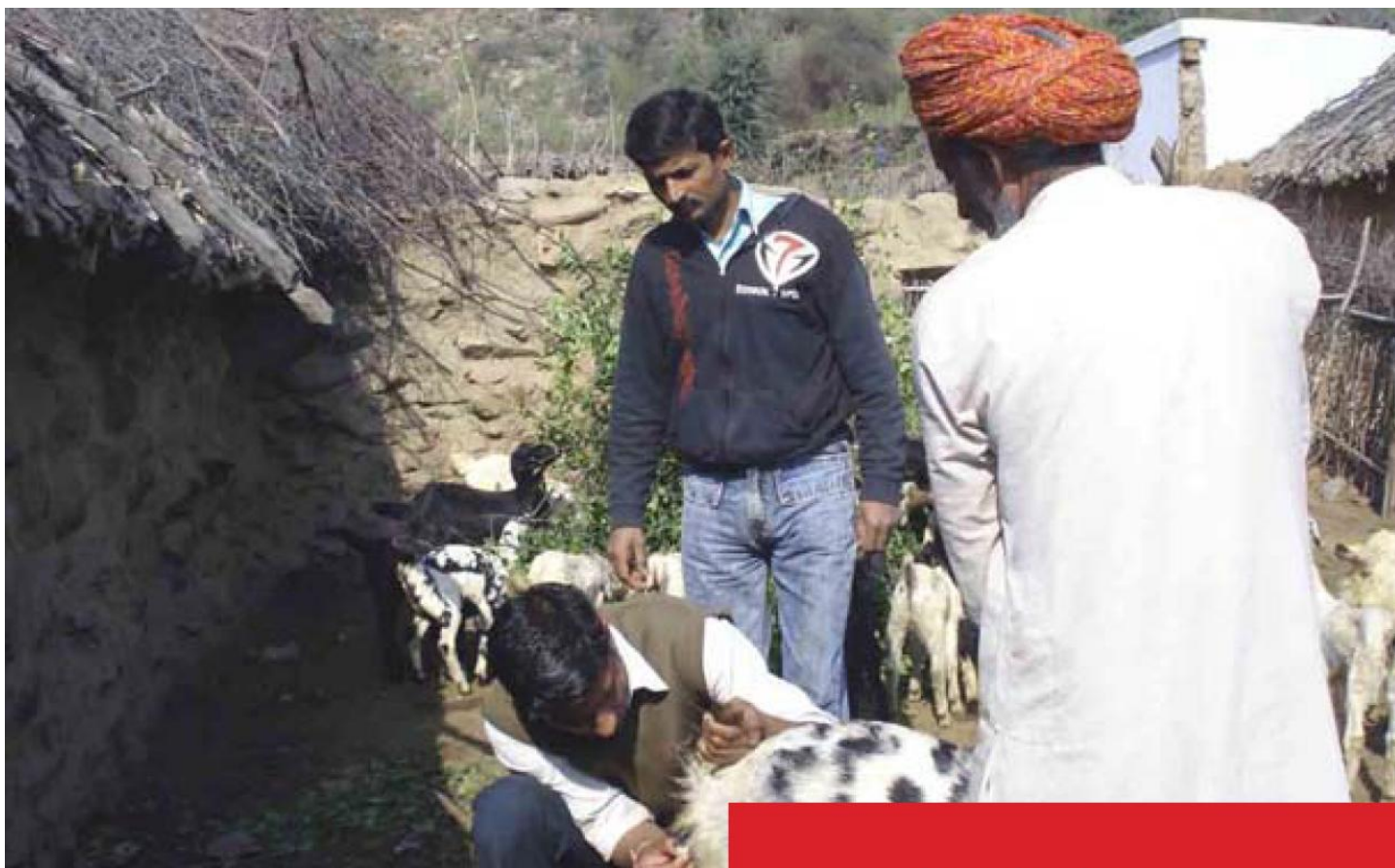
organisations were promoting community forest management. In December 2008 we made an exposure visit to VIKSAT in Gujarat, an institution experienced in promoting community management of forests, especially by women groups. We discussed with the women self help groups and the tree growers cooperative societies about the community management of forests, and in October 2009 we made a four day exchange visit to Pune, where we met pastoralists from across the country.

These visits, and the resulting exchange of experiences, helped us see the possibilities for implementing a people-led development process. We saw that we could try something similar to what other MISEREOR partners were doing, even though our situation was different. Most important, perhaps, we got a more complete understanding of the local livelihood strategies. We saw that we had to go beyond forming samithies while working with people. We became sensitive to people's needs and priorities, and started realising how people negotiate rules. We could easily see which segment of the community was being excluded from participating in the collective initiatives. We also made efforts to create and strengthen local networks in an attempt to bring in everyone into the fold of the development process. Finally, we also understood the importance of communicating back to the communities. In short, we felt we could truly behave as community facilitators, and not as implementers of a programme.



Living beings in perfect harmony in a Oran

Found at the foothills of the Aravalli range, Orans are local micro biodiversity reserves, varying in size from a few hectares to hundred hectares. More importantly, Orans are a refuge for wildlife in an otherwise densely populated landscape. Most have sources of water, with either small springs or rivulets running through them, and a variety of ponds and nadis in their midst. In total, there are about 300 identified Orans in the Alwar District. In many cases, they are used for community gatherings during festivals.



Pastoralists lead mass campaigns

Completely led by pastoralists, in August, 2009, about 6000 pastoralists from the 300 villages in and around the Sariska Tiger Reserve, converged in Alwar to demand their historic grazing rights. Bera villagers, who were involved in the PLDP reflection process, took the lead in convening meetings in the affected villages and bringing them together to assert their historic claims over grazing. Grazing was severely affected by the transformation of Sariska into a tiger reserve and more recently into a national park.

Normally, before a national park is to be notified, the government is supposed to settle first any claims of affected communities in the area. But the records of the forestry department wrongly indicated that the pastoralist villages did not exist, even though people belonging to these villages have been paying taxes for their livestock. Both the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and the Wild Life Amendment Act (WLPA) 2006 were grossly violated. KRPAVIS helped people understand these procedures and facts, helping pastoralists believe that their claims were just.

Following this successful mass action, a number of parliamentarians have come forward to support the pastoralist cause. Kalpavriksh, a well known advocate for the environment has also extended support to the cause of the Gujar pastoralists. KRPAVIS has remained as a witness through out, helping communities with the documentation process. We see this as one of the most inspiring results of adapting a more people driven process.



Visible changes

Looking back, we see that the workshops and meetings we held have helped pastoralists try out and develop various forest management practices (including rotational grazing, or different lopping methods for different trees). These are complemented by many joint efforts, such as those of the women's association in Bakhtpura who, having been trained in nursery raising techniques, are currently producing more than 25,000 seedlings every year (and are reintroducing endangered species such as Jiyapota or Adusta). In other cases, we have seen individual initiatives being followed by many other villagers. In the village of Gujarwas, Mr. Sitaram took the initiative of replacing his goats with sheep, finding that they are far less harmful to the Oran. Other pastoralists gradually followed his example. In the village of Kerwawal, Mr. Sohan Singh decided to go all the way to Basur, some 50 km away, to purchase seeds of mustard plants which were not available anymore in his region. These were rapidly multiplied and exchanged, and are now widely grown. It is clear that most communities have become much more aware of their responsibilities in managing the local resources, and of the benefits this brings.

KRAPAVIS continues to play an important advisory and organisational role. Local networks, such as 'Rajasthan Charwah Vikas Sangthan', have emerged as platforms for exchange of ideas and information on matters related to policy on Orans. The Oran Forum, formed by representatives of NGOs, government bodies, environmentalists and the local communities, has been meeting regularly and looking at the best ways of supporting the local management of all Orans. One of its most important results can be seen in the recently published State Forest Policy 2010 report, which includes the local population in the management of Orans. Considering that 'Orans are islands of good forests and repositories of rich biodiversity...' or that 'Orans are excellent examples of people's religious faith linked with conservation,' the state authorities acknowledge the ideas that KRAPAVIS has been advocating for long. This recognition has instilled a lot of confidence in the community and in our own organisation to continue with a people-led development process.

The staff's perspectives

Having worked with KRAPAVIS since 1998, Bala Sahay Tiwari sees a clear difference between his work back then and what he's doing today. Earlier work focused on forming a samithi, for which he felt he had to give instructions. When he learned more about people's traditional knowledge, he realised he should let them take the lead. At the start, Balasai saw himself as an adhikari (officer), whereas now he feels he is a prerak (facilitator). A similar opinion was given by Dasrath Yadav, who joined our organisation in 1997. Back then we were promoting the construction of check dams, or the renovation of ponds, and assistance was simply 'a question of visiting communities and asking them which service they required'. This was complemented by subsidies, something that is gradually stopping. Colleagues who joined the organisation recently highlight the emphasis given to community-planned solutions to livelihood problems.

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