

Nanalal Angari: Profile of a Village Leader

SEVA MANDIR

One man's passion and commitment becomes a formidable movement, in which forests are protected and resources enriched...

Nanalal Angari's story is that of an exemplary leader. Despite his humble upbringing and lack of formal education, he has played an active role in freeing the surrounding forests from encroachment. His concern for nature and regard for the many ways in which natural resources support human life motivated him to establish community-based institutions for the protection of forests. Nanalal's contribution has won him many awards, including the Village Hygiene and Cultural Communication Award in 1986 from the District Education Officer as part of the Yuva Netratva Shivar. He also received an award for exemplary work on Self-Governance by Seva Mandir, Udaipur, in 1995. Narratives on village leaders being scarce, this article speaks of the qualities of a true village leader and shares how Nanalal has successfully couched a strong conservation ethic in the beliefs, values and practices of his people.

Nanalal belongs to the Angari clan (ST) that numbers around 36 families in the village of Shyampura, Rajasthan. Nanalal was born in 1952 and is the eldest of four brothers and five sisters. His parents used to earn paltry sums of 75 paise and 50 paise per day and needed extra hands to supplement the total income of the household. Nanalal was, therefore, pulled out of education at an early age. He began to graze the cattle of a prosperous Patel household in Bichiwara to earn some money. He would do household chores and get paid a sum of Rs 200, in cash or kind, for the whole year. These small sums supported a hand-to-mouth existence but did not allow the household to make savings.

In 1969, Nanalal started working at the Nagmala Talab for 75 paise per day. Later on, he went to Vallabhnagar to work as a wage labourer in the Kikawas canal project for a mere Rs 6 a day. He worked in the canal project for four months and then returned to Shyampura. Later he was taken by a contractor to Dhariyawad (Datriya pond), where he worked as a wage labourer. The earnings were irregular and scarcely enough. Nanalal was on the lookout for other opportunities. Just then, a tailor from the neighbouring village got in touch with Nanalal and expressed his willingness to take on Nanalal as apprentice for an annual sum of Rs 300. Nanalal was already getting tired of the exploitation at the work sites; he, therefore, consented to work under the tailor. However, this money also fell short of meeting

his household requirements and he eventually started his own work as a tailor. He continued in this vocation for 25 years. In retrospect, Nanalal says that his job as a tailor gave him the financial stability to be able to engage with other concerns related to the degradation of forests. It also gave him the luxury of examining the fabric of society from close quarters.

In 1982, a centre for adult literacy was started by the NGO, Seva Mandir, in Shyampura. Nanalal attended classes religiously from 8 to 10 p.m. in the evenings at the centre. Even though the classes often stretched late into the night he would be awake at four in the morning and set out to collect firewood for the household. He would have to walk no less than 6 km to the forests of Bada Bhilwada to collect firewood. There were no other sources of wood around his village. Whereas his night-time lessons made him ponder over the beauty and importance of forests, his visits to collect firewood during the day motivated him save the forests from degradation. Enthused by this feeling, he planted 75 trees, including 19 neem trees in 1984. This was the first of his efforts to regenerate forests. He continued this private wasteland development effort by re-planting 20–25 plants every year. As of today, he has planted 700–800 saplings. Inspired by him, 12–15 households in the community are trying to develop their own wastelands in a similar manner.

From 1982 to 1991, he actively participated in all sensitization efforts being undertaken in the area in the fields of education, health and watershed development. The construction of an anicut in 1987 brought the entire village together and thus paved the way for more serious community-based protection mechanisms. The collective effort resulted in

the formation of Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) and Gram Vikas Committees (GVCs) in early 1991. Nanalal was chosen as the head of both these with full consensus.

Besides his active participation in both these committees, he played a central role in the Joint Forest Management (JFM) exercise carried out in 1991 in Shyampura. This was one of the first of a series of such exercises carried out in Rajasthan. In the following years, Nanalal reached out to members of the nearby villages of Phalasia and Jhadol. He inspired the youth and women to participate in forest protection and conservation initiatives. Feeling the need for a federating body, the Van Utthan Sangh (VUS) was registered on the 15 October 1998. Most of the members from the 22 committees under the Van Utthan Sangh lacked the capacity to lead the federation from the front. So Nanalal was unanimously selected as the head of the federation.

After the formation of the Van Utthan Sangh, Nanalal started devoting all his time for the cause of environmental protection. Nanalal shares that his family members initially opposed his increased interest in conserving forests because it ate into the time he had to exclusively fend for the household. This was a genuine concern because Nanalal had inherited just two bighas from his father when eight bighas were distributed among the four brothers. Most of this land had no irrigation facility. His livestock holding was also confined to two work animals and one buffalo. Owing to all of this, his wife had to toil as a wage labourer while he gave his time and energy to the cause of forest conservation. But despite the initial grumblings, his family members eventually began to discern the true

worth of his work. Today, Nanalal enjoys the full support of his family in his ventures, which seek to ensure the common good of the whole community.

As mentioned, one of Nanalal's foremost achievements has been his fight against the illicit privatization and encroachment of forests and commons lands. In 1984, the forest department carried out trench digging and plantation work in Shyampura. Nanalal helped mobilize the support of local communities for this. But some people, who held encroached lands near the plantation, obstructed the plantation work. With assistance from the forest ranger, Shri. Laluram, and other village leaders such as Valanath, Bheranath and Hukavela, the villagers were finally able to remove the encroachments. Group meetings were held to sort out issues in a positive manner. The plantation was established and remained under community protection till 1989.

In the mid-80s, there were 19 encroachments in the village. Nanalal brought this down to 7 by 1989. As per his suggestion, practices such as stall-feeding of cattle and limited lopping of the forest became popular in the village. The people from the neighbouring villages of Turgarh and Amlia had also encroached on the common lands of Shyampura. Under the leadership of Nanalal, the members of the GVC went to the encroached places and destroyed the huts. Not just this, they also took legal action and filed a case against the encroachers. In this way, 37 hectares of land was brought under JFM arrangements. In due course of time, FPCs were also formed in Turgarh and

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Amlia. That many villages suffered from the problem of encroachments became increasingly clear; therefore, it was necessary to have a common forum to deliberate on it.

A meeting was held at the sacred grove of Kirit Mahadev Ji, which was attended by senior people from the forest department such as the Ranger, Aravalli, Shri. Satish Sharma, the staff from Seva Mandir, including Shri. S.N. Bhise and Shri. Suresh Sharma, and people's representatives from 22 villages. Various legal issues such as those related to encroachments were discussed and it was decided that a common representative organization should be formed. Thus, the Van Utthan Sansthan was formed and 11 members were nominated/elected to carry forward its activities. Nanalal was elected president, given his good track record in dealing with contentious issues such as encroachments. The more recent encroachments in the villages of Madri, Ogna, Amlia, Tunder and Bada Bhilwara was brought to light in the meetings. Each of these cases was dealt through the Van Utthan Sansthan, in order to get the commons freed from illegal encroachments.

In 1999, a paryavaran yatra, in the nature of an environmental rally, was conducted to express unity among the forest dwelling communities. In one of the cases taken up by the Van Utthan Sansthan, people from Tunder encroached upon some of the land of Bada Bhilwara where a JFM site was proposed. Van Utthan Sansthan, under the leadership of Nanalal, took the matter to the forest officials in 1992–93. The Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF) went along with them and

destroyed the hutments. Thus, 712 ha of forest land was freed from encroachment.

Soon after, 50 ha of this land was brought under JFM in Bada Bhilwara village. Another 100 ha were taken up in a similar manner in 2002. On the day of the *shilanyas* of the JFM site, Nanalal was leading the people to the JFM site when people from Tunder started pelting stones at them from a nearby hillock. Subsequently, Bada Bhilwara filed a case against Tunder and hence resolved to get the commons freed from encroachments at all costs. The people of Bada Bhilwara thus become more conscious of the value of their resources.

Similarly, Madla had 56 ha under a JFM site, but the sarpanch, Dhularam, was not willing to impose restrictions on the unabated cutting of grass. Van Utthan Sansthan, under the leadership of Nanalal, took the help of the forest department and resolved the dispute. Disputes between Shyampura and Amlia, Bada Bhilwada and Tumdar, Madla and Sigri, Madri and Pargiapada, Som and Karel were sorted out successfully through the Van Utthan Sansthan in a similar manner.

Nanalal engaged with the bureaucracy and district-level departments, to ensure the protection of forests. As far as the issue of obtaining the JFM lease from the forest department was concerned, there were procedural delays and red-tapism. Accompanied by Seva Mandir staff and three other members of the Van Utthan Sansthan, Nanalal went to Jaipur in 2000 and pressed for the speedy grant of JFM sites. They met with the Chief Conservator of Forest (CCF)

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and explained their eagerness to conserve forests through community-based measures. They also got the opportunity to meet the forest minister, Smt. Beena Kak.

Nanalal has shown how motivated individuals and advocacy on their part can

lead to the successful management of common property resources in the long run. Over the years, Nanalal has played a significant and considerable role in taking the membership of Van Utthan Sangh from the initial number of 22 in Jhadol to about 103 in Jhadol, 38 in Kotra, 18 in Phulwari ki Naal Sanctuary, 28 in Kherwara, 28 in Gogunda and Badgaon blocks of Udaipur District.

From the initial 22 FPCs, today Van Utthan has become an umbrella for more than 100 FPCs, sharing grievances as well as experiences. It has been instrumental in helping the FPCs to start their Joint Forest Management programmes through regular follow-ups with the forest department.

Thus, Van Utthan Sansthan has been able to make JFM a success in quite a number of villages such as Shyampura, Madla, Pargiapada and Bada Bhilwara.

Despite the many accolades, Nanalal believes that when working for the common good, one should keep away from mainstream politics because it detracts one from his/her social ideals. Nanalal feels no shame in acknowledging his failures, among which he counts the encroachments of Turgarh and Amlia. Nanalal has keen foresight and knows that many of the social problems are because of the paucity of land, which is under twice the pressure because of the population

explosion. He believes that this has reduced options for the tribal people. In his opinion, it is very necessary that somebody takes up this issue with the authorities.

Although Nanalal has achieved much in a short duration, he feels that he has a

long way to go before he can say that his work is done. Nanalal does not take any stipend for the work he does. This gives him a greater feeling of pride and selfless service. He thinks that anyone can become a village leader, so long as he or she is service-minded and impartial.