

Van Utthan Sansthan: Securing the Commons for the Common Good

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Developing degraded forest lands through collective management by the tribals and in collaboration with the government, the VUS seeks shape democratic institutions, and conserve land rights and tenure of communities on these lands.

Van Utthan Sansthan, or VUS, (meaning Forest Promotion/Protection Society) was established by Seva Mandir in 1995 in Jhadol block of Udaipur District. VUS is a network of Village Forest Protection Committees (VFPCs) promoted by Seva Mandir and working in alignment with the Joint Forest Management (JFM) policy of the government. Since its inception, VUS has been actively involved in its mandate of collective management, and protection and management of degraded forest areas.

Seva Mandir has been actively involved in helping marginalized tribals through various natural resource management efforts such as agriculture, watershed development, afforestation on private and common lands, and JFM on forest lands. Seva Mandir's work is based on the premise that improvement in the natural resource base leads to improvement in the livelihoods of tribals because they are predominantly dependent on land. A majority of its interventions have been routed through the formal and non-formal village institutions such as the Gram Vikas Committees and Forest Protection Committees (FPCs). The focus of such institutions has been on promoting collective action to bring about the development of common property resources (CPRs) such as forests, and pasture lands. Common properties that comprise revenue waste lands, grazing pastures and forests constitute about 70% of the total land whereas forest lands in themselves account for nearly 40% of the total area. Thus, most of Seva Mandir's development interventions in the village are centred on CPRs.

EXPERIENCES IN JFM

In pursuance of the National Forest Policy 1988, the Government of India (GoI) issued guidelines in June 1990 instructing all states to adopt the new concept of managing forests, popularly known as JFM, in which the local people protect forest lands and help in the regeneration and management of these, in collaboration with the forest department (FD). The villages, in return, are entitled to the usufruct rights over Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), fodder, fuel wood and a share in the timber proceeds of the final harvest.

Seva Mandir's involvement with the JFM programme dates back to over a decade and half. Seva Mandir started the first JFM in Rajasthan in 1992 in Shyampura village in Jhadol tehsil, after the state government of Rajasthan issued a resolution on JFM in 1991. The government order was viewed as an opportunity for village groups and NGOs to contribute to the development and management of state forest lands, access to which had hitherto been denied. Seva

Mandir started work on the scheme to regenerate degraded forest lands through FPCs that were registered with the forest department. The degraded forest lands of these villages were afforested with financial aid from Seva Mandir. By 2006–07, Seva Mandir had developed 1,210 ha of forest land under 19 different JFM sites. The last decade has seen an appreciable spread of JFM in physical terms. A critical concern remains about moving towards the actual goal, that is, the empowerment of the communities through the decentralized management of forest resources.

PROBLEMS IN THE JFM PROGRAMME

The FD and the village communities are supposed to work together as equal partners in the JFM programme. In reality, however, this relationship appears to be skewed; one partner, that is, the FD, acts as a patron and has control of all the regulatory and decision-making powers whereas the other partner, that is, the community, is relegated to the client status. At the micro level, there is a lack of awareness of the FPCs about the ideology of the JFM resolution and to the spread of the programme. Important issues relate to an

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awareness of operational guidelines such as membership pattern, structure of executive committee, meetings, the role of the *panchayat* members and the forest officials in the committee, the memorandum of understanding and its significance, the election process, the protection of developed JFM areas, the encroachment problems and so on. The FD followed a target-based approach for the spread of JFM to greater areas whereas the FPCs looked upon the

massively funded programme as an opportunity to earn wage employment, with no clue about the incumbent responsibilities of protection and management. In many cases, JFM was being practised with scant regard for traditional users, their access and rights vis-à-vis their institutional or legal rights. As a result, many conflicts simmered among neighbouring villagers over the issues of curtailed access and disputed boundaries.

GENESIS OF THE VUS

The need to have a block-level network of FPCs was recognized during the course of Seva Mandir's work in JFM. This was because many aspects of JFM required institutional interaction at various levels. In the initial years, Seva Mandir decided to support these fledgling FPCs and contribute to institutional interaction at various levels from the village to the FD, for balanced negotiation and resolution of impending issues. Seva Mandir was, thus, able to build the capacity of a few FPC members so that they could take up these issues with the FD officials. The presence of a platform as an interface was considered essential for a dialogue between the community and the FD.

Seva Mandir then constituted a network of FPCs in 1997; this was an informal group of FPCs, comprising the FD, NGOs and even self-initiated groups that engaged in forest protection meetings regularly, under the banner of Seva Mandir, to deliberate on the issues concerning the implementation of JFM in the field. Thus began Seva Mandir's efforts at organizing the FPCs of Jhadol block into a block-level network called Van Utthan Sansthan. Over the years, the VUS worked on enhancing awareness about JFM and safeguarding land-based CPRs from encroachment. The VUS was finally given formal shape on 28 March 2003 when it was registered under the Societies Registered Act.

In June 2005, a workshop was held to define the vision and mission of the organization and the direction that the VUS should take. One option was to work like a development agency and the other was to take up networking and advocacy in a big way (ultimately shaping a mass movement). Finally, the following conclusions were arrived at.

- ♦ **Vision:** To work for securing the commons, specifically the forests, for the common good.
- ♦ **Mission:** To generate networking and awareness regarding criticality of commons, especially the forests.
- ♦ **Long-term Goals:** Shaping the work of democratic institutions such as the FPCs and the Eco Development Committees (EDCs) to enable conservation of land rights and tenure of the community as a whole on forest lands.
- ♦ **Short-term Goals/Objectives**
 1. Liaise with the FD to improve institutional interaction, and improve the collective bargaining power of VFPCs vis-à-vis the FD.
 2. Initiate conflict resolution among VFPCs by way of dialogue and negotiations

3. Spread awareness about the provisions of JFM to newer villages.
4. Training and capacity building of VFPCs.
5. Thwart attempts at illicit access to forest lands.
6. Policy advocacy on state resolution on JFM through field research.

From the initial 22 FPCs, today VUS has become an umbrella of 100 FPCs, which share grievances as well as experiences. VUS has a 15-member executive body with a President, a Vice-President and a Secretary, who carry out its activities on a voluntary basis. These 15 people are experienced leaders from the Jhadol *taluka*, who have gained the respect of the local people because of their sustained efforts in forest protection and regeneration.

ACTIVITIES OF VUS

- (i) Awareness building on various issues of JFM through monthly meetings and cluster-level meetings of FPCs, in which issues related to the formation and the registration of FPCs, as well as management issues are discussed. VUS has also been undertaking the formation of FPCs and registering it with the FD.
- (ii) Issue-based meetings with the FD: Most of the issues raised in the cluster meetings and which need intervention of the FD are taken up in these meetings.
- (iii) Training and capacity building: The VUS has been working organizing trainings of FPCs on implementation, management and re-election issues. VUS has also been helpful in training of Van Sahayogis, a scheme initiated by the FD.
- (iv) Conflict resolution: The VUS has been working on the issue of resolving conflicts with regard to boundaries, grazing and other traditional rights, which the

- adjacent FPCs have to face when they try to develop their JFM areas.
- (v) Releasing land under encroachments: VUS is helping FD to check illegal privatization of forest lands.
 - (vi) Advocacy at the district and state levels: The VUS has shown how active advocacy can lead to the successful management of common property resources. Over the issue of obtaining a JFM lease from the FD, it was found that the FD was reluctant to grant permission in certain cases. Therefore, three members of the VUS, accompanied by Seva Mandir staff, went to Jaipur in 2000 and advocated for the speedy grant of the JFM sites. They met the Chief Conservator of Forests and explained their eagerness for participatory forestry. They also got the opportunity to meet the forest minister Beena Kak.

The VUS has also helped with re-organization and re-election of FPCs. In 2005, 39 such FPCs were re-organized by the members of the executive body of the VUS to ensure that they are truly representative and comprise proactive members. Moreover, 27 FPCs were formed afresh. However, many problems were faced when it came to the registration of these FPCs by the FD. The FD refused to accord recognition to the re-organized committees and the efforts made by the members.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES OF THE VUS

Spreading the JFM concept to other development blocks: Members have started visiting other blocks such as Kherwara, Kotra and Gogunda. Given the incidence of encroachment in these areas, it seems imperative to sensitize the institutions in these areas.

ENCROACHMENTS ON FORESTS

The forest land of Bada Bhilwara village was encroached upon by the people of neighbouring Tundar as well as a few families of Bada Bhilwara. The villages in the area are single caste tribal villages, the encroachments are thus made by members of the same community. The VFPC members of Bada Bhilwara opposed this trend and lodged a complaint against the encroachers with the local FD Beat office. The officials from the Beat Office visited the site and convinced the encroachers to release the occupied land. But the encroachers did not yield and the problem persisted. The VFPC members then contacted the members of the VUS, and with their support, contacted the Division office in Udaipur. The VFPC members along with the representatives of the VUS met the Conservator of Forests and apprised him of the situation. An FD team was sent to the site to evict the encroachers. The encroachments were removed and the forest land belonging to the village Bada Bhilwara was reclaimed. The VFPC members then submitted a proposal to enclose the area and develop it under JFM. The proposal was ultimately sanctioned in December 2002. This success has paved a way for more such people's associations to come together and resist the privatization of common resources.

Moving towards eco-development: The VUS has been in regular touch with the FD to extend its work in the Phulwari ki Nal Sanctuary. The sanctuary is home to a number of endogenous species. Senior officials of the wildlife department have been contacted. Some of the wildlife has been venturing into the programme villages because of their loss of habitat. Seva Mandir

has been attempting to pacify the people and reduce the man-animal conflict in such areas.

VUS members have also tried to intervene and (a) promote modalities for eco-development and the modalities involved in through the formation of the EDCs, (b) to prevent the illegal felling of trees, and explore (c) benefits through NTFP collection, physical works and that can be conducted in the sanctuary areas and the prospective benefits of tourism.

FOREST RIGHTS ACT 2006 AND THE WAY AHEAD

The recent enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 recognizes and vests forest rights and the occupation of forest land in forest dwelling scheduled tribes (STs) and other traditional forest dwellers, who have been residing in the forests for generations but whose rights have not been recorded. This is a welcome step but it will also lead to the illegal privatization of forest land. As per the Act, all encroachments till 13 December 2005 will be regularized and given rights over land, which is under cultivation. This would do a lot of damage to the forest area. *Panchayats/gram sabhas* have been given the right to receive claims, inspect the areas and recommend cases for regularization to the Sub Divisional Committee. The VUS has discussed the provisions of the Act with the FPC members. It insists that the FPCs take active part in the *gram sabhas* and place the actual position of encroachments before the *gram sabha* and put up valid objections, if any, about regularization. Although it is not possible to cover all the *panchayats*, the VUS will try to cover at least Kotra and Jhadol blocks. They have found support for their discussions in the villages. The role of the network is to evince institutional

support from the FD, through collective bargaining and negotiation. The network is being looked upon by the member FPCs as a forum wherein the members can voice their concerns and issues regarding JFM. This federation has been contributing in dealing with complex administrative procedures. More important, the federation's steadfast stand on the issue of encroachment has helped in the removal of encroachments through composite dialogue between the villagers and encroachers.

In this regard, the Community Forest Rights (CFR) proposals as per the aforesaid Act are being pursued at the *gram-sabha* level. Seventy of the ninety proposals submitted have been approved/accepted at the *panchayat* level and supporting documents are being secured. The VUS has also consulted with the tribal commissioner of the region, who has promised action and issued directives to the FD so that progress can be made. Special *gram sabhas* were organized and CFR claims have been submitted with proof of settlement records, evidence of village elders, plans of the FPCs, and verification by *gram sabhas* and *sachivs*. Seventy-five proposals were filed in June and July 2010 and are being verified at the village level.

With regard to constructive sensitization, the members have continued with their resource management and awareness generation endeavours. These include cluster meetings (*baithaks*) at the *van nakas* and the monthly *baithaks* in Jhadol. Amidst all this, the VUS is gradually seeing the transformation of its own goals and role from a persuading agent for ecological security to a prospective internal agency that has to assume a much more active role in the way people lay their stake on forests and protect these from falling prey to individualization.