

An effort well rewarded

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For conservation work to be successful, involve the people.



SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVE: people's force.

"Choker" *panchayat* is one of the 52 *panchayats* in Sangrah Development Block of Sirmour district in Himachal Pradesh. This *panchayat* has a chequered history of conservation of natural resources mainly forests, leading ultimately to create a better environment. The *panchayat* consists of five wards and a total of 15 hamlets spread over a difficult hilly terrain of about 15 sq. km.

The seeds of self-initiated Community Development were sown in 1978 when 16 families of "Shilli Bhangari" village of the Choker *panchayat* under the leadership of Shri Amar Chand and Shri Muni Lal took a decision to save heavily degraded "Ban oak" forests on which they were dependent, for fodder, small timber, medicinal plants and manure. They constituted a "Samuhik Sarankshan Committee" (Joint Protection Committee) and closed a patch of about 50 hectares of the forest for protection.

Manage the forest

Negligence on the part of villagers to protect the forest had very little hope of getting its lost glory back. From every household, one person was nominated to the Committee and these 16 persons took the role of Rakha or guard in rotation to protect the patch of "Ban Oak". Initially this patch was closed for 10 years. Rules to manage the forest were framed. The area was protected so passionately that the results were noticeable and people from adjoining villages envied them.

This has influenced the remaining villages of the Choker panchayat and several outside the panchayat too, covering 15 panchayats of Sangrah Block. "The villagers are managing the forests on their own and there is hardly any conflict among them or with the Forest Department," says Mr. Rattan Lal Forest Ranger. Today, villagers of 15 panchayats are managing more than 2000 hectares of "Ban Oak" forests and have developed their own rules to share the usufructs equitably. To generate funds, the panchayats have fixed membership fees keeping in view the paying capacity of each household. The initiative has broadened the vision of village community as, they are aiming to expand this movement towards the issues of conservation of water, forests and land — key to the sustainable development of the mountains.

What Can I Do?

Gandhiji's dream of Gram Sawaraj can be realised if people are aware about such initiatives. We can bring about change by becoming a part of change first.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group