

Changing a way of life

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Hivre Bazar is an example of what the people as a community can achieve.



THE SECRET: Proud villagers explain their success to visitors. PHOTO: MANISHA GUTMAN

In the fast developing urban growth of India, there are a few small villages that can teach us a lot about progress. Hivre Bazar would certainly lead the list of these villages. About half an hour away from the upcoming city of Ahmednagar in Maharashtra, this community of 1,250 people have taken the reins of their future firmly in their hands. This village was considered a "punishment zone" by government officials posted there due to its high crime rate. But, in the last 17 years, it has turned around completely. Affected by repeated droughts, migration and alcoholism, this village touched rock bottom in the late 1980's.

A group of youth from the village, desperate to save their environment, approached young and educated Popatrao Pawar, who accepted to become the "sarpanch" (village leader). His main task was to rebuild the moral fibre of the community and over his next three terms as Head, the village underwent an unbelievable transformation.

Rebirth

Under the Adarsh Gaon Yojana (Model Village Scheme), Popatrao led the villagers in restoring the natural environment around the village mainly by addressing the problem of soil and water conservation. Due to heavy deforestation, the meagre rainfall received was lost in surface run off. The first steps were to help this water percolate into the earth so that wells could be recharged and vegetation could grow again. Nearly ten and a half lakh trees have been planted in the past decades. As the water table got recharged, water reappeared in open wells. This helped both agriculture and livestock along with availability of fodder. Eventually, forestlands around the village were handed over by the government Forest Department to the villagers to manage.

Most of this was possible because of the discipline that the villages agreed to impose upon themselves and adhere to. The village established several rules, some of which directly linked to environment. These include: A ban on free grazing in forest lands; A ban on tree felling; Shrama daan — a voluntary offering of labour for the community welfare.

Also, since maintaining that the moral fibre of the person is equally important, the villagers have accepted a ban on liquor and other addictive substances.

Outsiders cannot buy land in Hivre Bazar and those returning from the cities (and there are several) have to stay in the village for a minimum of one year to prove their commitment to village life, before they can be reaccepted!

Finally, one realises, the secret of their success is the respect and space given to each resident's opinion. All decisions are taken through a process of consultation, ensuring inputs from the collective wisdom of the community. Life in Hivre Bazar is sustained by self-discipline - the lives of both the environment and humanity!

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group