

CHANNELISING PEOPLE'S POWER TOWARDS PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS*

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Introduction

Every year numerous conflicts centre on the need of development, conservation and people's livelihood. Forests and wildlife reserves remain the primary area of conflicts (Sarin, 1996; Srivastava, 1997). In most of the Protected Areas, protection and biodiversity conservation efforts are nullified due to increasing conflicts between local communities and forest officials. Most of the Protected Areas in the country are burdened with biotic pressures like illicit felling, illicit grazing, fire and uncontrolled collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) (Singh, 1997). In fact it is impossible to protect and manage the Protected Areas in the country with the help of existing infrastructure available to the Forest Department.

'Gyanganga' Sanctuary in Buldhana District of Maharashtra stands out as an exemplary case of local community's involvement in protection, conservation and regeneration of the area. Established in May 1997, the little known 'Gyanganga' Sanctuary sprawls over 203 km². It is located in the famous Ajanta hill ranges, nearly 50 km away from the Ajanta caves. The name 'Gyanganga' is given after the small river of the same name flowing through the sanctuary.

Once characterised by the rich flora and fauna, the whole area was degraded due to heavy grazing, illicit felling and frequent uncontrolled fire. Consequently the wildlife population was depleted due to loss of habitat and organised poaching. Habitat destruction resulted into the depleted population of Leopard, Sloth bear, Barking deer, Spotted deer, Blue bull, Hyena, Wild boar and many varieties of other animals. The population of Tiger is almost negligible in the area. Many varieties of avifauna draw attention of the wildlife lovers. Local communities were mute witnesses to the whole degradation process. Forest officials could organise the local people and channelised their strength for protection and management of the forest areas adjoining the villages to reverse the process of degradation. It is important to note that even before the notification of the 'Gyanganga' sanctuary, local communities residing on the fringes and inside the forests could organise themselves under guidance of forest officials for the cause of conservation and protection. In fact the protection efforts of the local communities was the precursor for the sanctuary formation. Unity of the local people could successfully reverse the degradation process by minimising the biotic interference and induced the natural regeneration in the forests. After the

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complete protection and regeneration achieved with the co-operation of the local communities, the Government of Maharashtra had decided to constitute the 203 km² of the forest area into the sanctuary for better protection and management. In this paper some aspects of the community participation in protection of 'Gyanganga' sanctuary are discussed.

Location

The 'Gyanganga' sanctuary is located between 19° 51' to 21° 17' North Latitude and 70° 59' to 75° 57' East longitude. Total area of the sanctuary is 203 km². There are 28 villages on the fringes of the sanctuary and only one village named 'Devhari' in the centre (Fig. 1).

Forests of the area fall under the category 5A, i.e. Southern tropical dry deciduous forests (Champion and Seth, 1968). These forests earlier being predominantly Teak bearing had dwindled to miscellaneous forests, having majority of Anjan (*Hardwickia binnata*), Salai (*Boswellia serrata*), Dhawda (*Anogeissus latifolia*) etc. Buldhana and Khamgaon are the two main towns exerting pressure on the above forests for the timber, fuelwood, and fodder.

Management Problems

Grazing : Most important problem of the area was the presence of two groups of the 'Kathiawadis' settlement inside the forests and three groups on the fringes of the forests. These 'Kathiawadis' were staying in and around the forests for about six months in a year since last twenty years. Around 300 families along with 40,000 Kathiawadi cattle (Gir breed of cow) were the main cause of destruction of the forests.

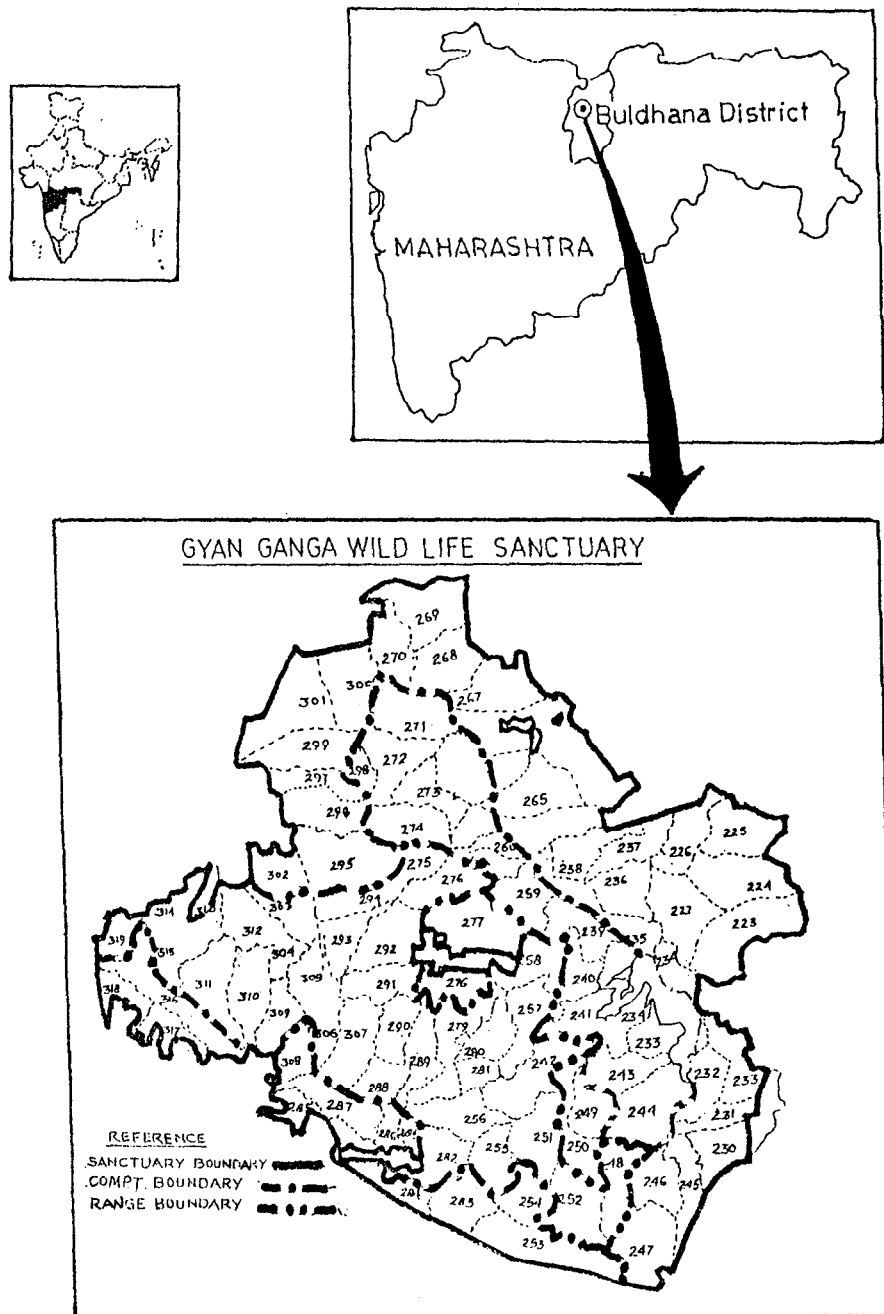
The 'Gir' variety of cow is famous for their high yield of milk and also for their capacity to consume large quantity of grass and fodder leaves. Normally a group of 15 families used to manage 3,000 cattle professionally. Uncontrolled grazing and lopping of the fodder trees particularly Anjan caused immense damage to the whole ecosystem of the area. Occasionally the 'Kathiawadi' graziers felled the valuable Anjan trees for the direct consumption of the leaves. Besides consumption of the fodder by the cattle the 'Kathiawadi' families damaged the forests for timber and poles to construct the temporary hutment. They also damage the forests to meet their daily need of fuelwood for cooking and for keeping the colony warm and lighted at night. It was impossible to take action against these 'Kathiawadis' because they had the silent backing of the local politicians, some influential local villagers and some forest officials. In the process, lakhs of rupees changed hands, while the 'Kathiawadis' earned in multiples of what they offered to earn 'support' at the cost of forest wealth.

Another important problem was the migratory sheep, which used to graze in the forests from June to December every year. About 2,00,000 sheep were illegally grazing in the closed area causing damage to the natural regeneration, young seedlings and grass.

Grazing in this area was having another important dimension. Local people used to bring the cattle from the nearby villages for grazing in the forests and rearing and in return cattle owner used to pay them some money.

Hence the grazing pressure of local cattle coupled with the 'Kathiawadi' cattle;

Fig. 1



Location Map of Gyanganga Sanctuary

migratory sheep and 'cattle from outside the village' caused immense damage to the forests and catalysed the degradation process. Heavy grazing suppressed the natural regeneration and reduced the grass production. Other impacts like compaction of soil, soil erosion and depleting water table lead to the loss of habitat for the wildlife.

Illicit felling : Problem of illicit felling was alarming in the forest due to involvement of the organised gangs. There were two types of pressure leading to the felling of trees and young seedlings : one, for the fuelwood and another for the timber. Fuelwood was collected by the local communities and also by the persons from the nearby towns. However, the organised gangs from the nearby town were involved in the felling of trees for the timber. Occasionally local people were involved as labourers for cutting the trees.

Fire : Intentional fire at the behest of the Tendu contractor caused great damage to the forests in the past. Extent of fire damage varied from 7,000 ha to 15,000 ha during the years 1992-1996. The infrastructure of the Forest Department is inadequate to control forest fire. There are little funds available for the fire protection in the Division. Fire control normally is a difficult task and many a times left to nature for auto control. Because of the total apathy of the local communities, it was impossible for the local staff to control the forest fire.

Initial Confrontation with the 'Kathiawadis'

In June 1996 some villagers from a village named 'Dongarkhandala' approached the Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF) with some complaint against

the local forester. The main complaint was regarding the involvement of the forester in keeping the 'Kathiawadis' along with their 6,000 cattle inside the forest area. Next day DCF organised a meeting with the villagers of the 'Dongarkhandala' and had a detailed discussion about the problems of illegal grazing by the 'Kathiawadi' cattle. On detailed enquiry, villagers revealed that the forest officials, some politicians and influential villagers had vested interest in keeping the 'Kathiawadis' in and around the forests. These cattle not only damaged the forests but also damaged the crop of the villagers. It was also learned that these 'Kathiawadis' had purchased a small piece of land on fringe of the forest and had also entered their name in the voters list.

Initially in the meeting villagers were hostile against the local staff and blamed the forest officials for indirect support to the 'Kathiawadis'. In the meeting it was gathered that almost 95% of the people were against the 'Kathiawadis', whose cattle not only damaged the forest wealth, but also damaged the crop of the local villagers. Then direct question was put to the villagers "if every body is interested in removing the 'Kathiawadis' then what is the problem ?" And finally villagers suggested that if two uniformed staff along with a tractor trolley is given, then 'Kathiawadis' and their cattle could be removed to protect the forests. Assurance was given by the DCF to provide the needed support and it was decided to start the operation from the next day.

Next morning with the rising sun around 200 villagers and few uniformed forest officials arrived at the 'Hetis' (Hutment) of the 'Kathiawadis'. Seeing the forest officials and villagers approaching, 'Kathiawadis' started stone throwing on

the crowd to disperse them. But at last 'Kathiawadis' surrendered to the unity of the villagers and the forest officials. However they asked two days time for packing and removing all cattle from the forests. Villagers granted them three days time for final pack up.

Withstanding Political Pressure : Taking advantage of the time grace given by the villagers powerful 'Kathiawadis' approached various politicians and tried to pressurise the forest officials. But the forest officials informed the politicians that it was the decision of the villagers, so villagers should be approached for change in the decision. When the politicians approached the villagers, they told them that the decision to remove 'Kathiawadis' was taken by the villagers and if they used any force they would have to face the consequences. Villagers even threatened the politicians for not electing them in future election. With this sort of reply finally all politicians kept them away from helping the 'Kathiawadis' and accepted the wishes of large vote bank (villagers).

Ultimately, the 'Kathiawadis' along with their cattle left the forests of Buldhana Division and the battle was won with the active participation of the local communities.

Initial success in removing the 'Kathiawadis', who were staying in the forests for past 20 years with support of the politicians and officials, gave the villagers tremendous courage and self confidence. Taking this opportunity, forest officials explained the concept of Joint Forest Management (JFM) to the villagers and first Forest Protection Committee (FPC) was formed in the Division in June 1996.

Spread of the news

Initial experiment of 'Dongarkhandala' and the success of unity spread like wild fire. Immediately villagers from the 'Takerkheda Helga' approached the forest officials for helping in removing the cattle of the 'Kathiawadis' from the vicinity of their village. Promptly using this opportunity, forest officials organised a meeting in the village and formed a FPC and a decision was taken to remove the 'Kathiawadis'.

Takerkheda Helga - a hard nut to crack

On the line of 'Dongarkhandala' villagers started pressurising the 'Kathiawadis' for removal of their cattle from the vicinity of the forests. But in this village, a powerful Milk society was running under the control of a very powerful local politician and he opposed these moves from behind the scene. But under the pressure of the majority of the villagers and the enthusiastic forest officials 'Kathiawadis' promised to leave the area in fifteen days. On the pre decided date they left along with their cattle peacefully. After few days some villagers came to DCF and informed that around 3,000 cattle were still inside the forests. Forest officials and the villagers again approached the 'Kathiawadis' and persuaded them to leave the forest area amicably. The clever 'Kathiawadis' under the guidance of the local politician brought their better cattle inside the 40 acres of agriculture wastelands owned by them on the fringe of the forests and refused to leave the area. They argued that no law could prevent them from keeping the cattle inside their own agricultural land.

Finally the villagers discussed that cattle could not be kept for long in the

wastelands. They were bound to enter the forests for fodder and water. It was decided to cordon the whole agricultural land along with the cattle. Villagers and forest officials cordoned the area so as to prevent any possible entry in the forests by the cattle of the 'Kathiawadis'. After around 72 hours 'Kathiawadis' realised that the cattle could not survive without entering the forests and finally they left the forest area.

With the spread of the news gradually 'Kathiawadis' left the forest area of 'Devhari', 'Botha', 'Mandani', and 'Warwand'. These initial successes gave tremendous confidence to the villagers and forest officials.

Control of Sheep Grazing

Initial success in removing the 'Kathiawadis' with the help of local people gave confidence to the forest staff. Local communities joined hands with forest officials to control the sheep and goat grazing. There were many assaults on the forest staff and on the villagers in the beginning to demoralise them, but in vain. To begin with, villagers in consultation with forest officers levied heavy fine on the sheep owners and many habitual offenders were prosecuted. Sheep owners tried to use their political connections to influence the forest officials but failed. Gradually the sheep grazer restricted him or herself to the open area and avoided the closed forest area; some of them even migrated to other places and also sold off their sheep.

People's power vital for forest protection

Local communities and the forest officials could stop the illicit felling of Teak trees by group patrolling in the sensitive

parts of the forests (Fig. 2). Initially the villagers were apprehensive about the probable attacks on them during the 'Bazaar' day by the smugglers, but gradually that fear disappeared. Forest officers also realised that wherever the local communities joined hands for the cause of forest protection, gradually illegal activities were controlled effectively.

With the passage of time, the villagers developed trust and respect for the forest officials. As a result of this, villagers offered willing and active support to the forest officials in the protection of the forests. Gradually complaints against the forest officials reduced substantially.

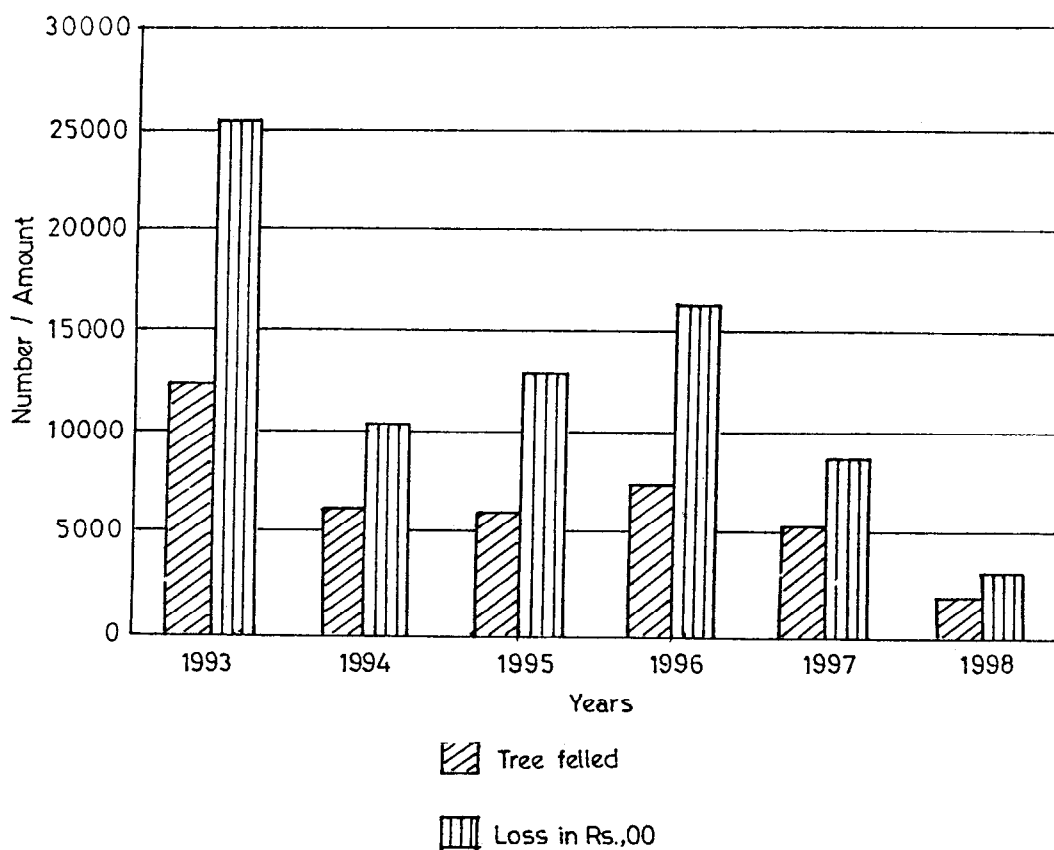
Reinstilling a sense of belonging

Local communities realised the importance of their unity and developed a sense of belonging towards the adjoining forests. Villagers in some villages could provide voluntary labour for fire tracing and fire control. Many a times villagers informed the forest officials on phone "We are going to extinguish fire in OUR forest and if some forest staff are available send them immediately". In one incidence in 'Botha' village the villagers decided to postpone the marriage ceremony and actively helped the forest officials in the fire fighting operation. There are many incidences, which indicate that the local communities are gradually developing a sense of belonging towards the forests.

Birth of a people's Wildlife Sanctuary

Successful protection of the large chunk of sensitive forest area with the active participation of local communities reversed the process of degradation and could instill a sense of pride among the

Fig. 2



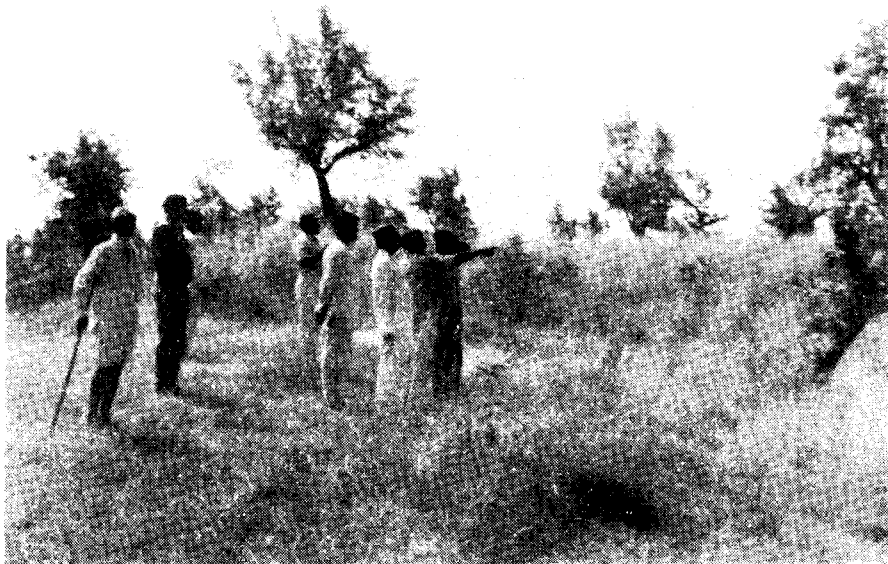
Illicit felling in Buldhana Division

forest officials. This experience could infuse the confidence and sense of belonging among the local communities.

Natural regeneration of Teak, Anjan, Dhawda and many other local species can be witnessed in the forest as a result of protection. Remarkable improvement in the crown of Anjan testifies the absence of lopping by the local people. Presence of well-formed crown of Anjan tree provides treats for nature lovers and testifies the absence of reckless lopping and felling (Fig. 3). Seeding of Anjan was not observed

in this area since last 15 years. First time in 1998 profuse seeding of Anjan was observed in the forest. Plenty of grass gives the testimony of reduced grazing in the forest area.

Active participation of local communities could control illegal grazing, illicit felling and fire. In order to provide more importance to the forest area and to control sheep grazing in future it was decided to constitute a sanctuary. In May 1997, out of 600 km² of forests in Ajanta

Fig. 3

Well formed crown of Anjan and plenty of grass due to protection by FPC

Fig. 4

Coppice of Teak after six months of stump dressing and protection by FPC

hills, a chunk of 200 km² was declared as 'Gyanganga' sanctuary.

March towards Community Management

Local people are now attempting to manage the forest area with the support of the forest officials. The first thing the local community adopted was to stop the practice of rearing cattle of outsiders and decided to provide fodder to those villagers on cutting basis. Secondly, they decided to adopt rotational grazing, so as to provide enough resting period to the grazing grounds. In some of the villages people have sold their goats and purchased buffaloes to reduce the pressure on the forests. Thirdly, people under the guidance of forest officials took up the job of stump dressing to obtain better coppice growth in future (Fig. 4). Fire tracing partly by 'Shramdan' is another important management practice observed by the local communities. Scientific collection of Anjan leaves by hand without

using axe is the innovative idea developed by the local people in this area. Local communities are now providing Anjan leaves and grass to the nearby towns and villages for the stall feeding of around 40,000 cattle.

Self-sustained Development

It is a common experience that community participation is obtained by providing immediate monetary benefit, but in such cases the response continues till the stimuli lasts. That means the moment the source of funds stops, enthusiasm of the community dries out.

Since, in Buldhana this movement started without any financial support and expectation, the sustainability is ensured. Now slowly people are getting benefits from the sale proceeds of Anjan leaves and grass and also meeting the requirement of fodder in the nearby towns and villages. Prior to the protection movement people were not

Box 1

Problem of Wild Boar Solved

'Dongarkhandala' is the first village from where the 'Kathiawadi' cattle were removed successfully with the active co-operation of the local community. Author visited the village after six months and organised a meeting to discuss other issues related to the forest management. During the meeting one villager came to the author and told "Sir, in past there was lot of damage to our crop by the 'Randookar' (Wild Boar), but this year there is no damage". Author asked the reason for this change from the villager. The villager explained innocently "Sir, When the 'Kathiawadi' cattle occupied the nearby forest land, the 'Randookar' migrated to our fields and damaged the crop annually. But now, as the 'Kathiawadi' cattle were removed from the forest land, hence the 'Randookar' went back to their original home in the forest. This is the reason that this year there is no crop damage." Perhaps scientifically the explanation offered by the innocent villager might not be true. But the story gave us a moral that the habitat of wildlife should not be damaged.

getting any benefit from Anjan leaves and grass. Slowly people are now trying to add value to some of the forest produce for getting more benefit. In short, the degraded forest responded to the protection effort and now producing enough NTFP for local people.

Degraded forests are regenerating without any monetary input and producing enough NTFP to sustain the local village economy. Demands of fuelwood are met from dead and fallen trees and branches. Systems of collective collection under the supervision of forest guard and FPC have been developed to reduce the burden on the female members. This system also eliminates the chances of green felling for fuelwood.

A chain of sustainable biomass-based economy has been triggered for the protection and conservation of habitat and biodiversity.

Lessons learnt

From the above experience it is evident that forests and Protected Areas can not be

protected effectively by the state machinery. Excessive biotic pressure leads to the destruction of the habitat for wildlife and the purpose of constituting the Protected Area gets defeated. However, if a sense of belonging towards their resources can be reinstalled among the local communities and the value of the resources explained to them, it is possible to protect and conserve the Protected Areas. Local communities should be united and their enormous power should be channelised to fight against the external destructive forces.

The experience in Buldhana Division of Maharashtra is an eye opener for Protected Area managers. Here local communities decided to protect a large chunk of forests from the onslaught of 'Kathiawadis', sheep graziers, timber Mafia, fire, etc. and ultimately led to natural regeneration and habitat improvement. Protection efforts of the local communities led to the constitution of the new 'Gyanganga' Sanctuary and the sanctuary is being managed for future generations.

The 'Gyanganga' experience may be an example for the policy makers to redefine the management policy for Protected Areas.

SUMMARY

This paper deals with a case study of newly constituted 'Gyanganga' Sanctuary in Buldhana District of Maharashtra. Local communities around the forests in the Ajanta hills organised themselves and removed the 'Kathiawadis' along with their 40,000 cattle and also controlled the illegal sheep grazing in the forests. They also controlled the illicit felling and fire and catalysed the natural regeneration without any financial support. Local communities could get some benefits from the sale of Anjan leaves and grass, which in turn could lead to stall-feeding. Efforts of the local communities culminated in the formation of new 'Gyanganga' Wildlife Sanctuary.

जनता की शक्ति को रक्षित क्षेत्रों की रखवाली और उनका प्रबन्ध करने की तरफ प्रवर्तित करना

मोहन झा

सारांश

इस अभिपत्र में महाराष्ट्र के बुलढाणा जिले में नए-नए बनाए जानगंगा अभयारण्य में किए गए एक अध्ययन को प्रस्तुत किया गया है। अजंता पहाड़ियों के जंगलों के आसपास बसने वाले स्थानीय समुदाय आपस में मिलकर संगठित हो

गए हैं और 40,000 पशुओं सहित काठियावाड़ियों को वहाँ से हटा दिया है तथा जंगलों में भेड़ों का अवैध चरान बंद कर दिया है। उन्होंने अवैध वृक्ष कटाई और आग लगना भी नियन्त्रित कर दिया है और कहीं से भी कोई वित्तीय सहायता लिए बिना उनमें प्राकृतिक पुनर्जनन प्रोत्साहित किया है। अंजन की पत्तियों और घास की बिक्री से स्थानीय समुदायों को कुछ लाभ भी मिले हैं जिससे खूटे बंधा पशुपालन भी शुरू हो सकता है। स्थानीय समुदायों के प्रयत्नों के परिणामस्वरूप ही वहाँ 'ज्ञानगंगा' नामक वन्यप्राणि अभयारण्य स्थापित हुआ है।

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