

**REGENERATING**  
**OF**  
**FOREST**

**PROF. MOHAN SHROTRIYA**





# PREFACE

When Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) started working in the Thana Gazi area, its focus, no doubt, was on water. But conservation and regeneration of the forest, in however embryonic form, was very much among its long-term priorities and goals. That we did not talk loudly about it was primarily because we wanted to mobilise people around an issue that concerned them most – so much so that their very existence depended on it. Even a cursory look at the action development – achievement chain forged by TBS and the rural people should be enough to indicate our stand and perception. But for this Sariska proper and its vicinity would not have been what it is today.

The slow but steady growth of Johads, anicuts and check-dams brought about a transformation not only in terms of the ever changing face of land, but also people's attitudes. A new sense of belonging could be seen among the people. As a consequence of an upgraded day-to-day life pattern, a new concern for the degraded ecology could be noticed. People's wholehearted participation in the anti-mining crusade as also in the forest-conservation and regeneration endeavour is enough evidence of the new sensibility. Simultaneously, a spontaneous sense of responsibility for conservation of forest overtook the people as is evident from the formation of village level committees seeking to ensure that the forest is not further degraded. As a result of vigilant behaviour and campaigns for sensitising more and more people to these

issues, a new stage signifying joint action (people and forest officials) couldn't wait to mature and materialize.

It goes to the credit of TBS activists and their way of working that the apathy and couldn't care-less-attitude (which earlier used to be the hallmark of social discourse and functioning) has been finally shattered. The successful attempt at developing a people's wildlife sanctuary (Bhaonta-Kolyala) marks a new stage of the heightened consciousness of the people : call them rustic, illiterate, back-ward or what you will !

It augurs well that the success of this project has brought us and the forest and wild life officials closer. They appreciate our work and seek to collaborate with us in conservation and regeneration enterprises. It marks a significant movement ahead seeking to undo the atmosphere of apprehensions and prejudices that had embittered our relationship. Examples rather than slogans work such wonders. We at the TBS are confident that things will go from good to better with each passing day as far as joint action with regard to managing the forest, wildlife and ecology in general, is concerned.

Emboldened by the successes achieved in the past, TBS undertook a new job of sensitising the youth to the imperatives of ecological challenges. With a view to catching them young a community based conservation programme was launched (October 2, 1999) in 56 schools falling in the core, buffer and peripheral areas of Sariska. Anti-mining and anti-poaching content of the programme has been systematically and consistently communicated to the

students. At 15 camps, 850 students have dedicated themselves to the massive task of forest conservation. A highlight of this programme is the change of heart brought about in four poachers. They have now dedicated themselves to protecting the tiger (now people call them protectors of the tiger).

As of today the Sariska area is free from the menace of mining. It is a matter of great satisfaction to us. Not far away is the day, let's hope, when the area will be as free from the menace of poaching, too.

We at the TBS rededicate ourselves to the task of translating this dream into reality of course in partnership with the people of the area as well as the forest and wildlife function areas.

I wish to thank **Prof. Mohan Shrotriya** for capturing the essence of our activities and documenting the same. This book was ready for publication way back in May 1998, but for some unavoidable reasons it couldn't move from the computer to the printing machine. But being late is any day better than never arriving.

**Rajendra Singh**  
General Secretary  
TBS

# PEOPLE'S SANCTUARY

People's interest in water leads to greater interest in the forest and its wildlife.

What should be the perfect reply to the forest department's eviction of people from a tiger reserve ? Go for a people's wildlife sanctuary, managed and protected by the people. After all, forest dwellers also conserve wildlife.

That is exactly what the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), which fought against the Sariska Tiger Reserve (STR) officials' eviction drive against the villages inside the reserve, did on January 14, 1995, with the help of villagers. The people of Bhaonta-Kolyala have been protecting the neighbouring forests. In 1995 they declared it a 'people's wildlife sanctuary'. It is claimed to be the first of its kind in the country. Symbolically, the sanctuary area starts from a dam built by the villagers.

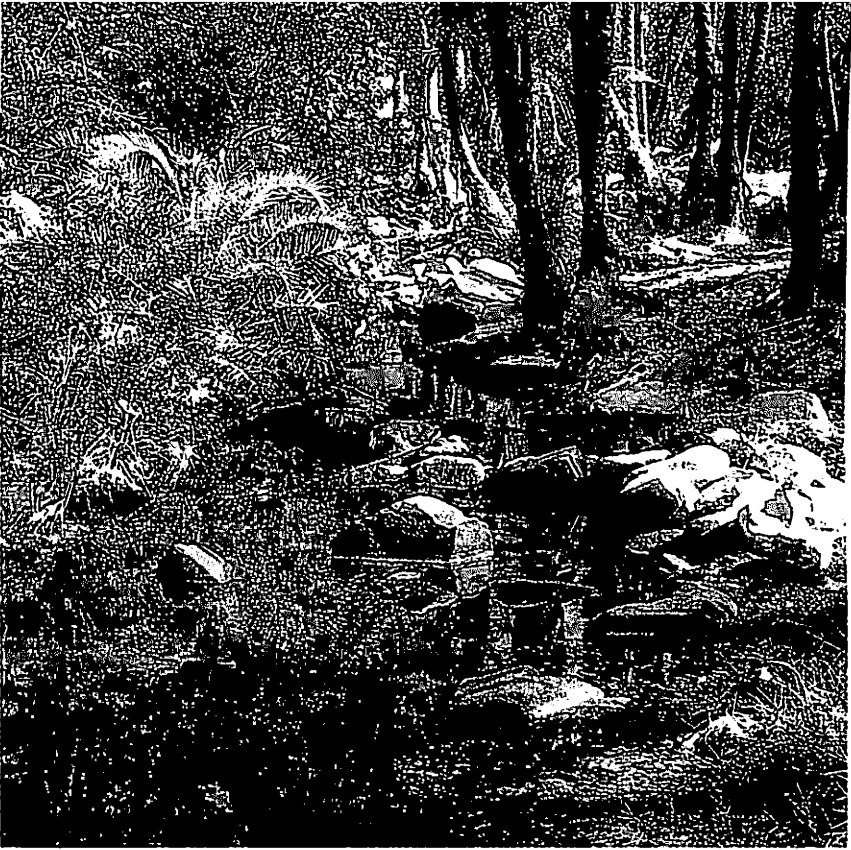
'Bhairudev People's Wildlife Sanctuary; is painted on the wall of the dam. "It is the expression of our love for wildlife," says Nanak Ram, who was hounded by the forest department for inciting villagers against the forest officials.

The people's sanctuary is the final expression of the anguish of the people living inside the reserve. Since it was declared a tiger reserve, villagers have been living at the mercy of forest officials. In 1985, TBS discovered that villagers were paying hefty bribes to forest officials as 'forest tax'. "Conservation was just a guise for the officials to exploit the villagers. When the villagers stopped giving bribes, the eviction threat was intensified." Remembers Rajendra Singh, Secretary of TBS.

As the villagers started protecting forests with TBS's support, the ecology started recovering. Wild animals started migrating from the Sariska forests to the regenerated forests. According to the villagers, there are three tigers and many Neelgai and deer in the sanctuary. The pugmarks vouch for it. "Our forests are totally protected, nobody disturbs the wildlife," says Dhanua Baba, the gram sabha head of Koyalala village.

The sanctuary is totally under control of the two villages. A strict code of conduct has been imposed – felling trees is banned, though villagers are allowed to lop branches for use. Grazing is restricted to a specified patch of the forest. Recently, the villagers dug a pond for the wild animals on the periphery of the sanctuary.

**Curtsey Down to Earth March, 15, 1999**



## BY WAY OF PROLOGUE ...

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“Who is to own all this ?” my father asked him...

“The people”, Ianto said... Only the people. God made the earth for *Man*, not for some of the men.”

“God made the coal, Dada”, Ianto said. “But man makes the money. *Pity, indeed, if God put his hand down through the clouds and gave us all a bill for the riches, He made for us and gave to us, free. What would happen, I wonder.*”

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The valley was part of us and we were part of the valley, *not one more than the other, never one without the other*. I was of the valley, and the valley was of me, and every blade of grass, and every stone, and every leaf of every tree, and every knob of coal or drop of water, or stick or branch or flower, or grain of pollen, or creature living, or dust in ground, all were of me as my blood, my bones, or the notions from my mind.”

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“Bad thoughts and greediness, Huw” my father said. “Want all, take all and give nothing. The world was made on a different notion. You will have everything from the ground if you will ask the right way...”

p. 38

How Green Was My Valley  
– RICHARD LLEWELLYN

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“Of course I do. I never forget anything, Tolgonai. I bear the traces of the centuries since the beginning of time. Not all history can be found in books, not all history has remained in the minds of people, but it is all within me. And your life, too, Tolgonai, is within me, in my heart. I hear you, Tolgonai. Today is your day.”

p. 167

Mother - Earth  
– Chinghiz AITMATOV

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# REGENERATING THE FOREST

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## THE TBS WAY

**M**an's relationship with the forest is very old : in a way, too old to be traced with exactitude and precision, dating back to the evolution and emergence of the *homo sapiens*, as man is known biologically. Even the archetypal memory fails us in charting this relationship signifying man's absolute dependence on the forest (another name for nature) as it was on the abundant and unconditional



*So dull and lifeless was the scenario when  
TBS started functioning*

bounty of the forest that man thrived – abode, food and water, so essential for his survival. The modern man cannot comprehend and realistically recreate those circumstances and that scenario, and hence his inability to relive and foster that idyllic relationship, symbiotic in essence as well as manifestations.

Man initially was not a social animal. The concept and organisation of society came much later. It is only now when man has acquired refined sensory perception and a much sharpened intellect, that the desire to trace the lineage (in familial terms) as well as to trace history (in racial terms) that he seeks to find some satisfaction by locating himself and mankind in one or the other glorious epoch of history (to be exact, in the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, or some other variety of folklore that has the semblance of history, even if the same is not designated as history in the modern connotation of the term). The attempt by different races and regions to locate themselves in the epics – the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* has to be seen and appreciated in this light. What is today known as Alwar (Sariska, Thanagazi, Virat Nagar region, although the last one forms part of the present-day Jaipur district, constituted what in the *Mahabharata* was known as the *Matsya Desh* (may be because of how it looked like, topographically). But all said, human history even in the Indian context did not begin with the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* which by any reckoning are of a very recent origin as compared to the evolution of man. No man-made thing, even if they are holy scriptures, can be as old as man, and as such cannot be a reliable take-off point for comprehending and formulating the relationship between man and his environs. The simple rationale for this lies in the fact that the epic-man or the folk-lore-man stands thousands of millenniums ahead of the

primitive man (and hence much more evolved, possessing immense knowledge and a well-shaped and sharpened intellect : society having not only come into existence, but having as much developed as tribal-feudal system could permit, with kings and queens and armies; marriage, and therefore also family as institutions had come to stay by then and social codes had been formulated, signifying a remarkable distance away from the primitive man who viewed everything that constituted his environs with a sense of awe and astonishment as also with a sense of being overwhelmed – failing to comprehend the causistry of the phenomena. Man began with viewing the forest as donor and giver, and himself as recipient and taker. That was the age of man's absolute and unqualified dependence on his environs for everything; a sort of animal relationship with nature (*a la* Wordsworth's evolution as nature poet) as he could create nothing, produce nothing. It lasted more or less through all stages of his development from discovery of fire, invention of the wheel, discovery of metals to invention of tools and taking to farming. There is no gainsaying that all this took many centuries for man to traverse as much, culminating in the formation of family and clans.

The initial sense of astonishment and awe that had overpowered man made him lend a sort of divinity to all that surrounded him – water, air, earth, sky, trees. This in turn gave him a sense of pride, treating himself as the child of Nature, born in the cradle of the forest and sustained by it. It was this divine-spiritual relationship with the forest **that made him partake of it, but at the same time kept him from its indiscriminate and senseless exploitation.** Exploitation of the resources (as we understand them today) beyond his basic needs was inconceivable to him. And the scale of his needs was so narrow that it could easily permit

him to survive without causing any injury whatsoever to the donors. This unwritten code of man's relationship with the forest runs even today among the forest-dwelling tribes, who by the mainstream people may be considered as backward, primitive, and what have you.

With the onward march of civilization, towns started coming into being, leading to creation of a gulf between the townsfolk (urban people) and the forest-dwellers, slowly but surely did it lead to a point when the urban people were labelled as civilized and cultured whereas the forest-dwellers were considered uncivilized and uncultured. It took quite a few centuries for the gulf to widen so much that the two were treated as irreconcilable entities. However, trees, if not the forest, continued to fascinate and give aesthetic pleasure to the townsfolk, as is evident from the town-planning of Harappa and Mohen-je-daro civilizations. It is only in the context of the immense value attached to trees that they find a respectable place in town planning, architecture, sculpture and even in engravings on coins, not to talk of *paean*s being sung for them in scriptures and other literature reflecting lofty imagination. In ancient Greece the best laurels and trophies awarded to the talented and the deserving used to be twigs of trees (a far cry from today's sensibility reflecting love for the metals - Gold, Silver, Bronze). That is only indicative of the cultural heights that had been scaled then, whence we are only sliding downwards. **And to falls there are no limits !**

During the period referred to above, *Bargad*, *Peepal*, *Aonla*, *Bilba* and *Shami* (*Khejri*) were accorded utmost piety, designating them as the abodes of deities. *Nem* was found to be an eminently health - friendly tree. In different parts of the country, there were quite a few other trees that were

accorded the same status : Imli and Saal, particularly the latter among the tribals of Middle India occupied the same pride of place. As a corollary, the concept of *Orans* and *Devbanis* (sacrosanct forest areas destroying which was codified as sinful) was translated into life-practice. These spiritual moral codes gradually became a powerful weapon for protecting and conserving the forest, and at the same time became the touchstone and guiding principle of an individual's social conduct. It needs no elaboration and confirmation that over the centuries, it was these codes that were largely responsible for conservation of the forest as well as maintenance of ecological balance.

All through the feudal social order and even during the initial years of the East India Company (which later acquired legitimacy as the British colonial rule) not only was the forest wealth exploited with moderation and temperance, the written-unwritten law, the traditional value systems and customs governing the relationships between the forest and the forest-dwellers were accorded due respect. Feudal lords and their kith and kin had laid the foundation of the *Dharari* system (caste/clan kinship with particular trees) which got extended to other segments of the society, ensuring thereby protection and conservation. On the other hand, the forest-dwellers firmly believed that the spirits of their ancestors lived in the trees. They also believed that the forest belonged to them, and anybody invading their *Sanctum Sanctorum* would naturally be viewed as an alien and enemy. It was this perception that conditioned and determined their attitude to outsiders, who they thought were only up to some mischief or the other, seeking to assault the sanctity and privacy of their sylvan abode. These people known as the tribals and considered backward, were touchy to the core on this subject, ready to retaliate if encroachments were sought to be made



or if attempts were made to dislocate the forest-dwellers. Their collective fury knew no abating even in the face of organised might. Rather than stealthily and cowishly moving away they would take to the arms - bow and arrow being their principal weapon. History of late 18th century and 19th century Middle India is replete with glorious cases of armed insurrection not only against the feudal lords, but also against the East India Company. At least in this one sphere the tribals exhibit a far more heightened consciousness than their so called mainstream counterparts. The more intimate the relationship with the environs, the greater the resistance to foul play with nature as also to encroachment and dislocation - in a nutshell, the greater the desire for peace, freedom and close relationship with the forest. But that also means self-abnegation to the point of limiting one's necessities to the bare minimum level that can be seen in relation to the forest-dwellers even today. But that later.

It was during the British regime that for the first time the forest started being exploited for timber for commercial purposes. Rulers' greed knows no limits, particularly if the exploitation of resources is instigated by interests other than those of satisfying the basic individual needs. That was the beginning of a vicious circle, initially modest but leading to wholesale felling of trees by the fifties of the 19th century for large scale construction of war material (ships and guns). This was as unprecedented as shocking. The enterprise launched in the interest of the state (be it war or development) was flawed and faulty in the sense that it just did not consider the human factor. It failed to take cognizance of the interests of those whose relationship with the forest dated back to times immemorial, and for whom the forest was not just a resource although it gave them almost all that they needed : for them the relationship was

spiritual, their ancestors heaving through the forest and supervising their well-being.

So when freedom came, a large part of forest had disappeared from the face (map) of the country. Mining had also contributed its share to the process of destruction of the forest : hills started being denuded. In the preceding two centuries clearing land for the purposes of cultivation had been undertaken on a massive scale, but that pertained mostly to the plains; but now hills and plateaus were also being assaulted, and in a big way at that. Quarrying stone for the construction industry made no small contribution to the hill-denuding exercise – superficially appearing to be need-based but in essence and reality causing unprecedented ecological degradation, putting big question mark after existence. Not only the faulty Government policy was responsible for the sorry state of affairs, but also the nexus that was emerging between the powers that be and the vested interests – the embryonic form of the mafiosi, now in **full bloom and all colours and true ferocity.**

To be able to understand today, we have to examine and analyse **yesterday**. On the morrow of Independence **Development** became the keyword : heavy industry, big dams, exploration and exploitation of mineral wealth, setting up of new industrial and other townships. All that sounded fine as it was advertised as harbinger of self-reliance (it being the essence of economic freedom which in turn is viewed as a prerequisite for actualization of political freedom). Looking back one comes to the inescapable conclusion that the model of development adopted for achieving the long-term objectives couldn't but fail to deliver the goods as the same has not been man-centric. For being man-centric, **development** had to take care of the aspirations of all men.

Even if we choose not to use the Orwellian dictum : *all men are equal, but some men are more equal than the others*, as to some it might sound as vulgar lampooning, but we cannot but observe that in the wake of freedom the signals that got sent and registered signified that **whatever God had created (or nature offered) was not for all men** but some of the men, and hence the unprecedented chaos and mishmash of priorities and goals. In view of the vast cultural and ethnic diversity as also of horrendous disparity, no development plans and schemes could be uniform or identical : traditions, ethno-cultural beliefs, area-specificity, community life-styles in no way are too insignificant considerations to be ignored. But sadly, that is exactly what happened. And it is not accidental that in one of **Habeeb Tanvir's** plays, even the benign-looking construction of a road is viewed by the victims (**not beneficiaries, mind you!**) as a tool of oppression and torture as it not only displaces some people, but also brings on their threshold prowlers out to vulgarise their cultural ethos. You have to have trees felled as you need timber for the construction industry and for the paper industry. O.K. so far, but couldn't you plan and project the needs and in advance take measures to ensure planting of trees in a phased manner to be commensurate with the projected needs. That is happening elsewhere in the world. At many places. That could take care of meeting the needs as also ensure that delicate ecological balance was not disturbed. Plus, such an exercise could show some respect for the sentiments of those people, for whom the forest or trees are not a mere resource just like any other.

The forest laws enacted after Independence, rather than being progressive not only in relation to the customs and conventions evolved over the centuries but also in relation to the laws enacted during the British period, are patently

regressive. One very small, yet very significant, example is that of **Orans** and **Devbanis** which had been decreed to be unassailable even in the princely and British regions. Ironically, no forest legislation in Independent India has cared to incorporate such a provision. This has adversely affected the forest-consciousness of the people. In a way it has also shattered their age-old belief that causing even a slight injury to trees would bring down evil on the perpetrators, as a consequence of divine wrath. Alas, not only the forests have been vandalised, poor people have been robbed of their belief, too. And it was this belief that made them care for the trees as much as for their offspring.

The Sariska region in particular and the Alwar region in general, specific to the purposes of our study, might have been a dense forest during the epic period, but there are evidences in the form of relics of *Buddhism* and *Jainism* (the former in Viraatnagar and the latter in Tijara) that amply indicate to flourishing civilizations having been in existence here during the two milleniums preceding independence : cities, towns and principalities having emerged in the mean time, naturally resulted in deforestation of the plains. Denuding the hills is another story, and that started after independence was achieved. Prior to that only a few mining exercises had been undertaken in the Thanaghazi region on a considerably limited level. That could not have caused as much harm to the forest, as was done later. Over the centuries the percentage of people living in the forest got negligible in relation to the total population. And since nobody other than the forest-dweller himself comprehends the essence of the significance of the forest, nor has the commitment to its conservation and preservation, the forest was turned into an object of game (hunting) or a vehicle of extracting as much mineral wealth as possible. The forest having been

declared public property (which is just a euphemism for Government property), the gains that accrued to the Government by way of contracts and leases (even if we choose to unsee for a moment the socio-cultural-environmental cost) were nothing as compared to the gains that accrued to the legitimate contractors and leasees and also to the small time Mafia. The official forest-approach (as well as perception) as formulated 1955-onwards bears enough testimony to the short sightedness of the powers that be, and also to the nexus between politics and vested interests. Sariska which earlier was the game-reserve of the Prince of Alwar, during this time went a long way, its status changing from Reserved Forest to National Park, and finally to Tiger Project : from game reserve to a tiger project may be something that environmentalists and wildlife-lovers may find gratifying, but more often than not adjectives and fancy names mislead. The facts related to the wild animals, the forests as well as the forest-dwellers, in a tell-tale manner, reflect a fate that couldn't have been **sorrier**. Apart from the flawed policy, the conduct of the forest officials, of guards in particular, epitomises the pithy folk saying to the effect that the **fence swallows the harvest**. What is true of macro political *modus operandi* is true also of the micro forest *modus operandi*. Like those entrusted with the destiny of the nation and yet busy looting it, the forest officials too are hand in glove with those who are minting money unmindful of/unconcerned with the damage they are causing to the forest. It is a sad reflection on the state of affairs that the forest officials today are by and large behaving more irresponsibly and self-seekingly than their counterparts of princely and colonial times. In end number of cases they have been found instrumental in covering up deforestation drives as well as in bringing to book the **innocent forest-dwellers, who by conviction and life-practice are protectors of trees and the forest.**



At times, the forest officials, in order to show how conscientious and dutiful they are, lay hands on the daily wage-earners, start proceedings against them thereby shielding the real culprits. **Thus offence is taken cognizance of, and at the same time the offender is allowed to go scot-free.**

The first assaults were made on the forest that were in the vicinity of the Alwar town and small towns coming up on the State Highway because of the easy accessibility and transportation-friendliness. This resulted in denuding of the hills and the plateaus. Quarrying and crushing of stone made forest regeneration (naturally or through collective human endeavour) almost impossible. This is how the hills around Alwar, Ramgarh, Rajgarh, part of Thanaghazi and along the State Highway between Alwar and Bhartrihari were denuded and robbed of the luscious green cover that was a feast to eyes until the beginning of the seventies. Some of these sites constitute the Sariska Buffer Zone. From the Buffer Zone the movement naturally had to be towards the core zone. Tree-felling contracts and mining leases, granted without caring for what policy or constitutional principle they were violating, resulted in further worsening and deterioration of the situation, so much so that the inhabitants (God knows since when) of the core zone, who were witness to legal and also illegal activities going on in the area, were declared illegitimate dwellers, off and on to be threatened with eviction. **Isn't that height of cussed, callous and inhuman treatment?** Nobody even tried to understand and appreciate the quality, nature and character of the ties between the forest-dwellers and the forest. This was the minimum that ought to have been done, for these are the people who, deprived of all the gains of the much talked-about development (health, education, gainful employment,

transport, and what have you), despite all odds, do not wish to leave the place. They have their roots there, and are afraid that uprooted from here they would become rootless. **Only those equipped with the right sensibility and sensitivity can appreciate the linkages between roots and tradition and tradition and history.** Those fine-tuned to globalisation, and cut-throat and competitive consumerism, may care two hoots for roots, tradition and history, but it is **an incontrovertible fact that roots give you an identity and a sense of belonging.** What is incomprehensible for the representatives of the so-called educated modern urban society, is a simple truth of life - a conviction that keeps them from breaking down suffering yet braving the vicissitudes of sequestered life.

Maybe those who had a vested interest in Operation **Deforestation** had not even dreamt of a time and a *situation* when denuding of hills and plateaus would result in scanty rainfall and scarcity of water. **These people can hardly be credited with the understanding of cause and effect theory; one thing leading to another, and that to still another, the effect acting as cause for something else.** It must have been beyond their comprehension, or even concern, that **massive deforestation drive would lead to the underground water table going deep down, and the brunt of nature's wrath would have to be borne by those living in the vicinity - be it the core zone or the buffer zone.** These people in most cases subsisted on animal husbandry and in stray cases on restricted agriculture. The exploiters of the forest belonged to towns, and what is interesting is that while all this was going on, **the urban intellectuals (writers, artists) and also the press known for their social concerns and conscience, did not even care to know what was what, and therefore did not**

react the way it was expected of them. It is likely that since their lives had in no way been affected by the havoc or its consequences, they could afford to sit pretty. And a few of them who now and then voiced their minds seemed to justify everything in the name of development, with a capital D - wood and timber is needed for construction, mineral wealth is needed for strengthening the economy, quarries and mines are needed for providing employment, and all sorts of sensible - sounding things, yet all the same devoid of any understanding of the real causistry of things. They did not even know that they were advocating the interest of those whom they professed to oppose tooth and nail and thus establish a new social order.

It may appear a bit archaic and out of date that it was the strength of the myths and beliefs of the tradition-bound forest-dwelling people that determined their minimum need-based drawing on the forest produce, consuming anything beyond which was considered sinful. Today when we are busy exploding all types of myths and forsaking all beliefs, all this may sound rubbish, but the fact is - and it is amply substantiated historically and anthropologically - that these myths, metaphors and beliefs were actually responsible for laying the foundation of a temperate life style that was inevitable for natural equilibrium.

Some of the myths were of course exploded albeit in a negative way. The enemies of the forest (even *Orans* and *Devbanis*) knew it fully well that they did not have to fear any secular reprisals or divine wrath, and they went ahead with their nefarious designs like all those whose conscience does not prick. But since the offenders were not made to suffer any consequences - no divine punishment was meted

out to them - doubt started raising its head in the minds and hearts of the simple rural folk, it pertained to their beliefs about divine justice. Poverty and destitution made some of them follow suit to be able to make both ends meet. The petty forest officials (guards and the like) were always prepared to unsee such activities provided they got their share - 2 kg ghee after every buffalo and Rs. 51/-. Not everybody could afford it, and the victims of the newly born greed could not risk giving offence to their brethren.

Normally crying starts when the milk has already spilt. These people were no exception. Water became the most scarce commodity - not a drop for humans and the cattle folk alike. Not being nomadic, they could not start thinking in terms of long term migration. And there were hardly any greener pastures in the vicinity to extend them a cordial welcome. But the clamouring was so intense that they started looking around - how people in similar conditions were coping with life, and in this process they came across some very inspiring real life stories, but that will have to wait until the second part of this booklet. When the going gets tough, the tough get going - so goes the saying, but sadly enough, they were only tough enough to bear the slings and buffets of fate, but not tough enough to act on their own. Emaciated - physically, economically and even organisationally - people can act only if some role models are offered to them, or else there is always the hazard of them complaining yet cowering in the face of gang-up of Government agencies and private vested interest, determined to exploit all the resources in one go, even if it sounds as stupid as slaying the hen that lays golden eggs.

And this is what the paradigm of development is all about : a model adopted by the Government that swears by

Gandhi's name, yet it is not a Gandhian model which would have been motivated by a *Vaishnav* resolve to eliminate the causes of *Paraayee Peer* (agony and anguish of others - the non-self). As a matter of fact, this model is not, by any stretch of imagination, a man-centric model. For, the first prerequisite of such a model would be that plans, schemes and projects be formulated keeping in view the area-specific reality and aspirations of the people who lend meaning to that area. **If man gets hurt, if man is injured and that too in the name of development, then the quickest conclusion one arrives at is that the fruits of development are to go the way of some particular class or group of people.** Mining and industrialisation (installation/setting of industry) may be essential for development, but **more important perhaps is to try and know as to what its impact would be on the environment, ecology and more importantly on the people of that particular region - be it Sariska or tribal Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh or West Bengal.** Volumes can be written about inhuman and anti-democratic cases of large scale displacement of people and of vandalising their life styles and cultural ethos, denigration of their faiths and beliefs - all in the name of development.

Attempts at undermining people's relationship with **land, water and forest** are indicative not only of inhuman and insensitive attitude but also of a brazen violation of the Directive Principles as enshrined in the constitution, safeguarding which is the duty of the State. No policy statement or Act can override the Directive Principles. **The right to live is more fundamental than any other right and therefore should have precedence over any other consideration.**



During the last two decades or so, at the global level an unprecedented concern has been expressed for excessively degraded environmental and ecological status. It has naturally compelled the governments everywhere to pause, brood and rethink over the prevalent development strategies. The hazards of global heating and ruptured ozone layer assumed nightmarish proportions. In such a scenario a good number of organisations came up in the developed countries, and soon funds were created which made public their commitment to encourage and fund the attempts and endeavours of governmental agencies as well as Voluntary Agencies (VAs) and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) espousing the cause of forest regeneration and maintaining environmental equilibrium. In certain countries even political parties (like the Green Party in Germany) were formed with such objectives constituting the core of their socio-political agenda. The climate created by such organisations and political parties was appropriate for building and exerting some sort of moral pressure, while at the same time offering them incentives by way of massive financial assistance, on the governments of developing countries. This newly created climate also contributed to acceleration of the process of sensitising urban people the world over, who during the past few decades had grown indifferent and apathetic to whatever was happening around, with regard to an unprecedented insane exploitation of the natural resources – both on the surface as also inside the womb of the mother earth. In fact, this was the scenario in which a host of NGOs came into existence in India; organisations wedded to basing their activities on the traditional wisdom of the people and relying on the community - participation potential in the stupendous task of management and conservation of land, water and forests. This, these organisations perceived as crucial to the much talked about (also as much abused and misrepresented)

concept of sustainability of development. The coming up of NGOs (the term may be new and its currency, recent) is not a new phenomenon in our country, the only difference being that earlier they called themselves voluntary agencies. What marks an outstanding differences is the fact that the earlier versions lacked the sharp edge and thrust - force that their new *avatars* display in abundance, and it is this new dimension that not only makes their presence felt but also endears them to the people. Also while the VAs aimed at doing good for the people on their own and as per their perception of the needs, the NGOs (the genuine ones) seek to involve people, make them feel the need and then have them to participate in the whole exercise - from planning to implementation. That is actually the surest way to ensure sustainable development - that is the one that can be sustained even after the exit of the NGOs from the particular region and specific activity.

The Government of India has not thus far undertaken a serious review of its development strategies as could lead to reformulation of the direction of development as such. But the moral pressure exerted by the group of experts and specialists along with the **tempting carrot of funding and financial support offered by the international donor agencies** has created a situation where environment and ecology have perforce come to the fore. An unbiased assessment of the apparently changed thrust would leave no one in doubt about its content : at best, these attempts amount to no more than window-dressing. **It is not difficult to comprehend why government efforts are so lifeless or soulless : the near - total absence of political will is the principal cause.** And hence, the development plans and schemes **whose focal concern is not man.** If a policy here and a scheme there were designed to the contrary, the

half-hearted measures taken, in fact defeat the very purpose for the fulfillment of which these were initiated. It is only in view of this that the **all-pervading attitude bordering on cynicism** can be understood - **nothing is possible in this country or everything goes here**. In short, the above scenario, by itself so bleak and frustrating, has resulted in the emergence of an unforeseen by-product – coming into being of action groups and NGOs that are convinced that such a thought and behaviour-process at the ruling level can only prove fatal, and the voodoo has to be broken, which is possible only if start looking for the justification and rationale of every move only in the context of man, the ultimate beneficiary, and thereby seek to empower him to the extent of making him self-reliant : **so strong and confident that the community feels inspired enough to decide what is best for it, in terms of its physical, natural and spiritual interests and concerns**. Man becoming the yardstick and touchstone of things will naturally hit hard and stop the process of alienation between the so-called welfare schemes and their supposed beneficiaries. It is not incidental, therefore, that the deep dark pall of despondency that over the years had enveloped the psyche of **the disadvantaged, the deprived and the marginalised**, had suddenly started showing some holes through which light has started trickling, giving some hope to those who have so very often been cheated, and who seem to belong to a country much less developed than India, *Hindustanva*, in the words of *Dr. Brahma Dev Sharma*.

The programmes launched by the governments for the supposed amelioration of the people's living conditions are hardly ever area-specific. Each government boasts of incurring increased expenditure on education, health and other related amenities. But sadly enough, in the event of

the potential and target beneficiaries not coming forward to benefit from these programmes and schemes, hardly ever has an attempt been made to learn from them as to what prevents or stops them from coming forth. The governmental perception has been so much at variance with the people's perception, that things seem to have topsy-turvied to such an extent that governmental priorities appear divorced from the ground reality. In a country where safe potable water is still beyond the reach of thousands of villages (in Rajasthan alone), and demand for water, sounds like crying for the moon, it is time that the job of determining the priorities was taken to the grassroots level, and the people there were involved in a sincere heart-to-heart dialogue. That the people have lost all faith in the efficiency of the system should be recognised as a fact of life. Dialogue can break the ice. Then the people can tell you why they do not send their children to school, and rather prefer to send them to work that fetches a paltry amount of money. Study of the real life conditions of the deprived masses from close quarters can point to the error of the entire planning and development endeavour, which is usually surrounded by fanfare and ritual. The reason for the success of certain endeavours catalysed by Action Groups or NGOs lies in the fact, more than in anything else, that through direct and man-to-man contact with people, they could make a clean and clear causal analysis of the reality that obtained in particular areas, bring to the fore **the factors responsible for what** things are : clarity about the **whats** and the **whys** can easily take you to the *hows* if you are really committed to the long over-due task of social transformation. **And no social transformation can ever take place, nor has it taken place anywhere else in the world, without the active and whole-hearted participation and support of the masses.** Legislation and ordinances (decrees and commands) may have their value

but only upto a particular limit, and this limit may vary from society to society, and people to people. And things may go for the worse if there is credibility-gap between the legislators and the people, between the rulers and the ruled. **And confusion is worse confounded in our country as the people's representatives (legislators) do not really represent and share the cause of the constituency as much as the perception and interests of the political party they are members of, or maybe as much as their own individual vested interests.** This, on the surface, may appear a bit out of place in the present context, but dig a bit deeper and you will find it is not. The crisis of faith in the system and its managers, and the sapped self-confidence of the people are the two sides of the same coin. Any agency (governmental, non-governmental, philanthropic or the one based on community initiative), with redoubtable bonafides can seek to win the people over to its action-plan. If such issues (like forest regeneration, creation of water-harvesting structures and so on) are being addressed, as do not immediately catch the fancy of the people, **it is all the more essential (even imperative) that the suffering people are convinced or persuaded to believe that things can and will change only if they shed the diffidence and start seeing where their community interest lies.** Education, health-care, water-soil-forest management, economic well-being will then automatically come on their agenda. And from this will spring community empowerment essential for giving a befitting blow to the apathy of those in power, who while pursuing anti-people, anti-nature policies are yet masquerading as well-wishers of the people. If these are (Central and State) governments of the people, for the people and by the people, the basic touch-stone will have to be such individual interests as do in no way clash with the interests of the community. **And that will be the acid test**

**to determine whether a particular policy is pro-people or anti-people.** Exploitation of natural resources (be it in the name of development, or what have you) therefore ought to be justified, or condemned on the ground as to who is benefiting from it or whether it is to the detriment not only of the majority of people but also the future of mankind. **This calls for a fresh look at the development-model as well as the priorities adopted, to realise the model-goals.**

## II

It is in the light and the context of the aforementioned scenario that the role of an Action Group or the nature, quality and impact of people's participation can be fruitfully seen and evaluated. These things cannot be presented generally as, more often than not, doing so leads to abstraction which is likely to quarrel with our perception and empirical evidence. **Sweeping generalisations are hardly ever a substitute for a concrete, real-life situation manifesting experiment and result.** It has become all the more essential today when we are faced with the phenomenon of mushroom growth of NGOs, all swearing by people, their participation and their real development as distinct from the model pursued by the Government.

Tarun Bharat Sangh, founded in 1975, came to **Bhikampura-Kishori** (Thanagazi, Alwar) in 1985. Its founders were inspired by a zeal which could as well be dubbed as craziness, for they had chosen to launch their work in an area which had long been designated as **dark zone**, and consequently given up by the Government and other development agencies. All the same, such zeal and idealism, however rare a sight it might be, acts as the

springboard for achieving the **impossible** (yes, the word exists, Napoleon's dictum notwithstanding).

Talking to the people of the area, quite a good number of whom have now become activists/volunteers dedicated to the trend-reversal campaign, and you'll find that until nearly ten years back they were convinced that **they had to learn to live with the increasing scarcity of water and accept the process of denuding of the hills and large scale deforestation drives : these two, in fact, had been taken by the local inhabitants as irreversible trends, something that could not be fought, nor wished away.** And TBS too, in its turn, while launching the construction of water harvesting structures, did not talk tall and refrained from making forecasts about or projections of the likely impact of the exercise it undertook in collaboration with the suffering people : I mean, not beyond the creation of situation where water would be available for most part of the year. Maybe, even TBS had not been able to visualise what next or as a consequence of availability of water. **Be it Deori or Gopalpura or Suratgarh, visibility of water over a relatively long duration started refreshing people, clearing away the mist from before their eyes, and setting them to start thinking and apprehending the implications of what had happened. One pinches and pricks oneself to be doubly sure of what one sees,** because it is something that had long been ruled out. During the first year of operations and success, TBS appeared to be taking stock of the changing scenario, but soon raised the slogan of protecting *Jal, Jangal and Gochar* (water, forest and pasture), inspiring the new found beneficiaries to rally round it. The rustic folk took no time to recognise the significance of the slogan as it amounted to ensuring their well-being, on being translated into practice. Between July

1986 and August 1987, lot of effort was put into mobilising people on these key issues; **Gram Swaraj awareness-building campaign, catchment area development campaign, and Plant and Protect Trees Campaign** constituted the various loops of the action-chain. This in effect was like laying the foundation of a quiet but radical change. Our experience shows that all attempts at bringing about radical change have to face resistance, even opposition. Well-entrenched vested interests tried to put as many hurdles as they could - in the name of legality and otherwise, to the extent of trying to get inhabitants of twentytwo villages evicted, and month-long nocturnal hurling of stones at the houses in **Deori** village. In situations of such harassment two things are likely to happen : **either lose hope, give up the struggle and sit quiet, or stop caring for the consequences and renew the determination to fight to the finish.** It augurs well that the victims of administrative callousness and the highhandedness of the forest guards, inspired and supported by TBS chose to adopt the latter course. But that did not signal that the end of the people's misery and sufferings was imminent : on the contrary it only meant that with every success that the people posted, there would be newer challenges. The villagers succeeded in having the forest Post at Deori officially removed, and they took upon themselves the responsibility of protecting the forest and the wild life in their vicinity. A month later in August 1988 they succeeded in having another forest Post removed, this time at Haripura. **The then District Collector of Alwar took these supposedly drastic measures on being convinced that the forest guards were in fact doing what they should not have been doing (which essentially means they were not doing what they should have been doing, and what they were being paid for).** This provided some respite to the villagers, who in



collaboration with TBS gradually took to more and more tree-plantation. Not even one full year had elapsed when in June 1989, even planting trees was considered and declared an offence. A fine of Rs. 4,950/- was slapped on TBS by the Government of Rajasthan. And for what offence? *Lo and behold*, the state government found TBS guilty of planting trees where they should not have been planted. That marked the beginning of a struggle - a brand new type of struggle where the people declared that **“planting trees is our birthright. And we shall have it”**. It is a measure of the indomitable will of the people as well as TBS, as also a measure of the indigenous wisdom of the illiterate masses that **plantation of trees on a massive scale was taken up not only with a view to replenishing the depleted and depleting greenery but also to combating increasing soil erosion**. Soil erosion assumes the form of an inescapable tragedy when trees are felled and hills are denuded. A CHIPKO movement, therefore, was launched in the Sadiyavas Catchment area by the Gopalpura *Gram Sabha*.

It was in this backdrop that Gopalpura became a battleground. Under the very nose of the administration, large scale felling of trees was undertaken, and the resisting inhabitants of the village were sought to be threatened and intimidated. Efforts to divide the villagers were also made, but failed. **The brave resistance staged by the villagers and the exemplary unity forged by them was indicative/demonstrative of some sort of divine/spiritual motivation and inspiration**. Nothing else can explain the firm resolve of the local people in an unprecedented setting of **unequal battle**: the administration possessing immense prohibitive and intimidating force on one side, and unarmed and peacefully resisting rustic folk on the other. This incident

caused considerable anxiety among environmentalists when the print media brought it to the fore and under sharp focus.

Eminent environmentalist **Chandi Prasad Bhatt** and well-known journalist **Prabhash Joshi** intervened. And as a consequence of this intervention, the then District Collector of Alwar tendered apology for all that had happened on account of the hostility shown by the administrative machinery. This led to melting of the tension that had brewed over a prolonged period of time. To generate understanding and good will, a convention was held. It was a very largely attended good will get-together. The District Collector put on record his sense of appreciation of the good and valuable work being done by the villagers and TBS.

With a view to sensitising the people in far-flung areas to the value and significance of the protection and regeneration of the forest, a *Padyatra* was undertaken. More and more people rallied round the slogans; **planting trees is our birth right, and let's protect trees and plant more trees**. This amounted to a new spirit on the model of our Freedom Movement. Emotive exhortations and the success stories of **Deori** and **Gopalpura** enthused the people immensely. The *Padyatra* lasted ten days. On the *Rakshabandan* day, it culminated, with men and women tying *Rakhees* around trees. This amounted to modifying the symbolism of *Rakhi*. Traditionally the sister (desirous of ensuring brotherly protection ties *Rakhi* around the brother's wrist. Here it was reversed, signifying the protector's will and readiness to assure the trees that they would not be allowed to be felled down. **This gesture was not a mere ritual. In fact it was proclamation of a new sensibility :** a sort of reawakening that signified recalling the long forgotten wisdom which people possessed since times

immemorial, and which they in the mean time had forgotten as lust, and in some cases, helplessness had put blinkers before their eyes.

For TBS also it was a new beginning. New in the sense that 1989 onwards, **all their efforts of creating water harvesting structures were coupled with a new thrust and focus on the urgency of forest regeneration.** In February 1990, a water and forest conservation convention was held at the TBS campus, *Bheekampura*, known as *Tarun Ashram*. The eminent villagers wedded to this cause were honoured and felicitated.

**If people are sufficiently and appropriately motivated to champion causes that do not directly and immediately concern them, or that could benefit them not right now but in distant future, they show ample ingenuity by devising hitherto unknown norms and forms of environment-building for translating their dreams and ideas into action.** This is exactly what happened in 1991. From January 14 to June 21 that year a Forest protection and conservation *Yajna* was held under the joint auspices of the Sariska Zone inhabitants and TBS. It was a unique *yajna*, unheard of elsewhere. Forest officials also participated in it with equal fervour and enthusiasm. Two momentous decisions were taken unanimously : **Seeking to have the mining activities and operations stopped in the Sariska Zone, and initiating a dialogue with the forest officials for effecting joint management of the protected forest area.** This in effect was a plea for joint natural resource management, which can be the only effective measure in the crisis-situation the country is faced with. **Without seeking to involve the inhabitants of the area no government can ensure proper and sane**

**management of natural resources.** Making the people themselves responsible for the up-keep of things is a sure way of ensuring fault-free combat with those responsible for accelerating the rate of ecological degradation. It has to be noted in the light of the experience and evidence obtained from all forest areas **that most interested in the protection, conservation and regeneration of the forest in any part of the country are the people who live in those environs, for the simple reason that it is they whose very existence is conditioned, determined and governed by the nature and character of the forest wealth surrounding them.** It is probably as recognition of this fact and phenomenon that even in the official forest policy perspective of the Government of India these days, the concept and practice of joint management are being sought to be underlined. **Such belated reading of the writing on the wall by the Government contrasted with the farsightedness and initiative of the rustic people speaks volumes for both parties, without any elaboration or commentary from any quarter.**

With a view to motivating people towards forest-regeneration and also regarding dedication and excellence in this domain, TBS instituted *Paryavaran Premi* (Friend of Environment) award (drawing from the fund created on the strength of the money received by TBS with the culture award made to TBS). On October 2, 1990 five *Gram Sabhas* were honoured with the *Paryavaran Premi* award. These awards may not mean much in terms of money, but they without any doubt inspire others to emulate these new role-models. Even if the life practice of everybody doesn't undergo a qualitative change, the change can at least be felt in as much as this they are sensitised enough not to harm the forest. And in any case there are some who move ahead of

others in terms of perception and commitment, and thus goes on the chain of people involving themselves neck-deep in the forest conservation effort. In **Deori, Gopalpura and Bhaonta-Kolyala** this process could be witnessed even in the early stages of the regeneration effort. It goes without saying that creation of water-harvesting structures gave the local people hope for a brighter future, and it was this hope that made them realise where they had gone wrong earlier. **This in turn made them commit themselves to making their environs greener, thereby reducing the chances of recurrence of the calamities that had in the past made their life miserable and unbearable.** The TBS effort assumed the nature and character of a campaign, albiet a localised one, which in not a very distant future was destined to transcend the boundaries of the district.

In this process, quite a few things of historic significance came to the fore. These could become a model for other places where a similar effort is on the anvil :

- (i) Once motivated, people could be trusted, and entrusted with the task of planting trees and protecting them;
- (ii) People could happily take upon themselves the responsibility of protection, conservation and regeneration of the forest if they were left to themselves - that is, with no forest functionaries there to defeat their endeavour by instigating the anti-forest and self seeking elements to fell trees and thus earning a quick buck;
- (iii) People could be motivated to become partners in the joint management effort, if the forest authorities could ensure re-orientation of their ground-level

functionaries, and place such functionaries as are inclined towards discharging their duties in consonance with the role expected of them.

The very fact that despite removal of forest posts from quite a few places, the hills are getting greener and the forest denser, is ample testimony to people's growing concern for the success of the forest regeneration campaign. **It is normally assumed that agriculturists and those whose subsistence depends on the cattle folk cannot be drawn into a campaign/movement that does not directly have a bearing on their livelihood and welfare.** People in the Thanagazi area have disproved this assumption. Water harvesting structures may have fascinated them for the immediate gains, but what about the anti-mining campaign and the forest-regeneration campaign (Padayatras and conventions included)? There is considerable factual evidence to the effect **that they contributed more than their share to the success of these programmes by their physical participation, at times even neglecting the day-to-day chores that could benefit them instantaneously.** The role of the non-statutory *Gram Sabhas* and *Mahila Mandals* can also be seen in this process. The progressive and militant role of these agencies, formed and organised on the strength of people's spontaneous and collective will, also indicates to the future course of things, particularly in the domain of Natural Resource Management as also with regard to evolution of social accountability and a new cultural ethos among the villagers. It will be profitable also to examine the functioning of these *Gram Sabhas* that are, more or less in all active villages, trying to revive and revitalise the *Dasturs* (traditional customs and practices pertaining to forest conservation and communal well-being) and apply the same to the changed and changing scenario symbolising the new

challenges emanating from the course of the **development-model of a new civilizational order, of which they are victims, and not beneficiaries.**

It is largely owing to the new sense of duty towards the environs, evolved during the last ten years or so of active collaboration and partnership between TBS and the rural folk that a good amount of regeneration is visible even at places that had fallen prey to the evil designs of forest contractors, lower level forest functionaries, and the mine-owners, all operating under the direct and not so direct patronage of the Government and administrative officials; an insane pattern of exploitation of the natural resources by self-seeking capitalists and their henchmen, and greedy and short-sighted Government, neither bothering about the inevitable fall-out of such operations. Wild Lifers in their own cynically mysterious way aggravated the situation demanding eviction of people to ensure and safeguard survival of the wild animals.

An experiment made by the people themselves, at their own initiative, at Bhaonta calls the hoax of the Wild Lifers' perception, and at the same time **underlines the age-old and time-tested experience that there is no contradiction whatsoever in the proximity of wild life and human beings.** They laid the foundation of a People's Wild life Sanctuary. Spread over a hills tract of 12 square kms, the Bhairundeo people's wild life sanctuary, is a pacesetter, unheard of in any part of the vast country that India is. **Golden Bird** is the other name given to it by the local people - maybe by way of referring to the glorious past of the country, which the world-over was known as a golden bird. The freshly revived *Dasturs* helped a lot in the arduous task of protecting and conserving, as also further regenerating

the forest, Today not only wish green environs can be seen, but also panthers, leopards, antelopes, rabbits, jackals, deers and stags can be seen moving inside the sanctuary and without any apprehension. At times these wild animals come close to the farms, neither harming anybody nor being harmed. **This may sound like a leaf out of some fairy tale or fable, but isn't truth at most times stranger than fiction.**

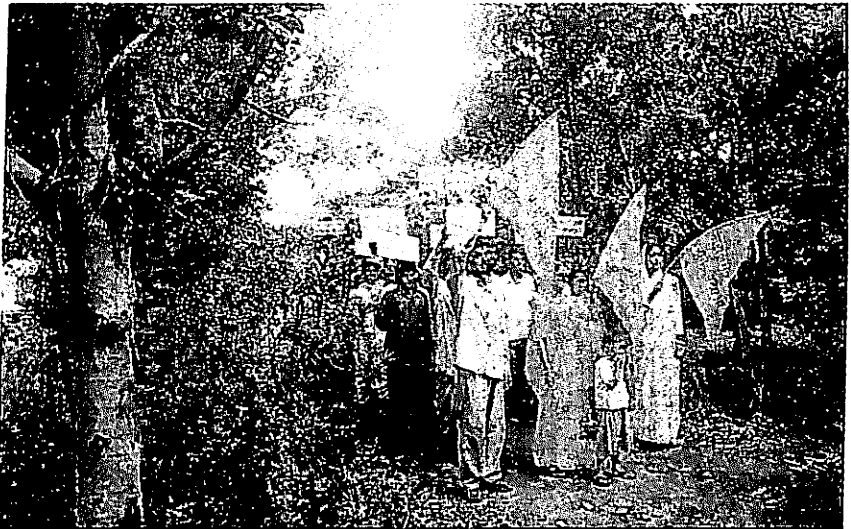
The message that this purely local initiative sends, and which ought to be received, registered and respected is that the prevalent notions about natural resources, their management and ownership have to be changed, giving place to such notions as are conducive to creating a sense of belonging in the minds and hearts of the people. Saying that people belong to their surroundings would amount to saying nothing. These people in fact, are rooted here so deeply in the philosophical – cultural sense. Or else, there can be no other explanation for their being stayput, all odds notwithstanding, and never even casually entertaining the idea of permanently shifting to some greener pastures. With gradual re-charging of wells, whose ultimate culmination has been, unforeseen though, the rejuvenation of six rivulets, the people of this zone have put their heads together, recorded the essence of the good old days and facilitated by TBS devised ways and means of combating the recent negative trends. They could see linkages between ecological degradation and their misery and destitution. The new found availability of water (rising water table and almost perennially flowing rivulets) undoing part of the damage done, gave not only a sense of confidence and hope but also a sense of direction and commitment. It should not be seen as an attempt at exaggerating or eulogising the rustic effort. On the contrary, facts speak for themselves. Constituting vigilance teams –



two persons to take charge once a fortnight - has gone a long way in conservation and preservation of the regenerated forest, as well as thwarting the clandestine attempts of the enemies of the forest thriving on tree-felling. It is worth noting here that any amount of tree planting by any agency - Governmental or non-governmental (TBS in tandem with people has planted more than four lakh trees) would have had no effect but for the people's willingness and readiness to make all-out effort to see that the trees survived. Another notable feature is much higher survival rate here in relation to the plantation undertaken by this forest functionaries under various aid programmes.

TBS over the past few years has evolved a multi-pronged strategy from achieving its long - term objectives that encompass the trinity of *Jal, Jangal and Zameen* (Water, forest and land). Launching of water harvesting structures was strengthened by indigenous wisdom. The essential tenor of the enterprise was collective (community-based). Protection, conservation and regeneration of the forest were also within the limits of manageability, once the need was transformed into a felt need and related cultural ethos which had been submerged under the sand of oblivion, particularly during the preceding fifty years of growth of self-seeking (dis)value system, water-related action and an all-sided dialogue has proved eminently useful. **Dialogue with the people has raised their status from that of beneficiaries (takers) to that of activists and actors in the exceptional drama of transcending short term personal gains** (they thus demonstrate that they are worthy of being respected more than the so-called mainstream people who, confounded and way-laid by the allurements of consumerism, have no time to stand and stare, and who can not look beyond their nose. This same

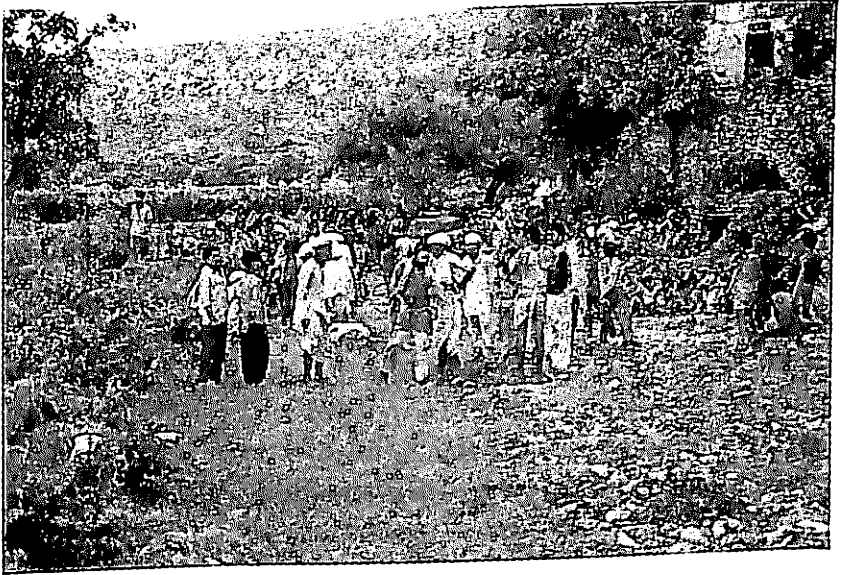
dialogue is laying the foundation of a cultural resurgence : the nearly forgotten concept and practice of DHARARI (caste-elan relationship with trees, rooted in the resolve and commitment to protect particular trees. To say that over the years this lofty resolve had degenerated into a mere ritual, the relationship with particular trees recalled and observed in a ceremonious manner only on certain occasions like childbirth or marriage in a family, is not wide-off the mark. Seeking to revive it would have meant no more than trying to glue back the dead, dry and fallen leaves onto the branches of the trees. Dialogue paved the way for its renewal in these complex and much too changed times. The significance of what happened (was achieved) at the TBS Ashram in the first week of December 1997 is yet to be comprehended and grasped beyond this field area. The decision unanimously arrived at a convention of activists of Alwar, Jaipur, Dausa and Sawai Madhopur



*Villagers campaigning for conservation of forest and protection of wild life*

districts is nothing short of an epoch making one : rather than relating to specific trees and resolving to protect them, today's circumstances hearty welcome to village-tree relationship. It needs to be underlined here that the credit for arriving at such an epoch-making decision goes to the rural participants themselves : their shared perception and common experience coupled with their concern for the existing state of affairs, make them look back and trace the chain of actions – omission and commission both considered – that is responsible for the nerve-breaking situation. It is only natural for those passing through bad days to relate themselves to the times when things were not as bad. It was this process of alternating between present and past and of deliberating on the causes that had led to the sorry state of affairs, which resulted in the vigorous resolve to redefine the glorious community tradition and practice, thereby radically transforming the same.

Dialogue, the keyboard in TBS functioning, extended to the forest officials. The initial hostility and mistrust gave way to understanding, appreciation and co-operation, slowly but certainly. A definitive role was played by TBS organised *Akhand Ramayana Paath, Jangal - Jeev Bachao Yatra* and other similar programmes, in winning the confidence of the higher level officials of the State forest department. Co-operation thus evolved and generated is crossing over to the next stage of development – i.e., collaboration. TBS and the Forest department are jointly organising in April 1998 a two-day symposium to work out strategies to cope with the challenges. Over the years, TBS has gloriously succeeded in putting forth its case for evolving a balanced approach to wild life and human inhabitants of the forest, forcefully rejecting the idea of counterposing wild life and people. Now more than ever before, the forest officials appear ready and



*Dharari : A pledge renewed and redefined*

willing to believe that any exclusivist approach will ultimately be self-defeating. One can only hope and wish that the spirit and the message of such a fruitful dialogue reaches both the grassroots level forest functionaries as well as the activists and volunteers affiliated to and motivated by TBS. It is only at this level that the success or failure of a policy decision or resolve rests.

TBS, with a view to sharpening its perception and directing its efforts, has also initiated another form of dialogue : with environmentalists and concerned groups of individuals whose commitment to making ecology better and people happier is beyond an iota of doubt or suspicion. One such dialogue (consultation) was held on April 10-12, 1997. This helps in pooling the intellectual resources as well as gearing up into action.

The activities of TBS in this regard are in no way confined to the narrow Sariska confines and its people. the *Aravalli Bachao Yatra from Gujarat to Delhi via Rajasthan and Haryana; Nadi-Pahar Bachao Yatra from Galta (Aravalli) to Gangotri (Himalayas). Jangal Jeevan Bachao Yatra* (encompassing nine States and their National Parks, Tiger Projects and Wild Life Sanctuaries) are pointers to the fact that for TBS these issues are the heart and soul of its concern and endeavour.

Likewise, on issues detrimental to the eco-system, TBS doesn't fight shy even of moving the apex court of this country, while at the same time it doesn't abdicate its responsibility of warning and advising the various departments of the union government. The people of the area have been given orientation to enable them to see the merit of the entire exercise, in parts and as a whole. It is only as a consequence of this symbiosis of theory and practice that TBS has been able to mobilise people and of late also win the confidence of the higher echelons of forest administration. It also draws sustenance from the support of those who don't seek to compartmentalise environment, wild life and people.

The ideal before or the guiding principles paving the TBS path can be summed up as :

- (i) Empowerment of the people to the extent that they start treating the common property as their individual property and take care of it, and watch its interests in an appropriate manner.
- (ii) Inculcating and nurturing of the belief that only people can protect, conserve and regenerate the forest at the same time managing the other natural resources

(transformation of the Dark Zone into a White Zone is an example);

- (iii) People have as much right to the forest as wild life has, neither more than the other;
- (iv) People ought to have unimpeded and uninhibited access to the uses of biodiversity (medicinal and other tradition-sustained uses, it will also lead to providing access to easy economical and affordable health-sustaining avenues;
- (v) Involving people rather than imposing prohibitive policies is the key to regeneration and management of natural resources. Minus the people and see the quantum of the damage done, avoidable damage at that;
- (vi) Revival and contemporary-contextual modification of the indigenous wisdom can go a long way to make people self-reliant, thereby cutting at the dependence on the multinationals who, under the processes and policies of globalisation and liberalisation, have suddenly become the key players at the behest of World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the hegemonistic arm of imperialism led by the United States of America.

The above indicators epitomise the essence of a new social order which has to be established, the wishes of the vested interests – local as well as global – notwithstanding. It augurs well that in every part of the vast country that India is, action groups and individuals committed to actualising the dream are coming up. **In the vast ocean of**

self-seeking competitiveness, they may be no more than islands of public conscientiousness, but it is a happy thing that they are there. All social revolutions start like this, and like this they succeed. Amen !



*A Sariska village forest : example of joint management.  
Village Committee Chairman Sumer Singh and  
forest guard Sardara*

## COMBATING ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION : THE TBS WAY

Although founded in 1975, TBS took six years to decide to shift its area of activity from urban to rural. 1981, in that sense marks the watershed, when the first dialogue with the rural youth was held. It was only in 1985 that TBS made its entry into the rural world, where it has been functioning since. The efforts geared into result-oriented, meaningful and sustainable development work have been herculean and the experience highly gratifying and ennobling. Though in no sense has the journey been straight and smooth : on the contrary, it has been fraught with distress, uncertainty and even personal risks – stretching to threats and attempts at physical elimination of the TBS personnel, including the General Secretary. But thanks to the single minded-devotion of the TBS personnel and whole-hearted and unqualified support and participation of the beneficiaries – real or potential, all was well in the ultimate analysis.

At the point of time when TBS made its entry into Bheekampura (Thana Gazi, Alwar), the scenario that met its eye was extremely bleak. The TBS functionaries could not even have dreamt of the quantum and scale of ecological degradation that in reality accosted them. Maybe the TBS activists had at the back of their minds the dictum : **when the going gets tough, the tough get going.** As a matter of fact, the very fact that the TBS activists had chosen to come to this part of the world was in ample measure testimony to their toughness, and they got going, undeterred



by the initial mistrust of the local people. These young men were out to win the people's trust - not through precept, but through practice.



*Mobilisation for Regeneration*

The TBS activists through their incessant dialogue with the people belonging to the **Dark Zone** (in the official records it was described thus, signifying that there was no underground water, precluding thereby any hope for the people), they not only got to the core of the problem, but also succeeded - slowly and steadily - in creating among the latter, sympathisers and potential activists in the event of actualisation of the dream of WATER.

Exploratory activities were launched in **Gopalpura, Suratgarh** and the **Sariska Tiger Project** area, culminating in attempts at constructing water harvesting structures and deepening the wells. The period between 1985 and 1991 was marked by several ups and downs : successes coming the TBS way and obstacles and obstructions put in their way by



*Gopalpura : Pasture Development*

the officials, government machinery and the local vested interests.

The government lost no time in issuing notices to TBS declaring illegal and unlawful the dams and other water harvesting structures, whose creation it had catalysed, ensuring mass participation. At the same time no notice whatsoever was taken of the fact that **these structures had given hope to the people - hope of survival and some sort of human dignity, in embryonic form though.** But TBS by now had gained considerable strength from the people who had come to rally round its activities, and as such, remained unperturbed by the notices and threats of evicting the people from twentytwo Sariska villages. Counter measures were contemplated with a view to equipping the people with legal literacy empowering them to stay put in the face of all odds and onslaughts. Meanwhile, campaigns for forest conservation and regeneration, removal of forest posts from Deori and Haripura, wild life conservation, and

launching a CHIPKO ANDOLAN in Gopalpura (Sadiyawas catchment area) were taken up in right earnest-all extensively supported by the people.

Taking up anti-mining campaign in the form of combating ecological degradation, in a big way would have been impossible but for a chance happening. A johad was constructed in Tilwari village at the behest of Chhotelal Meena who had seen the Gopalpura structures and was immensely impressed with the gains that had accrued to the villagefolk. But when two consecutive monsoons since the construction of the johad failed to deposit any water there, it was reason enough for anxiety. It was the first such experience, with no apparent and plausible explanation for something that had never happened before. It was only during the third monsoon that the real culprit was discovered : the huge pits caused by senseless mining were filled with water. It was these pits that disallowed water flowing down to the johad.

This incident compelled the TBS activists to have a fresh look around. It was then that the massive damage caused by mining attracted their attention : damage to land and forest, and threat to the survival of bio-diversity. What was advertised as a stepping-stone to development, with a capital D, came to be recognised as a menace. A closer scrutiny of the ownership/lease rights brought the malaise to the fore. The politician - industrialist nexus was visible behind the legitimate and not so legitimate lease-rights granted. Mining exercises had been undertaken even at places where it was not permissible as per the regulations determining and governing the Sariska Tiger Project and National Park status. **Almost anybody who mattered in political circles had a stake in mining. It was this fact**



*Activists close the road : a mass campaign for stopping mining activity*

**which made opposition to the continuance of mining activities both urgent and difficult.**

What began as a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) against mining in the Supreme Court of India, soon developed into a long drawn-out battle far transcending judico-legal frame of reference, casting shadows on the grassroots level activists of both TBS and the newly converted local activists. Considering the validity and gravity of the plea, the Supreme Court prohibited the government to sanction and issue new mining leases. The apex court also constituted a commission to go into calling a halt to mining activities as also delimiting the Sariska area.

The vested interests were so vexed and desperate that mine-owners and their mercenaries fatally assaulted the TBS General Secretary in the presence of the chairperson of the Commission, and state and district administrative and police



*Saying 'No' to mining activity – R.G. Soni, Chief Wildlife Warden, Rajasthan and Valmiki Thapar, Member, Tiger Conservation Steering Committee*

officials. At several places, TBS activists were assaulted. Naturally these assaults were aimed at demoralising the activists, but the steel having been tempered, they were not in a mood to oblige the tormentors and intimidators. By this time the national press had started championing the TBS cause which gave substantial fillip to the latter's morale. It was in the fitness of things that rather than bowing out, TBS decided to take the battle to its logical conclusion. The apex court found the mine-owners guilty of assaulting the TBS General Secretary and awarded appropriate imprisonment to the offenders.

It was the fall-out of TBS perseverance that the Environment Ministry of the Government of India was made to issue a notification to ban mining and industrial activities in view of the alarming ecological degradation of the Aravallis.

As extension of this, also was issued a notification for nation-wide environmental protection, and it was made mandatory to obtain a **no objection certificate** from the environment ministry before sanctioning mining and industrial operations.

But the state government, under pressure from several quarters, did not comply with the court orders. This led to TBS initiating contempt proceedings in the Supreme Court. The state government was censured and the guilty officer had to be suspended. **It is unfortunate that even court verdicts do not receive the respect and compliance they are constitutionally entitled to. Legislatures are misused and abused to ensure that the ruling classes are not divested of their hegemony.** Most vocal and vociferous were the legislators with a dubious track-record. They did not hesitate in going as far as making the bonafides of TBS look suspect in the eyes of the people at large, as if TBS was working against the national interests and seeking to scuttle the developmental efforts, serving certain foreign (donor) agencies. Being sure of its moorings and motivations (despite receiving assistance from foreign agencies on certain projects), TBS demanded constitution of an all party legislators' committee to look into its activities. Such a committee was constituted, which subjected TBS activities to a close scrutiny. Nothing foul could be discovered as there was nothing foul in the TBS crusade against mining and ecological degradation. This, rather than silencing the opponents of TBS, the henchmen and collaborators of the mine-owners, made them feel humiliated. Their attitude – provocative and revengeful – was reflected in the witch hunt they had launched against TBS activists. In 1992 a PIL was filed in the court against these atrocities. At the same time a demand was also made

to make public the findings of the all-party legislators' committee.

With a view to sensitising people about the Supreme Court verdicts, and also exerting pressure on the government to respect the said verdicts, a *satyagraha* was launched at Mallana in January 1993 on the specific demand of closing down the mines. Roads were blocked by the activists of the *SARISKA BACHAO ANDOLAN*. In March, the *satyagraha* was organised at five different places simultaneously. On April 4, 1993 the mine-owners manhandled Dr Rajeev Dhawan, Advocate, Supreme Court of India, and the TBS activists. The offenders did not stop at that. They attacked even the dispensary at *TBS Ashram*. Two days later, contempt proceedings were initiated against the mine-owners. The very next day - April 7, '93 - the police administration thought it wise to arrest the culprits accused of assaulting Dr Dhawan and the TBS activists. In a quick succession of



*Preparing themselves for saving the Sariska : Activists putting their heads together*

events, the Supreme Court ordered the Government of Rajasthan to stop all mining activity **immediately, and without any further delay**. In May 1993, the Supreme Court ordered the state government to provide protection cover to TBS.

Beginning October 2, 1993 ARAVALLI BACHAO YATRA was launched all through the Aravalli range (from Himmatnagar in Gujarat to Delhi, via Rajasthan and Haryana). **The purpose behind this was to make people aware of the havoc played by mining and industrial operations to the eco system of the entire area.** People could be mobilised to stand up and say **No** to these operations, only after they were apprised of the quantum and scale of the damage done. This was directed at laying the foundation of people's movements as and when necessary.

The Supreme Court granted pardon to the assaulters, when they prayed for it, at the same time warning them of dire consequences if such an act/offence was committed again.

The review petition filed by the mine-owners was dismissed by the Supreme Court. But the Government of Rajasthan had yet not given up its effort to find a way out : it wanted to appease the mine-owners without offending and appearing to be contemptive towards the court. On May 6, '94 it designated the 8 April '93 verdict of the Supreme Court as tentative. This resulted in reopening of the Sariska delimitation issue.

In June '94, a NADI PAHAR BACHAO YATRA was organised by TBS, beginning at Galta in the Aravallis to Gangotri in the Himalayas. It aimed at sensitising people towards gearing up into action for conservation of common



property (greenery of the mountains and sanctity of the rivers). As recognition of the contribution made by TBS to the cause of ecological conservation and regeneration, the National Environment Award came to TBS.

Enthused by mass response to its earlier *Yatras*, TBS undertook between January 14 and March 2, 1994 a JUNGLE JEEV BACHAO YATRA covering national parks, tiger projects and wild life sanctuaries of nine states. Fostering fraternity among the forest-dwellers and organising them nationally was crucial to this *Yatra*. Sensitising the people about the need for joint management of forest was also one of the core issues. **A salient and very heartening feature of the *Yatra* was the participation of high ranking forest officials, environmentalists, forest dwellers and representatives of a host of NGOs.**

On September 14, 1995 the Supreme Court ordered the Government of India to implement the May 7, 1992 notification and submit a map of the area along with an affidavit to the effect that it was being complied with in. On February 6, 1996 a parliamentary committee visited the Bhaonta wild life sanctuary created by people's participation. The committee was impressed with the work done and recorded its sense of appreciation of the TBS endeavour of bringing about a transformation in people's perception and attitudes. This experiment amply demonstrates that people by themselves can take charge of newer responsibilities provided faith and trust is placed in them, and their back is patted for competently doing what the paid forest guards at most places have not done or are not doing.

Calling the hoax of unemployment of the erstwhile mine-workers, on account of closure of mining operation, TBS

has drawn up plans and schemes to help such people. The question that ought to be addressed is, who are these unemployed ex-mine-workers. Without mincing words, and without beating about the bush, **it must be candidly put on record that these ex-workers were reduced to the status of labourers only on account of unprecedented degradation of Sariska eco-system. When things were not as bad, these people were either farmers or cattle-rearers. The TBS crusade against mining activities that, along with merciless deforestation, were responsible for the alarming scale of ecological degradation, in fact, is a step ahead in the direction of restoration of the lost dignity of the people.**

That this is no self-praise can be seen and appreciated in conjunction with the key activities undertaken by TBS in the past dozen years or so : creation of water harvesting structures and soil-management based on the traditional wisdom of the people, who may be illiterate, but without doubt possess a rich wealth of dependable experience. The main thing is to re-awaken that sense of self-confidence and respect, which over the years has been sadly sapped. **Every tunnel, however long and dark, ends somewhere, beyond which there is light - uninhibited and abundant.**

Tarun Bharat Sangh can legitimately congratulate itself that it is playing the role of a catalyst in the awareness and confidence-building campaign among the people.

## **JAL, JUNGLE, ZAMEEN**

Excerpts from the 19th Report (1987-89) submitted to the President of India by Dr. B.D. Sharma, Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

### **Land**

All struggles concerning cultivation of land are basically a conflict between two rights. **On one side is the right to life and on the other the right to property. The right to life is basic and much higher than the right to property.** Where a person is earning a living by cultivating the land, its ownership cannot be bestowed on him straight away for some reasons, the minimum which can be expected from the government is to ensure that he continues to remain in possession of that land and his right to make a living from it is effectively protected.

The first step for protecting the right to life related to land will have to be to ensure that, whatever may be the law, or even if the law is silent on this issue, the person who is cultivating a piece of land continues to be in possession of that land. The principle should be openly promulgated and the fact of possession through cultivation should be entered in government records. Moreover, if a zamindar tries to evict a person ignoring this right, the government has the responsibility to provide full protection to the victim. And if a government cannot protect this basic right, no one can take away the right of an individual for self-defence. This is the message of our Constitution.

## Right Over Resources

The primary resources other than agriculture in the traditional economy are forests, pastures (waste land and water) on which the ordinary people depend for their living. The wrong entitlements over resources of all descriptions started getting established during the British period. **It was in that period that the intimate relationship between the resources and the local community which was like that between the mother and the child, was ended and the State acquired monopoly rights thereon.** This colonial process of centralisation has unfortunately got further reinforced under the tutelage of the new paradigm of development which has been adopted in our country after independence. The full implications of this colonial-developmental process are becoming clearer only now. **Everywhere the life support system of the local community and the common man at the moment is being snatched away by the abstruse state institutions and big people without any qualms of conscience.** In this situation, the people are engaged in a fierce struggle of their right to life. But the system is branding their current use of these resources as illegal and is driving them away taking undue advantage of its authority.

The first fundamental change which was effected in this process related to forests. In the new frame, the symbiotic relationship between the forests and the forest dwellers was not recognised and the forests became property of the State. After the state acquired monopoly rights over the forests, a formal system was established for their management which gradually became increasingly comprehensive and also strong. The biggest irony of this change was that the forest-dweller who has a life-long relationship with the forests-which are their very homes, their religion, their culture and their their

every thing was conspicuous by its absence in that frame. In this formal structure, which recognizes only administrative and market relations. An all-out effort has been made to see that these life-long mother-child relationships are transformed into market relationships. How can this be possible ? It is on account of this basic lack of understanding that there is state of confrontation and regime of destruction in almost all the tribal areas which in final analysis means great injustice to the tribal people.

The British enacted the Indian Forest Act with a view to acquiring formal control over the forests. At the time of reservation of forests, legal formalities were no doubt complied with, but there was no question of people getting justice. Most of the tribal people were forcibly evicted from their homes. The memory of that forcible eviction now remains only in their folk tales. Whosoever could do, prepared agricultural land outside the forests. Even then their living relationship with the forests still continued. Those communities, which are totally dependent on forests have not been able to overcome this great tragedy even now. The primitive tribal communities and the shifting cultivators in many areas are still engaged in a struggle of life and death. Similarly, the right to life of the nomadic communities has also been disregarded. Their problems have so far remained altogether unnoticed.

It is clear that the right to life at the individual level and the human right of maintaining the identity at the community level in the case of the tribal people have been ignored in the Indian Forest Act. Therefore, this law is not in consonance with the spirit of our Constitution. But since the state itself was one party in this deal, there was no change in it even after the Constitution was adopted and the

situation remains as it was before it. In this way, the constitutional provisions for protection of tribal people as also the human rights have been ignored in the system of management of forests adopted in our country. This is also the most sore spot for the tribal people; this is also the most pathetic tale about the condition of these communities.

All the tribal areas were incorporated after independence in larger state units. In this process, no special attention was paid to the existing administrative arrangements and everywhere the system of the larger unit as it is was gradually extended to the tribal areas. Wherever forests were not reserved, the process of reservation was started. The private forests were taken over by the State. In this way, all special features of the earlier management systems evolved in keeping with the local traditions stood derecognised in the new system. But people's life does not automatically change simply because a new system may have been adopted. Therefore, numerous anomalies arose in the field and people really could not accept the new system from the core of their hearts. Consequently there is confrontation in many areas on this count.

The process of reservation of forests after independence was largely pursued in a routine fashion. In some cases, mere formality was observed just for the sake of it and even the fact that some people were living in the forests was not taken note of. In this way, the spirit of the law itself was violated. For example, in some cases of Jagirdari forests the original inhabitants were deemed to be encroachers without any enquiry as soon as these forests were taken over by the state. In some cases, no lines were drawn on the spot at the time of reservation. So the people could not know as to which land was being reserved. In some

cases, the officer did not visit the spot, yet recommended reservation of the area. Similarly, there were a variety of local practices in each area, like *warkas* in Thane, *dali* in Raigarh and green manure leases in Karnataka, etc., which were not even looked at. Therefore, the old legal arrangements became illegal in many areas just with the passage of new law without any consideration and without any thought. And the tribal became a law breaker.

This reservation of forests predictably failed to protect the forests. Firstly, the internal pressure on forests has been rising incessantly on account of growing population and increasing needs of the people. But the biggest devastation was caused by external pressures. Extensive plantations of mono-culture species after clearing the natural forests in the name of scientific management, establishment of tea, coffee and cardamom plantations, leases of forests produce at throw away prices in the name of promoting industries and establishment of industrial and mining complexes in the name of development, construction of highways, heavy influx of outsiders, eviction of tribals, supply of forest produce for meeting new demands, everything in the end proved to be a big burden on the forests. Consequently, there was ruthless destruction of the forests. The worst effect of this mindless destruction has been on the life of the tribal people. The very basis of their life is getting destroyed. But unfortunately no attention has been paid to this aspect of denudation of forests. For example, food production in our country has increased manifold, but how much loss have the tribal communities sustained in terms of non-availability of food articles from the forests due to their destruction does not find a place in national accounting. In all campaigns for the protection of forests the real culprit, who has destroyed them for quick gains and who continues to destroy them even now, is left

out and the full wrath of the system falls on the tribal, who is already under tremendous pressure.

While discussing management of forests, besides the issues concerning the life of the people, those relating to environment and national development cannot be forgotten. But a direct consequence of non-recognition of even the existence of the community and not associating it in the management of forests, the position of forests has become very vulnerable. They are like that public property which has no one to look after and, if at all there is one, he too is far away from the scene and has no significant role to play in its protection. It is true that the internal pressure on forests has increased. But the tribal after all brings only a pole or two for constructing his hut, a small branch for making his plough and dead wood for lighting the fire to protect him from worms and insects, wild animals as also from cold during the winter. Nowhere he had built grand mansions. When the tribal clears the forest and cultivates forest land it is under compulsion of his circumstances. If he can be provided an alternative, he will happily accept the same.

The main reason for the depletion of our resources is the growing inequality and the rising tide of consumerism. But unfortunately these facts are not even alluded to anywhere. Therefore, the greatest need today is to put stringent check on the consumerist life-style and ensure equitable entitlement in the use of natural resources. For achieving this, it will be necessary that all those vested interests, who have entered into forests for quick gains and establishing big jagirs, are ruthlessly suppressed. All plantations small and big, legal and illegal, for example those which have mushroomed in Karnataka, should be taken over by the government and handed over to the labourers. If a



poor person gets due entitlement over the natural resources, he will be relieved of the problems of the *day*; only then he will be in a position to think for *tomorrow*; in that frame he will become the greatest friend of environment. There are some good experiments of partnership of the people in protection and development of forests from West Bengal which are worth emulation. In many areas, people are taking initiative on their own. which deserves to be strongly supported.

### **Minor Forest Produce**

The minor forest produce has an important place with regard to people's partnership in forestry. I had recommended in my previous report that the people should atleast be given full rights over the minor forest produce. The rights presently claimed by the government on minor forest produce even with reference to the provisions of the Indian Forest Act, are not legal, and royalty levied thereon is unethical. The declarations of the Governments of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar last year recognising the tribal people as owners of minor forest produce instead of mere labourers engaged in collecting the same, was the first major step towards ending the historical injustice with regard to forest against the tribal people. It is, however, a matter of deep regret that regressive forces got active immediately after this declaration in Madhya Pradesh. And today the situation is that even this great decision is being denied. This regressive step is a mockery of the entire constitutional ground plan in which the State has been given with great confidence the responsibility of protection of the interests of the tribal people. Will the Governor and the President, keeping aside all sorts of formalities in this regards, ensure that this just decision is not negated and that the subsequent regressive decision does not become a blot in the history of our social justice.

## Wild Life

A highly anomalous situation has also arisen in the management of wild life on account of ignoring certain basic facts about the tribal scene such as the tribal people and the wild animals have co-existed reasonably well since times immemorial, that wild life has not been destroyed by bows and arrows, and that the real culprit responsible for their destruction is the outsider. Consequently unnecessary restrictions are being placed on the activities of the tribal people and in many cases they are being forced to move out of their homes. Their plea is that they have been living with the tigers through the ages and they can still live with them quite well. But nobody is prepared to listen to them. In many areas their economy has been greatly damaged through measures which are not legal. There is open violation of their right to life, which is not in keeping with the spirit of our Constitution. There is an urgent need for serious review in all these cases both at the level of law and also in terms of actual practice.

## Need for a Permanent Solution

**The management of forests unfortunately is being done on a purely formal basis instead of seeking participation of the people.** There is no doubt a reference about people's participation in management in the new forest policy. But even in respect of implementation of this idea, market forces and formal relations are being relied upon and accepted as the basis. Therefore that decision at the policy level in practice becomes meaningless. In this situation, the conflict between the government and the people has increased and is continuing to increase, There is a state of confrontation between the people and the state almost in the whole of middle India; many of these areas are outside the ambit of the authority of forest departments. The situation everywhere

has been deteriorating only because (i) no attention has been paid even to the fully justified demands of the people, (ii) attempts have been made to superimpose the law unilaterally, and (iii) the behavior of the department officers has been repressive. In the end, either the people themselves have risen in revolt against the administration or extremists have taken up the cudgels on their behalf. It is necessary that satisfactory answers are found to the basic questions of the people such as their assertion that the forests are theirs and their very life depends on them. It is regretted that instead of attending to the basic questions, the state of confrontation is sought to be resolved by use of force treating the unrest merely as an expression of extremist activity. This will not do. It is necessary that the entire management of the forest is given a fresh look beginning with the first principles. **Otherwise neither the forest will be saved, nor will there be a solution of the problems of the tribal people !**

### **Immediate Action**

If the present confrontation between the tribal people and the administration has to end, complete clarity about the issue of land must be reached immediately. The most important thing in this regard is that certain basic premises, which are accepted without any thought, such as, the boundaries of the reserved forests are unalterable and any tribal who is found inside the forest is a trespasser, must be abandoned. The habitations and agricultural lands in many cases predate the reservation of concerned forest; the process of reservation has been faulty in many cases. Therefore, people in such cases cannot be treated as trespassers and encroachers. Moreover, whosoever is living in whatsoever manner in the forest cannot be just **driven away just like that, unless the government provides him an alternative**

**which is within his capability of use.** Until such an alternative is given, the tribal will continue to do what he considers as right according to his understanding. This is his basic constitutional right.

There is only one way to resolve this tangle. The present law and order approach must be abandoned for good, and a clear plan of action should be formulated on the basis of mutual understanding and goodwill between the government and the people within the frame of a clear long term perspective. A beginning in this regard can be made with a sort of informal agreement between the people and the government accepting *today's position* as it is about the land with the people. In this case, the government on its part should make a commitment that no action will be taken against the people in respect of the land under cultivation unless and until a final action plan has been prepared on the basis of mutual understanding. The village community on its part should take the responsibility of ensuring that there will be no further extension of cultivation in the forest. With a view to creating a climate of goodwill, all cases pending in the courts against the tribal people should be withdrawn. Moreover a final decision should be taken in respect of the land of each individual taking into account his specific situation. If this approach is adopted, the preset confrontation between the people and the State about the land will end. A plan should be prepared for making this temporary state of peace a permanent one. Such a plan should, inter alia, provide for work to the people in the immediate context, protection and improvement of environment and creation of a strong and permanent economic base for the tribal people.

### **Waste Lands and Degraded Forests**

It is necessary to give special attention to the

management of waste lands and degraded forests within the overall frame of equitable rights over resources. So far these resources were either unproductive or were located in remote regions. Therefore nobody had any objection if the poor were depending on and making a living from these resources. But now that there is a good possibility of huge profits being made from them, all eyes are fixed on them. But most of these resources are still the basis for making a living for many amongst the poor. This fact is hardly realised simply because unfortunately the people do not have formal rights over them. Therefore, the government can do whatever it likes with these resources. The rich people are trying to acquire rights over them, taking advantage of this invidious situation in the name of development and under the cover of law. Any alternative use of resources ignoring the right of life of the people is against the spirit of our Constitution and therefore unconstitutional.

The plea to include industrial establishments and rich people in programmes of waste lands and degraded forest land is not only anti-people but is also detrimental to the national objective of environmental protection. The perception of the industrialists and rich people about the use of resources is purely commercial guided by profit and loss accounts. The cost of their programmes becomes very heavy because the design in their case intrinsically involves opposition to forces of nature and confrontation with the common man. Moreover these programmes are knowingly made so expensive so that the poor may not get included in them. In a way, this is a part of the big conspiracy of the rich people which aims at grabbing all these resources at the national level. Moreover the scope of such costly programme is bound to be limited and limited to only better lands. In contrast, the programmes of the poor, based on full use of their personal labour and

nature's force, can be taken up on a very large scale with out much dependence on financial investment. This will serve best the interest of both the poor and the environment.

Thus an opportunity has arisen in the economic history of our country when the resources from which the poor people have been making a living, howsoever meagre and without formal recognition of their rights, can be put to a new use which can enable them to lead a good life. If their right for making a living from these resources is acknowledged, they can have something which they can call their own. If this is to be achieved, industrialists and rich people must be strictly kept out of any programme of waste lands and depleted forest. All contracts and large leases such as the ones in Orissa and Karnataka, should be annulled. Social equity must be given the highest place in the new agreements. Only those persons should be included in the new programme who are prepared to work with their own hands. It is only such a policy, that will help in improving the environment and will strengthen the foundations of national economic development.

The marginal resources comprising the waste lands and depleted forests are the **last hope of the poor and also the only opportunity for them. If the open loot of these resources by a handful of persons, on the strength of their control over technology and money resources is not prevented, this last flicker of hope of the poor will get extinguished and perhaps their last opportunity for living with dignity and self-respect will also slip through, maybe for ever.** There is only one ray of hope in this grave crisis – perhaps the poor people will not accept this injustice !

## Water

The right to life of the people in relation to the use of water as a resource has also been compromised in recent times **on account of the process of centralisation in its management and entry of capital in its use.** The water therefore, is becoming out of reach of the common man who so far was able to use it, employing his own labour and skills and common place technology. The stronger sections of the society are now using water indiscriminately for personal profit with the help of capital and technology at their command. Similarly on another front the State and other formal institutions have acquired control over water in rivers and tanks ignoring the rights of people making a living from it. There is great dissatisfaction amongst the fishermen and *kevals* living on river banks. A number of movements have also been launched by them at a number of places.

Similarly the interests of formal institution, and alongwith them those of contractors, in the rivers and tanks in tribal areas have become quite prominent. In this process the traditional rights of the local community have been completely ignored. The people are not prepared to compromise with this situation. A new structure should be evolved with regard to water resources as well, on the same lines discussed for other resources. The right to life of the people must be kept at the centre. The present trend of centralisation with regard to the right over water resources must be checked in the interest of social equity. Otherwise, the right to life of the people will continue to be ignored and the Constitution will continue to be violated.

The fact is that the paradigm of development adopted in our country and its compeer life style are themselves incongruous with our socio-economic situation. So long as they

are accepted as ideals, establishment of a 'Fourth World' and biological exploitation of the people comprising 'Hindustanwa' are inevitable. Therefore, the very foundation of the new structure is wrong. **The minaret of development, which is being raised on the ruins of the economy of the ordinary people with utter disregard of their fundamental rights, cannot be a lasting structure. The people, who are victims of injustice, are now rejecting this paradigm.** Whatever may be the formal position about land acquisition, to the ordinary tribal it is nothing but forcible occupation of his land. There is nothing new in this. This has been his experience through the ages, it is his experience even now. There is, however, a difference. Earlier other people were aggressors, today the assault is by government itself. Then where is he to go ? And it is here that he revolts - from the core of his heart - against the entire system.

A pre-condition for any new use of natural resources should be that the concerned institution or the government should not only provide an alternative economic base for the people, who may have been depending on them for their living, but should ensure that the new life is better than the earlier. Moreover the government must proceed with honesty, it must be fully convinced that whatever is being promised is real and feasible. What is still more important is that the affected people should themselves be able to realise that the alternative will be better for them and they are prepared for it of their free will. If these principles are ignored, any action in that situation which may cause displacement will be against the democratic value and also against the spirit of our Constitution. And any use of force in the name of law and order against the people, who are fighting for establishing their right to life, must be given up forthwith.



**Joint statement on Wildlife Conservation and  
People's Livelihood Rights**

Consultation on Wildlife Conservation and People's  
Livelihood Rights : Building Bridges  
TBS Campus, Bheekampura

**10-12 April, 1997**

**JOINT STATEMENT**

A group of about 20 social activists, wildlife conservationists, researchers, lawyers, and media-persons met from 10 to 12 April 1997, at Bheekampura-Kishori in Alwar District, adjacent to the Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan. The meeting, called by the Indian Institute of Public Administration and **Kalpavriksha**, and hosted by **Tarun Bharat Sangh**, was an attempt to initiate a dialogue between those advocating the cause of wildlife protection and those struggling to uphold the human rights of rural communities living in and around wildlife habitats.

Over the last few years, conflicts have erupted in many of India's national parks, sanctuaries, and other natural habitats, between officials and NGOs involved in wildlife conservation on one hand, and local communities and social activists on the other. Clashes between the Forest Department and local people are increasingly becoming common. A top-down, centralised model of conservation, which has ignored

the dependence of local communities of the resources of natural habitats, as also their traditions of conservation, is one root of this conflict; other factors include the increasing politicisation and commercialisation of rural areas, breakdown of traditions, and the demands made by growing populations of people and livestock, all of which clash with conservation goals. Simultaneously, wildlife and wildlife habitats continue to be destroyed by the dominant industrial-commercial economy, and the rampant consumerism of the rich minority. The same governments which declared protected areas (national parks and sanctuaries) are today eager to open them up for mining, dams, industries, tourism, roads, and other so-called development projects, to the extent of being willing to even denotify them.

Activists, conservationists, and community members have increasingly felt the need to respond to these conflicts, and to explore ways of working together to conserve wildlife, ensure local people's livelihoods, and challenge destructive industrial-commercial forces. Yet dialogue among us has been limited and sporadic. This meeting was an effort to initiate a more systematic process of dialogue and mutual understanding.

This brief statement is one outcome of the meeting, and should be seen in the context of a longer report, which elaborates many of the points made below. We recognise the complexities of the issues involved, and also the limited representativeness of the group that met, but we believe the consensus achieved could be the base on which further evolution of the dialogue and alliance could take place. In addition, we have decided a number of joint actions which could test out and implement the principles and strategies stated below.

## Principles

We have arrived at a consensus on the following principles for further action :

1. Wild animals and plant species have a *fundamental right to existence*. Protected areas and the Wild Life (Protection) Act are essential to protect this right, and we accept that the primary right of conservation values in protected areas must be recognised.
2. We believe that local communities have a *fundamental right* to resources necessary for living and livelihood, along with a responsibility to conserve these resources in protected areas and other natural habitats, without interference from market forces.
3. Conservation attempts must have a *full and equal participation* of local communities, from the stage of conceptualisation to planning and implementation; for instance, protected areas should move towards joint management.
4. Efforts at *conservation, social justice, and sustainable development* have to go hand in hand, along with brakes on the consumerism of the rich.
5. Community and national *self-reliance* is fundamental to conservation and development efforts and we oppose any dependence on foreign agencies (e.g. the World Bank State Forestry Projects and the GEF Ecodevelopment Project).
6. *Forcible displacement* of local communities in the name of wildlife conservation is unacceptable, and

reparations must be made for such displacement that took place in the past.

7. The complete protection of *threatened wildlife* species all over India is essential.
8. The complete protection of some *areas as inviolate* (core zones, groves, etc.), with the consent and participation of local communities, is essential.

### Strategies

Based on the above principles, we believe that the following strategies are necessary :

1. Social activists and wildlife conservationists should consider each other's objectives as being mutually supportive, and should take up *joint programmes* for ensuring conservation, people's livelihood rights, and community participation.
2. Conservationists should uphold the *rights of local communities* to livelihood resources, while social activities should respect the need for *protected areas and wildlife legislation* for achieving conservation.
3. Before declaring a protected area or conservation programme, and periodically afterwards, there should be *public hearings*, and *dialogue* among government agencies and local communities. All conservation programmes must have full transparency (including public right to information) and public participation.
4. **The Wild Life (Protection) Act** must be strengthened against destructive commercial and

industrial forces, for which not only the Forest Department but also all citizens, including local communities, must be suitably empowered. The Act should be amended to encourage full community participation in conservation programmes.

5. Social activists and conservationists should focus on immediate *areas of conflict*, and work together to resolve the problems which affect these areas.
6. While opposing *destructive development* projects in natural habitats, social activists and conservationists should also question their own *lifestyles and consumerism*, and make efforts to minimise their adverse impacts.
7. A detailed study should be conducted of people *displaced* by protected areas (including tiger reserves) so far, and retributive justice delivered to them in the form of satisfactory rehabilitation and other measures. In particular, those displaced by *Project Tiger* must receive justice as a first step towards repairing the relationship between people and protected areas.
8. All protected areas and other areas of special biodiversity significance, should be declared off-limits to *destructive development and commercial* projects.
9. *Studies* on carrying capacity, conservation values, impacts of human activities, land use history, livelihood possibilities, and other topics should be urgently carried out, by exploring the complementarities between *local/traditional*

knowledge and *formal/modern knowledge*.

### **Joint Actions**

To this end, we have decided to take the following joint actions :

1. Forwarding this statement of the Committee which has been set up by the **Ministry of Environment and Forests** to review the **Wild Life (Protection) Act** to insist that the draft Act be vetted in a consultative manner before it is converted into law, to protest the non-consultative mode of functioning thus far, and to urge it to (a) incorporate the above concerns into the revised Act and (b) initiate a more transparent, participatory process of amending the Act.
2. Bringing out a booklet explaining the Wild Life (Protection) Act in simple language, especially for use by local communities and organisations working amongst them.
3. Facilitating a detailed independent investigation through the **Indian People's Tribunal on Environment and Human Rights**, into the tensions in and around some of Madhya Pradesh's protected areas (including Kanha, Pench, Bori, Udanti, Samarsot, and others), especially related to the declaration of buffer zones, and the notices issued by Collectors, under the **Wild Life (Protection) Act**, to villagers regarding their rights to resources.
4. Providing research, legal, and financial support to the proposed **Arvari Water Catchment Sanctuary**, a

503 sq. km. protected area to be declared by the villagers living in the catchment of the Arvari Rivulet in District Alwar, Rajasthan, as an experiment towards community management of a large geographical unit.

5. Taking legal action against major tourism projects in and around some protected areas, including **Sariska Tiger Reserve**, Rajasthan, and **Bhimashankar Sanctuary**, Maharashtra.
6. Ensuring regular communication and information networking within the participants, and with other groups and individuals involved in similar issues, especially to discuss the *pros* and *cons* of any precipitate action (e.g. litigation) being taken in response to to conservation and livelihood crises.

*We resolve to work together towards ensuring the conservation of species and habitats, and the traditional rights of access to resources of local communities, for which our main struggle will be against the destructive industrial-commercial economy.*

(sd/-)

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**Devjit**, Campaign for People's Rights over National Parks and Sanctuaries, Raipur, Madhya Pradesh

**Walter Fernandes**, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi

**Ajit Grewal**, Farmer, Tijara, Rajasthan

**Royina Grewal**, Writer, Tijara, Rajasthan

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**Bittu Sahgal**, Sanctuary Magazine, Mumbai, Maharashtra

**Rajendra Singh**, Tarun Bharat Sangh, Bhikampura-Kishori, Rajasthan

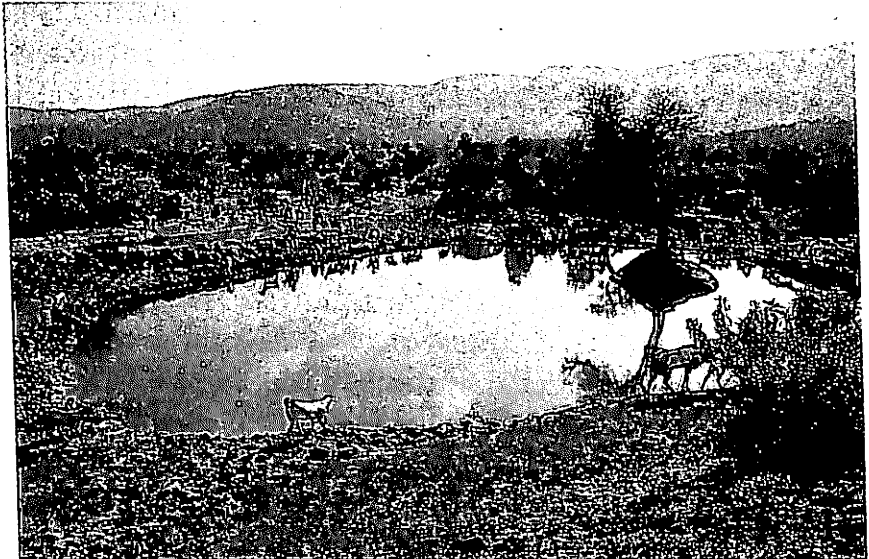
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**Farhad Vania**, Artist, New Delhi

**Rustam Vania**, Artist, New Delhi

**Vimal**, National Alliance of People's Movements, New Delhi





## *Annexure-IV*

In British India, as a departure from the ancient man-forest relationship, forest-rights were taken over by the Government and the access and the right to use these were withdrawn. Thus to enable the Government to meet its priorities such as military and commercial needs, which in turn benefited the Government predominantly, Forest Act 1965 was passed. Subsequent Indian Forest Act 1878 was more comprehensive which enhanced exclusive control of most forest areas defined as reserve and protected forests which a smaller portion called village forest was there to meet the needs of large village population. In addition it was more restrictive. The Government control over forest areas was further increased by bringing in Indian Forest Act 1927, thereby repealing the 1878 Act.

National Forest Policy 1952 issued as a Government Restriction focussed on the paramount national needs. These needs include use of forest areas for various development works (agriculture, mining, industry) which were considered as essential for ushering economic regeneration in the country the resolution stated that claims of communities living in and around should not override the above stated national needs. This, therefore was also in contradiction of the country's ancient precept which had continued in a manner with the advent of the British power. Even the report of the National Commission on Agriculture did not make any recommendation which would suggest that the commission had gone into traditional systems, mode and restraints in the management of forests.

Also in contradiction with the constitutional provisions (DPs) with regard to the tribals.

**JUNGLE JEEVAN BACHAO YATRA**  
**Statement, 28 February, 1995**

**YATRA CALLS FOR RECONCILIATION OF  
WILDLIFE CONSERVATION  
AND PEOPLE'S NEEDS**

About 35 villages, activists, and researchers started on a unique journey, on 14 January 1995, from Sariska National Park in Rajasthan. The Jungle Jeevan Bachao Yatra (Save Forest Life Journey) was aimed at initiating a dialogue between various local communities living in and around national parks and sanctuaries, as also between these communities and the Forest Department. *Stressing that India's fast-depleting wildlife habits need urgent conservation measures, the Yatra intended to explore forms of conservation which ensured the participation and livelihood security of forest-dwelling people.*

In its 45 days of travel, covering about 15,000 km., the Yatra has passed through about 18 national parks and sanctuaries in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. In all, well over 100 people travelled with the Yatra, and several thousands attended the meetings held along the way. The Yatra will hold its final programme over two days on February 28 and March 1, 1995, in Delhi.

The Yatris include villagers From Sariska National Park (Rajasthan) and Bhimashankar Sanctuary (Maharashtra), and members of NGOs and agencies like Tarun Bharat Sangh, Maharashtra Arogya Mandal, Ekta Parishad, Kalpavriksh, Satyasodh, Keoladeo Research Foundation, Bombay Natural History Society, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Arch-Vahini, Sanctuary Magazine, Indian People's Tribunal. World Wide Fund for Nature-India, Indian Institute of Public Administration, Centre for Environment Education, and Adivasi Ekta Vikas Mandal, Action India, VIKSAT, and Gandhi Peace Foundation. Along the way, villagers, forest officials and staff, academics, students, and others participated in the various public meetings, consultations, dialogues, and on-site visits that the Yatris organised.

### Major Observations

While each of the protected areas (PAs) visited by the Yatra has presented a unique set of issues and problems, and there is no attempt to generalise on the basis of the limited observations during the Yatra, some common themes have come up time and again :

1. There is in many places a strong *readiness amongst local communities to participate in conservation and natural resource management of the habitats and wildlife* of these areas ; indeed, in many places, they have not only traditionally been protecting forests (e.g, sacred forests in **Bhimashankar Sanctuary, Maharashtra**), but have also in recent times waged struggles against destructive forces like mining. The example of **Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan**, where villagers organised themselves to stop several hundred mines, was highlighted during the Yatra.

2. However, there is also a strong *feeling of alienation among local communities*, as their traditional access to the forests has been curtailed by the imposition of the **Wildlife (Protection) Act**. In many places, the Yatra found people pointing to the “government’s forests”, or the “sarkari tiger”, and expressing their inability or unwillingness to help in their conservation if there is no reciprocal acceptance of their access to forest resources. The Yatra got the feeling that *support for conservation can only be achieved if the legitimate rights and needs of these communities are guaranteed*.
  
3. *Forest officials are opening up to involving people in the conservation of these areas*; the Yatra met several officers who were categorical that they could not on their own save wildlife. The Yatris feel that this could be a basis for government to accept a central role to local communities in the management of protected areas.
  
4. Most disturbing is the *hypocritical nature of government policies with regard to critical wildlife habitats* : on one hand local forest-dwelling communities are being denied their traditional rights and access to forest resources, in the name of wildlife conservation, while on the other the same areas are being opened up to commercial uses and elite tourism. Examples include **Sariska National Park, Rajasthan** (mining), **Gir National Park, Gujarat** (temple trust), **Bhimashankar Sanctuary, Maharashtra** (temple complex), and **Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary, Gujarat** (bamboo felling for paper mill).

5. Indeed, the Yatra found that *the greatest threat to forest and wildlife in these protected areas is from commercial demands and development projects, especially mining, dams, illegal logging poaching, encroachment. Forest Department officials expressed their limitations, as government functionaries, in single-handedly countering strong commercial and vested interests; local communities also admitted that on their own, they would not be able to stop such destruction.*

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the above observations, it appears to the Yatris that conservation of *wildlife and natural habitats can only be achieved if there is strong and sustained cooperation between local communities, forest officials, conservation and social action groups, and independent ecologists.* Such cooperation will require the following :

1. A clear and strict national policy not to allow industrial, urban, and commercial pressures impinge on PAs, including a ban on denotification of PAs for such purposes;
2. An official recognition of the legitimate resource rights and needs of local traditional communities, and measures to meet these needs;
3. A central role for local communities in the planning, protection, and monitoring of protected areas, including in the determination and enforcement of inviolate core zones and sustainable use buffer zones;
4. Planning the management of protected areas based

on a healthy interaction between formal ecological science and traditional knowledge, learning especially from traditional practices which have helped to conserve and sustainable use natural resources.

5. Greater sharing of the benefits of protected areas, including biomass rights, tourism income, employment in wildlife/forest related work, alternative livelihood opportunities, and others.

### **Follow-up**

Participants are meeting in Delhi to discuss the shortcomings and achievements of the Yatra, and to plan follow-up actions. Such actions will include preparation and dissemination of reports and a film on the Yatra, further dialogue and ground work in each of the PAs visited, declaration of people's sanctuaries in new areas, building state-level and national networks, more intensive yatras at a state level, and training exercises for NGO volunteers and forest staff.

(sd/-, on behalf of the Yatris)

**Rajendra Singh, Tarun Bharat Sangh**

**Farhad Vania, Kalpavriksh**

**Anand Kapoor, Maharashtra Arogya Mandal**

**Ashish Kothari, Indian Institute of Public Administration**

**Bittu Saghal, Sanctuary Magazine**

**Kiran Desai, Centre for Environment Education**

## By way of epilogue ...

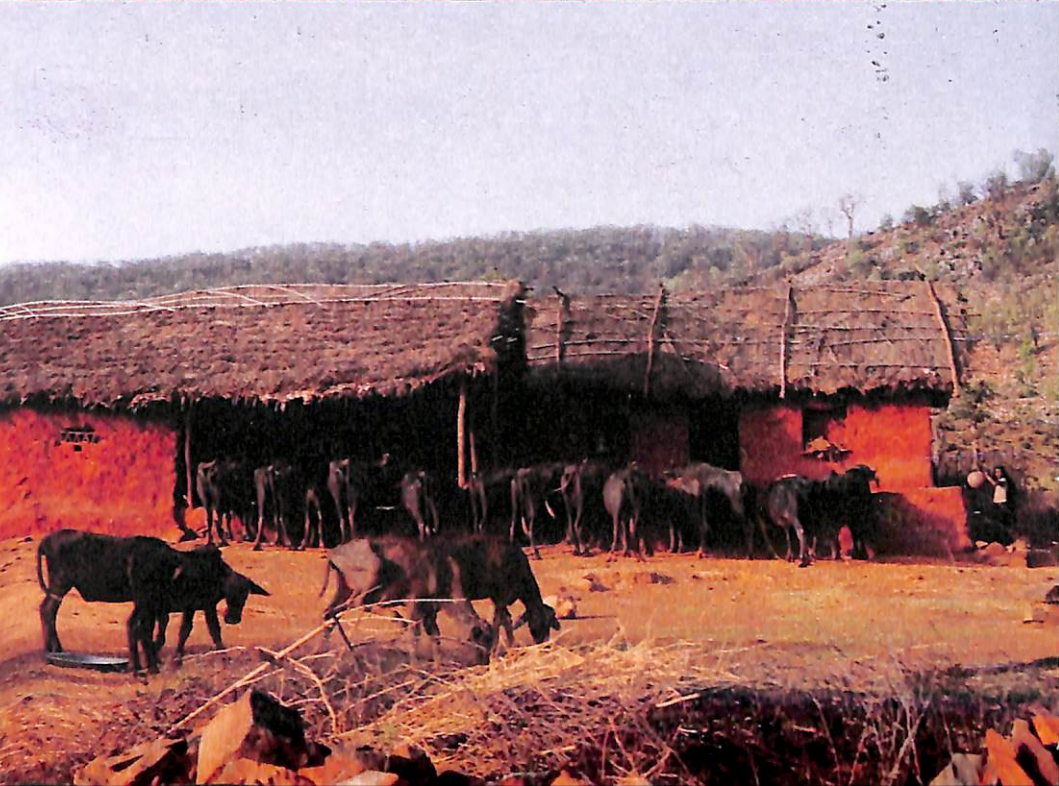
... While undoubtedly the last few decades have seen a massive erosion of the communities to manage sustainably their resource and knowledge, the answer is not to centralise power further, but to enable and encourage a revival of such capacities, through legal, educational and economic measures. In any case, to expect one central authority to perform the task of safeguarding the enormous biological and intellectual wealth of the country, even with the best of intentions and a plethora of expert committees to assist it, is as big a folly as expecting the forest department to conserve India's forests and wildlife all by itself.

**Ashish Kothari**

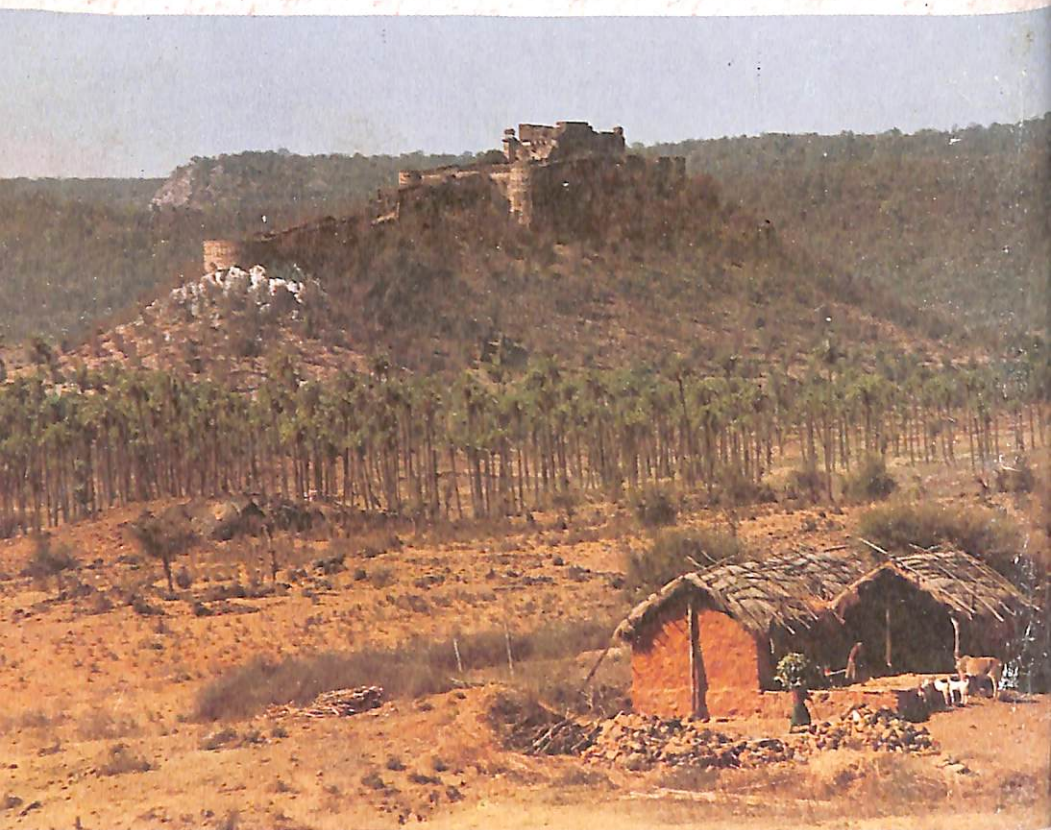
**Frontline : April 4-17, 1998**



*We shall march ahead – TBS General Secretary,  
Rajendra Singh with prominent rural activists*







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