

Shahpura Explores Innovative Ways of Governing the Commons

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This case study describes how a village, Shahpura, collectively saved its common land, developed a plantation and innovated a way to water it regularly without adding to women's burden. It is a part of a series collected from diverse villages in Ajmer, Rajasthan where through FES's interventions, the villagers struggle, and in most cases, succeed in laying claim to their pasture lands

Prakriti Karyashala which translates to 'Rural College', was started in 2012 to respond to the rising needs of the rural communities, village institutions, panchayats along with government and non-government officials, to steer processes at the village level. This body enhances the knowledge and skills of individuals and community institutions to play an active role in governing their common resources and enables them to access and implement relevant schemes. Prakriti Karyashala trains a cadre of field trainers who in turn provide training to stakeholders closest to their location. The various strategies employed include facilitating interactions with district administration for district-level implementation design, building collaborations with Milk Unions and NGOs for handholding support in natural resource management for Panchayats and village institutions, and conducting training programmes.ⁱ

SHAH PURA

"When there is good work happening, all protests will stop." Member of the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti

Shahpura is a large village in Jawaja block of Ajmer comprising 600 families and 35 different castes. Their primary occupation is agriculture and cattle rearing. The village has a large area of common land, some of which had become inaccessible due to the abundance of the fast-growing and untamed *Prosopis juliflora* (angrezi babul). In the absence of a map or a boundary demarcation the villagers of Shahpura had also been unable to ascertain how much of the land was actually part of their Commons and how much of it, private. To add to the confusion, the placement of their common lands close to an arterial road created a higher probability of encroachment, with people

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from other villages setting up habitations there. This was beginning to become a cause of great concern to the villagers.

During the winter of 2015, Jorawar Singh, a Prakriti Karyashala trainer from FES, visited Shahpura and began talking to the villagers and creating awareness about Commons. He told them about the 2011 Supreme Court Order, wherein State Governments were instructed to evict illegal/unauthorized occupants of Gram Sabha land, and restore these lands for the common use of the villagers. Armed with this knowledge, the local community members were ready to rally together to fight the encroachers and secure their Commons. But this was just the first step.

After attending the PK training sessions, the people of Shahpura learnt that according to the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Rules, 1996 rule 170(1), there was a provision made for the formation of a five member committee called the 'Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti' at the village level for the management of Pasture Lands. The rule also had a provision for planting of the appropriate type of grasses, shrubs and trees as well as protecting it from encroachments. Jorawar Singh also informed them of their rights under the Land Revenue Act article 91(6), where the district collector should issue orders in writing, entrusting the responsibility of preventing and removing the encroachment on land used for common purposes, with the Patwari, Sarpanch, Gramsevak and Tehsildar. This helped them identify the different departments and individuals they could approach when sending in their applications for the removal of encroachers from their common lands.

The next step for the people of Shahpura was to form a Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti, which would make important decisions regarding the management and development of their common lands. This Samiti would be headed by the Ward Panch and four other members, nominated by the Gram Sabha. The members gathered together and set rules and regulations for their village common lands.

Their first intervention was on their common pasture plot called 'Sarakana wala Charagah' which lay on the banks of an important road. The committee realized that this prime location was in danger of being encroached by people from other villages who could come in overnight and build houses on the open commonland. The Samiti's first task was to secure the land by demarcating its boundary using stone pillars (minar). Following this, a few members from the committee came up with the plan for starting a plantation in this 6 acre plot. This idea was met with a lot of resistance from the villagers because this land was normally used by their animals to graze. It took patience and dedicated attempts of the committee members to explain to them that even though this land would be inaccessible (ban on grazing) for a couple of years, there would be other pieces of land which would be open as grazing lands for their animals. They explained that they had to see this as an investment as there were many long-term benefits that the village would gain from the planting in just a few years.

A sum of INR 14 lakh was sanctioned through MGNREGA to develop this common land. They marked its boundary with stone in one area and thorny branches in another. Soil and moisture conservation work like trenches and water harvesting structures, locally called 'Nadi' were developed for improving soil moisture and drinking water availability for cattle. There was a clear demarcation of areas where the planting would be undertaken. As is the case in a lot of villages across Rajasthan, it is usually the women who take their animals to graze. Without a designated

pastureland guard, the responsibility of ensuring the safety of the newly planted, young saplings fell on the women. These women kept an eye out for unauthorised grazing by fellow or neighbouring villagers, while they take their goats to graze in the designated open grazing areas.

“We are informed in the FES training to take ownership of the roads we walk on, the ponds we drink from and the schools and hospitals we go to. If we keep thinking that they belong to the government, we will keep waiting for them to fix issues. This is our village. This is our responsibility.” Residents of Shahpura

Innovative Drip Irrigation

One of the elders in the village began to wonder about how these plants were being watered. This task was also assigned to the women of the village as they visited these lands often. He wondered how long it would take them to water each plant manually. This led to villagers discussing alternative methods to ensure efficient watering of the plants. The youth of the village



Innovative drip irrigation: Drip bags attached to the plant to reduce water wastage and regular watering.

felt that as there was a borewell in the vicinity, they could irrigate the plants through water pipes. This was an expensive method and was immediately scrapped. Another member suggested using a pot which had holes in it, kept at a certain height above each plant. This was also vetoed because they couldn't control the flow of the water. The Sarpanch then came up with an idea which had never been heard of before. Right next to their common lands, was a Primary Healthcare Centre. Through a few conversations with the medical professionals there, he learnt that they had a lot of medical drip bags with pipes, which were going to waste. He believed that this could solve the issue of watering the plants regularly, because the flow of water could now be controlled.

The Healthcare Centre provided the village with 150 of these drip bottles. They fixed the pipe on a stick, close to the plant, sticking the other end of the pipe near the root of the plant. A hole was cut at the top of each bag so it could be filled easily. This innovative method of drip irrigation ensures that the water goes directly to the roots and isn't wasted, which was the case when the

women manually poured water over the plant. It also reduces their burden to some extent as they only need to ensure that the bottles are filled at regular intervals every couple of days. Each one of these bottles has been set up to last for at least 48 hours. The plants are growing well with very less effort from the women. This innovative method of drip irrigation using hanging saline bottles to 150 plants is expected to be replicated with each of the 2000 saplings planted in the 6 acre pasture land that has been taken under community protection since 2017. The community has also constructed a water harvesting structure within the protected plot. They have done grass seeding of Dhaman grass this year and have started collecting these grass seeds for next year's grass seeding. They have also taken up protection of the adjacent pasture plot for better fodder, fuel and water benefits to the community.

Villages like Shahpura deserve all the credit for fighting and taking responsibility for what is theirs. By shifting the onus from just the leaders or Samiti members to the entire village, there is a true feeling of ownership, and therefore people take pride in their work and the role they play as stewards of their Commons.

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Training Modules for Restoration and Governance of Commons

