

UVM-SVARAJ

Community-based project for Small Height Anicuts

Kishore Saint

The ancient, jagged Aravali hills of Rajasthan are dotted with innumerable hamlets and villages along streams and watersheds inhabited by an ancient tribe, the Bhil adivasis. Not long ago, these hills were densely forested. They were the natural providers of virtually all the basic needs i.e. fuel, fodder, food, wood for housing, and water for these communities. Times have changed and the forests have been taken over by the State and its wealth destroyed by commercial exploitation. Famines and droughts have followed as a result of this.

Awareness about this alarming situation and about the even grimmer prospect of desertification of the region dawned during the 80s. Restoration measures in the form of reforestation, pasture protection and soil and water conservation have since begun to be put in place. This work has had some impact in halting degradation. The effort and outcome however have not been commensurate with the requirement of the situation and much remains to be done to strengthen natural resource bases for the livelihoods of the people.

Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal (UVM), an organisation of Bhil adivasis, as a pioneer in this process, has over the past two decades undertaken awareness raising, community organisation and protection and regeneration initiatives for pasturelands, forest areas and water bodies. The UVM-Svaraj project for small-height construction is the latest addition to these activities. This is an outcome of an earlier programme of training and planning for local water conservation carried out in collaboration with Tarun Bharat Sangh in 2005-07.

Three village communities – Dodavali, Pipaliya, Majam – were selected initially. Later Majam was replaced by Kundal for logistic reasons. All these communities have been associated with the earlier activities of UVM including rights-based education and community organization. They have also been involved in joint forest management initiatives of the forest department. In addition, Pipaliya took initiative to get a tarmac built for the village. In Dodavali the people successfully had rates of work revised upwards under National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGP).

The criteria for selection included: community cohesion, capacity and will to take responsibility for preparatory work and to carry out construction, contribute towards labour costs, share benefits in equitable and transparent manner and look after maintenance. These were explained and agreed to in open meetings of the community. Consent of panchayats and concerned departments was to be obtained by the community leaders. Technical design and estimates were obtained with the help of the civil engineers of Vidya Bhavan Community Polytechnic. Final decisions about design, costs, duration and work allocation were taken by the community leaders after taking into account site, material, labour, and weather conditions in each locality.

In Dodavali and Pipaliya work started in early May with the digging of the foundation. Sand and stones were

collected locally while cement was brought from Udaipur. In Dodavali both labour and skilled masons came from the village. Masons from a neighbouring village were engaged in Pipaliya. Supervision and guidance was provided by UVM staff and members. In both places work was completed by the end of May.

With the onset of pre-monsoon rains both the anicuts were filled to capacity. The Dodavali anicut measures 64' in length, 4'x 2.2' in width and 5.3' in height. Pipaliya anicut is 80' long, 16' high and 2' wide on the upstream face of an existing stone masonry structure.

The tangible benefits have been in the form of drinking water for livestock, groundwater recharge, and increased level of water in wells downstream with the possibility of additional irrigation. The community is planning maintenance and de-silting in the dry season, ensuring longevity of storage capacity by upstream watershed treatment, equity in sharing benefits and open participation in management decisions.

This water harvesting project, through community effort, has brought tremendous satisfaction and a sense of achievement to these communities. They have demonstrated their capacity to undertake self-planned works and are keen to undertake more projects of this kind along the small catchments above their cultivated lands.

*Kishore Saint is Advisor, UVM
chand67@bppl.net.in*

