

# Arvari Sansad: the farmers' parliament

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The success of a rainwater harvesting programme in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, India, supported by the NGO *Tarun Bharat Sangh* (as reported on in LEISA Magazine Vol.19, No.3, September 2003 and Vol. 16, No.1, March 2000) brought about increased water availability and related benefits. With these benefits also came new challenges, such as managing the equitable use of this water. There have been various attempts to take advantage of the improved water availability, and policies and mechanisms were needed to counter the threat which was looming over the sustainability of the community's efforts to secure their livelihoods. We now return to the story of the *Arvari Sansad* to take a more detailed look at how this locally initiated institution achieves its aims.

## Farmers' parliament

The *Arvari Sansad*, or parliament, was formed by villagers in 1999 with the primary objective of safeguarding community efforts for the conservation and use of their scarce natural resources. It follows a Gandhian notion of eco-friendly village-level self reliance (*Gram Sauraj*), where decisions are made at the grass-roots level instead of by centralized institutions.

The role of the *Arvari Sansad* is to develop policies and rules to govern the use of natural resources like water, soils and the forest, resources which are directly related to the wellbeing of the villagers. The parliament represents 72 villages and meets four times a year to discuss problems and decide on the best strategies for land and water use. It has 142 members who are nominated by their respective village institutions (*Gram Sabhas*). Policies and rules decided upon during meetings of the *Arvari Sansad* are noted down by volunteers from institutions or NGOs

## Ensuring that policies are followed

The village institution, in this case the Gram Sabha, will hold a public hearing in which both the alleged violator and petitioners are given a fair chance to represent their case in public. Based on the local community rules, after pleading and reasoning of the parties involved, the Gram Sabha takes decisions which are then binding on both parties and also on the communities involved. If the accused is found guilty and does not comply with the ruling, the Gram Sabha can order a community boycott. This means that all the villagers are told to shun the violator. They are forbidden to socialize with him, which involves no talking, no interaction, and neither inviting nor attending any of the violator's social functions. In this way, the violator becomes isolated, and after some time will generally give up his or her actions and comply with the ruling.

In extreme cases where the violator still does not comply with rulings of the Gram Sabha, social coercion is resorted to (*Huka Pani Bandh*). This is a method of societal pressure or collective community forcing. This system is stronger than the community boycott, in that it bans the carrying out of all daily chores with the violator. He is not allowed to trade with anybody, nor attend village institutions and social events. Establishing and carrying out any kind of relations with him are banned. The violator is not even allowed to take drinking water from the common well. No person is allowed to work at his farm or rent out bullocks or labour to him. Leading a normal social life within the village community becomes impossible for the violator.

like *Tarun Bharat Sangh*. The *Arvari Sansad* parliament members also elect a coordination committee among themselves, including some external facilitators like volunteers and social workers. This coordination committee is responsible for ensuring that policies and rules are followed. Any *Arvari Sansad* member can suggest items for the agenda. In situations where village-level violations are reported, solutions can be arrived at amicably through discussion and mutual consent within the village communities. If this does not prove effective, community boycott or social coercion is resorted to. In India, this is a system which involves shunning the violators within the society or village (see Box).

## Participatory policy development

One policy recently decided upon by the *Arvari Sansad*, was to support a cropping pattern in favour of local indigenous crops, which use less water. They also discouraged the growing of water intensive crops (e.g. sugar cane) for commercial purposes, since this might disrupt the improved water availability. During community discussions, however, this met with stiff opposition from members as it became clear that some farmers wanted to grow sugar cane for domestic use, not commercial purposes. The farmers' argument was that they need sugar cane for use at home and for making sweets, for special occasions like marriages and festivities such as *Diwali* or *Holi*. It was established by the *Arvari Sansad* that these farmers did not have sufficient money to buy such products from the market. In addition, the efforts of these farmers in the conservation of water, soil and forests was also taken into consideration. It was realised that if farmers are able to conserve natural resources in an effective way, then they also have a right to the sustainable use of these resources. Through a long process of debate and discussions in various public meetings and workshops with the farmers, regional communities, village institutions, *Arvari Sansad* members, social workers and volunteers, the *Arvari Sansad* arrived at an innovative and sustainable solution to this issue which they call the "compensatory agricultural crop pattern". Under this system, if a farmer wants to grow a water intensive crop like sugar cane for domestic use on 25 percent of his agricultural land, then he has to grow less water-consuming crops like mung bean (*gram*) on the remaining land. This was unanimously agreed upon in the parliament and is being successfully implemented. Though outside advice from volunteers, social workers and others is welcomed, the decision to accept or reject any suggestions rests with the *Arvari Sansad*.

Many intelligent and insightful suggestions emerge from the village communities themselves. For example, the basic idea of compensatory agricultural crop pattern came from local farmers. Water was declared to be a common property resource of the community which had worked for its conservation. Such an innovative solution is a unique example, not found in other parts of India. Since most of the farmers in the area only have land holdings of approximately 2 hectares, there is little chance of misuse by farmers with large land holdings.

Another successful policy of the *Arvari Sansad* was to rule against the sale of agricultural land to industries or big private companies who wanted to establish water consuming enterprises, such as a proposed brewery. The sale of agricultural land to the beverage company did not materialize, as a result of opposition by local communities and the *Arvari Sansad*. The company realized the strong level of resistance by local people and withdrew their plans while still in the initial stages.



Policies and rules are agreed upon in an open discussion in the Arvari Sansad.

### Using the present legal system

If violators are external companies or industries, or there are conflicting government policies, it is possible to resort to litigation. For example, the *Arvari Sansad* was successful in getting a fishing licence cancelled, which had originally been granted to a private external contractor by the government fisheries department. This had allowed the external contractor to take fish from the village of Hamirpur in the Arvari catchment area. Under the present government policy, natural resources like water and fish are the property of the government. But the *Arvari Sansad's* argument was that, since it was the people and not the government whose initiative to construct hundreds of traditional water harvesting structures (*johads*) had resulted in improved water availability, which then led to the re-emergence of fish in the stream, then they, the people, and not the government, should have the right to decide what to do with the fish and water. Money required for litigation in this case was raised through donations and legal help from various social organisations like *Tarun Bharati Sangh*. Though common or ordinary litigation requires money, in India there is an alternate system of justice called Public Interest Litigation. Under this system, any person or group of persons can send a public interest application to the state High Court or the Supreme Court of India. If the court feels that the issue is of significant public interest, it appoints lawyers who take up the case for litigation. Applicants do not have to pay for litigation in such cases.

In order to discourage the sale of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, the *Arvari Sansad* has made rules against the sale of agricultural land to outsiders for non-agricultural purposes without prior permission of the regional communities concerned. The *Arvari Sansad* is also taking advantage of a present law under which special permission is required from the government to convert fertile agricultural land for other uses. The *Arvari Sansad* is currently planning to take up legal action against the sale of fertile agricultural land to a big hotelier group for the construction of a five star hotel, which they consider a threat to the agriculture and ecology of the area.

Initially, government institutions did not take much notice of the farmers' parliament until the *Arvari Sansad* stood up against various decisions, like challenging the granting of fishing rights to an external contractor. It was during this time that the government ordered the dismantling of the office of the *Arvari Sansad* near Hamirpur. This step was taken out of political

frustration in an attempt to discourage the farmers' parliament movement. But this did not prevent the *Arvari Sansad* from fighting for their cause, and ultimately they were successful in getting the fishing licence cancelled. After achieving this success, the village parliamentarians gained considerable self-confidence in community-based interventions.

### The future

In spite of the many successes, the *Arvari Sansad* faces many challenges, including new leadership, religious and caste based differences, as well as large scale illiteracy. The situation has improved since the initial days, as there is now greater participation of landless people and women, and the caste based groupings are less prevalent. This is due to a better common understanding and frequent interaction between numerous people of different social backgrounds. *Arvari Sansad* is also generating awareness through public meetings and awareness campaigns about future threats to natural resources and livelihoods. Other social issues like rights, education for disadvantaged community members, gender issues, deforestation, biodiversity conservation and ways of reviving sustainable traditional farming systems are also being taken up in the *Arvari Sansad* meetings now. Local politicians have assured the villagers that the sustainable practical initiatives taken by the *Arvari Sansad* will be supported by friendly policies. Policy development in India is a lengthy and time-consuming process and takes many years to bear fruit. Despite the complexities of the political scene, some of the efforts of the *Arvari Sansad* have borne fruit and many of its demands, like stopping the privatisation of water and ensuring equitable sharing of water, have been accepted by the present state government.

Despite previous anti-farmer actions and policies of the government, which have tended to be supportive of large scale commercial farming and industrialisation, efforts like these give out a ray of hope. Such initiatives by villagers, farmers and local institutions are an example for policy makers, governments and other communities in India and around the world to follow. The *Arvari Sansad* is determined to carry forward the torch of rural self reliance and sustainable development. ■

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