

Conservation catalyst

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A non-governmental organisation in Rajasthan has motivated villagers to take up preservation of forests.

WHEN the people of Satawat village decided to sue the government for incorporating their land in the Sariska sanctuary, Rajinder Singh, the convener of the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), felt the Sangh's work had paid off.

TBS, a local voluntary agency, was instrumental in making the people aware of the need to save the environment and forests using their traditional knowledge, rather than depending on government hand-outs. Says Singh, "Government officials don't understand the emotional context of a people's attachment to the forests. The only way the forest department can save the forests is to pay heed to these sentiments."

The TBS has played an important role in sustaining the Save Aravalli campaign and has organised marches and meetings on the issue. Among TBS' main projects is the revival of traditional forest management methods. Its attempts to revive the old system of people's forests has yielded good results. In fact, the TBS ashram in Bhikampura-Kishori is itself an experimental roondh on land donated by the villagers, who can use its produce in times of need.

TBS also tries to resolve disputes between the state and villagers. The most famous case is that of Gopalpura village, where the villagers' attempts to store monsoon water using indigenous techniques in 1986 was declared illegal. TBS played a major role in refuting the charges of the government.

In June 1987, TBS persuaded the villagers to plant trees near their village and had a protective wall built around them. This, too, angered the officials and the TBS was fined Rs 4,950 for "planting trees on government land".

Singh says that the situation has to change because the villagers are now demanding their rights. "The government cannot expect nobody to react," he says.

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