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ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Villages Coopted Into Conservation

By **Keya Acharya****KOLAR, Karnataka, Apr 16 (IPS) - An initiative in India to introduce environmental conservation into village administration is making good headway in this rural district some 120 km from Bangalore, capital of southern Karnataka state.**

Venkatesh, 34, a local rural administrator from Maramakindapalli village in Kolar, bordering the discontinuous Eastern Ghat range of hills along India's eastern coastline, says his mandate this year is to protect the surrounding scrub jungle in the Rayalpad forest zone from being lopped off by the villagers.

That scrub, purportedly 'forest' under the forest department, has been denuded due to villagers cutting the trees for fuelwood and from massive forest fires, in all probability a consequence of the loss of tree cover.

"I remember, in my grandfather's time, there was such fear of the range forest officers that no one dared venture into the forest to cut branches", says Venkatesh, " But nowadays there are no patrols and forest guards hardly come here."

" Now that the fear is gone, there is rampant cutting, and because of this water-retention has gone down," he continues.

Venkatesh now thinks that part of his administrative work is to keep the villagers out of the surrounding scrub jungle.

Venkatesh has support from the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), a non-government organisation (NGO) initiated by India's very successful National Dairy Development Board in Anand, Gujarat, and now funded by both government and international institutions like the British High Commission in Delhi, Swedish International Agency(SIDA), UNDP and the Canadian Agency for International Development (CIDA).

FES works in seven of India's 35 states and territories and along with various rural institutions towards the restoration and conservation of natural resources.

Karnataka is the only state where FES is working with the local village administration to introduce environmental conservation into planning. "We chose Karnataka for this exercise because the village self-administration system works well here," says FES project officer, Jojo John.

India has, by law, a decentralized system of administration whereby rural villages govern themselves through leaders they elect in 'panchayats', or local bodies. The 'Gram Panchayat', or village local body, is the lowest rung of governance, accountable to two more institutions above it at area and district level in this three-tiered system of administration.

This decentralised system of village self-administration was a dream of Mahatma Gandhi's, the father of Indian independence in 1947. But that dream was realised only in 1973, with a special Act making it compulsory for all of India's states to set up the three-tiered system.

Almost 70 percent of India, which is said to live in its villages, is impacted by the panchayat system of administration.

The Mudimadagu panchayat in Kolar district, where Venkatesh is a member, has 32 villages with a population of 6,000 under its jurisdiction.

So far, about 215 hectares of an identified 1,000 ha of 'common lands', where the panchayat holds custodial rights given it by the government, have been covered under various soil and moisture-conservation measures in Kolar district.

"Our thrust is on 'common lands' because it is very critical to the village marginalised," says FES project coordinator Vijay Kumar. "Right now we can say that we have, at the least, positively impacted the basic needs of fuel, fodder and drinking water in the all the 125 village institutions."

"Working within the panchayat system is more long-lasting than conservation efforts from non-governmental initiatives because this method deals with incorporation of environmental conservation in policy as well as in the administrative mindset", says John.

FES says it began by legally incorporating a subcommittee within village panchayats, and asking them to detail, through illustrative maps, what they thought were uses and problems concerning their common lands.

Through a system of dots and crosses, meticulous maps are drawn up detailing housing in the villages, the seasonality of work and various activities, the names of trees and its uses, marking even the oxygen it produces.

Problems within these areas are then identified and tackled in gradual steps.

Another panchayat president, Krishnappa, of Bagepalli region in Kolar district says the training by FES has helped village leaders in his panchayat learn how to make their own plans for natural resource conservation.

"We now need to get all the people involved in various activities in the village, namely the government, NGOs, self-help groups and others to get involved in the planning process," says Krishnappa.

"The panchayat system needs to encompass 'soil and water, forests and products and draught animals'



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into planning," says Prof. Abdul Aziz of the Bangalore-based Institute for Socio Economic Change, an expert on India's panchayat system.

India's ruling United Progressive Alliance, a coalition of parties led by the Congress party, has set up the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) programme, wherein one member of each rural household will be assured of 100 days of paid employment by the government.

Aziz believes that this rural employment programme should be used by FES as a tool to incorporate environmental conservation into the village development process.

In Karnataka, the government appears to be a step ahead of Aziz, in that it has already prioritised soil and water conservation work as one of its foremost activities under NREG.

"We're optimistic that there is a way ahead now that gives us more opportunity to push environmental conservation into the decentralisation process", says Vijay Kumar, "but it's still a long way ahead before the NREG actually moves ahead".

(END/2008)

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