COMMUNITY INITIATIVES IN ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT – A
CASE STUDY OF BISHNOIS IN JODHPUR DISTRICT

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Abstract

The paper highlights Bishnois community initiatives in protection of Environment particularly in vegetation and wild life. It also focuses the principles of Bishnoism i.e, their traditions, customs and taboos and the historical perspectives in the protection of wild life and vegetation. In addition, it delineates on rainwater harvesting for drinking water. It concludes that the Bishniosm can be replicated in other parts of the country for conservation of vegetation and wild life.

Introduction

Environmental protection is the concern of every one today. The rapid growth in world’s population and indiscriminate use of natural resources are a consequence of land erosion, over fertilization and problems of preserving forests, and wildlife. The assessment of ecological changes and of the beneficial use of land, water and air resources requires collective wisdom. Given the current rate of increasing depletion of natural resources, the growing problems of ecology might well become a major source of ‘internal strife’. Therefore, newer ways of conservation and promotion of natural resources, and their distribution need to be evolved. In this gloomy and circular scenario the approach, method and reasoning used by the great saint Guru Jambheswar Ji or Guru Jamboji provides a new hope. Can any one imagine that more than 450 years ago, he started the Bisnois cult (Bees means twenty and naui means nine) from a remote desert area, without having even formal education, clearly understood himself about environment? Moreover, he had the wisdom of influencing generations of people for protecting vegetation and bio-diversity of their villages. These people are inhabiting the desert area of western Rajasthan and some parts of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and they have

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recognised as outstanding environmentally conscious community in the recent times. Recently, Bishnois community of Jodhpur district has hit the headlines of Newspapers by arresting poachers for killing Blackbucks in their village vicinity. This incident shows the commitment towards protection of wild life in their village surroundings. Perhaps, because of their Eco-friendly life, the Bishnois are more prosperous than other communities living in the Thar Desert with plenty of vegetation and herds of antelopes roaming freely in their village peripheries and their villages are easily distinguishable’ (The Hindu, Survey of the Environment-99). These people are wisely using the natural resources including water resources for protecting their environment. In addition, they are tapping rain water through their traditional rainwater harvesting structures which are being used for their drinking purposes especially in summer months. Considering the facts, an attempt has been made to study this Eco-friendly Bishnois community, their attitudes, beliefs and more importantly their management systems aimed at conserving and promoting the environment and their hygienic practices of drinking water and sanitation.

Review Of Literature

• Priya Das mentioned in her article titled ‘If there is a will’ (Hindu-survey of Environment-1997) that local communities can successfully mange their environment. She stated that the people residing inside the Kailadevi Wild life Sanctuary, Rajasthan have laid down certain rules on the use of forest resources. In addition, no one is allowed to carry an axe into the forest area of the sanctuary. Moreover, the villagers are allowed to collect only dead and dry wood for cooking purpose of personal use (not for sale). However, timber for household purposes can be brought only with the Forest Protection Committee’s (FPC) consent. Members of the FPC keep a constant vigil and report any untoward happening in the forest. The FPC penalizes anyone violating these rules through fine for the offence committed ranging from Rs.11/- to Rs.1100/-. These rules have apparently been reached by common consensus. The money collected thus is created as community resource and
put to use for community services. The villagers of Lakhruki, Sawai Madhopur districts were constructed a pond from the resources collected.

- ‘Rural communities in poor countries are bio-mass based subsistence economies in that their rural folk eke out a living from products obtained directly from plants and animals (Dasgupta:1998). For example, studies in India have shown that in a number of regions as much as 40-50 per cent of the working hours of villagers are devoted to fodder and fuel collection, animal care, and grazing. The Earth summit (1992) envisages that the conservation of bio-diversity is internationalized and became a global concern. Accordingly, the participated countries are evolving strategies for economic and sustainable development by appreciating and using their bio-diversity through the involvement of indigenous communities.

**Objectives**

- To analyze the perceptions of Bishnois about environment and its impact on Community.
- To assess the community initiatives on management of Drinking water and sanitation.

**Methodology**

A sample of 50 Bishnoi households was interviewed through a structured interview schedule. Also, Participatory Rural Appraisal tools like focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and transect were used to gather additional information and insights of the Bishnois beliefs, customs, traditions in management of environment protection in their village vicinity. Moreover, discussions were also held with the Divisional Forest Officer (Wild life), Executive Engineer of Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) of Jodhpur, Faculty members of SIRD, Jaipur, Bishoi Samaj Committee members and other concerned officials to get their perceptions about Bishois initiatives in protection of vegetation and wild life.

**Study Area**

Based on the Bishois’ population, Jodhpur district in Rajasthan was selected for the study. From the sample district, Luni Block was selected. From the sample block two villages called ‘Gura Bishnoiyan’ and ‘Khejarli kalan’ were
selected for the study. The survey was conducted at two intermittent periods in the months of February and March, 2002.

**Brief Profile Of Sample District – Jodhpur**

Jodhpur is one of the districts of Rajasthan State. The district headquarters is located in Jodhpur City. The district is bounded on the north by Bikaner and Jaisalmer districts, on the south by Pali and Nagaur districts and on the west by Jaisalmer district. The district is divided into two sub-divisions namely Jodhpur and Phalodi, each sub-division is under the control of a Sub-Divisional Officer and each tehsil under the charge of a Tehsildar who also enjoys the powers of an Executive Magistrate. The Collector is the overall administrative head of the district and also discharges functions of the District Magistrate. According to 2001, the total population of district is 28,80,777 persons (males 15,09,563; females 13,71,214). The literacy rate of the district is 57.38 per cent (13,40,097 persons) with male (9,05,259) and female(4,34,838) literacy rates are 73.86 per cent and 39.18 per cent respectively.

According to 1991 Census, The highest proportions of the rural population (22.06 percent) reside in Osian Panchayat Samithi followed by 12.01 percent in Luni Panchayat Samithi. The SC and ST populations to total population are 15.27 percent and 2.82 respectively.

**Brief Profile Of Sample Villages**

The villages namely Gura Bishnoiyan and Khejarli kalan are 24 km and 25km respectively away from Jodhpur city. Gura Bishnoiyan village has the population of 5855 (751 households) as per 1991 Census and majority of the population belongs to Bishnois community in the village. The total area of the village is 5919.83 hectares. Also, the village is having educational facilities from primary to high school. Further, the village has a Primary Heath Centre. Majority of the people is depending on agriculture and dairy for their livelihood.

According to 1991 Census, the Khejarli kalan village has the population of 2103 (323 households) and their main occupation is agriculture. The subsidiary occupation is selling milk nearby town ie. Jodhpur. In this village, majority of the
population belongs to Bishonis sect. The village is having educational facilities from primary to high school.

**Emergence Of Bishnoi Community – Role Of Guru Jambeshwarji**

Bishnois are the followers of Guru Jambheswar popularly known as Jambhoji. He was born in the year 1451 AD in the village of Peepasar. Presently, the said village is situated in Nagaur district of Rajasthan. At his childhood, Guru.Jambhoji was taking a herd of cattle for gazing in the desert. His father assigned this job to him. During the time, he used to watch a few herds of black buck from the shade of Khejri (desert tree) trees and developed fascination on these antelopes.

When he was 25 years old, a drought attacked the Western Rajasthan region due to this scarcity of fodder, water both for irrigation and drinking occurred. As a result, the livelihoods of people had severely affected in the region. During the time, as a survival strategy, a large number of trees were cut down by them for selling this wood nearby villages and, a large number of antelopes and birds such as Chinkara, black buck and pigeons etc were hunted by them for meat purpose. In addition, majority of the villagers (middle class and poor) had migrated to other parts of Rajasthan in search of livelihood. To cope up with this pathetic situation, Guru.Jamboji found out that the human beings should protect the nature like flora (Khejri, Beri, Ker - desert trees) and fauna (chinkaras, black bucks, blue bulls, peacock, pigeons, quails) for eradication of droughts in the desert. Accordingly, he invited the villagers to participate in the movement for protection of flora and fauna in the region. For this noble cause, he left his home in the year 1484 and started living on the ‘Samathal sand hill of Mukam village’ situated in Nokha Tehsil of Bikaner district in Rajasthan. In the year 1485, he launched the Bishnoi cult and framed 29 principles or commandments for his followers. The Guru or father of Bishois spent the remaining 51 years of his life to spreading his great vision to the people of the areas of Thar desert. The principles laid down by him were adopted to conserve the bio-diversity of the area as much as a healthy Eco-friendly social life for his followers.
Principles Of Bishnois Sect

- Of the **twenty nine principles/commandments**, **eight** were prescribed to preserve bio-diversity as much as to encourage animal husbandry. These include non-sterilization of bulls, prohibition on killing of animals, birds as much as the cutting of any green trees. In other words that all living beings should be protected by the Bishnois.

- **Ten principles** deal with the personal hygiene and health for all. These mention simple instructions like vegetarianism, safe drinking water (cloth filtered water), bathing daily, environmental sanitation, prohibiting the use of tobacco, opium and alcohol.

- **Four principles** provide guidelines for worshipping God daily and always remember that God is omnipresent. On every **Amavasya**, a fast should be observed and collective lighting of holy fire is to be performed for the salvation of the soul. In Bishnoi’s temple, idol worshiping is discouraged. Ritual prohibition for thirty days after childbirth and five days during menstruation are observed.

- **Seven principles** describe directions for healthy social behaviour. These direct the followers to live a simple truthful life, be content, be abstentions, avoiding false arguments. Criticizing others are strictly prohibited. The tolerance is always shown while discussing with the people.

Community (Bishnois) Initiatives In Management Of Environment
Section -A; Protection Of Vegetation – Historical Perspective

In the year 1730 AD, when Maharaja Ahay Singhji, ruler of Marwar (Jodhpur) State desired to construct a new royal mansion, namely, Phool Mahal For this purpose, some quantity of limestone was brought from nearby quarries but it had to be burnt before use in other words some firewood was needed. In view of this, the king sent his troops to cut the trees. Thus, the troops reached a Bishonis village called **Khejali** about 21 km away from Jodhpur city. This village was having rich green patches while comparing with other parts of the area as they been protecting and nourishing since after launching of the Bishnoi cult in
the village. Firstly, the troops approached the **Ramuji Bishoni’s residence** where a huge sprawling Khejri (prosopis cineraria) tree were being grown. At that time, Ramuji went to his agriculture field and his wife, namely, **Amrita Devi** and their daughters, namely, **Asu, Ratni, and Bhagu Bai** were at home. During the time, **Amrita Devi** felt that some commotion was going on outside the house, accordingly, she had instructed the daughters to find the matter. They observed that the troops were preparing to cut the green trees which were in front of their house. Subsequently, **Amrutha Devi** resisted cutting of the green trees as it was prohibited in their cult. However, the troops offered the gold and money but she was not succumb to temptation for bribe. Further, she stated that she considered it as an act of ignominy and insult to her religious faith. Furthermore, she expressed that she rather give away her life to save the green trees. Furthermore, she said, “**if a tree was saved from cutting at the cost of one’s head, she was ready for that**”. Subsequently, she offered her head for sacrifice. The axes were cut the neck of **Amrutha Devi** and her daughters. Thus, this news scattered to the other Bishnois villages like a wild fire. The Bishnois of eighty-three villages rushed to the spot and tried to protect the trees but it was in vain. Subsequently, they took the decision that each tree should be embraced by a Bishnoi volunteer like chipko movement occurred in the 20th century. Like this, they sacrificed their lives for protecting the green trees. In the beginning of sacrifice, old people started embracing the trees, in this way, many old people sacrificed their lives for the noble cause, however, and the trees were being fallen. Meanwhile, the Hakim (head of the soliders) commented that Bishnois were getting rid off their old people in this manner, then, young men, women, just married, unmarried, rich and poor sacrificed their lives by embracing the trees. Ultimately, three hundred sixty three people sacrificed their lives for these noble cause of protecting trees in their village vicinity. After this the genocide, the troops went back to Jodhpur and informed the same to the king. He apologized the Bishnois for occurrence of the incident. In addition, he issued a royal decree, engraved on a copper plate ordering the following – All cutting of green trees and hunting of animals within the revenue boundaries of Bishnoi villages was strictly
prohibited; It was also ordered that if by mistake any individual violated this order, severe prosecution and penalty could be imposed; Even the members of the ruling family should not shoot wild animals in and around Bishnois villages.

**Section - B; Protection Of Wild Animals – Some Case Illustrations**

The respondents delineated that the Bishnois have been sacrificing their lives for protecting the chinkara and black buck from the hunting. Some important case studies of self-sacrifice for protecting chinkara and blackbuck in the vicinity of their villages are presented below –

(A). Chimna Ram and PartapaRam sons of Gorkha Ram Bishnoi (both were brothers) resided in a village called Barasan, nearby Dhori Minna town, Barmer district, Rajasthan became martyrs, while saving an antelope. The context is that the brothers were bringing water on their camels, during the time, the poachers were chasing a herd of antelopes. The brothers immediately objected them not to kill the innocent animals. Ultimately, the situation was happened that the two Bishnois (brothers) were shot dead by the poachers. This incident occurred on the 12th August, 1947. 

(B). On the 3rd February, 1948, Arjun Ram Bishnoi, son of Prabhu Ram belonged to Bhaktasani village, Jodhpur district and the village is situated close to Khejari village (sample village). A hunter killed him while he was saving a chinkara from the shooting.

(C). Chuna Ram Bishnoi son of Hardon Godara resident of Rochicha Kallan village, Jodhpur district. While protecting a herd of black buck and chinkara from hunters. The merciless hunters also killed him. The incident occurred in the year 1948. 

(D). Another martyr is BhinaRam Bishnoi son of LalRam Bishnoi, resident of Bjaar village, Jodhpur district. He objected poachers not to kill the black buck however, the poachers killed him. This incident occurred on the 17th May, 1963.

(E). Lohawat Marwar village falls under the sub-division of Phalauudi, Jodhpur district. In this village, a Bishnoi person called Birbal Ram laid down his life on the 17th December 1977. In this incident, three hunters indulged in poaching. The culprits were sentenced on the 9th January 1979 by the sessions court to 20 years rigorous imprisonment. 

(F). Nihal Chand Bishnoi who was killed on the 3rd October, 1996 by a gang of poachers, while protecting a deer from the poaching. A documentary film titled “Willing to Sacrifice” produced by Yamini Films
directed by BVP Rao recorded that Nihal’s father mentioned that my son was killed by poachers when he tried to save a deer from the poaching. The father also expressed that his son sacrificed himself for the Bishnois faith. This incident was on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} October, 1999. Nihal Chand Bishnoi was awarded ‘\textit{Shauraya Chakra}’ posthumously by the president of India, Shri.K.R.Narayanan. (G). Mrs. Rama Devi wife of Rameswar Das Dharnia Bishnoi, breast-fed a fawn to save its life. The incident took place when hunters chased a deer herd. A pregnant deer straggled behind under cover of bushed and the fawn. This was occurred in the village called Nadori, Hissar, Haryana on the 10\textsuperscript{th} May, 1978. This incident shows that love and affection on animals by the Bishnois. (H). Recently, Gangaram Bishnoi sacrificed his life for protecting a chinkara from the hunters. This incident took place on the 12\textsuperscript{th} August, 2000. He belonged to Chirai village, Osia tehsil, Jodhpur district. These case studies envisage that rigid protection of wild animals by the entire Bishnoi commnity.

\textbf{Results And Discussions Based on field Inquiry}

- In order to follow the background behind the 29 principles/commandments fully, one must understand the Environment and geography in which Guru Jambheswarji preached and lived. In brief, his message is conservation of natural resources and cleanliness, so as to maintain ecological balance, tolerance, simplicity, right action and humanism, which holds good even today as much then. The respondents mentioned that they are staunch followers of 29 principles. Because to these, their cattle population (micro dairy) and green patches are increasing in their villages. This is a positive sign for their prosperity than other communities in the sample villages.

- Sacred Groves are small patches of vegetation in the villages of Rajasthan which are traditionally protected and managed by the local people. These sacred Groves are called as ‘Orans’. In the Orans, a grain bank is also maintained for which each Bishnoi family contributes one tenth of the grains from their yearly crop. These gains are used for feeding wild birds and animals. Generally, a big bowl of grains (bajra) and a water trough are kept in a corner place of orans. The respondents expressed that some of the Orans
in and around sample villages are more than 400 years old. It is observed that all the sacred groves are being managed by the Bishonis in the sample villages. They believe that the animals are born along with the human beings on the earth, therefore, they (animals) also have the right to share their food and water along with the human beings. The inference is that this community is a role model in protecting vegetation and wild life in the country.

• The Bishnois are not only leading Eco-friendly life but also they are leading to Eco-friendly even in the death rites. In focus group discussions, the respondents mentioned that they are not burning their corpses for protecting the vegetation in the desert as it is limited in the area. Further, they expressed that they are teetotalers. Normally, they wear white shirt, dhoti and turban, which are ideal for the hot dry desert climate. It is observed that they pay special attention to hygienic practices and environmental sanitation in the home as well as in the courtyard. Moreover, they harvest the rainwater through underground tanks called ‘tankas’ which is being used for only drinking purpose. The Cattle is allotted in a separate compound adjoining to the house.

• The respondents said that the chemical fertilizer usage in their agricultural fields is very meagure as they are using natural manure (cow and buffaloes dung). In addition, they mentioned that they are only using cow-dug flakes as fuel for their cooking purpose.

• The traditional village Panchayats / caste councils are existing in the sample villages. Generally, the elderly person of the village is elected as Mukhia (head man) by voice vote. These panchayats main function is settling the land disputes among the villagers. Mukhia also conducts their religious functions like marriage, birth etc. It is observed that the traditional panchayats are active in solving the land problems. The statutory panchayats are taking care of development programmes of the area.

• Majority of the respondents (70 per cent) were literates. It is significant to note that male literates were more than female literates. The survey revealed that
26.0 per cent of them studied up to primary school level, while 30.0 per cent of them belonged to the category of illiterate respondents. Further, respondents mentioned that the girl child education is gaining momentum in the sample villages.

- The analysis showed that 30.0 per cent of the respondents' incomes was between 40,001 – 50,000 per annum and remaining was below Rs. 40,000/-

Further, the analysis showed that there is no respondent belonging to Below Poverty Line (BPL) in the sample villages. The respondents stated that they are more prosperous because of their hardworking and strictly following their Guruji’s principles.

- Majority of the respondents belonged to the 17(2 adults + 6 children) members families followed by the 11 (2+5) members families. It is evident that the RCH National Programme is yet to make a substantial impact on Bishnois in sample villages despite the IEC efforts made by the Government of Rajasthan. More than half of the respondents said that they were using the tankaras water (traditional rain water harvesting structures) for their drinking purpose. They said that they harvest the rainwater through their tankaras and the same is being used for their drinking water purposes in the summer months. 36.0 per cent of the respondents are using the water for the drinking purposes from the taps (household connections and street corner taps) through the piped water supply which is supplied by Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) through mini-piped water scheme. The respondents revealed that their water carrying time was reduced. The respondents mentioned that the chlorinating was being done once in a month. Only very few are using the hand-pump water for drinking purpose.

- The perception of respondents on ‘What is good water’. 26.0 per cent of respondents mentioned that if the drinking water ‘looks clear’ that water could be drinkable followed by ‘cooks well’ (22.0 per cent). The reason is that the sample villages get sandstorms due to that the water contaminates with dust and sand (becomes dusty) and cannot be drinkable. Also, they said that they do cloth filtering before using for drinking purpose. 20.0 per cent of the
respondents felt that the drinking water should be tasty. Another 14.0 per cent of respondents mentioned that 'all these factors' such as looks clear, tastes good, cooks well and free germs were important for good water.

- More than 75.0 per cent respondents opined that they are not willingness to pay any amount as water charges. Further, they said that the State Government should provide drinking water freely as it is being practiced at present. 24.0 per cent of the respondents expressed that they are willing to pay water charges (Rs.15 – 40) if PHED provides safe drinking water without contamination through piped water supply even in summer season. The PHED officials revealed that the drinking water is being supplied freely at present. Further, they mentioned that the operation and maintenance (O&M) is also being done by PHED. Furthermore, they said that there is a loud thinking to introduce water charges in near future.

- Majority (66.0 per cent) of respondents was not having sanitary latrines in their houses. Further, the field discussions revealed that generally they did not construct the toilet inside the house as they had feeling that sanitary latrine emits fowl smell. Therefore, they go for open defecation. Despite IEC efforts in the sample villages, they have not changed their attitudes towards open defecation. The traditional sanitary latrine (4.0 per cent) was meant that they constructed them with locally available material and without having any sanitary ware. Also, they said that they had not provided any government assistance for the construction. Remaining 26.0 per cent of respondents were having with septic tanks within the house compound which was assisted by the Rural Development department.

Suggestions

- Creating Web-Page On Bishnois’ Sect

There is a need to create web page in Internet so that many other parts of the country and the world can be known about the successful lessons of Bishnoism in protecting the wild life and vegetation in their villages. In addition, the message of non-violence, cleanliness, conservation of natural resources is to be disseminated so as to maintain ecological balance.
• **Introducing Bishonism In School Syllabus**

It is suggested that Bishnois stories on protection of wild life and vegetation should be included in the school syllabus in all over the country, due to this, the school children will get awareness towards the protection of vegetation and wild life.

• **Strengthening Of IEC Strategies**

Despite their hygienic practices, a few households are having sanitary latrines in their houses and open defecation is prevalence in the sample villages. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the existing IEC through advertisements in Television, Radio etc. Also, the Government of Rajasthan should increase the financial support in construction Individual Sanitary Latrines to the Bishnois.

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