We have also noted that after about 20 years of work in the area, the government employees – Block development officials, police officers, Tehsil officials, the Collector – know that if the Adivasi Development Forum people approach them with an issue, then they are going to have to do something, are going to have to solve their problem. The AVM leaders and members will not go away, they will stick with the issue until it is resolved. Astha does not have to do any orientation about this – the reputation of the Forum is well known, and passed on to new officials when they join.

The People of the Area Know About AVM

Likewise, the people of the 3 Blocks, know that if they try to solve their problems, and they are not able to, they can always contact the Adivasi Development Forum which is well-known as a group of local people who are strong, knowledgeable about the laws, procedures and are able to put pressure in the right places, and solve problems.

5. THE VAGAD LABOURERS AND FARMERS ASSOCIATION -- *VAGAD MAZDOOR KISAN SANGATHAN*

The Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization was formed in 1997, in 2 Blocks of Dungarpur District, and today, the Organization covers 4 Blocks of Dungarpur District and 2 Blocks of Banswara District. The "Vagad" area is nestled in the Aravalli Mountains of South Rajasthan, and the majority of the population is made up of members of the Bhil Tribe – Bhil-Meenas. The Organization was formed around the issue of the struggle to protect homesteads situated on Forest Land from displacement, and today, this issue has met with success, and the Organization has taken up a wide variety of other issues of the tribals / adivasis of the area.

There are 16,282 members of the Vagad Asociation as of March 2008. 480 villages are associated with the organization in both the Districts.

Work has been done on the issue of Tribal Self Rule, and there are 192 declared Village Republics, each with their Gram Sabha, or Gaon Sabha (Village Assembly).

Important Activities During the Year

Tribal Self Rule

- In 1996, when the Central Government passed the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, recognition was given to the rights of tribals
    - to have control over the natural resources within their village area,
    - to continue to with traditional dispute resolution systems,
    - to control money-lending, liquor shops if any, entry of development programmes,
    - and to have a decision making structure which was composed of all adult citizens in the village, meeting as a Gram Sabha, or Village Assembly.
- The Rajasthan government enacted the necessary PESA act in 1999. Since then, Astha has tried to make the benefits of this Act known to the tribal people living in Schedule V areas, in South Rajasthan.
- 72 new tribal villages have declared themselves Tribal Self Rule villages in the past year, making a total of 192.

- Of the existing Gram Sabhas, or Village Assemblies, 34 are running their affairs independently – meeting, deciding, acting.

- 46 Gram Sabhas passed resolutions about the forest land dwellers in their village, saying that they had the right to stay on the land.

- To support the TSR Village Councils, the system of a Regional Councils of Village Republics (*Kshetriya Gan Parishad*) was evolved in this year. The role is:
    - to help in solving any problems of any one of the Village Republics in the collective,
    - to help to form several new Village Republics in one Gram Panchayat area,
    - to help to unite and organize the various Village Republics in each Gram Panchayat area to put their ideas and resolutions before the Gram Panchayat,
    - and to be a force that the Gram Panchayat has to listen to.

- Since most of the Adivasis work as daily wage labourers, and a large number of them are unskilled labourers, the concern about the low economic return for labourers is an issue. In this year, resolutions were passed in Tribal Self Rule Village Assemblies, and forwarded to various levels of government (from Block Councils to Chief Minister / Prime Minister), demanding that the wage rates for unskilled labourers increase, and that a proper living wages be paid.

Forest Land Rights—

The Vagad Association did a lot of work in relation to the new Forest Rights Law –
The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The leaders and workers tried:

- To spread awareness about the new law
- To increase the understanding of the implications of the new law, among those whose homesteads are on Forest Land
- To facilitate the implementation of the new law. A team of active an aware members and leaders of the Organization moved throughout the Blocks working to insure that the Gram Sabhas pass resolutions forming the Forest Rights Committees in each revenue village. These Committees, according to the new law, are the structures to investigate the land possession, tenure and other details. The Committee then presents its report to the Gram Sabha, and the Gram Sabha then decides who is eligible under the law to get land ownership papers. The total list of those families who have been investigated by the Forest Rights Committee, then gets forwarded to the SDM[30] and his/her Committee, for ratification. Ultimately, all the papers and recommendations go to the District Collector and the District Level Committee for final decision-making.
- With the help of the Animators of the Vagad Association, 1,826 files were made in the year, ready to put into the process -- when the forms get ready, and the system is in place.

NREGA – National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

- This important Act provides for 100 days of labour in a year, on demand, from rural families who want to work. The priority for works selected should be soil and water conservation, but other works are also allowed. NREGA work sites for soil and water

[30] SDM = Sub District Magistrate, a relatively senior official over one or more Blocks and/or Tehsils.

conservation can be set up on the private lands of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. It started first with 6 Districts in Rajasthan, then in 2007-2008 was expanded to 12 Districts (from April 2008 all Districts are covered).

- In Dungarpur and Banswara, in spite of a lot of effort on the part of the Vagad organization, still, when a survey was done, the average number of labour days worked per family was only 80-90, and that too, in areas where there had been a lot of effort. This NREGA has the potential to be an important source of annual income to the poor adivasi families of the area, but the People have to follow-up on their requests for Job Cards and Work Demands, and the Administration has to take action in a timely and honest way

- At the same time, in the Vagad Organization area, there were pockets, 2-3 villages, 2-3 Gram Panchayats, where the people had been active, and fully understood the procedures and systems of the NREGA, had gotten Job Cards, and all had done 100 days of labour. They were advocating that the NREGA rules should be changed to provide for 150 days of work a year!

- 5 principles for work on the issue of NREGA were decided at a meeting in February, 2008 of the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association. The 5 principles are:

    - Get everyone to demand work, and get receipts for the application given
    - People will work according to measurement, and do measurement on group basis (groups of 5 labourers working together on an assigned task)
    - Each group will get paid according to work done, not according to the average amount of work done by the total labour gang
    - "Ekal Job Card" – for those who are alone, such as widows, unmarried sons
    - Facilities needed at worksite – health kit, water, crèche

- In February, 2008 4 Gram Panchayats were selected by the Vagad Organization, to be "Ideal NREGA Gram Panchayats" – all provisions provided according to the Act. The Animators will work with the Village NREGA Committees to see that all work site facilities are provided, that there is proper and timely payment of wages, that receipts given for applications for work, etc.

- 300 labourers from both Dungarpur and Banswara[31] got less payment for their NREGA work, so they talked with the programme officers, and as a result, the rate was worked out at Rs. 65 to Rs. 70 per day, and they got the proper payment. The Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization leaders made the labourers aware that they should raise their voice if they were being exploited.

- 226 Job Cards were made, with the help of the Vagad Organization, in a way that those who were related, but adult heads of separate household units (widows, unmarried adult sons, etc.) got separate job cards.

- The Government of Rajasthan called 3-4 people who had been involved in about 3 Social Audits, to Jaipur for training, and when they returned to Dungarpur, they trained 10 Gram Panchayat "Social Audit Forum Committees" in how to do a Social Audit.

[31] Banswara District – Kushalgarh Block, Potliya Village. Dungarpur District – Dungarpur Block, Kakra Dara and Beechiwara Block, Chundawada Village

Banswara District Social Audits of NREGA Works

(a) The Bagidora Block Social Audit was carried out May 28 – June 4, 2007

- The Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization members participated in the teams doing the Social Audit.
- 18 Gram Panchayats were covered in the Social Audit of NREGA works in Bagidora Block of Banswara District.
- The Social Audit was successful in making the people aware, in getting the records of the NREGA works, etc. – so successful, that the District Collector asked if Astha and the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association would help in doing a Social Audit of the whole District!

(b) The Banswara District Social Audit – December 4-20, 2007

- The success of the May-June Social Audit in one Block of Banswara District, had alerted the officials who were corrupt, and who were siphoning off money from the Scheme that if the Social Audit programmes continued, more "heads would roll" and people would be suspended from their jobs. So, the Social Audit team was greeted with solid opposition to the proposed Social Audit, and not even the Collector could break their unity!!
- The Chairpersons of the Village Councils (Sarpanches), Village Secretaries (government appointed), Junior Engineers, other government functionaries had united under the banner of the "Sarpanch Sanghersh Samiti". They would not make the records available to the team. In order to do the audit, the team had to see what had been paid out, what money had come in, to whom the money had been paid, how much cement or material had been purchased, etc. No records!
- The Local people, the village people who had done the labour, were with the team wanting to do the audit
- Those gathered for the Social Audit, about 350 people, began a Sit-In or Dharna in front of the Collectorate in Banswara in order to get the documents. Applications on proper formats under the Right to Information Act were filed in an attempt to get the information.
- After 6 days, some documents were given – thanks to the RTI Act
- Ultimately, the Social Audit was done. The Gram Sabha meetings to expose the local audit results could not be held because of the tension, and so, on the 20th, a Public Hearing was held in Banswara, and government officials, Ward Councillors, Village Council Chairpersons, Village Secretaries, Political Party people, and the Joint Secretary in the office of the Government of India's Accountant General, Parliament officer, Amitabh Mukhopadaya, came to be part of the panel. The press covered the event widely.[32]

Displacement

- The Kadana Dam was constructed in Gujarat, and was a part of an inter-state agreement between Gujarat and Rajasthan. The Kadana Dam was constructed between 1971 and 1977.

- Kadana Dam – When the rains came, the dam filled up, and the backwaters rose and displaced the people of Anandpuri and Gerdi Blocks of Banswara District. Those whose lands have been submerged, and who have received no compensation, or no compensation of which they have possession, approached the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association for help. The Vagad organization did a survey of the displaced

[32] It can be noted that one of the Astha workers was beaten badly by some of the Village Council Chairperson and Secretaries during the attempt to get the records for the audit. The local Chairpersons and Secretaries did not want the social audit to go on, since their corruption would be exposed.

people -- who got land and who got cash compensation. 226 families were identified who got neither land for land nor cash compensation. These people are resident in 26 villages – 20 in Anandpuri Block and 6 villages in Gerdi Block. On this issue, the Vagad organization has a network linkage with the Guru Govind Submerged Area Struggle Committee.

- The Vagad Association workers and leaders got files ready for those families who had received no compensation or rehabilitation, in preparation for filing a case. In the file, they included:
    - Their old land papers
    - Papers relating to new land that had been allotted at that time, but which they did not possess even up to today because others are occupying the land
    - The present physical status report (neighbours sign this report) of their housing and livelihood
    - Ration card

- They gave the files, and petition to the Additional Collector, Banswara in January 2008. He said he would study the files, and follow-up on this. Since then, more files of more families have been prepared, but still, the administration has not taken an initiative, nor given any response.

Food Security

- 9 women's groups began monitoring Ration Shops, ICDS nursery schools for small children, and Mid-Day meals in Primary and Middle Schools –
- In one school, the cook of the Mid-Day meals had not been paid for the last 6 months, and the Vagad Organization advocated on her behalf, and with her, got her money

BPL List Mistakes

- The Below Poverty Line families receive many benefits from the government, in an attempt to bring them above the poverty line. But the BPL lists often include some/many families who are well-to-do, and often exclude the very poor families. When there seemed to be a problem in the villages where the Vagad organization is working, the workers and leaders surveyed the Gram Panchayats, and found many families who were actually eligible for inclusion on the BPL lists. The Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association appealed to the SDM, and the cases of 275 families in Banswara and 460 families in Dungarpur were put up to the administration to be reconsidered and included on the BPL lists. Of these, 275 Banswara families, and 340 families from Dungarpur were accepted, and 120 cases are under consideration. (80-90 cases have been accepted after consideration).

Bank Credit

The tribals in the area have been receiving loan recovery notices from the banks, and there is a feeling that the banks are "over-recovering" the loans – even after the loans and interest have been repaid in full, the banks continue to demand installments! Using the "Right to Information" Act, the people have been asking to see their bank records.

- 42 families asked for the records of their loan, from the Bank. And they got the bank records, and the people are studying the records. After getting the records, the banks have stopped asking for more loan installments.
- 2 families got "no dues", when earlier the bank had been demanding more installments
- In 210 villages, the issue was raised in the Gram Sabha, and those who feel their loans are being "over-recovered" are being supported to apply to the concerned Banks for the records of their loans.

- 830 families wrote postcards to the Chief Minister for waiving their loans
- 10 TSR Gram Sabhas gave notices to the banks, saying "Those people from our Village who have loans from your bank want to talk to you. Please bring your records and come to our Gram Sabha meeting and talk with us." 1 Bank said that they would come to talk, but have not come to talk …. yet.

A general conclusion of this action of asking for records, giving a notice to the bank to come and talk, has been that now, no bank is asking for recovery of the bank loans from the people who have asked for their records. (From others who have taken loans, recovery is going on.)

Strengthening the Organization

- The organization works in 2 Districts, Dungarpur and Banswara
- Village level members meet as members of the Tribal Self Rule Gram Sabhas, or Village Assemblies. They meet monthly
- Block Level meetings – From the Village Gram Sabha Committee, selected members (average 2-3) attend the Block Level Meetings of the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association
- District Level Meetings – General Body meetings are held of all members who want to come. Generally, there are about 125 people, of whom about 15-20 are women. This District Body meeting is held every month, on the 6th of the month.
- Animator meetings – The 16 Animators of the 2 Districts meet monthly. Joint planning is done for the coming months.
- Sanchalak Mandal or the Core Leadership Group of animators, selected members from the General Bodies of the 2 District Level Meetings (about 30 members) meets quarterly. Major decisions are made here.
- Leadership – The profile of men and women who make up the leadership of the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association, is as follows:
    - Organization-wide -- 1 person, a man
    - Banswara District Level -- 3 persons – 2 men, 1 women
    - Dungarpur District Level -- 4 persons – 2 men, 2 women
    - Block Leaders Dungarpur – (4 Blocks) 7 women, 28 men
        - Dungarpur 2 women, 6 men
        - Beechiwada 3 women, 10 men
        - Sagwara 1 women, 5 men
        - Simalwara 1 women, 7 men
    - Block Level Leaders – Banswara (2 Blocks) 3 women, 11 men
        - Bagidora 1 women, 4 men
        - Kushalgar 2 women, 7 men
- 18 Women and 40 men are also taking leadership responsibility at the local level

<u>Training Programmes Help to Strengthen the Leadership</u>

In the year 2007-2008, the following training programmes and conventions were held:

- Leadership Training -7
- Sanchalak Mandal (Core Leadership Group) members trainings -2
- TSR Village Assembly (Gram Sabha) Committee Members Trainings -1
- Women's Conventions -3
- Big Event (annual programme on December 24th of over 2,000 members) -1
- Kshetriya Gan Parishad Trainings (for members of the Area Councils of Village Republics) - 5
- Animator Training ("animators" are local leaders of the Association) - 1
- Sahyog Samiti Training (SS) -- (Training of members of the registered society, formed to support the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association in the long run) - 1

- Youth Camp -3
- Issue Based Trainings –10 Issue Based Training Programmes were organized on topics related to Forest Land Rights, and Displacement issues.
- Women's Leadership Training – Banswara, 1 training

Conclusion

- There has been a lot of monitoring of government programmes and attempts to see that the maximum benefit and resources reached the people for whom it was intended – awareness raising, monitoring, social audits, forming issue based groups to monitor, surveys, use of RTI, etc.
- The formation of Cluster groups of about 15-20 Village Republics and forming the Kshetriya Gan Parishads or Regional Councils of Village Republics was an important development in this year. With the formation of these structures, the Sarpanches or Panchayati Raj Chairpersons of the Village Councils have now started to recognize and listen to the Tribal Self Rule Village Assembly members and take note of their decisions.
- The identity of the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Association at the Blocks and Districts level, is now established. The leaders, Animators, and workers of the organization can now talk and work at the Block and District level with ease.
- Over the years, there have been several National Level and State Level leaders, who have come to attend various programmes and functions of the Association. Now, the elected representatives of both the Districts ask for information and seek the opinion of the Vagad organization leaders and workers. The Vagad organization has also worked, over several years, on issues of employment, rights over resources, local self-governance, and have earned the respect of the local decision-makers.

6. JARGA KSHETRIYA VIKAS SAMITI – JARGA AREA DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

The Jarga Area Development Society was formed in 1997, in the Rajsamand District Block of Kumbalgarh. This Block has a large number of tribals (Bhils) but they are not in the majority, and the dominant caste culture is Rajput, and most non-tribal people oppress and exploit the tribals. The tribal people had been excluded from political leadership in the area – for almost 50 years after Independence. In 1997, the tribals were unorganized and marginalized. The work of the Jarga Development Society has been to build an organization of tribal men and women, who, organized, aware and knowledgeable, are able to help the tribal communities in the area to solve their problems. In the last 10 years, the people have begun to work on their livelihood issues, trying to increase the rate of the locally available "custard apples" or "sita phul" and jetropha, and trying to keep control of their land resources. Other issues relating to drought, drinking water -- and building self-confidence.

Imporant Activities in the Year

By the end of March 2008, the Society was working in 139 villages, in 27 Gram Panchayats and had 4,912 members. The work is confined to Kumbalgarh Block of Rajsamand District.

Forest Land Rights

- 235 tribal families have completed their files, giving proof that they were living and farming their homestead land before December 2005. These files will be used to claim the land ownership rights given according to the Forest Rights Act passed in 2006.