

Jan Chetna Padyatra and the Dhundhur Ratan Award



Photo: The annual Padyatra foot march flowing through a village. Banners proclaim “plant trees for more greenery” and “cutting trees leads to drought and starvation”.

The Jan Chetna Padyatra is not just a foot march, it's a annual festival bringing communities together to discuss how to deal with their collective problems and the needs of the village. It's a joyous celebration, where Hindus and Muslims, men and women, join as one to give thanks for the water, plants and village developments of the previous year. The Padyatra is held on the Dev

Uthani Gyaras Festival, the 11th day in the Hindu holy month of Karthik, an auspicious day to begin new ventures.

GVNML saw the Padyatra as the perfect opportunity to push village developments forward with participation from the whole community. We have developed a process to ensure the event is a success. 10 days before, small meeting take place in every village to plan the upcoming celebrations and issues to be discussed. During the five days of Padyatra, four teams each visit 15 villages. Teams include colleagues from GVNML funding agencies, block level officials, the sub-division magistrate and revenue officers.

The padyatri, or pilgrims are welcomed as they reach the boundary of a new village, then move to worship the village's water tanks and pastureland with singing and dancing. The officials address the crowds and hear their achievements, give recognition to the people that made them happen and listen to their concerns. These could include encroachment problems, the mismanagement of common property and the quality of government development activities.

Raksha Sutras, or holy friendship bands are tied between villagers, and also around the trees, symbolising their promise not to harm these precious resources. Village action plans for the forthcoming year are put together and individuals publicly commit to help, with GVNML keeping a record of the promised actions.

A big ceremony in the centrally located town of Nagar marks the culmination of the Padyatra. Each team shares their experiences of village consultation and celebrities in the world of water management and state level government members attract crowds. 2008's Jan Chetna Padyatra featured 83 villages, 5,230 participants and a vibrant closing ceremony with 350 attendees. After each Padyatra, the event is reviewed by GVNML, and follow up activities take place like handing out tree saplings.

The Dhundhur Ratan award, which takes its name from this collection of 1,000 villages is presented to up to 10 individuals who have made outstanding efforts in managing natural resources. One winner in 2009 was Sharvan Lal Gurjar. When the common land in his home village was almost destroyed through disrespect to the natural resources, he became determined to act. He worked tirelessly to improve the common talab (water tank), widening it and strengthening the embankments. Sharvan has since campaigned to remove encroachers and through his efforts 120 trees have been planted which he personally cares for.

The Padyatra is a celebration, it joins villages together in unity, it promotes harmony with nature and proclaims village development achievements to the government and other officials. It allows everyone to have a voice and participate in the development process.