

VIOLENCE AROUND GRAZING LANDS

Public memory is short. The fact that most people would have forgotten about Bharatpur firing on livestock grazers who wanted to gain access to large forest lands which had been closed so as to protect wild life, would prove this point. Still my submission is that problem should not be defined as an issue merely of law and order or an insistence of a few hundred families of a semi-arid district in a particular state to continue a practice of grazing on government lands. Firing on sheep killing here costing more than a lac of rupees by range officers of forest at Dalinola on August 19, 1983 (Nai Dunia, August 22, 1983), death of two harijans by caste hindus on alleged dispute over grazing by harijans at Kasudi in Ramnathapuram district (T.O.I. May 25, 1983) and killing of a harijan at Honea in Gaya district (L.C. May 22) are just some of the instances which found mention in the column of national dailies. The problem is much deeper and much more widespread. Without sounding alarmist, I would like to mention certain structural features of fodder crisis in most parts of the country (particularly in drought prone regions) which is affecting the powerless marginal or landless livestock farmers very severely.

Recent concern being shown by various international aid agencies towards waste land development (or what is called as 'the uncultivated half') also needs to be put in proper perspective before it is too late. The illustrations from Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are used to highlight the seriousness of problem. It is hoped that concerned social scientists and policy planners will appreciate th

critical phase through which pastoral economy is passing in our country. It does not have to be said that (perhaps like American cattle war) conditions if allowed to worsen may certainly lead to much more serious social tensions in not very distant future. Why should social response always precede the crisis? At least after the confidential Home Ministry's report on agrarian tensions in late sixties we should have become wiser in this regard.

The major dimensions of the problem are as follows:

- i) The irrigated farmers in some of the semi-arid regions are refusing dry farmers to have access to their fallow lands for grazing.
- ii) The barren village common lands in some places have been so excessively grazed that cattle at times grazing on such lands transgress adjoining cultivated fallow lands inviting violent attacks (during June, 1982 I saw personally such instances in some villages of semi-arid part of Haryana.) The cattle of landless Harijans are particularly subjected to such treatment.
- iii) The prices of dry fodder have increased considerably in last 4-5 years. Last year in pre Rabi-harvest phase, in parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, the fodder prices were as high as Rs. 90-120/- per quintal. The market imperfections because of bulk nature of commodity are also very high and even in Haryana where villages are well connected by road, and transport, very significant inter-village price differences were noted. In some parts of Haryana, privilege of grazing on fallow lands is traded in terms of votes in Panchayat election.
- iv) The village common or pasture lands are auctioned generally for cultivation or grazing purpose. While in Haryana, one third of the land is supposed to be reserved for Harijan such that they only can bid, in practice, we did not find in 24 villages under study, a single case where Harijans had been able to outbid the caste farmers. In reserved portion, sometimes caste farmers had made the bid in the name of Harijan. Argument given by a panchayat members was that Harijans tend to quote such a low price that village income would go down if separate bid were organized.

- v) Many times village panchayats in order to prevent landless livestock grazers from having free access to common waste lands authorize forest department to close the better part of the lands for forest development. The resolution for such purpose is either passed without informing harijan before hand or by out voting them. There may be a correlation between social tension and decision of panchayats to give lands for afforestation.
- vi) In some places like Kutch where supposedly Asia's biggest pasture Banni is situated, vast tracts of waste land exist virtually under the control of few tribal chiefs who charge considerable sum from those who rear their animals there. Incidentally, hundreds (or probably thousands) of buffaloes when they become dry in Bombay are sent for salvage purposes to Banni. Since feudal chiefs receive commission from contractors of Bombay salvage animals, they often object to grazing by those who do not pay commission. The power of these chief particularly emanates from the control of water which is very scarce in Banni because of excessive salinity underneath and flat lands. Even the grass which grows heavily in certain parts where there is no water and hence no grazing is cut through these chiefs who act as the middlemen and pay very little to landless labourers.
- vii) In Raibachnagar district, Andhra Pradesh, Chenchus tribe is facing very serious problem on account of declaration of Srisailem forest as reserve forest for protecting wild life. The problems of chenchus briefly stating are of the following types
- a) The tribal population within the forest survives mainly through collection of minor forest produce like gum or honey and occasional hunt. Recently, many lamans (a nomadic tribe) have settled near chenchu settlements and have been trying to cultivate lands in forest though not on fair terms vis-a-vis chenchus. Chenchus do not generally keep animals, lamans do.
 - b) The people from plains send their cattle for grazing to the forest because intensity of cultivation having been increased in recent past, not enough lands are available in plains for grazing. The dung of these cattle had been collected in past by chenchus as well as others. Forest department used to get manure made out of this dung auctioned to farmers from plains informally.
 - c) Some chenchus who had earlier been settled outside the forest by Government under its tribal welfare scheme (have also been taking their cattle for grazing to forest. The area around this village

village had been demarcated traditionally between different tribal sub groups for grazing purposes. Government used to pay compensation those whose cattle were killed by wild animals. Of late, government has started delaying the payments in some cases for over a year so as to discourage these people from taking their animals into forest. These people claim that if their access is prevented by Forest Department, many of them may be forced to go back deep into forest and take to the comparatively more primitive ways of life than what they were leading now. One of them mentioned, "it had taken several decades for us to come to this stage where we can atleast talk to you. Once our livestock economy is ruined, we would be forced to adopt beastly ways, may be some of our actions will be termed by you city folks as criminal acts' but what are the options?"

Several interests are clashing and so far the situation has not reached Bhutapur stage largely because of tolerance being shown by forest people. But how long will it continue?

viii) In western Maharashtra, the problem has some very unique dimension such as :

- a) Some of the migrant families who spend about half the year in Konkan along with their animals in transportation, charcoal making etc. many times are not given even ration cards in the native villages which prevents them from getting fodder permits during scarcity periods. The local officials don't recognize their claims of seasonal settlements.
- b) Reduced grazing cover during the period when they come back forces them to abandon their animals at their risk with contractors in Konkan who would often ignore them leading to starvation deaths among cattle.
- c) In many places the facilities in government enclosures meant for keeping 'stray' animals (i.e. cattle which stray into somebody else's land leading to confinement of animals in Government cattle yard) are very poor. The fine extorted is very high

besides the stress on the animals because of lack of water during period of confinement. Such cases are becoming more frequent.

- d) The recent afforestation programmes leading to closure of village common lands and government lands have further aggravated the problem of grazing for people with no land or very marginal lands.
- e) The fodder scarcity and drought effect have prevented many farmers owning as much as 10 dry acres in some parts to recoup the losses of bullocks sold or and died in 1972 drought.
- f) Certain operations like weeding in sugarcane fields western Rajasthan which used to fetch some wages to women in past today do not entitle them to wages any more. The grass collected from the fields is supposed to be wages for these women who have to carry it to nearby towns or markets for selling grass bundles where prices fluctuate from day to day, even within a day between morning and evening.

- ix) In western Rajasthan, the traditional institution of 'Auran' lands (the village lands left for Gods & Goddesses) around each village probably had served as natural buffer against ecological imbalance. Neither trees were cut from these lands for fuel purposes nor cattle were allowed to graze. The dead wood or twigs of trees were used for funeral purposes of the village poor whose kith and kin could not afford to buy the wood. Of late due to cultivation of marginal lands, the quantity of auran lands is eroding. Only problem is that it is not the poorer livestock farmers who benefit from this incursion because they often migrate out due to lack of grazing facilities; those who remain behind only benefit.
- x) In some places, as a part of drought prone area development programmes, 100 hectare sheep and pasture development plots were established on cooperative basis on village common lands. As an intervention for restoration of ecological balance, this effort was extremely effective. However, the consequent social tensions somehow have not been given adequate attention. The problems were:
 - a) the lands which were allocated for closure and pasture development were not the type VI or VII i.e. most degraded ones. To show results faster, better lands were chosen.

- b) the site of these plots was close to the village obstructing the traditional passage of grazers to far off lands.
- c) while before closure everybody grazed their animals on this land, after closure, the income from grass seed and disposal of sheep (reared as a part of share capital contribution) was distributed only amongst the members of cooperatives led by high caste big landlords.
- d) there was no system by which cattia required to graze in the plot for helping regeneration of grass could be distinguished on the basis of ownership i.e. lesser charges for landless-higher charges for landed farmers.

Rural tensions emerging in different part of the country triggered by grazing problems are often reported as law and order disputes. Many times the victims of this type of violence are too weak to lodge complaint with police which has not been known to act rather speedily when interests of weaker section are affected.

Technological options for range land management continue to be searched either in the closure or fast growing exotic plant species which require water in the early growth stages. Also the leaves of these trees have to be cut, chaffed and mixed with other grasses to make them palatable - a proposition which did not appear remunerative to poor people. The closure of road side low-lying trenches having better grass in desert region by wire fencing without provision of cross-way has complicated the problem further.

Breeding input responsive dwarf varieties of millets obviously don't find favour with those who prefer crops adapted to widespread sowing period, high moisture stress and high fodder content with differential maturity process as against synchronous maturity in hybrid millets. In this short note, some random issues affecting the conditions of some of the poorest inhabitants of this earth in most inhospitable draughtprone region are briefly stated.

It is unlikely that conscience of policy planners would be stirred by these instances of emerging stress. Ironically, the tensions around grazing have the potential of preventing emergence of any solicitude amongst migrants and landless on one hand marginal and small farmer on the other hand. Perhaps, incidents at Charatpur, Dehinda, Ramnathapuram, Bati, Gaye, Ambedkar, Farhoochnagar etc are not serious enough to provoke ministry of Home to appoint another enquiry committee to trace the roots of agrarian tension in arid and semi-arid regions. Tensions in green Revolution districts affected the articulated elite more directly than perhaps the tension in dry region.

Undoubtedly, even the social science barometers are not calibrated precisely enough to spot such tensions and highlight their importance, how else one explains general neglect of grazing problems in contemporary research. Neglect of fodder in one of the major dairy development programmes is understandable because it is focused on best one third part of the country.

Victims of this violence should not be made the culprit in the debate on environmental degradation. That message is driven home is the belief underlying this note.

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for comments.