

A constructive leadership approach of poor tribal women, towards equitable and gender just relations around common land.

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights struggle of poor tribal women towards protection and conservation of village common lands i.e. forestland, village pastures and reservoirs. These studies capture importance of common land resources in the daily survival of tribal women and their forced alienation and marginalization in the governance of these vital natural resources. The paper then details out struggle of tribal women leaders, who stood up against the tide of oppression posed by feudal lords and other powerful patrons in their respective villages. Being tribal women in socially stratified rural landscape has been an added disadvantage, amongst multiple layers of vulnerabilities. The paper highlights agonies and discrimination experienced by poor tribal women at the hands of the powerful patrons & also their own community members. How these women challenged the conventionally oppressive forces in a constructive and peaceful manner is broadly captured in the study.

These tribal women leaders spearheaded grassroots movements for the purpose of equitable and more gender just land relations. These women leaders were instrumental in altering the skewed property and power relations and establishment of normative protection and management systems around commons, through village level institutions. These women leaders also played a strategically critical role in sustaining the developed common pool resources by working out appropriate resource sharing mechanisms. There have been enormous economic, socio-political and institutional gains of these initiatives of women leaders; around common land resources. Work of these women leaders has inspired many other village leaders and development workers at the grassroots.

This narrative is based on an action & applied research work conducted by development practitioners in the field areas of Seva Mandir a voluntary organization working in tribal dominated Udaipur and Rajsamand districts of Udaipur in Rajasthan province of India. The study represents compilation of case studies in which poor tribal women have displayed a highest level of leadership towards stewardship of common land of their village. Under the research, live examples of struggles of women leaders are shared. The study is based on a combination of personal interviews, focused group discussions and write shops conducted with the prominent women leaders.

Context

Seva Mandir operates in Udaipur and Rajsamand Districts of southern part of Rajasthan in western part of India. Its work area encompasses around 700 villages and 60 Urban settlements of which the majority are located in Udaipur District. In total the organization reaches out to around 70,000 households, influencing the lives of approximately 360,000 persons. It works in the areas of Natural Resources Development, Education, Health, Women's Empowerment and Village Institution Building.

The rural population consists primarily of Bhil tribe (68%) and other disadvantaged communities whose resources are severely limited. The district is characterized by rocky and hilly terrain, low rainfall and extreme temperatures variations (4.48°C). Today, the forested and common lands, which constitute 72.73% of the total area, are excessively degraded. Of the total area under cultivation in the district (17.58%), only 13.6% of the cropped area is under some form of irrigation. Hence, small and marginal tribal peasants are not able to make their living out of their rain fed agriculture and they migrate for earning wages in the nearby towns and cities. Most of the households live below the officially declared poverty line and rank low against most of the development indicators.

Finally, institutional processes necessary for democracy and governance if existed earlier, are not present today.

Common Property Resources.

The forests and other common lands like pasturelands, revenue wastelands constitute 72.73% of the total area and are in an excessively degraded state. Forests are the dominant land category assumed to occupy more than 40% of the total area. In Jhadol and Kotra blocks, the forestland is approximately 50% and 70% of the total geographical area.

While some forest patches are still dense, most of them are severely degraded and contested. Commons are highly privatized albeit different categories to different extent. In a survey conducted by Seva Mandir (Ballabh, 2003) in ten villages, it was found out that approximately 27% forest area 54% pasture area and 100% revenue area has been privatized. In a different study (Seva Mandir, 2011), 69 % of the total area under commons was found to be privatized. So in watershed where all land area needs to be treated it becomes very difficult to work on the common land due to their contested status. As land has a lot of political value it further complicates the whole process. Common lands are often free gifted (or at least promised) before the election.

In Physical sense- the larger implication of these scattered encroachments is that, they foreclose the possibility of the common land development. It is the most critical issue associated with the common land development. If we look at the consequences in terms of land governance- people have been compelled to opt for vertical ties with their patrons at the cost of

community solidarity and social cohesion. They opt for individual interests at the cost of their collective ones. In this process, there had been weakening of the collective bargaining power of the people and creation of a norm less society in the villages.

In spite of above challenges, commons still remain a core livelihood resource in the area. In a study done in 2012 people were reported to be very closely associated with the common lands which was reflected in the frequency of their visit to common lands. Fifty-nine percent of the respondent reported that they visited commons daily and twenty-one percent stated weekly visits throughout the year. The reasons for visiting common varied from grazing, collection of firewood, grass and minor produces, and vigilance for protection. The female respondents mentioned common land development and protection, firewood and cultural services more than their male counterparts.

The major benefits from the commons were the collection of grass, firewood, marketable produces like *mahua* flower (*Maduca Indica*), *mahua* seeds and *tendu* leaf, and consumptive benefits such as fruits like *Karamda* (*Carrisa crandas*), wild Mango (*Mangifera indica*), Jamun (*Syzygium cumini*), wild tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), wild dates (*Phoenix spp*), and timru fruit (*Diospyros melanoxyton*), gum and honey. Among all the benefits, grass is the major requirement of the households. The average economic benefits per annum INR 5705.65 was reported by the respondent families.

(Poojary, 2012)

Position of the women in the society and state of gender relations

Throughout the rural third World, the conditions which women face are harsh. Not only are they responsible for the housework and for bearing and bringing up the Children, but their workload also normally extends outside the homes. The areas of rural Rajasthan where Seva Mandir works are no exception to this grim state of affairs. Among the Bhils, the relationships between men and women are some-what freer than urban areas of the region and the practice of *pardah* (*veil*) is also less strict, but most of the other disadvantages remain. The women often work as day labourers and also help the men with the agricultural work. Many of the men habitually migrate for labour work, leaving the women to cope alone with the family, the house and the land. Because they live scattered over the hills in hamlets, rather than in compact villages, the chores of fetching water and gathering wood are all the more onerous. The risks of childbirth, the lack of education and the pervasiveness of illiteracy are extremely high.

Last, the property rights in most cases lie with their husbands and women may have little or no access to their family property (Bose, 2012).

Seva Mandir's Approach on commons

Building Institutions and developing leadership

In the absence of a clear institutional framework, neither community nor the encroaching household has any stake in the protection and development of the common lands. Seva Mandir understands that, realization of collective entitlements is a must for creating a sense of secure tenure among the communities and also for the democratic, participatory, sustainable and gender just land governance.

Seva Mandir works through Samuahs (Village groups) and Gram Vikas Committees (GVCs) and it invests lot of time and resources building self sustaining village institutions based on the principles of democracy and equity. In these village institutions, all sections of the village community are represented and all the decisions are taken in the group meetings following a consensual approach. Women are integral part of the institution building and leadership building exercise.

Key objective of Seva Mandir women's Development Programme has been to encourage women to assert their position in the community and to become involved in decision-making and development. Also the core of Seva Mandir's work on commons emphasizes on transforming distorted inequitable and skewed gender relations. It uses common pool resources as platforms through which women can come together and gain strength from each other to bolster their individual and collective struggles for greater freedom.

Privatisation of commons is an acute problem in the area. Seva Mandir encourages, village institutions to negotiate with families, which have encroached upon the common lands to vacate their encroachments. This negotiation process is complex and might take considerable time. After the complexities of property relations are resolved, the community works out norms to protect, develop and manage the commons. In the normal process, the norms evolve as per the local conditions.

Seva Mandir also promotes networking of village institutions with a federation called *Van Uthan Sansthan (VUS)*. Women leaders have played a significant role in promoting and nurturing the VUS. The VUS has given an appropriate direction in dealing with the issue of common property resources. This network has helped in advocacy at every village and district level-. Van Uthan Sansthan is also working with the tribal communities in more than 150 villages of south Rajasthan for realization of Community Forest Right (CFR) provisioned under the Forest Right Act (FRA)-2006.

Seva Mandir deeply acknowledges the commitment and initiative of local communities- village men and women actively involved in the conservation of village pastures, forest lands and other common natural resources like village water reservoirs and rivers. Seva Mandir organizes a function in which awards are given to Village Institutions, Forest Protection Committees and Individuals who have shown exceptional leadership qualities on the issues related to conservation of natural resources including common property. Every year, more than 300 people from tribal dominated rural areas of South Rajasthan participate in this award ceremony.

Following are case studies narrating struggle and achievement of four such outstanding awarded women leaders.

Savita Devi

Savita Devi was born into a poor tribal family of village Garanwas . She was married to Heera Lal of Village Naya Khola, at the age of 13 years. Naya Khola village is a settlement of around 200 poor tribal households 82 Km towards south of Udaipur city. Like usual tribal families, Savita`s parents did not encourage her to study. However, Savita was desperate to read, she studied till 5th Standard. After marriage, she enrolled herself in a Non Formal Education Centre run by Seva Mandir. Her husband Heera Lal, who studied till 8th standard, always encouraged Savita to study.

Heera Lal was quite a social person who invited fellow villagers to have discussions on social and development issues. He encouraged Savita to take part in such deliberations. Savita soon was able to overcome her apprehension and actively started taking interest in conversations. With The support of her husband & Seva Mandir , Savita`s confidence grew and she was transformed into an able community leader. Savita rallied both men and women of the village to discuss the issues affecting their lives. One such important issue was to protect the forestland of their village.

Women of the neighboring village were engaged in rampant theft of the wood from the forest of Naya Khola. When the local guard appointed by the village group, tried to stop the women, they accused him of molestation. From these circumstances, was born a women`s force in Naya Khola led by Savita.

Women of Naya Khola came to blows with women from the neighboring villages. They guarded their forest for one whole year from 7 till 9 in the morning when the theft of wood was most common. In this way, women were able to make their local forest free of trespassers. Once, Savita and other women spotted a man cutting and stealing wood from their forest. Savita asked the trespasser to deposit a fine of Rs.500 otherwise they will report the case to the Forest Department. However, the man resisted it and threatened the women of dire consequences. Soon the men folk of Naya Khola also reached the spot and told the trespasser that women of their village are very strong and determined. They mean to do whatever they say. Scared of the legal action, the trespasser deposited the fine the very next day.

In an another incident , a staff members of Seva Mandir spotted a few people quarrying and carrying away stones from inside the forest area of Naya Khola. Savita with other villagers visited the site and it was found that stones were being stolen not only from inside the site, but also from the boundary wall of the forest area and almost 500 meters of boundary wall was stolen.

The contractor turned out to be from the village itself. When the contractor was summoned, he accused the villagers of being party to the whole business because; all his laborers were from the Naya Khola village. The contractor was part of a bigger nexus involving a few local politicians and derelict grassroots functionaries of the Forest Department. Under the leadership of Savita, the incident was reported to the Forest Department. However, response of the Department was quite lukewarm. Since many youth of the village were employed by the influential contractor, public opinion in the village for taking an action against him was divided.

Like other tribal villages Naya Khola also a kinship based settlement, majority of villagers were in favor of pardoning the contractor. Savita and a few other local leaders took support of Van Utthan Sansthan (VUS) a federation of village groups and Forest Protection Committees (FPCs). This peaceful struggle went on for almost a year. Many a times, situation of hopelessness emerged but Savita kept persuading villagers with workers of VUS and Seva Mandir to stop quarrying by the contractor and penalizing him for his deed. Savita also took the help of local caste heads to socially boycott the contractor and his associates for damaging the common forestland. Ultimately people of Naya Khola realized that if they did not control the quarrying the forestland will suffer an irreparable damage. Savita persuaded local caste leaders to socially boycott the contractor and his associates. This proved to be effective; contractor and other villagers involved in the theft of stones from the forestland accepted their crime. Later on, the village group fined the contractor of Rs.5000 and warned him not to go near the forestland in future. This episode established Savita as a local leader in the area, for the cause of forest conservation.

Savita is amongst the founder members of the Van Utthan Sansthn. She has also played an active role in organizing and federating village groups and forest protection committees to work on proper implementation of CFR (Community Forest Resource) the under Forest Right Act (FRA) 2006. She has been actively campaigning in more than 100 villages for CFR for last 10 years. In July 2018, 9 villages were conferred with CFR titles for self governance of their village forestland.

Jelki Bai

Jelki Bai lives in village Koldara of Kotra block of Udaipur district. This block is among the most backward areas of India. Jelki Bai was born in neighboring state of Gujarat. She was married at the age of 18 to a man who belonged to village Koldara. As an illiterate housewife, Jelki bai used to look after household chores and worked in agricultural fields. It was this time when she came in contact with the workers of NGOs like Astha and Seva Mandir. As Koldara village was situated inside a forest area, livelihood of the local household to an extent was also dependent upon sale of tendu leaf (of tree *Diospyros melanoxylon*). People were not getting fair price of collected tendu leaves, while middlemen took away most of the profit. With the support of Astha, Jelki Bai organized the villagers to have a tendu leaf collection centre in the village. It enabled community to achieve a fair price of their forest produce without exploitation.

Later on Jelki Bai was associated with Seva Mandir. She started attending the meetings of village group to deliberate over the issues related to health, education natural resource management and over all village governance. Jelki Bai's confidence and strong negotiating skills soon rose her to a leadership position.

The local village institution under the leadership of Jelki Bai started working for conserving forestland of their village. They soon realized that a company based in Gujarat was illegally cutting trees from their forestland. Some local officials of the Government Forest Department were illegally supporting the company. A few villagers were also involved in the business of illegal logging. Once, three truck load wood of illegally fell trees was being transported out of Koldara village. Jelki Bai and members of the village group blocked the way of vehicles. They

informed the Forest Department of the theft but no help came. Agitated over this, Jelki Bai called an urgent meeting in the village and declared the road blockade to go indefinitely, till the officials of the department took an action against the trespassers. The village group also threatened the complicit local villagers of socially boycotting them if, they sided with the company. Consequently, officials of the Forest Department arrived and confiscated the wood laden vehicles & imposed a heavy penalty on the company.

Associating with a local Women`s Resource Centre (WRC) Jelki Bai is actively working on addressing the issues related to violence against the women. She has also helped many women and men of the village in getting a pension meant for old age persons or widows. She was also instrumental in establishing a lentil processing unit in her village.

Champa Devi

Champa Devi was born in Mathara village of Khedbrahma district of Gujarat. She studied till seventh standard and got married to Shripal of village Vasela in Kotra block of Udaipur district. In the very early days of their youth, during the decade of eighties both Champa and Shripal came in contact with Seva Mandir. Champa first worked as an instructor in a Non Fimal education Centre run by Seva Mandir to educate deprived children of Vasela Village. Champa also actively participated in the monthly meetings of village group organized by Seva Mandir. Soon, she took leadership in implementation of various activities related to agriculture, forestry, soil and water conservation and constitution of women self help groups, in adjoining villages. Gradually, her leadership got recognized in the region and she became village head of local Panchayat (a local constitutionally elected body of government).

The most remarkable facet of Champa`s leadership was her struggle against a local feudal chieftain. There was a community reservoir in the village. It was under the ownership of the Panchayat with rights reserved for local residents. With Political influence at the higher level of the government, the chieftain managed to obtain a lease for carrying out fishing from the reservoir. Champa and a few other villagers of Vasela opposed monopolization of a public water body by an individual. However, most of the villagers were afraid of powerful chieftain who had nexus with politicians and government officials. The chieftain also tried to divide the village group by offering some of them, a share in the earned profit. He kept harvesting fish from the reservoir for almost two years. Champa and the village group were quite upset with this injustice. Without getting disheartened, they continued to work at the local level and lobbied to build a broader consensus in Vasela and nearby villages for getting collective rights over the reservoir. With full grassroots preparation, Champa called a meeting of the village Council (*Gram Sabha*). She strongly presented the proposal of conferring fishing rights to the Panchayat before the assembly. Chieftain also put his proposal, for renewal of his lease, for the next term. Due to enormous community pressure and determined leadership of Champa , the Village Council cancelled the earlier lease approved to the chieftain keeping fishing rights reserved for the inhabitants of Vasela.

This episode further strengthened leadership position of Champa in Vasela and adjoining areas and her enthusiasm to persistently serve the community.

Harku Bai

Harku Bai was born in a village Bhadwi ka Guda of Gugunda block of Udaipur district. At the age of 17, she was married to Bhima resident of a nearby village Jogion ka Guda. Harku Bai came in contact with members of village group who used to meet every month to discuss various development related issues in the village. During such discussions, the village group decided to develop 25 hectare common village pastureland. However, a portion of the pastureland was encroached upon by a few influential people. Under the leadership of Harku Bai, the village group negotiated with the encroachers to vacate the pastureland in the common interest of the whole village. After many rounds of discussions, encroachers vacated their encroachments.

Village group of Jogion ka Guda conducted activities like construction of a stone boundary wall around the pastureland, soil and water conservation and planting of saplings on the pastureland. Harku Bai actively participated in working out a proper protection and management systems for the developed pastureland. Under the management system, grazing was strictly prohibited inside the developed area for three years.

However, after the development of pasture, there were many challenges associated with protection and management. In an incident, few influential Rajput families pushed their goats for grazing inside the pastureland. Harku Bai and few other tribal women caught these animals and locked these in the community centre of the village.

Powerful Rajput households got very agitated over this issue. Together, armed with swords and axes they reached to the community centre and threatened Harku Bai and other women to return their goats or face dire consequences. Harku Bai asked Rajputs to deposit a fine as they had breached the rule by pushing their animals inside a freshly planted common pasture area. Listening to this, Rajputs got further angry and said "Rajputs never pay a fine, in fact they are there to collect fine from others". Harku Bai maintained calm and patience under this extremely tense situation. In a peaceful manner, she and other women persuaded Rajputs, mentioning that it was responsibility of the entire village to follow norms. Soon, people from nearby hamlets also arrived at the community centre and they all supported the valid point raised by Harku Bai. Consequently, the Rajput families were convinced of their mistake and they deposited the fine in the village development fund. Harku Bai appreciating their appropriate gesture handed the goats over to the concerned Rajput families.

Harku Bai continues to mobilize the women of the village for protection of the village pasture. She also works for equitable distribution of grass and other produce from the common land.

(Tiwari, 2015)

Discussion

All above four case studies narrate deprivation of the women leaders in their early days. These women were not encouraged to study. It is a fact that the problem of power imbalance with relation to the gender (Kashwan 2018). The imbalance of power simultaneously exists in the family in other formal and informal institutions. Last, these stories conclude with ray of hope that -everyone has an agency which needs to be facilitated and nurtured to realize its actual potential.

In case of Savita, the first support came from her husband. Unlike other men folk of the village he did not object to his wife going out to work. He never felt low with Savita`s position rising above his. Similarly, as Champa`s husband himself was a social worker, he encouraged her to follow the suit. So, in case of both these women, the change was first accepted in their families.

Next support in all the cases, came from a local village level institution, federations and Seva Mandir. Hence, appropriate enabling institutions are of paramount importance for protecting commons. Institutions in all the four cases, followed a normative, value based system which evolved as a result of consensual decision making. As majority of people in the village and area stood by norms, the women leaders were able to overcome internal contradictions and were successful in their pursuits on collective interests.

All the case studies also highlight the stratification of rural society in India on the lines of caste, class, power and gender. Further, people are divided on economic and political grounds. As observed in village Naya Khola, where Savita lives, there are many contradictions due to conflicting claims over commons in the community. The women in all the four cases had to work for years to make commons work for the benefit for all, especially the poor and the least powerful. They had to follow a path of non violence and constructive work without giving up to the powerful patrons. This required patience and a lot of social capital.

The case study also highlights gaps in the policy paradigm and governance of commons on the ground. As we see in case of Jelki Bai , Savita and Champa the state functionaries, rather sided with the guilty oppressors. These women leaders on the other hand, were discouraged to work for the cause of commons by the same authorities. In fact, the state machinery supported the people who were exploiting the commons for their individual benefits. Though we have very clear laws and enforcement system to stop illegal privatization and destruction of commons, their implementation is hardly visible at the grassroots. Thus we need appropriate practicing of policies towards commons.

Conclusion

Economist Gary Becker in his 1992 Nobel address mentioned that women and minorities frequently under invest in their own human capital, where education and training are concerned making bad decisions because they are made to believe that they cannot do certain things that other people can do. Becker considered these decisions bad for the people and advocated for a wise contrary policy to revert that (Nussbaum, 2000)

On the similar note, the most critical message of the studies is -to bring about change in the state of commons; one could practice the Gandhian approach of constructive work with patience

and perseverance. Women prove to be the most important agents of change as far as plight of commons are concerned.

In the course of its work on commons, Seva Mandir has found women, less prone than men to resignation and apathy, despite the appalling hardships from which they suffer. It has come to recognize their vitality, maturity and good sense, and finds them potentially more responsive to ideas and proposals which might help them to overcome the acute problems associated with commons.

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