

# Semal Pastureland - From Encroachments to Collectivism

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Under the Rajasthan Tenancy Act (1955), pastureland is defined as – land used for grazing of cattle of a village or villages or recorded in the settlement record as such at the commencement of this Act or thereafter reserved as such in accordance with the rules framed by the state government. It may be defined as “A field covered with grass or herbage and suitable for grazing by livestock”. As per ownership pattern, this category of land comes under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. However, the relation of Panchayat or village community with pastureland may vary from village to village, because there are no written rules/regulations that govern such relationship.

In northern India pasture lands are known by various names, like *Gochar*, *Charagah*, *Gamau*, *Khula Jungle*, *Gamau beed* etc. About 4% of the reported area in the country comes under grazing land category. However, the land percentage varies from state to state. The area varies from 8.54 to 4.66% in Karnataka, M.P., Gujarat, Rajasthan, Orissa and Maharashtra. In Rajasthan, nearly 5% of the area of the state is categorized as pastureland.

Pasture plays a very important role in the life of rural communities in India. It provides grazing land for animals, fuel and other Non-Timber Forest Products for the rural communities. Pastures have become much more important for the landless rural community. Pastures are one of the most effective, economical and practical means to conserve as well as enrich the soil. Considering the

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dependence of rural communities on pastureland, it is necessary to protect and regenerate it. However, there are a number of interests that affect the pasture land and result in their decline and degradation. Pasturelands in many areas are partially or fully encroached upon by some dominant people and it is quite difficult to remove them. Depletion in vegetation or over- grazing results in the decline of productivity of pastureland. Loss of vegetation, in turn, leads to soil – water erosion problems. Many times the government allots pastureland for construction of school, hospital or houses for landless persons resulting in the loss of such areas.

The pasture land in Semal village was also encroached by some prominent people from the village itself and from its neighboring village for many years which resulted in degradation of the common land.

### **About Semal Village**

Semal is a revenue village of Nathdwara *tehsil* in Rajsamand district. According to Seva Mandir's area of work it falls under Godech zone of Badgaon block. The village is situated 35 kilometers from Udaipur and 20 kilometers from Nathdwara. Semal village is divided into 12 hamlets where 450 families reside. The village has a mixed caste structure where Gameti, Rajput, Nai, Jain, Brahmins are living together since many years.

### **Semal Pastureland**

The total area of the Semal pastureland is 48 **hectares** on which villagers undertook plantation and soil water conservation work in 2008 after removal of encroachments. This pastureland, on which the entire village has ownership rights, remained with 25 persons for 20-30 years since they had encroached upon it. 16 of these families belonged to Semal village and the remaining 9 families belonged to the neighboring village, **Valicha**. Most of the encroachments in the village were made by the 'Sim ki Bhagal' (Semal) families

and they were quite old too. In Semal village, Seva Mandir's previous intervention was through a minichak plantation (plantation on individual farmers' land grouped together) programme. Since then people have been regularly linked with village/ group meetings held in the village.

### **Seva Mandir's Pastureland Development Programme**

Most of the 162 pasturelands protected and regenerated by Seva Mandir so far are located in Badgaon block, and even within Badgaon, the maximum number of pasturelands have been developed in the **Ghodach** area. While developing these pasturelands, the villagers have been managing them quite systematically and efficiently over the last 15-20 years. They have been raising grass and other products in a very planned and systematic manner after having consultations among themselves. As a result, very good pasturelands have developed in many villages in the Ghodach area, like Barawan, Ghodach, Bandariyon ka Guda, Bhilon ki Talai, etc. In these pasturelands, besides the grass, trees have grown tall and bamboo plants have also grown well. In the process of regenerating these common lands people faced a lot of difficulties. Problems were created by certain people within the village or from nearby villages but the community spirit and common wisdom lead in taking farsighted decisions which have resulted in proper development and protection of these pasturelands.

### **The process of protecting the Semal Pastureland**

Semal village being a part of the Ghodach area, the people were witness to the development of bad pasturelands into good ones in nearby villages and raising of good grass and other agro-produce in those lands. These made a great impact on them and they decided to develop the pastureland within their village. However, as pointed out earlier, there were encroachments of nearly 25 families on the land earmarked as pastureland at Semal village and these encroachments were quite old too. So it was difficult to get these encroachments vacated. However, some of the villagers started to regularly raise the issue of removing

these encroachments in the community meetings and also called such meetings frequently. Therefore, the atmosphere started changing. The people contacted the local (area level) workers of Seva Mandir in this matter. Shri Shivji, the Ghodach zone staff attended community meetings and discussed the issue of removal of encroachments. It was made clear that until all villagers united to get the land freed from the encroachers, it would not be possible for Seva Mandir to undertake the work of plantation and pastureland development.

Some of the villagers who included Shri Vijay Singh, Shri Mangu Singh, Shri Chunni Lal, Shri Lakshman Singh, Shri Ramesh Sen and others came forward and took lead in the campaign to remove encroachments from the pasture land of the village. Slowly and gradually, the issued gained momentum, unity and consistency and it continued to grow. However, in spite of discussions held in several community meetings, the encroachments could not be removed. Some of the encroachers avoided the meetings in spite of proper intimation and it became difficult to arrive at a workable decision. The people of the village contacted the *Sarpanch*, *Ward Panches* and the *Patwari* to help and guide them in getting the encroachments vacated. But all these efforts also yielded no results. Thereafter, the villagers, accompanied by the workers of Seva Mandir, started making individual contact **with the encroachers**, visiting their homes, and convincing them about the importance and genuineness of the cause. As per Shri Shivji, the following main points were the basis of discussions with encroacher families which helped convince them:-

1. The pastureland belongs to the entire village. It has been earmarked for cattle grazing. Its' ownership cannot vest in anybody's name despite having encroachment on it many years back.
2. All village people should be able to avail the advantage of the pastureland not merely the people who have encroached upon it.

3. If you do not vacate the land in the interest of the village voluntarily, it would be done forcibly by the *Panchayat*/government because the *Panchayat* has ownership rights on this land and not the encroachers.

4. Even after explaining to them, if the encroachers do not vacate the land, all the villagers will jointly initiate legal proceedings against them and they will be deprived or debarred from availing the benefits of pastureland in future.

Though slowly but certainly these things started having an impact on the thinking of encroachers and they started coming forward, one by one, to vacate the possession of the land encroached by them. This process took at least five to six months. After removal of encroachments, we talked with some of the encroachers to find out what were the considerations for giving up possession of the encroached land. Some of the points that emerged out of this dialogue were:-

- That they realized that the encroachment on pastureland can not be regularized. They will never be able to get the title of the land in their possession and there will always be a fear of ejection from that land.
- That at any time the government can eject them from the land by launching a drive against illegal possessions.
- That they considered the common interest of the village and development of pasture for the cattle. They felt that once the pastureland is developed, they will also be able to avail the benefits accrued from it. They further thought that the development of pastureland will strengthen other activities of village development.
- That the pressure from the village community was immense. They felt that they have to live in the village itself so it would be difficult to live peacefully if they quarrel with their fellow villagers and earn their displeasure and annoyance.

After having freed the land from the illegal possession of the encroachers, all the villagers approached the *Sarpanch* and *Patwari* of the village and requested them to earmark the land with small stone pillars and issue a no objection certificate (NOC) from the *Panchayat*. After completing this formality, they approached Seva Mandir with a proposal to develop the land as pasture for the cattle of the village. On the basis of this proposal, in early 2008 Seva Mandir initiated several activities on the pasture land such as construction of loose stone boundary wall, soil-water conservation, direct seed sowing and plantation. The rainfall following the plantation was good ensuring satisfactory growth of the plants. For developing this pasture land, 20% share of its total cost is being deposited by the villagers in the *Gram Vikas Kosh* as their contribution.

## **Conclusion**

The constant and serious efforts made by the village community, Seva Mandir, village *Panchayat*, and the village *Patwari* ensured that the encroached land in the village could be transformed into the category of a developed pastureland for common usage. Keeping these efforts and the accomplishment in view, following conclusions can be drawn:-

1. It is very difficult to work on common land, especially, when it has been encroached. Even after developing such land, its' management and distribution of produce derived from it is a challenging task for the village community. Maintaining an appropriate level of management requires activeness and smartness on the part of the village community.
2. Initiative, co-operation and partnership of villagers are very essential for long term development of the pastureland.

3. Collectivism on the part of the village is quite necessary for undertaking any community development project including development of pastureland and for resolving the most difficult and challenging tasks.

4. It is also essential for the Sarpanch and other members of the Panchayat, besides the villagers themselves, to have an inclination towards village development.

One can hope that the development of land, which was once encroached upon, into a good pastureland as a result of community efforts of Semal village, will be an inspiring example for other villages as well.