

# **Locked Horns**

Conflicts and their Resolution in  
Community Based Natural  
Resource Management

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Case 4

## **Power of the Marginalised**

Community Action by a Tribal Community to Uproot Encroachment  
from Common Grazing Land at Viyal Village, Rajasthan

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## **Introduction**

Viyal, a village situated about 20kms from Udaipur city, established tentative links with development NGOs in 1969 when it took part in the adult literacy campaigns conducted by the Udaipur-based Seva Mandir.<sup>2</sup> Work in the area of natural resource management began in 1994 when programmes to arrest soil erosion and afforestation of private lands were taken up in the village. As a result of these interventions the tribal villagers became bold enough to regularly hold meetings and discuss their problems. These meetings played an important role in focusing their attention on the social and economic problems of their community.

This paper presents a conflict between two communities of Viyal village. The downtrodden tribal community of this village challenges the power wielding Rajputs on the issue of controlling the village grassland. The case highlights the importance of concerted action in removing encroachments by powerful sections of society on common lands. An important aspect of this case is the fact that the villagers steadfastly refused all forms of external intervention and took effective non-violent steps of their own to resolve the conflict.

## **Context**

The area surrounding Viyal was traditionally used by the villagers to graze their cattle. Over the last decade, as a result of various afforestation programmes initiated by the Forest Department (FD), open grazing in most of the jungles near the village came to a stop. In desperation, the villagers tried to gain access to adjacent lands belonging to the Devasthan Department<sup>3</sup> but the Department evinced little interest in their proposals.

These circumstances gravely threatened the main economic occupation of the tribal community, i.e., animal husbandry. Gradually, every bit of land used by them slipped out of their hands as they had little or no legal rights over land. Their sense of deprivation was aggravated when they saw villagers in nearby villages successfully taking up ambitious projects to develop the barren lands in their villages under the guidance of Seva Mandir. These participatory projects provided tangible benefits to these villagers. The success of their neighbours spurred the villagers of Viyal to approach Seva Mandir to initiate similar programmes in their village also.

They decided to start water and soil conservation programmes in the land of the entire village. The villagers hoped that this would solve the recurring menace of drought and sinking water tables once and for all. Water conservation measures were completed in all private plots of the village. Thereafter they decided to take up similar measures in all the common land also.

The tribal community took the main initiative in all these activities as it hoped to improve its economic condition by means of the ecological regeneration that this would lead to. But the Rajputs looked at the situation in an entirely different way. They feared that if the tribal community improved its economic status, their social dominance would be jeopardised. They visualised countless problems for themselves if the economically impoverished and disunited tribal community became affluent and united as a result of these development programmes.

The tribals had been living in this village for the last 500 years, whereas the Rajputs were more recent migrants to the village. The latter had come a couple of centuries ago with the intention of grazing their cattle in the rich grasslands around Viyal. They were originally the inhabitants of a village named Jholavas village of the Gogunda Panchayat Samiti, but soon took up permanent residence in Viyal. Since that time, the two communities had peacefully co-existed without any major difference of opinion over any important issue. The tribal youth worked as labourers in the fields belonging to the Rajputs. There existed, thus, mutual dependence between the two communities.

It is against this backdrop that the tribal community along with Seva Mandir took up soil and water conservation activities in Viyal. Before initiating any actual work, a few members of Viyal visited Nayakheda where similar activities were already in progress. In Nayakheda village people faced stiff opposition from a very influential and powerful Rajput landlord who had illegally occupied a part of their Gauchar land for carrying out mining activities. The villagers took up this challenge and were successful in evicting the encroachment and developing their pasture land on a community basis. This boosted the morale of the people of Viyal and they felt confident to take-up the fight against Rajputs in their own village.

After this exposure visit, Seva Mandir trained some villagers on the various social aspects of community development. During this training a lot of emphasis was laid on self-reliance and the need to tackle problems in a cooperative manner.

For best results, villagers were advised to decide on their own the course of development programmes and to keep outside intervention to a minimum. The inherent strength of cooperation and community effort was particularly stressed.

### **Evidence of latent conflict**

The village had 28 hectares of common land. In 1992 the villagers had made the first attempt to remove the encroachments of two Rajput families. This attempt was not quite successful as the Rajput families had passive support of a few tribal families in the village.

In 1996 the villagers decided to take up soil and water conservation in the entire area falling within the boundary of the village. At that point in time, seven Rajput families had encroached on 5 hectares of common land. The Rajputs promised to vacate the encroachments to facilitate the soil and water conservation work.

Looking at the past experiences, it soon became clear that the development of the common land was going to be contentious – the common lands could not be developed without removing the encroachments. On the other hand the Rajput community saw the eviction of the Rajput families from the common land as a serious affront to its social status. A showdown between the two communities became imminent when it was decided to enclose and develop the 28 acres of pasture land.

### **Manifestation of the conflict**

In 1997 the work on enclosing the community pastureland started. It was planned to develop the entire pastureland in two phases. In the first phase, 14 ha of pastureland free of encroachments were to be enclosed.

The tribal community was determined to see the Rajput families giving up control over the encroached parts of the common land. Its leaders formally approached the Rajput community with this demand. The Rajputs promised to give up the area that they had encroached upon. It was on the strength of this promise that development work was initiated in the common lands. After the construction of the wall, the tribal villagers took turns to keep watch over the common land. This led to frequent arguments with Rajput women who were found to be violating the regulations for use of the common lands that had been agreed upon by both the communities. The tribal male watchmen were reluctant to restrain the Rajput women as this could lead to social tension.

After the common land was walled off and entry into this resource was closely monitored, the Rajput community requested the tribals to allow them to take one more crop during the *khari* season from those parts of the common land that were in its control. Considering the investments in time and resources that had already been made and the promises of the Rajputs to eventually vacate the encroached areas, the tribal leaders agreed to this.

At the end of the year when it was time to cut grass from the common land, the Rajputs in utter disregard of previously agreed terms, began to cut grass on their own from those parts of the common land that they controlled. They further demanded a share from the grass cut from the rest of the common land. The tribal leaders reminded the Rajputs of their promise to vacate the encroached areas and requested them to keep their word. The Rajputs turned a deaf ear to these requests.

The tribal leaders nevertheless continued their efforts to get the Rajputs out of the common land.

Finally the Rajputs gave up beating about the bush and flatly refused to vacate the areas under their control. They further challenged the tribals to do whatever they could to stop them. They insulted the tribal leaders and made disparaging remarks about the tribal community. The Rajputs declared their intention to spend any amount of money to retain control over the encroached areas. In reply, the impoverished tribal community resolved to use its social strength to evict the Rajputs. Thus by the end of 1998, the contours of conflict between the two communities became clearly drawn.

### **Initial efforts to evict encroachers**

The tribal leaders emphasised internal unity to face the aggression of the Rajputs. Meanwhile a situation akin to police-imposed curfew prevailed in the village. The tribal villagers decided to put away all other matters till this overriding issue was sorted. As a first step they decided to boycott all social functions of the Rajputs. The next step was to ban any adivasi from working in the fields of the Rajputs.

After six months the situation had not improved significantly. The tribal community organised meetings to discuss its future course of action. The following important decisions were taken as a result of these meetings:

- The Sarpanch and *Patwari* of the gram panchayat would be brought to the site of the conflict and these officials would be briefed on the issue.
- Before forcing the Rajputs out of the common land, all tribal members would first relinquish control over any encroachments that they had made on revenue land.
- The conflict would be resolved through their own efforts and external political elements would not be allowed to take advantage of the situation.
- The voluntary organisation that was carrying on activities in the village would not be brought into the conflict.

Accordingly, the tribal community brought the Sarpanch and the *Patwari* to the site of the conflict. However, this did not entirely serve their purpose, for the *Patwari* tried to prove that the area encroached by the Rajputs was actually revenue land and not common land of the village panchayat. Fearing reprisal from the powerful Rajput community and conscious of his own political interests, the Sarpanch also did not raise any objections to this prevarication of facts.

Having been denied justice from the Panchayat, the tribals considered their next course of action. They decided to approach the *Tehsildar*. The *Tehsildar* issued a written order to the concerned *Patwari* to remove the encroachments on the common land. The *Patwari*, however, refused to take any action on his own, as he feared physical violence to himself from the powerful Rajputs. The villagers assured the *Patwari* full protection and requested him to at least visit the disputed site and help them in removing the encroachments.

In the presence of the *Patwari*, each tribal member gave up control over any revenue land that he was encroaching. However, these encroachments were quite small in size and were in the nature of extensions of their homestead land or cattle sheds. Having given up their own encroachments, during the evening the tribals asked the Rajputs to give up their encroachments by next morning, failing which, they would be constrained to remove the encroachments by force. Fearing the worst, the *Patwari* fled the village in the middle of the night.

The next morning all the tribals got together and removed every sign of encroachment from the community pasture land. The Rajputs were forced to accept the inevitable.

### **Situation after the eviction**

After the Rajputs vacated the common land, the sanctity of the common land was re-established, and by the beginning of 2000, all families of the village, including Rajput families, began to use the common land in accordance with the rules and regulations devised by the villagers. A decision was also taken not to individually approach external agencies in the event of a dispute. If any external agency was to be involved for help of any kind, that decision would be taken unanimously by the villagers. A written document enumerating the above points was prepared and the signature of every family was obtained on this document.

Throughout the year, the villagers took turns to guard their common land. Last year, some families who did not fulfil this responsibility, were allowed to cut grass from the common land only after they paid a fine. However, this year the villagers have decided to disallow families not participating in the patrolling exercise to harvest grass from the common land.

By the end of 2000, the villagers had completed the development works on the remaining part of the pastureland. Now the entire pastureland of the village was managed by the community as a whole.

### **Costs of the conflict**

As a result of this conflict the Rajputs have had to pay a heavy social price. Before the conflict surfaced, the tribal community had a lot of goodwill and respect for the Rajputs and used to address them as *bapu* (father). Moreover in all social and political ceremonies, the Rajputs were always accorded a frontline position. After the souring of relations between the two communities, the tribals do not even invite Rajputs to social functions. They have also ceased to show any respect to Rajputs. The tribals have also decided that henceforth they will not work on the fields of Rajputs and if any member of the tribal community defies this decision, he or she will be ostracised. The tribals of Viyal also sent messages to their brethren in neighbouring villages asking them not to agree to work for the Rajputs of Viyal. Word spread that if any outsider came to Viyal to work for Rajputs, he would be soundly thrashed. The conflict therefore resulted in loss of employment as farm labourers in the fields of the Rajputs.

The Rajputs on their part, did everything in their power to hold on to the land. They bribed the *Patwari* and got him to declare the encroached area as revenue land. They tried to intimidate the tribals by a show of might, but ultimately the tribals succeeded in evicting them with the help of the *Tehsildar*.

### **Benefits from the conflict**

The successful conclusion of this campaign instilled in the hitherto downtrodden and exploited tribals a sense of confidence in their ability to solve intractable problems at their own level. It also heightened their awareness about the power of community action. The tribals had first attempted to solve the problem at the village panchayat level. However, when this attempt proved futile they did not hesitate to shift the conflict to the administrative arena at the office of the *Tehsildar*, even though they were all illiterate and largely ignorant of how city-level officialdom worked.

The victory has infused the tribal community with unbelievable social and political panache. The most important point in the whole issue is that it has brought about a complete change in the feudal set up of the village. Further, every villager now recognises the importance of community action in solving inter-community problems. Thus it can safely be said that the successful struggle of the Viyal tribals is a high point in the quest for equitable development at the grassroots level for this village.

### **Analysis and reflections**

#### *Strategies adopted and their outcomes*

Provocation-response analysis was carried out to map the strategies of the two groups (see Annex 2).



Initially the Rajputs tried to use power over certain tribal villagers who were dependent on them for their livelihood. The tribal community however foiled this move by getting united and boycotting the Rajputs. When the tribal community tried to shift the conflict into the legal-administrative arena, the Rajputs used their social and political clout to intimidate the *Patwari* and the Sarpanch. To counter this pressure the tribals convinced the *Tehsildar* who in turn put pressure on the *Patwari*.

Meanwhile, at the village level the tribals used their social strength to ostracise the Rajput community. They realised that the dependency of the Rajputs and the tribals was mutual. The Rajputs were as much dependent on the tribals to run their farms as latter were on them for labour. Ultimately it was the unity and determination of the tribals that swung the power equation in their favour and compelled the Rajputs to give up the land which never belonged to them in the first place. Another aspect of the tribal community's strategy was the moral stand it took by voluntarily giving up all the land encroached by it, before asking the Rajputs to do the same. Its decision to rely on its own strength rather than that of its potential allies would have also sent the right signals to the Rajputs and ensure the durability of the solution.

#### *Policy Implications*

The villagers often have little knowledge about the exact legal status of the different types of land in their village. The government also takes little interest in educating villagers in this matter, or in disseminating proper information among them. This situation is actually abetted by the panchayat and lower-level government officials, who purposely keep the villagers ignorant about the legal status of the land belonging to the village. This enables the *Patwari* and other representatives of the people to dupe innocent villagers and earn money from illegal transfer of property rights.

There are two departments involved in the transfer of property rights (the Land Record Settlement Department and the Revenue Department), and their records pertaining to the same piece of land seldom match. Officials in both the departments use this discrepancy in official records to elicit bribes from hapless villagers. This is one of the prime reasons for a large number of land disputes in the region that often lead to loss of life and damage to property.

Many well-meaning policies formulated by the government are rarely implemented. A few examples will suffice to prove the point:

- The government has clearly indicated its intention of not regularising encroachments on common lands, but with the collusion of lower-level government officials and people's representatives, the power-wielding sections of the society frequently encroach upon village commons.

- Recently many state governments (such as the Rajasthan State Government) have granted their people the right to information. However, the ground reality is quite different and government officials share little information with the people.

## Conclusion

As has been highlighted in this case, normally not much can be done when powerful sections of society appropriate common resources for their exclusive use. There are very few instances where villagers have solved such a problem by initiating a powerful but non-violent mass campaign against the violators. However, it is a fact that this is a viable option to resolve such problems. Given the general failure of the state machinery in dealing with the problem, perhaps this is the only option left for local communities. However, individual officials can and often do play a significant role as was demonstrated in this case.

This case highlights the fact that the nexus between local government officials and the local elite can be broken through concerted community action. The conflict resolution process has greatly enhanced the self-confidence and social status of the tribal community and helped to make social relations in the village more equitable.

### Postscript

Presently, the common grassland is being protected and managed effectively by the *Samuh* (Village group). The trees are well established. Every year grass is harvested by the villagers on equity basis. A contribution of Rs10 per sickle is made towards the *Gram Kosh* (Village Development fund) by the villagers in accordance with the norm developed by the *Samuh*. During 2005–06, 69 families were involved in grass cutting and they collected 2.5 to 3 quintals of grass per household.

Both the communities have been living in harmony with each other. The tribals have been able to strengthen their position in the village on account of the strong stand taken by them on the issue of common land. However, there have been certain attempts to disrupt the unity. In 2005 some Rajputs lured some of the tribals to breach the boundary wall as they wanted the right of way for their cattle to go to revenue wastelands of another village beyond the common grassland, for grazing. A *Samuh* meeting was held on the same day and it was decided that those who had damaged the wall would repair it immediately. In deference to the *Samuh's* order the erring tribals repaired the wall on the same day. They even refrained from cutting grass that year although they were not debarred by the *Samuh* from doing so.

As of now the relationship between the two communities appears to be cordial on the surface, but some sections of the Rajput community continue to bear a grudge against the tribals. As such the tribals have gained solidarity and strength from the conflict, and are confident of meeting any offensive of the Rajputs. Perhaps the Rajputs are also aware of this fact, and hardly indulge in any dispute with the tribal community. In this way the successful management of the conflict by the tribals has led to redefining the social relations in the village.

**Endnotes**

- 1 The first author is Block Coordinator and the second Developmental Professional with Seva Mandir, Udaipur.
- 2 Seva Madnir was founded in 1969 by late Dr Mohan Singh Mehta, with the twin objectives of strengthening village institutions and broadening the livelihood base of the tribal communities. Apart from Udaipur district it also works in Rajsamand district. It follows an integrated strategy for rural development covering various aspects of rural life such as natural resource management, women in development, education, health, etc. Seva Mandir has been one of the first to initiate JFM activities in Rajasthan and has contributed significantly to its evolution in the state.
- 3 Devasthan Department takes care of temple property, temple-land and the donations collected at the major temples throughout the state. In fact, Rajasthan also has a Devasthan Ministry, which oversees the operations of the Department.

**Annexure 1**  
**Chronology of events**

Year	Event
1969	First entry into the village by Seva Mandir.
1992	The first attempt by the villagers to remove encroachments on the common land.
1993	Work begins on private land.
1994	Training on community action Consensus on starting water-harvesting in private and common land.
1996	Water conservation work begins.
1997	Work begins in 14 ha of the common land.
1998	The conflict surfaces over control of encroached part of the common land.
1999	Encroachments are fully removed.

**Annexure 2**  
**Provocation-response analysis**



