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Forest Ecology and Cattle-Graziers : Where do they stand ?
(A study of the Gir Forest and Maldharis in Saurashtra
Region of western India)

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Working Draft

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Introduction

Commoners of grazing land or forests have survived, through generations on CPRs, though not enriched. When compared to the modern industrial counterparts, they have been blamed for the over use of their resource, ultimately leading to the stock depletion and, what Hardin has described "tragedy of the commons."

The basic issue is, whether the so called tragedy is an outcome of their own action or it is because of some externalities for which they are not responsible. Often, it is true otherwise till they are allowed to continue to use the CPR and manage through their collective rationality and understanding.

The case which is selected for the discussion in this paper attempts to narrate a story which suggests that Maldharis - cattle-graziers of the Gir Forest in

Saurashtra region of Western India, have been forced to follow the road leading to a 'Tragedy' which they have had never experienced till they were not disturbed by an action from the State.

The Gir Forest case is of an exclusive nature, in that forest resource on one hand and the man and animal life on the other have developed complex type of interdependence with the presence of Asiatic lions. Not many parallels could be found of this triangle wherein cattle graziers depend on the forest mainly for their live-stock and on the other hand, lions depend on the live-stock as a principal prey, besides some other forest-creatures. This typical relationship remained stable for a fairly long period and it became a way of life for the cattle graziers.

One fine morning on January 17, 1972, the State Government declared that "The Government of Gujarat is pleased to direct that the Gir Sanctuary area should be closed to grazing by domestic live-stock from outside and that the maldharis residing in the sanctuary area should be shifted alongwith their live-stock and resettled on its periferal areas." Though the Government was pleased in making such declaration, the cattle graziers were certainly very unhappy with that.

The eviction of cattle graziers from the Gir Forest provides an interesting case to expose, how the natural scientists, for the purpose of forest conservation and protection to the Wildlife, particularly, Asiatic lion, prompted the Government to pass the law in favour of the above eviction, but not taking the role that cattle graziers used to play in both-the conservation of the resource and protection to the Wildlife.

We here take a position that, while missing this important dimension of the public policy, the entire purpose was marred and the results produced were contrary to what had been conceived.

Whether cattle graziers harmful to the resource : Myth and Realities.

Cattle graziers of the Gir Forest entered as a nomades, with some Negros, about 300 years ago since the forest was a no-man's land. It was three time larger, and highly dense as compared to what it is to-day. Since last two decades cattle graziers of the Gir Forest have been charged by the experts and Government officials as being harmful to the forest resources, largely on the following points :

It is argued that the cattle graziers are still semi-nomades internally. They move place to place in search of good pasture and where ever they stay for some

time, erect a hut. This activity results into cutting of trees. It is also alleged that they take away fruits for consumption and branches-leaves etc for the purpose of medicine.

A charge is levelled against the graziers of the Gir Forest that around their cluster of huts, they exert externalities on the forest resource in the form of ashes produced due to burning of cow-dungs. It is also argued that cattle movement results in hardening the soil and impairing the fertility.

A serious charge is levelled against the above graziers that they join hands with illegal tree cutters and cause irreparable damage to the forest resource. Besides, they are charged for an indiscriminate grazing, resulting into serious stock-depletion.

In sum, the activity of cattle graziers of the Gir Forest alleged to have reduced the forest cover to the minimum, besides, the natural regeneration inhibited by the live-stock.

The above charges try to justify the Government action of eviction of the forest graziers. But these charges may be treated more as a myth rather than realities. The realities, provide true picture of the role that the forest graziers have played historically.

Before the role of graziers of the Gir Forest is analysed, a clarification is necessary on who are settlers and who are invaders. The graziers, who face eviction from the forest may be categorised as settlers -- whereas there is an another category of graziers who are, in fact outsiders and enter into forest, periodically in search of grass and other forest resources. Their intentions are largely influenced by the short term gains as they do not own the resource. They are just like invaders. They come and take away whatever they find rewarding, strichy in terms of personal benefits. These outside graziers are in large a number, holding some 40,000 cattle heards and out number the settlers having cattle population around 16,500 only.

It is interesting to note that the cattle holding of settlers is within the carrying capacity of the Gir Forest as per estimates prepared by some experts. They put such a capacity around 21,000 of cattle population. It is clear, in the light of these facts that it is not the activity of the settlers, per se, which has caused any harm to the forest resource. But the punishment in the form of eviction is made to them. The outsiders do not have to face the "eviction" as they never settled in the forest.

Secondly, the forest of Gir before 1947 was ruled by the Nawab of Junagadh, and many thousand trees were cut

place to other is a part of their strategy to survive their cattle and themselves against crisis. Such a move is helpful to the forest in terms of spreading cattle-dung and seeds on a large space as a natural process.

The settlers have, obviously developed a sense of belonging to the forest and its resources because of their staying since generations and being intimate part of it. Their life and living is blended with flora and fauna. Their oral folk traditions are found developed around the flora and fauna. A forest officer who stayed for more than a decade is of the opinion that the settlers are useful to the forest. The real villains are outside graziers or invaders, who enter for a temporary stay, erect huts for time being but without any sense of belonging.

In the Gir Forest, grass grows normally upto 6 feet height. If not removed in time ~~as~~^{or} grazied periodically, it becomes dry in summer. Such a dry grass is highly inflammable and becomes instrumental to destroy, not only the forest resources but Wildlife also. The grass grazied by the cattle of the forest, cattle graziers, in the light of this fact is functional to the conservation.

twice a year and open land was brought under cultivation for the villagers, specially invited and settled by State officials. The purpose was to earn revenue and to keep the forest free from criminals and robbers.

The human interference started since then has been continued and accelerated after 1947, especially in the form of illegal cutting by outsiders. Even road development in the forest since pre-independence has helped transporting the illegal material. Industrialisation-Urbanisation, population growth, development of sawmills, owned or backed by politicians, of surrounding villages and towns have been found playing a destructive role. Forest settlers use only branches of trees for their huts and cow-dung as fuel and some plants, leaves etc. for their medicine. In fact, they are not interested in tree-cutting.

As it happens elsewhere, the Gir Forest often catches fire. In a very recent incident of forest fire, the settlers were first to rush to the officials and helped in fire-fighting, which require manpower larger than what Government personnel can provide.

Tree seeds, that cattle swolled during grazing become naturally processed when come out with their dung and grow easily. The cattle dung functions as a natural fertilizer to the forest soil. The settlers move from one

Protection to Wildlife : Myth and Realities

The Asiatic lion is the only species in the World, found in the Gir Forest. In the past, they were roaming over a vast stretch of the Northern and Central portions of the Indian sub-continent. The shooting of this species continued unabated upto the turn of the century. Before independence, lions' population went up and down. But after independence, it increased steadily.

Some Wild-life experts in India and abroad observed that presence of forest graziers and their cattle was a problem to the Wildlife in general and to lions in particular. As they explained further in their studies that the cattle graziers were found involved in killing of lions through poisoning. It was also pointed out that the presence of cattle graziers had made lions to change their preying habit, from wild animals to the domestic ones.

It is known fact that the forest graziers and lions have developed co-existence and the graziers consider lion as the vehicle of their Mother-Goddess. Moreover, if the cattle of graziers are preyed by lion, the Government gives compensation to the owner. The graziers have taken, their cattle preying as normal. They rationalize that they get their cattle grazied almost freely and normally their old-aged cattle become the prey of lion. So they do not take it as a serious loss, compared to the gain. Some

lion killing cases had happened before some two decades. But according to a forest officer, such an act is normally done by migrant graziers and not by the forest graziers. Vora and others report, on the basis of their field investigation, that lion killing by the forest graziers is a false charge.

Whatever may be the cause, or who so ever may be responsible, the effect is, the lions are forced to move out of the forest in search of domestic animals after the Government launched the eviction programme.

It may be wise policy to make the original settlers resettled in the forest only and make their living again co-existed with the Wildlife. As the compensation rates are four to five times less than the market price of the cattle, the Government may adopt a policy of raising the compensation rate of killing of their cattle by lions so that cases of lion killing may not re-occur.

The Socio-Economic Upliftment of the Forest Graziers :

Myth & Realities

The eviction of cattle graziers of Gir Forest has also been rationalised on the ground of their socio-economic upliftment. Before making a case for eviction, the Government prepared a project report on the socio-economic conditions of the graziers. It was pointed out in the report that, in the distant past, graziers of the Gir Forest used to live relatively a better life. There was

plenty of water and pasture available and the lions used to prey more wild animals as compared to the cattle. The Government project report further observed that the above situation altered over a period of time. The climate became malarious. In absence of communication and other amenities, their health standard deteriorated because of a number of contagious disease. The changed preying habit of lions killed the cattle in a large number than ever before. The graziers, periodically entering in from outside competed away the forest settlers, which resulted into diminishing pasture.

Buying of cattle-feed like cotton seeds and oil-cakes was out of reach for this, debt burdened, cattle graziers. In past, the debt or their relatively alienated forest life was never a problem. But the Government stressed the point of their miserable socio-economic condition and argued that their life and living could be improvised, if they are resettled in nearby villages.

Based on the above rationalisation, the eviction programme included the resettlement plan in which the Government selected nearby villages for the forest graziers and allotted land for cultivation as well as common grazing sites. The resettlement plan also included other incentives also.

The basic issue, however, is after the eviction decision and the resettlement programme exercised, where do exactly graziers of the Gir Forest stand ?

Several reports have documented the conflict cases, within the villages of resettlement, between the graziers - now outsiders - and the original village dwellers. The village dwellers had to face the competition on the limited grazing land and village pasture.

The occupational transformation, from exclusive grazing to cultivation first and grazing next has caused problems of skill transformation. This has left them as neither graziers or cultivators. Many of them had to sell their cattle as they were unable to purchase fodder for their cattle. Some cases have been documented as to how some graziers turned out to the labourers as they were given west-land and had to survive by selling their cattle wealth.

Summing Up

This paper examines the triangle relationships among the forest resource, lion and the cattle graziers of the Gir. The public policy to protect the forest and lion has led the eviction of the cattle graziers. The decision of eviction rests largely on the grounds prepared by the environmentalists and Wildlife experts, besides some administrative personnel of the Government. The entire

issue of forest-degradation and poverty of the graziers needs a fresh look, using human-side in much closer socio-cultural and anthropological contexts. Such an approach, as used in this paper may help in getting a true picture. The analysis presented here does not claim a detailed probing and sound policy implications but suggest that the cattle graziers, particularly of the Gir Forest are functional for both : the conservation of the resource and protection to the Wilflife.

Note :Author of this paper is very much thankful to Professor Dr. K.K. Khakhar for providing resourceful discussion. Data for this paper have been pulled from the following sources besides personal observations and discussion with many informants.

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