

Whither Common Property Resources?*

As we approached Ladudi we were quite excited about the scope of wastelands and grasslands development in a village which had 729 acres of government wasteland and 357 acres of panchayat grassland. We had learnt that the government had already allotted 22 acres for the resettlement of cowherds who had moved from the Gir Sanctuary, 10 acres for the extension of the village site, and 150 acres were given for cultivation to poor families. Even then 547 acres of land was left, large enough to undertake a sizeable programme of tree planting. The programme would provide employment and income to twenty landless families and to another fifty-three government land allottees who could not make a livelihood from the three acres of wasteland and, therefore, were in need of supplementary income. More than 350 acres of grazing land belonging to the panchayat also held a promise for launching a massive programme of rejuvenation and development that could support substantial livestock population and a dairy.

The Ladudi Story

The sarpanch, a cheerful, well built Rajput, listened with bemused curiosity to our ideas of developing common property resources (CPR). After we finished, he asked, "Have you seen these lands?" "No, we are yet to see," we answered. "First see and then you won't talk about raising trees on them. They are all barren rocks," he said with disdain. "How come? Your village is close to the Gir forest. We have seen farms on the way, the soil looked very good," we inquired. The sarpanch asked us to sit down and after ordering sugary tea for us, talked to us like a teacher giving an elementary lesson. He began, "A lot of labour has gone to make our farms what they are now. They were not so fertile twenty-five years ago." "You must have put a lot of farmyard manure," was our encouraging response. "Yes, to some extent but the real source was the soil from the wasteland that we have been removing and putting on our farms," he told us. Overcoming the shock, we said, "But that would ruin the public land--you cannot do that." He explained, "I am not talking about myself. Everyone is doing it, year after year. Now, there is hardly any soil left. After some time the land will be good enough only for quarrying. And you are talking about raising trees on rocks!"

It was no use discussing the matter further with a cynic. We then went to Jayamal Parmar, who had, according to government records six acres of land. We asked how he managed to earn a living with six acres of unirrigated land.

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He replied in a matter-of-fact fashion, “I have encroached upon four acres of adjoining government land.” “That is quite an area added,” we exclaimed. “This is nothing. Some have taken ten acres. Whoever had government land adjoining to his farm, has used it as his own. It all depends how much you can manage.” We learnt later that about 300 acres of land has been encroached upon thus. Even then about 250 acres of public wasteland was available.

Next we asked Nathu Vasharam, who had received three acres of government land, to what extent he was dependent on the CPR. His family used to bring firewood from the wasteland. We were confident that he would be more interested in CPR development. With most of the trees gone along with the soil, now he has to bring it from a nearby forest. Learning this, we said, “But that is rather far. A lot of time must be spent on fetching firewood.” Nathu took a puff of his beedi and dismissed our point. “That is no problem. Only women and children have to bring the firewood.” He had a ready solution! With our concern for the overworked women, we asked, “But the women have hardly any time from their responsibilities of cooking, caring for children and cattle...” Nathu threw away the butt of his beedi and cut us short, “You have no idea how much time they spend in gossiping and backbiting. It is better to keep them busy with work like collecting firewood.” “But children should go to school rather than...” we suggested. Again, he interrupted, “School? Where is the teacher? He comes only to collect his salary and thereafter he is not seen for days.”

We thought it wise to change the topic. We asked about the usefulness of panchayat-owned grazing land. Nathu regularly sends his cow to the grazing land, for “exercise.” With the soil removed and trampled upon by cattle, there is hardly any growth of grass. His cow gave a small quantity of milk and cow dung was used for making cakes to be used as fuel. We asked the inevitable question, “Then how do you manage with three acres?” “I have attached two acres of the adjoining government land to my three acres,” came his matter-of-fact reply. We were a little worried. Nathu was a small man. In fact, he was a part-time farmer and most of the time worked as an agricultural labourer. Was he not afraid that he might be hauled up for grabbing public land? But he was not unduly concerned because, he said, “I am not alone in encroaching. When government takes action, it will be against all. My fate will be the same as that of the others.”

The Tale from Sorambhada

Sorambhada is a small village in the perpetually drought prone area of Surendranagar district. As we approached the village, it looked dry, dull, and depressing. Some villagers were sitting idly in a group. The leader showed us the formal courtesy as we joined them. We were told that there were only a few people in the village because thirty-five families had already left--seasonal migration--to graze their cattle in south Gujarat. Anakbhai Visubhai, the village leader, had about thirty acres of land and thirteen members in his family. The wasteland of the village supplied about sixty kg. of firewood everyday. His cattle were out the whole day on the panchayat grassland.

Mohanbhai with four acres of land was definitely a small farmer. He grew 100 quintals of bajra on one acre, another acre yielded about 100 kg. of sesame seeds, and the rest was put under fodder crop. His family collected about 10 kg. of firewood from the public wasteland. He had two heads of cattle which joined the herd in the daily “exercise” of grazing. All the ten villagers sitting around had the same story to tell: women and children spending four to eight hours collecting firewood from the wasteland and grazing “exercise” for their cattle on the panchayat land. There were three villagers in the group who had been allotted government land. From the four acres each had got, they were able to raise one crop in the kharif season, *bajra*.

By-Gone Days

To inspire them for the future, we thought of taking them back in time, which we assumed must have been better days. “What was the situation earlier, say, twenty-five years back?” Gordhanbhai, a landless villager, the oldest in the group, looked above and beyond us as if into the distant past and said, “Definitely things were better. There were trees on the wasteland; they are no longer there. Collecting fuel wood from shrubs is becoming more and more difficult.” Ramsingbhai, a small farmer nodded and added, “Our village grassland was also better. The cattle returned with their belly full; now they return hungry and tired with extensive roaming. The grassland is exhausted. The seasonal migration, therefore, increases year after year.” We thought it was time to lead them to talk about better prospects in the future. “What can be done to restore the health of the wasteland and the grassland?”

Anakbhai looked around and replied in a manner that indicated that he spoke for all. “It is no use trying to flog a dead horse. Ask Ramsingbhai--he has not been able to raise crops even on his five acres of

farmland. Who will work for developing public land? Instead, if you can help repair the irrigation tank (pond), that would be a boon to the village. Before the breach in the tank during the 1979 floods, the water percolated into our wells, and we were able to take some irrigated crops. If you renovate the tank to store rain water, we will show you what we are capable of.” There was a faint stir in the gathering as they looked at us with expectation. There was a sparkle in their eyes when we told them that our organisation was working, among other things, for harvesting rainwater. When we clarified that we can help in rainwater storage and wasteland development, their unspoken reaction was very frank. They cared only for the programme that would improve productivity of their own farms. They did not mind if we were keen to develop their wasteland too, they would cooperate.

Bilothi

Bilothi is a village set in the hilly tribal area. It is a central village with satellite hamlets called *falias*. We were attracted to Bilothi because it had 372 hectares of government wasteland, of which 216 acres were encroached upon by farmers. The farmers had annexed land parcels adjoining to their own farms. The landless and even many who did not belong to the village had encroached upon the government land. Punjabhai had no land to begin with, now he had five acres, all annexed public land. He raises *urad* and *jowar* during the rainy season. Last year he earned about Rs. 750 from the five acres.

The same story was told more or less by ten families that we contacted. Land was encroached upon as a routine matter. Since most families were doing it, nobody had strong views on the matter. Of course, they admitted that with the increase in the human and animal population and with rising illicit felling of the trees, the wastelands and the smaller panchayat-owned grasslands were becoming less and less productive. People continued to remain dependent upon panchayat-owned grasslands for fuel wood as well as for grazing their cattle. If they participate in our wasteland development programme, they would have benefits of a higher wage income. However, they would not discuss enlarging the wasteland by removing encroachments and developing the larger area. After all, wasteland development activity gave them wages for a limited period; the encroached land gave them steady supply of food grains year after year, even though the quantity was modest. The future benefits from tree planting were fraught with many uncertainties and risks. The stories of the failure of social forestry programme were well known. They preferred the certainty of small, immediate gains, rather than the promise of large, possible advantage.

Ambakhadi: A Curious Exception

Ambakhadi hamlet was a curious exception. An active group there had persuaded the encroachers to vacate ten acres of their land to develop them as public wasteland with the support of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, India. Perhaps the encroachers were not able to raise anything on the land they had grabbed. Perhaps even to protect it was a liability. Earning wages was a preferred certainty.

Whether in prosperous Ladudi or poor Sarambhada or hilly Bilothi, the public land resources lay exhausted through over exploitation. The villagers were indifferent about the public land; they did not care if it were restored its health and productivity or not. Their concern was with their own private lands, whether owned or encroached, and the possible improvement in their productivity.

Protecting, restoring, and developing public land is clearly an uphill task. First, one has to experiment on a small patch of land, then demonstrate the short-term and long-term benefits, and only then the larger areas of public lands can be developed. With the public lands and other common property resources shrinking in size and productivity, the task of public and voluntary agencies trying to protect and develop them is a struggle against formidable forces. Every failure makes the struggle harder. But the struggle is the only hope, the only option.