

## Pasture Regeneration Increases Sustainability and Resilience in Indian Villages

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*While frequent concern has been expressed regarding the degradation or even ‘vanishing’ of pastures or common grazing land of rural communities, the work of protecting whatever pastures still exist or regeneration of degraded grazing land has been frequently neglected.*

This has become a silent crisis which has been weakening the base of sustainable livelihoods in many villages. Hence any efforts to give adequate importance to regeneration and improvement of pastures and to take forward this task with the involvement of rural communities is highly desirable.

Seva Mandir is a voluntary organization working in South Rajasthan which has placed great emphasis on regeneration of pastures as well on overall prioritization of community based protection of common lands. In 2023 this work was honored with the Elinor Ostrom Award, a prestigious world-level recognition for excellence in commons governance. Since 1985, Seva Mandir (SM) has also helped to develop shared, uncultivable private lands allowing families to grow fodder and minor forest produce. This also motivated villagers to develop community pastures.

Jhadol Block of Udaipur district is an important region where the development and regeneration of many pastures has been taken up and considerable experience has accumulated with the field and community workers who have been active in taking forward this work with the help of rural communities.

As Bhanvar Singh of SM who has been in the forefront of these efforts says,

“In our area 67 pastures have been taken up for development and regeneration, and this has covered approximately 1000 hectares. This achievement must be seen in the context of the planning and care that is involved in the proper regeneration of any village pastures. There has to be a sustained dialogue with and among the villagers over a long time. Sensitivities of several people have to be considered. Hence the initial planning and resolving of conflict issues can take a long time, even before the actual development works start.”

One main reason why the preparations can take a long time is that in most cases there are illegal encroachments of pasture land, mostly by those who are more powerful and influential. Understandably, removing encroachments by the more powerful and influential persons can be difficult. Yet community members working together in committees have been able to achieve the removal of such encroachments in one pasture after another. The beauty of the process followed in such Seva Mandir initiatives has been that permanent

hostilities could be avoided and settlements could be reached without any violence. This reflects a great level of trust between SM and community members on the one hand, and within the various members of village community organizations on the other hand.

However a more difficult to resolve dilemma emerges when an encroachment by a poorer person is discovered and discussed, as per land records. People explained a case where this person's encroachment was also removed as per rules being the same for everyone but he was helped by the community members to make up for this loss in other ways. Perhaps some similar steps can be taken so that this becomes a general practice.

Once the conflicting issues have been resolved, the people are ready for the actual pasture regeneration work in the form of the boundary, the trenches for conserving rainwater, the pits for planting trees followed by the actual planting of trees. Then comes the next stage of caring for the trees and maintenance of other works. Those involved in the work recognize that all the three stages are important for the success of the work—the first stage of planning and conflict resolution, the second stage of the actual work and the third stage of follow-up care and maintenance.

To this we should add that in fact it is the creation of community organizations in the work area of the SM that plays a very important role in the success of such work. Without the preceding work having been done for the formation of community organizations, such as village development committees, and the establishment of relationships of trust based on such community mobilization, it would become very difficult for a work which involves conflict resolution and removal of encroachments to have a smooth sailing.

Once successfully completed, pasture regeneration work can be very helpful to ensure availability of fodder in easier ways, improving the base for animal husbandry related livelihoods as well as for reducing the drudgery and difficulties of women in particular. In addition of course the cause of moisture and water conservation is also helped. All this can become the base for other ways of strengthening sustainable livelihoods. From the perspective of climate resilience and adaptation, and to some extent from the point of view of mitigation also, this work is important.

However the entire potential will be better realized if this work is seen not as an isolated work but as a component of much wider protection of environment and even stronger sustainable livelihoods based on this. At present several villagers here are seeing a reduction of animal husbandry related activities due to bullocks being replaced rapidly by tractors for various kinds of work and dairy development being limited in other ways. In addition there are problems also with keeping only cows while rapidly discarding bullocks. However if an innovative model can be worked out which is based on natural farming, village-based food and milk processing and closer linkages with urban consumers for supplying healthy food then, along with pasture regeneration and water conservation, all this can together mean something more promising not just to present day small farmers but also to the upcoming new generation with new talents. There will be more scope in this model for many kinds of creativity and innovativeness which will excite the younger members of the community. Their educational and computer skills will also find much use in such efforts, particularly on the marketing side. At the same time, the entire initiative can be taken forward in ways, including promotion of natural farming and reducing greatly the footprint of fossil fuels in villages, that it will be very important from the perspective of climate adaptation as well as mitigation.

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