



A Laudable Victory over Encroachment

A Story of Surtakheda

Surtakheda is a small village in Akola Panchayat located in Bhupalsagar Block of Chittorgarh district, Rajasthan. The village has 133 households and a population of 557. The local community is primarily dependent on agriculture, livestock rearing and wage labour work for their livelihoods. Surtakheda has adequate common lands which directly meet the needs of the community, particularly for water and fodder for livestock, fuel-wood, fruits and non-timber forest products. However, a considerable extent of this area has been encroached upon, gradually depleting their resources over the years.

Rajendra Singh Chundawat, working as a field trainer in Bhupalsagar block with FES, has been engaged in building capacities of the PRI members, community, village youth and local community institutions and supporting them in securing, restoring and governing their Commons. He approached the residents of Surtakheda in 2019 to understand their perspective about the

Most of the Common lands in Rajasthan are categorized as revenue wastelands. In order to protect and develop such revenue wastelands, the State Bio fuel and Pasture Land Board of Rajasthan issued an order in 2017 on establishment of Bio fuel and Pasture Land Development Committees at the District, Block and Panchayat Levels. In addition, the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Rule (1) 170 of 1996 mandates the formation of pasture land development committees, called Charagah Vikas Samitis (CVS), at the village level for the management and governance of the resources by the locals further enabled this provision.

village common lands and create awareness regarding the legal provisions available to protect and restore the common pastureland. After several rounds of interactions with Rajendra, the community decided to form the village Charagah Vikas Samiti (CVS). The CVS was constituted in February 2020, with representation from all social and economic groups in the village. Rameshwar Lal Banjara was elected as the President of the committee. Subsequently, trainings and meetings were organized for the community, discussing with them about Commons, the role of village institutions, and legal provisions and processes in securing and restoration of Commons.

According to the Jambandi (local records), there was 19.97 hectares of pastureland in Surtakheda. Following the training, the CVS members completed identification and mapping of common resources in the village with Rajendra's support, using a technological tool called the Common Land Mapping (CLM) tool. The land was mapped in two different sections, one measured 1.32 hectares and the second 6.51 hectares. The remaining area, 12.14 hectares was found to be under encroachment. The findings of the mapping exercise were shared with community members during a village meeting. Most of the common land under encroachment was being used for farming, while some individuals had also built houses. Discussions ensued on identifying the infringers and the possible action to be taken. Foremost, based on the information and data collected from the land mapping, the CVS members drafted a resolution for the entry of their Commons into the Panchayat Asset Register and submitted the same to the Panchayat Sarpanch. The issue of encroachment was also discussed with the Panchayat members.

With everyone's consensus, a formal complaint was lodged telephonically on 181 – Rajasthan Government's complaint helpline number - about the encroachment and an application was submitted to the Gram Panchayat, requesting action for removal of encroachments on the village common land. Regular follow-up ensured that the application was forwarded to the Revenue Department at the block level. To expedite the process, the CVS members personally approached the Revenue officials (Patwari and Tehsildar) on the matter and submitted a letter, requesting them to address the issue on a priority basis. The villagers were keen for the processes to be fast-tracked, as the continuous restriction on movement and lockdowns in the State due to the COVID-19 pandemic implied the possibility of the entire process slowing down and the issue being pushed into a matter of non-importance. The consistency of the CVS members eventually yielded action when the Patwari arrived in the village with two constables and a JCB machine. The Tehsildar was also present at the scene. Around 10 hectares of Common Lands were cleared of encroachment. On the remaining 2 hectares, pakka houses had been constructed. Notices were served to house owners to clear the encroached area.



The community is pleased with its victory. However, the residents are aware that timely action is necessary for ensuring that the land remains protected from any future encroachments as well. The CVS members furthered this agenda during the Gram Sabha, following which a restoration plan for the common pastureland constituting of plantations, bunds and grass sowing was developed. The plan has been submitted as part of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan and will be executed after approval.

Active participation of the local community in discussing, collective decision making and consistent follow up by GPAS members, along with the responsiveness of government functionaries, has played a significant role in securing and protecting the village Commons. Surtakheda is one successful example among many other villages across our project areas in Chittorgarh where the rural communities have been taking initiatives to secure, restore and govern their Commons.