

Quiet Transfer of Commons

Pastoralism, Shrinking Pastures and the new GR in Gujarat

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On 17 May 2005, the Government of Gujarat issued a resolution (GR) to bring wastelands under cultivation inviting big corporate houses and rich farmers – a beginning of corporate farming in a big way in the state. The GR has the provision of giving wastelands up to 2000 acres for a lease period of 20 years. To encourage larger participation, the first five years are rent-free after which a varying rent from Rs. 40 to 100 per acre shall be taken.¹ While some people see it as an opportunity to make a meaningful use of the wastelands, a fair amount of criticism has been mounting against this GR.

There have been protests by many civilians, NGOs and tribal *sangathans*. There have been demands for distribution of such lands among landless and other marginalized groups for cultivation. There have also been dharnas and rallies demanding its immediate withdrawal.

While most demands seek distribution of such lands among the marginalised communities for cultivation, none of the alternative demands question the very premise of bringing more and more wastelands under cultivation. The issue of people's dependence on the wastelands appears to have taken a back seat. We would like to discuss here one of the most important use of the wastelands – as pastures, the current status of designated pasture lands and the relationship of pastoralist and other livestock keepers with it.

We argue that though the concern for developing wastelands is well placed and a much needed welcome move by the state however, there is an urgent need to look into the alternative potentials of wastelands especially as grasslands or silvi-pasture systems keeping in view the current uses of such lands.

Pastoralism in Gujarat

Historically pastoralism has been an important occupation in the semi arid regions of Gujarat – especially Kutch, Saurashtra and North Gujarat. Undulating terrain, vast open lands and relative unsuitability of agriculture in large parts gave rise to a very well developed pastoral occupation here. Pastoralists form a sizeable population in Gujarat. In absence of any official census or even an estimate, it is difficult to know their total population. However, estimates vary from a conservative 25 lakh to about 40 lakh, 5 to 8 percent of Gujarat's population! Yet, their existence and resource base remain largely unacknowledged and unnoticed by the state, policy makers, academicians and NGOs alike.

¹ As per this GR, “the lands will be given up to a maximum of 2000 acres (800 ha.) for 20 years lease. The project must begin in first five years and the required capital shall be arranged by the lessee. Rs. 500 per acre shall be charged as interest free security deposit. If the project does not take off in five years, the deposit shall be forfeited and land shall be taken back. It is compulsory for the lessee to use the modern micro irrigation methods. There shall be no rent for the first five years. Annual rent will be charged at Rs. 40 per acre from 6th to 10th year and Rs. 100 per acre from 11th to 20th year. When any value adding activities are taken up, there will be 50 percent increase in the rent. The lessee can also mortgage this land to scheduled banks and RBI approved other banks. In case of any processing of the agricultural produce from this land no NA (non-agricultural) permission is required.” GR No. JMN/3903/453/A (part – 1)

Designated Pastures: Increasing Deficiency of *Gauchar* at Village Level

Traditionally various common lands and harvested agricultural fields were major sources for grazing livestock.² Of all the commons, *gauchars* are officially acknowledged permanent pastures and can be defined as the designated pasturelands in the village for village livestock.³ As per the official standard, every village shall designate 40 acres (16 hectares) of *gauchar* land in the non forest areas and 20 acres in the forest areas for every 100 livestock heads.

Over the years, the livestock has increased across the state but the *gauchars* have not. A closer look at the ‘on paper’ pastures and livestock population reveals that from 1960 to 2003 there is almost 60 percent increase in livestock while the *gauchars* have reduced by 18 percent at the state level which has generated severe pressure on the existing designated *gauchar* lands. (Table 1) Instead of 100 livestock for every 16 hectares of *gauchar*, it varies across the state from 218 to 819, 2 to 8 times more as compared to the government standards.

Table – 1: Gauchar Deficiency (1960 – 2003)

Details & Regions		Kutch	Saurashtra	North Gujarat	Central Gujarat	South Gujarat	Gujarat State
Changes from 1960-2003	Livestock	58.4	38.9	47.9	92.2	67.9	59.3
% change	Gauchar	3.4	-14.6	-27.4	-12.9	-34.7	-17.6
Livestock Pressure (Against the std of 100 per 16 ha.)	1960	221	133	230	371	304	207
No/16 ha.	2003	338	218	469	819	784	400

Source: Compiled by authors based on detailed analysis of relevant Census figures.

As per the current livestock population, the state level deficit of *gauchar* is 25.5 lakh hectares. Besides enormous official deficit, the situation is far worse at the village level. Large scale encroachments of *gauchars* all over the state is a phenomenon seldom reflected in the records. There are no systematic studies to record encroachments. However, all the studies on commons of Gujarat (Iyengar, 2002; Mahadevia, 1998; Chen, 1991 etc.) have brought out encroachments of *gauchars*.

An analysis of written requests made by the pastoralists to the State Pastoral Board from 22 June 2001 to 15 July 2002 revealed that of 34 applications received, 30 were requests to remove encroachments on their village *gauchars*, varying from 15 to 300 acres.⁴ A study of wastelands in 15 villages brought out that in most villages; *gauchar* area was either encroached or allotted for various government schemes. In one village it was found that large farmers extracted soil from *gauchar* for improving the fertility of their privately owned land. (Iyengar, 2001)

² Commons included *gauchars* - permanent pastures under village panchayats; *vidis* - protected grasslands; *padtar* - open wastelands; *bets* – grass islands; *cher* – mangroves and the mainland forests.

³ Many times the word *gauchar* is used interchangeably with grazing resources of all types, however in this paper by *gauchar* we mean the permanent pastures designated by the state and as recorded in the official land records of the village and the Revenue Department.

⁴ Analysis by the authors from the available records at the office of Gopalak Nigam in August, 2002

Another serious issue is the quality of the existing gauchars. Officially, gauchars have always been considered only in quantitative terms. No attention has been paid to the issues of its productivity and diversity. The productivity of our pasture lands has reached its all time low in past few decades. Describing the current state of gauchars one of the senior forest officials writes in his note, “Places where diverse types of grasses and vegetations grew all around the year, where there was enough to graze once and the livestock returned well fed from there in the evening, have degraded like never before. The number of palatable species has reduced on such lands and there is serious invasion of *Prosopis Juliflora* in these lands. . . With all these, there is a severe scarcity of good quality fodder today.” (Varsani, 2002)

Wastelands: Lifeline for Pastoralists & Livestock Keepers

While all those pastoralists having large herds have been migrating out of Kutch every year, people like – Ranabhai of village Khara Paswaria has been able to survive without migrating. He keeps sheep and goats. Though his sheep are weaker as compared to the real fat sheep of the Dhebar Rabaris who have migrated to the forest areas of Maharashtra and make more money per sheep than him, he is happy. Because he is at home. Open lands around his village are enough for his livestock. At times he has to walk longer to access the open lands of nearby villages. But lately, he has begun worrying. The pace at which big industries are taking over large areas of land in Kutch after the earthquake, he fears that his survival may be at stake.

Like Ranabhai, for many pastoralists of Gujarat these ‘wastelands’ is a lifeline despite its extremely degraded state. When the quality and the effective size of the gauchars are fast declining, ‘wastelands’ form an important grazing source and support livelihoods of the pastoralists and other livestock owners of the state.

Be it Bhal and Panchal in Saurashtra or Abdasa-Lakhat and Banni in Kutch, one spell of rain and most parts of semi-arid Gujarat take a beautiful green cover. Walk in any part with a pastoralist who would show the diversity of palatable grasses that grow in many of these wastelands, though their numbers and heights have reduced over the years. In a recent study by Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology (2003) in Naliya region 14 species of grasses and 46 herbs totalling to 90 species of shrubs, trees and climbers were found in open lands. Similarly 41 species of grasses, herbs, shrubs were found in the open lands around a small village in Banni (Singh, 1998)

A recent survey by us in 60 pastoral villages along the coast of Gujarat showed that wastelands form the major source of grazing round the year. It brought out that in the monsoon when all the cultivable lands are sown; in 92 percent villages, livestock used wastelands for grazing and in the summer when these wastelands have least to offer, 52 percent villages’ livestock used wastelands for grazing. (Bharwada & Mahajan, 2005) This means that even during the lean season, dependency on the wastelands for grazing is fairly high.

Besides the pastoralists who keep large herds, most landless and landed rural communities also keep livestock ranging from cattle and buffaloes to sheep, goat and donkeys and graze them in these ‘waste’ lands. If we include them, the actual people dependent on the wastelands will be a substantial proportion of the rural Gujarat households.

In an outstanding work on coping with seasonality and drought in a Gujarati village, Martha Chen (1991) lists down multiple uses of common lands by the people. She listed some 35 physical products that were collected or harvested from commons and the largest number of

products contributed to daily subsistence fuel and fodder requirements of poor. Poor people of the village met 70 percent of their fuel and 55 percent of their fodder needs from these resources.

In case of migrating pastoralists the wastelands also provide camping sites while on the move. As camping on *gauchars* and private lands need permissions from the panchayats and land owners respectively. Low-lying areas and natural pits in these wastelands also form a source of water in monsoon.

Cultivation: Only Way to Rejuvenate Wastelands?

In the post independence developments more and more wastelands were brought under cultivation. Introduction of modern technologies in agriculture reduced the fodder production and access to the fields became limited as the number of sowing cycles increased reducing the fallow period. Chemical fertilizers and farm mechanization reduced farmers' demand for manure and draught. As a result, pastoral livelihoods have been severely affected. On the other hand, the commons that formed the basis of survival were fast changing with newer land use policies that considered growth of agriculture and industries synonym to development never showing concerns for other land based livelihood systems.

New GR states that, "The objective of bringing wastelands under cultivation has not been met till now by the existing policies and thus it was under active government consideration to lease out these lands to cultivate it using modern technology for horticulture and bio fuel trees to the big corporate houses and individual resourceful farmers." Further quoting the Directorate of Agriculture, it states that such lands cannot be brought under cultivation without big investments. There are two assumptions made simultaneously. First, that the wastelands cannot be developed unless brought into cultivation and second that it is possible to do so only through big investments.

We would like to question the premise of 'bringing it under cultivation.' On what basis it is decided that such lands must be brought under cultivation? Is cultivation the only way to develop or rejuvenate the degraded wastelands? Are there really no options offered by such lands? There have been several experiments by the government's own institutions and departments, which suggest otherwise.

In a state where there is sizeable population of pastoralists and other livestock keepers, when the lands of many areas in Gujarat are naturally suited for grasslands why the state can not consider developing these lands as grasslands? Why the grasslands can not be recognised as a resource for pastoralists? Why can we not make efforts to reclaim, rejuvenate and rehabilitate the large tracts of wastelands as grasslands?

Often forwarded argument is of technical infeasibility but there are enough evidences to prove otherwise. There have been several experiments by both Government and non-government institutions to show the potential of rejuvenating wastelands as grasslands. We would like to quote some of the promising works.

A long drawn work of more than 15 years towards silvi-pasture development on wastelands by the Institute of Grassland and Fodder Research Institute, Jhansi (IGFRI) has shown that the productivity of forage and firewood can be increased 8 to 10 times respectively from 0.5 to 5.5 and from negligible to 2.5 tons per hectare. IGFRI's document on this experiment states; "The present work has shown a new technology dimension...if utilized and implemented even

on half of degraded lands, can solve the problem of land degradation and also of animal feed and firewood.” However as this work is in a relatively more controlled condition some people may find it may appear unrealistic. Let us look at another interesting work by the Gujarat Forest Department near Jamnagar on the open degraded wastelands. By minimal protection, some seeding and no water other than the annual rainfall the average fodder production has increased from 300 kg per hectare to 7000 kg. per hectare in two years.⁵ GUIDE’s grassland restoration experiments in Banni have also shown the rejuvenation potential in terms of increased production and diversity of grasses.

Table 1: Status of Gauchar and Potential of Wastelands as Grasslands

Region	Kutch	Saurashtra	North Gujarat	Central Gujarat	South Gujarat	Gujarat Total
Current Gauchar Deficit (ha.)	-166909	-514955	-585044	-897339	-392445	-2556692
Uncultivable wastelands (ha.)	430968*	541900	85900	169100	101300	1329168
Gauchar Deficit or Surplus after converting all uncultivable wastelands to pasture (ha.)	264059	26945	-499144	-728239	-291145	-1227524

Compiled by the authors

Livestock figures from Livestock Statistics, 2003 and pastures figures from the Statistical Abstract, 2003

** As per the District Panchayat Statistical Report, 2001-2002. The state level data includes the Ranns of Kutch and other saline lands and hence misrepresents the actual wasteland figure. To avoid this, we have used the district level data for Kutch.*

To further the argument of wastelands as grazing lands instead of cultivated lands, let us see if Gujarat can meet its pasture requirement after converting all its wastelands to grasslands. Unfortunately not. Only Saurashtra and Kutch will have some surplus lands after such conversions. All the other three regions will continue to have gauchar deficit. At the state level, there will still be a deficit of 12.27 lakh hectares to meet the grazing needs as per the government standards! Indeed an alarming situation. (Table 2)

Need to Re-consider

Livestock is insurance to survival in semi arid regions like Western Gujarat where due to the degraded land quality, uncertainty of rains, poor ground water resources and lack of reliable irrigation facilities in arid parts even a single crop fails many times. Pastoralism has been a well-developed occupation in Gujarat. Besides its several other uses, wasteland is a regional grazing resource. By designating uncultivable lands as ‘wastelands’, the Government grossly undermines its significance for those who survive on it. Rejuvenation of such lands need not always mean cultivation.

Often forwarded argument in favour of leasing out the wastelands for other purposes is that there are designated pastures in every village and the pastoral needs should be met from these lands. The analysis shows that the designated pastures are far from sufficient to meet the grazing needs of the livestock. Figures also show that even if all the wastelands are converted to grasslands, there still remains gauchar deficit of 12.27 lakh ha. at the state level. In such a scenario, when the government makes an announcement to give it for corporate farming, it is

⁵ Personal Communication with Assistant Conservator of Forest, Rajkot and an official presentation on the same by the ACF in September, 2005

certainly and consciously sacrificing present and future interests of lakhs of pastoralists and all those small and marginal livestock keepers in the name of wasteland rejuvenation.

There is an urgent need to understand the existing uses of and dependence on wastelands before defining the possible uses and ways of rejuvenating such lands. Directive principle under the Article 39b and c of the Indian Constitution states, “The state shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing, that the ownership and control of the material resources of community are so distributed as best to sub-serve the common good; that the operation of economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment.” Can the government, the trustee of common resources, take away the commons and quietly transfer them to the ‘big’ private interests without ever consulting and informing those who have been using it for generations? Without ever considering the ecological aspects and the livelihood systems of people dependent on the so-called ‘waste’ lands?

Note

This article has drawn some of its ideas from our ongoing study on the pastoralists of Gujarat. We would like to acknowledge our discussions with Girish Patel and some of the pastoralists leaders in Gujarat.

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