

Villagers Unite Against Illegal Mining

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In Sawar village in Ajmer, over the years private mining companies, extracting stone and marble that is exported all over the world, have progressively encroached on village common lands. Not only have villagers lost their commons and grazing grounds but have been subject to increasing air pollution from the dust and debris. This case study is about how commoners have united to stop common land encroachment from illegal mining. It is a part of a series collected from diverse villages in Ajmer, Rajasthan where through FES's interventions, the villagers struggle, and in most cases, succeed in laying claim to their pasture lands.

Prakriti Karyashala which translates to 'Rural College', was started in 2012 to respond to the rising needs of the rural communities, village institutions, panchayats along with government and non-government officials, to steer processes at the village level. This body enhances the knowledge and skills of individuals and community institutions to play an active role in governing their common resources and enables them to access and implement relevant schemes. Prakriti Karyashala trains a cadre of field trainers who in turn provide training to stakeholders closest to their location. The various strategies employed include facilitating interactions with district administration for district-level implementation design, building collaborations with Milk Unions and NGOs for handholding support in natural resource management for Panchayats and village institutions, and conducting training programmes.ⁱ

Sawar

Sawar, a village divided into 17 wards, is famous for its mines which export stone and marble to countries around the world. Out of 1400 bighas bighas needs to be changed to acres of common land in the village, about 10 per cent has been encroached upon illegally by private mining corporations. These mining corporations have been operating from Sawar for years, setting up five mines and hindering the daily lives of the villagers by obstructing their grazing lands and endangering their health with mining debris and pollutants.

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Ranglal Bheel, a retired BSF veteran, is the Sarpanch of Sawar. After his retirement and on his return to his hometown a couple of years ago, he found that these mining corporations were rapidly illegally encroaching their Commons. The cattle in the village, especially large ruminants like cows, were losing ground on which they could graze. Ranglal was furious that their cows were being treated poorly and decided that something had to be done. He believed that what the mining corporations were doing was nothing short of violence to these animals and they needed to be stopped.

Around a year after Ranglal was made the Sarpanch, Ganpat who was trained as a Prakriti Karyashala trainer, came to Sawar and began conducting training workshops for the communities. Through these sessions, Ranglal soon realised that there were government and court orders in place which protected common lands and that he, along with the other villagers had the power to enforce these laws and stop the miners.

Ganpat provided Ranglal with information about the Supreme Court judgement from 2011 where directions were given to all the State Governments in the country for eviction of illegal/unauthorized occupants of Gram Sabha/ Gram Panchayat/ Shamlat land and restoration of these lands to the Gram Sabha/ Gram Panchayat for the common use by communities of the village. This empowered him in his fight against the private mining corporations.

On further investigation he realised that, firstly, the government was not allowed to sell their common lands to private mining corporations. Secondly, they also needed to obtain No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from the village gram sabha in order to set up these mines, which nobody in Sawar had signed. Ranglal had enough information with him to register a complaint with the Sub District Magistrate and then with the Tehsildar. When there was a delay from the higher officials in taking action, he staged a protest with the support of the youth from his village. It soon came to light that the mining corporations had been permitted to enter their common lands as they had lied to the government that they were going to set up farms in these areas.

The fight is still on to stop the mines and Ranglal Bheel religiously visits the Sub District Magistrate's office with his bulky folder, carrying all the important documentation related to the common lands for Sawar. His dedication and selflessness to improve the village and fight for their Commons gives him very little time to spend with his family. As the Sarpanch, he has pushed for the development of his village, building a road which eases the commute for his people and setting up a water pipeline to service five bastis or settlements in his village. A devout man, he believes that this is all part of his service to God.

“This is God’s work. God has asked me to fight for the cattle in my village. What the mining corporations are doing is not right and they’re eating into land where our cows should graze.” - Ranglal Bheel

A Matriarch Joins the Fight

Lakshmi is a Ward panch who was appointed as the Adyaksh of the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti in Sawar. A widow and a matriarch, she supports her family financially and has proven herself as a strong leader of both men and women in her village. Her passion and dedication in leading her people made Ranglal feel that she would make a good leader for the development of their common lands. As a Ward Panch, she has attended every meeting held for the betterment of her village and has been actively involved in the decision-making process.

Ranglal Bheel showing the FES Team the areas which are being encroached upon by the mining corporations



Lakshmi at her residence with the stone chain she makes, which is used in stone cutting machinery.



According to Lakshmi, the mining corporations have improved the economy of the village as they provide jobs to their people who work as laborers to make ends meet, especially when it's off-season. Lakshmi herself benefits from the mining corporation because she makes stone chains which are used in powerful cutting machinery, to provide for her family. Without these corporations, a large part of their income would be destroyed, so making this decision to support the eviction of the mining corporations from the village common lands was not an easy one.

Knowing that their cattle were losing land to graze and empowered by Ranglal Bheel's fight for justice, Lakshmi was determined to stop the encroachment of the private corporations and support the cause by doing her bit. Inspired by the way the Sarpanch puts the thought of the villagers and the development of their common lands before his own and his family's needs, she was encouraged and empowered to become the Adyaksh of the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti.

Ranglal's and Lakshmi's efforts might not be enough to remove the encroachments from their Commons entirely but the biggest achievement here is the commoners taking a stand and

saying that mining can continue on legally approved patches. This move would ensure that their cattle did not lose their grazing ground.

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Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)

FES, spread across diverse ecological and social geographies, works with large efforts towards the conservation of nature and natural resources through the collective action of local communities. The focal point of their work dwells on locating forests and other natural resources within the existing economic, social and ecological systems in rural landscapes. In the Indian context, FES has played a pioneering role in strengthening the concept of Commons as an effective instrument of local governance, as economic assets for the poor and the viability of adjoining farmlands. As of June 2020, along with its grassroot partners, FES works with 31,065 village institutions in 78 districts across 10 states and assists the village communities in protecting 8.84 million acres of common lands. These include revenue wastelands, degraded forest lands and Panchayat grazing lands. FES’s impact is a rural populace of 16 million, across the country.

Training Modules for Restoration and Governance of Commons

