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Title: A Gandhian approach : Building Institutions for the sustainable development of commons

Seva Mandir works with tribal communities to build village institutions to improve land governance over common property resources. In our area, the commons constitute largely of forests, revenue and village pastures, occupying 72.8% of the total geographical area. Commons are excessively encroached and degraded. Traditional governance arrangements communities have got fractured on economic and socio-political lines. Creating a new institutional framework to exercise governance of commons is imperative.

The area is situated in Aravali hills in south Rajasthan (western India). It is primarily inhabited by Bhil tribes. 90% of tribal families with small holding practice rain fed agriculture. With low farm output and lack of other avenues of employment, tribal families live below poverty line ranking low, against all development indicators. Common lands which were once an important source of livelihood, and provided ecological and cultural services are alarmingly degraded and privatised. According to one estimate of Seva Mandir, different categories of commons have encroachments ranging from 30% to 100%. Both rich and poor members of community encroach upon commons. Land has political value; and the commons are often the site of patronage, specially at the time of elections where peasants are encouraged to occupy common lands. Those who benefit privately, enter into patron- client relations of dependence with state functionaries and local politicians. They also weaken their ties of solidarity with their own community members. This leads to the weakening of people’s collective bargaining power, social cohesion and overall ability to exercise self -governance.

Over last 50 years, Seva Mandir has worked to build village institutions called Gram Samuhas. Following Gandhian approach of Satyagraha (truthful persuasion), Gram Samuhas negotiate with encroaching families to vacate the common lands in public interest. Gram Samuhas also incentivize encroachment vacating families by providing them access to irrigation facility or develops their agricultural fields. This process of Satyagraha is complex, cumbersome and takes lots of time. Many a times, these negations fail. Still, following path of Satyagraha, Seva Mandir and Gram Samuhas have been able to alter distorted property relations in more than 300 villages, paving the way for equitable and sustainable land governance.