

## **Reclaiming Commons Restoring and Protecting Grazing Lands from Illegal Dumping**

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*While tourism may support a town economy, it can also damage the environment and ecology of the surrounding villages and destroy common grazing lands. Here's how two villages fought to preserve their common lands. These case studies are a part of a series collected from diverse villages in Ajmer, Rajasthan, where FES's interventions in training villagers to reclaim what is their own has been successful.*

*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.<sup>i</sup>*

When small towns like Pushkar attract tourist attention nationwide, there is a lot of talk about the economy of the nearby villages improving. But rarely does anyone talk about the pollution and destruction of common lands in the vicinity, due to such heavy tourist inflow. While most village folk watched tourism slowly take a toll on their land, and in some cases, their livelihood, some brave women and men decided to question these developments and put an end to it. Here are case studies of three different villages and their fight to protect their common lands, no matter what the odds.

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## *Nedliya*

Nedliya is a small, bustling village in Peesangarh Block, bordering the holy town of Pushkar in Ajmer. It has 250 families with a total population of 1200 members. The proximity of the village to a popular tourist destination comes at a disadvantages. Due to the lack of a dumping ground close to Pushkar, hotels and restaurants began dumping tractor loads of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste on the common lands of Nedliya. Over time and with continued dumping, the stench emanating from the area made it difficult for anybody to walk past it without covering their nose. Not only was the stench worse during the monsoon months, but the waste heaps led to the spread of disease. Cattle strayed in from Pushkar, ingesting non-biodegradable trash like plastic bags, leading to them choking and dying, breeding more insects in the area. This had been going on over a long time, but nobody had been willing to do anything about it.

Sometime in 2015, Kailash, a young man who was trained and deputed by the Prakriti Karyashala, came to this village for the first time. Armed with a diploma in Integrated Regional Rural Development Planning, he had joined FES in 2014 and on visiting Nedliya, he immersed himself in the area, understanding and responding to the needs of these rural communities. In the years that followed, he has helped enhance the villagers' knowledge, enabling them to play an active role in the governance of their common resources. His dedicated efforts make him welcome and loved by the communities with whom he works. When asked why he works here, Kailash said, "I love enabling and empowering these communities to come up with solutions to the problems they are facing. Knowledge gives them power."

The process of organizing panchayat and village level capacity building programmes brought in awareness about the importance of securing their common lands and legal rights over their village pastures. Kamla, who was a mate under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) since 2008, also participated in these sessions. Her role as a mate was to supervise the worksite of about 100 workers, which was very close to the open dumping ground. She, along with her workers, who used to work around this area, found it very difficult to sit anywhere near it for their lunch breaks because of the unbearable stench. Kamla often voiced her concerns, but it fell on deaf ears. On attending the Prakriti Karyashala sessions, she learnt about Commons and the need for a village institution or a *Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti* to protect and develop these lands.

According to the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Rules, 1996 rule 170(1), a provision has been made for the formation of a five-member committee called the 'Charagah Vikas Samiti' at the village level for the management of Pasture Lands. The rule also has a provision for planting of the appropriate type of grasses, shrubs and trees, as well as for protecting them from encroachments.

Having been affected by polio when she was young, Kamla can only get around with the support of a crutch. She has never let her disability come in her way and decided to stand for the post of Ward Panch in 2015. To her surprise she was well-received by the people in her ward. Their trust in her propelled her forward and she took it upon herself to stop the illegal dumping once and for all.



*Kamla, who mobilised people to fight for the Commons.*

With the help of PK Trainers, Kamla quickly learnt how decisions were made and which applications needed to be filled and sent to the respective authorities. For example, she found that under the Land Revenue Act article 91(6), the district collector should issue orders in writing, entrusting the responsibility of preventing and removing the encroachment on land used for common purposes, with the patwari, sarpanch, gramsevak and tehsildar. She approached the sarpanch with a letter written on her official letterhead asking him to sign and take it to the tehsildar, with the hope that their issue would be solved. Kamla says that it took a couple of visits by the sarpanch to the tehsildar and then finally, one visit to the Chairman of the Nagar Palika to finally get them to act. After four years of following up, the land is finally clear of garbage and the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Committee has also ensured that the *Prosopis juliflora*, choking the land was gradually removed and native species were planted.



*The branches of these shrubs used to have plastic bags stuck on them but due to the efforts of these communities, this is no longer the case.*

Inspired by Kamla, the youth in her village have taken issues of governance very seriously and ensure that their Commons are not only secure but are also being developed in the process, with boundary demarcations, planting of native grass and tree species and construction of water trenches for their animals. Further, they have also prepared plans for eco-restoration of the reclaimed pastureland. As a result, they have received sanctions for INR 29.91 lakh from MGNREGA funds, which is helping them continue the work till date. Kamla, who is nothing short of an inspiration to her villagers, spends her free time educating the young children in her village because she truly believes that education and knowledge is the key to ensuring change.

## *Nala*



*Nala's Charagah Bhoomi which has been protected from encroachment and waste dumping from hotel and restaurant owners in Pushkar*

*“We try to inform all the members about the importance of securing communities' land rights on our Commons but it's not in everyone's immediate interest. It then ends up falling on those that are brave and who don't fear the repercussions.” - Kailash, PK Trainer*

Nala is a village similar to Nedliya, 2-3 km from Pushkar. Here too the villagers here were faced with the problem of garbage dumping on their common lands, while stray cattle from Pushkar encroached on their common lands to graze. After the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti was formed in 2015, post Kailash's training and intervention, one night a group from the nearby communities moved in and encroached close to 100 acres of common land, planted saplings and putting up wire fencing to ensure that it wouldn't be easy to ascertain whether it was actually Nala's common land. A few people from Nala got wind of this encroachment and informed the members of the Charagah Bhoomi Vikas Samiti. Realising that they needed the strength of the entire village, the Samiti called for a Gram Sabha where everyone was informed of the situation. A joint decision

was taken to send a notice to the encroachers. When their notices were wilfully ignored, the Samiti members went to the tehsildar to demand that action be taken.

As part of their training, the Samiti had drawn up a map of their common lands with boundary demarcations, and this was presented as evidence to show how much of the land had been encroached upon. This knowledge about their rights and knowing whom to approach and the processes to be followed empowered the residents of Nala and they won back their common lands from the illegal encroachers. While they have won this battle, they continue to grapple with the illegal dumping of garbage from Pushkar's restaurants and hotels, all of which happens in the middle of the night. For now, the village is tackling this situation by appointing a chowkidar to keep an eye on their common lands and stop anyone from dumping their waste here. They have also created a physical boundary which demarcates their land and attempts to protect it from being encroached upon.

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## <sup>i</sup> Training Modules for Restoration and Governance of Commons

