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Oran System in Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT: As in all pastoral societies, village commons occupy a pivotal place in the lives of Rajasthan's livestock-dependent communities too. Locally called orans, these are lands where herders have been grazing their cows, sheep, and goats for centuries. Usually featuring a temple and a waterbody, these community-conserved pastures are rich in biodiversity.

KEYWORDS-oran,system,Rajasthan,livestock,lands,herders,community,pastures

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rajasthan orans are home to the endangered great Indian bustard (GIB), chinkara, and the Indian desert fox. The lands are under threat now as they are sought to be used for generating "green energy", solar in particular.

With high solar radiation, Rajasthan's Thar desert is considered ideal for solar power. According to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, Rajasthan has the highest installed solar capacity in the country, of 7,737.95 megawatts. But solar installations and plans for future expansion come at the cost of existing village commons.[1,2,3]

On December 11, 2021, people from Jaisalmer marched through 40 villages, covering almost 300 kilometres, demanding protection for the orans. The Oran Bachao Yatra ended on December 19 when the protesters submitted a letter to the Jaisalmer District Collector with a demand to recognise orans in revenue records as village commons and to protect them as deemed forests, as the Supreme Court had ordered in 2018. Almost four years after the Supreme Court directive, not a single oran has been declared a deemed forest.

The letter pointed out the importance of orans, which are oases of traditional flora and fauna. Named after deities, they are considered sacred by the local people and protected as such. In recent years, villagers have been actively involved in safeguarding the critically endangered GIB, locally called godawan, which is also the State bird of Rajasthan. There are only about 150 GIBs left in the wild now: many of them have died after hitting the power lines that criss-cross the landscape.[5,7,8]

Fatal Collisions

Experts say that in the last few years, orans have either been handed over to green energy companies or been encroached upon by power grids and lines installed by these companies. The power lines have caused the death of not only GIBs but also of the laggar falcon and other such endangered species.

But the local administration does not seem to be bothered. Sumer Singh, a herder and one of the leaders of the march, sounded sceptical. "They give assurances but nothing happens," he said. This is the seventh time that they have submitted a letter to the Collector's office since 2020, but to no avail.[9,10,11]

"Development should happen but not like this. Trees are cut overnight. Some of these trees are hundreds of years old. What will happen to us? This is our livelihood," Singh added.

Tina Dabi, District Collector of Jaisalmer, neither answered calls nor responded to messages seeking an interview about the protest march and the people's demands.

"The richest biodiversity in the deserts is in the orans," M.R. Baloch, Director, Arid Forest Research Institute (AFRI), told Frontline. AFRI is a Jodhpur-based autonomous body under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. Many of the orans, however, are classified as "wasteland" in revenue records, according to the Wasteland Atlas prepared by the Union Ministry of Rural Development.

At present, solar and wind power projects do not require environmental clearance under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, unlike other developmental projects involving highways, hydropower and the like.

This is why the Supreme Court had intervened in 2018: its order recognised the ecological importance of desert ecosystems and of orans in particular, which were to be brought under the tag of “deemed forest”. As per the Supreme Court order, the Rajasthan government was supposed to form an expert committee comprising representatives from AFRI, Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI), and other relevant bodies and departments “to identify areas which are representative of various types of desert ecosystems”.

Bega Ram Jat, Chief Conservator of Forests, Rajasthan, confirmed that the committee had been formed and that they were in the process of drawing up a list of orans. “As of now, we have listed almost 50,000 hectares of land in Jaisalmer as orans,” said Ganesh Verma, Divisional Forest Officer, Jaisalmer. He explained that once the list was finalised and the lands were notified as deemed forests, the forest department would take possession of them. But there would be no restriction on grazing, he clarified, adding that they were consulting local people for listing orans.

Sumer Singh disputed this statement. “This is the first time I am hearing about the forest department preparing a list of orans. They have not spoken to any of us who protested,” he said.[12,13,15]

Parallel efforts

Communities and civil society groups are leading parallel efforts to conserve the orans. Sumit Dookia, scientific adviser to the Ecology, Rural Development & Sustainability (ERDS) Foundation, a Rajasthan-based grassroots-level conservation organisation, said that they had identified around 130 orans in consultation with local people.

The Supreme Court-ordered list though is long overdue. The report on orans was supposed to be finalised within six months of the date of the order, by January 2019.

II.DISCUSSION

“In the last three years, because of agitations, the local administration is trying to be careful with land allotment [to renewable energy companies],” said Parth Jagani, district coordinator from Jaisalmer for the ERDS Foundation. But power lines are still being drawn across orans and trees being cut.

In July 2021, when villagers from Bikaner staged a dharna protesting against plans to lay power lines across pastures, they were lathi-charged by the police. A core demand of the dharna was the settlement of community land rights over the pastureland. Just a few days before this, the Rajasthan High Court had ordered the cancellation of around 900 acres of land allotted to Adani Renewable Energy Park Rajasthan Ltd in Nedan village near Pokhran.

The company had been allotted around 3,800 acres in 2018. The land, with a water tank and a school, supported grazing and was also used for agriculture. The affected people went to court demanding a return of their community land. The court recognised that since the land hosted public utilities, it could not be used for a solar park.

It also directed the State government to survey the entire stretch and cancel allotments where the land is used for public purposes. Located at a distance of about 70 km from Desert National Park, this land had been marked by the Wildlife Institute of India as a “potential area” for the conservation of GIBs.[17,18,19]

Sujan Singh Salkha, a herder from Sam village near Desert National Park, explained that while work undertaken by a wind power company on an oran in their area had come to a halt, the core issue of oran protection remained unresolved. “The company has already developed some part of the land. If they take it over entirely, what will happen to our cattle and the wild birds and animals?” he asked.

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The Crux

- Rajasthan's village commons or orans are threatened by green energy projects
- The Rajasthan orans are home to the endangered great Indian bustard (GIB), chinkara, and the Indian desert fox.
- They are central to the lives of the herding communities.
- In 2018, the Supreme Court recognised the ecological importance of desert ecosystems and of orans in particular, which were to be brought under the tag of "deemed forest".
- Almost four years after the Supreme Court directive, not a single oran has been declared a deemed forest.
- From December 11-19, people from Jaisalmer marched in Oran Bachao Yatra to protest against the destruction of orans.
- But the local administration does not seem to be too bothered.

In western Rajasthan, near Jaisalmer, locals are battling with the administration to save a 600-year-old sacred grove, as high-tension power lines are being laid in the area.[20,21]

The Oran (sacred grove) is an oasis of life with a rich diversity of flora and fauna, and small water bodies, and serves as a grazing ground for camels, sheep and goats of local herders. Cutting of trees, however, is strictly prohibited by the locals.

The district administration maintains that the power lines being laid are not in the Oran land.

The genesis of this problem — and there have been similar battles earlier — goes back to 2004 when the government reclaimed this land and a portion of the Oran was left out in the official revenue department records.

For centuries, the trees in Oran, or sacred grove, near the Samvata village in Rajasthan's Jaisalmer, have stood tall and untouched. Not a branch was cut, "not even for datoon (twig to clean teeth)," said a villager, Sumer Singh Bhati.

Spread across a massive expanse, this patch of vegetation with trees, bushes, and grasslands has supported a rich variety of flora and fauna. The Oran has been the perfect grazing ground for camels, sheep, and goats, thereby also supporting the livelihood of local herders.

A few weeks ago, however, excavators started making an appearance and trees began to be uprooted. For a solar power plant, someone was told.

Aghast, the locals raised the alarm and approached the district administration. It brought the excavation work to a halt. Still, as electrical lines continue to be laid in the area, the locals are bracing themselves for a long fight for the sake of this patch of greenery that they deeply revere and feel obliged to protect.

A history of conservation

The significance of Orans, which are rich in biodiversity and usually have water bodies like ponds within, is that they are akin to oases in the dry state of Rajasthan. There are an estimated 25,000 Orans in the state, as per the NGO Krishi Avam Parishitiki Vikas Sansthan, an organisation for the development of ecology and agriculture-livestock. The Samvata Oran is one of the biggest.

Locals say that about 610 years ago, the then king of Jaisalmer had entrusted the responsibility of this Oran to the priests of the local Shri Degarai Mata temple. Since then, the temple had ensured that cutting of trees was forbidden and cultivation not allowed. Only the grazing of animals was permitted.[18,19,20]

III.RESULTS

As a result, it has become a thriving patch of different local species of trees, like khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*), kumat (*Acacia senegal*), babul (*Acacia nilotica*), ker (*Capparis decidua*), and rohira (*Tecomella undulata*). There are different grass varieties, like sevan (*Lasiurus scindicus*), motha (*Cyperus rotundus*), and saanthi.

Consequently, this Oran supports a variety of wildlife, like blackbuck, blue bull, jackals and even the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard (GIB) has been spotted here.

While there's no doubt about its ecological and economic significance—the Oran supports more than 5,000 camels, 20,000 sheep and 10,000 goats of local herders with fodder—its size has been the bone of contention between locals and officials.

“The Oran is 60,000 bighas in size and has been under the care and protection of the Shri Degarai Mata temple trust for more than 600 years,” Bhati, a camel herder and resident of the Samvata village, told Mongabay India. “But when the government reclaimed this land some years back (in 2004), it identified only 27,000 bighas as Oran.”

Bigha is a traditional unit for land measurement in India. In Rajasthan, 1 hectare is 6.25 bighas.

This “silence of the government agencies over the rest of the 33,000 bighas, despite locals having a solid record for the entire 60,000 as Oran is a battle that has been raging between the two for all these years,” said conservationist Sumit Dookia.[13,15]

As a result, development projects—mostly solar and wind energy projects—have become a source of nervousness and anger amongst the locals who fear that the Oran would be destroyed by “encroachment.

“This area is identified as a renewable energy site,” said Dookia, adding that there are several windmills south and east of the Oran, “whereas the northern side is now under solar power sites.”

There are 12 villages on the Oran fringes in Samvata. Most of the inhabitants are camel, sheep and goat herders, who are heavily dependent on the Oran for fodder for their animals. “We have always revered the Oran; it nurtures us and is our source of life,” Bhati, who has 300 camels, said. “Almost 5,000 camels and other animals graze here; if the Oran is destroyed, what will happen to us? Where will we go to feed our animals?”

Others echo similar sentiments. “The Oran feeds us by feeding our animals, providing them with water in the harshest of summers, and has never let them go hungry even in the worst of famines,” said Gopal, a sheep herder of a nearby village. “When we saw the excavators uprooting trees of the Oran for what we came to know was a solar power plant, we were shocked. The work has stopped now, but we are still wary of the ways of the powerful.”

IV.CONCLUSIONS

For an outsider, this juxtaposition of a thriving local ecology versus clean energy projects may appear confusing. Parth Jagani of the Ecology Rural Development & Sustainability (ERDS) Foundation in Jaisalmer however, said that often green energy is “disguised” and that “one doesn't know what the cost of the power generated is.”

“In 2010, 1,138 bighas of land was acquired in Nokh village near Jaisalmer by a private company to set up a solar power plant,” Jagani told Mongabay-India. “The villagers were promised a bright future. But the project collapsed.” The fiscal status of the project, he said, collapsed; as a result, the locals did not benefit, and the plant was under-utilised.

“And at what cost? Ecologically, that land was devastated. To install a solar plate, you need to dig seven-eight feet for the concrete base of the pillar and this makes the land around uncultivable,” said Jagani.[20,21]

In the Oran near Samvata, high-tension electricity pillars have been installed and overhead electricity lines are being laid in between, which, locals say, is “very close the temple” and therefore encroaches the Oran land.

Chanan Singh of the Shri Degarai Mata temple committee said, “We have met the district collector regarding this issue. Our demand since 2004 has been the same—the entire 60,000 bighas should be declared as Oran so that, as per the Supreme Court order, it will be considered a Deemed Forest and will get the protection against any such activity.”

When contacted, Namit Mehta, the district commissioner of Jaisalmer, refuted the claims of any construction or uprooting of trees in the Oran. “There is some confusion over the Oran land. A local delegation did come to meet me and I have assured them that the electricity lines which are being laid are not on the Oran land,” Mehta told Mongabay-India.

Elaborating more on this, he went on to say that a “765 MW power grid has been installed near a village” and that “electricity lines are just being laid between the power grids by the Power Corporation of India.”

The locals, are, however, not convinced and see this as a ploy for encroachment. Bhati said that in 2016, the revenue department had allotted a part of the non-official Oran land for a wind energy project through which windmills were to be set up.

“At that time, all of us from the 12 villages stood up against that decision and approached the district administration to stop the Oran and the ecology it supports from being impacted. It was an andolan, a stir. They finally agreed,” Bhati said, “We didn’t agree back then, we won’t give in now — despite the pressure being high on us.”

Despite repeated attempts, Power Grid Corporation of India Limited was not available for comments.

Another point to be considered, said Dookia, is that since there are records of the critically endangered GIB being spotted in the Oran in winters — two GIBs were spotted here in November 2019 — electrical lines must be underground in that area and not overhead as are being laid. In February this year, the Supreme Court had asked the Rajasthan state government to consider laying underground cables as overhead power transmission lines have been the cause of many GIB collision-deaths.

The Jaisalmer district commissioner, however, reiterated that none of the activities was in the Oran, and hence was not a “forest department-related issue, otherwise, permissions (for the said work) would not have been given”. This, said the locals, was precisely the point: to declare this unrecorded Oran land as a Deemed Forest. A deemed forest has land rights with the revenue department but is managed by the forest department and this, said Dookia, in addition to a “clear boundary and a buffer area, with no power transmission lines inside and surrounding areas, since it’s a GIB habitat” would be the ideal case scenario to conserve the ecology of this area.

“We are not against any solar power or other development project,” Bhati said at the end, “All we are saying is that develop these projects far from us. This Oran is a forest and our life source.”[21]

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