

# FREE-GRAZING CATTLE: Overcoming the Menace

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Large tracts of up-land areas in Godda district of Jharkhand are left unutilized and uncultivated and are almost considered redundant by the villagers. Not because the land is uncultivable or because they don't want to cultivate this land, but because they can't. All because of a very strange practice here...that of free-grazing cattle

“The land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it's the only thing that lasts.”

**Gerald O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind***

— **Margaret Mitchell**

## The background

In the backdrop of this piece are two *panchayats*—Chandana and Kusmaha—in the Sundarpahari block, of Godda district, Jharkhand. Godda happens to be one of the most underdeveloped districts in Jharkhand<sup>1</sup>, and Sundarpahari is touted to be its least developed block. Barring two hamlets of non-tribal families, the Santhal and the Pahariya tribes entirely dominate these two *panchayats*. According to

<sup>1</sup><http://devinsights.co.in/district-level-development-jharkhand/> - Retrieved on 3/04/2018

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block officials, a major chunk of the Kusmaha *panchayat* falls under the CPI (Maoist-infested) area and a dedicated task force is stationed there for security reasons.

The Santhals and the Pahariyas are both involved in domesticating indigenous cattle breeds (cows, oxen and calves), utilized primarily for ploughing and rarely for milk. The excess animals are sold in the weekly cattle *hathiya* (village market) at nearby Banka or are purchased by traders directly from the villagers.

*Kharif* crops such as paddy and maize are at the core of agricultural production here. Other crops such as horse gram (*kurthi*), seasonal vegetables and sweet potato occupy a peripheral position in the annual crop itinerary. Rabi crop, as a practice, is a long-lost one and almost negligible in these regions; crops such as mustard and Bengal gram are sparsely grown. The cultivated lands in the region are mainly low-lands, mid low-lands, and homesteads. Large tracts of up-land areas are left unutilized and uncultivated and are almost considered redundant by the villagers. Not because the land is uncultivable or they don't want to cultivate this land, but because

they cannot. All because of a very strange practice there...

Every year, around mid-January, after the Santhal festival of *Sohrai porb*, domesticated cattle are untied, left to roam free and enter the fields, regardless of who the land belongs to. Even a week after the festive season is over, merry-making continues and people, especially the men, indulge in heavy drinking. It is considered beyond the spirit of the spirit to go and tend the cattle. When the monsoons (mid-June) arrive, the villagers go to the forests to fetch their cattle; the animals remain tied till January and the next year this cycle is repeated.

All this would have been absolutely acceptable had it merely been a part of their culture without any untoward consequences for anybody. To those unfamiliar with the people, this is true, to some extent. But it certainly has ramifications.

As the wizened village-folk say, 10 or 15 years ago, this was not the case. The society adhered to strict tribal laws. Those were the times when agriculture was considered pious and was one of the crucial means for dousing the fires in the belly. Animals, howsoever important they were, were kept

away from the crops. Dedicated people (usually children and the elders) would shoulder the responsibility of grazing cattle in the designated commons. In case some itinerant cattle entered the crop-fields, the owner of the cattle would be fined. All this happened because a crucial tribal law enforcement machinery was in place.

Apart from *kharif* cropping, *rabi* crops were also sown and the yields were sufficient to cater to the villagers' healthy lifestyle. Paddy, pigeon-pea, maize, Bengal gram and millet constituted the *kharif* crop, and mustard, linseed and horse gram were the main *rabi* yields. The oil and protein components of the diet of the people were obtained from their own fields.

Now the situation is different. As modernization found its way inward, new trends of seasonal migration have crept in, and the 'Dilli-' and 'Bambai-' returned mobile flashing young generation has shunned the old tribal customs. Animal grazing laws have taken a backseat and, subsequently, as soon as the paddy harvesting season is over, the animals are left open for uncontrolled grazing. The results have been disastrous for

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the community. Almost nobody cultivates pigeon-pea; a very cheap and no-maintenance crop, which is a big source of protein. Over a period of time, *rabi* crop cultivation has become negligible. The precious and nutritious crops such as linseed, Bengal gram and new ones such as wheat are not in trend anymore. Whosoever even dares to sow these suffers because the animals graze on the crops and nobody empathises with the cultivators. Consequently, as a norm, selected crops are sown and, that too, on nearby lands, taking care that animals do not damage the crops.

### The Intervention

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From an outsider's perspective, this is a serious issue. Having large tracts of land, and yet not farming because of fear of domesticated cattle eating the crops is an agrarian misadventure. Interestingly, this problem has been contained (to some extent) in several other *panchayats* such as Bara Dhamani, Kairasol and the nearby Budhikura. This issue was discussed with the Village organization (VO) members and some of them even had an

'exposure' visit to Budhikura. After the exposure visit and the initial rounds of discussion with community members, awareness was created and an understanding regarding the issue was built.

- **Cultivation of pigeon-pea (summer variety)**

Pigeon-pea is a rain-fed and low-input requirement crop, which, unlike paddy and maize, requires very little water and nutrient management, and is apt for cultivation in arid lands here. It is a low greenhouse gas-releasing crop and is a crucial nitrogen-fixing legume.



**During a field exposure visit, promoting the cultivation of pigeon-pea**

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Nevertheless, our focus on pigeon-pea is entirely due to its field retention period of nine months. It is sown in June-July and is harvested by March-end. Also, since pigeon-pea is sown by broadcasting and doesn't need any special care (or any care) or round-the-season maintenance, it was an automatic selection for the up-lands.

If a village were to grow pigeon-pea, the crop would stay in its up-lands till March and would achieve three targets simultaneously—utilization of

unused up-lands, cultivation of this highly protein-rich legume and controlled rearing of animals, thus allowing for *rabi* crop cultivation. Whereas it is seemingly simple, the issue of animals being let loose for grazing cannot be controlled by only one village. There will be considerable opposition from adjoining villages. However, if a large number of contiguous villages were to adopt this practice, it would become sustainable.

Because of the lack of consensus, this strategy was carried out

in only two *panchayats*. Many meetings were held, both at the VO and the informal village levels. Non-SHG community members were also included. When the villagers were convinced, another problem arose—seed availability. Although community members agreed to cultivate the land and were willing to support the strategy, they had no access to local seeds. The seeds were available in the adjoining villages of Budhikura and Jhilua *panchayats*; yet, we were sceptical about farmers making the effort to procure the seeds on their own.



**An interaction and planning meeting during a field exposure visit**

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Purchasing and distributing seeds was another humongous task that also involved money collection. Every time the seeds arrived, new indents would be made as more members became interested in cropping. Taking new indents, procuring seeds from individual farmers and bringing it to the village, therefore, was a routine exercise for almost a fortnight. After this, villagers eventually began to grow this variety in their fields.

### • **Exposure to the field**

Come December, we began to hear hushed talk of villagers wanting to set free their cattle by January. Again, a new set of challenges presented itself. It was not enough to merely convince the people to take up the new crops but they also needed to be persuaded afresh into containing their cattle.

Community members (SHG and non-SHG) were taken on exposure visits to Kundada and the villages of Jhilua *panchayat* (Godda block) in batches. The *Manjhi Hadam* (Santhal chieftain) and other influential people were invited to the group. The exposure visits included walks through the fields, and discussions with SHG members.

The benefits of growing pigeon-pea on fallow land were discussed as was the mechanism to control loose cattle. The area had the advantage of a government-built *adhgadha* (traditional community animal enclosure) whereas ours (the intervention areas) had no such facility. Some of the visiting community jokingly asked whether they needed to make their own *adhgadha*?

When they came back to their own villages, the community members met and took some decisions.

### **Its consequences**

#### • **Adhgadha construction**

What I thought was a sarcastic comment was considered by the villagers to be a serious issue. Sagar and Kadampur villages made their own *adhgadha*. Without any external involvement, intra-village chieftains met over several rounds and reached a conclusion to set up the *adhgadha* to contain the cattle.

This decision was conveyed to other villages during a *hاتيya*.

Once the *adhgadha* was operational, whosoever brought

loose cattle to the shelter would get Rs 10 as incentive. The owner would pay the fine for the cattle and take it away. A record was being maintained of the incoming cattle and of the owners reclaiming it.

Sagar village was able to cultivate wheat, with an average yield of 70 kg per family. The entire *adhgadha* operation captured around 150 cattle and yielded Rs 23,000 cash to the community.

A decision is yet to be taken about its utilization. The *adhgadha* construction is another point of motivation for the adjoining villages. Because their cattle had been caught and they had to pay fines, they were motivated to prevent any further detention of their cattle. The only way out would be to grow pigeon-pea in their vacant fields as well.

#### • **The pigeon-pea harvest**

The villages—Sagar, Chandana, Kadampur, Tetariya, Damru, Kusmaha— of the two *panchayats* took up the crop and, after some initial failures, were able to protect it. However, the villages of Angwali, Bariyarpue, Paharpur and Dumki suffered acute failure due to the lax attitude of certain community members.

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In one instance, out of sheer adventure, the cattle were left loose and it initiated a domino effect of sorts and everybody let out their cattle.

An average of 50 kg yield of pigeon-pea was harvested. Poor agriculture practices and lack of nutrient management could be attributed for this. No doubt, this will be further taken care of during the upcoming season.

- **Rabi cultivation**

Although this intervention was not taken up very actively by the team, certain patches did grow crops such as wheat, horse gram and flax. The one that deserves mention here is the production of wheat in Sagar village, which despite periodic animal encroachments yielded around a quintal on an average.

### The Way Forward

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Taking forward the agenda of last year, the villagers have planted another crop of pigeon-pea this year. The surrounding villages have also taken up this initiative. The new villages of Chhota Sindhri, Ghorawali, Angwali, Bada Haripur, Chhota Haripur and Khepadih have joined in.

This year, the team plans to take up the *rabi* cultivation with greater zeal. Also, since we are working on a sustainability mode, the search for indigenous flax seeds will be a difficult exercise for the team. Yet, it will be taken up with enthusiasm.

Not taking any chances, the same set of exposure visits will be planned with the new villages.

Of course, there have been setbacks as well. Certain villages such as Paharpur, Bariyarpur and Kusmaha will not be taking up pigeon-pea this year because they are wary of the cattle from the *panchayats* of Goradih and Susni. Also, some new initiatives were taken up in a few villages in Goradih *panchayat*, but these are yet to materialize in the field. However, the team is hopeful of future missions in these areas.

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