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## **Dalit Access to Common Lands**

### A Case of Two Initiatives in Maharashtra

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The author explores the changing importance of marginalised lands in the face of increasing scarcity and growing population and highlights two Dalit initiatives for access and control over *gairan* lands, traditionally considered out of bounds for Dalits. The article also raises issues about equity and distributive justice *vis a vis* the denial of rights to marginalised communities and how they are defending their traditional rights with the help of Civil Society Organisations.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

*...For ours is a battle of not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality.* –Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, All-India Depressed Classes Conference, 1942.

Access to Common Pool Resources (CPRs) for the marginalised sections has become an area of growing concern in India as they contribute significantly to the livelihood requirements of the assetless rural poor, especially the Dalits. There is approximately 68.35 million hectares (Mha) of “wastelands” in India. About 50 percent of this non-forest land can be converted to productive use. In Maharashtra, eight percent of non-forest land under the control of the government is designated as wasteland. As per the land use classification, this land is otherwise categorised as “uncultivated”. Government records indicate that around 1,47,000 landholders own about 2,06,000 hectares (ha) of Mahar Vatan land in Maharashtra (Kamble 2002: 10). Data for the local level distribution of Mahar Vatan land is unavailable. Similarly, there are 35,181 *gairan*

holders spread over 1,609 villages occupying about 70,340 ha in eight districts of Marathwada and one district of Vidharbha.

Grazing land is one of the categories included in wastelands. This land, if allocated equitably among the marginalised can contribute significantly to their livelihood security. Of course, the significance of Dalit access to common lands goes beyond livelihood; it is an instrument for assertion of their rights and dignity.

Many studies have explored CPR management through “institutional rules” (Ostrom, 1998: 73–80). These studies have drawn attention to the “heterogeneities” among different users in property rights, political power and costs (Schlager and Blomquist, 1998: 102-109). Beyond this, their focus seems to be inadequate to understand the complex nature of caste dynamics and equity in access to common lands.

CPRs refer to natural or man-made resource systems comprising fishing zones, ground water basins, grazing areas, irrigation canals among other resources (Ostrom, 1991:30). Unregulated commons are not governed by any rules or principles, thus making them open access commons (Benkler, 2003: 7). Sustainable use of the CPRs is possible only under certain conditions like sharing, equitable access, minimum number of beneficiaries and reciprocal relationship among the users (Gadgil and Iyer, 1989: 241). Such commons create problems in terms of access to poor in general, and Dalits in particular. Conflicts always compel groups—Dalits and non-Dalits—to adopt ways to sustain their own interests. Habermas focuses on “communicative rationality” (Habermas, 1984: 8–10) wherein acts are based on communication for ‘mutual understanding’. Common language is not only the source of personal identity, but is also a medium through which groups understand themselves as part of a larger social group (Habermas, 1987: 113–152). Symbolic interaction can be used to apply Habermas’ theory of communication to construct the Dalit identity. This communicative rationality energises Dalits to coordinate activities in such a way as to enhance their self esteem and dignity.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had expressed that the cost of production increased with small land holdings. He therefore suggested “consolidation” as remedy to reduce costs (Ambedkar, 1979: 459). He also maintained that Dalits can live dignified lives only if they follow the pathway of “educate, organise and struggle”. Following the same doctrine, Munagekar (1999) proposed community farming as an alternative for Dalits who have very small landholdings. Risks can be shared by Dalit communities if they take up collective farming (Tupe, 1999: 406).

The present study explores two initiatives<sup>1</sup> of Dalits from Maharashtra: a) Arajkheda village in Latur district, and b) Nimgaon-Mhalungi village in Pune district. These initiatives concern largely with the cultivation of the *gairan* land (grazing land) and the Mahar Vatan<sup>2</sup> land respectively. The study describes the emergence of collective farming, how the initiatives were managed, and the type of challenges faced.

## METHODOLOGY

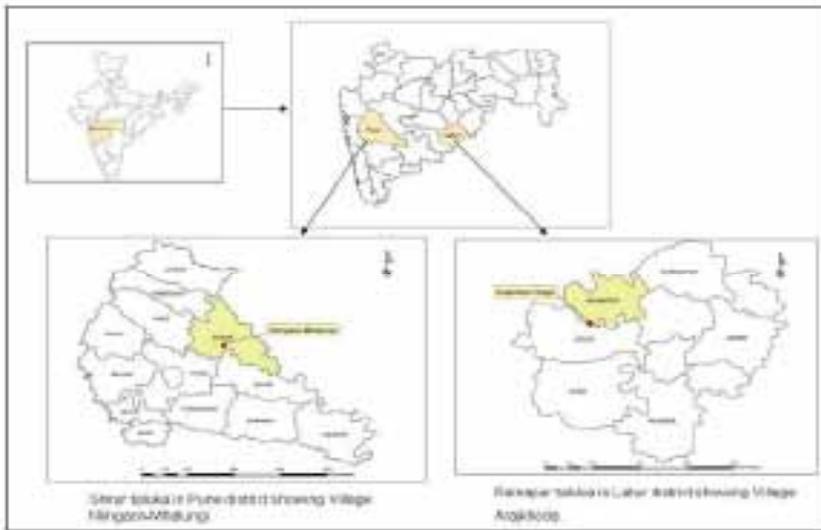
The study adopted a case study method and is mainly based on primary data. In-depth interviews of stakeholders from various groups such as Dalits, upper castes, the shepherd community, government officials, and CSOs were conducted. The respondents were above the age of 35 years. Data collection was done between October to November 2010. For maintaining anonymity, the names of the respondents have been changed. Most of the Dalits involved with the Nimgaon Mhalungi initiative had migrated, thus making it difficult to track them down. This was a limitation to data collection.

## Area of the Study

Maharashtra is spread over 307.6 lakh ha with a gross cropped area of 226.6 lakh ha. The area under forest is 52.1 lakh ha, land not available for cultivation is 31.5 lakh ha, and other uncultivated land is 24.1 lakh ha. Agriculture and allied activities contribute to 11 percent of the State's income, though about 55 percent of the population is dependent on them (Government of Maharashtra, 2010: 84). According to the Census of India (2001): 10.2 percent of the population in Maharashtra are Scheduled Castes (SCs). The incidence of 'landlessness' among SCs is 24.31 percent in the state (Tiwarly, 2006: 92-93). The *gairan* land was brought under the Gram Panchayat's (GPs) management in 1956. Prior to that, especially, during the Nizam's rule of Hyderabad, rights to the *gairan* had been conferred on the Dalits in Marathawada (NCAS, 2005: 12).

Arajkheda village is situated 20 kms from Latur (Figure 1). Latur district is an important market place in Maharashtra due to its connectivity and location. Merchants come to this district to buy *udid* and other agricultural commodities. More than 78 percent of the workers are directly engaged in agriculture (Government of Maharashtra, 1995). In Latur district, 2,181 *gairan* holders from 118 villages are agitating for legal entitlements over 2,232.87 ha land (Awad, 2010: 40-44).

The Nimgaon-Mhalungi village of Shirur Tahsil (Figure 1), is situated 30 kms from Pune (Government of Maharashtra, 1995). Pune district mainly produces crops such as rice, *jowar*, *bajri*, and maize.

**FIGURE 1: Arajkheda and Nimgaon Mhalungi villages**

Though Nimgaon Mhalungi is substantially larger, both in terms of geographical area and population, Arajkheda has a higher proportion of SC population (Table 1). Arajkheda also reports slightly higher proportion of irrigated land, cultivable wasteland and area not available for cultivation. Both the villages have no forest land.

### **THE CASE OF ARAJKHEDA**

The Arajkheda village has 38 ha *gairan* land. The land is situated on the banks of the Manjara river and is very fertile. The first attempt to grab the *gairan* lands by the older generation of Dalits was made in 1978. To secure their claim over the *gairan* land, some of the Dalits cut down a few trees and shrubs and started cultivating for a period of one year. The forest department, however, reclaimed the land by undertaking afforestation activities. Subsequently, the Dalits again attempted to cultivate it. However, the upper caste community of the village reclaimed access to the land from Dalits in 1991. The struggle for establishing rights to the *gairan* has been continuing since then.

The land had been under the control of the Department of Social Forestry from 1990–2000. Over a period of time, the upper castes gradually encroached on the *gairan* adjacent to their farms. The Dalits again asserted their traditional rights and encroached on 14 ha of the land after 2001. The conflict between Dalits and non-Dalits erupted when the upper caste aggressively opposed their claim over the land. The Dalits were threatened

with dire consequences and ultimately the upper castes perpetrated various atrocities against them. They destroyed the standing crops on the *gairan* and deliberately started grazing cattle on the land. Police protection was provided to Dalits during these sensitive days.

**TABLE 1: Demography and Land use of Arajkheda and Nimgaon Mhalungi**

<i>Demography and Land use</i>	<i>Arajkheda</i>	<i>Nimgaon Mhalungi</i>
Total households	242	860
Total population	1312 (100)	4413 (100)
Total SC population	250 (19.05)	260 (5.89)
Total ST population	5 (0.38)	66 (1.50)
Geographical area (ha)	639 (100)	2675 (100)
Forest land (ha)	–	–
Canal irrigation (ha)	5 (0.78)	–
Well irrigation (ha)	14 (2.19)	68 (2.54)
Tube well irrigation (ha)	15 (2.35)	15 (0.56)
Other irrigation (ha)	30 (4.69)	101 (3.78)
Total irrigation (ha)	64 (10.02)	184 (6.88)
Total unirrigated area (ha)	461 (72.14)	2208 (82.54)
Culturable waste (ha)	18 (2.81)	73 (2.73)
Area not available for cultivation (ha)	96 (15.02)	210 (7.85)

Source: Census 2001

Note: The figures in brackets indicate the percentage.

Criminal cases against the upper caste community was filed under the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe (Prevention of Atrocity) Act 1989 (PoA Act). A cross complaint for destruction of trees on the *gairan* was filed against the Dalits. Consequently, the Dalits were asked to report to the police station daily, which was situated at a distance of 15–20 km from the village. The Aurangabad High Court passed an order on the issue of regularisation of *gairan* land in November 2004 (NCAS, 2005: 13). This judgement seemed to have strengthened the claim of the Dalits.

The upper castes of the village announced a social boycott of the Dalits, who continued to agitate for retaining their rights over the *gairan*. During the social boycott, Dalits were denied work (and wages) in the fields of the upper castes. The Dalits retaliated by refusing to work in the fields of the upper castes. As most of the agricultural labourers belonged to the Dalit community, this move affected the agricultural operations of all upper castes. Getting labour from outside the village turned out to be expensive,

and very often the upper castes could not afford to pay for transportation and other allied costs. This led to the weakening of the social boycott.

Along with land development, organic farming had also been introduced in Arajkheda. Prior to the grabbing of the *gairan* by Dalits, the undulating topography of the land discouraged tilling. The Dalits started cultivation after levelling the land. Collective farming was started to counter the hegemony of the upper caste Marathas and the state government. To meet the initial capital expenditure for cultivation, the Dalits received financial support from Anik Micro Finance Company (Khunte, 2010: 88–90). The company provided financial assistance up to Rs. 50,000/- to three Self Help Groups (SHGs). This credit facility improved the fall back options for Dalits in the region.

### **Profile of the Movement**

The 1990s witnessed the struggles for redistribution of wasteland in Marathawada. The Jamin Adhikar Andolan (JAA), meaning ‘Land Right Movement’, had emerged as an umbrella organisation for Dalit and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Marathawada working on Dalit land issues. The JAA has since been organising struggles and negotiations with the Maharashtra government for legalising the Dalit title over *gairan* land (Awad, 2010: 13–14). Kalapandhari, an NGO working mainly in Latur, Osmanabad and Nanded districts of Marathawada, is one of the partner organisations of JAA. While the JAA undertook various activities like mobilisation of the landless, promotion of land ownership, facilitation of land verification, and agitation for regularisation of land titles, Kalapandhari also worked in Arajkheda on various Dalit issues. During the 2004 state assembly elections, JAA released a manifesto demanding the regularisation of the *gairan*. A written consent supporting this demand was obtained from the candidates contesting elections (NCAS, 2005: 13). Also, the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) worked towards protecting Dalits against the atrocities perpetrated by the upper castes. The Dalits were also given financial assistance through the SHGs formed by Kalapandhari.

### **THE NIMGAON MHALUNGI INITIATIVE**

In 1982, about 27 Dalit farmers came together to cultivate 48 ha of Mahar Vatan land. Gramayan, an NGO based in Pune, encouraged the Dalits to take up joint farming (Gramayan, 1985: 10–12). Some of the Dalit families had approached the Late Mr. Narayan Phadtare, a non-Dalit local activist of Gramayan. This led to the idea of developing a cooperative farming

society. There was, however, one hurdle. Some of the Dalits had migrated to Mumbai about 25 to 30 years ago and were staying in slums. Subsequently, a series of meetings were conducted with the Dalits in Mumbai to motivate them to return to Nimgaon Mhalungi. The exposure visit to Mhaisal<sup>3</sup> helped them understand the benefits of collective farming. About six families returned from Mumbai. Out of the total twenty-seven families, eight families ultimately joined the experiment. It was decided that the other remaining families could join later. Lack of educational facilities discouraged the remaining families from returning. Gramayan had planned to start a hostel to take care of this; however, this plan failed to materialise. Those who came back did not have accommodation initially and had to put in a considerable amount of labour to build houses on the farm land.

The technical support, agricultural inputs and irrigation facilities during the implementation phase of the project were provided by Gramayan. The foodgrain and wages were provided to the Dalit families during the initial critical period. An annual remuneration of Rs. 1,500/- for per acre of un-irrigated land, and Rs. 2,500/- for per acre of irrigated land were given to Dalit families. Technical experts prepared the development plans for the land and irrigation facilities. An old well was rejuvenated and a new well excavated. Around 10 ha of land was brought under horticultural plantation. A comprehensive watershed development programme by the government was also started (Gramayan, 1985: 10-12; Gramayan 1994: 3-5, Gramayan, No date: 12).

### **Formation of the Cooperative Society**

The Nav Chaitanya Samyuktaya Sahakari Sheti Santha (meaning: New Energy Joint Co-operative Farming Society) was formed in 1982 and formally registered in 1985. The joint farming project was implemented during 1983-1993. The guidelines of the Nav Chaitnya society included: 1) common control and management of all augmented resources; 2) no agricultural produce sharing without prior permission from members; 3) facility for buying agricultural produce; 4) production to be considered as CPRs; 5) accountability in financial matters; 6) maintenance and repair; and 7) annual remuneration.

In a bid to fulfill the livelihood requirements of Dalits, Gramayan considered the possibility of replicating the Mhaisal experience. One of the experienced activists from Mhaisal also joined the project team of Gramayan to provide guidance (Gramayan, No date: 12). However, when Gramayan withdrew from the project in 1993, the joint cooperative farming lost momentum. The project was unable to fulfil what it promised.

The Dalits eventually migrated elsewhere or took up other sources of employment. The reasons as to why the initiative stopped functioning, is discussed in the following part of the article.

## **STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS**

### **Primary Stakeholders**

The stakeholders include Dalits and non-Dalits—Marathas and Dhangars (shepherds). The primary stakeholders, involved directly or indirectly in the initiatives, had differing perceptions as to why these initiatives succeeded or failed.

Vithoba Patil, an upper caste (Maratha) farmer of Arajkheda, says:

“We were arrested under the PoA Act as we destroyed the crops cultivated by the Dalits. Our intention was to prevent them from grabbing the land. If we had succeeded in that, then they would not have got permanent rights over the land and hence, could not have coped with their livelihood problems.”

It was felt that if Dalits became prosperous and lived a dignified life, the upper caste community would be deprived of labourers for agricultural operations. However, the fundamental issue at stake was that the Dalits should not cross certain ‘social limits’ and that they should not defy the orders of the upper castes.

Vithoba further expressed that the GP basically intended to deny Dalits their claim to the *gairan* land and therefore decided to utilise the land for some other purpose. With this purpose in mind, the GP passed the resolution to set up a sugarcane research centre. This was also promoted by one of the cooperative institutions in the district. The Maratha lobby was averse to Dalits establishing rights over the land. Since a criminal case was pending against the Marathas under the PoA Act, none of them wanted to be imprisoned again. Apparently, some of the upper caste men imprisoned earlier were treated very badly. Food and water was given only after obtaining permission from other Dalit prisoners. It was, thus, propagated that the Dalits could use the *gairan* for the time being only, but not permanently.

According to Tanaji, the Arajkheda village leader, the upper castes wanted Dalits to remain slaves forever. He stated:

“The situation has changed and the Dalits are more aware of their rights. They are educated. When there is an atrocity, they unite and resist. In the era of internet and mobiles, the news on atrocities against Dalits can be easily spread outside the village. The Dalit community and NGO activists could help us to fight collectively against the oppressions. This gives more strength. Since 2002, Dalits have started aspiring to live with dignity and self-esteem and decided to resist the upper caste hegemony.”

To resist the upper caste hegemony and retain the access to the *gairan*, certain innovative ideas had been introduced in the village. For example, Tanaji says:

“If Dalits have to sustain their access to the land, they have to pursue collective farming. In future, fencing would be done. We are going to form 2-3 different groups among Dalits who can cultivate the farm collectively. A single Dalit family cannot carry out agricultural operations on such a grabbed land.”

Dalits reported that if the Marathas were ready to surrender their portion of the encroached *gairan* first, then the Dalits would also give up their claim on the *gairan*. However, the prevailing “caste prejudices and social status” of the Marathas is a socially inhibiting factor imposing constraints in accepting this proposal in a peaceful manner. If any institutional arrangement for the management of the *gairan* comes up in future, the Dalits would get involved in such an initiative.

Vasant Jondhale, Arajkheda’s Dalit farmer says:

“The *gairan* belonging to Indarthana<sup>4</sup> village had been excavated completely. If the Dalits had not grabbed the portion the land, which is adjacent to the excavated area, we would have had the same fate also.”

Though the GP is responsible for protection and maintenance of the land, it gave permission for permanent destruction of the land. This damage can never be rectified. Thus, the point arises: if Indarthana’s *gairan* had been occupied by Dalits, an ‘ecological damage’ of this type would not have occurred.

Mr. Balu Shinde, a shepherd,<sup>5</sup> was totally dependent on the *gairan* for grazing his cattle. He reported that the Dalits had grabbed the *gairan* and free grazing was not allowed as the land was converted into crop land. For the shepherds, the common land was the main source of fodder. They had to occasionally fetch fodder from other lands. According to him, the *gairan* belonged to the government and nobody had the right to restrict its access. Only a small portion of the *gairan* land now exists for common use. Many years ago, the land had been grabbed by the Marathas. Thus, they have no moral right to oppose the Dalits. However, Dalits are always physically assaulted when they try to stake their claim over the *gairan*. He added further:

“If the *gairan* disappears in future, we would be losing the grazing land. In that case, we have to sell our cattle for other occupations.”

The shepherds’ concerns have never been raised in the village assembly as they comprise a small percentage of the village population.

The Nimgaon-Mhalungi’s case is different from that of Arajkheda. Ganpat Kasbe, a Dalit from Nimgaon-Mhalungi, reported that the project

could not sustain as there was no continuity in wages. Also, the income from the sale of agricultural produce was inadequate. The members could not even get their annual remuneration, especially after Gramayan's withdrawal in 1991. The lack of cooperation and conflict among the Nav Chaitanya members jeopardised all attempts to revive collective farming among the Dalits. Moreover, some members secured jobs in industries set up close to the village. The society has remained non-functional since the last few years.

Kasbe added:

“Rohidas Kasbe, a member of the cooperative farming society, created conflicts within the society. He was also involved in corruption under the project.”

It was reported that Rohidas created major hurdles in the implementation of the project. As a result, many members withdrew their individual portion of land from the project. There was no common interest binding the members in the latter period. It was stated that some of the members sold 18-19 acres of their shares of the Hadki-Hadola land. The rest of the members wanted to sell their land and were hence interested in redistribution of the land. Kasbe further adds:

“Individual farming needs more investment of capital. Instead, joint cooperative farming is economically viable. But, on the condition that it should be managed well. It also requires unity among its members and they should be firm in their aims.”

## **Secondary Stakeholders**

The secondary stakeholders considered here are government officials and representatives from CSOs. They were directly or indirectly involved in the initiatives. During the study, the resident tehsildar of Renapur was reluctant to share his views as the issue was very sensitive: a) the atrocity took place against Dalits and b) the government's unwillingness to give the Dalits the land rights to the *gairan*. He stated that the *gairan* in the taluka was allotted to the forest department for implementation of forestry programmes. Out of the total available *gairan* land, around five percent is still not under the control of the forest department. The forest department has done some remarkable work in a couple of villages—they did splendid work in terms of restoring the ecological balance of Poharegoan village in Renapur tehsil. According to him, the problems in Arajkheda emerged because of the nature of local politics and the distinct “groupism” in the village.

It was observed that the government apparatus was unable to explain any specific policy related to the *gairan*. Sakharam Gaikwad of the JAA explained that the movement works across caste groups. Advocate Eknath

Awad, the leader of the movement, had been playing an important role in this process. The government would not sanction any collective rights to the *gairan* holders. Government policies indicate that the *gairan* holders might obtain individual rights. In the case of Arajkheda, the Dalits opposed the hegemony of the upper castes, the administration and the political class through collective farming.

The Nimgaon-Mhalungi initiative was unsuccessful. All agricultural profit was used to meet the operating costs of the project. Sunil Kulkarni of Gramayan stated that the aim of the project was to enhance Dalit economic empowerment. The Dalits would thus be able to stand on equal terms with other castes, as was seen in the case of Mhaisal. Kulkarni states:

Through this experiment, we learnt that all rules and procedures of cooperative farming should be well formulated and managed. Along with the cooperative initiative, the local leadership should emerge and develop, so that they could take care of the entire governance of the properties in future. If, after the withdrawal of the Gramayan, they had invested capital and time, there would have been a very optimistic picture. And it is proved through this experiment that it is possible to achieve this.

He also added that the cultivated land did not yield sufficient produce. The input cost was very high compared to the output. The augmented resources including vegetation and water attracted other villagers, especially, the Maratha farmers who, to some extent, played an indirect role to break the collective of joint cooperative farming. He further explained that the executive body of the Nav Chaitanya society was unable to resolve the conflict among its members. Additionally, problems of addiction and alcoholism were great obstacles. The families who participated in the experiment could not get formal ownership of land—for example, the land record of 7/12 *saat bara* was not transferred to their names.

## **DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNT**

While the Arajkheda initiative of collective farming was successful, the Nimgaon Mhalungi initiative was not. However, both the initiatives offer certain lessons for the future.

In both the cases, the primary aim was to maximise agricultural production. In Arajkheda, manual labour and monetary contributions were provided by the Dalits. However, in the case of Nimgaon Mhalungi, financial assistance came through project funds and government support. The Arajkheda initiative operated more in the mode of a ‘Social Movement’ to essentially regain Dalit identity and dignity.

Leadership provides a platform for any successful initiative. The JAA network is led by Dalit leaders at various levels. In Arajkheda, the local leaders were charismatic and helped to bring their struggle into the administrative and political arena, both at the local and national level. On the other hand, there was no local Dalit leadership in Nimgaon Mhalungi. Moreover, the project team did not have a single Dalit member.

While in Arajkheda, the need for initiating agricultural work emerged from within the settled rural Dalit community, this was not the case in Nimgaon Mhalungi. Most of the Dalits from this village had migrated to the cities around 25–30 years ago. They had to be coaxed to return to their village, and had no agricultural skills. Most of them had by then got used to an urban lifestyle and had little enthusiasm for agricultural work. Further, the lack of accommodation and food security contributed to the Nimgaon Mhalungi failure.

Numerical strength is an important factor to be considered in the caste dynamics of rural India. In Arajkheda, Dalit unity was a vital force against upper caste hegemony, as the Dalit population was proportionately high. Less numerical strength leads to dependence on non-Dalits and/or Dalits not rebelling against injustice and oppression.

There have been a few supportive notifications and circulars that favour the *gairan* holders. According to the State Government's circular (dated 14.12.1995): the powers had been given to the 'Forest Rights Committee' of the GP. This committee is supposed to verify cases of encroachment. Very often, non-Dalits are members of these committees. In many places no committees had been formed. The local administration either created certain obstacles or remained non-cooperative in awarding legal entitlements. The collective action in Arajkheda, however, has shown the way forward to counter the upper caste hegemony.

Arajkheda's struggle for land rights and unity was based on Ambedkar's philosophical principle of "Educate, Organise and Struggle". On the other hand, Gramayan had intervened without understanding the village caste dynamics in Nimgaon Mhalungi. The Dalit families, who were encouraged to reverse migrate, were not given sufficient food security and dignity of existence.

Further, observing the strong unity among the Dalits in Arajkheda, the social boycott was gradually softened. This development led to positive changes in social practices in 2003. Dalits became more conscious about the benefits of reciprocal relationship with upper castes. They started

receiving their wages on time. Ownership of land is often linked to economic prosperity and social status. The Arajkheda Dalits carried this symbol with great pride.

Securing land rights helps Dalits to achieve upward social and economic mobility (Shah and others, 2006). In Arajkheda, the tangible benefits helped achieve, to some extent, upward economic and social mobility. The collective farming initiative seems to be economically viable and can be managed well. It also helps to assert 'collective bargaining power' of the Dalits in the overall socio-political context. It was seen that 'mutual understanding' of achieving the goals were prominently promoted by the Dalit section. Nimgaon Mhalungi had a contrasting picture. There were no tangible benefits to the Dalits. Even the formal rules could not strengthen the economic security.

The *gairan* issue is very significant to the Dalits of Marathawada region. The struggle for access to *gairan* land is still alive in more than 1,600 villages. Moreover, there is a huge amount of land available under Mahar Vatan in Maharashtra.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Dalits migrate from rural to urban areas because of push (caste based atrocities) and pull factors (employment, education, and so on). Urbanisation and industrialisation do create more opportunities. Often, the employment is irregular and also insecure. Dalits, who survive these, settle down in the cities, often in slums. Reverse migration from urban areas is possible on certain conditions. For example, the development approach has to be more rural oriented, should focus on equitable access to the deprived sections, and so on. Securing Dalit rights and dignity are key issues to be tackled. Agro-industrial development could be one of the pathways for development of rural areas. Dispersed agro-industrialisation can provide employment in a sustainable way. However, there should be a precondition that priority will be given to Dalits.

Upper caste hegemony and caste oppression are deeply rooted in the Indian caste system. The demand for Dalits' access to common land would open up a major avenue for progress and economic liberation. Most of the primary stakeholders have no equal entitlement over resources. A common understanding about equitable access and sustainable use of resources can be developed among all stakeholders. This can be ensured by initiating various supportive policy initiatives for establishing collective farming among Dalits.

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**NOTES**

1. This study was conducted for the “case competition” organised by the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) and Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) as a part of the 13th Biennial Conference of The International Association for the Study of the Commons.
2. This land is privately owned and is not part of the CPR. It is mostly traditional right given away to Dalit or group of Dalits. It is also called as Hadki-Hadola land.
3. Mahisal village in Sangli district (Southern Maharashtra) is known for its collective farming experiment by the Dalits initiated by Mr. Dewal. This experiment proved that Dalits could generate livelihood options even during severe drought if they could collectively invest labour and manage resources in a sustainable manner.
4. The Indarthana village *gairan* is adjacent to the Arajkheda Gairan, where the land is under common control of respective GPs. An interesting observation was that there was no encroachment yet. The land excavation was carried out by the contractors, who were outsiders and had a concrete mutual tie up with the GP and Tehsil office.
5. Arajkheda has 6 households belonging to the shepherd community. Their main occupation was cattle rearing and the secondary occupation was working as agricultural labourers. This community has been using the *gairan* for the last fifty years.

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