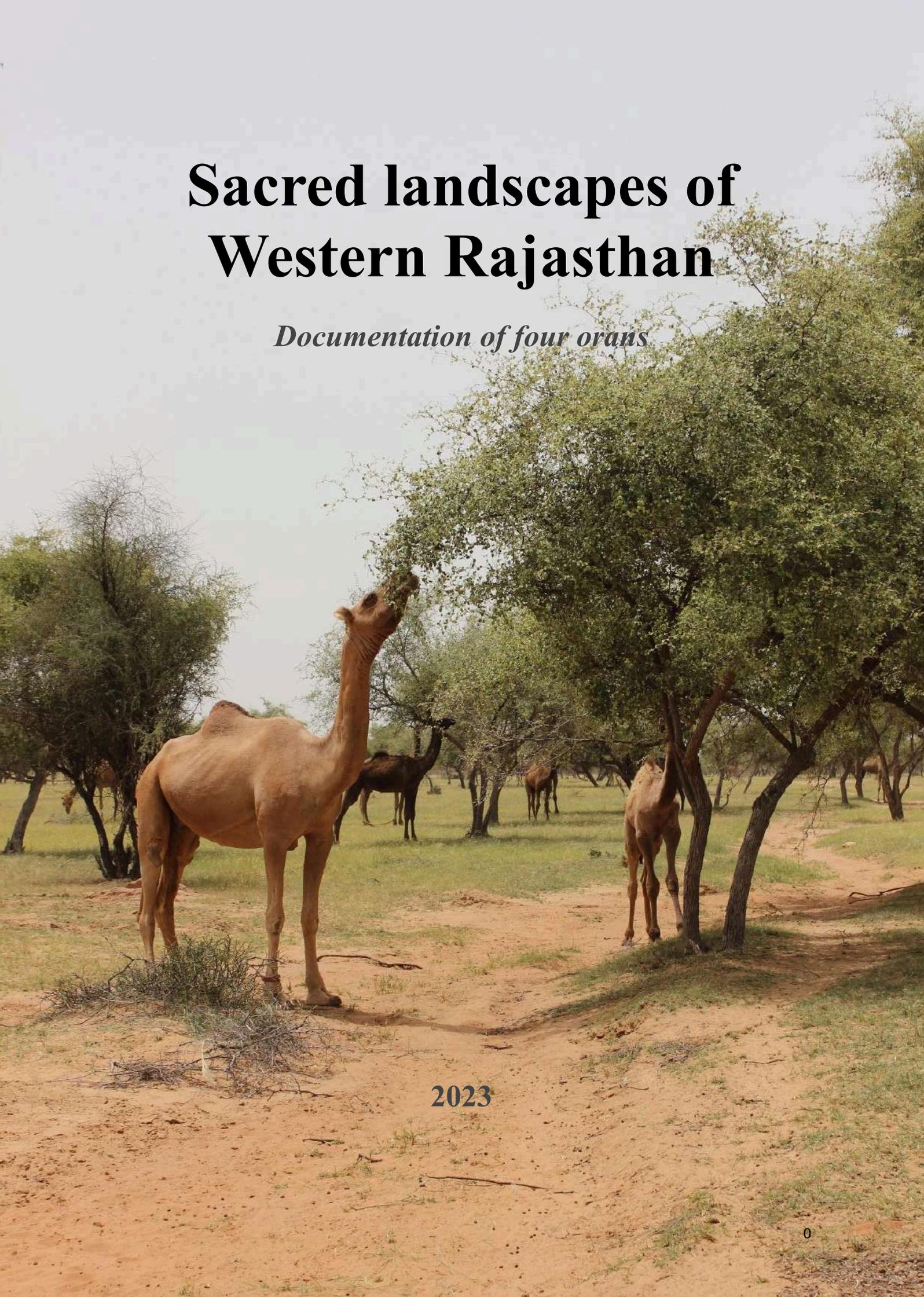


# Sacred landscapes of Western Rajasthan

*Documentation of four orans*



2023

## CREDITS

Study team: Shailendra Tiwari and Rudrath Avinashi

Text: Shailendra Tiwari and Rudrath Avinashi

Design: Rudrath Avinashi

Photographs: Rudrath Avinashi

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Contact: Rudrath Avinashi, [rudrathavinashi16@gmail.com](mailto:rudrathavinashi16@gmail.com)

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Kalpavriksh  
Apt. 5 Shree Dutta Krupa,  
908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004  
<http://www.kalpavriksh.org/>



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## **Orans: A brief overview**

Orans are community conserved areas (CCAs) that have gradually been realised to be important reserves of biodiversity in the arid region of Rajasthan, India. The landscape of an oran can include pastures, grasslands, sacred groves, wetlands etc. Considering biodiversity as sacred due to centuries long belief in a local deity and the associated land with it, the governance of an oran and the motivation to conserve these areas are closely linked to religious and cultural sentiments.

The area of each oran can vary but they cover around 5% of the total geographical area of Rajasthan<sup>1</sup>. Usually an oran comprises a temple of the local deity and a large open area for grazing of livestock. Ecologically, most orans embrace a silvopasture system. Some orans have a discrete management system while in others, management systems are not so well defined. However, usually in all orans, norms are strictly followed by all community members.

Traditionally, communities of Western Rajasthan have been conserving orans for centuries. These orans have social, cultural and economic significance. They are the lifeline of livestock based livelihoods of communities living in the desert areas. Ecologically, most orans embrace a silvopasture system. Some orans have a discrete management system while in others, management systems are not so well defined. However, usually in all orans, norms are strictly followed by all community members.

However, the orans face challenges of encroachments due to the push towards wind and solar energy projects, especially in the last decade. The lack of clarity in their legal status also adds to the uncertainty for the ecosystem and people's livelihoods. Currently, the local communities' are striving to get appropriate recognition for their orans by creating awareness about its social, economic, ecological and cultural values through oran *yatras* and liaising with district administration.

## **About the report**

The initiatives documented in this report are essentially about the efforts of the local communities' who conserve their lands through traditional governance systems, rules and regulations. The report was completed after field visits in August 2023 to three orans of Jaisalmer and one oran, which was a gauchar land<sup>2</sup> in Bikaner. The study team visited all the sites and were assisted by local village leaders such as Sumer Singh Bhati, Sujan Singh and Kundan Singh.

## **Methodology**

- Primary research through in-depth interviews, participant observation that was facilitated by local community leaders
- Identification of the existing vegetation type such as trees, shrubs, grasses etc. and local fauna like mammals, reptiles and birds.
- Informal conversations with various community members, farmers & village leaders to understand different issues.

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<sup>1</sup>

[https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/FAO-countries/India/docs/case\\_studies/Restoration\\_and\\_Conservation\\_of\\_Ecosystems\\_through\\_Orans\\_Final.pdf](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/FAO-countries/India/docs/case_studies/Restoration_and_Conservation_of_Ecosystems_through_Orans_Final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> A grazing land that is only reserved for cows

## **Purpose of documentation**

The documentation was undertaken to explore and understand the following aspects:

- **Dynamism of orans in the current era:** How do we see orans in the contemporary era (globalised/ liberalised, privatised economy, changing aspirations etc.)? Threat of establishing more and more wind and solar power that might create an ecological imbalance in the orans. Changing developmental priorities.
- **Changing socio-economic landscape:** Agriculture and livestock rearing are not viewed as livelihoods of the future. These occupations may become unsustainable for local livelihoods.
- **Policy gaps, threats or ambiguity-** Oran lands are not well defined legally (still they are not recorded as oran in most villages. It falls under the category of Sivay Chak). Now, Camels can not be sold outside Rajasthan so camel breeders find this business non-viable. As a result, many have given up the profession and many camels have been abandoned. Numerous orans are encroached and the land is being diverted by the government for infrastructural purposes. So there is a dichotomy at the policy making level.
- **Struggle of local communities:** How do they deal with immediate current threats: How diverse are these efforts?

# Degrai Mata ji Oran

Villages	Bhopa, Rasla, Achla and Sanwata
Area	60,000 bigha (12,000 hectare). It is the second largest Oran in Jaisalmer after Bhadaria Oran which is of 1,00,000 bigha (20,000 hectare).
Communities	Rajput (Bhati)- 1500HH, Meghwal- 200 HH, Rabari- 250 HH, Jogi- 3 HH, Muslim- 100-150 HH, Suthar

## History

The Oran is dedicated to goddess Aai Degrai. It has existed since time immemorial. It is said that around 600 years ago, Maharaja Bair Singh's lieutenants came to demarcate the boundary of the state land. One sergeant's horse collapsed just after entering the land. The Maharaja realised his mistake of trespassing and then he dedicated the entire land to the goddess Degrai declaring it to be free from the state's control. Since then, the land of Degrai Mata Oran has been used by local communities' of around 24 villages which surround it.



*Degrai Mata oran in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan*

There are two temples (old and new) of the goddess Degrai inside the oran. The new temple is situated near a pond in Rasla village. People in the region have a strong belief in the goddess Degrai.

## Physiographic & Ecological Profile

The oran by and large has flat terrain with a few undulating patches. It also has some highland areas with rocky landscapes. Mostly, the flat area has sandy soil on which exists a silvopasture system. Here the dominant tree species is Ber. Inter tree space is occupied by shrubs and grasses. The silvopasture system offers excellent grazing avenues for almost all categories of livestock throughout the year. It was informed that usually livestock from all the 24 villages graze in the Degrai oran during monsoon months. After monsoon, livestock from other neighbouring areas also graze in the oran. There are also around 35 ponds and 4 wells here that are said to be around 1000 years old.

Livestock (of four villages: Bhopa, Rasla, Achla and Sanwata )				
Camels (5,000)	Sheeps & Goats (50,000)	Cows (12,000)	Horses (500)	Donkeys (80)

Faunal diversity	
Wild animals	Chinkara, Desert cat, Spiny tailed lizard, Monitor lizard
Birds	Tawny eagle, Steppe eagle, Eurasian collared dove, Laughing dove, Asian green bee eater, White eared bulbul, Red vented bulbul, Indian courser, Ashy-crowned sparrow lark, Variable wheatear



*A monitor lizard comes out during the day to hunt*



*Large group of Camels feasting on ber*

Floral diversity	
Trees	Ber (dominant species), Ker, Kumtha, Khejri, Rohida, Jal, Ker, Kumtha etc.
Shrubs	Kheenp, Aakh, Phog, Sonamukhi, Chug
Grasses	Kanthili, Ganthia, Lanp, Bekar, Buhari, Dhaman, Jhirni, Dudheli, Likhi, Sonila, Bui, Behani, Tunhad, Haderi, Sevan, Damini, Moth, Murat, Burda, Kal (Karad)

## **Governance of the Oran**

Degrai Trust is the apex body which is responsible for management and governance of the oran. Although there are four villages inside the oran however the management committee has representation from all the 24 villages which govern the oran.

Following are the rules that are strictly followed by inhabitants of the villages.

1. Ban on all sorts of hunting and cutting of trees.
2. No one is allowed to pollute the water bodies.
3. One should remove its shoes before entering into a water body.
4. There is a separate place for animals to drink water.
5. Bathing and washing of clothes is strictly prohibited.
6. Filling of water tankers is not permitted.

If anyone breaches these rules, the committee convenes in a meeting in which people from the respective village are present and the person is given suitable punishment. However, no case has been reported in the last five years.

## **Threats and Challenges**

In the year 2015-16, a few companies were allotted 3794 hectares of the oran land. These companies set up around 8-10 windmills in that time however the villagers agitated and fought a legal battle against the government and the companies. The court gave a verdict in favour of the local communities' and the companies had to remove the windmills.

## **Information provider**

Sumer Singh Bhati (local community leader)

# Veer Aala ji Oran

Villages	Dujasar
Area	12,600 bigha (2500 hectare)
Communities	Rajput, Meghwal, Suthar, Prajapati (Kumhar), Goswami and Muslim

## History

The village has a famous oran known as Chhatrapati Veer Aala ji Oran and it is around 475 years old. There are around 500 households in Dujasar village. The livelihood of people to a great extent is dependent upon animal husbandry.

In 2002, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL) a public sector undertaking (PSU) established windmills on the oran land. Since then, a number of companies like WWIL, Suzlon, Ghamasa and VVRD started to survey the land and came forward to put up their windmills in the oran. Currently, around 800 windmills are placed inside the oran.



*Multiple windmills stand in the backdrop to a sacred pond in Veer Aala ji Oran*

When villagers wanted to know more about the wind energy projects, they were informed by the company officials that windmills and solar panels are being installed based on the order by the government so people would not ask much. Sujan Singh, a community leader in a bid to protect the oran started to initiate dialogues on the issues of land and livelihoods that will be threatened if the windmills continue to increase in number.

In the beginning the response of the community was poor and in many instances, he remained the lone fighter. Apart from five-six people in the village, many were lured by the false promises of the companies. Sujan Singh then began to ask the companies to show their papers and the officials got agitated with this demand.

At the local level, a campaign to save their oran was launched. Under the campaign, school children were made aware of the issues and then they started joining a foot march called *Oran Bachao Yatra* to save orans within the Jaisalmer region which was organised in 2018. This *yatra* started from Degrai Mata ji Oran and it passed through many villages including Dujasar and culminated in Jaisalmer. Around 40,000 individuals participated in the seven day event. These campaigns created enormous public pressure on the district administration.

Gradually, most people realised the intentions of the companies and then, got a resolution passed in the local panchayat against the allotment of oran land to the companies and approached the District Collector’s office to cancel the allotment.

With persistence and firm pressure from the community, most of the companies removed their windmills from the oran.

## Physiographic & Ecological Profile

Most of the orans within Jaisalmer district in terms of the ecosystem are similar to each other. The existence of a silvopasture system along with shrubs and grasses occupying the land is seen here as well. Two ponds namely Soda sar and Aala sar are considered sacred.

Livestock of Dujasar village	
Sheeps & Goats (600)	Cows (5,000)

Faunal diversity	
Birds	Grey francolin, Tawny eagle, Eurasian collared dove, Laughing dove, Asian green bee eater, White eared bulbul, Red vented bulbul



*A couple of grey francolins about to fly*



*A herd of goats in the sacred grove*

<b>Floral diversity</b>	
Trees	Ber (dominant species), Ker, Kumtha, Khejri, Rohida, Jal, Ker, Kumtha etc.
Shrubs	Kheenp, Aakh, Phog, Sonamukhi, Chug
Grasses	Kanthili, Ganthia, Lanp, Bekar, Buhari, Dhaman, Jhirmi, Dudheli, Likhi, Sonila, Bui, Behani, Tunhad, Haderi, Sevan, Damini, Moth, Murat, Burda, Kal (Karad)

## **Governance of the Oran**

Similar to Degrai oran, following are the rules that are strictly followed by inhabitants of the villages.

1. Ban on all sorts of hunting and cutting of trees.
2. No one is allowed to pollute the water bodies.
3. One should remove its shoes before entering into a water body.
4. There is a separate place for animals to drink water.
5. Bathing and washing of clothes is strictly prohibited.
6. Filling of water tankers is not permitted.

## **Threats and Challenges**

During the course of fieldwork, the authors met one farmer who owned around 400 sheep. He belonged to the Bhati-Rajput clan, an upper caste. He said, through his livestock, he is able to earn a decent sum. As he lives in a village, he has limited expenses. However, his brothers live in Jaisalmer city and have jobs. They have given up traditional occupation of animal husbandry and are pressuring him to give up livestock farming and pursue a job in Jaisalmer as livestock farming is not looked upon as an honourable means of earning.

Grazing land that was meant for animals is now being allotted for solar and wind power projects at a rapid pace to the companies, thus, farmers are compelled to reduce their herd size. There is also an uncertainty around animal husbandry being taken up as a profession by future generations as well. However, the struggle of a few youth in the region raises some hope for conservation of orans and pastures in the desert which are repositories of biodiversity, culture and life support systems.

## **Information provider**

Sujan Singh (local community leader)

# Dungar Pir ji Oran

Villages	Mokla, Bhadasar, Ranela and Kathodi
Area	40,00 bigha (8500 hectare)
Communities	Rajput, Meghwal, Nath, Bhil, Kumhar, Suthar, Muslim (Ravna and Magnia)

## History

Dungar Pir is the name of the local deity and the oran has existed in his name since centuries. Traditional occupation of the communities has been animal husbandry. Farmers rear cows, goats and sheep. Previously, the local communities' also used to rear camels but after a ban on shipping camels outside the state by the Rajasthan government, people have given up camel farming since it has affected the sale significantly. As most of the camels are abandoned by the farmers, these animals roam around in the oran for grazing.



*Number of windmills installed inside the Dungar Pir ji oran*

## Physiographic & Ecological Profile

The Oran spreads over four villages of Mokla, Bhadasar, Ranela and Kathodi. Furthermore, villages such as Moti, Kila ki Dhani, Khincha, Khimsar, Kabir basti, Sonu and Punam Nagar are situated on the periphery of the oran. In total, 3600 households are reported to be dependent upon the Dungar Pir ji Oran.

Faunal diversity	
Wild animals	Deer, Hare, Wild boar, Fox and Wolf
Birds	Great Indian Bustard, Grey francolin, Tawny eagle, Eurasian collared dove, Laughing dove, Asian green bee eater, White eared bulbul, Red vented bulbul



*Herd of sheep on a hot day*



*A sacred pond and some transmission lines behind*

Floral diversity	
Trees	Ber (dominant species), Ker, Kumtha, Khejri, Rohida, Jal, Ker, Kumtha etc.
Shrubs	Kheenp, Aakh, Phog, Sonamukhi, Chug
Grasses	Kanthili, Ganthia, Lanp, Bekar, Buhari, Dhaman, Jhirni, Dudheli, Lilkhi, Sonila, Bui, Behani, Tunhad, Haderi, Sevan, Damini, Moth, Murat, Burda, Kal (Karad)

## Governance of the Oran

Similar to the orans mentioned above, following are the rules that are strictly followed by inhabitants of the villages.

1. Ban on all sorts of hunting and cutting of trees.
2. No one is allowed to pollute the water bodies (*nadis*)
3. One should remove its shoes before entering into a water body.
4. Bathing and washing of clothes in a *nadi* is strictly prohibited.
5. Filling of water tankers is also not permitted.

## Threats and Challenges

In 2012-13, Suzlon started commissioning windmills. It obtained a lease of 20 years from the government to put 25 windmills inside the oran. As Dungar Pir ji's oran land is designated as Sivay Chak (a category of state owned revenue land), so the company got the land allotted for installation of windmills on it.

Apart from the oran, Mokla also has 80,000 bigha Sivay Chak land (approx. 16,00 hectare) on which the company installed 75 windmills. The company appointed local community members as security guards to keep a watch on the windmills. Initially, they gave cars on loan, Rs. 70,000-80,000 per month and Rs. 20,000 for diesel to the villagers. The villagers sold their livestock. Quickly, agriculture and animal husbandry based traditional livelihoods were taken over by company driven employment. Youth were particularly attracted by this new opportunity.

However, after a few years, the company stopped giving any funds. Many security guards lost employment. In 2015, the company hired a guard at Rs. 4000 per month to look after two windmills. Now in 2023, a guard looks after three windmills and gets the same amount. The locals were compelled to sell their vehicles because they were not able to repay their loan. Many of these people have re-purchased livestock to pursue traditional animal husbandry based livelihood again.

In Sivay Chak land where the company commissioned 75 windmills, the guards started to encroach upon common grazing land and are cultivating the land, thereby depriving the rest of villagers of their collective grazing rights.

Kundan Singh, a local youth says *'Initially, a group of people tried to oppose allotment of oran and Sivay Chak land to the companies as it threatened our grazing rights but the company patronised the rich and powerful in the village to push its interest forward'*. Also, the families which got employment and contracts from the company opposed the people who stood up to protect the commons. This divided the community at the cost of their collective interest.

Kundan Singh adds *'slowly people are now realising the intentions of the company'*. People who lost their jobs and contracts are joining hands to protect Oran and Sivay Chak. Initially only 10% were with Kundan Singh and other people but now more than 30% villagers want the company to leave. Most people are now thinking of shifting to traditional livestock based livelihoods hence the significance of oran lands in larger socio-economic and ecological climate is reiterated.

## **Information provider**

Kundan Singh (local youth leader)

# Nathaniya Gauchar

Villages	Sujan desar
Area	23,000 bigha (5200 hectare)
Communities	Rajput, Meghwal, Bhil etc.

## History

In most Gauchar lands, the traditional systems of governance have been very strong. The local communities' here have mostly depended on livestock rearing which would hold them well in terms of financial security. It has been possible since the ecosystem functions well as grazing is regulated. Additionally, the diversity of grasses adds to the richness of flora which bodes well for cows.



*Fencing in the Nathaniya gauchar aimed to prevent encroachment*      *Sevan grass in the foreground*

## Physiographic & Ecological Profile

The gauchar is rich in shrubs and grasses that are very nutritious for the cattle. Sevan, a grass that can grow up to 3-4 feet can be found in large patches here. It can live up to 20-30 years with just one or two showers.

Floral diversity	
Trees	Ber, Ker, Kumtha, Khejri, Rohida, Jal, Ker, Kumtha etc.
Shrubs	Kheenp, Aakh, Phog, Sonamukhi, Chug
Grasses	Sevan, Kanthili, Ganthia, Lanp, Bekar, Buhari, Dhaman, Jhirni, Dudheli, Lilkhi, Sonila, Bui, Behani, Tunhad, Haderi, Sevan, Damini, Moth, Murat, Burda, Kal (Karad)

## **Governance of the Oran**

Although there is not much clarity on the governance system followed in this gauchar, however there are a few rules that are strictly followed by the villagers such as:

1. Ban on all sorts of hunting and cutting of trees.
2. Only people from the bhil community are allowed to take wood from the gauchar

## **Threats and Challenges**

Currently, the gauchar is under a constant threat from encroachments. Devi Singh, a community leader, facilitated fencing up to 40 kms along the boundary of the land to prevent encroachments however the issue still persists. Additionally, there are no written records documenting gauchar with the land revenue department.

## **Information provider**

Devi Singh (community leader)