

# Understanding Ravangaon through the lens of Political Ecology

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*'The farmers who cultivate sugarcane over three-four acres of land and have a borewell drilled around the house/farms, have better and easier chances of finding a girl to marry their sons. There are several men over the age of thirty years in the village, who are unmarried owing to the lack of socially preferred assets like sugarcane farming and individual borewells.'*

- excerpt from a conversation with one of the farmers in Ravangaon

We started our fieldwork in Ravangaon with a clear agenda and tools that we would require to collect all the necessary data from Randhwanmala, a cluster in the central part of the village. We intended to gather data on access, availability, use, and quality of wells and borewells that belonged to each household in this cluster. As social workers, we are always



advised to go beyond a prescribed format in the field, engage with the community outside of the data collection and observe. It is during those conversations that we were enabled to ponder over the farmers' relationship with groundwater, sugarcane, the socio-economic, and political dynamics of it all. In our discussions post fieldwork, it was evident that groundwater development and the transformation of its governance in Ravangaon can be better understood through the lens of Political Ecology. This note presents our initial reflections of its political-ecological analysis.

Ravangaon is a village in Daund taluka of Pune district in Maharashtra, surrounded by sugar factories which like the village, are predominantly governed by a single political party. The gram panchayat and the credit society in the village is constituted of supporters of the same political party. Given the stronghold of this political party in the overall decision-making institutions of the village and sugar factories, sugarcane growing farmers always attempt to maintain a close and cordial relationship with the political party. In other words, not maintaining such a relationship can socially and economically harm these farmers. One must wonder about the ways in which these sugarcane growing farmers have to maintain these relationships with powerful institutions.

Since, political party that owns majority of the sugar factories in the area also governs the village institutions, there is a natural encouragement for the farmers in the village to grow sugarcane. The credit societies in particular have a pivotal role in enabling specific cropping patterns and discouraging others. The farmers reflect that acquiring loans for sugarcane crops is less arduous than other crops thereby incentivising them to take up sugarcane cultivation. In addition to that, credit societies offer loans to those who have politically supported them and the gram panchayat during the elections. There have been instances where farmers who belong to the opposing political parties to the one's incumbent, have struggled in acquiring loans for agriculture-related



*A dug well near the stream*

activities. Along with these enablers, farmers also take up sugarcane farming because that is a crop that yields them the maximum price for relatively less laborious farming activities unlike those in growing fruits and vegetables. Besides, growing sugarcane is considered to help in attaining higher social status. To put it plainly, farmers with sugarcane fields have a better chance at finding a bride for their sons.

The only hindrance in taking up sugarcane is its demand for frequent irrigation cycles. However, the apparent scale of sugarcane cultivation in Ravangaon despite being

located in a rain shadow area is a testament to the fact that despite the excess demand for water, the required quantum of water has been made available to the farmers.

There are alternatives to the current water-guzzling agricultural practices that exist in the village; like – solar pump sets on borewells that use drip systems to irrigate three times a piece of land in the same time as electricity. The solar pump sets are not only a cost-effective option but also a less water-intensive method of farming (as informed by the farmers from their experience over three years). The farmer who first availed the scheme of setting up a solar pump set was in fact denied electricity connection in his field for over eleven years. This he mentions was a result of being a part of the political opposition of the people who occupied the Gram Panchayat (Local governing body) over those years. He had been applying for a connection since 2007 and the prolonged denial enabled him to find an alternative energy source to irrigate his fields. Despite its benefits, this practice has failed to gather a large number of takers in the village. Since the scheme was introduced by the political opponent of the current Gram Panchayat it hindered them from accepting the suggestions and promoting the scheme amongst the other farmers. Also, solar pump sets for agriculture appear to offer a sense of autonomy and independence to the farmers with their irrigation cycles, unlike the canal system. Could such autonomy with the farmers have the potential to better usage of the resource and disrupt the nexus between the political parties-sugar barons-canal operators-village level institutions?

The burgeoning numbers of borewells in the village denote that the village is heavily dependent on groundwater to meet its demand for agriculture especially sugarcane. Along with the availability of groundwater in the village, there is a network of a canal



*Extraction of groundwater from a dug well in Ravangaon*

system that passes through the village providing water, however irregularly, for irrigation. The farmers thus acquire the required quantum of water is through the conjunctive use of canal systems and groundwater. As long as there is a flow of water to their sugarcane fields, there is nothing that is a matter of concern, not even the evidence of fields in the village that have lost their fertility due to

over-irrigation or chasing the falling levels of groundwater in the fields.

The demand for sugarcane cultivation in Ravangaon is therefore sustained because of its economic returns, socio-political pressures, and incentivising tools, coupled with the current availability of hydrological resources. To put in Erik Swyngedouw's words, the socio-ecological conditions, that is the system of sugarcane cultivation in Ravangaon are invariably sustained and organised by a combination of social processes and transformation of hydrological resources in the village (Swyngedouw, 2009). The political-ecological assessment of Ravangaon embodies the interwoven relationship between the social, political processes with the mobilization and transformation of hydrological resources. Over the years, these processes have directed the flow and consumption of water in the village with no regard to their ecological implications and created grounds for future conflicts.

## References

Swyngedouw, E. (2009). The political economy and political ecology of the hydro-social cycle. *Journal of contemporary water research & education*, 142(1), 56-60.