

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF CULTURAL AND INFORMAL NORMS IN SHAPING COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES ATTITUDES ACROSS DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The sustainable management of common property resources (CPRs) such as forests, water bodies, and grazing lands remains vital for rural livelihoods and ecological balance. While formal governance frameworks provide regulatory mechanisms, this study highlights the significant role of cultural values and informal norms in shaping community attitudes toward shared resources. Traditions such as sacred taboos, seasonal restrictions, and collective labor often act as unwritten rules that guide resource use, foster cooperation, and encourage conservation. Findings reveal that informal norms often compensate for weak formal institutions by promoting reciprocity, accountability, and community stewardship. However, these norms are dynamic and subject to change under the pressures of modernization, commercialization, and demographic shifts. Moreover, cultural systems are not always equitable, as they may reinforce exclusions based on gender, caste, or class, thereby affecting access to CPRs. The study concludes that cultural and informal norms are pivotal in influencing how communities perceive and manage CPRs. For effective and inclusive governance, there is a need to integrate traditional wisdom with formal state policies, creating hybrid systems that balance sustainability with social justice.

Keywords: *Common Property Resources, Cultural Norms, Informal Institutions, Community Attitudes, Sustainability, Equity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The sustainable management of common property resources (CPRs) such as forests, pastures, water bodies, and grazing lands has long been a central issue in both environmental governance and community development studies. These resources often form the backbone of rural livelihoods, particularly in developing regions where communities depend heavily on them for fuel, fodder, food, and income. While formal institutions and government regulations play an important role in shaping the use of CPRs, there is increasing recognition that cultural values, traditions, and informal norms embedded within communities are equally significant in determining attitudes and practices related to these shared resources.

Across diverse communities, cultural beliefs and informal rules often act as unwritten codes of conduct that guide resource use, access, and distribution. These norms can encourage sustainable practices through mechanisms such as community sanctions, reciprocal obligations, and collective decision-making. For instance, in many tribal and indigenous societies, traditions of sacred groves or customary taboos on overharvesting function as informal systems of conservation. Conversely, the erosion of such norms under external pressures—such as commercialization, modernization, and migration—can lead to resource depletion, conflicts, and inequitable access.

The role of informal institutions becomes even more critical when formal governance mechanisms are weak or absent. In such contexts, community-led management rooted in local customs often provides resilience against overuse and conflict. Moreover, attitudes towards CPRs are not uniform; they vary depending on social hierarchies, gender roles, economic conditions, and cultural histories. Understanding these variations is essential for designing policies and interventions that are not only ecologically sound but also socially inclusive.

This study seeks to explore how cultural practices, informal norms, and social values shape community attitudes towards common property resources across diverse social settings. By analyzing the interplay between traditional knowledge, social organization, and external developmental pressures, the research highlights both the strengths and vulnerabilities of community-driven management systems. Ultimately, the insights gained can inform policy frameworks that integrate formal and informal institutions to promote equitable, participatory, and sustainable management of common property resources.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rajpal, Navin & Tamang, Sharmila. (2022) Conflicts over ownership of common property have long existed, both within and between communities, and even between communities and the state. Common property resources are mainly defined based on their significance, visibility, accessibility, and understanding. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including harvesting and extraction from natural sources. More often than not, CPRs are taken advantage of because of the way their dependence on PPRs is structured. The Mayurbhanj tribal people in Odisha, India, relies on a variety of resources, and this study employs stratified and multi-stage random sampling to examine their relevance, use, and limitations of these resources, as well as their dependence on CPRs. The Mayurbhanj sample respondents continue to depend more on CPRs for livelihood maintenance, despite having participated in the Self Help Group program for an average of seven years, according to the LDI (Livelihood Dependency Index) assessment. Transportation of forest products, upkeep, local auction, daily wage-based leaf collection and storage for government auction, transportation, and women's participation in CPR-based item production are just a few of the many occupational adjustments that the local population, especially those residing near forests, has an enormous need for.

Deb, Pamela & Mukherjee, Rameswar. (2022) Using the Vulnerability Index at the household level (HVI), this study investigated the climate variability vulnerability of the major Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Dooars district of West Bengal, India. Tea plantation work is the most common kind of employment for members of the Oraon, Munda, and Santal tribes. Almost none of them work in agriculture. The sample size of 650 households was determined by purposive sampling using the proportional allocation technique. Using the household data to calculate the HVI, each indication was given a proportional weight to generate a composite indicator index. The

end result is a weighted average index based on the IPCC's exposure, sensitivity, and adaptability aspects. Situated in the foothill zone of the Shiwalik Himalaya in West Bengal, the research region is known for its heavy rainfall and flood risk. Additionally, really heavy rains may cause flash floods in steep regions. The indigenous population is particularly vulnerable to floods and excessive rains at these times since they are often found in remote areas without many resources. This study reveals that the Maynaguri block is the area's weakest link when considering exposure and adaptability characteristics. On the other hand, Falakata is the most resilient block due to its incredible adaptability.

Sen, Sucharita. (2021) This study intends to fill a gap in the existing literature by investigating how the dearth of common property resources (CPR) impacts the unpaid work of women in India who are dependent on these assets. It takes resource-constrained regions into account and looks at the pattern of CPR-dependent work that women in these regions did during two time periods. Research is based on secondary sources of information. It draws on two household-level datasets generated by the National Sample Survey Organization. Findings reveal an inverse relationship between the scarcity of CPRs and the breadth and depth of CPR-dependent behaviors among women. When there is a lot of involvement at the extremes (a surplus of CPRs) and very little at the middle levels, a U-shaped curve is formed. This trend, however, turns around and involvement in CPR-dependent activities drops beyond a certain degree of shortage. With a particular emphasis on Scheduled Castes, the paper draws attention to the evidence of excluded or driven-to-withdraw socioeconomic groups as the CPR shortage worsens. Institutions and policies in rural India must work towards preserving and improving village commons while considering the intersectionality of gender and caste to alleviate severe livelihood pressures, such as women's possible withdrawal from paid work and social tension and conflicts. This is particularly the case in places where natural resources are dwindling.

Banik Saha, Sumita. (2021) People in North East India rely on CPRs (Common Property Rights) to sustain their agricultural economy. They are also very important from an ecological protection standpoint. Compared to open access property, state-owned land, and privately held property, centrally placed properties (CPRs) are more likely to safeguard the environment. Overexploitation, incompetent management, dwindling populations, transient communities, and external aggression all pose persistent risks to the availability and quality of these resources.

Sourav Kumar Das (2017) Part of the policy toolkit known as "social protection," which tries to relieve poverty and vulnerability, include assistance programs, insurance policies, and measures to enhance social involvement. Problems affecting indigenous populations are rooted in politics, culture, and the economy. People generally see them as a more defenseless group. They now have social protection as a policy goal for development. Living conditions have improved as a result of the use of common property resources. Public opinion and political demands, not a real care for the people's needs, seem to be the driving forces behind policy choices in contemporary India's democracies and administrations. Three tribal districts in West Bengal—Purulia, Bankura, and Paschim Midnapur—are economically disadvantaged. The goal of this study is to find out how well these places' common property resources and social protection programs work. Social protection, shared property resources, and food security are all strongly correlated, according to the findings. Implementing a comprehensive social protection program that impacts food security level is less important than building policy links from social protection to other sectors, such as agriculture, education, health, and nutrition, and institutionalizing social

protection within government systems. This will confer a justifiable improvement in the social standard of the tribes.

III. CULTURAL AND INFORMAL NORMS IN CPR MANAGEMENT

Cultural values and informal norms form the unwritten rules that guide community behavior in managing common property resources (CPRs). Unlike formal legal frameworks, these norms are rooted in customs, traditions, and shared beliefs that evolve over generations. In many indigenous and rural communities, access to forests, grazing lands, or water bodies is regulated not by state law but by culturally sanctioned practices. These practices often define who can access a resource, the extent of its use, and the timing of exploitation, thereby functioning as a decentralized governance system that promotes cooperation and sustainability.

One of the strongest features of informal norms is their moral authority within the community. For example, cultural taboos on cutting sacred trees, hunting during breeding seasons, or fishing in certain water bodies reflect deep ecological knowledge embedded in cultural traditions. Violating such norms often invites social disapproval, ostracism, or traditional penalties, which act as strong deterrents even in the absence of state enforcement. These mechanisms ensure compliance through collective pressure, making them a powerful tool in regulating community behavior toward CPRs.

Cultural norms also play a critical role in shaping attitudes of reciprocity and trust within communities. Practices such as communal labor in irrigation management, rotational grazing, or collective forest harvesting embody a sense of shared responsibility. Such traditions strengthen community solidarity and reduce the likelihood of resource conflicts. However, these norms are not static; they are continuously renegotiated as communities encounter external pressures like market integration, urbanization, and migration. In some cases, this leads to the weakening of traditional institutions, thereby increasing resource depletion and disputes.

Importantly, informal norms are not always inclusive or equitable. They may reflect existing social hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, often restricting marginalized groups from equal access to CPRs. For instance, women or lower-caste groups in some societies may be excluded from decision-making processes despite being primary users of forests and water. This dual character of cultural norms—both enabling sustainability and reinforcing inequality—underscores the need for critical engagement with their role in CPR governance.

In sum, cultural and informal norms are integral to the management of CPRs, functioning as both social regulators and conservation strategies. They offer valuable lessons for sustainable resource management by emphasizing collective responsibility, local knowledge, and ecological ethics. Yet, for these norms to remain effective in contemporary contexts, they must adapt to changing socio-economic realities while ensuring inclusivity and justice for all community members.

IV. LINKAGES BETWEEN CULTURAL NORMS AND RESOURCE ATTITUDES

The relationship between cultural norms and community attitudes toward common property resources (CPRs) is deeply interconnected. Cultural values provide the moral and social foundation upon which individuals and groups form their perceptions about shared resources. When communities are socialized through traditions that emphasize respect for nature, collective ownership, and shared responsibility, their attitudes toward CPRs are more likely to reflect conservation-oriented behaviors. For instance, in many indigenous societies, forests, rivers, and grazing

lands are not seen merely as economic assets but as sacred entities tied to community identity and spirituality. This worldview cultivates attitudes of reverence, restraint, and stewardship, reducing the likelihood of overexploitation.

Informal cultural norms also shape community expectations of fairness and reciprocity, which directly influence how people perceive their rights and duties in relation to CPRs. Practices such as rotational access to grazing fields, communal irrigation turns, or seasonal hunting bans foster a sense of equitable distribution and collective accountability. As a result, attitudes toward CPRs become oriented around cooperation rather than competition. Individuals are more likely to perceive sustainable resource use as a community obligation rather than a personal choice, thereby reinforcing long-term resource security.

At the same time, the erosion of cultural norms under the influence of modernization, market forces, and demographic change can lead to a shift in resource attitudes. Where traditional rules once emphasized restraint, newer values of individual gain and profit-maximization often encourage attitudes of exploitation and privatization. This shift not only alters the way resources are used but also weakens the collective sense of responsibility that sustained CPRs in the past. Consequently, resource depletion and conflicts over access become more prevalent when cultural norms lose their influence.

It is also important to recognize that cultural norms can generate diverse attitudes across social groups within the same community. For example, men and women may hold different resource attitudes depending on their roles in collecting fuelwood, fetching water, or managing livestock. Similarly, dominant castes or clans may view CPRs as entitlements, while marginalized groups may see them as contested spaces where their access is restricted. Thus, while cultural norms foster shared values, they can also reinforce inequalities, shaping resource attitudes in ways that reflect existing power structures.

In essence, cultural norms act as a mediating force between ecological needs and human behavior, shaping how communities perceive, value, and use common property resources. Where these norms align with sustainable practices, they nurture positive attitudes of stewardship and collective action. Conversely, where they are exclusionary or eroded, they can foster negative attitudes of neglect, conflict, and exploitation. Understanding these linkages is therefore crucial for designing policies that not only conserve resources but also respect the cultural fabric of diverse communities.

V. CONCLUSION

The study of cultural and informal norms in relation to common property resources (CPRs) highlights that community-based practices are not merely peripheral to resource management but are often at the very core of it. Across diverse communities, informal rules, customs, and traditions provide the framework through which access, usage, and distribution of shared resources are regulated. These norms, grounded in cultural values and social relationships, significantly shape community attitudes, fostering cooperation, reciprocity, and restraint in resource utilization. In contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent, cultural norms serve as de facto governance mechanisms, ensuring resource sustainability through community enforcement and social accountability.

At the same time, the research underscores that these norms are dynamic rather than static. They continuously evolve in response to socio-economic changes, population pressures, market integration, and state interventions. While many traditional practices encourage conservation—such as rotational grazing, seasonal restrictions, or

sacred taboos—others may reinforce inequalities by privileging dominant groups over marginalized sections like women, lower castes, or migrant communities. This duality demonstrates that while cultural norms can be powerful tools for sustainable management, they also require critical evaluation and reform to ensure inclusivity and equity.

Another key conclusion is that cultural and informal norms cannot be viewed in isolation from formal policies and governance structures. Where state-led policies complement local practices, resource management is more effective and sustainable. However, where government initiatives disregard community norms, conflicts and resistance often emerge. Thus, the integration of local cultural institutions with formal governance frameworks holds the potential to create hybrid systems of management that are both ecologically sound and socially acceptable.

In sum, cultural and informal norms play a pivotal role in shaping attitudes toward CPRs, influencing not only how resources are used but also how they are valued and preserved across generations. Recognizing and respecting these norms, while simultaneously addressing their limitations, is essential for building resilient systems of resource governance. For policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders, the lesson is clear: sustainable management of common property resources requires a balanced approach that combines traditional wisdom with modern governance. By acknowledging the cultural foundations of resource attitudes, diverse communities can be empowered to protect their ecological heritage while advancing towards equitable development.

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