



Understanding conservation of Orans in India through the lens of institutional bricolage

Majumdar, S¹; Nandigama, S².

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, Pilani Campus, Rajasthan, India;

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, Pilani Campus, Rajasthan, India.

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Abstract

'Orans' are centuries-old traditional grazing lands of Rajasthan, India, that are preserved and conserved because of spiritual beliefs and cultural values of the local communities. Due to religious sanctity, the villagers do not cut trees or poach animals in the Orans. However, they use them to graze their animals for which there are strict guidelines regarding the period of grazing and the type of animals that are allowed to graze. In the arid state of Rajasthan, Orans play a vital role in supporting the livelihoods of the local livestock-based communities. They provide not only grazing grounds but are also a source of water, fodder, firewood, wild fruits, medicinal herbs and other utilities. The management and conservation of Orans heavily depend on the active participation of local communities. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the local socio-cultural practices that these communities have been practising from generations to conserve Orans. While formal institutional mechanisms deployed by the government and forest departments are important, understanding the informal dynamics of local actors are equally vital. Hence, this paper finds that the effectiveness of institutions depends not only on their formal design but also on their alignment with existing local practices. This process is called Institutional Bricolage that involves creative recombination and adaption of institutional elements to fit local contexts. The paper analyses the concept of Institutional Bricolage in the context of Oran conservation and management practices that will seek to understand the interplay between informal and formal institutions in natural resource management, highlighting the need to blend formal institutional frameworks with informal local practices for effective conservation outcomes. This paper emphasizes the importance of recognizing local agency and indigenous knowledge systems in conservation practices of rangelands, advocating for context-sensitive approaches to conservation policy in India and beyond.

Introduction

The state of Rajasthan is situated in the northwestern part of India and is known for its arid climate and desert landscapes, where water scarcity, hostile weather conditions and increasing desertification pose serious challenges to its inhabitants. The scarcity of vital resources such as water and fertile land demands careful management practices, many of which are embedded in the socio-cultural customs of the local communities. The *Orans* or *Devbanis* are one such example of community-based sustainable resource management. Central to the Rajasthan's pastoralist lifestyle, *Orans* are the sacred groves or rangelands traditionally protected and managed by the local communities (Singh 2016). In Rajasthan, agriculture is particularly challenging due to extreme weather conditions, poor soil fertility and low rainfall, forcing many rural communities to rely on

livestock as a viable source of livelihood. Animal husbandry not only provides a steady source of income¹ but is also the much-needed insurance against frequently occurring scarcity conditions in Rajasthan. Since ancient times, the communities of Rajasthan used to keep aside a certain patch of land as grazing grounds that also contain water bodies like ponds or waterfalls in order to support their livestock. These lands are called ‘*Gauchars*’ (*Gau*- Cattle, *char*- to graze). To discourage cutting of trees and exploitation of the resources, some of the *gauchars* or grazing lands were dedicated to the local deities or supranatural powers who are believed to be responsible for the protection and well-being of these sacred places and organisms residing within them (Chaudhry, Bohra and Choudhary 2011). *Orans*, thus, serve as vital natural reserves, offering crucial grazing lands and water sources for the livestock. However, in recent years, the growing demand for livestock and the increasing human population, coupled with surging consumerism and urbanization, have disrupted traditional institutions. This breakdown has resulted in the loss of collective wisdom, ultimately causing significant land degradation and desertification in the region.

Methods

Sacred groves, being cultural and ecological entities, demand a methodology that captures their complex socio-cultural, spiritual, environmental and economic dimensions. Accordingly, this study employed a qualitative, interpretive and ethnographic approach to examine the conservation of sacred groves in Rajasthan, drawing on both primary and secondary data sources. This strategy allows for an in-depth understanding of the narratives, practices and values associated with the rangeland management. The fieldwork for this study was conducted across 6 sacred groves in the *Shekhawati* region and *Dhundar* region of Rajasthan in the districts of Jaipur, Alwar and Jhunjhunu. 25 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus group discussions were conducted for this study. These interviews included elderly villagers, temple priests and women, who are the custodians of oral traditions. Other ethnographic methods such as participant observation and transect walks were also employed to capture the lived realities of the local communities. In addition to engaging with community members, this study also incorporates insights from forest guards, local leaders and elected representatives who belong to or are directly involved with the communities stewarding these rangelands. Their dual affiliations—to the community and to formal governance systems—help illuminate the bricolage between the indigenous practices and state-led conservation efforts. Along with the primary data, the study also used secondary sources such as published scholarly articles, books and governmental reports on the *Orans* of Rajasthan.

Results

The lifeline of the rural communities in Rajasthan, the *Orans*, are facing severe exploitation and destruction. The ever-increasing growing population of livestock is putting immense pressure on the grazing lands. According to the 20th Livestock Census², the total livestock population in Rajasthan has grown to 56.8 million in 2019, a significant jump from 32.43 million in 1956. This substantial rise in the livestock population highlights the increased demand for resources and the added pressure acting as a challenge to sustainable management of the region. There has been also a rise in the spread of non-palatable species of the grasses and weeds in the *Orans* such as *Prosopis juliflora* and invasive tree species of *Accacia* due to their faster growth rates and grazing tolerance. Due to these invasive species, an accelerated destruction of the native vegetation in the *Orans* can be observed. This has a direct impact on the capacity of the *orans* and *devbanis* to support the livestock of the locals on a daily basis.

The traditional beliefs and religious sanctions that once acted as powerful social deterrents have been sidelined due to rapid urbanization leading to over-exploitation of these *Orans*. The younger generations as well as rural communities, influenced by consumer-driven values, no longer hold the same reverence for the *Oran* deities. In addition, State-led forest conservation interventions often pitch formal and informal governance practices against each other. The *Orans* do not fit neatly into a single category of land use pattern in government records

¹ [The livestock are good source of milk, meat, manure and transportation.](#)

² The Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying (DAHD) conducts the Livestock Census every five years in collaboration with State Animal Husbandry Departments. The latest 20th Livestock Census was conducted in 2019.

leading to their multifaceted classification as pasturelands or fallow lands or cultivable wastelands or as forests lands. This inconsistency in classification results in competing institutional mechanisms creating challenges for local communities to uphold their traditional and spiritual practices. This ambiguity leaves *Orans* vulnerable to illegal mining, encroachment and overexploitation, further threatening their ecological and cultural significance.

Discussion and Conclusion

The *Orans* have been able to survive since time immemorial due to the socio-cultural norms and traditions (Singh 2016) ensuring their safekeeping for the future generations. These sacred customs meant that *Orans* were not subjected to the same kinds of commercial exploitation as the other lands in the locality. Trees could not be cut down indiscriminately, lands could not be exploited, animals could not be hunted on these sacred grounds and the collection of resources such as wild fruits, fuelwood and medicinal herbs were strictly regulated by the local communities. This unwritten code of conduct was passed down through generations by community elders and priests. Historically, the traditional practices such as rotational grazing, periodic restrictions on certain grazing practices, controlled tree lopping and vigilant monitoring by watchmen (Jodha 1990) played a crucial role in safeguarding these pasturelands. However, these community-sanctioned measures have lost their relevance in the face of increasing environmental threats and socio-cultural changes.

A unique aspect of *Orans* lies in the integral role of priests in their conservation and management. Acting as guardians of these sacred forests, priests maintain the socio-ecological divinity that fosters biodiversity conservation. These informal practices and community gatherings associated with *Orans* serve as powerful symbols for fostering social cohesion. These practices are deeply ingrained in local culture and spirituality thus providing a framework for trust, reciprocity and collaboration, which are essential for managing the *Orans* of Rajasthan. These traditions not only reinforce a collective cultural identity but also create mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution through storytelling and mythological narratives that emphasize respect for nature. Elinor Ostrom (1990) also underscores such values of community-based practices in her design principles.

The analysis of sacred grove governance depends not only on the formal forest governance rules and regulations but also on the informal rituals and taboos. The institutional bricolage (Cleaver 2017) offers a great analytical lens to comprehend the informal institutions and their interplay with formal ones. For instance, communities decide which trees to cut based not just on formal laws but also on traditional norms and their livelihood needs. This flexible approach shows that regulations are not always followed strictly but are interpreted in ways that make sense in real life. This shows that how communities actively negotiate, reshape and reinterpret rules, creating a mix of old and new practices.

Institutional bricolage helps us understand that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. People adapt, change and create systems that fit their needs, cultures, and challenges. Therefore, effective conservation of rangelands in India and globally requires to look beyond written laws and pay attention to cultural values, traditions and daily realities. By respecting local knowledge, blending formal laws with traditional practices and supporting alternative livelihoods, we can create flexible and culturally appropriate conservation strategies. Involving communities, especially women, in decision-making and adopting adaptive management practices ensures that regulations are practical and sustainable. By embracing this nuanced approach, we can achieve conservation goals that are not only ecologically effective but also socially equitable and resilient.

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