RURAL COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES: A GROWING CRISIS

N. S. Jodha

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N. S. Jodha is currently head of the Mountain Farming Systems Division at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu, Nepal. This paper is a shorter version of the Foundation Day lecture, 16 May 1990, for the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, New Delhi, India. The original is obtainable from SPWD, New Delhi.

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Common property resources (CPRs) are in decline throughout the developing world. Unlike in high-income countries, CPRs continue to be a significant component of the land resource base of very many rural communities. But they are threatened by neglect, over-exploitation, under-investment and expropriation.

CPRs are among the most neglected areas in development planning. To all but the poorest they are almost invisible. This paper, by focussing on CPRs in India, documents micro-level evidence on the contribution of CPRs to poor people’s livelihoods, their steep declines in area and production over the last 40 years, the collapse of traditional management systems, and the consequent pauperisation of the poor. In conclusion, I will suggest courses for immediate action to offset some of these alarming trends.

CPRs in India

Common property resources (CPRs) can be broadly defined as those resources in which a group of people have co-equal use rights. Membership in the group of co-owners is typically conferred by membership in some other group, generally a group whose central purpose is not the use or administration of the resource, such as a village or tribe. In India, these resources include community pastures, community forests,
wastelands, common dumping and threshing grounds, watershed drainages, village ponds, rivers, rivulets, their banks and beds. Even when the legal ownership of some of these resources rest with another agency, such as wastelands belonging to the Revenue department of the State, in a de facto sense they belong to the village communities and continue to be a significant component of the land resource base of rural communities. And these resources contribute to the production and consumption needs of rural communities in some critical ways.

The evidence presented in this paper is based on the field studies of CPRs conducted during 1982-1985, when I worked at ICRISAT\textsuperscript{1}. The village and farm level data collected over a period of four years relate to 82 villages from 21 districts, scattered in seven major States in the dry tropical zone of India (Figure 1). The method included regular monitoring structured surveys, physical verification/measurement, recording of oral history, and participant observations by (background and age-wise heterogeneous) teams of formal and informal cooperators in each district. The above information was supplemented by detailed longitudinal data available from ICRISAT's village level studies (Singh et al, 1985) conducted in ten villages of five districts which were also covered by the CPR studies.

\textsuperscript{1} International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Topics