

COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES AS A SAFETY NET FOR THE POOR: A CASE STUDY OF WEST BENGAL

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1. Context and Objectives of the Study

This is a study of dependence of the rural poor of West Bengal on Common Property Resources (CPRs). CPRs are neither State property nor Private property. A well-defined group has exclusive rights of use on these resources with non-excludability condition for every member. CPRs are: Common lands in a village; Forests that are not reserved for specific use and Common property water resources (CPWRs). Sometimes resources owned by private persons are used by majority in the village. These become CPRs by usage. CPRs contribute significantly to income generation, self employment as well as auxiliary consumption of the poor. In times of stress, the members harvest these resources by right. In this sense, CPRs become safety nets for the poor. For the safety net to work, health of ecosystem that ensures collection is important. This CPR-ecosystem relationship substantiates the researcher's claim that conservation of CPRs is a non-market solution for the very poor to deal with poverty.

The study considers socio-economic and environmental factors that impact collections from Commons, making this a multi-disciplinary investigation on CPRs' role in sustaining the poor in rural West Bengal. This work differs from other studies on CPR dependence, in taking a study area that has ecological diversity and in using CPWRs as source of collections.

The *aim* is to establish that poverty is the main reason for households to collect from the Commons and collections from Commons by poor households are mainly for consumption and not for sale. Hence CPRs' safety net aspect is more important than its income generating role.

2. Data Set, Model and Methodology

The choice of West Bengal for the study is based on the following unique features the State offers, in terms of diversity of ecosystems; plentiful water sources; progressive Land

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Reforms and decentralization through establishment of Panchayati Raj. In addition, the State in its policies of poverty alleviation has revealed a pro-poor stance compared to other Indian States in the 90's. It is ironical that still wide discrepancies across districts in the level of living stand out.

The entire work is divided in two main areas: Macro and Micro Study

(1) *Macro Study* that gives an overview of the State, in terms of population, land use, agro climatic zones, hydrology and environmental features. It also has a description of institutional change. It includes assessment of availability and access to CPRs, collections from CPR land resources, state of village facilities as well as use and quality of Common Potable water, based on the NSS 54th round (1998) survey. An inter district study of the State, based on a disaggregated data of NSS 54th Round (1998) created especially for this study, was very useful in selection of villages for the Micro study which is the main body of this research.

(2) *Micro study* is based on the researcher's sample survey of 7 villages in rural West Bengal which are extremely diverse in location as well as character and cover all 3 agro-climatic zones of the State. Criteria of choice were: different water ecology; a large proportion of poor in population; some noticeable water related degradation of CPRs and some community effort to tackle or reverse the problem of degradation.

Two Questionnaires were canvassed on 7 villages and a sample of 441 households. Information on level of living, collections from CPRs including CPWRs and water sources' availability, access and quality was collected for village and sample households respectively.

There are *two enquiries* are made in the research work:

1. Collections from Commons

The aim in this was to establish that irrespective of ecological differences, the very poor in a rural setting depend significantly on collections from Commons, for survival and nutrition. Information on collection was tabulated by item and by village for : reason for collection; time of the year; sources of collection and average time taken by household to collect.

The analysis of data was done by using a Binomial Logit model in which seven items of collection were dependent variable and the independent variables were per capita income; dependency ratio; type of dwelling; caste; education and distance from the market.

2. Investigating Water Quality of the Common ponds and relating it to Health and Well being

After getting visual evidence of degradation of multipurpose Common ponds in the villages which are sources of collections and also water for household, one needed the feel to test water quality. Water was tested for one common pond in 6 villages and the test report confirmed poor water quality. Based on this, a causal relationship was sought between pollution in the Common pond and being ill with water borne diseases.

A regression exercise was conducted to establish the causal link between degradation of ponds to contacting water borne diseases. The effect of poor water quality on user household's health was studied using a Probit model in which the Dependent variable was waterborne disease and independent variables were per capita income; education; use of piped water; access to toilet and proof of degradation of pond water.

3. Main Results

(A) Conclusions of the Study on Collections

- i. For most of items collected, the significant explanatory variable is per capita income; vindicating the claim that poor collect items of consumption from Commons. So poverty explains collection.
- ii. The collectors of food items are invariably poor by the definition of poverty line in West Bengal at the time of the survey. But many are not registered as BPL.
- iii. Majority of collecting households in selected villages collect for consumption rather than sale of the items.
- iv. Households are dependent to the extent of 60% to 70% of their total consumption of edible roots, tubers and vegetable as well as edible stems, leaves, sticks and flowers, on the Commons. There is significant dependence of fish consumption also on the Commons. This means that for nutritional security, most rural households in the sample critically depend on Commons.
- v. A major factor explaining collection is distance from market. This is a common observation for all items of collection. has not been very important in collections except for snails and shells. There is also not any major evidence of caste bars from collection, especially of water.

(B) Conclusions of the study on water quality of water ponds

It concluded that of six independent variables, it is degradation which significantly explains probability of water borne disease for user households.

4. Overall Conclusion

A detailed study of the diverse and poor regions of West Bengal is instructive in revealing pockets of dire poverty even within professedly pro-poor governance in the State.

In the absence of proper enumeration of the BPL population, only conservation of CPRs is the best proxies for anti- poverty planning. Also, reversal of extreme ecological degradation has to be looked into as a tool of sustainability. Preservation of water quality of Common Ponds by user households will improve health well- being.