

When Access Fades: Rules in Use and Inequalities in Planned Omkareshwar National Park Complex, India

Cuando el acceso se desvanece: reglas en uso y desigualdades en el complejo del
Parque Nacional Planificado Omkareshwar, India



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Abstract

Compensatory conservation has emerged as a result of conflict between state development projects and the environmental movement. Planned Omkareshwar National Park Complex in Central India is a result of a resource control strategy to compensate the biodiversity loss from submergence and construction of Indira Sagar dam. This study investigates how the transitional moment from community to state-mandated institutional changes alter myriad relationships local people have with the forest resources. Through longitudinal ethnography, it examines how changing rules-in-use reshape different socio-economic impacts among different groups in proposed ONPC. A total of 145 surveys and 18 longitudinal qualitative interviews were conducted in 4 villages. The study concluded that instead of formal rules, local's access depends on negotiations, economic power and social networks.

Keywords: indigenous, compensatory conservation, rules-in-use, access, forest livelihoods, India

Resumen

La conservación compensatoria ha surgido como resultado del conflicto entre los proyectos de desarrollo estatal y el movimiento ambientalista. El Complejo del Parque Nacional Planificado Omkareshwar, en el centro de la India, es el resultado de una estrategia de control de recursos destinada a compensar la pérdida de biodiversidad derivada de la inundación y la construcción de la represa Indira Sagar. Este estudio investiga cómo el momento de transición desde arreglos comunitarios hacia cambios institucionales impuestos por el Estado altera las múltiples relaciones que las poblaciones locales mantienen con los recursos forestales.

A través de una etnografía longitudinal, se examina cómo los cambios en las reglas en uso reconfiguran distintos impactos socioeconómicos entre diversos grupos dentro del ONPC propuesto. Se realizaron un total de 145 encuestas y 18 entrevistas cualitativas longitudinales en cuatro aldeas. El estudio concluye que, más que las normas formales, el acceso de la población local depende de las negociaciones, el poder económico y las redes sociales.

Palabras Clave: pueblos indígenas, conservación compensatoria, reglas en uso, acceso, medios de vida forestales, India

Introduction

Compensatory conservation schemes (biodiversity offsets, compensatory afforestation) have been gaining momentum worldwide since the beginning of the 21st Century. They have emerged as a result of conflict between state development projects and the environmental movements (Robertson, M., 2004, Martin *et al* 2016). Practiced as a prioritising tool, it justifies creation of increasing number of development projects (infrastructure projects, resource extraction or urban expansion) by compensating or offsetting biodiversity loss elsewhere, thus legitimating environmental damages (Karlsson, M., & Björnberg, K. E., 2021, ten Kate *et al* 2004, Robertson, M., 2004, Vaissière *et al* 2017, Tupala *et al* 2022). Often these development projects are created in areas not to the advantage of proximate local communities, thus affecting their rights and well-being, but for benefit of communities elsewhere (Crootof *et al* 2021, Tupala *et al* 2022).

Few examples of global compensatory policies include Brazil's Native Vegetation Protection Law (de Mello *et al* 2021), Chile's Law 20.283 on Native Forest Recovery and Forestry Development, 2008 (Villarroya *et al* 2014) and the Indian Forest (Conservation) Act (1980, amended in 1988 and 2023). In India, the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980 and its amendments (1988 and 2023) establishes grounds for compensatory afforestation often overlooking customary rights of forest dwellers. However, such top-down regulatory policies function as rules-to-control, thus replacing local norms and rules-in-use that have traditionally governed resource use and management intergenerationally with the idea of common stewardship. This study contributes to the rules-in-use scholarship by offering insights into how change in rules-in-use are reframed and practiced in transition from communal to state governance that result in varying socio-economic impacts across different social groups including indigenous communities in proposed ONPC in Central India. As an ongoing process, formal rules and local practices coincide and produce different access mechanisms which are continuously reframed through negotiation, enforcement and interpretation in everyday practices. Hence this paper examines how institutional (rules-in-use) change, negotiate and produce differentiated socio-economic impacts across social groups in proposed Omkareshwar National Park Complex (ONPC hereafter), India.

In India, about 5% of total geographical area (32,87,263 sq km) consists of protected areas including 104 national parks, 551 sanctuaries among others (Bhargav, P., 2020). The central state of Madhya Pradesh has largest forested area (30.8% of total forests cover) (Forest Survey of India 2023). Demographically, it is largely composed of 85% of indigenous people/Scheduled Tribes (ST)/*adivasi* (literally meaning 'original inhabitants') dependent on forest resources for daily subsistence or commercial sale. As such there is no definition of Scheduled Tribes, however legally, those communities who are scheduled as per the Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, that are declared by the Indian President through public notification (Ghurye, G. 1980). Different *adivasi* groups that live here including *Korku*, *Bhilala*, *Bhil*, *Borla*, and *Maan*.

ONPC is a planned park in Madhya Pradesh, near well-known Narmada Dam development project that displaced several millions of local inhabitants including *adivasis* from the submergence areas (Baviskar, A., 1995, Chitale, M., 1997, Dharmadhikary, S. 2001). Situated in the backwaters of the nearby Indira-Sagar dam, the proposed ONPC is designed to overcome the biodiversity loss by the dam construction and resulting submergence. This is an ideal example of creation of new conservation enclosure with restructured governance where the quotidian forest resource use is influenced from shift in common tenure to state ownership. The birth of 'Save Narmada Movement' and resulting socio- environmental inadequacies has made the whole region sensitive and volatile for policy implementation.

Literature Review

Community versus State Forest Governance in India

India has a strong contentious history of exploiting and marginalizing the forest communities leading to changes in ownership and traditional forest rights (Aravinda, L. S., 2000, Behera, *et al* 2022, Saxena, K. B., 2024). By 1900, at least 80% of India's forest resources were commonly managed (Saxena, 2024). Colonial-era forest laws in India dismantled customary forest rights and access, broadly the communal governance systems of traditional forest communities to gain monopolistic control (Bandopadhyay, A., 2010, Guha, R., 1994, Saxena, K. B., 2024). While these colonial and post-colonial policies were largely created in the state interest, they implemented strict control on the use of forest resources by the forest dependent communities, thus reducing the extent of communal rules-in-use.

The Indian Forest (Conservation) Act (1980) asserts compensation for any change in forest land use to a definite non-forest land use accomplished on site through deforestation, de-reservation or diversion for any development project monitored through set of established rules (Kohli *et al* 2011). While this act mandates a strict approval process to ensure land diversions are minimal and justified by requiring prior approval of central government, the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act 1988 takes a step backward by diverting forest land use towards mining, defence projects, and hydroelectric projects in non-transparent, non-consultative and without consent of the local communities (Government of India 1988, Saxena, K. B., 2024). Since 1980, it has been noted that about 0.921 million hectares of forest land has been diverted to mining, dams, infrastructure and other defence projects (Saxena, K. B., 2024). As a result, these acts undermined the local rights, well-being and resource access of the forest dependent communities by centralizing the decision-making about diversion of forest land use.

A legal counterbalance to Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 and Amendment Act 1988's centralized power, a new policy Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 was passed. While on paper it recognized customary rights of traditional forest communities who have recorded or unrecorded land tenure rights to their generational forest land, it has been sparingly implemented on ground.

Rules-In Use

Rules-in-use provide essential framework to understand how institutions function, make decisions and manage resources through collective action rather centralized state control (Ostrom, E., 1990, Cleaver, F., 2002, Cleaver, F., 2012). Alternative to formal written rules that are centralized, rules-in-use refers to the actual, existing functional rules that govern how community use and manage resources. Adapting rules to the local environmental context is the key.

Ostrom's (1990) seminal work suggests guidelines aimed towards developing institutions by the local communities often centred around resource use and management, in this case, forest resources. Her idea focused on sustainable conscious use of resources instead of degrading; governing the resources themselves without the role of government and or private firms. These rules and norms often generate from within the community, informal and unwritten yet implemented and accepted socially.

Institutional change should be viewed as struggle over control rather than just formal rules. Empowering communities with access rights in community resources is important for sustainable stewardship and governance considering its interwoven with power and authority, all of which are constantly contested and negotiated (Ribot and Peluso 2003, Sikor and Lund 2009, Myers and Hanson 2020). Furthermore, Cleaver (2002, 2012) assert that institutions are not originated anew

but are constructed and assembled together from existing norms, rules and practices. As a result, it is constantly evolving through both deliberate choices and everyday practices (Cleaver, F., 2002, Cleaver, F., 2012).

Several recent global studies exist on institutional change (Parajuli *et al* 2024, Chai and Zeng 2018; Korol and Korol 2025 and Cumming *et al*'s 2020). Cumming *et al* (2020) suggests that rules-in-use are the systemic changes in interaction mechanisms in the rules and relationships between actors, institutions within their environment between two points of time. Parajuli *et al* (2024) suggest most studies on institutional change in common pool resources are still influenced by rules-in-form as opposed to rules-in-use. It is asserted that more empirical work on changes in rules-in-form exist while scholarship on rules-in-use changes remain minimal (Parajuli *et al* 2024, Chai and Zeng 2018; Korol and Korol 2025). By seeking to fill this gap, this study investigates how institutional change reshape rules-in-use and produce differentiated socio-economic impacts across social groups in proposed ONPC while capturing the transition moment between communal governance and state control.

Research Question

This study proposes when institutional change occurs, it is not simple to directly impose or resist rules-in-use. Both formal regulations and informal local practices coexist during periods of institutional change. Responses are reshaped by everyday practices, negotiation and unequal enforcement of rules in context of access, control and mobilization of forest resources. Therefore, this study investigates how ongoing institutional change reshape rules-in-use and produce differentiated socio-economic impacts across different social groups in proposed ONPC in Central India.

Study Area

The planned ONPC was designed to overcome the loss of wildlife and forest resulting from the Narmada dam project in Madhya Pradesh (Figure 1a and 1b). Situated at the junction of three districts, namely, Dewas, Khandwa and Khargone, it consists of Omkareshwar National Park, Singhaji Wildlife Sanctuary, Mandhata Sanctuary and Narmada Conservation Reserve Unit I and II (Figure 2). The creation of the ONPC broadly results from one of the mandatory guidelines from the independent review conducted in 1991.

Figure 1 (a) and (b). Location of the proposed Omkareshwar National Park Complex in India and within the state of Madhya Pradesh

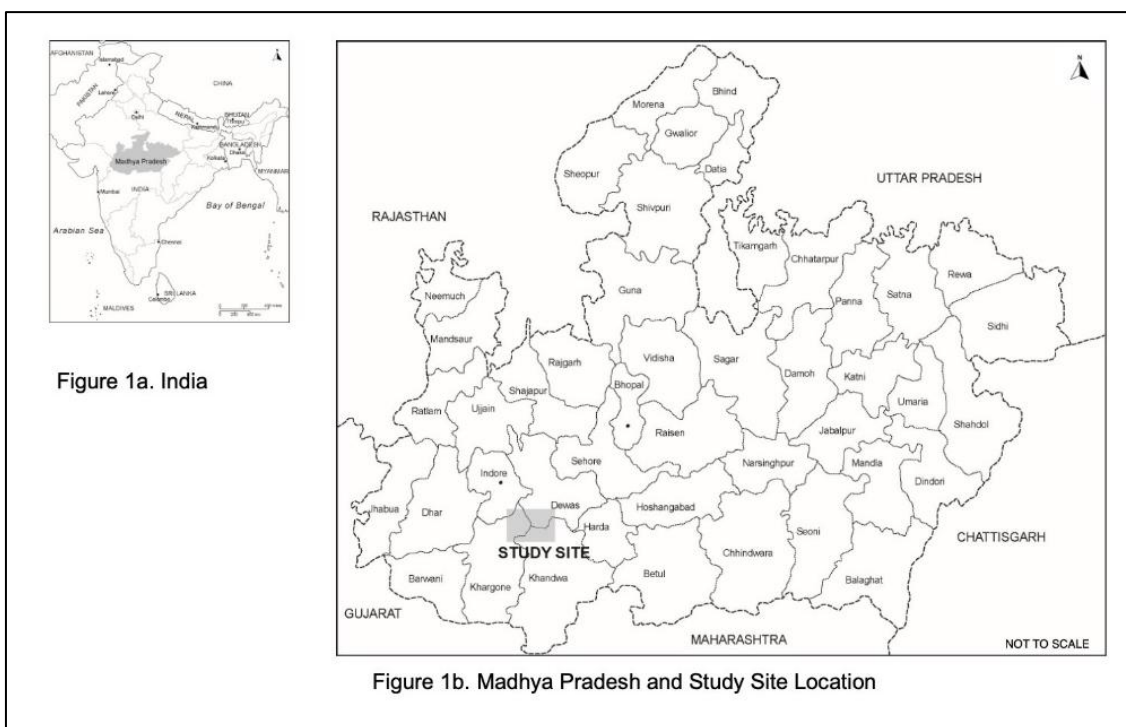
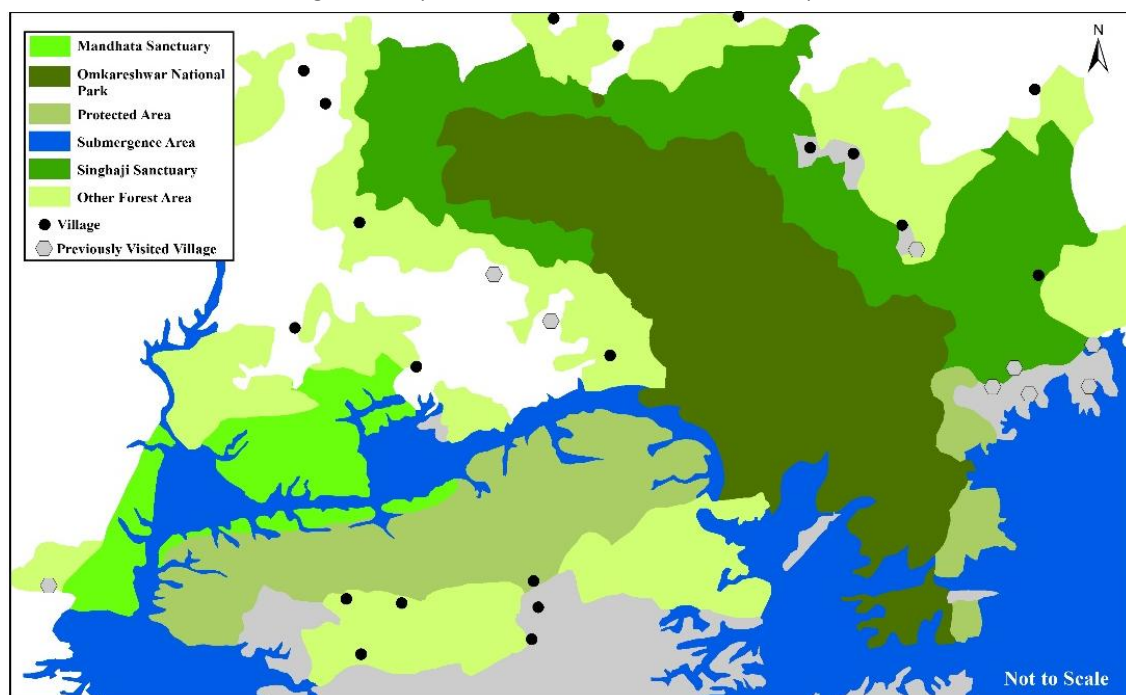


Figure 2. Proposed Omkareshwar National Park Complex



Historical Context

In 1987, the Government of India approved the redirection of 41,111.97 hectares of forest lands in Dewas, Khandwa and Hoshangabad districts towards the construction of the Indira Sagar dam project. It recommended that a protected area, combination of national park and wildlife sanctuary with total area 758.88 sq. km., should be established and formed a committee to prepare impact assessment report. Initial disagreement over the total extent of the protected area halted the proposed ONPC project. Ultimately, in 2007, it was announced the total extent of the protected area to be 651.31sq.km (Omkareshwar National Park (ONPC), n.d.).

In March 2025, the process of notification of the planned ONPC finally began which means that the state declared its intention to constitute a protected area specifying its territorial limits and that it shall be a protected area in and from such date as specified in the notification.

The selected villages in the region have underdeveloped state of basic infrastructure (Table 1). While there is some electricity in the villages, there exists a disproportionate number of water sources. There are no middle or senior schools in the villages, thus explaining surprising literacy rate. Many *adivasis* continue to live in this forest landscape (Table 2), where access to resources and livelihood opportunities is constrained in addition to limited infrastructure.

Table 1. Village infrastructure details.

Parameters	Village Infrastructure Details			
	B	C	E	F
Total Households	146	478	83	78
Literacy rate	51%	37%	25%	60%
Water sources				
Hand pumps	4	12	2	5
Well	0	2	1	2
Tube well	20	0	0	0
Pond	1	1	0	0
Others	0	0	0	0
Sanitation facility in households	1	433	0	0
Electricity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
School				
Primary	1	1	1	1
Middle	0*	1	0	0
Senior	0	0	0	0

Source: Based on author's fieldwork, 2022.

*Proposal sanctioned. Construction will begin within one or two years

Table 2. Socio-cultural make-up

Socio-cultural groups	Village B	Village C	Village E	Village F
Total sample	36	34	36	39
<i>Adivasi</i>	29	30	33	37
Non- <i>Adivasi</i>	7	4	3	2
Total percentage of <i>Adivasi</i> (%)	81	88	92	95

Source: Based on author's fieldwork, 2022

Note: Percentage has been rounded off

Methodology

The study follows longitudinal ethnography (from 2008-2024) to examine the continuous processes and communities in the same field site frequently. During the field visit in 2008, multiple villages were identified situated within 5 kilometre radius of the boundary. These villages were selected through multiple approaches – recce visits, map identifications, advice from the Chief Conservator of Forest and forest officials. They were further shortlisted based on logistical factors including acquiring network contacts, proximity to nearest town (Narmadanagar), safety and accessibility especially during the severe monsoon season (July and August). Data was collected from four villages – Village B, Village C in Khandwa district and Village E and Village F in Dewas district. Once the fieldsites were identified, contacts were established and informal trust exercises were conducted for almost 6 months before data collection. This helped in creating and executing pilot surveys and later final surveys and interviews. A total of 145 surveys and 18 longitudinal qualitative interviews were conducted in 4 villages. Respondents were selected through random chain sampling.

Different closed ended survey responses were collated and examined while open ended interviews were translated and transcribed first. They were then coded to identify different patterns using NVivo program. Various survey findings supported qualitative insights conceptually. Integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews enhanced depth and validity of findings (Omkareshwar National Park (ONPC), n.d.).

Result & Discussion

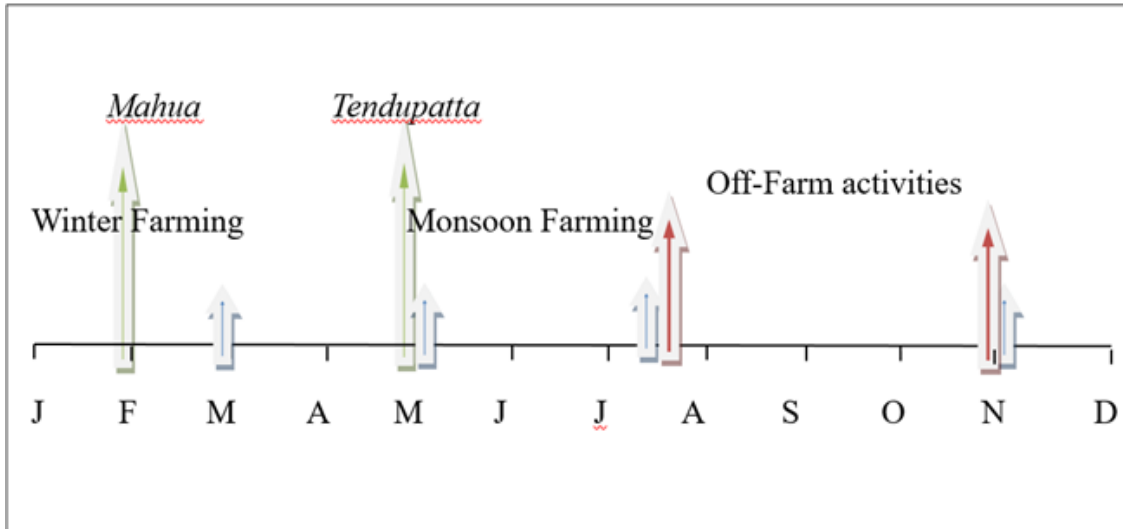
Surveyed rural villages varied with demography and development patterns. These villages lie in districts with more than 50 % less poverty than State Average Poverty. Most of the surveyed villages are situated atleast 2-6 kilometres away from the nearest paved road.

Livelihoods in proposed ONPC

Forming diversified seasonal livelihoods, different household economies in the proposed ONPC integrate agriculture and resource extraction with labour work differently (Figure 3 and 4). The local communities depend on forest resources such as *mahua* (*Madhuka indica*), *tendupatta* (leaves of *Diospyros melanoxylon*), fuelwood, *kullu* (*Sterculia urerns*) and *dhavda* (*Anogeissus latifolia*) gum for subsistence and commercial needs. The locals generally extract *mahua* flowers in February. Simultaneously, if the well-off non-*adivasi* households have irrigation facilities, they engage in winter farming from November to March and continue with monsoon farming from May to July/August. In May, *tendupatta* is extracted for up to a month. Rest of the year, locals depend on the labour activities.

Local people engage in labour work including digging of well or canal and repairing village road. Irregular availability of these jobs is the main problem. While landless people are hired during agricultural season for preparing the land for sowing seeds, watering or harvesting; the household labour participates in *tendupatta* and *mahua* extraction. Additionally, locals (young adults) migrate to work, seasonally or annually, in cotton factories or chili factories in nearby towns.

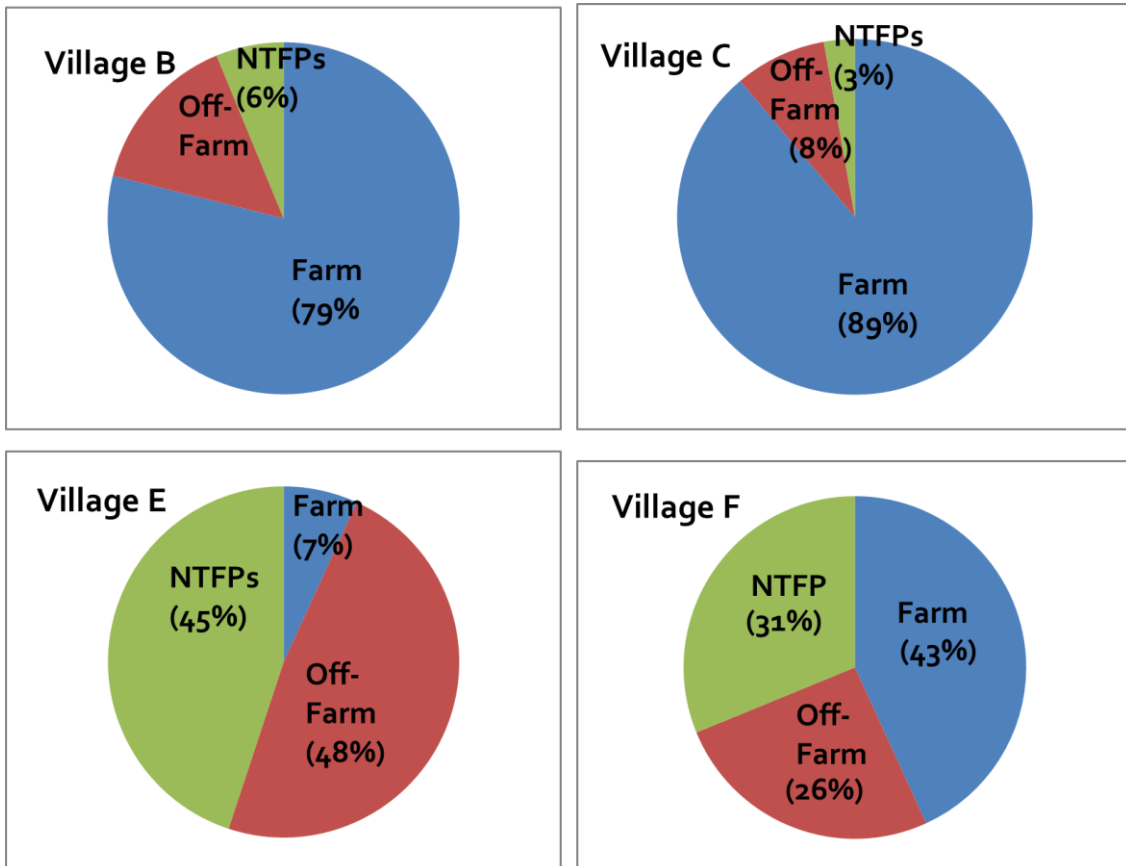
Figure 3. Seasonal variations of economic activities



Source: Based on author's fieldwork, 2010

Note: *Dhavda* gum is extracted throughout the year

Figure 4. Economic Activities in surveyed villages



Source: Based on author's fieldwork, 2010

Pre-existing rules-in-use

Before creating proposed ONPC, locally embedded practices and norms governed access to local forest resources in and around the forests. Local shared understandings, traditional practices and social relationships controlled the local informal and unorganized practices. Practiced in traditional forest communities, these were often mediated through kinship relations, mutually agreed community expectations and obligations. Different rules-in-use that existed varied during pre-ONPC and during planned ONPC (Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of Forest Rules-in-Use before and during the ONPC implementation

Forest extraction activities	Rules-to-control	Rules-in-use (currently followed)
Fuelwood	Extracted from village forest; extract as per need; Nationalized in 1974	One headload per person allowed during one/multiple visits
Cattle Grazing	Cattle can graze anywhere	No cattle grazing allowed except on reserved forest land
NTFPs: 1. <i>Tendupatta</i>	Private extraction; Nationalized in 1964	Extracted under Park officials' supervision; sold to cooperatives only
2. <i>Mahua</i>	Extracted from private trees; sold to village merchants	Private extraction; sold to village merchants
3. <i>Kullu gum</i>	Nationalized in 1995; free extraction	Extracted from reserved forests; sold to cooperatives.

Note: self-curated from secondary sources and primary fieldwork (2008-2024)

Fuelwood: Earlier, the designated park area was managed by the state forest department as village forest where locals were allowed to extract resources for different sustenance needs. The timber was nationalized in 1974. As a result, to control illegal tree felling, the forests of Khandwa division were classified as protection forests, production forests and social forests (Lal 1987). While Protection forests was off-limits, Production forests could be used for commercial purposes and local communities were allowed to fulfil their daily needs through social forests. However, it was noted in 1987 that the social forests were gradually being degraded by the local inhabitants for agricultural, settlements and other purposes (Lal, S., 1987). Hence, villagers were restricted from extracting timber and fuelwood.

Tendupatta (Leaves of *Diospyros Melanoxylon*): *Tendu* leaves are used to produce local cigarettes or *bidis* largely as it is decay and fire resistant. During pre-ONPC, before 1964, *tendupatta* was extracted privately by landowners and sold it to *bidi*-making businesses independently. To stop illegal extraction of *tendupatta* from state and forest lands, to safeguard extractors' interests against exploitation and to increase the state revenue, in 1964 *tendupatta* extraction was nationalized, which meant that it could not be traded freely (Madhya Pradesh State Minor Produce 2010).

Flowers of Mahua (Madhuka Indica): Known for its high sugar content, the *mahua* flower is used to prepare local alcohol and also eaten as a cooked vegetable. These trees can be found on the village land and forests. Local households privately own the trees which are scattered around their land. Hence, during the pre-ONPC days, local inhabitants could freely extract flowers of *mahua* from the forests and around their villages.

Kullu Gum (*Sterculia Urerns*) and Dhavda Gum (*Anogeissus Latofoia*): Kullu gum is extracted during the summers, while the dhavda gum is extracted throughout the year. Kullu gum has high medicinal value and is bought by the pharmaceutical companies. In local practice, extracted kullu gum is often given to pregnant ladies for building strength. Before the creation of ONPC, due to rapid exploitation of these trees, the state government banned its extraction by the late 1980s but later uplifted in 1995 when the extraction of kullu gum was nationalized.

State enforced conservation rules

With the transitional implementation of compensatory conservation, the forest governance changed from communal to state owned. This institutional transition shifted rules-in-use. Once where the locals could access resources freely, now it was governed by formal restrictions to access, control and mobilize the forest resources. Since then, the forest governance and authority has undergone multiple shifts between the state forest department and the proposed ONPC park officials. Such back and forth in the institutional control has resulted in gaps within collaboration with different stakeholders, thus contributing to ineffective management, policy implementation and long term development. Following section demonstrates what changes were made to the different resource extraction.

Fuelwood: All the previous rules and regulations that were applicable to timber or fuelwood were terminated. According to the continuing rules-in-use, the state would not allow commercial or subsistence activity inside the core of proposed ONPC. To use the conservation reserves, the locals were expected to acquire permission from the forest guards. Women were allowed to bring fuelwood for their daily survival needs, but only as much as they can carry in a single headload. Local people were not allowed to take vehicles like tractors or bullock carts inside the forest. This inhibited their ability to cut down large trees for constructing their small huts. It is believed that before the proposed ONPC, the fringe communities grazed their cattle in the forests. Due to stricter rules-in-use, the cattle grazing will now be limited to the 'Other Forest Area'.

Tendupatta: Before 1964, villagers extracted *tendu* leaves as they much as they wanted without any supervision or restriction. After 1964, the *tendupatta* producing forest areas were divided into forest compartments by the state forest department. The same regulation is still followed today. Different processes including pruning of the *tendu* shrubs and the extraction of leaves are supervised by the forest officials. Since 1964, all the villages were divided into clusters and formed cooperative societies. As a result, the bundled *tendupatta* are now sold to the respective cooperative societies which are supervised by the *bidi* contractor and the forest officials.

Flowers of Mahua (*Madhuka Indica*): Once the park gets officially notified, the local people would still be able to extract flowers from their private trees but not from the forests, unless it lies within 'other forests' created for the local village use.

Kullu Gum (*Sterculia Urerns*) and Dhavda Gum (*Anogeissus Latofoia*): Currently, it is extracted through Minor Produce Cooperative Societies and district unions. It was observed that the proposed ONPC management holds meetings about one a year to educate the locals about the right procedure to extract gum. In addition, they are also given necessary equipment including a sickle and plastic sheets.

Evolving rules-in-use

Soft enforcement actions

Proposed ONPC department enforced several soft actions to imply their presence in the area through symbolic acts and physical infrastructure during the transition. Rules and regulations were imposed on access to resources on the fringe forest villages within the 5 kilometres boundary. Monetary fines were levied on the rule-breakers from the forest communities. Rules were imposed to avoid further forest degradation evident by the heavy resource dependency of the locals on firewood, *kullu* and *dhavda* gums. Additionally, labour work was created by constructing new development projects, such as a village pond or village roads, as a means to gain the trust of the local communities. Such different approaches can be considered as indirect forms of state governance through which it subtly controls local communities.

By 2010, physical boundaries such as wired fences were erected around the fringe forest villages of the proposed ONPC. Such evidence was meant to ensure that the villagers get the clear message that forest, beyond the border, is out of limits for them. Additionally, territorial implementations included “boundary pillars, integrated trench-mound wire- biological fence and propagate social fencing (awareness and motivation) to discourage boundary encroachment” (Omkareshwar National Park (ONPC), n.d.). However, Ramdayal Singh an ONPC official explained- “we are fencing around so that the wild animals and other animals do not come out from the forest and disturb the villages.”

This indicates by directly implementing formal rules, local access not only gets restricted, but also indirectly and subtly controlled through symbolic acts and physical means.

In Village B, the villagers discussed about the wired fence separating their village-forest that signified that they were aware of the wired fences that were erected. However, within few days of fencing, it was noticed that the wired fence was torn and two cows were seen grazing on the other side of the fence in the forest. This example shows clearly how the rules are broken by the villagers, thus exploiting their access to forest resources and space. This finding demonstrates that formal rules are often ignored and thus evolve into fragile and inadequate mechanisms to manage forest resources. Over time, if this local behaviour becomes normalized and weak enforcement of formal rules may result in overexploiting and forest degradation.

Differentiated access

Different social groups depend on different livelihoods and own varying sizes of landholdings. This influences their need to depend on forest resources to supplement their income. With limited forest resources and scarce opportunities to access them, the question then becomes ‘who gets the access’. Negotiating access to everyday forest resources is not same for all the village members. Not only it varies across various social groups but inequalities are produced and reproduced through continuing processes based on their social networks, economic position and power. Some households experience minimal authoritative obstruction due to their socio-economic status, while others are at times scrutinized or fined. For instance, Markam one *adivasi* respondent from Village B asserted:

“*Zamindars* (non-indigenous landowners) know forest staff very well, so no one really stops them or fines them. But for us *adivasi*, it's different. When we go and if we get caught, they check us and often fine us extra even for small things.”

While the non-indigenous groups own bigger sized farm land (upto 4 hectares), *adivasi* own not more than 0.4 hectares per household. Therefore, non-indigenous families earn the profits from their agricultural produce such that they need not supplement their income with additional labour

work or extraction of the forest resources except during an abnormal monsoon season. Alternatively, *adivasi*, being small landholders, bear the brunt of restrictive access, severe regulations and economic insecurity. They are forced to renegotiate access and migrate for labour work.

Dhan Singh, an Adivasi respondent from Village E stated that:

“Households who own big lands don’t worry much. They have enough resources and money to grow crops and hire villagers to work on their fields as laborers. They are able to sell crops, generate income and manage annually. They don’t have to fully depend on forest resources like we have to. I have only 0.2-hectare land. Even though it is not enough, we manage. If the monsoon rain fail, then it becomes difficult to manage. Depending on *mahua* and gum helps a bit, but it is not enough. And if we are restricted to go inside the forest, then I don’t have a choice. I have to leave my family here to find work in next village or town. It becomes difficult to manage without family, so I try to migrate seasonally only.”

Placed at the lower rungs of the social pyramid, *adivasi* are economically marginalized by the local ‘elites’ and the forest officials. In absence of access due to restrictions or opportunities, migration not only becomes a coping mechanism but results in commodification of labour, a process that transforms their self-sustenance to wage economy in distant markets. Changing their labour into a marketable commodity reintroduces them to multiple vulnerabilities including alienation from social community, and economic insecurity, hired for low paying often exploitative jobs and strenuous work. This economic transition from agriculture and forest resource dependency to migration for labour work demonstrates how restrictions on access to forest resources are reframing struggles within rural livelihoods and mobility patterns, thus suggesting a shift from local livelihoods to market based employment. Additionally, the uneven household inequalities reveal that access is socially structural and hierarchical in nature. Hence, there seems to exist a clear divide between who wins and who loses as a result from change in rules-in-use in the forest governance in Central India.

Negotiating access

This study is an example of how the changes in rules-in-use have implemented restrictions on the access, control and mobilization of daily forest resources. Access is not directly given, due to rules and regulations, instead is reshaped by everyday interactions and practices by different social groups. Villagers generally engage in informal relations to acquire access to resources as required, thus attempting to influence being selected to access by negotiating with authority or offer payments. When the forest officials informally broadcast about paid work through word of mouth, like pruning *tendu* shrubs, access to information is restricted to small number of locals, when economic opportunities are already scarce. Communicating such information through selective channels ensures that information does not reach equally to all members of the village community. Villagers with closer association with forest officials or prominent kinship nexus are more likely to hear about such opportunities and engage, thus creating a situation of no equal access. This means access is not simply permitted or prohibited by official rules instead it is shaped by interactions, everyday practices, social networks and informal relations, thus further reinforcing inequalities.

State’s strict implementation of rules also leads to social tensions among the different actors. Instances of manipulation, free rides, bribery and corruption are widely evident. The forest guards (*nakedaar*) derive their authority as a state enforcer that empowers them to impose rules and regulate local forest access. Social relations and positioning within the community influenced the access to forest resources including who could collect, from which areas and how much. As Sitaram Yadav, an Other Backward Caste respondent from Village C stated:

“Earlier we could just go into the forest and bring what we needed. Now at the checkpoint, the forest guard stops us if we carry more than a headload of wood. If it’s just a small bundle, they let it pass. But if more, they ask questions. Then we have to give extra money to get through. Especially when there is a wedding or function at home, one headload is not enough. Then we bring a full cart of fuelwood and bribe guard. Not everyone can afford bribes. We have to borrow money from others. If you don’t have extra money or contacts, you have to manage with less or make multiple trips and risk getting stopped.”

Such an authoritative and empowered role of forest guards indicates that state control is exercised unevenly through local social relations and networks, thus producing unequal access to forest resources among different social groups. It seems clear that newer rules-in-use, such as fenced village-forest boundary and guards enforcing rules, has resulted in restricted access and mobilization of local resources. Hence, access is not managed and controlled only through formal rules, it is also negotiated, enforced and interpreted differently and through everyday practices in localized contexts by different social groups.

Conclusion

Planned ONPC is a result of a resource control strategy that reframed the prevailing forest institutions thus influencing local access to, control of and the mobilization of the forest resources. This study examined how restructured forest governance produce differentiated socio-economic impacts across social groups in central India. The transition from communal to state governed rules-in-use is an ongoing process.

Change in rules-in-use in forest governance is not a straightforward or a continuous process. While the state led changes in rules-in-use attempt to regulate access, however everyday local norms and practices work in complex way by continuously reshaping through negotiations, selective enforcement by state actors and resistance. Lack of strong enforcement of formal rules may result in weak and inadequate mechanisms to govern forest resources, thus resulting in overexploitation. Access is implemented directly or indirectly by the forest officials and subtly controlled through symbolic acts and physical means such as wired fencing. The institutional change has experienced a shift towards different access mechanisms ranging from rule-breaking by the villagers to weak rule enforcement by the state actors, local negotiated access and restricted access based on social relations and power. Access to forest resources differs across various social groups based on their social networks, economic position, kinship and relationship with officials. Different social groups extensively negotiate their access to resources by intersecting and overlapping authorities, changing directives and everyday practices. Such transitional processes reproduce and intensify existing inequalities and unequal power relations embedded in the social structure resulting in differentiated access to resources. Different social groups exist including indigenous and non-indigenous communities with varying economic realities. While non-indigenous own large agricultural lands, they depend less on alternative income sources. Alternatively, *adivasi* households who have to struggle everyday to constant uncertainty and negotiation due to owning fewer resources and opportunities. This answers the question ‘who gets the access’. Thus instead of securing local well-being and economic security, such institutional change may reinforce existing inequalities in different forms. Hence, restrictions on access results in economic insecurity, migration and commodification of labour. Institutional change then becomes a constant struggle, a transition reframed by necessity, uncertainty and unequal opportunity.

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