Community Development Approach for Water Conservation in India

Amruta Ramsevak Mukhekar, PhD Scholar,Department of Political Science, Hind Seva Mandal's, Pemraj Sarda College, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra.

Abstract:

Participatory methods used in development initiatives that focus on common-pool resources aim to re-establish the role of local communities in the management of these resources. Community involvement is widely recognized as vital for ensuring that such resources are used both effectively and equitably. Nevertheless, participatory approaches frequently fall short of meaningfully involving all segments of a community. This failure often stems from the assumption that communities are socially uniform and from insufficient attention to the deep-rooted socio-political divisions that exist among community members. In Maharashtra's community-based water conservation policies, such as the Jalswarajya Project, Gram Sabhas were empowered for decision-making through Village Water Supply Committees, yet elite capture and exclusion of marginalized groups like women and tribals persisted despite participatory planning. Consequently, development interventions may become influenced by existing power structures, leading to superficial forms of participation and allowing local elites to retain or even strengthen their control over natural resources. Such outcomes can undermine principles of good governance and hinder the fair allocation of shared resources, as seen in cases where groundwater contamination from overexploitation exacerbates inequities, mirroring broader Indian challenges like Punjab's "cancer train" linking patients from arsenic-polluted Malwa groundwater to Rajasthan treatment centers. This paper examines the application of participatory approaches in water-related projects and evaluates the extent to which power dynamics shape water management outcomes. Adopting a qualitative research framework, the study draws on case studies from India—including Maharashtra's Pani Panchayat and Jalswarajya initiatives to highlight major challenges in participatory water governance. These challenges include low levels of social trust, domination of participatory processes by elites, unequal and diverse power relations at the local level, and the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making processes. Based on insights from these case studies, the paper contends that successful participatory development initiatives must critically engage with the socio-political power relations embedded within communities—an area that is inherently complex and contested. Furthermore, the sustainability of community-based projects largely depends on a well-designed "exit strategy" that facilitates genuine community ownership. A deeper understanding of these dynamics can significantly enhance the effectiveness of development interventions aimed at addressing water-related challenges.

Key Words: community-based water management projects (CBWM); climate change; micro-political dynamics; common-pool resources; cancer train; Punjab; Rajasthan; Maharashtra;

Introduction:

Active participation of local communities has long been acknowledged as a cornerstone of rural water resource governance in India. Empirical studies indicate that traditional water management institutions in the country have historically regulated and governed water resources through the collective involvement of community members. However, in several instances, these systems also reveal the significant influence of local elites, often drawn from dominant social classes, castes, or tribes, in shaping decision-making processes at the community level. By

revitalizing customary norms and institutional practices, contemporary development strategies in India increasingly promote community-based or community-led participatory approaches, devolving authority over decision-making, management functions, and financial resources to local communities.

Community-based water management (CBWM) initiatives in India are typically either externally initiated and funded or locally initiated with support from external financial and institutional agencies. The central objectives of these initiatives are to strengthen inclusive participation in water-related decision-making and to enhance the capacity of communities to manage water resources in an effective, equitable, and sustainable manner. From an economic perspective, CBWM frameworks also incorporate cost-recovery and pricing mechanisms, as communities assume responsibility for the operation, maintenance, and governance of water infrastructure and associated resources.

In arid and semi-arid regions of India, demand-driven water scarcity has increasingly contributed to socio-political tensions within and between local communities, and in some cases across administrative boundaries. Growing pressures on surface water and groundwater resources have the potential to intensify conflicts, thereby weakening active community engagement in water governance and management processes. Therefore, broad-based and meaningful community participation remains critical for mitigating social conflicts, reducing economic disparities, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of water resources in rural India.

Despite the recognized importance of participation, the willingness of individuals to engage in collective action and the level of social trust among different social groups are often constrained by a range of internal and external factors. These include environmental stressors, socio-economic inequalities, institutional arrangements, and governance-related challenges within user communities. This study examines the factors that act as barriers to interaction among participants involved in CBWM initiatives in India, as well as the degree of tolerance for cooperative water use at the local level.

The research is based on case studies from India, with a particular focus on regional-scale analysis in Rajasthan. The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, identifying both internal and external obstacles to community participation in water management. This is followed by the presentation of a theoretical framework for diagnosing levels of community participation. Section three outlines the research methodology, while section four describes the case study region. Section five presents the results derived from the case analysis. Section six compares and discusses the key findings, and the paper concludes with a concise summary of the principal arguments and implications.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Typologies of Participation

To begin with, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of participation. Participatory approaches have been promoted as a means to restore the diminishing role of community involvement within international and national development initiatives. Participation is widely regarded as a central component of development intervention, natural resource governance, and local-level institutional arrangements.

Participation is conceptualized in multiple ways, commonly described as "citizen participation," "people's participation," or "community participation," with each term reflecting differing theoretical perspectives and contextual interpretations. The notion of "citizen participation" may, intentionally or otherwise, imply exclusionary boundaries, as constitutional and legal frameworks may deny formal citizenship to refugees, undocumented migrants, or stateless populations. Under such circumstances, participation becomes restricted to legally recognized citizens within a defined territory. In contrast, "people's participation" and "community participation" are generally understood as broader and more inclusive concepts. In both academic literature and development practice, these latter terms are often used interchangeably.

A defining characteristic of community participation is the direct involvement of individuals in decision-making processes and development activities, either as stakeholders or as collective rights holders. From this perspective, community participation entails a redistribution of authority and responsibility to local actors and is closely linked to processes of decentralization and devolution. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation categorizes varying levels of citizen involvement based on the extent of decision-making power exercised by participants. Among these, delegated power represents a form of decentralization in which authority is transferred to communities. However, decentralization that lacks coordination can result in fragmented governance structures, thereby weakening the overall effectiveness of water management systems.

Sector-driven, top-down approaches to water governance tend to suppress meaningful community participation and institutionalize hierarchical policy implementation within existing political cultures. Within the framework of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), participation is recognized as a critical element for achieving effective and efficient water governance. Active participation under IWRM occurs when all relevant stakeholders within a defined spatial scale are meaningfully engaged in both decision-making and implementation processes. Similarly, in community-based water management (CBWM), active local participation is essential for integration and sustainability. Nevertheless, a range of internal and external constraints may undermine or entirely curtail community participation in development initiatives. When genuine community engagement is absent, IWRM risks becoming dominated by technical experts and knowledge elites rather than reflecting participatory governance principles.

As highlighted by Ahmad and Abu Talib, operational questions—such as which activities are undertaken, who participates, and the manner in which participation occurs—are fundamental for understanding participation mechanisms within development projects. In many cases, sustained and meaningful participation in community-based natural resource management, particularly for common-pool resources, proves difficult to maintain due to interacting internal and external pressures. The following subsections review the principal barriers to community participation identified in the literature.

2.1.2. Power Heterogeneity

Development practice has increasingly emphasized local participation alongside notions of empowerment. However, excessive focus on the "local" scale often obscures internal inequalities and power relations within communities. In the context of community-based water management in India, participation forms part of broader efforts to decentralize governmental authority in order to enhance efficiency, equity, and responsiveness to community needs. Since participatory approaches became mainstream in development discourse during the 1970s, they have been criticized as

mechanisms of political control that frequently leave communities with limited influence over outcomes.

Social hierarchies structured around class, caste, tribal identity, and gender often result in the marginalization of subaltern groups from decision-making institutions. Such exclusion plays a decisive role in shaping power relations among competing actors in local natural resource governance. In some cases, decentralization at the grassroots level may inadvertently reinforce elite dominance by privileging the voices of influential local actors.

If participatory arrangements fail to acknowledge the pluralistic and unequal nature of society, the intended goals of inclusion and empowerment are unlikely to be realized. These shortcomings are frequently attributed to insufficient attention to power dynamics and political processes within development interventions, particularly those driven by technical frameworks that depoliticize governance.

Participatory spaces are inherently political rather than neutral. Scholars argue that actors' positions within water governance systems are shaped by historical, socio-economic, and cultural interests associated with water use [34]. Certain interests are more visible and politically influential than others, enabling dominant groups to shape governance outcomes in their favor. Consequently, stakeholder influence depends not only on water-related interests but also on broader social power relations. Empirical studies demonstrate that unequal power dynamics among participants often result in weak community engagement and, ultimately, project failure.

2.1.3. Exclusionary Governance Instruments in Community-Based Water Management

State-driven community development programs may function as extensions of government or ruling-party agendas, legitimizing dominant development narratives at the local level. The growing influence of technical professionals in water governance has, in many cases, limited meaningful civic participation in decision-making and policy implementation. As a result, inadequate collaboration with non-state actors, including communities, often generates competing interests and governance tensions.

While technical experts play an important role as key stakeholders, their dominance can transform communities into passive recipients rather than active participants in development programs. Such expert-driven control may emerge not only within sector-based governance regimes but also within IWRM-oriented frameworks. Knowledge elites often define management objectives and governance instruments in CBWM systems, marginalizing locally embedded, practice-based knowledge. From a Gramscian perspective, hegemonic power operates through material, discursive, and organizational forms that suppress alternative knowledge systems.

The structure and intensity of participation vary widely across programs, and representative mechanisms may inadvertently consolidate power among selected elites, creating contradictions within democratic processes. Frequently, project objectives fail to align with community priorities. Critical institutionalist scholars argue that such barriers arise from the interaction between formal and informal institutions, traditional and modern arrangements, and power relations linking society, natural resources, and governance structures.

Project sustainability is closely linked to the presence of a clearly defined "exit strategy," outlining how communities will assume long-term ownership after external actors withdraw. Community ownership refers to a strong sense of control and responsibility over both the project and resource management processes among local stakeholders.

2.1.4. Climate Change as a Stressor Intensifying Intra-Community Competition

Beyond governance and user-community characteristics, environmental factors significantly influence participation. Climate change increasingly restricts access to essential resources such as land and water, directly affecting human livelihoods. Its impacts are observable across multiple spatial and temporal scales, ranging from local and regional levels to long-term climatic cycles.

In India's arid and semi-arid regions, declining surface water availability has intensified dependence on groundwater for agricultural and domestic use. Socio-economic and demographic pressures—including population growth, urbanization, and social unrest—further exacerbate vulnerability in climate-sensitive regions prone to droughts and extreme weather events. Water and land are particularly susceptible to climate shocks, and increased variability places additional stress on resource accessibility.

At the community level, competition over scarce resources essential for survival has intensified. In the absence of inclusive and participatory governance systems that ensure equitable access, social conflicts become increasingly likely. Climate-induced stress can trigger intra- and inter-community disputes, contributing to political instability.

2.1.5. Land Distribution and Demographic Dynamics

Rapid population growth in many parts of India has increased household sizes, resulting in land fragmentation and changes in land ownership patterns. These demographic shifts, combined with water governance challenges, have contributed to declining groundwater levels and heightened conflict over access to resources. Spatial and temporal variability in water availability, along with extreme climatic events, has intensified water stress over recent decades.

These trends underscore the need for adaptive and effective water governance frameworks, including periodic revision of policies, legal instruments, and regulatory mechanisms to address growing scarcity. In this context, community-based natural resource management has gained prominence among policymakers and funding agencies, emphasizing decentralization and local-level decision-making.

2.1.6. Diversification of Local Natural Resource Ownership

Natural resource stewardship is typically shared among the state, private actors, and local communities across social and ecological scales. Debates surrounding common-pool resources (CPRs) highlight shifting governance arrangements and property regimes among stakehold. CPRs are often proposed as alternatives to exclusive private ownership or rigid tenure systems.

Distinctions must be made between de facto and de jure ownership, as well as between commercial and non-commercial uses of shared resources . Legally, CPRs are usually owned either by the state or by communities, with access governed through formal or customary rules.

Open-access resources represent a different category, characterized by the absence of defined ownership and regulation. Such conditions increase the risk of overexploitation and environmental degradation. Although access is theoretically open to all, inequalities arise due to disparities in technology, proximity, and socio-economic power. These inequalities intensify competition and conflict among users. Efforts to convert open-access resources into community-owned CPRs may face resistance from excluded groups, further eroding social trust and increasing conflict.

2.1.7. Social Trust

Social trust encompasses shared norms of reciprocity, fairness, reliability, and mutual support. It extends beyond interpersonal relationships to include trust in collective institutions and community functioning. High levels of trust are critical for collective action, as they encourage cooperation over individual self-interest.

In the management of common-pool resources, social trust mediates competition, supports equitable access, discourages free-riding, and contributes to long-term communal stability. Trust can thus generate reinforcing cycles of cooperation. Social trust has been conceptualized as an emergent outcome of property relations and governance structures, linking social norms to resource systems.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the literature, this study proposes a diagnostic framework for analyzing community participation in water management. The framework identifies three interrelated categories of influencing factors: environmental conditions, user-community characteristics, and governance arrangements.

Guided by this framework, the study addresses the following diagnostic questions:

1. Which social factors constrain interaction among community members in community-based water governance?
2. Why do communities disengage from community-based water management initiatives?

Power asymmetries, climate-related pressures, land distribution challenges, external governance interventions, and changes in common-pool resource ownership collectively function as internal and external barriers that shape social responses within participatory systems.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. Data collection in the Indian case study, with a focus on Rajasthan, involved desk-based research, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with community members. Interviews were conducted remotely using digital communication platforms between August and October 2025. In addition, legal frameworks, policy documents, and institutional guidelines related to water governance were systematically reviewed. The qualitative data were analyzed using interpretive and normative methods to examine participation dynamics, governance structures, and social interactions within community-based water management initiatives in India.

4. Case Study Region

4.1. Water Scarcity in Rajasthan and Socio-Political Drivers of Vulnerability

Rajasthan, the largest state in India, is located in the north-western part of the country and is characterized by predominantly arid and semi-arid climatic conditions. The state frequently experiences droughts and chronic water shortages. Approximately 75% of Rajasthan's population, estimated at over 68 million people, resides in rural areas, where livelihoods are largely dependent on agriculture. Despite supporting about 5.5% of India's population and nearly 10% of its livestock, Rajasthan has access to only around 1.15% of the nation's total water resources.

Over recent decades, surface water availability in the state has declined significantly, rivers and traditional water bodies have dried up, and drought periods have become longer and more intense. Low and erratic rainfall, population growth, rising average temperatures, and advancing desertification are expected to further intensify water scarcity in the region. These environmental

pressures have made agricultural livelihoods increasingly precarious, compelling many rural households to abandon farming and migrate to urban areas in search of wage labor.

The district of Alwar, located in northeastern Rajasthan, lies between 27°40′ and 28°40′ north latitude and 76°70′ to 77°13′ east longitude. The region has an average annual temperature of approximately 24.9°C and receives around 672 mm (26.5 inches) of rainfall per year. December is typically the driest month, while August records the highest precipitation.

Although climate change has contributed to environmental stress in Rajasthan, water scarcity cannot be explained by climatic factors alone. A range of socio-political dynamics significantly constrains effective water governance and intensifies shortages. While state and central government policies play an important role, local-level socio-political conditions are equally critical but often overlooked. India's deeply rooted caste system, along with inequalities related to land ownership, political influence, religion, gender, class, and wealth, creates power imbalances within rural communities. These dynamics shape access to resources and decision-making authority, with outcomes varying widely across districts, villages, and even households.

5. Results

5.1. Micro-Level Power Asymmetries as User-Community Characteristics

5.1.1. Rajasthan, India

Field research conducted for this study revealed that decision-making authority in the village of Khejrigram (a pseudonym used to protect anonymity), located in Alwar district, was concentrated among a small number of families. The village has an estimated population of around 3,000 residents.

The findings indicate that local power structures are largely shaped by land ownership, resulting in the intergenerational control of social and political decision-making, including matters related to water access and management. Although the dominant families belong to caste groups traditionally categorized as lower status, their extensive landholdings have enabled them to attain higher social and economic standing within the village.

Elite power consolidation is reinforced through multiple mechanisms. Political alliances are often strengthened through strategic marriages with influential families in neighboring villages. In addition, moneylending practices play a critical role. Wealthy landowners frequently provide seasonal loans to small farmers at high interest rates. When borrowers are unable to repay these debts, they are often compelled to sell livestock and, eventually, their land. This process has allowed village elites to steadily accumulate land from poorer, less educated, and more vulnerable households. Given the close link between land ownership and water rights, control over land directly translates into influence over water resources.

This concentration of economic power has translated into political dominance, with elite families repeatedly occupying the position of sarpanch (village head). As a result, a pattern of elite capture has emerged, whereby water-related decisions are shaped to serve the interests of a few rather than the collective good. Dominant households exert significant influence during community meetings and over the allocation of funds for water infrastructure, often directing benefits toward themselves or their allies.

Although this was not directly observed in Khejrigram, respondents noted that in other parts of Alwar district, individuals from upper castes are frequently favored in local elections, while lower-caste candidates are discouraged or excluded from contesting leadership positions. Such practices

further entrench unequal power relations. In some cases, powerful landlords act as local strongmen with political backing, using intimidation or patronage to control village affairs and suppress opposition, including turning a blind eye to corruption.

5.2. Declining Participation within Community Governance Structures

5.2.1. Rajasthan, India

Respondents from Khejrigram described how, in earlier periods, community members were more actively engaged in collective decision-making, particularly around shared water resources. Daily life revolved around communal wells, and established systems governed water use through shared financial contributions and collective labor. Over time, these arrangements deteriorated, and communal water infrastructure fell into disrepair.

The erosion of social trust was identified as a major factor behind this breakdown. Growing divisions along economic, educational, religious, and social lines, as well as tensions between long-term residents and migrant populations, have weakened collective cohesion. Similar patterns of fragmentation were reported across other villages in the Alwar district.

Tarun Bharat Sangh: A Community-Led Model of Water Governance

Comparable socio-political challenges were observed during the 1980s by Rajendra Singh, a prominent Indian water conservationist widely known as the "Waterman of India." Singh recognized that local power relations, while contributing to water scarcity, could also form the basis of solutions if properly understood and addressed. This insight emerged following his encounter with a farmer in Gopalpura village in 1985, who emphasized that water scarcity, rather than health or education, was the community's most urgent concern.

Motivated by this interaction, Singh founded the organization Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), which initiated a grassroots movement to restore traditional water management practices. Central to this approach was the construction and rehabilitation of johads—earthen, semi-circular water harvesting structures designed to capture runoff and recharge groundwater. Between 1985 and 2007, TBS facilitated the construction of over 8,600 water harvesting structures across more than 1,000 villages in Alwar district, covering approximately 6,500 square kilometers. These efforts contributed to the revival of aquifers and the restoration of rivers that had remained dry for decades.

A key feature of the TBS approach is the use of open village assemblies, where water-related issues are discussed transparently and decisions are made collectively. This process minimizes elite domination and prevents decision-making behind closed doors. TBS also mobilized existing social networks through awareness campaigns and yatras (processions), including initiatives focused on water conservation, village self-reliance, and afforestation.

The success of the TBS movement demonstrates the potential of community-led governance to overcome socio-political divisions, rebuild social trust, and achieve sustainable water management outcomes. By fostering inclusive participation and collective ownership, TBS offers a model for addressing both water scarcity and underlying social inequalities in Rajasthan's dry regions

5.3. Commons, Land Distribution, and Climate Stress

5.3.1. Rajasthan, India

MGNREGA: Strengthening Localized Water Governance

Community-driven initiatives such as those implemented by TBS can be further reinforced through government programs like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee

Act (MGNREGA). Enacted in 2006 and extended nationwide in 2008, MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of paid employment annually to rural households. The program aims to enhance livelihood security, reduce poverty, and improve social well-being by providing legally enforceable employment opportunities within 15 days of demand.

MGNREGA offers significant potential to support local water conservation efforts by compensating community members engaged in activities such as restoring johads and other traditional water systems. Integrating MGNREGA with grassroots water governance initiatives could enhance participation, strengthen local ownership, and simultaneously address rural unemployment.

6. Discussion

Decentralized water governance models that promote local ownership through community control and water user associations are widely regarded as effective alternatives to centralized management. Such approaches can reduce state subsidies, improve cost recovery, and alleviate fiscal pressures associated with poorly performing state-led systems.

In Rajasthan, community-based water management initiatives supported by government agencies and civil society organizations have demonstrated varying degrees of success, largely shaped by internal community dynamics and external governance conditions. Power asymmetries, elite capture, and social fragmentation significantly influence participation levels and institutional effectiveness. Political affiliations and links to higher-level power structures often shape local authority, undermining trust and collective action.

Unequal access to financial resources, technology, and capacity-building opportunities further constrains community engagement. Many initiatives struggle to sustain activities due to limited local financial capabilities. At the same time, growing water demand driven by agriculture places additional pressure on groundwater resources.

The Rajasthan case illustrates how competition over scarce water resources is closely linked to land ownership patterns and social hierarchies. However, the TBS experience demonstrates that these challenges can be addressed through inclusive, community-led governance that rebuilds trust, reduces power imbalances, and fosters shared responsibility. By confronting socio-political divisions directly, community participation can be strengthened, resulting in improved water availability and equitable access.

Scaling up such successes requires integrating grassroots approaches with supportive state programs like MGNREGA. While such integration can enhance participation and sustainability, it must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing existing power asymmetries. Addressing inequality and building social trust must remain central objectives.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that community-based water management in Rajasthan faces multiple, interconnected challenges. These include social fragmentation at the village level, elite domination of decision-making institutions, politicization of community organizations, and limited community ownership of governance processes. While climate change intensifies water scarcity, its effects on participation are mediated through land tenure systems and social institutions rather than acting directly.

Overall, barriers such as inequality, low trust, limited capacity, and entrenched power relations significantly constrain community participation. These findings highlight the importance of

understanding local communities as embedded within broader social, political, and historical contexts. Simplistic assumptions that water conflicts can be explained through rational choice models fail to capture this complexity.

Evidence from Rajasthan suggests that community-based water management is most effective when initiatives are designed as bottom-up processes with strong grassroots engagement, as demonstrated by the TBS movement. However, long-term sustainability depends on clear exit strategies and the empowerment of marginalized groups. Greater attention must be given to building trust, ensuring equity, and designing inclusive institutions capable of responding to increasing water stress in India's dryland regions.

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