# Reimagining ‘Wastelands’: Unlocking the Potential of India’s Commons

In this interview article with Hindustan Times, Jagdeesh Puppala, convener of the Common Ground Initiative, calls for a fundamental rethink of how India treats its commons—including a long-overdue shift away from the colonial term “wastelands.” He highlights how 205 million acres of shared forests, pastures, and water bodies support over 350 million people, and argues that secure tenure, self-governance, and area-based planning are key to advancing India’s climate and development goals.

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*The full interview here:*

‘75 years into independence, it is high time the nomenclature of “wastelands” is recoined’

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As India grapples with the escalating impacts of climate change, the future of its commons—shared lands, forests, and water bodies as well as its self-regulatory aspect—has never been more crucial. This interview examines how these vital resources can serve as a cornerstone for climate resilience, the gaps in governance that hinder their protection, and the bold steps needed to secure their role in the nation’s ecological, economic and social fabric.

India’s 205 million acres of commons—spanning forests, pastures, and water bodies—are a lifeline for over 350 million rural people, including marginalised groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women. These resources provide essentials such as food, firewood, and fodder, but their overuse has deepened climate vulnerability and rural distress. Equally critical are the customary self-regulation practices of local communities, particularly in tribal areas, which ensure sustainable use and foster inclusion and representation in grassroots democracies.

Jagdeesh Rao Puppala is the Chief Executive Officer of Living Landscapes, a backbone organisation that supports the Common Ground initiative, a collaborative effort involving 58 organisations. He previously served as the CEO of the Foundation for Ecological Services (FES) for over two decades.

Wastelands Illustration1536×1024 204 KB

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Q. How do existing Indian laws and regulatory frameworks facilitate or hinder effective commons conservation, particularly in the context of climate resilience and adaptation?

Answer: We are on the brink of crossing the 1.5-degree Celsius mark and are witnessing the disastrous impacts of climate change. Many significant changes like biodiversity loss, failing soil health, and depleting groundwater levels often go unnoticed. These are clear signals of a failing relationship between humans and nature. The time for debating or denying these changes has passed; now is the time to act.

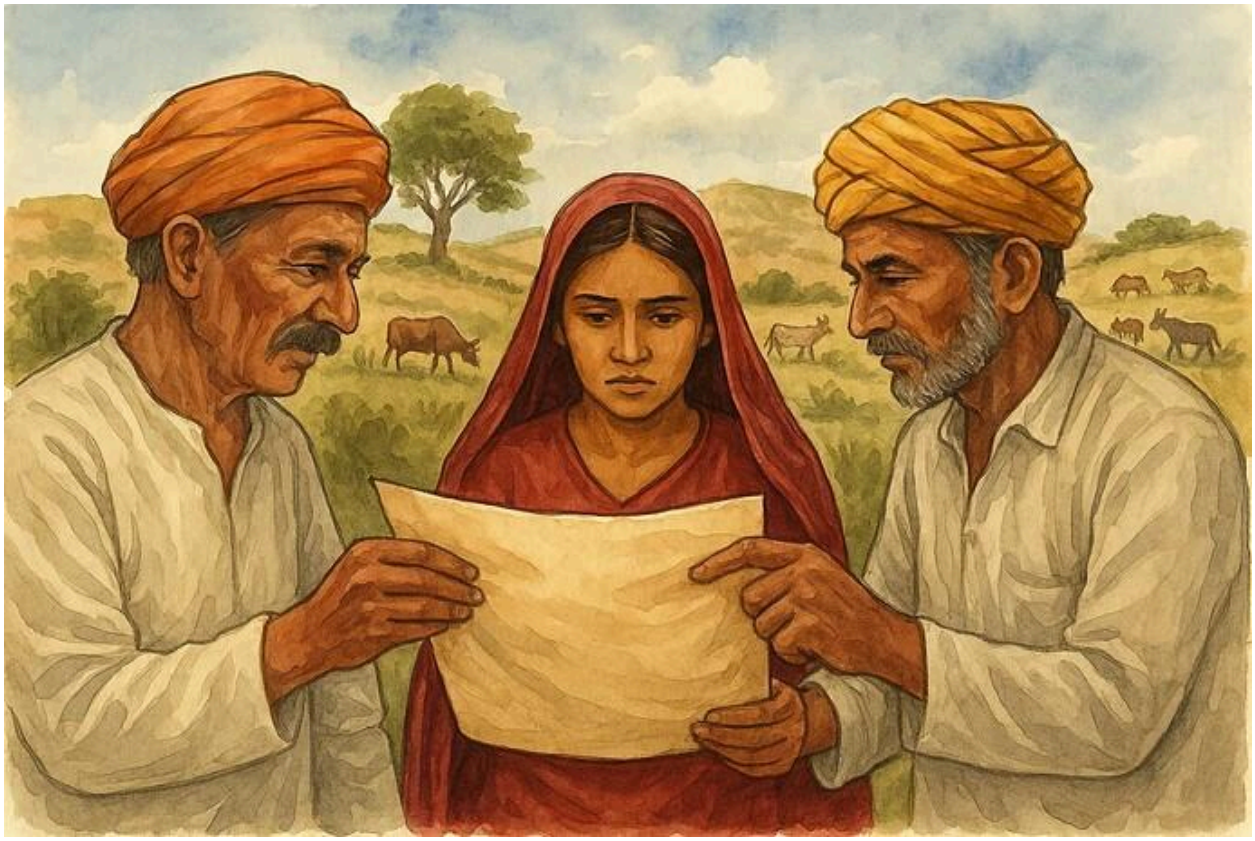
India has several policies and financial flows supporting climate action, including climate missions and action plans. Acts like the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments promote decentralisation or devolution. Funding mechanisms such as NREGA, CAMPA, and DMF, along with tools like GPDP and the Panchayat-SHG architecture, provide a strong foundation. Beyond governments, other think tanks and resource agencies also contribute significantly.

Despite such enabling conditions, there is a major gap in translating the intent into practice. Public policy often focuses on solutions driven by governments or technology, viewing citizens as passive recipients rather than active participants. Addressing climate change, biodiversity

loss, and depleting water resources demands interdisciplinary collaboration, which is more often than not neglected.

Although every state has Land-use Boards, desirable practices are often ignored. Developmental approaches instead lean on land ownership, leading to permanent undesirable changes. Though the government constituted 13 or so committees over decades, agroecological zone-based planning remains ineffective. Since climate change affects each geography differently, planning aligned with local agroecological zones is essential.

Communities require tenure security and local institutions to invest in their lands for long-term benefits. However, the dominant notion that local communities cannot manage their resources effectively persists. Though governments step in, their reach far exceeds what they can grasp capably. A collaborative approach with layered roles for communities and governments could yield better results.



Tenure Rights Wastelands Illustration1536×1024 233 KB

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Q. Given India's complex regulatory landscape, what changes would you advocate to strengthen commons governance to meet the country's climate commitments?

Answer: Commons, by their very definition, are two-faced - ecological commons are shared resources such as community forests, pastures, and water bodies. Equally important is the

self-regulatory nature of communities in framing rules and regulations of local self-governance. To strengthen Commons, secure collective property rights and match self-governing institutions need to be established. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) and 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provide adequate space. However, we need to ramp up their implementation in true spirit. Such devolution does not necessarily do away with the role of governments, instead, the government's role could be enhanced to provide an enabling environment and also play the larger regulatory functions rather than on-ground implementation and management.

It might be reductionist to look at ecological Commons in isolation. In most human-inhabited landscapes, there are private spaces, collective or common spaces, and public spaces. A landscape approach can ensure that Commons are preserved alongside private and public lands, creating a continuum where preservation, conservation, and resource extraction, could serve ecological and economic priorities. Ideally, planning based on agroecological zones and with an area-based approach could promote place and context-based land use and action, which is much needed for addressing climate change.

India's commitments, under national and international frameworks, aim to address climate change, biodiversity conservation, land degradation neutrality among others. While these commitments are much necessary, there is considerable room to purposefully address these in a composite manner. An area-based approach can bring a cohesive perspective that integrates forests, water, agriculture and livestock systems. Coupled with efforts that enhance local self-governance, such area-based approaches could create synergies that advance climate action and several other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a rounded and impactful manner. Similarly, the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG), which is currently focussed on individuals, needs to be embedded in such an area-based approach to pay double dividends.

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Q. Self-governance has proven effective in several commons management models worldwide. In the Indian context, what role do traditional and local governance systems play in conserving commons, and how can they be integrated more effectively with formal regulatory frameworks?

Answer: India has a long history of self-regulatory systems. Forest-dwelling communities and pastoral groups have developed mechanisms to manage their environments effectively. These traditional systems often operate on principles of shared responsibilities, equitable access, and stewardship. However, challenges arise when customary laws, such as the collective relationship of tribals with forests, do not align with modern property laws that are centred on individual ownership. Similarly, tensions exist between customary institutions like Panch Systems and formal frameworks like Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). While customary institutions are considered 'informal' by outsiders, they are very formal in the day-to-day affairs of tribal communities even today. Superimposing modern laws and institutions on the customary ones yields suboptimal and at times very undesirable outcomes.

Adaptation measures like storage, mobility, diversification, and communal pooling, developed over centuries, are still relevant today. Storage includes preserving resources like seeds or grain for future shortages, while mobility refers to moving resources or communities to manage seasonal changes. Diversification spreads risks across different livelihood activities, and communal pooling ensures shared access to resources. Such practices, deeply rooted in local traditions, offer valuable lessons for designing adaptation strategies.

The institutional design underpinning the FRA in India is probably the most seminal advancement worldwide in aligning customary laws, norms and practices of communities living close to natural systems with contemporary laws and institutions. They also move beyond current thinking of ‘settlements’ or village-focused public policy to looking at inter and/or trans-village associations (such as hunting in different parts of the landscapes; gathering honey or specific forest produce; celebrating particular forest deities or rituals) that communities living in the proximity of forests are accustomed to.

At another level, while designing the PRIs, the lawmakers relied on the traditional Panch systems then prevalent in rural India and went a step ahead into making them more democratic and inclusive. While the deficiencies in the PRI system could be argued, they remain the constitutionally mandated lowest form of local self-governance critical for governing the Commons. With political backing some states advanced in making them work and certain reforms are further needed in devolving further to wards/hamlets.

The SHG framework, widely established across India, can serve as a bridge for integration, though its primary focus on economic upliftment means it may not be fully inclusive of all villagers. Embedding SHGs within larger governance structures, like panchayats, could enable broader inclusion and strengthen their role in environmental stewardship. A successful example is the Kudumbashree SHGs in Kerala, which are embedded into local governance institutions to drive both economic and governance initiatives. By marrying economic and governance-related functions, this approach can build an adaptive foundation for Commons conservation, integrating traditional knowledge with modern scientific insights.

The key to effective integration lies in bridging traditional and modern systems. Customary institutions should be complemented by formal regulatory structures. This requires a nuanced understanding of local practices and respect for the cultural and ecological knowledge embedded within them. Combining these strengths with scientific insights could create governance models that are both inclusive and adaptive to current challenges.

Self governance and local practices illustration1536×1024 278 KB

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Q. India has made several global climate commitments under frameworks like the Paris Agreement. How can a stronger focus on commons stewardship contribute to these commitments, especially concerning biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and community resilience?

Answer: India's ecological commons provide a singular platform for addressing poverty alleviation, reducing inequalities, and enhancing ecological health. Ecological commons directly contribute to India's commitments on climate change and beyond. Moreover, the self-regulatory institutions of Commons provide a strong institutional foundation for resilient communities swiftly adapting to change best suited for their environment.

Revenue wastelands, a legacy of colonial policies that deemed certain lands as "wastelands" or "not worth taxing" properties, present a significant opportunity for addressing our global commitments on climate change, biodiversity losses, land degradation and water security. How can a country like India, with over 1.4 billion people, probably a matching livestock population, and with a third of the population living in poverty afford to neglect about 40 to 75 million acres of such revenue wastelands? Though they are considered wastelands, they are de-facto Commons, which village communities use for a range of benefits such as food, fodder, medicine, firewood and small timber. 75 years into independence, it is high time that the nomenclature of "wastelands" is recoined.

Instead of a commonly held notion that such revenue wastelands are required for “development” or for urban expansion, a more nuanced approach where such revenue wastelands under a few kilometre radius of tier I, II, and III cities are set aside for future expansion. Land required for ‘developmental’ purposes is identified and set aside, and the considerable land within the close proximities of villages could be vested to local communities as common lands.

By delineating such lands as common lands and assigning communities’ tenure (in line with the principles of FRA) over these lands, village communities can invest their energies and futures in the restoration and management of an otherwise neglected land, thereby locking carbon, enhancing biodiversity, recharging groundwater, and improving local livelihoods.

Internationally, the dominant mindset of addressing climate change, biodiversity losses etc. seems to excessively rely on market instruments like carbon and biodiversity credits. The mechanisms necessary for village communities to negotiate with such ‘buyers’ are uneven and nascent. While literacy on such instruments and spaces that provide an equal playing field for village communities is critical, we may have to consider two important policy narratives. First, as these instruments tend to monetise several important ecological functions and services, it is imperative that as a country we embark on Natural Resource Accounting Systems (NRAS) in parallel with our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) such that true ecological and social costs and benefits are weighed. Second, market instruments are not necessarily the only means to address measures required for climate adaptation or poverty alleviation, and providing incentives in terms of secure tenure could spur local green economies and entrepreneurship.

To achieve global commitments, a supportive infrastructure around natural resource management, commons in particular, is imperative. Government capacity, private sector incentives, technological reach to the ‘first mile’, and local communities’ influence are each insufficient to catalyse the change required. It is essential to enable collaborative action amongst them from local to national levels to foster synergistic and multiplier effects. The dominant mindset necessary for such an infrastructure is to ‘distribute the ability to solve’ rather than the governments and technocrats solving the problem.

As we strengthen local capacities and align goals, local communities emerge as champions for addressing climate action and several other aligned objectives rather than being seen as passive beneficiaries.

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