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Role of Social Capital in Coping Water Scarcity: Governance Lessons to Trans-Himalayan Region of Nepal from Pre-colonial South India

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Abstract

Social capital plays crucial role in the governance of common pool resources. The development of accepted rules and norms for resource governance takes considerable time but less time to deteriorate. An example is the tank irrigation systems in South India which was the prevalent mode of irrigation before the British colonial regime. The degeneration path of this irrigation system is the lesson for similar systems in the world. We take the case of glacier irrigation system of the Trans-Himalayan region (THR) of Nepal which is undergoing profound change in political and climatic environment which may undermine the current rules and norms resting on social hierarchy. The foundation of social capital that made the regular maintenance of tank irrigation in south India was social hierarchy. The local elites used to contribute the capital (for position) and the peasants had to contribute labour for the maintenance of tank irrigation system. British authorities used to collect taxes from the local elites and they (local elites) used to manage the irrigation systems and collect levies from peasants. The irrigation system started degenerating when British colonial government started to collect tax directly from the farmers ignoring the local power situation. The social capital in the form of the ruling-working class relationship and informal rules was lost. Finally, the tank irrigation system was collapsed. Similarly the social hierarchy and informal rules in the THR of Nepal assign distinct tasks for ruling and working class for the irrigation system. Ruling class, the manager, provides capital and working class contributes labour for irrigation system. Both parties trust each other, therefore, the irrigation system is still sustaining from centuries. The impact of climate change in the Himalayan ecosystem reduced the volume of glacier and has compelled the society to invest more on irrigation. Therefore, they require more cohesiveness and trust than the previous. The present political changes in Nepal have influenced the power relations and undermined the capital investment and labour commanding ability of the ruling class. We analyse at the historical similarity of the degeneration pathway of social capital in both irrigation systems and reveal possible measures.

Keywords: Climate change, political power, social capital, social hierarchies