

Institutional Adaptation and Indigenous Governance: *Sociological Perspectives on Community Conservation in the Garo Hills, Northeast India*

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Abstract: *Indigenous communities worldwide are increasingly recognised as key players in environmental governance. However, research has often prioritised indigenous ecological knowledge over the institutions that coordinate collective efforts and uphold community stewardship. This article focuses on the Community Conserved Area (CCA) at Damaldipo in Meghalaya's West Garo Hills district. It investigates how indigenous governance evolves with social change while preserving environmental responsibilities. Employing a qualitative case study, the research includes field visits, semi-structured interviews with the village elders, members of the Community Conserved Area Committee, former senior officials and staff from the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCRMP) and West Garo Hills Community Resources Management Society (WGHCRMS). These insights were supplemented with analysis of village records, project documentation, and policy reports. Results indicate that the longevity of community conservation depends less on maintaining traditional practices and more on the adaptive capacity of indigenous institutions. Damaldipo exemplifies how customary authority, collective responsibility, and local legitimacy are reinterpreted within shifting religious, political, and economic contexts, without losing their governance functions. The study suggests that institutional adaptation offers a valuable sociological perspective for understanding indigenous governance and enhances broader discussions on commons management, environmental sociology, and sustainable development.*

Keywords: Indigenous governance; institutional adaptation; community conservation; commons governance; Garo Hills

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change have renewed global interest in indigenous approaches to governing natural resources (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2021; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2019). International frameworks increasingly acknowledge that indigenous communities contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation and climate resilience (IPBES, 2019; UNESCO, 2017). Although this progress has led to increased research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, much of the existing literature still focuses primarily on ecological knowledge, rather than the institutions that organise and apply this knowledge to collective efforts (Agrawal, 1995; Berkes, 2018).

This article adopts a sociological approach to the subject. It contends that indigenous governance offers a more comprehensive analytical framework because it directs attention to institutions, legitimacy, and collective responsibility rather than knowledge alone (Scott, 2014; Ostrom, 1990). While knowledge remains significant, its efficacy is contingent upon the social structures that govern resource access, conflict resolution, and the maintenance of cooperation.

This study focuses on the Community Conserved Area (CCA) at Damaldipo, a village located in the Dadenggre Civil Sub-Division, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya. Historically, the village safeguarded a *Kosi*, a culturally protected forest managed under the *A-king* system of Garo customary land tenure (Malhotra et al., 2001; Roy Burman, 2002). The

Nokma, the traditional custodian, oversees the stewardship of the *A-king* and is responsible for governing community land and resources. Like many indigenous communities in Northeast India, Damaldipo has undergone significant social changes driven by religious shifts, expanded education, democratic decentralisation, better connectivity, and evolving livelihoods (Fernandes, 2008; Nongbri, 2003). Despite these transformations, community conservation remains a central aspect of village life. The central question guiding this study is straightforward. How do indigenous governance institutions adapt to social change while consistently maintaining collective stewardship of shared resources? The article contends that Damaldipo exemplifies institutional adaptation rather than institutional persistence. Community conservation remains effective because customary institutions have reinterpreted inherited norms within contemporary environmental governance whilst maintaining local legitimacy (Scott, 2014; Ostrom, 1990).

Beyond the Damaldipo case, the article contributes to environmental sociology by emphasising the relationship between institutional adaptation and ecological stewardship. It also broadens the conversation on commons governance, showing that successful community conservation relies not just on rules but also on socially recognised institutions that foster trust, participation, and shared responsibility (Redclift, 2005).

2. Indigenous Governance, Institutions, and Community Stewardship

Research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems shows that indigenous communities have intricate ecological knowledge

gained from prolonged engagement with their environments (Agrawal, 1995; Berkes, 2018; Gadgil et al., 1993). These findings challenge the prior belief that only modern scientific knowledge underpins sustainable environmental management. However, many studies have viewed knowledge as a standalone resource, rather than exploring the institutions that sustain it.

Institutional sociology provides a wider view (Scott, 2014). Institutions are made up of socially accepted norms, values, and practices that structure group behaviour and confer legitimacy (Scott, 2014). Their authority comes not just from formal regulations but from ongoing community acceptance. Indigenous governance extends beyond traditional leadership to include the institutional connections that allow communities to manage shared resources, negotiate duties, and uphold common values.

This view aligns with Ostrom's (1990) theory of commons governance, showing that communities can effectively manage shared resources when governance structures are locally created, widely accepted, and properly overseen. Environmental sociology also highlights that ecological sustainability relies on social institutions that foster cooperation, trust, and collective effort (Redclift, 2005; Turner, 2005).

In the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, these traditional institutions have long been part of customary governance. The *Nokma*, village structures, and the collective norms linked to the *A-king* have overseen land, forests, and water resources for generations (Fernandes, 2008; Roy Burman, 2002). While these institutions have evolved due to political, religious, and economic shifts, they still influence community life. Damaldipo provides an opportunity to examine how such institutions adapt while maintaining their legitimacy.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. Damaldipo was chosen because it is one of the initial Community Conserved Areas created under the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCRMP) by the West Garo Hills Community Resources Management Society (WGHRMS), a joint project of the Government of India and the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD], 2008). It illustrates the relationship between traditional governance and modern community conservation.

The research used methodological triangulation. Primary data were gathered through field visits in early 2026 and semi-structured interviews with the *Nokma*, village elders, Community Conserved Area Committee members, women engaged in community activities, former senior NERCORMP and WGHRMS officials, staff, and other knowledgeable residents, who played a key role in implementing community resource management initiatives in the district.

These interviews were supplemented with a review of Community Resource Management Plans, village resolutions, project reports, IFAD publications, government documents, and relevant academic literature. The data underwent

thematic analysis to explore themes such as institutional legitimacy, collective stewardship, community participation, and institutional adaptation.

Damaldipo: Institutional adaptation in practice

Damaldipo lies in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya in India, an area where forests continue to shape both livelihoods and community identity. Before formal conservation initiatives emerged, the village maintained a *Kosi*, a customary sacred forest protected by social norms rather than statutory regulation (Malhotra et al., 2001). Access to the forest was governed by the authority of the *Nokma* and reinforced by collective expectations about appropriate resource use.

Interaction with village elders showed that the cultural significance of the *Kosi* has evolved. As Christianity became more widespread, traditional rituals gradually faded away. However, the core idea of conserving the forest persisted. Today, community members link conservation more to water security, environmental well-being, and the needs of future generations than to religious practices. This change demonstrates how institutions adapt over time, rather than decline (Scott, 2014).

Rising concerns about forest degradation and shrinking water sources led the village to enhance its conservation initiatives. Field discussions indicated that forest conservation is closely associated with the preservation of rivers and streams. Community members recognise that maintaining tree cover helps keep the surrounding environment cooler and contributes to the continued flow and health of water sources. Thus, the forest is understood not merely as a habitat for plants and wildlife, but as an important ecological system that sustains water, human well-being, and other forms of life.

Supported by NERCRMP-WGHRMS facilitation, community discussions culminated in the official creation of a Community Conserved Area spanning about thirty hectares. This initiative complemented, rather than replaced, existing governance structures. The *Nokma*, village leaders, and the Community Conserved Area Committee collaboratively established rules governing the harvesting of timber, fuelwood, bamboo shoots, and other forest resources. Adherence mainly relied on community consensus and social accountability (Kothari, 2008).

Field interviews revealed that local participation was key to the initiative. Community members helped monitor the protected area, participated in meetings, and accepted resource-use restrictions because they saw these as collectively negotiated duties rather than external rules. Former project staff also highlighted that the initiative's success relied more on community ownership than on financial aid (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013).

The perceived benefits of conservation were also described in practical and intergenerational terms. Community members associated the protected forest with a cooler local environment, healthier rivers and streams, and the availability of water for human consumption. The presence of trees was understood to help maintain the surrounding ecological conditions, while healthy streams were seen as supporting both human and non-human life. Conservation was therefore

viewed not simply as restricting resource use, but as an investment in the ecological security of the community and in the well-being of future generations.

Ecological changes were also apparent, with respondents regularly noting better forest cover, more wildlife sightings, and springs that became more reliable for the village. The continued presence of flowing streams and other water sources was particularly significant because water was understood as one of the direct benefits of maintaining forest cover. While the study does not aim to quantify ecological results, these reports suggest that institutional adaptation was linked to perceived environmental recovery.

Most importantly, Damaldipo shows that indigenous governance stays socially relevant because it evolves. The village did not keep traditional institutions exactly the same. Instead, it reinterpreted its inherited principles of collective stewardship to fit new social, religious, and administrative settings. The meaning of conservation has consequently expanded from the protection of a culturally significant forest to include the protection of water sources, biodiversity, a cooler and healthier local environment, and resources for future generations. Conservation became a way to maintain institutional continuity by adapting rather than resisting change.

4. Discussion

The Damaldipo case demonstrates that indigenous governance functions more as a process of institutional adaptation than mere tradition. The ongoing relevance of customary institutions does not arise from preserving historical practices unchanged. Instead, it reflects their ability to reinterpret shared norms and responsibilities in response to evolving social, religious, and political environments. Thus, community conservation exemplifies an adaptable form of governance rather than a static tradition.

This finding contributes to institutional sociology by demonstrating that institutional legitimacy is maintained through adaptation. In Damaldipo, the *Nokma*'s authority and village institutions continue to shape environmental decisions because they are still socially recognised and responsive to current community needs. Their legitimacy is based on collective acceptance rather than formal legal power (Scott, 2014; Ostrom, 1990).

This study further contributes to understanding commons governance. In line with Ostrom (1990), the Community Conserved Area is defined by locally developed rules, collective monitoring, and shared responsibility. However, the findings suggest that governance persists not only through institutional structure but also through cultural legitimacy. The rules stay effective because they are rooted in relationships of trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility that have developed over generations (Turner, 2005).

From an environmental sociology standpoint, the research emphasises the strong link between ecological stewardship and social organisation. In Damaldipo, forest conservation is not just driven by ecological awareness or external project backing. Instead, it results from institutions that promote

participation, ensure accountability, and link environmental care with community well-being. Importantly, the field findings show that this relationship is understood in very tangible ways. Trees are valued for helping maintain a cooler environment, while forest protection is associated with the continued availability of rivers and streams that support both human consumption and other forms of life. Conservation therefore connects ecological processes with everyday community needs. Consequently, ecological resilience is closely linked to institutional resilience (Scott, 2014; Berkes, 2018).

The intergenerational dimension of conservation is also significant. Community members understand the protection of forests and water sources as a responsibility extending beyond the present generation. Conservation is therefore not only about responding to current environmental needs but also about ensuring that future generations inherit functioning forests, flowing water sources, and a healthy environment. This perspective adds an important temporal dimension to indigenous environmental governance, in which collective responsibility extends across generations.

The study emphasizes the significance of institutional complementarity, demonstrating that NERCORMP-WGHCRMS did not supersede traditional governance. Rather, it offered indigenous institutions opportunities to bolster their conservation initiatives through technical assistance and community planning. This instance exemplifies how robust environmental governance can be achieved through collaborations between local institutions and development programs, while maintaining community ownership (IFAD, 2008).

Although this article centres on a single case, its insights have broader implications. Numerous indigenous societies are navigating comparable transitions shaped by religious shifts, market forces, expanding state institutions, and environmental challenges. The Damaldipo experience indicates that the future of Indigenous governance hinges on adapting to these changes while preserving locally accepted systems of collective stewardship, rather than resisting them (Berkes, 2018; Turner, 2005).

5. Conclusion

This article explored community conservation in Damaldipo, focusing on how institutions adapt and on indigenous governance. It suggests that the sustainability of community conservation depends more on indigenous institutions' ability to adapt than on the persistence of traditional practices. The case shows that community stewardship remains successful because inherited norms of collective responsibility are continually reinterpreted within evolving social and environmental settings (Scott, 2014).

The field findings further demonstrate that the contemporary meaning of conservation is closely connected to everyday ecological and social needs. Forest protection is perceived as contributing to a cooler local environment, sustaining rivers and streams, supporting biodiversity and other forms of life, and maintaining sources of drinking water. Conservation is therefore understood not simply as the protection of trees or

forest land, but as the protection of interconnected ecological systems on which community well-being depends.

This study contributes to environmental sociology by shifting the focus from indigenous ecological knowledge alone to the institutions that facilitate collective action and support environmental stewardship. It also adds to discussions on commons governance by emphasizing the crucial roles of legitimacy, trust, and community involvement in sustaining locally managed conservation efforts.

The emphasis placed by community members on conserving resources for future generations also demonstrates that environmental stewardship is understood as an intergenerational responsibility. The forest and its water sources are valued not only for their present benefits but also for their importance to those who will inhabit the community in the future.

For public policy, the findings indicate that community conservation remains most sustainable when development initiatives support rather than replace indigenous institutions (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013). Policies that acknowledge customary governance as a valuable institutional resource tend to foster lasting community ownership and ecological responsibility (Ostrom, 1990).

Future research should undertake comparative studies across indigenous communities in Northeast India to explore how various institutional contexts influence environmental governance amid evolving social conditions. This would enhance sociological insights into institutional adaptation and add to wider conversations on sustainability, climate resilience, and community-driven conservation (Fernandes, 2008; Nongbri, 2003).

Damaladipo's experience shows that indigenous governance is neither fixed nor outdated. It continues as a living institutional process allowing communities to balance continuity and change while maintaining their connection to shared landscapes (Berkes, 2018). In this process, conservation is increasingly understood through the practical relationships between forests, water, climate, biodiversity, community well-being, and the needs of future generations.

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