

OBITUARY



Narpat Singh Jodha (1937–2020)

J. Gabriel Campbell
Jeffrey Y. Campbell
Prakriti Gurung

In his book of collected essays, *Life on the Edge: Sustaining Agriculture and Community Resources in Fragile Environments* (2001), Narpat Singh Jodha dedicated his book:

“To the people and communities of dry tropical areas and mountains whose wisdom and ways in adapting to fragile environments induced and enhanced my involvement in promoting the issues and messages communicated through this volume.”

Dr. Narpat Singh Jodha was a multi-dimensional mountain of a man devoted to understanding and supporting the rural poor. A tall Rajasthani economist, with all the pride that entails, he had a soft spoken and humble presence that belied his brilliance, and a warm heart that embraced so many of us into lifelong friendship. Jodha’s scholarly work spanned the commons of the poor from the arid deserts to the high mountains. His influence has traversed the globe. Jodha’s work has provided new frameworks, empirical data, and analytic tools for scholars, policy

makers, and development workers to discern how seemingly unregulated natural resource landscapes provide the basis of subsistence and ecological survival through the dynamic interactions of local communities with their natural resource environments.

As a towering pioneer in the emerging field of the intersections of common property resources, social institutions, and economic conditions, Jodha changed the way we think – and sometimes the way we act. The “we” here is highly inclusive and instrumental: government agencies; international donors; academics and researchers; policy makers; NGO workers; and investment entities.

Career

Narpat Singh Jodha attended the University of Rajasthan for his Bachelor’s, received his Master’s degree in Economics from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi and his PhD in Economics from University of Jodhpur. He conducted his doctoral research on farming systems and research management in arid regions (Jodha 2006).

Jodha’s distinguished professional career with government, national, and international organizations encompassed working in over twenty countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas (Jodha, 2009). He started his career working in the Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI) Jodhpur in 1963. He then joined the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in New Delhi and various organizations under the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), most notably the International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Hyderabad for five years. ICRISAT proved to be fertile soil for Jodha to start generating his landmark empirical studies on the role of the commons in sustaining the poor.

Jodha then went on to extend his work to various arid and semi-arid parts of Africa. These included the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Nigeria, and

more briefly, the International Livestock Center for Africa in Ethiopia, and the United Nations Environmental Programme in Kenya. He also periodically worked in West Africa in countries such as Mali and Niger.

In 1986 Jodha, joined the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu, Nepal as head of the Mountain Farming Systems. ICIMOD and Kathmandu, Nepal was to become his primary professional and personal home for eighteen of the following twenty-one years (1986–1993, and 1997–2017). This geographic change marked a shift in his focus from the study of dry arid regions in the plains to both arid and temperate mountain regions. During his tenure with ICIMOD, Jodha was instrumental in developing the ‘Mountain Perspective Framework’ based on his identification of “mountain specificities,” which we will examine in more depth later. This work shaped ICIMOD’s programmes and was utilized to establish and implement interventions to develop mountain regions throughout the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region (Jodha 2009).

In between his ICIMOD assignments, Jodha joined the World Bank in the Social Policy and Resettlement Division under the Environmental Department in Washington D.C. Realizing in his own words that he was a “misfit” in this position, he returned to his focus on ‘micro-level ground realities’ and ‘conceptual economics’ at the intersection of poverty and natural resources studies, and after three years, re-joined ICIMOD as a Senior Policy Analyst in 1997.

Publications and Awards

Jodha’s prolific work on rural poverty, agriculture, and livelihoods resulted in hundreds of authored and reviewed articles and over ten books. His vast contributions in these fields can be projected through a Google Scholar search which results in over 6,800 hits. However, the lack of consistency in his name attribution makes bibliographic and citation research problematic (i.e. N.S. Jodha, Narpat Jodha, Narpat Singh Jodha, and Narpat S. Jodha were all used at various times – while our personal preference is Jodhaji).

In 1966, Jodha’s first most widely read article “A Semi-Nomadic Farm Family from the Arid Zone of Rajasthan” was published by *The Agricultural Development Council* (now the Winrock International) where he centered his study on arid agriculture through the perspective of a “farm family.” In the same year, he was recognized as a major dryland economist after publishing his paper “Scarcity oriented growth pattern of arid agriculture” in 1966 in *The Indian Journal of Agriculture Economics* (Jodha 2009).

Although his most cited article, with 3,655 citations listed in Google Scholar, is “Sustainable Science,” co-authored with Kates et al. (2001) and published in *Science* (Nagendra, Mukhopadhyay and Ghate 2021), his seminal and most quoted study is considered by us and others to be the “Common Property Resources and rural poor in dry regions of India” published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1986 (Jodha 2006).

In this paper, Jodha quantified how common property resources (CPRs) sustained the livelihoods of the rural poor by contributing between 9–26% of their total household income. Through this ground-breaking work, Jodha paved an ingenious way for theorizing and studying rural poverty for decades to follow. This paper further induced agencies such as ICIMOD and the World Bank, that didn’t primarily work on drylands, to utilize his expertise (Jodha 2006). Some of his popular papers were re-published in his book *Life on the Edge: Sustaining Agriculture and Community Resources in Fragile Environments* in 2001, published by the *Oxford University Press*, cited at the beginning of this tribute.

N. S. Jodha’s lifelong work on the intersection of the dynamics of natural resource use in interaction with communities and the changing economic circumstances of marginalized peoples has been recognized by a number of prestigious awards and positions. He was awarded the *Fellow of World Academy for Art and Science* (Los Angeles) in 2001, and most influentially, served as the *President of the International Society for the Study of the Commons* (IASC) from 2004–2006 and as the *President of Indian Society of Ecological Economics* (INSEE) from 2004 to 2006. He also served as the *Conference President of the Indian Society for Agricultural Economics* in 2008 and continued to be active as a prominent member of INSEE and SANDEE (South Asian Network for Development and Environment Economics) until his death in February 2020 at the age of 83.

Mountain Specificities and Legacy

Jodha elaborated mountain specificities in his typical matrix-styled thinking as: limited accessibility, marginality, diversity, and nature endowed niche resources. (1990, 1997, 2001). Jodha conceived of these specificities as bio-physical and socio-economic characteristics with “inter-linkages [that] do vary within and between different mountain areas, and ... are not static but do change depending on the functioning of nature – society interaction patterns and their positive or negative consequences” (Jodha 2012: 1).

In this article revisiting the mountain perspective, Jodha explored the dynamic nature of this framework for

understanding mountain processes by identifying recent changes in many mountain regions e.g. improved infrastructure and communications; new opportunities for marginal, sloping land; community forest and irrigation management; educational opportunities and changing aspirations; as well as the damaging impacts of poorly conceived policies, investments, and inappropriate technologies. The interplay of these myriad forces with what he called the “imperatives” or “driving forces” of the physical and social characteristics provide a compelling framework for analysis and deeper understanding of specific ecological and social systems.

While Jodha was a strong advocate for community-based institutions for resource management, he recognized the need for supportive services, investment, and regulatory assistance from outside agencies. He was, however, wary of the consequences of government over-reach through misplaced subsidies, populist land distribution policies, and bureaucratic institutions. He was equally critical of corporate greed and often discussed how vulnerable the commons of the poor were to changes in technology and markets as well as local preferences by new generations.

From the scholarly perspective, Jodha’s work was a major foundation stone for productive research and analysis. The growth in multi-disciplinary common property studies has mushroomed in the last decades from an average of fifty papers a year published in 2002 to over 300 per year in 2020 (van Laerhoven et al. 2020). New concepts and theories have been developed for the study of social-ecological systems, especially through the work of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom and many others (ibid 2020). The scope of CPR has been expanded beyond traditional natural resources such as land, forest, biodiversity, water, and fisheries to cyberspace, big data, urban commons, climate and air, gender, outer space, and knowledge systems – and to tools such as polycentric analysis. ‘Commoning’ is now an accepted verb. As exciting as these new developments and frontiers are, however, we need to acknowledge how they built on the early work of pioneers such as Narpat Singh Jodha.

As a specific example, the monumental *Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment – Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability, and People* published in 2019 indirectly relied on Jodha’s early insights and analysis to provide an extraordinarily comprehensive assessment of the state of current knowledge, the drivers of change and their impacts, and the development of evidence-based policy solutions and recommendations through the collaboration of literally hundreds of scholars and experts. This

magnificent achievement coordinated by ICIMOD serves as indirect tribute to Jodha’s enduring legacy.

But, most importantly, we believe Jodha would have wanted his legacy to be found among the communities of natural resource users that are struggling to navigate the transition from traditional livelihoods to those in our modern era. The threats to the commons have never been greater. Fortunately, Jodha’s commitments are alive today among grassroots organizations advocating for the resource rights of local and indigenous peoples; in federations of forest users sustainably managing their local ecologies; in environmental economics societies; enlightened policy makers; and in the halls of higher education.

Personal Tributes

Eklabya Sharma PhD, Vice-Chancellor, TERI School of Advanced Studies and former Deputy Director General, ICIMOD:

Dr. NS Jodha was always ahead of time in his scholarly contribution. He came from the plains of Rajasthan, India, however he spent his entire professional life with great passion for mountains and people. The ‘Mountain Specificity’ concept and approach Dr. Jodha developed in the 1990s has become even more relevant now. During the over two decades of my association with him we pursued mountain specificity both at strategic and policy levels in the Indian Himalaya, the eight countries of the Hindu Kush Himalaya, and in the global mountain agenda. His astounding contributions will always be of great value for researchers, academicians, policy makers, practitioners, and the mountain development fraternity for many years to come. His demise has created a great void among mountain scholars and thinkers.

Jianchu Xu PhD, Principal scientist, World Agroforestry Centre and Professor, Kunming Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences:

N.S. Jodha pioneered the development of the social analytical framework for property and poverty in the Himalayan region that has been instrumental in helping reduce poverty in ICIMOD’s regional member countries stretching from China to Afghanistan.

Jeffrey Y. Campbell MSc, former Manager, Farm and Forestry Facility, FAO:

I got to know Jodhaji when I was working at the Ford Foundation in New Delhi in the early 1990s, supporting social and community forestry in India and Nepal. Jodhaji made a strong impression on me with his soft-spoken personality and the breadth of his thinking. He was somehow humble and confident at the same time with a twinkle in his eye, an ironic smile, and an ability to

listen as well as talk. Well known for his work on the vital importance of common property resources in the drylands of his native Rajasthan, he was turning his focus to the social and ecological context of the Himalayas and he had come to explore funding from the Ford Foundation for his work at ICIMOD.

It was clear to me that his thinking which ultimately led to his work on mountain specificities (1990, 1997) was valuable and that some people needed to be supported as thought leaders to inspire and engage. I decided Jodhaji deserved to be funded primarily to be able to continue to be himself, to think creatively about what makes the lives of natural resource dependent people and communities unique, and to remind all of us the special challenges people living in fragile ecosystems like drylands or mountains must face.

His work on the Commons remains ever more important today in the face of a future in which the pace of social, ecological, climate and economic changes keeps shifting into higher and higher gear. Jodhaji was ahead of the curve in understanding the complex interdependence of private, public, and common property and the relationship between communities and places which is currently being given attention within the narratives around landscapes and better understandings of climate change and the systemic exclusion of natural resource dependent women, men and communities (2001).

His own personal mien and style brought out the importance of combining both the local and deeply rooted knowledge, seemingly humble and quiet, of rural family members with the shared commons of scientific and academic study set amidst the larger political world of power and its arrogant appropriation of land, forests, resources, and opportunity for so many. He inspired me by being able to speak quietly yet forcefully about these vitally important issues maintaining all the while a Rajasthani smile of pride.

J. Gabriel Campbell PhD, Senior Fellow, Instituto de Montaña and former Director General, ICIMOD:

Having been deeply influenced by his seminal article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* on the economic contribution of the commons to the livelihood of the poor in dryland India (1968), it was a momentous pleasure to first meet Dr. Narpat Singh Jodha at a conference on common property resources held in Jaipur in the late 1980s. His talk deeply inspired us as researchers and development practitioners. I vividly remember driving back while conducting an informal survey on the collection of roadside fuelwood, grass, and leaves by gender and age group with Sunita Narain (now Director General of the Centre for Science and Environment) and continuing to debate insights arising from Jodhaji's pathbreaking empirical work – although we did wish that his gender analysis could have been stronger (INSEE 2021).

Prakriti Gurung is an aspiring sociologist working as a Socio-Economic Research Associate in the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) based in Nepal. She has a Master's degree in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Prakriti's professional interest lies in the fields of poverty and indigenous right based approach to development.

Jeffrey Y. Campbell currently composes music and poetry under the *nom de plume* *Jhaffur Khan Azad Darakth*. He worked on community forestry and rural development at the Forest and Farm Facility of the FAO, Director of Grantmaking at The Christensen Fund, and Program Officer and Deputy Director Community Resource Development, in the New Delhi, Jakarta and New York offices of The Ford Foundation. Jeff has also worked as an Extension Forester, an AAAS Fellow, a naturalist, photo-journalist, teacher, ecotourism manager and father. Born and raised in the Himalayas, he has a Master's in Forestry ('86) from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

J. Gabriel Campbell is an applied development anthropologist who received his Masters from Wesleyan University and PhD from Columbia University. Gabriel has been intimately connected with the Himalaya from his birth in India until after his retirement in Nepal from ICIMOD where he served as Director General from 2000 to 2007. His work has focused on natural resource management as a social science researcher, development practitioner, interdisciplinary knowledge broker, and institutional manager. Gabriel has worked with Governments of the Hindu-Kush Himalayas, local communities and regional and international Universities and NGOs under the auspices of the World Bank, United Nations agencies, bilateral aid agencies of USA, U.K., and Switzerland as well as The Mountain Institute and other NGOs. He has been closely associated with community forestry in Nepal since 1978 and social forestry in India and helped the Governments of Nepal and Tibet Autonomous Region of China to establish new national parks. Gabriel now lives in Santa Rosa, California and the U.P. of Michigan.

was fortunate to maintain close contact with Narpat Jodha in the subsequent decades, and truly privileged to have him as a senior colleague and guru at ICIMOD. When I joined as Director General in 2000, the strategy and work program of this independent inter-governmental institution serving the eight member countries of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan) was already shaped by his pioneering

work on 'mountain specificities.' Jodha's subsequent research continued to broaden and deepen his insights while bringing in new understandings of changing dynamics. The opportunity to debate and discuss issues and policies with Jodhaji throughout my seven years with ICIMOD and afterwards was an extraordinary privilege and pleasure.

References

Jodha, N. S. 1966a. A Semi-nomadic Farm Family. From the Arid Zone of Rajasthan. *The Agriculture Development Council Inc.*

———. 1966b. The Scarcity-Oriented Growth Pattern of Arid Agriculture. *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 21(4): 238–246.

———. 1986. Common Property Resources and Rural Poor in Dry Regions of India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 1169–1181.

———. 1990. *A Framework for Integrated Mountain Development*, Mountain Farming Systems Discussion Paper, MFS Series No. 1. Kathmandu: ICIMOD

———. 1997. "Mountain Agriculture" In *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority* edited by B. Messerli & J.D. Ives. New York: The Parthenon Publishing Group.

———. 2001. *Life on the Edge: Sustaining Agriculture and Community Resources in Fragile Environments*. Oxford University Press.

———. 2009. CAZRI: How it Shaped my Professional Growth. In "Nostalgia: A collection of narratives on CAZRI and its people by the CAZRIANS." *Central Arid Zone Research Institute*. Retrieved from: <https://lib.icimod.org/record/16880>

———. 2012. Revisiting Mountain Perspectives: Reasons and Challenges (?). Unpublished manuscript, *HimalDoc*. Retrieved from: <https://lib.icimod.org/record/20534>

Kates, R. W., Clark, W. C., Corell, R., Hall, J. M., Jaeger, C. C., Lowe, I., McCarthy, J., Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, H.J., Bolin, B., Dickson, N.M., Faucheux, S., Gallopin, G.C., Grubler, A., Huntley, B., Jäger, J., Jodha, N. S., Kasperson, R.E., Mabogunje, A., Matson, P., Mooney, H., Moore III, B., O'Riordan, T. & Svedin, U. 2001. Sustainability science. *Science* 292(5517): 641–642.

Nagendra, H., Mukhopadhyay, P., Ghate, R. 2021. Celebrating Jodha: And Revisiting the Commons. *Ecology, Economy and Society- the INSEE Journal*, 4(1): page numbers?

van Laerhoven, F., Schoon, M., & Villamayor-Tomas, S. 2020. Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Ostrom's *Governing the Commons: Traditions and Trends in the Study of the Commons*, Revisited. *International Journal of the Commons* 14(1): 208–224.

Wester P., Mishra A., Mukherji, A., Shrestha A.B., eds. 2019. *The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment – Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability and People*. Springer Nature Switzerland AG, Cham