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Taboos: Traditional beliefs and customs for resource management in the western Himalaya

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People residing in interior areas of the Himalaya are highly dependent on natural resources and thus have evolved their own beliefs and customs, the taboos, for conserving resources. Taboos form an important component of tribal lifestyle and guide sustainable utilization and management of natural resources. The present study was carried out in the higher reaches of Himachal Pradesh that are known for their rich bio-cultural diversity. The study aimed at documenting and classifying taboos prevalent in the area. For this, field surveys were carried out and interactions were held with the local people (n=210) using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The results revealed a prevalence of 22 taboos that were mainly related to forest, water, farmland, and food resources. Of the total taboos, the maximum belonged to the segment and method category taboos (32% each) while the minimum (5%) were species-specific taboos. Adherence to taboos is high and breaking them is believed to bring the wrath of God. They, thus, are important for resource management. Studies targeting the history of taboos and their policy implications are much desired.

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Taboos represent informal local institutions that guide human use of resources¹. As opposed to state natural resource management, they are voluntary and often based on myths and beliefs². Derived from the Polynesian word 'tapu' which means a ban on the use of certain resources¹, taboos are generally related to place, person, belief, or tradition^{1,3,4}. Thus, taboos symbolize key cultural values with a high level of adherence that have deep rooted social ethics⁵. Generally, taboos have a story associated with them⁶. They exist in all traditional cultures and have global prevalence¹.

It has been argued that the dependence of traditional people on natural resources is very high and thus they make rules in form of taboos for their sustainable utilization^{7,8}. Historically, taboos have been used to impose restrictions for social wellbeing and their legacy is passed on from one generation to another⁹⁻¹⁵. Recognizing that most of the biodiversity exists outside the protected areas, taboos play a pivotal role in the conservation and management of bio-resources²⁻³. With declining biodiversity and diminishing ecosystem services, the interest and work on taboos is resurging¹⁶. Consequently, studies in this

direction have seen a renewed interest. Many authors have documented and reported that ethnic communities have a close relationship with nature and despite modernization; taboos play an important role in protecting biodiversity¹⁷. Their role in personal wellbeing, nutrition and conservation has also been highlighted¹⁸⁻²⁰. In India also, studies have noted the prominent role played by taboos^{21,22}.

The high altitudes of the Himalaya are regarded as the abode of Gods²³. These are inhabited by 6% of the total Indian population, many of which represent tribal communities whose lifestyle is governed by traditional beliefs and customs²⁴. These tribal communities are highly dependent on bio-resources and have evolved strategies for their sustained use and management in the form of rituals, beliefs, and taboos. Recognizing that in many tribal areas weak enforcement of resource management laws is a major problem, traditional institutions that guide and manage natural resources are of high importance for resource management²⁵. It is with this background the present study was carried out in higher reaches of the Himalaya with the following two main objectives: i) to document different taboos existing in the study area and ii) to identify the role of taboos in the resource management.

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Methodology

Study area

The present study was carried out in the higher reaches of Kullu and Kangra valley of Himachal Pradesh that are known for their rich cultural diversity and holy places²⁶. Temperate broadleaved forests dominated by Oaks (*Quercus* spp.) and stands of *Cedrus*, *Pinus*, and *Picea* are common in the landscape. The alpine meadows comprise of herbaceous and graminoid lifeforms that are used by the local people as grazing grounds during the growing season of plants²⁷. Monsoon sets in mid-June and lasts till mid-September while December and January are the coldest months when the temperature is often sub-zero.

The resident population of the area is agro-pastoralist, God fearing and highly dependent on the resources offered by nature. Consequently, various traditional practices are maintained in the area such as the festival of Dussehra which has gained international repute²⁶. Further, the prevalence of taboos in the area makes it ideal for such studies.

Survey

A total of 44 villages were surveyed during 2016-2018 for recording the prevalence of taboos

(Fig. 1). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and personal observations²⁸. Preference was given to the eldest person in the family and their age, gender and occupation were noted. Informants were requested to list all the taboos existing in the area and the reasons behind these taboos. Besides, information was also recorded from local forest officers, priests, temple authorities, and local authorities²⁹. A total of 210 semi structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Later, the taboos were classified following Colding and Folke¹ (Table 1) and their role assessed in terms of resource management.

Results

The results reveal the prevalence of 22 taboos in the study area. Most of these taboos (n=6) pertain to the management of the forests and were mainly associated with sacred forests of deities (Fig. 2). A similar number of taboos (n= 6) were associated with water and were primarily related to sacred ponds (Fig. 2). These were followed by food (n=3) and farmland (n=1) taboos. Food taboos are related to the consumption of food while the farmland taboos related to tillage and other farmland activities. Six

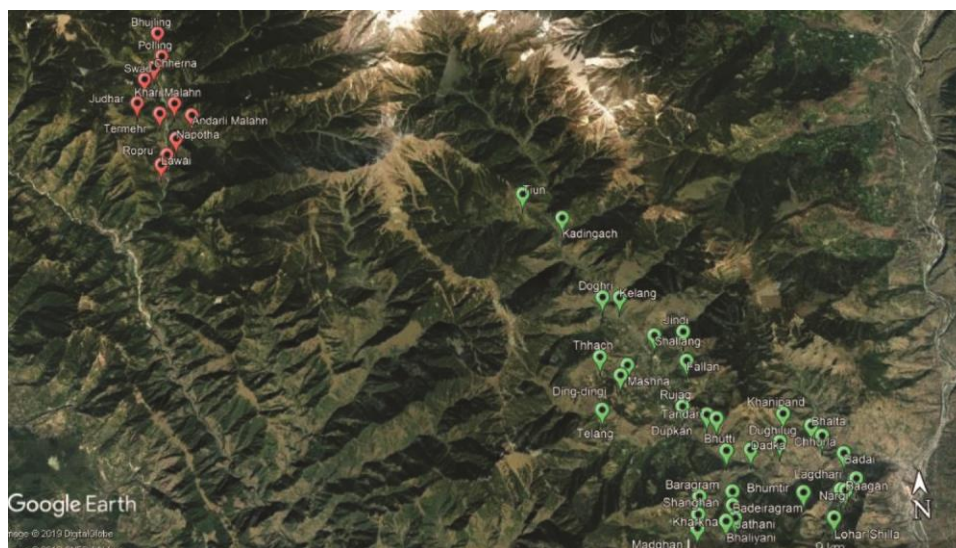


Fig. 1 — Geographical locations of the study area

Table 1 — Taboo categories and their functions

Category	Function
Segment taboos	Regulate resource withdrawal by certain segments of the society. It may be related to age, gender, or social status
Temporal taboos	Bans access to resources during certain time periods
Method taboos	Prescribes certain methods, to be followed/not to be followed, for resource withdrawal
Life history taboos	Regulate withdrawal of species during certain vulnerable life history stages
Species specific taboos	Ban on killing and use of specific species in time and space
Habitat taboos	Regulates access and use of resources from habitats in space and time



Fig. 2(a-d) — Various taboos existing in the area

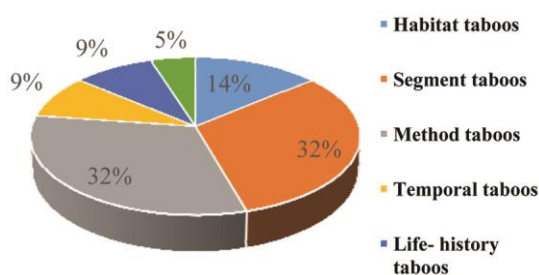


Fig. 3 — Relative percentage of different taboos

taboos that have been named “Other taboos” are related to the harvesting of plants and poaching of animals (Table 2).

Overall, based on categorization, the maximum number of taboos were segment and method (32% each) followed by habitat taboos (14%). Temporal and life history taboos accounted for 9% of the total taboos, each, while the minimum (5%) were species-specific taboos (Fig. 3).

Method taboos

We identified seven taboos falling under this category and these are related to the prohibition of tools, goods and mannerism (smoking) while performing certain activities.

Entering the sacred forests and ponds such as *Panchali Narayan*, *Falyani Narayan* at Lug Valley and *Devnala Ajaypal* at Chhota Bhangal with footwear is not permitted. So the method for approaching these sacred sites is barefoot. Similarly, for the collection of some of the medicinal plants, special techniques and methods are followed. For example, *Astragalus multiceps* is collected during dawn hours on Thursday mornings only. At the same time, no metal tools are used for the collection of *Staphylea emodi*. These method taboos help in the

sustainable utilization of plant resources and their use. These methods result in a minimum collection of plants and hence play a pivotal role in conservation.

Performing religious ceremonies for a plant at night such that it can be uprooted in the morning is noteworthy for *Barn (Polystichum suarrosom)* (Table 2). It is believed by the local people that if this ceremony is not performed (permission of uprooting not sought) then the patient will not get cured. These are the conservation practices for maintaining populations of species in the form of taboos (Table 2).

Segment taboos

A total of seven taboos fall under this category. Prohibition on lower caste people and menstruating women from entering sacred forests such as *Mata Dhara Pujani & Devta Devnala Ajaypal* and ponds such as *Mathasar & Dyansar* are examples of this. People belonging to *Luhaar* community (ironsmith) and women during periods are banned from entering the premises.

Another example of segment taboo includes prayers to be performed by members of only one clan/family such as during *Kahika* fair (Lug valley) and *Kaanabeerusaaja* festival (Chhota Bhangal). While people from far off villages come to witness these fairs and festivals, rituals are only performed by people of selected clans.

Pregnant women are not allowed to eat papaya as it is believed to lead to abortion/miscarriage. One of the segment taboos related to *Vaids* (traditional healers). They are not supposed to disclose the remedies as it is argued to lead to loss of healing powers (Table 2).

Habitat taboos

Three habitat taboos were documented and these ban the utilization of specific resources from certain habitats. It is believed that these habitats are residing places of deities and are considered very sacred. Extraction of any kind of resources including fuel and fodder are not allowed from sacred forests such as *Falyani Narayan*, *Panchali Naryan*, *Bhalathi Narayan* at Lug Valley, and *Devnala Ajaypal* in Chhota Bhangal. Also, from the sacred ponds (*Mathasar* and *Badasar*) at lug valley and *Dyansar* (Chhota Bhangal), no resource extraction is permitted. According to the taboo, the lake is home to the Goddess Parvati who visits the lake during Bhadrapada (August or September) of the Hindu calendar. Similarly, fishing is prohibited from sacred water bodies for example *Machhyal* and trees around sacred ponds are also not allowed to be cut. People

Table 2 — Taboos and their classification

Taboo	Type	Explanation
Forest taboos		
Restriction on access of resources	Habitat	Extraction of resources is prohibited from sacred sites
Entry of women during menstruation is restricted	Segment	Menstruating women considered impure and prone to attacks by evil spirits
Entry of lower caste people is restricted	Segment	Entry inside the sacred site is prohibited as their work are not considered pious
Goods of leather and smoking materials are restricted	Method	Entry with these items is prohibited as leather is of animal origin and smoking pollutes the peaceful environment
Only male members can perform the prayers in the worship ceremony of deity	Segment	Only males identified as <i>Gur</i> (priest) are authorized to perform prayers
Iron tools are restricted in sacred site	Method	Restriction on using iron tools inside sacred site limits extraction
Water taboos		
Access to resources restricted	Habitat	Extraction of plant resources and fetching of water from sacred pond
Entry of women during menstruation is restricted	Segment	As in Forest Taboo
Entry of lower caste people is restricted	Segment	As in Forest Taboo
Goods of leather and smoking materials are restricted	Method	As in Forest Taboo
No entry with footwear	Method	To protect piousness and quality of water
Restriction on fishing	Habitat	Fishing from sacred pond is restricted as they are divine
Farmland taboos		
No work on fields on certain days	Temporal	Restriction on tillage and other farmland activities during Deity festivals and child birth so that the focus is not shifted
Food taboos		
Eating of meat, fish and poultry is restricted during certain days	Temporal	Eating of meat is prohibited during Navratri, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday
Pregnant lady is not allowed to eat some fruits	Segment	Restriction on eating papaya during pregnancy to protect fetus
Not allowed to eat flesh of some animals	Species specific	Prohibition on eating beef. Cow is highly revered
Other taboos		
Restriction on harvesting	Life history	Not allowed to harvest plant before seed set. To ensure population augmentation
Local <i>Vaids</i> are not allowed to disclose the identity of medicinal plants to local people	Segment	To ensure respect/prestige in the society and also plant protection
Specific method of extracting medicinal plants	Method	A ritual ceremony is performed before harvesting plant. Seeking permission from the God
Restriction on hunting and killing of animals	Life history	Hunting and killing of pregnant Doe is restricted to ensure progeny
Collection of <i>Astragalus multiceps</i>	Method	Harvesting only on Thursday morning before sunrise
Collection of <i>Staphylea emodi</i> without using metal tool	Method	Extracting plant without metal tools limits collection

can use water from these ponds only during deity festivals for a ritual bath. Locally, it is believed that if people do not comply with the prohibitions then God will punish them by bringing upon them bad luck and natural calamities. To avoid the punishments, the person must sacrifice a goat and perform rituals in front of the deity (Table 2).

Temporal taboos

This taboo limits access to resources during certain time periods. Two temporal taboos were identified in the study (Table 2). This includes suspension of farmland activities including tillage during festivals of

deity such as on Vishwakarma day which is a resting day for all farmers. At the same time, a family where a woman has recently delivered a baby refrains from agricultural activities. Disobeying these brings crop loss. Temporal taboos were also found to be related to the consumption of food resources. Eating of meat, fish, and poultry is restricted on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturday and during Navratri festivals (Table 2).

Life- history taboos

Harvesting of plant resources during certain stages and limiting the poaching of animals during pregnancy fall under this category of taboos (Table 2).

A total of two life-history taboos were identified. *Brahma-kamal* (*Saussurea obvallata*) is harvested only after seed set while the pregnant doe is never killed. Harvesting plants after the seed set does not affect future regeneration. If by mistake anyone kills a pregnant doe, the person should perform prayers for forgiveness.

Species-specific taboos

These taboos were found to be mostly related to food. Never ever did the people here think of having beef. Cows are worshipped across India; they are considered holy and a gift of God (Table 2).

Discussion

People in the area practice and follow taboos that are related to their cultural perceptions, customs, and beliefs. These prevalent taboos not only limit and help resource management but also regulate human behavior. Not only in the Himalaya, but taboos also exist in a number of traditional societies around the world and are related to age, sex and social status^{1,13,14,17}. Thus, taboos have a global presence and are enforced for several reasons including human well-being and conservation of natural resources³⁰. Revering nature through taboos plays a direct role in the protection of biodiversity and the management of local ecosystems¹.

Most of the taboos in the present study were related to forest, water and farmland. These are the prime resources and activities that the hill people of Himalaya are associated with. Their traditional management, therefore, becomes necessary³¹. It has been pointed out that the conservation of bioresources reflects our emotional attachment to it³². Hence most of the prevalent taboos press on harmony with nature that also involve restrictions especially on certain societies, pregnant and menstruating women probably due to health risks and also maintaining sanctity³³. The most common taboos occurring in the present area pertain to lower caste and menstruating women. Lower caste people are generally engaged in work that is locally believed to be disrespectful such as cobbler, blacksmith, etc. However, these communities are still God fearing and abide by taboos. Interestingly, in some places they have created their own sacred groves such *Ratashila* sacred grove in the district Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand³⁴.

With respect to women, the mensuration blood is considered to be a potent force that attracts evil spirits and thus many of the taboos govern women³⁵⁻³⁶. The

land of Himalaya is known as Dev-Bhumi and thus this taboo is expected to be the most prevalent here³⁴. Further, women are the most frequent users of natural resources and hence restricting their entry in form of taboos may provide them much-needed rest and also prevent the overexploitation of resources³⁵. Taboos that restrict the intake of certain foods especially during pregnancy are meant to help protect the fetus when the body is highly vulnerable to food poisoning³⁷. The meat tendering properties of papaya are well known³⁸. The consequences of eating the same during pregnancy would therefore be fatal. Alike in the present area, eating papaya is a taboo in many parts of the globe¹⁴. While we did not find any other specific taboo, in some areas eating the meat of certain animals is prohibited or the women are believed to deliver a baby that would be animal like³⁹. These types of taboos fall under the segment taboos and such practices are also reported from other areas^{17,33,40}.

Few taboos that fall under the method taboo category restrict entry inside sacred sites with goods of leather, footwear, smoking material, and metal. Entry into the sacred forest without footwear is less damaging than with the footwear³³. The prevalence of method taboo minimizes resource overexploitation and trampling. Digging plants without tools in the present area vouches for this. In addition, specific methods for collecting and extracting plant resources are reported in the study area. These also apply to the communities residing in other parts of the world. Use of fishing nets of mesh size less than 2.5 cm or the use of the poles, stick, draw nets is prohibited in Ghana. It is noted that it allows small fishes to escape and thus in the maintenance of the ecosystem⁴¹. Such method taboos have also been reported by Dhar *et al.*²⁴; Negi³³; Osei-Tutu⁴⁰; Brara⁴² from Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and Ghana.

Religious beliefs also play an important role in defining habitat taboos that limited access of local communities to the sacred ponds and forests. The exploitation of the resources from the sacred forests is completely prohibited except for cremation purposes. This allows the availability of resources in times of immense needs²¹. Sacred ponds protect the water that often are sources of drinking water for the downstream populations. Their pristine state allows them to be pollution free and sustained. The lake *Dyansar* located at 3700 m and *Thamri kund* located at altitudes around 4280 m are holy for the residents.

These certainly help in the flow of ecosystem services; maintenance of the biodiversity and regulation of the hydrological cycle as has been reported elsewhere^{14, 39-40, 43,44}.

Temporal taboos were found to be mostly imposed on food resources and farmland activities. In other Himalayan areas such as Uttarakhand people totally abstain from the consumption of meat, poultry and fish during Saravana month (August). In Madagascar, extraction of pandan species (*Pandanus* spp.) is prohibited prior to rice harvest while in Nigeria hunting is banned on certain days such as during MGBE day^{14,45}. During deity festivals, people in the present area refrain from farmland activities as has also been reported among the Ghanaian community⁴⁰. Amongst the Akan tribes, Thursday is considered to be sacred to mother Earth, and hence farming is avoided on this day⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸. These temporal taboos reduce the harvesting pressure on subsistence resources⁴¹.

Life history taboo regulates the withdrawal of species during vulnerable life stages. This includes collecting plants after seed set and ban on the killing of animals during certain developmental stages. Alike in the present area, hunting of deer calves and pregnant does is restricted in Maharashtra. This helps in maintaining the population of species⁷. Dhar *et al.*²⁴ and Negi³⁹ reported restrictions on the harvesting of plants before seed set. We have also reported the existence of the species-specific taboo on plant and animals. Such taboos also exist among other communities^{17,49-51}.

Conclusion

Taboos are an important part of tribal lifestyles that guide the sustainable utilization of natural resources. Being self-imposed, they are strictly adhered to. Different taboos cater to different themes that ultimately help manage resources. The evolution of taboos and their integration into policies is now much desired.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

AS carried out surveys for field recordings, digitized the data and drafted the manuscript. DT participated in field surveys and recordings. SKU planned and guided the work; and edited the manuscript.

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