



Photo: Aditi Veena



Adawal ki Devbani

An Oran sacred grove in Rajasthan, India

Author(s):¹ Aditi Veena, Aman Singh, Nitin Bathla

Orans are sacred forests situated in the arid and semi-arid regions across western India. Considered divine domains, Orans are places where land, water, and jungle peacefully cohabitate. They are community assets that lie at the centre of rural life, a land resource for all to share equally, and for all to protect under a communally enforced code.

Unlike other community conserved forests around the world that include a single large tract of forest, Orans are relatively small, with a range from 10 to 400 hectares. Their outstanding value, beyond serving individual communities, lies in their sheer number and the fact that they comprise a *network* of forests and semi-mobile agro-pastoral communities. It is estimated that there are over 25,000 Orans covering a total area of more than 600,000 hectares in Rajasthan (Singh, G. 2016). One of these is the Oran named *Adawal ki Devbani* in the Arawali hills, close to the town of Alwar.

Orans are ecological ecosystems that regulate the local climate. They are also home to endangered biodiversity and are critical water sources in the arid landscape of Rajasthan. Here, Orans protect springs and aquifers, and host centuries-old water storage facilities. Research into Oran water resources suggests that these potentially provide a permanent solution to water scarcity and degradation in the area (Krishna and Singh 2014). They ensure a continued supply of water after the monsoons have passed, and they greatly benefit local livelihoods through increased availability of water for livestock and crop irrigation. For example, Garuba ji Devbani and Adawal ki Devbani districts in Alwar irrigate about 200 hectares of land.

Many Orans today are overlapped by government-designated protected and reserve forests, including the Sariska Tiger Reserve, from which communities have been evicted, reinforcing a false nature-culture divide



50
hectares



Custodians:
Sirawas village,
population 1,000

(Singh and Jobanputra 2009; Singh 2011). Also, many are faced with multiple threats from urbanisation, population pressures and climate breakdown. Nevertheless, Orans continue to thrive to this day owing to the revered status accorded to them by communities.

¹ **Aditi Veena** is an ecologist, educator and artist whose work lies at the intersections of ecology, art and social empowerment. She is currently a visiting faculty at the **School of Planning and Architecture**, New Delhi. Aside from academic research, she is a musical artist who writes songs inspired by nature and works on community based and socially engaged art projects as *Ditty*.

Aman Singh is founder of Krishi Avam Parishitiki Vikas Sansthan (**KRAPAVIS**, ICCA Consortium Member), and **Chair of the Membership Committee in the Council of the ICCA Consortium**. He has overseen the regeneration of over 140 Orans (community conserved areas) in Rajasthan, India.

Nitin Bathla is an architect and researcher, currently pursuing Doctoral Studies at ETH Zurich. His work focuses on the intersections of urbanization and commodification of everyday life, especially through the questions of labour, ecology, and infrastructure. He is an Honorary member of the ICCA Consortium.

The case study is partially based on the forthcoming *Oran Atlas of Aravallis of Rajasthan*, edited by Aman Singh and Nitin Bathla, KRAPAVIS.

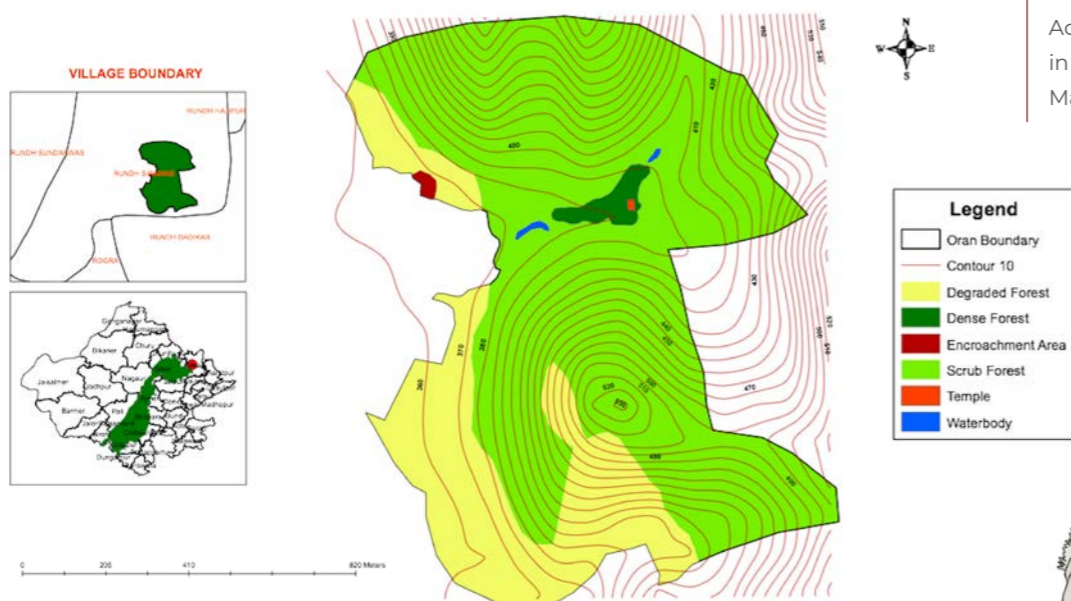
“The Adawal Oran is the driving force of our livelihoods. We are all aware that if we need anything, we take it from there. Our animals graze there. We understand that if we destroy the Oran, our lives will be compromised, and that is why

we organize through the Samiti [village organizing body]. We consider it our duty to protect and conserve the Oran.”

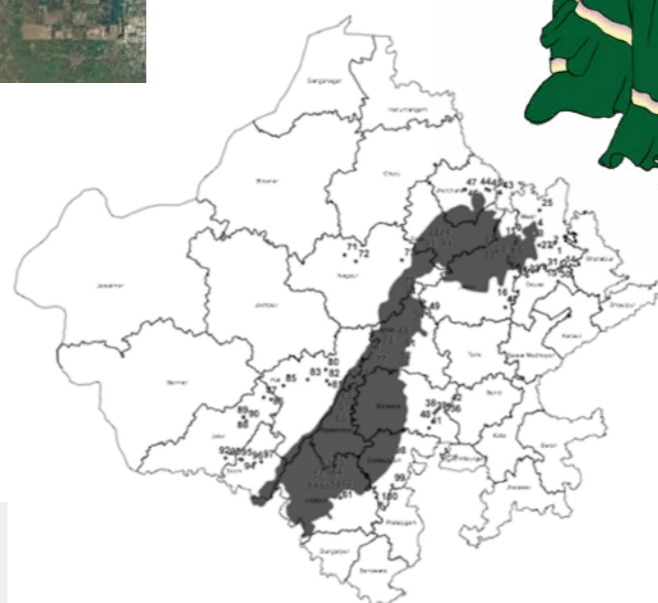
Deenaram Meena



ARV-ALW-04 - ADAWAL KI DEVBANI, SIRAWAS, ALWAR



ARAVALLI HILL RANGE WITH ORAN POINTS



India Boundary



Aman Singh on the multiple functions of Orans. Video: Aditi Veena, 2021

Orans as a model for conservation

The Orans provide a much-needed lifeline and safeguard the communities that are dependent on them, functioning as a vital infrastructure for resilience even in the face of the most extreme hardships. They have done so by allowing space for trans-species, religious and cultural solidarities. In contrast with state-led environmental conservation projects such as wildlife sanctuaries and citizen-led environmental initiatives for greening and restoration, the Orans are where communities conserve the environment for their socio-material sustenance and as part of their religious beliefs. They become important gathering points for communal congregations, festivals and other social events, the performance of which is linked to agrarian rhythms and the continued commitment of the communities towards environmental conservation.

The authors travelled to the Adawal Oran and neighbouring villages with year-long support from Krishi Avam Paristhitiki Vikas Sansthan (**KRPAVIS**) as part of their research for the Oran atlas. The table below shows results from visits to and interactions with the communities of the Adawal ki Devbani Oran.

Adawal ki Devbani

Adawal ki Devbani is located in the Sirawas village of Alwar district, about two kilometres from the village

settlement. It is spread over a 50-hectare area of hilly topography. The soil found in the Oran is mainly of mountain and loamy type. There is a perennial spring that emerges from the Oran. Several communities, with a total population of about 1,000, live in proximity to the Oran in different hamlets in the Sirawas village and interact with the Orans for their sustenance and livelihoods. The Gujjars are the original inhabitants of the Sirawas village. The Meenas were resettled here from a village nearby. There is also a community of Kumhars (potters).

Daya Ram Gujjar explains that they hold reverence for the Oran and take measures to conserve it since their livelihood depends upon it.



Dayaram Gujjar about the sustainable use of Orans. Video: Aditi Veena, 2021

The God's forests

Interspecies care and nurturing is integral to the relationship of Indigenous communities with their environments across the planet. In India, the sacred forests can be considered such an entity in which the

	Not Important	Some what important	Important	More important	Most Important
1) How important is the Oran to you?	0	0	0	0	72
2) How important is Devi to you?	0	1	0	0	71
3) How important is the Samiti to you?	0	1	5	4	62
4) How important is the Forest Department to you?	31	14	20	2	5
5) How much conflict over private land is there in village?	1	51	14	3	1
6) How much conflict over the Oran is there in the village?	69	2	1	0	0
7) How much conflict over other land is there in the village?	0	22	48	2	0
8) How is the state of the local environment now compared to the past?	0	46	22	3	1
9) How is the state of religious belief now compared to the past?	9	34	18	4	7

Results from a survey conducted by KRPAVIS with 72 residents from the Bakhtpura village on the significance of Orans to their everyday life and livelihood.



biophysical environment and livelihoods are part of a web of spiritual interspecies relationship. Sacred groves are premised on a belief that all creations of nature have to be protected, an idea which finds genealogical references in nature worship back to the Vedic period (5000 B.C).

The Orans are community conserved forests preserved in the name of local gods, goddesses, deities or saints. The temple is an important aspect of the forest. The Orans are colloquially referred to as *Dev-Banis*, literally translated as 'God's forests'.

At Adaval, Shri Hari Om Das Maharaj (the ascetic who lives in the temple complex in the forest) receives gifts and food from the community and plays a vital role in the preservation of the forest. He explains that the temple is a medium for conservation and reverence amongst the communities.



Hari Om Das Maharaj on the temple as a means for conservation of the forest.
Video: Aditi Veena, 2021

The Oran is imbued with myths and legends that are communicated from generation to generation in the form of oral histories, stories, and songs. According to the oral sources from the community, Adaval dates back to centuries ago when a saint by the name of *Choor Sidh* sat in the forest in meditation for several years. The



Gujjars recall that he was served by their community. In return for their care, the community was blessed with protection from tigers, cheetahs, and snakes in the forest. Pappi Gujjar, an elder woman from the Gujjar community whom we met during our visit to the Gujjar village, shares with us a folk song. She explains that they celebrate the forest and its inhabitants with zeal. Below, she and her daughter-in-law sing a popular folk song celebrating the monsoon and peacocks in the forest.

Adawal ki Devbani also serves as a socio-cultural centre for the community as it unifies people religiously, culturally and socially while providing a forum for village level discussions, festivals and other social events. An annual *Mela* (festival) is organized in the Oran in the month of April in conjunction with *Vaishakhi Purina*, with an estimated 10,000 pilgrims visiting.

The community acknowledges the presence of the perennial spring that flows through the Oran and takes extensive measures to conserve it. The tradition known as *Chitawal* (feeding birds) and feeding of aquatic species like fish and tortoise are examples of interspecies care. Several important tree species such as kadam (*Neolamarckia cadamba*), bargad (*Ficus bengalis*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) and gular (*Ficus glomerata*) can be found abundantly conserved in the Oran and have been assigned religious significance.

Ecosystem values and livelihoods offered by the Oran

Livestock grazing and non-timber forest products collected from the Oran provide a major source of livelihood for the community. Major products from the Oran include khajjur or date palm trees (*Phoenix sp.*), which yields both carbohydrate-rich fruits and leaves that can be used for making brooms and other products. Other important non-timber forest products from the Oran include kair (*Capparis decidua*) and ber (*Zizyphus mauritiana*). Water from the Oran's spring is used for irrigation by the community through a network of channels and pipelines that has been laid out from the spring. As much as 50 hectares of agricultural land is covered by this irrigation network, which is dependent on the Oran. The Oran land is also an important source

The Choor Sidh Maharaj Deity shrine located at the heart of the Adival Oran. Photo: Aditi Veena / Aman Singh



Water in the Adaval Oran. Left: A narrow stream emerges from the hills. Middle: The water body is the primary source of water for cattle. Right: Water level in the well is 50 feet. Photos: Aditi Veena

for grazing of village livestock. The community also depends on the Oran for local construction materials such as thatch, wood, sand, and stone.

The community depends on the Oran for their sustenance for nine of twelve months of the year and thus its conservation is critical for their semi-mobile agro-pastoral way of life. About 50 per cent of their income comes from the Oran during normal monsoon rains. In the summer, pastoralists from the village migrate for grazing or labour. For approximately three months during the winter, the community depends

on their agricultural land. During this time, they also use harvested leaves and grasses from the Oran. For about six months during and after the monsoon, their livelihood is partly dependent on the Oran. During drought periods, the Oran can sustain their livelihood for two to three months.

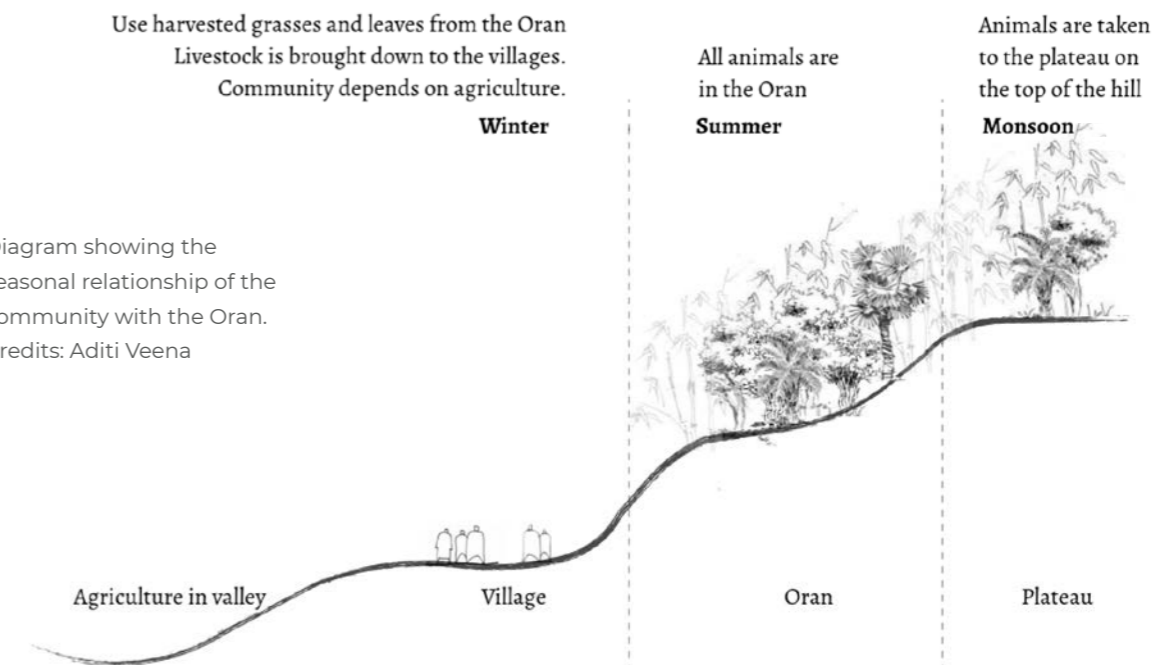
The Oran is critically important for sustaining pasture tracts for local livestock and to meet the real needs of the community. Thus, productive and better conserved Orans can reduce poverty and increase livelihood security among communities.

Use harvested grasses and leaves from the Oran
Livestock is brought down to the villages.
Community depends on agriculture.
Winter

All animals are
in the Oran
Summer

Animals are taken
to the plateau on
the top of the hill
Monsoon

Diagram showing the seasonal relationship of the community with the Oran.
Credits: Aditi Veena



Governance and ownership of the Oran

Strong internal social control within Oran communities enables effective sanctions to be imposed on violators, reflecting their importance to resource users. Orans generally have a well-defined boundary and are governed through an egalitarian system. The communities participate in setting and enforcing rules and not just in their implementation. Normally, every Oran has a mechanism for conflict resolution along with simple and clear rules for all, and there is significant commitment from all resource users (for example, they give annual contributions for maintenance).

Strong religious beliefs also support the Oran; for example, respect for the Devbani stems from strong faith in God. Orans are generally utilized and maintained in accordance with traditional, community-defined rules. For example, “a fallen log can be taken for a funeral pyre, but trees can never be felled”; “the water body can be used by livestock, but not so much for irrigation”; “herbs can be used for medicinal but not commercial purposes”; and so on. Maintenance of the Oran and its management is coordinated by the village community. The village community guards against the privatization of Oran land by any individuals and there are strict norms to prevent felling of trees and poaching.

The ownership of the Adaval Oran land is presently under the Rajasthan Forest Department, but Meena Sahakari Samiti, a village level institution, is involved in

its management. An ascetic named Shri Hariom Das looks after the Oran.

Biodiversity and livestock

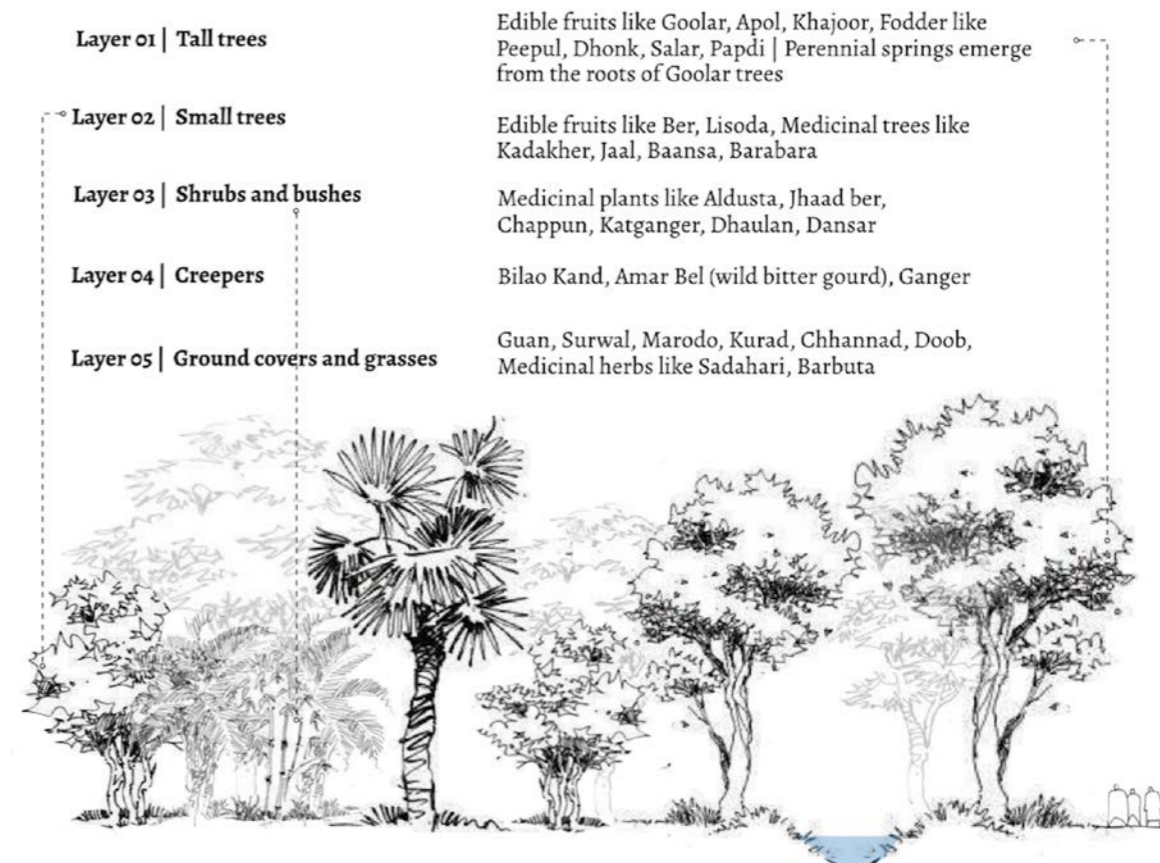
Orans contain unique and fragile terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems that comprise rare, threatened and endangered species and habitats, keystone species, species of evolutionary significance, and wild progenitors of cultivated plant species. The sites are culturally, aesthetically, and ethically important in the context of conservation management.

In Adaval, the livestock consists of 600 cows, 700 sheep, and 700 goats that directly depend on the Oran. The dominant tree species include khajjur (*Phoenix sp.*), dhok (*Anogeissus pendula*), kikar (*Vachellia nilotica*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), gular (*Ficus racemosa*), peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), sheesham (*Dalbergia sissoo*), kair (*Capparis decidua*) and chapun (*Grewia hirsutae Vahl*). Many birds, including pahadi chidia (*Passer domesticus*), peacock (*Pavo cristatus*), parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*), pigeon (*Columba ivia*) and Indian robin (*Saxicoloides fulicatus*), can be commonly sighted in the Oran. Other animals found in the Oran include wild pigs (*Sus scrofa*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), blue bull (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), and mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*).

In the Oran, khajjur (*Phoenix sp.*) and dhok (*Anogeissus pendula*) are the key protected tree species and pahadi chidia (*Passer domesticus*) the key protected bird species. The water sources in the Oran include a perennial spring and stream. These originate from places where gular (*Ficus glomerata*) trees are found in the Oran. The community recognizes the connection between the ficus trees and the originating spring and believes that ficus trees create water. The roots of the ficus trees create large cavities which collect water and become extensions of the interconnected underground aquifers. This water can slowly escape from the ground in the low-lying areas as a spring.

The communities see themselves as a part of a larger ecosystem. The Gujjars believe that they are a blessed community to be so close to the natural world.

Several ethno-botanical and ethno-veterinary traditions are associated with the Oran. The communities go to the local Vaid or apothecary who has extensive knowledge of the *jadibootis* or medicinal herbs and plants found in the forest. Ishwar Meena, a 40-year



Graphical representation and classification of various different layers of Flora in the Adaval Oran. Credits: Aditi Veena

old pastoralist from Meena ki Dhani is a carrier of the ethno-veterinary traditions and Indigenous knowledge. He shows us around in the forest and introduces several plants in his extensive repertoire.



Banwari Lal Gujjar about the co-existence with animals in the Sariska forest. Video: Aditi Veena, 2021

Internal and external threats and communities' hope for the future

Today, the main threats are the expansion of agriculture into the Oran. This occurs mainly due to internal politics and change in land status. At Adaval, the inner part of the Oran is fairly undisturbed and well taken care of by the communities as long as it still belongs to them. The other boundaries of the Oran are suffering because the Forest Department has envisaged a new strategy to include Orans and commons into their forest area and has declared an increase in total forest

area. This has been detrimental to the areas that have been left included and unincluded. The change of land status leads community members to give up their responsibility towards the Oran. The other unincluded area is thus facing a severe and rapid degradation.

Rights to all activities like hunting and grazing in reserved forests are banned unless specific orders are issued otherwise. Therefore, if these areas are protected by the Forest Department, the communities and their livelihoods remain excluded from these ecosystems. This leads to a change in attitude in the people towards the forest. Banwari Lal Gujjar, from the Gujjar community, explained that the Sariska Reserve was a community managed forest for centuries. Since it has become a Reserve Forest, the forest has suffered illegal poaching and felling of trees. He says that the community that coexisted with, depended upon and understood the spiritual significance of the forest has now been excluded from the duties and responsibilities of taking care of the forests. The forest officers who are employed in the forest lack the skills and the Indigenous wisdom that would protect and maintain the forest lands. He says that the government must find a way to integrate the communities, understand the value of Indigenous



“The forest gives us everything.”

A common saying amongst the Gujjar agro-pastoral tribes in Alwar, Rajasthan



A **song about the peacock**, by Pappi Gujjar, in the yard of the Oran temple. Video: Aditi Veena, 2021

wisdom that has been acquired over centuries, and not separate the forests from the people.

Another current challenge exists where the Oran falls under the supervision of the Land Revenue Department and is in the process of being acquired by the Forest Department. The Revenue Department is able to lease the land for development. For example, the **Delhi-Mumbai Corridor** has seen large tracts of land used to build roads and highways, and this land is the habitat of endangered wildcats. Urbanizing such ecologically important and sensitive areas is detrimental to plant diversity and to the movement of animals of local and national importance.

There are also other threats such as an excess number of livestock, particularly goats, which graze through most foliage. Shri Ram Meena told us that about a decade ago, the Oran was experiencing severe degradation due to the large number of goats. In 2011, the community, in its yearly self-initiated committee meeting, decided to put a restriction on the number of goats that each villager could rear. Goats were reduced to 20 per cent of their original population and this significantly restored the Oran. Meena also mentioned that 10 years ago, the water that originates from the spring at the Adaval Oran used to irrigate about 50 Bighas of land (**a local land measurement**) whereas today, due to encroachment and increase in population, only 20 Bighas are irrigated. Some developments have entered the villages and had different impacts; for example, electrification of the villages has had the potter community switch to electric wheels, some communities have started growing water-consuming vegetables like

onions as cash crops, and the local apothecary has been replaced by a western medicine doctor which has led to loss of trust within the community in the healing power of plant medicine. All of these changes have reduced and limited the community's connection with and dependence upon the Oran.

Lastly, the community longs for a larger watershed management plan. Through the support of organizations like KRAPAVIS and self-organizing community efforts, the community has been able to construct water harvesting structures like anicuts and check dams. The communities lead a very simple existence where they are only able to fulfil their basic needs of food clothing and shelter. They hope to find a way to co-exist with the changing ecological, social, and economic landscapes and create a secure world for their children.



Banwari Lal Gujjar about the impact of state-controlled conservation. Video: Aditi Veena, 2021

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Left and middle: The Kumhar potter community use clay from the water bodies that emerge from the Oran to create earthen vessels. Right: Pappi Gujjar using tools made from timber from the forest. Photo: Aditi Veena



Pastoral communities depend upon milk, yogurt, and cheese from their livestock. Photo: Aditi Veena

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About this report

This chapter is part of the Territories of Life: 2021 Report, composed of local, national, regional and global analyses of territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (sometimes abbreviated as “ICCAs” or “territories of life”). The report is part of an ongoing process to develop the knowledge base on territories of life in support of Indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ self-determined priorities. It is produced by the **ICCA Consortium with the support of several partners**.

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Available at: **report.territoriesoflife.org**.

About the ICCA Consortium

The ICCA Consortium is a global non-profit association dedicated to supporting Indigenous peoples and local communities who are governing and conserving their collective lands, waters and territories. Its organisational Members and individual Honorary members in more than 80 countries are undertaking collective actions at the local, national, regional and international levels across several thematic streams, including documenting, sustaining and defending territories of life, as well as youth and intergenerational relations.

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