

## A CRITIQUE OF “THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS”

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### Introduction

Since the publication of Garrett Hardin’s article “The Tragedy of the Commons” in 1968, it served as a basis for policy formulations in prioritising private or state control over resources rather than leaving them open for the community to exploit. Hardin (1968) argues that on a resource where modern concept of property ownership, either in the form of public or private, is absent commoners tend to overuse the resource to satisfy their personal interest by overlooking future gains from the property. He supports his argument by the example of an open-to-all pastureland. In the pastureland, the “rational herdsman” would try to maximise his benefit by adding more animal in the herd, as the proceeds from the sale of the additional animal would work as an incentive or “positive utility”. Hardin justifies such action on the ground that each individual would pursue “his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons” (Hardin, 1968: 63).

Such act of appropriation of pasture by the first rational herdsman worsens the situation for others. It violates the Lockean proviso of “enough and as good left in common for others” (Nozick, 1993:175). The action by the first rational herdsman worsens the situation of the others by limiting their opportunity to improve their situation by a particular appropriation and by no longer being able to use freely what they previously could. Such a situation gives rise to an unhealthy competition, where every rational herdsman, without knowing the intention of others, wants to maximise ones personal benefit by adding more animals in the common pastureland. To simulate the attitude of the “rational herdsmen”, as described by Hardin (1968), some scholars have used the defection strategy in the ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma’ game model (Ostrom, 1990). In this model, both the prisoners, who do not have the information about the intention of the other one, choose to defect. As a

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result of their decision they both get punished. Applied in the case of the pastureland, following the defection strategy, each “rational herdsman” adds up new animal to maximise their benefit. Such tendency on the part of the herdsmen result in overgrazing and eventual destruction of their future income potentials from the land.

However, Hardin was not the first writer to critique the existence of common property. As early as in the 1830s, in a series of lectures, Lloyd had made the same point (Feeny *et al.*, 1990). Gordon (1954) demonstrated the impact of overexploitation, in the case of fisheries, by one fisherman over the others in an open-access property. In 1955, Scott extended Gordon’s analysis on the future consequences of over-fishing by the reduction and depletion of stock (Fenny *et al.*, 1996: 188-89). Hardin (1968) and many subsequent studies based on his article concluded that much of the environmental degradation has been done because of the irresponsible use of the common property resources (CPR). Therefore, they recommended selling off common property as either private property or keeping them under governmental controls as public or state property. This goes in accordance to Adam Smith’s ideas, who long before Hardin, visualised the introduction of private property.

The explanations provided in those articles were very influential in decision making by governments and development agencies in the Third World countries. The policy prescriptions of transferring CPR to either private or state control were implemented by those governments and agencies on the ground that the common property regimes were unmanageable and the communities do not use the land on a sustainable way. However, recently the negative experiences of governments in redefining property rights in resources have led them to re-examine the collective management potentials (December, 1995).

The illustration of the “tragedy of the commons” scenarios, as inevitably doomed to degradation by Hardin and the subsequent writers have invited criticism from many scholars over the last three decades and has given rise to a host of questions. This paper proposes to put forward some questions. Shall we call someone as rational who by the short-term behaviour degrades the pastureland and destroys his future income potentials? Are CPR, as depicted by Hardin, so unmanageable? When Hardin talks about the introduction of newer animals in the pastureland by each of the rational herdsman, is not he suggesting the introduction of

an individual property (here in the form of animal) to benefit from the common property at the cost of the others? Similarly, in the case of fishing in the common waters, by the 'rule of capture' individual property rights are assigned to the catch as soon as somebody makes it (Fenny *et al.*, 1996: 189). This raises the question, in order to maintain the environmental quality of a common property should the resource be privatised or the common property management regimes should impose stricter rules that would bar people to benefit from their private property by using a common pool resource?

In order to have a thorough understanding of Hardin's concept of "carnivorous pastoralism" (McCabe, 1990: 83) it is useful to know about the different types of property management regimes. So, the second section of the paper deals with the definitions of various kinds of property management regimes. The third section attempts to answer the question regarding the rationality of the herdsman; fourth section discusses whether common property regimes are so unmanageable, as depicted by Hardin. The fifth section tries to focus on the most important argument of the paper regarding various causes of failure of CPR and especially on Hardin's idea of private-individual benefit from a common-collective land.

### **Definitions of Different Kinds of Property Rights**

The most common criticism of Hardin's article concentrates on his failure in distinguishing between common property and the free-access property. Critiques argue that what Hardin termed as an "open to all" pastureland as a common property, is in actuality an open-access property. So, in order to have a better understanding of "The Tragedy of the Commons" scenario, it is important to know about the nature and the legal rights attached to different kinds of property regimes.

Property has been defined as any object or right that can be owned. In this paper, property would be referred to as social institution and not as any inherent natural or physical qualities of the resource (as that is done in physical and biological world). Ownership involves possession. In simple societies to possess something is to own it. Beyond possession, ownership in modern societies implies the right to use, prevent others from using, and dispose of property, and it implies the protection of such rights by the government (Encarta, 2001). On the basis of management