

SHIFTING TIDES AND FADING TRADITIONS: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF CHILIKA FISHING COMMUNITIES IN RESPONSE TO ECOLOGICAL CHANGES

ABSTRACT

Brackish water lagoons, as transitional and highly dynamic ecosystems, are highly vulnerable to ecological disruption, which often affects the cultural and economic lives of the communities in response to environmental instability. Chilika, the largest brackish water lagoon in India, has historically supported the livelihoods of more than 400,000 traditional fishermen living in 150 villages on the shore and islands in the lagoon. However, over the past few decades, it has faced serious threats from both natural disturbances and human interventions, resulting in significant ecological degradation. This study aims (i) to identify major ecological changes and their key drivers in the Chilika Lagoon through a systematic literature review and interviews with fishing communities, (ii) to examine how these ecological drivers have influenced the socio-cultural dimensions of local fishing communities with the help of qualitative interviews, and (iii) to explore the specific ways ecological change has transformed cultural life using qualitative interviews. The research adopts a mixed-method approach combining a systematic literature review with qualitative fieldwork involving semi-structured interviews across ten villages in the Chilika region. The literature review identified thirteen ecological drivers, among which three emerged as dominant: sea-mouth changes, aquaculture, and government policies and interventions. Findings also suggested that these drivers precipitated multiple layers of socio-cultural impact, including the loss of community cohesion, alienation from the lake, occupational shifts, and the disintegration of belief systems. These effects were further synthesised into six overarching themes: loss of identity and sense of place, transformation of value systems, erosion of belief systems and rituals, fading oral traditions and folklore, decline of festivals and traditional customs, and emotional detachment from the lake. A significant generational and gender-based divergence was observed: while older participants conveyed grief and a desire to preserve cultural heritage, younger individuals often demonstrated detachment or provided reinterpretation of tradition. The study highlights how ecological degradation not only transforms livelihoods but also affects cultural memory, emotional bonds, and symbolic practices. It calls for greater integration of cultural considerations into environmental policy and conservation efforts, stressing that Chilika's long-term sustainability hinges on protecting its cultural heritage alongside its ecological restoration.

Keywords: *Chilika Lagoon, Cultural Change, Fishing communities, Ecological Changes, Ecological Drivers*