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Women and Commons in India: The need to rethink the relationship between sustainability, land and women's economic empowerment

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Author:

- ❑ Deepannita Misra, Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), Rajasthan, M.A. in Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS)

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Abstract:

Internationally, perceptions regarding the Commons have undergone major shifts, first with Garrett Hardin’s “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968), and then a few decades later with scholars such as Elinor Ostrom (1990) propounding that community management of land which belongs to all—and technically to no one in particular—is in fact possible. Today, it is widely acknowledged that the Commons, in the form of pastureland, forests, dryland and so on, are immensely rich in resources. They prove to be the sole income of several communities including pastoralists, who are at the forefront of deploying traditional sustainable practices dating back to several centuries to delay and mitigate climate change. However, in this entire narrative, the role of women and their unique position with regard to community management of common land and livestock is often overlooked. Even amongst rural agrarian and pastoralist communities, it is the women who engage most actively with the Commons by extracting their products and services. Women are also often not paid as much as their male counterparts for devoting the same amount of time and labour, if not more, to run a household. In the process of furthering the sustainability agenda, then, it is impossible to ignore the economic value of common land and the interlinkages it has with women’s financial autonomy. This essay, while tracing the historical significance of Commons and pointing towards the need to develop a national policy for them, takes into account how the Commons present a unique opportunity to rethink the relationship between women’s empowerment and tenurial rights, while taking forward the agenda of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



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Introduction

The term ‘sustainable development’ came into existence with the UN Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm in 1972. Thereafter, the Brundtland Report of 1987 re-established sustainability as a cornerstone for future development narratives. To a large extent, sustainability depends on human decisions which are socially, economically and environmentally viable (Porter & van der Linde, 1995, as cited in Mensah, 2019). Thus, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also encompass a number of interlinkages between the economic, social and environmental spheres.

However, as demonstrated in the past, it is more difficult to envision an inclusive policy framework from the beginning—especially for women—by taking note of interlinkages, than it is to achieve the SDGs on paper. Various discourses on ‘women’s empowerment’, ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ labour, what qualifies as legitimate ‘work’, and what necessarily comprises ‘income’ indicate that active inclusion of women in the development agenda and framing policies ‘involving’ them is significantly more arduous than reaching out to them as passive participants. This is because apart from state expenditure on programmes targeted towards them—which, no doubt, reflect well upon the national focus to achieve SDGs—policies for women must also address other interrelated issues. These include, but are not limited to, social security, wages, and infrastructural necessities such as fuel and sanitation. These have “either been neglected or have received very low priority in the policy agenda.” (Arya, 2008)

Commons conservation is an arena which demonstrates interlinkages vis-à-vis SDGs and women’s socio-economic independence quite clearly. The *Shramshakti* report of 1988 states: “They (women) are constantly gathering dung or wood for fuel...to earn what they need...” In fact, women’s labour forms the backbone of the rural economy. Commons are a major source of income for them. Yet, rural employment and income generation schemes seem to



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have neglected this aspect by not focusing on women and Commons explicitly, especially since there is no cohesive national policy for the Commons in India.

What are Commons

Commons can refer to a large arena, including not only environmental resources but also public roads, public transport, public education, open-source software and any of the “resources over which property rights have not been established” (Anderies & Janssen, 2013, as cited in Puppala et al., 2015) Historically, pastures, meadows, and grazing land available to communities came to be defined as Commons. Historians assert that prior to the genesis of ‘private property’, living in communities and community-ownership of land was the norm. To this end, Zuckert (2003) argues that in the Middle Ages in Europe, common ownership and facilities were central to the idea of living in communities. Later, expansion of agriculture threatened to bring this system to an end. However, Linebaugh (2012) notes that even in the 18th century, at the turn of the Industrial Revolution in England, “[h]alf the villagers of England were entitled to common grazing.” (as cited in Euler, 2015)

In “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968), Hardin famously presents the case of Commons from the perspective of economic futility. Since it is accessible to all, it ends up being ruined as it is not ‘owned’ by a particular group or individual who would then be responsible for its maintenance. However, Hardin’s stance has long been refuted by the likes of Elinor Ostrom (1990), who introduced the concept of “common-pool resources” (CPRs), and others such as Gordon (1954), who attributed the term ‘common-pool resources’ to oceans as well. Ostrom, in particular, differentiates between natural resources with limited and open access. She demonstrated that the Commons being a finite resource, had already been used and managed successfully by communities for centuries (as cited in Zuckert, n.d.).



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The Significance of Commons

Globally, the historical significance and utilization of Commons has been closely intertwined with agrarian societies. Even prior to the Agrarian Revolution in Europe, “[h]ow much livestock an individual could have depended on the amount of hay available as winter fodder, that is, on the size of the meadows. From spring to fall, cattle were herded on the common pasture” (Zuckert, n.d.). Thus, agro-pastoralist communities have had a major stake in managing the Commons due to their dependence on its resources and services. Traditional practices, cultural ties with the environment, and the economic and political atmosphere have chiefly determined how they came to be used. This has been the basis of their long-term utility and sustainable use. In India, women have ties with common land in different forms—be it grazing land, a sacred grove, or agricultural land—through their participation in community-based management of land.

More recently, research has also pointed out that the Commons are vital cogs in the wheel of climate change mitigation. For instance, West African drylands are known to host low rainfall. Their inhabitants depend heavily on livestock and livestock-based produce—including hides, milk and meat—and collecting wild produce such as medicinal herbs and fuelwood for sustaining livelihoods. Prevailing environmental conditions guide the socio-economic practices and climate change adaptation strategies of these pastoralist communities. However, as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) notes, despite certain communities successfully using traditional practices to sustain their dryland ecosystems, there have been massive changes in overall patterns of land use, changes due to imminent global climate change, and rapid conversion of rangeland areas to farmland, spelling disaster for pastoralists (Safriel & Adeel, 2005, as cited in Anderson et al., 2010).

This implies that since communities depend on Commons for a range of services, converting them to farmland and refusing to protect them nationally through the state’s consolidated



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efforts, affects livelihoods and also has serious implications for existing resources linked to the land, such as groundwater levels and soil quality.

Commons in the Indian Context

In the Indian context, a shared public definition of ‘Commons’ may be harder to seek. But various studies have pointed out time and again that they remain central to the “commons-livestock-agricultural complex which provides stability and security in an unpredictable environment and provides a degree of control in the lives of rural households” (Puppala et al., 2015). Thus, the concept of Commons is not altogether alien to the rural landscape.

The 54th round of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) survey conducted in 1998 provides a comprehensive database contextualising CPRs and their contribution in India. The survey report defines CPRs as “Resources accessible to and collectively owned/held/managed by an identifiable community and on which no individual has exclusive property rights...” (NSSO, 1999) The report used two approaches to perceive the Commons: a *de jure* and a *de facto* approach. The latter, in particular, is interesting as it includes in its definition all those resources which rural households ‘actually’ use, regardless of the legal status of land. This means that the definition of Commons here can be extended to state-owned revenue wastelands and forests as well (Puppala et al., 2015), so long as they are actually being utilized by households for various activities such as grazing, collection of fuelwood and so on.

Recent studies from India state that over 90 percent of the households in arid, semi-arid and sub-humid zones use their Commons for purposes such as fodder collection, agriculture, grazing, food, and fuelwood (FES, 2010, as cited in Puppala, 2015). An empirical study across the states of Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh to assess household dependence on CPRs demonstrates that even though they provide subsistence income to



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many, CPRs are an alternate source of income for those households which are not necessarily resource-poor or solely dependent on them too. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are collected and sold by these households for an additional income (Chopra & Dasgupta, 2008). Thus, it is not always the case that the Commons benefit only the poorest or traditional pastoralist communities. Since they are accessible, their products and ecosystem services in the form of NTFPs are available to all. This, in turn, has paved the way for additional income for several households.

In Rajasthan, *bannis/mandir vans/devbani* (sacred groves) and *orans* (sacred pastures) present an alternative perception of Commons as not only being economically viable chunks of land, but also being extremely significant in a socio-cultural sense. These groves and pastures have been historically linked to the livelihoods of pastoralist communities (Singh & Bahl, 2006). Along with grasslands and village wetlands, they fall under Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) in Rajasthan. They are not only known for their association with myths, legends and folklore, but have also been acting as safe havens for various species of flora and fauna for several centuries. They are protected by virtue of communities such as the *Bishnois*, who have been traditionally involved in the conservation of these lands in the state (Pathak & Kothari, 2013).

Women and Common-Pool Resources

To understand the significance of CPRs for women particularly, and what they stand to lose from the lack of a uniform policy on Commons, “we have to move beyond viewing a ‘traditional’ pastoral household as a group of individuals, but rather as a closely interlinked functioning whole in which all individuals play a role and the good of the ‘whole’ is more important than that of an individual” (Flintan, 2008). The ways in which women define their relationship with land and livestock, especially when they are not the direct owners, impacts their interactions with CPRs and the services extracted from therein.



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For instance, it has been indicated time and again that pastoral women are responsible for preserving food, including vegetables, dried meat, milk and intestines. This ensures a steady supply of food to the households even during droughts (Muhammad, 2002; Wawire, 2003, as cited in Flintan, 2008). Similarly, the *Raikas* of Rajasthan value their sheep as symbols of good luck and socio-cultural prosperity (Geerlings, 2004, as cited Flintan, 2008). Thus, women play a significant role in managing the community's land and livestock even if they aren't necessarily involved in ownership and decision-making due to a variety of reasons, such as cultural factors and patriarchal norms of inheritance preferring male kin.

In India, more than 80 percent of rural women contribute to agricultural labour and yet, are entitled to only 10 percent of the total rural land (Kelkar, 2012, as cited in Duncan & Agarwal, 2017). Land grabbing, mining, encroachments and a host of other issues plaguing the Commons reduce access to grazing land and rob women of traditional sources of income, such as selling milk. As a direct consequence of this, men tend to automatically become the sole decision-makers when it comes to managing household finances (Duncan & Agarwal, 2017). When the Commons vanish, it is not only the communities which suffer as a whole by virtue of being resource-poor. Amongst them, the women are marginalised further as they lack tenurial rights.

Moreover, the resources availed from CPRs are not gender-neutral. In India, women spend 374 hours on an average on firewood collection (PAC, 2014). Men are not as involved in this process. Further, about 84% of rural women aged 10-59 years are affected by fuelwood scarcity (UN, 1995, as cited in Waris & Antahal, 2014). According to the gendered division of labour, men and women are affected by different aspects of community-ownership of land. However, despite the magnitude of their contribution, women's role in pastoral communities continues to be undermined (Flintan, 2008).



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The Policy Scenario regarding Commons

Several studies have indicated that the Commons are on a rapid decline in India. Pasha's study (1992) demonstrated a 33 percent decline in Karnataka within a span of little more than twenty years. Jodha (1986) marked a decline between 31 to 55 percent in over thirty years across seven states in the arid and semi-arid zones (FES, 2010, as cited in Puppala et al., 2015). Yet, till date, there exists no national policy dedicated solely to the conservation of Commons, much less addressing women's socio-economic dependence on this land. Various programmes, especially under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and Joint Forest Management (JFM) under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), give precedence to community management of land. However, they do not explicitly take into account the perspective of the interrelationship between CPRs, women's labour, and tenurial rights, as if a programme which "invisibilizes the worker and the social relevance and ecological imprint of this work" (WRM, 2020) were the norm in this realm.

Conclusion

The fact that women in rural India depend so heavily on Commons should be proof enough of the economic value of CPRs. Perhaps even more so than agricultural land, women traditionally assert a sense of ownership over common land by means of community management, traditional incomes garnered from selling NTFPs and milk, and taking charge of animal husbandry in pastoralist communities—all discussed above in detail. In *Jagpal Singh & Others vs State of Punjab & Others* (2011, as cited in Puppala et al., 2015), the Supreme Court even acknowledged the significance of Commons. In accordance with this verdict, the Government of Rajasthan and Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) jointly drafted a *Common Land Policy* in 2011. The policy emphasizes strengthening institutions and community rights on common land in line with the existing legislation on Panchayati Raj Institutions.



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In states like Rajasthan, and through various programmes and MGNREGA, there seems to be an already existing framework and institutional mechanism in place to implement a national policy for the Commons. The way forward, perhaps, lies in acknowledging the role of Commons as not just ‘waste land’ but as economically productive tracts of land, on which various communities and especially rural women depend heavily. Once the role of conserving common lands is realised, it becomes easier to see various interlinkages and why Commons conservation is in line with achieving the SDGs, including women’s empowerment and sustainable development.



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