
India: Women, Commons and Patriarchy

A feminist view on Commons reveals that accumulation opposes the basic principles of sharing and sustaining: receiving from nature's abundance is done by ensuring that needs (and not wants or greed) define the extent of extraction. For the Commons to exist, abundance and not scarcity must inform the needs.

Commons are a basis for livelihoods and determine the life rhythms of a big section of the population in India, especially for those living on the margins of the dominant capitalist economy. Commoners form a significant section of the Indian population, and the majority are dependent on forests and small-scale agriculture. Development planners seek to draw commoners into the modern economy to enable them to get economic benefits, but they pay little attention to the fact that **Commons is a way of life and that the processes of development has placed those dependent on nature and their intertwined ways of life with, for example, forests, under threat** by assuming that the Commons and their inhabitants need a paradigm shift to a more “civilized” way of life. Embedded in the Commons - the inherently diverse forests, grasslands, water bodies, etc.— are the multiple traditions that remain alive and sustain themselves and the lives around them, based on a symbiotic reciprocity of nurturing and replenishing, on knowledge and practices which have evolved over centuries of being and doing.

Women have been at the centre of these communities practicing and nurturing the Commons. These practices emerge from a tradition of giving and receiving and, in turn, the creation of “abundance”.

Some feminists defend that since women are the birth givers, the status of caregiver is “naturally” given to them. Other feminists, on the contrary, view these assigned roles as socially constructed. The degree of acknowledgement and focus given to women and their contributions to the nurturance of societies has varied across regions and cultures. However, these have increasingly being diminished and subjugated by the **capitalistic, patriarchal and hierarchical socio-economic structure of society, characterized by oppressive control over labour and the domination of nature and women's work.**

Women's work in the household or on the fields, in the forest, raising animals or foraging for fuel, food, water or grasses is neither considered as “work” in the current dominant paradigm nor is it remunerated or respected. Women's rights to land and livelihoods are always the most insecure. **The rampant violence against women across societies is an expression of the domination and control of women's work and their capacities, as much as of the domination of nature** that comes in tandem with technologies for this purpose: mining, logging, trawling, etc. (1)

In India, grazers and herders, often nomadic, constitute a significant part of the population. They have foraged, hunted and gathered from the forestlands and have had centuries of learning to evolve “a way of life” that harmonizes their needs with those of nature, of which they feel part. Several such tribal societies have had a matrilineal history (where the descendants are identified via the mother's blood line), which is believed to be embedded in the centrality of women to maintain synergistic

relationships with the Commons (e.g. Khasis in North East State of Meghalaya, the tribals in Sirmor District of Himachal Pradesh in Northern India, etc.) Other tribal societies, however, established patterns of survival and sustenance in less egalitarian structures, and are increasingly turning towards rigid patriarchal modes of governance.

(Her)stories: Cycles and Abundance

The knowledge and stories, the lives and seasonal cycles of pastoral communities and indigenous peoples have increasingly been documented. Much of this documentation, however, has been **based on the stories told by men and informed by a patriarchal and capitalist mind set**. This has meant a foregrounding of certain activities and processes over others; of capturing experiences that portray and emphasise particular aspects of the economy and the relationships embedded therein; of highlighting specific values that create images of a certain lifestyle and emphasize certain choices over others – an attempt to validate the legitimacy of a world embedded in greed over need; of dominance and competitiveness as a natural attribute. Meanwhile, **those stories which are the foundation of multitudes of communities but do not serve the purpose of accumulation of capitalist modes of production, have been ignored**.

More recent attempts to document the stories of these communities from a women's perspective illustrate the nuances of their existence. They highlight experiences of communities sustaining their lives and livelihoods in simple yet intertwined modes of being with nature. They are mostly narratives and analysis from sites of displacement or climatic crisis, from the struggles against the onslaught of destructive development and aggressive industrialization, etc. In all of them, there are invariably women's experiences that bring forth the nuance, the expressions that inform the protests and the women bodies that end up mostly at the forefront of resistance. And thus, it is also they who are easy targets to the masculine aggressive power of the capitalist developers of industry, working in alliance with the state.

The Commons as a space and across time, as “culture” and “lifestyle”, have been integral to women commoners’ ways of doing, knowing and being. The space of the Commons defines and is defined by an infinite intertwining of their existence as entities embedded within these realms, ascribed by the rhythm of nature. Their rhythm and nuance is best unravelled from the oral histories and traditions. For example, the appearance of new leaves on a particular species of plant forecasts the possibility of a good monsoon, or a bird or a flourish of fruit flowers on a mango tree. **Commons’ economies from a gender perspective represent a daily cycle of balancing needs for survival and care, with processes of abundance and scarcity.** Taking from the Commons is done in accordance to the need to replenish towards maintaining a balance based on cycles and seasons. *Jhuming* (shifting cultivation) and Nomadism have followed such a rhythm across space and time.

While several economies seek to rediscover or re-imagine the Commons as a way of life, many societies in several regions of the global South have managed until now to sustain a life based on the Commons – as a set of principles and rhythms defined contextually, but also universal in its ideological roots of sharing and abundance.

Work, Labour and Production

Despite the significant current shifts in tribal societies under the influence of the oppressive, dominant mainstream economy, one still finds acknowledgment of women's rights to community resources. Yet, **their rights are curtailed in the realm of individual household rights to land**, a system that has emerged from the practices of non-commoners embedded in notions of private property.

Although women remain to a greater extent the holders of knowledge in relation to food, herbs and healing practices, aware and capable of foraging, gathering, harvesting and other work based on a legacy of gained skills and knowledge, this work is mostly invisibilized and lacks recognition. Such work became the burden of women when **the classification of work emerged: subsistence value work** (assigned to women who pursue it based on their conviction of its value) **became separated from economic value work** (assigned first and mainly to men who aspire to gain economic value through wage labour or other forms of market linkages). From this classification, **hierarchies were created, with economic value work being remunerated and** accordingly, having a higher value attached to it.

The system of labour (economic value work) is invariably performed for the “outsider” - a contractor or a local person with allegiance to the world outside the Commons - for motives other than subsistence or sustenance. The likelihood for men to be drawn into the economic value work system is higher due to the lesser extent to which they are embedded in the work related to their Commons, and to the nurturance of the Commons’ philosophy. **Men also began to dominate decision-making and rule making spaces that determine the terms of engagement with each other and with the outside/other world of the (labour) market.** As a result, many of such societies have been prone to adopt and reinforce mainstream practices and cultures, including patriarchal ideals.

Debates over the need to acknowledge women’s work as labour by compensating it through financial measures has found resonance in India among some policy makers and with western liberal feminists. While this might seem like an altruistic goal, it in fact detracts from the dignity of such work: It would reduce women’s nurturing work to an occupation for which a wage payment is due, and be done with it. **The act of sharing, sustaining and nurturing the Commons for the creation of abundance is negated when seeing it merely as a commodity to be remunerated.** But, as this function is not shared, it becomes confined to the domain of women and ignores the social and cultural structure embedded therein.

“Work” by the Feminist Commons

In managing food for the household, for instance, women would make discrete decisions about what to collect and how much. They would likely opt for that which is greater in abundance as these would be likely to replenish more quickly and more easily, as opposed to those particular herbs, tubers, roots or inner barks which would be useful as crisis foods, in times of ailments or if there is risk to abundance. **These discrete choices are rarely recognized or understood for their role in maintaining a balance in the use and replenishment within the cycles of nature** and would therefore not enter the forecasting of food needs or crisis management.

Yet, one often finds planners, bureaucrats and officials of state and aid programmes, immersed in the delivery of a particular recipe of development payments and packages, lamenting that communities do not seem to exercise a planning approach to deal with their problems nor save for times of crisis.

A feminist perspective on Commons would reveal that being embedded in the cycles and rhythms of nature makes the compulsion to hoard contradictory to the principles of sharing and caring. **That receiving from the abundance is a function also of ensuring that needs (and not wants or greed) define the extent of extraction,** in order to allow others and themselves to depend on the availability on future occasions. **Such communities have refrained from a culture of accumulation since abundance and not scarcity informs their needs.** The simplicity of needs is woven into a fine texture of relationships of receiving and reciprocity so that the need for hoarding and conflict may not arise. And if that were to arise, there are also norms for its redress that many

communities have been known to adopt.

The problem then lies not in their unwillingness to hoard or accumulate, but in the processes that threaten the sustenance of abundance on which they depend. “Work” from a feminist Commons lens needs to incorporate the actions and processes undertaken in a context of nature’s abundance and shared processes of production to **benefit the entire realm of wellbeing**. Labour, on the other hand, is coercion deriving from the sense of scarcity, which compels individuals to seek economic returns for themselves, irrespectively of how these tasks may affect nature and other beings.

Work viewed as labour, then, ignores the processes rooted in complex social and cultural contexts. It invisibilizes the worker and the social relevance and ecological imprint of this work. Women’s movements strive for recognition of such work, but **not as “women’s work”, but as work that is fundamental to the wellbeing of societies**. Feminists also strive for sharing such work as well as the rewards – be these in economic terms or in the relations that this work entails. If such work is to be shared, then **men and women could contribute together more holistically towards building nourishing Commons and societies**.

This is a summary of the article:

“Women’s Work is Work: A Feminist Perspective on the Commons as Process”, Soma KP and Richa Audichaya, India.

http://boellblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/KP_Soma.pdf

(1) “Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property rights. Patriarchal ideals act to explain and justify this dominance and attribute it to inherent “natural” differences between men and women.