

**HOW COMMON IS COMMONS:  
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WASTELAND DEVELOPMENT**

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The so-called 'uncultivated half' has received attention of Aid Agencies, Planners and Environmentalists to a great extent in recent past. For many, it is a wasted opportunity and hence a wasted land. Vandana Shiva (EPW XXI, 15, 1986) has raised some very relevant issues with regard to the official policy for wasteland development programme. However, while the over-all thrust of here argument is quite acceptable, there are certain inadequacies with regard to the conceptualisation of the problem and consequent search for the alternatives. I will first summarise some of the key points she makes and then present my arguments in the context of the recent lobbying pursued by FICCI, International Aid Agencies and concerned citizens within our country.

### Tragedy of the commons:

Vandana Shiva (henceforth V.S.) very rightly argues that privatisation of commons threatens the survival systems of poor besides the fragile ecological balance. The author then makes certain assumptions which create some problem. For instance:

- a) 'the free commons' have been the survival base for rural India;
- b) the economy of the commons does not need purchasing power, the economy of the market does;
- c) the needs of the rural poor are best met by leaving the commons untouched (this might look slight distortion of here position which is .....).

I fully agree with V.S. that most developmental policies designed avowedly for the benefit of poor generally harm them most. However, my position is that sometimes the minority of professionals who would genuinely like planners to modify the policies in favour of poor contribute inadvertently towards the cause of their ..... by making some difficult assumptions. I will also like to recall some aspects of lobbying which had been going on for the last four or five years amongst the industrialists as well as the Aid Agencies to woo policy planners in favour of technical solutions to the problem which are essentially political economic in nature. This will underline the need for minority of concerned professionals to lobby collectively lest their individual efforts are thwarted by stronger and well coordinated moves by industrial chambers and some of the Donor Agencies.

Critique:

Excellent work done by N.S. Jodha and documentation by the Report on India's Environment by CSE brings out the fact that much of what was common had already been privatised by the rural rich. The concept of commons needs to be distinguished from free-access to public resources or restricted access to Government resources. The condition of excludability and a well defined boundary are essential besides the existence of rules about the regulation of access amongst the members of the group having rights to the commons. By conventions, in some areas private fellows also become common properties for part of the year. However, the commoditisation of fodder in the last 10 to 15 years has had a profound effect on the informal institutional mechanisms with regard to the use of commons. The panchayat lands are not always available to all simply because of the revenue generating strategies of the panchayat bodies. Many times the least degraded lands are auctioned for the purposes of cultivation every year. Even though in some of the states like Haryana, there is a provision or a earmarking some part of the commons for use by Harijans, there are always some Harijans available to become pawns in the

hands of high caste wealthy people who manage to bid high and thus appropriate common resources for private use through market mechanisms.

The other instances of commons not being commonly available is the historicity of deprivation due to frequent droughts in semi-arid regions. For instance, when people have to sell their livestock particularly the heavy grazers (bullocks, cows, buffaloes) they have to invariably rely upon the species which cost less, which are labour intensive (instead of capital intensive) and which can survive even under the degraded conditions and not surprisingly these species are the browsers (sheep and goat). Since the drought induced migration affects the poor people much more than rich the catchment area from where the poor draw their sustenance and graze their animals is strikingly different from the catchment area from where the rich

people draw the dry matter. The overlapping common properties in the two sets of catchment areas are exclusively utilised by those who stay behind the village during the periods of stress.

And this leads us to the more important issue about what causes degradation. How do certain pieces of land lose their biological productivity and what role public and private policies play in this regard. It must be noted that in many places the soil erosion caused on account of wind, water or animals is not an outcome of homogenous human actions. V.S. is aware more intimately than me about the experience in hilly areas. In dry regions cultivation of marginal lands and reduction in private fellows due to increasing cropping intensity with the spread of minor irrigation does constrain the choice of people differently.

The key point to be kept in mind is that access to common properties cannot be analysed in isolation of access to private sources of capital as well as dry matter from the own land. Historically, the changes in employment pattern with seasonal migration becoming more and more pronounced and weakening of informal institutional mechanisms to regulate the use of common properties, have affected the pattern of ownership of different species. If poor have more browsers and rich more grazers (Gupta 1984) than the implication is not that poor utilised the grazing lands more intensively than the rich. Instead the issue is that with increased vulnerability and decline in communal resource sharing mechanisms the poor are forced to substitute grazers by the browsers. My field studies have shown that in terms of management of different livestock species poor have no inherent disadvantage in case of labour intensive species like browsers compared to the rich. Though, they do get constrained by way of reduced access to commons, govt waste lands, forests, etc.

The issue then is how would privatisation affect the uncommonly shared commons and the existing resource use of the poor. It is obvious that the major proportion of sustenance for the livestock of poor is not derived from the ..... commons only. Instead it is derived from much wider catchments of dry matter extending to roadsides Government lands, degraded forest lands, etc. Undoubtedly, privatisation of common affects the poor adversely. But the restriction of access to the other types of public, private and Government lands affects the conditions of the poor all the more. The robbery of commons thus must be seen in wider perspective of an overall reduction in access of ..... to various types of public and private, permanent and temporary fellows not of all which have been degraded. For instance, in some cases the hillocks used for mining purposes, in other cases wastelands 'used for plantation or afforestation purposes'. The author has rightly mentioned about the Task Force to Study All Aspects of

Grazing and Fodder to Evolve a National Grazing Policy (Ministry of Agriculture, 1984) begins with an approving quotation of British Forest Policy in which people were to be saved from their own improvidence. The recommendations of the report written by a Committee of Foresters and Professional Ecologists included very familiar advice such as migration of the livestock to be stopped, unproductive animals to be substituted by productive animals. Nomadic tribes needed to be permanently settled, people should be encouraged to adopt the system of stall feeding, grazing by sheep and goat to be completely stopped in various areas, creation of fodder banks and extension programmes to inculcate spirit of cooperation among the people (Gupta, 1985) my submission therefore, is that we need not search for the reasons of present public policies always sin the colonial legacies. The post-independence policy planners have been no less contemptuous towards complicated system of resource management and sharing of rights and responsibilities than their former colonial masters. The unfortunate aspect of the debate on management of common properties with specific reference to grazing land is that some of the most sympathetic and articulate group like CSE also fall in the trap of technological definitions of essentially political and economic problems (See the status of grazing lands, CSE 1985:4). The tautological explanations like over grazing being a consequence of too many animals and too little grass' do not help us understand how some people have too many animals of different species and how grass becomes less greener in some parts and for some people more than others.

It is not true that economy of the commons did not need purchasing power whereas the economy of the market did.

The whole conflict essentially started because Shylocks in the state and central ministries as

well as in the village became extremely alarmed over the fact that they were not getting their share of taxes and revenues from the people who were using these lands presumably free. The whole range of policies came about which led to increased commoditisation of fodder. The ..... dwarfing crop varieties, the increased demands of fodder from non-traditional dairy management regions, increase in industrial uses of fodder, straw and other crop by-products and finally the weakening of informal institutions have all contributed towards greater possessiveness amongst the cultivators and reduced access of poor to the grazing lands. I have found on the basis of detailed systematic field survey in semi-arid north-west Haryana that the tree density (Prosopis cineraria) on private cultivated lands in dry villages was highest on the marginal land holdings and minimum on the large land holdings (often cultivated by tractors). Therefore, poor who conserve private lands so well could certainly not be unaware about the utility of conserving common lands as well (Gupta 1984). Why is it then common properties get degraded?

'The tragedy of commons' is not a very helpful explanatory framework. Issue is not whether poor also contribute towards degradation of commons or not. The issues are whether the degradation is a consequence of weak enforcement mechanisms of the regulations which historically protected these lands till commoditisation of fodder became more manifest; whether similar actions with dissimilar compulsions should be interpreted in the same way; Whether rationality of every individual leads equally to collective irrationality; and whether the role of state is to levy equal costs of conservation on unequal partners?

The common is not a shared resource to which all in local community need to have equal access. The most important argument which the author (V.S.) makes is that privatisation amounts to closing access of large number, and giving control exclusively to some members of

the community. I would like to reformulate this statement by saying that commons, the way these exist, are not available to all the classes equally even now. Whenever, they are available they are not of equal significance to different classes. Those who have access to private fodder either self-cultivated or bought would not starve if the commons are degraded. On the other hand, the poor would have to travel to long distances if common get degraded by their own animals or by the animals of the rich but grazed by the poor. The need therefore, is to recognise this contribution so that the different incentive system (argued elsewhere, Gupta 1985, 1984, 1982) is developed. The programmes for management of commons could be developed in such a manner that poor who have greater dependence and greater stakes in the improvement and management of commons do not bear excessive burden of the improvement simply because they are not the only ones who led to the degradation in the first place. One would need to plead for such a regulation of the market that the assurance to the poor about supply of fodder in the short run could be provided in a manner that they could forego their rights to graze on degraded lands in the short run and thereby harvest more productive forages from the lands conserved in the long run. This will not happen without the sharing of the burden of the developmental costs by the rich people in the village as well as the state. In the next part I mention in brief the historical perspectives of the present wasteland development strategies.

#### The visible and the invisible planners:

It has been seen that incidence of violence have been increasing in the recent past (Gupta 1982). However, the planners in Agriculture Ministry did not get disturbed by these incidences even though violence in late 60s in the green revolution district did disturb the Ministry of Home Affairs and Agriculture. When the review of drought prone area programmes all over the country showed that the investment on soil conservation, improvement of pastures and



afforestation was negligible compared to the investment on minor irrigation and infrastructure (milk chilling plants) it again did not disturb the planners. The problems faced by the paper industry and by the forests (who did not curb the contractors but were visibly annoyed by the sheep and goat rearers) did disturb the Government. Almost at the same time the International Aid Agencies also realised that problem of food, fodder and fuel could be solved by the improvement in the productivity of 'uncultivated half'. The extraordinary increase in the dry fodder prices during the drought year (which were as high as cereal prices in some parts of the country in 1979) did not disturb the planners again but the improvement in productivity of dairy animals in hill areas as well as in plains did attract the attention of the planners. Thus on one hand, the projects were submitted to NABARD for Gochar land development in Gujarat though using irrigation for the cultivation of fodder and in areas where the prices of fodder was anyway least. On the other hand, some other projects were developed which required massive investments in infrastructure and organisation without providing attention towards the organisation of poor people to govern, control and manage these resources.

FICCI also submitted a project to Ministry of Agriculture as learnt through reliable sources, almost at the same time 1982-83. The original garden path was that the wastelands near the airports in different parts of the country, would be granted to industrialists without any land ceiling restrictions so as to grow vegetables and flowers to be exported to Europe and Arab. When a concerned official enquired as to why the industrialists were not interested in developing Chambal ravines, the pressure was put for clearing the project, rather than replying to the argument. Some of the Aid Agencies also tried to 'socially' influence the people in the Ministry as well as Planning Commission to see the logic of this proposal. Later when the then Secretary, Agriculture, himself called for the file and showed interest in this matter, things

became too difficult for petty bureaucrats or technocrats only at their level. With the intervention of some people in Planning Commission the move was stalled. But this was not the end of the matter. I am not aware of recent developments but I know for sure that the idea of wasteland development by the private sector was not given up entirely. The exhortations of G.V.K. Rao published in recent issues of EPW only confirms this.

Another stream of interventions was the pressure on NABARD for developing projects for the wasteland developments because the then Prime Minister was directly interested in this matter. Designing projects with the involvement of poor are not only difficult, complicated but also less attractive to those who would like to design these projects sitting in the office. A proposal was discussed in Rajasthan under which plots of 25 acres of wasteland near district headquarters was to be given on long term lease to unemployed youth for plantation purposes. NABARD was contemplating provision of low interest, long term loan as well as some amount of R&D funds for this purpose. It is obvious that no poor person would be able to invoke confidence amongst the bankers who would give loans for this enterprise. As V.S. rightly mentions in the name of landless the benefits would have flown to the dominant minority.

What these instances show unambiguously is that the policies of wasteland development are not entirely designed by the Donors. The dominant interests within Ministries, Banks and Academic profession coalesce to generate an environment in which Donor Agencies find it convenient to move in. I am saying this with the explicit purpose of avoiding eternalisation of the cause of the problems. There is no point in blaming the colonial masters or the Donor Agencies for all the ills of public policy. They could not do what they have done or proposed to

do in future without willing collaborators in the system. More so, not everybody in these agencies will be equally insensitive to people oriented issues just the way not all bureaucrats are.

#### Future Options:

We should not talk in terms of only basic bio-mass needs of local villages if we would like the policies to be biased in the favour of poor people. The needs of local villages and local poor are obviously not coterminous as the need of the local village often implies the need identified by local village body or panchayat for furthering minority interests.

If equity of industrial plantation was purchased through wage sharing by the poor landless who could in turn be enabled to manage the enterprise which would use this plantation resource then the plantation itself does not become a problem unless it is against the ecological needs.<sup>1</sup> The Ungra project in Karnataka conceived by a group of professionals from IIS, IIM and KCST was a step in this direction involving sisal plantation on wastelands by the landless. Unfortunately, that project did not grow too far. This does not mean, however, that alternatives of this type should not be thought of.

The public distribution system of fodder (tried to a limited extent in Gujarat) not merely in the drought period but also in the non-drought period would be a great incentive for a different strategy of livestock development. There are areas where huge amount of bio-mas exists, for example, Banni pastures in Kutch. However, public programmes for harvesting these grasses

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<sup>1</sup>Late Prof. Mathai had suggested such an alternative for Deogarh region in Rajasthan but based on loans from private sector and technical input from CSIR and ICAR institutions. I was critical of it at that time due to fears about non-replicability.

and stacking them for use in scarcity areas are implemented through the same tribal chiefs who exploit the local landless men and women. This again does not imply that alternative institutional arrangements cannot be developed. GSRDC did try to develop wastelands with the purpose of cultivation of fodder and its sale to local people. However, the lack of involvement of poor in design and management of these projects led to the usual consequences.

Within NABARD, there are professionals who are genuinely concerned about the interest of the poor. Unfortunately, these professionals are outnumbered by those for whom the quantities or targets are more important than the final impact on the poor. There is nothing wrong in recovering the loans which would need to be given for development of wastelands to the groups of poor. However, the leaders in NABARD are aware that commercial and cooperative banks very seldom pass on the benefits of longer repayment schedules to the beneficiaries despite clear instructions to that effect in the project documents. However, since 'a change not monitored is a change not desired' (Gupta 1984) one can only presume that NABARD is not able to enforce its own direction because of some problems which it finds difficult to solve. More than the money and the material the improvement of wastelands of various categories including village commons requires management which in this case will have to be in the hands of people who have to be provided an assurance about the future supply of returns from the present supply of restraint by them. It is well known that the degree of assurance which different classes need to make investment in any enterprise is not uniform even if the environmental risk is similar. The reason is that the stakes of the vulnerable poor are much more compared to the rich. Even though the poor may have greater willingness to contribute restraint they may not have capacity to do so. On the other hand the richer people may have greater capacity but may not have willingness to contribute. The organisational arrangements which will ensure that different

classes are provided different ration of assurance will have to be devised before taking up any investments. The fact still remains that by the time such organisational alternatives emerge, certain forces in the Government in coalition with the industrial interests will appropriate whatever resources exist. Thus the choice is really difficult. What is needed urgently is to recognise that violence around grazing lands (commons as well as not so common) if continues unattended man well engulf the social fabric much more irrevocably.

To me the real problem is not the development of only the village commons or the forest lands but concerns the whole gamut of demand and supply of dry matter by different classes owning predominantly different species and having differential access to private and public relief mechanisms. Such a concern would imply that a minority of professionals, NGOs, academicians and bureaucrats interested in the subject must realise the need for proper conceptualisation of the problem lest the solutions become the problems.<sup>2</sup> The hope of emergence of protest movements in support of reclamation of commons seem far fetched when village panchayats themselves allot these lands to forest departments for closure so that they could prevent landless from grazing their animals on these lands. And it is not uncommon as I found in western Haryana that the best parts of the village lands are given first for this purpose. I am convinced that there is no reason to dispute the need for development of common and private wastelands and their productivity. However, the survival needs of poor in the short run must be explicitly provided for in any developmental strategy so that the ability of the poor to participate in the contest for control of value added commons in long run is enhanced. The

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<sup>2</sup>Whether 'cattle wars' take place or not in the Indian arid west, what is beyond doubt is the fact that pastoralists will not succumb meekly, indefinitely. The Supreme Court judgement in 1984 is an indication of that.

tragedy will be far more severe if commons improve without improving the lot of commons  
poors. This is indeed the paradox for which solutions exist if only we would discuss them  
amongst ourselves and with poor as well as their official developers - the policy makers.

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