

Outline of discussions on commons perspective to development discourse

Background: The historical injustice done in the gradual appropriation of commons by the ruling elite (in the current context of India, the Capitalist class and in some contexts, the ruling Communist parties in the name of Dictatorship of the Proletariat). In terms of affected communities forest dwelling and forest dependent communities, pastoralists, small and traditional fisher folk and small and 'traditional' farmers, the commons is vital to their very survival in myriad ways. This relationship has not just been broken by usurpation of lands, it also relates to short sighted policies that force dependence on markets and commodities rather than first taking into account the dependence of a large section of the population on nature. The result has been a steady increase in the subsidies ostensibly for the poor but in reality lines the pockets of the rich with only a fraction of the amount reaching the intended beneficiaries.

Relevance of ecosystem approach to the commons: A number of studies point to the fact that different communities have distinct niches on which they depend. These are dynamic niches and while the physical spaces overlap, the niche does not. This dynamism in the niche formation and its relation to livelihood support systems is not understood resulting in short sighted policies taking at best the de jure status of the land into account. The de facto status is very complex to understand and requires long term and multi disciplinary/ multi dimensional studies to begin to at least comprehend what is taking place. A beginning has been made by recognising the relevance of the gram sabha to capture these complexities, but this ignores migratory communities particularly those having seasonal/short term dependence on the resource. The net effect is a complex spiral web of vertical and horizontal set of relationships.

This brings home the fact that individuals/communities that are part of this complex spiral web may at best understand and grasp their own concerns but not the entirety, the 'conflict of interest' that so arises as a barrier to comprehensive understanding requires an 'unbiased' external force to help facilitate an action based learning process. Such an 'unbiased' agency does not exist. However the sum total of human experiences and current developments provides the material on which to make a start to understanding the difference in 'systemic change' from system change. This is an appeal to those who have learnt enough to understand that the current system has no answers and a sincere effort is first needed to first free ourselves from the system spectacles that it gives so that we can begin to fathom what is it, that is needed for real change.

The theory of value and its limitations: Classical Economic theory culminating in Adam Smith and Ricardo found full expression in Marx's seminal work 'Das Kapital'. For the purpose of this discussion, the theory of 'socially useful productive labour' being the source of all value. The relevance of nature is factored into this and herein comes the rub. The impact of the human production system on nature is only now being slowly understood. Political positions notwithstanding, it is widely understood that this impact is borne primarily by the poor, disadvantaged and voiceless communities. It is our contention that this has a cost. Capitalism now talks in terms of unintended consequences, Stalin in his paper 'Economic problems of the USSR' talked of the fallacy of Comrades doing as they liked with nature as nature is governed by its own laws and not economic laws. The major common attempt to address this issue was taken up by the Brundtland Commission which brought out the report 'Our Common Future'. More than 30 years later, the world is still floundering.

As concerned individuals /groups we want to initiate a process of discussion that can begin to show us light at the end of the tunnel. We invite your participation in this regard.
