# Greening the Commons

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Ours is primarily a land of peasants and labourers, many of whom produce or earn barely enough to purchase the food they need. A majority among them cannot afford to pay for their other biomass needs. These needs are considerable — quantities of fuel, fodder, small timber, thatch, and organic manure whose continued availability is absolutely critical to most rural households. They fulfil these partly from agricultural wastes like cotton sticks and paddy straw, but more importantly from the biomass they gather from common lands. The dependence on common lands is even more acute among those sections of the rural population whose mode of livelihood does not depend on cultivated land, yet whose dependence on biomass resources is total — for example, nomadic shepherds and artisans such as basket-weavers.

The health of the plant cover of these common lands is, therefore, critical to the quality of life of hundreds of millions of Indians. Unfortunately, such lands are under stress everywhere. Part of the problem arises from the mounting population pressure; but that is by no means the whole story. In the last century and a quarter, these lands, earlier under *de facto* control of village communities, have been progressively taken over by the state and worked for commercial purposes. This process has been punctuated by bursts of widespread conflict between the state machinery and peasants who feel that their longstanding claims on forest produce have been neglected in favour of meeting urban and industrial demand for forest raw material. These conflicts, which show no signs of abating, have had a serious and adverse impact on the natural environment as well.

While our common lands are progressively getting degraded, most rural households continue to be crucially dependent on biomass resources. Regreening the commons is, therefore, one of the major development challenges of the day. Ironically, with the growing evidence of the mismanagement of these lands in contemporary India, we also have growing anthropological and historical evidence that this was not always the case. Barely a century ago, there did exist a widespread network of village forests, with well-knit local communities guarding and managing these resources quite effectively. But at that time these communities had the right to exclude outsiders from their community lands and to punish any of their own erring members. The British, by emphasising state monopoly over forest production and protection, took away such authority, grudgingly replacing it with some privileges. This divorce between use of and control over resources has had disastrous consequences, with the open access resources subjected to continual over exploitation.

After independence, this trend has intensified, with the government favouring the option of taking more and more lands under its control. Moreover, some of the traditions of local responsibility that still persisted crumbled after independence, in the wake of the politicisation that the elections brought in. At the same time, state control has also failed to deliver the goods, with the administrative machinery itself a vested interest accountable to no one.

The local government official, under threat of transfer from day-to-day, and under pressure from the political machinery, cannot be expected to be concerned with the health of the forest or grazing lands of any particular village. He is either helpless, or sometimes even a party to the shortsighted exploitation of these resources that is going on all over the country. Transferring the control of common lands to private hands is also no solution for such transfers ultimately end up benefitting a small class of richer landowners at the cost of the bulk of the rural population.

What then shall we do? The only ecologically sustainable and socially just option, especially in the long run, is to design an effective system of community management resting on local control. It is true that in the century-and-a-quarter since the state took over the forests, in many parts of the country a complex of factors have worked to erode the social networks which earlier enabled successful community management. These include: the greater penetration of the market and consequently of new opportunities for commercial agriculture (and commercial forestry), growing demographic pressures (both human and animal) on a shrinking resource base, and the use by the rich of the political system to advance their own ends.

These difficulties notwithstanding, it nevertheless remains true that the establishment of a decentralised, participatory system of forest management is imperative. For the only people whose self interest is firmly linked to the good management of the common lands are the local landless, the small and marginal farmers, the pastoral nomads, and the basket weavers and other artisans. It is this self-interest that could ultimately save these lands, and the people themselves, if it can be channelised properly.

This is a difficult task, for these people are disorganised and with little political and economic clout, *But it must be done.* This note, based on the

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experience of a number of voluntary groups closely working with villagers over the past several years in many parts of the state of Karnataka, provides some pointers on how we can begin. We hope it can initiate discussion on a theme seriously neglected in scholarly and policy debates but which is of critical importance to hundreds of millions of Indians.

1. *Identification of Common Lands*: There is an urgent need for scientific studies on the precise extent of rural biomass needs as existing in different parts of the country. These estimates can provide the basis for estimates of the common land required for fulfilling these requirements on a sustainable basis. Such estimates are needed at various levels — disaggregated to as decentralised a level as possible, preferably that of a village. Our rural colleges and high schools could be gainfully involved in conducting such studies, providing them a worthwhile task around which part of the teaching programme can be organised. Local voluntary agencies should also participate in such an exercise.

If the present availability of panchayat, revenue, gomal lands, minor forests, etc. (the definitions will vary across States) is not adequate to meet these estimated biomass needs, then other government land, *including reserved forests*, should be made available for the purpose. There should be a check on further transferring of land presently under the control of the revenue department or otherwise earmarked to meet the biomass needs of the villagers to the category of reserved forest. Unlike in the past, acquisition of land for government projects, etc should not be done without full consideration of the impact such acquisition will have on common lands and the availability of biomass resources.

2. *Legal Status of Common Lands*: To ensure the effective protection to and equitable distribution of forest produce, the organisational unit for the management of common lands should be the *village*, not larger and more heterogeneous units such as revenue village or Mandal Panchayat. The control of such land should not be with the revenue or forest departments or any other government agency, but with the community. In the present system, resource use is separated from resource management — while the community has certain privileges, common land is almost wholly owned and controlled by the state. In the system being proposed here, the government will play the role of facilitator and enabler, whereas control over common lands will vest in village level management committees.

This calls for an entirely new legal framework transferring effective control over common lands to relatively small and fairly homogeneous local communities. Only when the village communities are fully assured that the lands assigned to them and its produce will not be expropriated by the government will they regain their confidence to collectively manage such lands. Their ability to perform this role depends on powers to exclude outgroup members and to regulate the behaviour of in-group members. The local communities should be duly empowered to perform this regulatory function.

3. *Managing the Common Lands*: Management of the common lands should be the collective responsibility of the village population. However, within the village, some groups — for example, poor and landless families, artisans, and women — have a comparatively greater dependence on common lands while having comparatively little political influence. Hence they must be given a special role in the management of the common lands. Having transferred effective control of common lands to the villagers, the state should not be expected to go on investing for ever in production from these lands. Hence all members of the village should have access to the produce of common lands only at a price adequate to ensure its protection and regeneration. Arrangements should, however, be made for the weaker sections of the population to pay for the produce they need in the form of labour inputs. In addition, the government may financially subsidize landless and marginal families to a limited extent. Such families must obviously be given preferential employment in the plantation, protection, etc of common lands.

4. *Problems of Special Groups outside Village Society*: Taking the village as the unit of organisation effectively covers settled agricultural society. However, it does not fully account for three groups whose dependence on common lands is *total* (not merely supplementary). These are pastoral nomads, tribals, and some artisans. For each of these groups, special provisions should be made. For example, nomads should be allowed continued traditional use of biomass resources on common lands albeit under careful regulation. In areas where pastoralists are present, they could be incorporated in the management of common lands along with the host agricultural society. Similarly, tribals living in reserved forest areas must be assigned plots of forest as common land to be specifically used and managed by them for fulfilling their biomass requirements.

Special arrangements will also have to be made for those villages that do not have an adequate extent of land within reasonable distance for being assigned as common land and for meeting the biomass requirements of the poor in the towns and cities. Such needs will have to be met partly from reserved forests and partly from biomass production on farmlands.

5. *Provision of Technical Inputs*: Management of the common lands under the present day conditions must evidently take account of the much greater demographic pressure as well as the many technological advances. It is the responsibility of the society at large to ensure that the local communities are provided appropriate inputs to enable them to cope effectively with the present level of pressures and to take full advantage of scientific and technical inputs for conserving and enhancing renewable resources.

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6. *Market Forces*: It is necessary to ensure that the village commons thus constituted remain dedicated to their function of meeting the subsistence needs of the village population. This would be only possible if their production is not allowed to enter the open market — otherwise, the urban-industrial sector with its vastly greater purchasing power would quickly appropriate all produce. If, at some future time proper rehabilitation of the commons and the injection of modern technologies enhances the production to levels at which surpluses are genuinely available, rural artisans and village industries should have the first claim on this excess production.

7. *Eternal Vigilance*: There would undoubtedly be many varied vested interests and pressures in different parts of the country that could conspire to ensure that such a pattern of management does not work; that the production from the commons is overexploited in short term interests, and that the poor and needy are denied access to this production. It would, therefore, be necessary to set up a system which would ensure that information as to what is happening to the commons readily available to all, and that there is process of continual scrutiny from below as well as from above to ensure that commons are managed well.

8. *Employment and Renewable Resource Creation*: To reduce pressure on common lands, and to enable their proper development, there must be a greater emphasis on employment generation programmes for the rural poor. Some form of assured employment (modelled on the earlier Food for Work programme and the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra), should be implemented at an all India level. By gainfully employing landless and other underemployed labourers and providing them a stable source of income, such schemes would go a long way in reducing the presently unsustainable demands on the resources of common lands. However, to be properly effective such schemes should emphasise the creation of *permanent, productive resources* such as trees, pastures, and soil conservation instead of *unproductive, temporary* assets such as roads that get washed away.

9. *Industrial Demand for Forest Produce*: The demand for industries for forest produce is steadily expanding, and is at present seriously affecting the regenerative capacity of the forests. Here, it must be ensured that haphazard expansion of forest based industries is stopped. There must be no *unsustainable* demand of *nonessential* industries on the forest resources. Moreover, care should be taken that in no area should industrial demand be given preference over local biomass needs.

These suggestions for the regreening of the commons are based on our experience of one State, Karnataka. Given the enormous variations in ecology and social structure across the country, the appropriate institutional structure for any particular region/state will also vary. However, over large parts of India the greening of the commons could provide an effective focus around which the landless and poor peasants could be organised. □