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Gender and the Urban Commons in India
An Overview of Scientific Literature and the Relevance of a Feminist Political Ecology Perspective

Research Note

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Abstract

Traditionally, the concept of the commons implied a rural commons, an area of common usage for agricultural or pastoral purposes. As increasing numbers of people migrate to cities, however, sociological studies have focused on urban issues, of which the urban commons is one area of emerging research. In crowded, underdeveloped cities, residents must often rely on these shared public areas for their livelihoods or basic needs. This paper provides an overview of the literature on the urban commons in India, illustrating the relevance of a feminist political ecology perspective to sharpen its critical edge. The article begins with an overview of the commons debate and then moves on to analyse the question of the urban commons. After mapping the research on the urban commons in India, it analyses the issue of the urban commons within the context of the gender and environment debate that emerged in the 1980s. This is followed by alternative conceptualisations of gender and the environment as put forward by feminists in the Global South. Finally, a plea is made to engage in the study of the urban commons through the lens of feminist political ecology.

Keywords: India, urban commons, gender, literature, feminist political ecology

Defining the commons

If one were to look at the idea of the commons, one would invariably look at the rural commons, be it common ponds, lakes, forests, grazing lands, wastelands, meadows and so on. However, in recent years with the migration of large numbers of people to cities, the focus of research has shifted to cities and the urban commons is one area of emerging research. For the first time in human history, there are more people living in cities than in rural areas (UN 2003). Within the city, the lack of infrastructural facilities and the need to

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economise force people to depend on common areas or spaces that are available to all. Hence the urban commons – including the parks/gardens, *maidan* (open areas used for games or protest marches or just for leisure), lakes and ponds, as well as the civic commons, i.e., footpaths, railways, bridges, garbage dumps and so on – are at the centre of intense use and contestation. This paper provides an overview of the literature on urban commons in India, illustrating the relevance of a feminist political ecology perspective to sharpen its critical edge.

The commons can be defined as a resource belonging equally to all members of a community, who share it to ensure their own survival and well-being. David Bollier (2014) argues that the commons follows certain broad, general principles, including democratic participation in its management, transparency, fairness and use for personal need. The way these principles are translated into practice is highly contextual: it evolves within the given environmental context and adapts to local contingencies. Critical to the creation and management of the commons is the existence of a community that endorses certain social practices in relation to the maintenance of resources for the benefit of all. As historian and commons scholar Peter Linebaugh (2008) emphasises, the commons is not only about shared resources, but also about the social practices of managing the commons for the benefit of all. Hence, the commons is defined variously and quite similarly as consisting of (a) *a common resource* which could consist of material or immaterial resources; (b) *institutions or practices* of commoning, or processes of negotiating the use of commons; and (c) *communities or commoners* who use and reproduce the commons (De Angelis 2007). Commons are not things that can be pointed to, but are a part of social structures and processes that are constantly being shaped and enacted (Bollier / Helfriche 2015).

Garett Hardin's thesis in his famous article the "Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin 1968) is that disaster would ensue from the free use of the commons by commoners, who would deplete resources in maximising their own benefit. According to Hardin, this problem can be overcome by mutually agreed upon coercion by the majority of the affected people. Moreover, Hardin believed that in order to avoid total ruin of the commons, the best approach would be to introduce state management or private property, along with legal inheritance. This argument remained popular for decades. However, it was contested in the 1990s by the Nobel Prize winner in economics, Elinor Ostrom, in her work titled "Governing the Commons" (Ostrom 1990). Through her empirical field research among Indonesian fishermen, lobster catchers in Maine, communal landholders in Ethiopia and rubber tappers in the Amazon, she pointed out that these communities used common resources in a sustained manner. She outlined "eight design principles" which made this possible. First, the commons should have "clearly defined boundaries", delimiting both the

resources and the community of users. The remaining rules identified by Ostrom relate to commoning practices, such as "appropriation and provision rules", "collective choice arrangement", "monitoring and graduated sanctions", "collective mechanisms for resolution", as well as rules relevant to the multi-scalar governance of the commons across the local, regional, national and global levels. Ostrom thus focused mainly on institutional aspects.

Another important contribution to the definition of commons is provided by David Bollier, whose work focuses on the characteristics of resources and the way they influence the governing of the commons. For Bollier, the commons are characterised by "depletability", "excludability", "rivalrous use" and "regulation" (Bollier 2009).[1] These various understandings of the commons therefore encompass different dimensions: the *nature* of the commons, the *institutions* and practices involved, and the *commoners* or the communities or groups of users of the commons.

Urban commons

Given that large numbers of people now live in urban areas, the issue of the urban commons calls for attention. It resonates with the "right to the city" as put forward by Lefebvre, who questioned the enclosures by the state and private capital. For him, the city is a space of dynamism – a space that is created, used, shaped and reshaped by the various people who live in it and make it their home. For David Harvey (2012), too, the city is made and remade by its inhabitants, who belong to various classes and who together produce a common experience of an ever-changing city life.

In their work on the urban commons, Dellenbaugh et al. (2015) look at various dimensions of the urban – from the physical to the cultural – in the ordinary context of both the Global North and the Global South. By privileging the perspective of everyday experiences by citizens, rather than top-down planning, they identify a few challenges that the urban commons / commoners may face according to the given urban condition. These challenges include the negotiations and constant re-articulations of the commoner "we", i.e. the collective interests and identities of the urban commoners. They also entail the iterative re-definition of the boundaries of collective action. Another challenge

1 The nature of the commons and the specific community are major determinants in the governing of the commons. For example, natural resources tend to be depletable but digital information expands with users' participation. Further, certain resources are by default open to everyone – for example, watching sunsets or breathing air – and these are also non-competitive, as one person's enjoyment of the resource does not impact another's. Thus while depletable commons require commoners to establish limits on the usage of shared resources, others do not. The digital commons, for example, is more about regulating social relationships (Bollier 2009).

is to be alert to potential takeovers of the urban commons by the state and/or the market, under the guise of providing new ways of exploiting and controlling the creative and reproductive potential of the urban commons.

Against this background, Ostrom's guidelines for a clear boundary for commoners and their communities need to be rethought in an urban environment. Urban commoners are engaged in constant boundary negotiation. The urban commons institutions have to deal with governance issues across scales, given the different identities and mobilities of commoners but also the scarcity of face-to-face relations characteristic of urban communities. Furthermore, in terms of resources, the diversity and mobility across scales of the urban commoners means that interests and identities may develop in different directions, leading to different modes of production and consumption of the same urban commons, such as diverse usage of a public park, for example.

While some scholars argue for the need to move beyond the state and the market to deal with challenges posed by the urban commons, others such as Ramos (2016) believe that it is important to work within civic-state alliances and acknowledge the state's critical role in commoning strategies. All the while they do not look at the commoners as passive beneficiaries of the state or private technocratic systems. Rather, commoners are seen as being actively involved in the development and care of their cities, representing a new system of values and novel visions of their city and its future. Still others argue that it is during periods of "regulatory slippage" (Foster 2013: 66–68), that is to say, when the local governance is not strict and there is overuse by competing claims that lead to resource degradation, that the "tragedy of the commons" occurs. However, instead of tending towards more centralised government rule or resource privatisation, there are a number of cases where a more "enabling" collective action can be observed. Here, the local people / communities manage the collective resource with support from the local government in terms of incentives. These communities supplement – rather than supplant – the functions traditionally provided by the government. Another aspect of the urban commons is that it often emerges in urban spaces saturated with people, conflicting uses of resources and capitalist investment. This process is triggered by people who were once strangers, who come together to reclaim the commons and struggle to maintain it in the long term (Huron 2015). Having briefly looked at the trajectory of the commons and then the shift in focus to the urban commons in general, we can now turn to the emerging literature on India's urban commons.

An overview on urban commons research in India

The emergence of the topic

Research on the emerging field of the urban commons in India has largely focused on the ecological commons and the civic commons. Much of the focus has been on large cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai and, to a certain extent Pune city, while communal experiences in smaller cities have been largely neglected by researchers.

The emergence of the commons as a field of urban research in India was stimulated by the publication of the December 2011 issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW), "Review of Urban Affairs". In the introductory article to the issue, Vinay Gidwani and Amita Baviskar pointed out that up until then, the concept of the commons was associated largely with rural life. In recent years, however, the focus had expanded to include the collective practices that sustain communities in urban areas as well. According to the authors, these practices were erased by the capitalist expansion that had led to the colonisation, appropriation and destruction of the commons on which the poor depended, both in rural and urban areas. In the urban context, the authors highlight two major types of commons: the ecological commons and the civic commons.[2] They outline a wide ranging typology of urban commons that exist, ranging from the immaterial commons, such as the air one breathes, to the material commons such as infrastructure – public parks, gardens, schools, sidewalks, transport systems or garbage dumps (that provide sources of livelihood for waste pickers) – to inherited commons such as bodies of water, riverbeds, lakes and so on. These urban commons are slowly but surely being erased or enclosed as cities fall for the capitalist trap of ostensible improvement that actually only transforms the commons into urban showcases. As a result, the contribution and collective practices of the commoners are slowly being erased and their sources of vitality put in jeopardy.

River and lake basins as commons

In her work on the city of Delhi, Baviskar (2011) maps the changes that have occurred along the Yamuna river banks, which were transformed from an economically unimportant "non-place" occupied by very poor "non-people" to that of a commodified, anesthetised riverfront during the liberalisation period, starting in 1991. Under the pretext of creating a public space, it was actually transformed into a "terra nullius" or an uninhabited place that now invites

2 The ecological commons are constituted by the natural environment, such as bodies of water, riverbeds, lakes, etc. while the civic commons are based on maintained infrastructure such as parks, gardens, schools, sidewalks, transport systems, garbage dumps, etc.

investments from corporate capital, in order to create spaces similar to those in other world-class cities for private and elite consumption. As the author poignantly stresses, recurrent floods are nonetheless a reminder that there exist ecological limits to economic capital and that the river defies domestication.

Along with riverfronts, bodies of water such as lakes, ponds and seashores are a notable area of research on urban commons in India. An increasing number of studies have been conducted on the increasing urbanisation and the resultant conversion of bodies of water to private or public use within cities and in peri-urban areas. Here, works by Sundaresan (2011), Maringanti (2011) and D'Souza and Nagendra (2011), among others, are of note. In a paper on the lake commons of Bangalore (officially called Bengaluru), Sundaresan (2011) looks at the transformations over time of a lake and of its relationship with the communities living around it under modern bureaucratic systems of management. He argues that instead of examining the struggle towards the commoning of the lake through the lens of "bourgeois environmentalism",[3] one needs to define the commons in terms of the changing landscape of the communities involved in the struggle. The transformation of the commons often occurs at the inter-phase where democratic struggles and bureaucratic planning systems meet, which can lead to the transformation of the commons and the communities themselves. Claiming the planning process is thus fundamental. The production of the commons in Bangalore was channelled through the public sphere of urban governance, and it was through claiming the planning process that a new community of concern for the lake emerged.

In his article on Hyderabad, Maringati explores the right to the city through the struggles for access to lakes as urban commons. He analyses the tactics employed by an insurgent citizenship to establish their claims to the commons, through processes of occupation and legitimation. He argues that unlike the rural areas where one has to fight against the might of private corporate capital overtaking the commons, forests or mines, in urban areas this struggle involves as much a fight against government power as against the social power that gets played out through various privileges defined by caste, gender and other categories. Hence, exercising a right to the city as a right to the commons requires processes of collaborative knowledge production, which empower people to acknowledge and reject previous and existing discriminations. The author finds that in this context the control over information and knowledge plays an important role in creating new communities, which in turn generate information for a new ethics of the commons.

3 Bourgeois environmentalism" refers to environmental concerns of the upper class that are mainly centred around aesthetics, open green leisure spaces, clean air, etc. even at the cost of the requirements of the poor. It reflects the contradictory logic of the increasingly affluent lifestyle of the middle-class, which results in environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity and is rooted primarily in middle-class-rooted conservation agendas.

A related article on the lake commons is the one by D'Souza and Nagendra (2011), who focus on changes in public commons due to urbanisation in the Agara Lake basin, located in Bangalore. They argue that urbanisation brought about a shift in the management and governance of lakes from the community level to the state level. The discharge of wastewater from nearby households and small industrial units has polluted lakes and thereby altered ecological dynamics. This has also led to the depletion of ground water sources. With water now being brought into the city of Bangalore from the river Cauvery, the maintenance of the lakes has deteriorated and the lakes have been put to other uses. A shift occurred in terms of the needs that the lakes fulfilled. Earlier on, the community managed lakes with an eye to the holistic fulfilment of local needs, including both water and food security (fishing, grazing cattle, domestic water usage), as well as cultural and spiritual needs, in ways that were inclusive of the people belonging to the lower income group. Against this background, the system is now governed by governmental agencies through private-public partnerships, which exclude lower income users and fulfil urban recreational and leisure needs such as jogging, walking and cycling tracks, bird watching zones, and so on. These are now considered an oasis of nature in the city.

In further work published by Nagendra[4] on the lake commons of Bangalore city, she and Ostrom use a social-ecological system framework to understand why within the context of urbanisation certain lake commons have been successful in negotiating the shift from community-based systems of management to state management (Nagendra / Ostrom 2014). Debunking the idea that people will not organise efforts to deal with issues related to commonly pooled resources, they highlight success stories of collective action and their positive ecological impacts. Furthermore, they emphasise the need to explore government-community partnerships to provide inclusive, equitable and sustainable alternatives to privatisation. On this note, assessing the impact of Private-Public-Partnership (PPP) in the governance of Bangalore lake commons, Unnikrishnan and Nagendra (2014) point out the negative effects on social equality brought about by PPPs. The authors find that in comparison to the state management of lakes that support greater diversity in terms of traditional livelihoods, non-commercial uses and cultural services, the PPP model of lake governance tends to exacerbate inequities. By the imposition of entry fees and the shift in focus to promoting recreation (for joggers, walkers) rather than traditional usage (grazing, washing), the marginal groups are excluded from accessing the lake commons. They therefore urge a reconsideration of this model of governance.

4 See Nagendra / Ostrom 2014, Unnikrishnan / Nagendra 2014 and Unnikrishnan et al. 2016.

In another article, Unnikrishnan et al. (2016) look at the changing notions of the urban commons in the wake of increased urbanisation, migration and change in landscapes. They call for more historical research on the urban commons to help understand the contemporary trends and develop policies for the management of the commons. In so doing, they also emphasise that with growing urbanisation and migration, the usage of the urban commons reflects the requirements of the wealthy citizenry for recreation rather than the need for ecosystem services required by the traditional users who are often pushed out of the area. Mapping the transition of a lake in Bangalore to a sports stadium through the use of historical records, maps and oral histories, they highlight this transformation of a lake commons.

Highlighting the ways in which the less privileged eke out a living from the ecological commons, Parthasarathy's paper (2011) focuses on Mumbai city. The paper examines the invisible commoning practices of the city's hunters, gatherers and foragers: the marginalised tribal communities and the artisanal fishers, the salt pan workers who perform primary sector activities using the publicly owned bodies of water such as the sea, the rivers or parks – like the Sanjay Gandhi National Park – to eke out a living. Although these still remain publicly owned spaces, these marginalised communities are displaced as Mumbai increasingly emerges as a "global city".

Urban waste as a common good

In Indian cities, the emphasis on the city–nature relationship reflects a middle- and upper-class preoccupation with urban environmental aesthetics and notions of leisure, safety and health that Baviskar terms as "bourgeois environmentalism" (Baviskar 2003). Mawdsley (2004), exploring the rise of the middle classes and their active involvement in environment debates, argues that this has been due to their rising power as consumers and their control over the media, NGOs, bureaucracy and legal establishments. Along with this comes the rise of an environmental consciousness among the middle classes. They attribute the destruction of the urban environment to the rising numbers of people migrating to the cities, especially the poor. This, she argues, may have negative consequences for the poor. Ghertner (2011), referring to the "Clean Delhi, Green Delhi" campaign, points out that the discourse was built around the removal of slums that were considered a "nuisance" in legal terms. The slums were equated with filth and unruliness and seen as being responsible for destruction of the environment. The environment was reduced to matters of aesthetics. Hence the study of the urban commons – be it the ecological commons of lakes, rivers, water bodies or the civic commons of parks, *maidans*, footpaths or garbage dumps – is the focus of research in India.

In fact, the state of public sanitation, filth and lack of hygiene in India's cities has long been an issue of debate. Since the 1990s there has been a steady increase in the quantity of disposable consumer goods in urban India. One of the rising issues of modern-day urban life and its consumption lifestyle is the daily generation of tonnes of waste that is dumped out of sight in distant dump sites. The waste generated entails work of various kinds, at various levels, and provides a livelihood to waste pickers. In his photo essay on waste, Gidwani (2013) highlights the vital yet invisible work of waste pickers in the city of Delhi, whose everyday work is woven into the very fabric and working of the city. Referring to Walter Benjamin's "cultural-historical dialectic", he highlights the positive in that which has been rejected and marginalised, the political economy of the commons, waste and value. Through his photographs he argues that at certain moments in history, the waste is seen as a commons and subsumed under "capitalist discipline". The waste constitutes a commons that is used by a diverse community of waste pickers who, through practices of commoning, create value and return the detritus of the city to circuits of value. Further he argues that waste has now come to mark the capital's external as well as internal frontier, the "unruly other" that time and again escapes the capital's discipline.

In 2014, the issue of waste disposal acquired an important place in the government agenda, with the launch of the Swachh Bharat ("Clean India") Mission by Prime Minister Modi in October (which symbolically falls on the birth anniversary of Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, who fought relentlessly for a clean India). This programme has pushed towards the enclosure/privatisation of waste, against the interest of waste pickers. In Pune, however, they have resisted it by establishing collectives, based on the notion of waste as a common good.

In the face of the challenge of enclosure and privatisation of waste, the waste pickers of Pune city, in West India, organised themselves into a worker's collective that has ensured that their work space gets recognised as legitimate, improving their working conditions and contributing to public health and the environment. Among the informal waste pickers women constitute 90 per cent, largely belonging to the erstwhile scheduled castes. They are largely illiterate, work for more than 9–12 hours daily and walk more than 5 kilometres to reach the waste dumps (Chikarmane 2012). At the first convention of the waste-pickers' collective in Pune – the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP)[5] – in 1993, women informal workers protested against harassment

5 At the first convention of waste pickers and itinerant waste buyers in Pune city in 1993, the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat ("Trade Union of Waste-pickers") was formed after the passing of a resolution. The process of organising waste-pickers into a critical mass began much earlier and was an outcome of the implementation of the National Adult Education Programme of the SNDT Women's University in 1990. The collective was formed under the leadership of Dr Adhav, by the SNDT activists and Mohan Nanavre, the son of a waste-picker. The over 800 people assembled at the 1st convention asserted their ownership

and for the right to work with dignity, staking their claim on the collection of recyclables (Chikarmane 2012).[6] The KKPKP argued that sites of the waste pickers' work – public spaces such as streets, garbage dumps, etc. – should be recognised as "new" workplaces. However, with the capture of public spaces by the market and the elite, the voices of the informal workers have often been made invisible. The waste pickers realised that the "scavenging" they did was also "work" and that it was crucial, economically, socially and environmentally to the solid waste management of the city and to environment conservation.

In 2007 their activities led to the birth of SWaCH (Solid Waste Collection Handling, and at the same time meaning "clean" in Marathi), a fully worker-owned cooperative, 78 per cent of its members being women.[7] This example shows how commoners – here the waste pickers – as a counter-model to "bourgeois environmentalism" can successfully defend their right to livelihood and form alternatives that are transformative for the workers as well as for the general public, by organising into a collective to stake their claims to waste as a commons and articulating an area of citizen power and self-governance.

Access of women to public spaces as urban commons

Another strain of research on urban commons in India is relevant to the public spaces accessible to women. As illustrated by Ranade, Phadke and Khan (2009a), the city of Mumbai has hardly any parks, *maidans* and public spaces that are conducive and accessible to women for recreation. The existing ones are often badly maintained and/or policed and tend to exclude rather than include women (the poor, lower castes, minority communities – both religious and sexual, and the elderly). This is especially so in the post-liberalisation period of the growth of paid and privately managed public parks by local resident groups that have aesthetically improved and maintained the spaces but have in turn excluded certain groups of people from its use. This enclosure of public spaces privileges access to the public spaces to certain women, while at the same time denying others the same, based on intersections of caste, class and religion. This prevents women from participating in shaping the city (Ranade et al. 2009a). It is argued that only when women are able to access the city without having to demonstrate a purpose or reason for being outside can the city truly belong to all (ibid.: 436–438). The book *Why Loiter*? by the

over waste. The collective was joined by villagers living on the outskirts of Pune city, who were protesting against the dumping of urban wastes onto their lands. The waste pickers have agitated to be integrated into the value chains of waste disposal and against the indiscriminate dumping that was destroying their way of life, the environment and health.

6 As one of the organisers of the KKPKP, Chikarmane has worked amongst the waste pickers of Pune city using a Freirean conscientisation method and dialogue to mobilise the workers to realise the economic importance of their work of waste recycling not only to the city but to the larger global environment.

7 SWaCH entered into a memorandum of understanding in 2007 with the Pune Municipal Corporation to provide front-end waste management services for the city.

same authors has led to a campaign by women to reclaim public spaces in some cities in India as well as Pakistan. It is a small but growing movement started by a group of women who deliberately loiter in the city and explore the city by foot at night. It attempts to question the societal restrictions on the movement of women in public spaces.

Engendering the urban commons: A Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) perspective

The question of the urban commons is often – as the above examples show – a question especially relevant for women, particularly in India. We will thus review how ecofeminism in the Global South (cf. Shiva 1989, Mies / Shiva 1993) as a foundation for a feminist political ecology perspective can provide useful input on the debate on urban commons research.

Ecofeminism points out the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature in a capitalist-patriarchal world. It argues that women see themselves as being closer to nature, as they share reproductive experiences with nature and also similar experiences of domination and subjugation. The oppression and exploitation of women and nature, they point out, reflects a dichotomy between man and nature.[8] This approach has roots in the Western Cartesian concept of natural environments as a resource, detached from human beings.[9] This shift in perspective was generated in Europe by the male-dominated scientific revolution, capitalism and colonialism, which showed how women and nature share a close relationship, feminising nature (Merchant 1990). The dualisms of nature-culture, feminine-masculine, and emotion-reason are traced back to Western patriarchal thought that juxtaposes the relations between the human and natural world. Oppression underlies these dualisms. The human capacity for reason and thought is considered to be hierarchically above wild and unreasonable nature (Plumwood 1993).

Ecofeminist scholars like Vandana Shiva (1988) have criticised Western ecofeminists for their narrow focus on the conceptual world and for ignoring the lived realities of postcolonial societies. Bina Agarwal (1992) similarly pointed out the importance of the concrete reality of women's lives in the Global South, putting forward the idea of "feminist environmentalism". Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) endorses these critiques, by looking at the intersections of gender, race, class and caste in shaping environmental relations. The FPE perspective emerged in the 1990s to redress the negative, essentialist colour

8 On ecofeminism see e.g. Merchant 1980; Warren 1987, 1990; Plumwood 1993; Gaard 1993, 2011.

9 Cf. the concepts of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. On the powerful mindshift brought about by Descartes, see Capra / Mattei 2016.

that was related to the feminist analysis of environment issues. It is an offshoot of political ecology and questions the way power influences people's access and control of resources at different scales, from the local to the global. It focuses on the links between environment and society, as they co-produce each other (Castree / Braun 2001). FPE draws on ecofeminism, feminist science studies and feminist critiques of development. The idea that women can also be creators, knowers and producers of knowledge is a core aspect of FPE.[10] By endorsing situated knowledge (Haraway 1991), i.e. knowledge that emerges in relation to social locations and partial objectivities (Harding 1986) and that incorporates the potential of local knowledge, FPE develops more responsible ways of knowledge production. Consistent with the feminist critique of development, FPE has pointed out the adverse consequences on women caused by neglecting gender differences in development and conservation projects. It emphasises women as actors who are actively engaged in embodied practices of everyday environmental engagement. Like other strains of political ecology research, FPE emphasises the issues of social equity and social justice in line with feminism, taking as its focus the imbalances in power relations. This framework sustains a gendered analysis of the way knowledge is produced and the way power and politics influence the use, access and distribution of resources. It also resonates with a gendered analysis of grassroots environmental action.

To sum up, FPE encompasses (a) an intersectional analysis of human-nature relations; (b) a multi scalar analysis of power differentials and the way these translate into embodied experiences of environmental degradation and dispossession; and (c) an analysis of knowledge production and decision-making processes that shape environmental governance. Analysing the Urban Commons using this perspective would be highly relevant, especially because it integrates power and power relationships. While feminists have long analysed the commons, we find today an emphasis on the study of commoning as providing a radical alternative to marketisation and neoliberal practices. As Sylvia Federici (2019) points out, commoning brings to light the importance of the everyday processes of social reproduction, done mainly by women through processes of sharing and caring. In part, these practices originate from the fact that women depend on access to the commons – firewood, water, etc. – as part of their reproductive work, both historically and in the present times. Privatisation and enclosure of the commons have affected women the most, and they are often the ones who have come to the defence of the commons (Mies / Benholdt-Thomsen 1999). Hence, a feminist perspective is key to the task of

10 For FPE gender is treated as a critical variable that shapes resource access and control while taking into account the intersections of caste, class, gender, culture and ethnicity in shaping the processes of environmental change. It treats women as participants and partners in the preservation of the environment while at the same time looking after their livelihood issues. Hence the FPE perspective is a novel form of knowledge production.

reconstructing the commons with a community that is inclusive, based on cooperation and responsibility to one another and to the environment. It adopts an intersectional approach in which gender is but one of the various axes on which the community is formed. It also argues for an understanding of gendered subjectivities in collective action in the management of the commons, and emphasises the study of commoning practices rather than the commons themselves (Clement et al 2019).

In the review of the emerging work on the urban commons in India, we can see that the focus has been largely on large cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi and Hyderabad and the burgeoning second-tier city of Pune. The research reviewed in this paper has covered a variety of aspects in the ecological and civic commons, including (a) the change in land use, commodification, and the enclosure of river and lake basins; (b) processes of planning and policy making incorporated as a part of the process of commoning along with the creation of new communities of concern; (c) commoning processes sustained by marginalised communities that make their livelihoods through primary sector activities in the face of privatisation and transformation of the city into a global city; (d) access to parks and *maidans*; and (e) the collective mobilisations over waste as commons.

Overall, the research reviewed here shows that the commons are resources that are shared through practices of commoning by people whose livelihood needs are fulfilled through the commons. This is done by communities who are dependent on these commons and who follow certain unwritten practices in order to maintain them. The invisible commoning practices of the local communities, particularly of women, in maintaining and using the commons for their livelihood are gradually being erased. Corporate capital and neoliberal state policies are wilfully erasing the commons as well as the practices of the commoners and their contributions to city making. Since women are important maintainers of these commons, in so doing these interests are also invisibilising and marginalising their practices.

This provides a first, important rationale to employing the lens of a feminist political ecology perspective. Indeed, an FPE perspective makes it possible to explore the contestations that play out over the access and use of the urban commons within a neoliberal context of increasing privatisation, appropriation and commodification of ecological and civic commons. Moreover, FPE helps to interrogate the intersections of gender with caste, class, ethnicity, religion and age, to produce a gendered analysis of power relationships and processes in practices of commoning. This would provide deeper insights into the core nature of the collective practices of the commoning that sustains urban communities. FPE can also sustain our knowledge of socio-ecological interac-

tions. In fact, feminist political ecology emphasises the need to pay attention to the gendered nature of ecological degradation and conservation.

Finally, employing the lens of FPE in the research on the Urban Commons may sustain processes of societal change. In fact, this approach may broaden our understanding of ways in which women commoners question and negotiate practices of oppression and participate in collective action for social justice and empowerment, striving for a better world. Understanding the embodied experiences of women and men in their relation to nature may provide solutions that are other than techno-scientific in nature. This may prove to be an important contribution to finding environmentally sustainable and socially just solutions to civilisational challenges in the current era.

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