

Shifting Landscapes: The Making and Remaking of Village commons in India, by **Rita Brara**. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. 321 pp. Rs. 1000 hardback. ISBN: 9-780195673012.

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Social anthropological work in India in the last decade has seen a neglect of rural and agrarian issues, with the discipline's focus shifting to concerns like sexuality, globalization, diaspora, and urbanity. In this milieu *Shifting Landscapes* marks an exception and is an important addition to the study of rurality in India. It puts commons (as opposed to private property that has received substantial scholarly attention) at the centre of theorizing about rurality. The book argues for theorizing the village as a frame for locating fluid social representations and practices rather than as a reified community. While emphasizing the importance of the commons, especially pastures, in studying the village, it makes a case for exploring the linkages between agriculture and pastoralism.

Unlike most commons scholarship, which is essentially synchronic in nature, *Shifting Landscapes* historicizes the village commons in a delimited region in Rajasthan, India, and posits that central to their formation has been a process of codification through land settlements in the years 1940 and 1956 and the subsequent land reforms and land

redistribution in the area. Continuing her argument, Brara explicates how such codification of land rights has led to the transition from a hybridity of entitlements, obligations, and practices regarding the village commons to the increasing legitimization of the language of the law that has favoured the rich and powerful men belonging to the upper castes, who have slowly but irrevocably encroached upon the common lands.

Drawing upon the works of Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Frazer, the process of marginalization of women and the lower castes is juxtaposed against the creation of, what the author calls, ‘the village public sphere’. This creation has allowed the villagers to challenge the intrusion of the state, residents of other villages, and transhumant groups into the village commons. In an interesting case of institutional bricolage, the institution that serves as the node for such an engagement is the informal and non-legal village committee. These committees are composed of important male representatives of all the caste groups in the village, and in addition to managing the commons they fulfil most of the functions expected of the statutory village council.

Brara points out the irony of the fact that it was the state that provided the initial impetus for the creation of ‘the village public sphere’ by restructuring village sociality when it abolished feudalism. This has been accompanied by an increase in occupational homogeneity in the villages in the region that is centred on rain-fed agriculture and pastoralism and a certain decrease in the importance of old tenorial hierarchies. One of the most significant observations of the book is that the relations between the villagers are not over-determined by caste identities and are constituted in a fluid manner by contingent, communal livelihood practices such as transhumance, by the slow erasure of caste-based patterns of animal ownership, and the movement away from large pasturing

animals to sedentary and smaller animals. In this context the author makes a case for a gendered understanding of the processes through which village sociality and the commons interact with each other.

The changes detailed in the preceding paragraphs are framed within the context of increasing pressures on commons pastures due to population growth, statutization of commons and increasing encroachments (as perceived by the villagers) by powerful residents and the state. Such processes parallel the continuing discursive creation of village commons as non-productive ‘waste-lands’ that has enabled the twin processes of slow privatisation and statist attempts at environmental engineering in the form of ‘afforestation’ programmes that employ the expertise of scientists. Such de-contextualized, techno-managerial knowledge is counterpoised with what Brara details as ‘appropriate’ local knowledge.

But the book does not substantively engage with important scholarly discourses like social production of knowledge and commons scholarship that seem pertinent for such a project. Nonetheless, this richly detailed study adds to the increasingly important body of work in South Asian historiography that maps the continuities in the strategies, practices, and effects of statecraft of both the colonial and post-colonial state. Brara’s historicization details the changing dynamics and the long-range continuities of the links between dry-land agro-pastoralism, the wider environmental commons, and the intended and unintended effects of statist policies and interventions such as land reforms. While doing so, the book manages to make a significant advance on the existing literature on agrarian environments. This advance is achieved by the innovative use of new materials like records of court cases involving village common lands and revenue records of the

state government on encroachments and regularization, along with an intensive ethnographic engagement. The most important contribution of the book perhaps lies in the way it simultaneously retheorizes both 'the village' and 'sociality'. By showing how locality and sociality are mutually co-constitutive, it provides us with the tools to productively interrogate categories such as 'caste', 'the agrarian' (as conventionally opposed to the pastoral), and 'the environment' and gently yet firmly steers scholarship away from sterile debates about the 'reality' of such categories.