

The onerous burdens of Hindu culture on polluted rivers and women to remain pure: how feminist political ecology explains the commons crisis

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Abstract

The concept of common property resource management owes much to popular ideas that traditional, cultural values, meanings and nature of human-environment interrelations are inherently and symbiotically sustainable. But what if these supposedly altruistic traditional/cultural human-culture-nature interrelations turned out to be imperfect, justifying relations of unequal reciprocities? Taking the case of the rivers, Bagmati in Nepal and Ganga in India – and contrasting their pollution as described technically and/or scientifically to their ascribed symbolic and inherently indestructible cultural purity, this paper illustrates that the cultural narratives around water and purity are patriarchal and destructive in as much as is the contentious ways of the cultural subordination of women's sexuality. Like water, there are onerous "purity" burdens on women's bodies – particularly those of caste women - required to remain pure, sexually secluded, so-as-to maintain pure-lines of caste-based patrilineal succession. On the other hand, like water - women's bodies are easily violated for satiating patriarchal desires of [sexual] control and aggression. A critical, feminist political ecology lens allows analysing why and how development interventions in dealing with culture, water and gender overlook these imperfections of power and inequality.