

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Considering the Woods AND the Trees

By Arun Agrawal

McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Menon and Lele's note about my 2001 World Development paper makes a useful point – that most studies of the commons tend to focus on questions of institutional persistence and ignore questions related to equity and distribution. It is a relatively normal-science criticism that they present as a novel argument. To the extent my paper represents the existing mainstream literature on the commons reasonably, Menon and Lele's attention to allocation is well justified. But this is hardly a new theme in critiques of writings on common property. Indeed, what Menon and Lele call "the mainstream literature on the commons" is such a sitting duck on issues of politics and distributional equity that it seems hardly fair to take aim at it in 2003 using this particular sling. Michael Goldman assertively made essentially the same point six years ago in a paper published in *Theory and Society*. I raise the issue in a somewhat different way – by talking about power and the ways commons scholars (do not) attend to it in their analyses – in a paper that appeared in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* at almost exactly the same time as the paper in *World Development*. I discussed the matter more directly in my 1999 book on pastoralists, *Greener Pastures*.

But the comparative review of commons studies in *World Development* in 2001 aimed at a different target. It tried to synthesize what we have learnt from two decades of writings on the commons. It compared major contributions to this body of knowledge that use distinct methods and differing strategies of analysis. It attempted to outline a way forward for the mainstream scholarship on the commons by taking its goals as given (existence and persistence of local resource management institutions) but demonstrating problems in the adopted means (case studies and relative inattention to context). Indeed, a systematic comparison of the different contributions to this literature along all or each of the incommensurate criteria of efficiency, equity, and (ecological) sustainability is not possible. To suggest that my recourse to the dimension of durability was "facile," or tantamount to an "excuse" is to ignore the real problems in comparing the goals of the works I was considering. It is worrying to me that my paper's objective may not have come across clearly to my general readers. I should have been more explicit.

But what puzzles me in Menon and Lele's note is their recognition that the dominant theme in the commons literature is to explicate the conditions under which local users self organize and local institutions function, and their simultaneous attempt to take me to task for focusing on this dominant strand. The two other strands they mention are, according to them, in the "natural resource management literature," not the commons literature – I could not agree more. Indeed, I suspect that most of those they place as being located on the second and third strand of the natural resource management literature (emphasizing ecological sustainability and social equity) are likely to see themselves more as ecological economists, political ecologists, environmental feminists, social ecologists, and so on rather than theorists of the commons. And even some of those they cite as being concerned with questions of equity, such as Jodha, are at least also equally concerned about the survival of the commons. Such convenient glosses in thinking about different literatures and analysts detracts from the usefulness of Menon and Lele's critical note.

I am further at a loss by their nomination of questions of equity and other institutional outcomes as "deeper" and "fundamental" issues, and their reference to my focus on institutional persistence as "missing the woods for the trees." To the extent policies influence sustainability, distributional equity, or efficiency in use of resources, they do so through institutions. The existence of institutions is both logically and chronologically prior to their outcomes. Interest in institutional outcomes is meaningless without institutions. One may only be interested in outcomes of a certain sort, but for that interest to be relevant to policy and action, one needs to think about and explain institutional persistence, and the relationship between the persistence of certain institutional forms and

their impact. Whatever the sort of outcome in which one is interested, one first has to think about the institutional arrangements that would promote it, and whether such institutional arrangements can be achieved on a durable basis.

In contrast, one can be concerned about institutional persistence and its explanation as a research and policy objective without considering outcomes. Indeed, this is an important reason why it is possible to examine the wide literature on the commons by assessing its contribution to the problem of what makes institutions persist (as I did). If I were deeply and mainly interested only in particular kinds of outcomes and their correlation with institutional form, then the range and number of works I need have investigated would necessarily have been smaller.

It is worth pointing out that the overall argument of my World Development paper applies with greater force to what Menon and Lele assert at the end of their note than they realize: their suggestion that we pay attention to the role of yet more variables in evaluating institutional outcomes. My paper argued that commons researchers, in their zeal to promote specific cases of commons management, have identified an impossibly large number of variables – impossibly large for systematic analysis. The factors I cited as being relevant to institutional persistence likely also have an impact on institutional outcomes. Menon and Lele assert the importance of several additional variables – complexity, renewability, use diversity, non-local externality. In so doing, they further compound the difficulties I identified without suggesting how one might systematically analyze the impact of forty-plus variables on outcomes.

Menon and Lele overstate their position when describing my paper's conclusion as an advocacy of statistical and comparative analysis. For one, I don't claim that rational choice provides a complete explanation of micro-behavior. Nor do rational choice scholars make such claims. The alternatives Menon and Lele cite – Gandhians and ecofeminists – hardly have a theory of micro-behavior. They have structuralist positions that are seldom tested against evidence regarding human behavior and are typically asserted as articles of faith. In a search of the social science citation index using the keywords "Gandhian," "ecofeminism," and "human behavior," I did not find a single article, let alone one that used evidence to substantiate Gandhian or ecofeminist explanations of human behavior. A similar search with "rationality" and "human behavior" yielded more than fifty articles. More importantly, my paper is less a plea for an atheoretical recourse to statistics and comparative case studies than an advocacy for careful thinking about causal links prior to research design and data analysis, and subsequently, testing of these causal links using analytical instruments such as statistics.

The last few paragraphs of Menon and Lele's note seem more a statement of populist stances than a reference to what I do or not do in my paper, or what commons scholars do or not do. One of the most prominent commons researchers, Elinor Ostrom, is already doing (and has been doing for more than a decade) what they suggest as important new directions for commons research – carrying out interdisciplinary research, thinking about structuring multi-level governance, and integrating ecological and social science theories. Menon and Lele might want to consider both the trees and the woods in rethinking the substance and the tone of their criticisms.

arun.agrawal@mcgill.ca