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KEYNOTE PAPER

Reimagining Commons and Governance: Pathways to Institutional Innovations

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ABSTRACT

The commons-shared natural, cultural, and digital resources-face threats from population growth, ecological crises, and market-driven commodification, necessitating a new approach to their governance. This paper challenges the traditional view of commons as mere goods, proposing that they should be regarded as living systems that deserve reverence and collective stewardship. Drawing from Indian cultural ethos and global scholarship, it explores the concept of "commoning," a social process of community-led resource management, as a transformative alternative to privatisation and state control. The study critiques historical shifts-from the Industrial Revolution's exploitation of nature to neoliberal policies that foster inequality—and highlights Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" and Elinor Ostrom's community-based governance as key frameworks. In India, practices such as sacred groves and Gandhian principles of trusteeship and village swaraj embody commoning, aligning with Satish Kumar's trinity of Soil, Soul, and Society. Institutional innovations, such as the Forest Rights Act (2006), and initiatives like Mendha-Lekha, Dediapada, and the FES's documented case studies, showcase sustainable models of equitable resource management. The paper advocates for a global "Promise of Commons" movement that integrates decentralised governance, cooperative finance, and technology to ensure ecological resilience and social justice, fostering a harmonious coexistence of individuals, society, and nature.

Keywords: Commons, commoning, governance, institutional innovations, natural resources, community participation, ecological sustainability, social justice, trusteeship, village swaraj, Forest Rights Act, collective stewardship, privatisation, neoliberalism, cultural ethos

JEL codes: B31, D02, O17, P48, Q15, Q20, Q56, Q57, Z13

I

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the commons refers to shared resources-natural, cultural, manmade, or digital-that are accessible to all members of a society. Managing these commons is crucial to prevent their monopolistic control by the state or market forces, overuse, or degradation (the so-called "tragedy of the commons"). In the 21st century, as we face a large human population of more than 8 billion, estimated to touch 12 to 13 billion in 2100, ecological crises, social inequalities, and digital changes, there is an urgent need to re-examine both the idea of the commons and the institutions that govern and regulate it.

The expression above reflects a conventional approach. However, reimagining commons requires a paradigm shift in thinking. The above expression implies that commons are viewed as tangible or intangible goods. This presents a

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narrow perspective on the human-nature interface. Commons come into existence primarily when people in a society perceive and treat natural and manmade resources as belonging to all without any personal property rights. Another dimension to consider regarding natural resources is that commons must be viewed as living and sensitive organisms and treated with reverence.

This paper focuses on two aspects. First, it reviews perspectives from which the commons are to be perceived by humanity in the backdrop of the environmental and ecological crisis. Second, it explores institutional innovations that would conserve, support, and promote equitable management of tangible natural resource commons and intangible commons in the form of people's knowledge and practices, proposing new governance models and technologies within 'community participation' frameworks. The scope of this paper is limited to studying natural resources, land, water and forest and, to some extent, knowledge and cultural resources as commons.

II

REIMAGINING COMMONS

The concept of the commons originated in medieval England, where tenants of large estates collectively used uncultivated land for grazing, fuelwood, and other purposes, managing it according to rules to prevent overuse. Over time, forests, fisheries, and water resources were also considered commons. The Industrial Revolution, followed by the 'Enlightenment Project[i]', shifted perceptions of nature from a revered living organism to a material resource for human exploitation. Francis Bacon, the founder of the empirical method of induction, advocated that nature be "hounded in her wanderings" and "tortured" for her secrets[ii]. Such perceptions laid the foundation for this shift, prioritising control and commodification with a supposedly noble objective of improved material welfare of humanity.

Max Weber's (2001 edition) "Protestant Ethics" connected disciplined work and wealth creation to modern capitalism, thereby encouraging resource exploitation. Adam Smith's "invisible hand" proposed that individual pursuits benefit public welfare. Garrett Hardin challenged this idea in his article 'Tragedy of the Commons,' showing how rational individual actions, like adding livestock to shared grazing land, can lead to resource depletion without explicit property rights or regulations[iii]. Hardin's thesis pointed to the need for clear individual property rights and an authority-controlled regulation to prevent overuse, applicable to natural resources and population growth.

The transition from foraging to settled agriculture around 10,000 years ago marked a significant shift in human history, driven by the need for more reliable food sources. Foraging required vast land areas-up to 100 square kilometres per family in arid regions-supporting low population densities, except in resource-rich coastal areas where sedentary lifestyles emerged[iv] by the start of settled agriculture, the global

population was only a few million. The Agricultural Revolution spurred population growth, reaching 200–300 million by AD 1, driven by improved food production despite high birth and death rates, famines, and diseases.

The Industrial Revolution, besides mass production of material needs of people, also accelerated population growth through advancements in agriculture and medical sciences, such as vaccines and improved child survival rates. The global population grew from 890–980 million in 1800 to 1.56–1.71 billion in 1900, and reached 6.06–6.15 billion by 2000, with growth rates peaking at 1.3–1.4 per cent in the 20th century before declining to 0.7–0.8 per cent by the early 21st century. Projections estimate it will reach 10–13 billion by 2100. The most significant feature of the Industrial Revolution was a change in both the form and quantity of energy used. Had the form of energy not shifted from human muscle and animal power to energy derived from fossil fuels, socioeconomic developments would have been different. Wood fuel was also used in the agrarian society through combustion, but its contribution at the peak of total energy use in agrarian civilisation was less than 10 per cent[v]. Fossil fuel energy was revolutionary for crop production and manufacturing. The rate of fossil fuel use has been overwhelming; it increased by 60 times during the 19th century, by 16 times during the 20th century, and by about 1,500 times over the past 220 years. Had it not been so, large populations exceeding 1 billion could not have ever been supported.

The second agricultural revolution, fuelled by fossil fuels, improved crop varieties and mechanisation, transformed food production into a hybrid system reliant on solar energy and fossil fuel inputs. A significant feature of industrialisation and capitalism was that it commodified natural resources, leading to deforestation for agriculture, timber, and urbanisation. Huge quantities of natural grasslands were converted into grazing lands. Land use shifted as forests, grazing lands, and water resources were privatised or state-controlled, significantly altering the human-nature relationship. The World Economic Forum provides data on these land-use changes since the advent of settled agriculture[vi]. Over 10,000 years, global land use shifted significantly. Forests decreased from 6.08 billion hectares (57%) to 4.08 billion (38%) by 2018. Grasslands dropped from 4.68 billion (42%) to 1.78 billion (14%). Grazing land rose to 3.28 billion (31%), crops to 1.68 billion (15%), and urban areas to 0.150 billion (1%). FAO estimates (2020-22) show the world's land area, excluding Antarctica, at 13.5 billion hectares. Agricultural land covers 4.7 billion hectares (36%), with 1.6 billion for crops and 3.2 billion for grazing. Forests span 4.1 billion hectares, with half of the global forest loss occurring since 1900. Grasslands prioritise grazing due to rising meat consumption. Urban areas, now 1 per cent of the total land, doubled since 1800, growing significantly in 1900 and 2018[vii].

Arguably, the case for the commons is weak. Croplands constitute only 12 per cent of the total land area. The rest can be regarded as common. Why are commons under threat then? An obvious reason is population pressure. It is not just

the number that threatens, but also the rapidly increasing size of the consumer goods and services basket, which uses large quantities of natural resources. A dominant view in the modern world is that accelerated economic growth and social safety nets are a panacea for poverty alleviation linked to the population problem. A more 'significant' argument regarding the population issue was also advanced. Human wisdom accepted the argument that individual freedom was the most important value to uphold. This is reflected in the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', which describes the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society[viii]. Thus, the decision to decide about the size of the family irrevocably rests with the family itself, and none other can fix it. Hardin shows that freedom leads to a tragedy of the population. The logic of the tragedy of population, the commons, and pollution works with the same logic. Individual rationality is based on maximising private gain by increasing the size of the herd and family size for more labour for agriculture, but the negative externality generated by an individual's attempt to maximise is imposed on all. An individual has to bear only a small part of the cost. Thus, each one is passing the negative externality to the whole society to maximise individual welfare in terms of the size of the family (benefiting from the common kitty), maximising own production from land, water and forest commons, and maximising profit by polluting. Hardin's argument about an individual's action leading to the exercise of individual freedom to choose and use open access resources would inevitably lead to the 'Tragedy of the Commons'.

Hardin demonstrates that the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham's idea of 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' is unattainable. He contends that it is mathematically impossible to maximise two or more variables simultaneously. The second reason, Hardin explains, 'springs directly from biological facts'. Humans require calories for survival and for their activities. The combined calories needed for maintenance and work must be maximised. Work calories are not solely for earning a living or mere survival but also for enjoying comfort, luxuries, leisure activities, sports, and adventure. If the population is maximised, then work calories would tend to zero! Assuming a finite world with limited resources for producing and consuming goods and services, achieving maximum 'good' is impossible. Some might argue that the Industrial Revolution, an unprecedented and now unstoppable pursuit in science and technology, has led to immense material prosperity for human society. Therefore, continued scientific and technological progress is seen as the way to solve development-related problems. However, two scientists have warned that technology does not hold solutions for all problems. Regarding national security and nuclear war, J.B. Wisner and H.F. York noted in an article that 'Both sides in the arms race are… confronted by the dilemma of steadily increasing military power and steadily increasing national security. It is our considered professional judgment that the dilemma has no technical solution. The use of finite natural resources has eventually led to a dilemma for which technology cannot have a solution.' The distilled wisdom of the two scientists is also relevant for 'decent human survival' on the earth

perpetually. The decency sets its own standard, adjusting to the vulgar luxury levels set by the materially super-rich people. No limit games can never be a 'win-win' game.

In the context of common use, Hardin proposed privatisation as a solution. He recommended assigning ownership of the resource to individuals or entities who have a vested interest in maintaining its sustainability. Private owners would manage the resource carefully to safeguard their long-term interests and prevent overuse. Essentially, he suggested dividing a common pasture into privately owned plots, where each owner would control grazing on their land. His second solution was strict state regulation to ensure that individuals don't violate the rules by encroaching on others' property. These solutions align with the main discourse of his time for solving such problems. Neoliberalism, which gained influence in the twenty-first century, opposed any form of state intervention regulating economic activity. Hardin's solutions, particularly privatisation and coercion, sparked debate. Critics note that privatisation risks excluding vulnerable groups or privileging the wealthy, while coercive measures threaten freedoms. They further argue that the decline of common-property regimes stems less from inherent flaws than from weakly defined property rights and institutions. Rather than dismantling community governance, strengthening these frameworks can enhance the sustainability of commons management (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975; Ostrom, 1990; Bromley, 1989, 1992; Marothia, 1993, 2002).

Elinor Ostrom (1990) provided a comprehensive response to Hardin's analysis and solutions. She argued that Hardin's model assumed that individuals acted only in their short-term self-interest and could not cooperate effectively. He overlooked the ability of communities to self-organise, develop rules, and enforce sustainable resource use. Hardin's solutions did not suit all contexts and could lead to exclusion, inefficiency, or loss of local knowledge. Hardin also implicitly assumed that people using the commons don't communicate with one another. Ostrom pointed this out, and Hardin agreed that he had overlooked this aspect[ix]. Grounded in empirical research at the global level, she argued that communities can successfully manage common-pool resources (CPRs), such as fisheries, forests, or water systems, through collective, community-based governance, thereby avoiding the tragedy of the commons without external intervention. Ostrom developed a theoretical framework in which she proposed that communities can overcome the tragedy of the commons through locally designed, cooperative systems[x]. Her theory emphasises institutional design principles that enable sustainable resource management. However, it also has certain postulates such as 'clearly defined boundaries', 'proportional equivalence between benefits and costs', 'collective choice arrangements', monitoring and penalties for violation of agreed rules.

Ostrom's work, theory, and potential for action are considered a strong alternative system to manage natural resources sustainably. In the Ostrom School of

thought, the commons are generally understood as common-pool resources (CPRs). They include a wide range of natural and cultural assets, such as lands, forests, water bodies (like wetlands, streams, rivers, canals, irrigation channels, tanks, and reservoirs), fisheries (both inland and maritime), wildlife, agro-biodiversity, sacred groves, and natural sites (including sacred hills, worship places, and mountains), as well as traditional collective knowledge. These resources have been vital for supporting local livelihoods and providing essential ecosystem services worldwide (Jodha 1986, Iyengar 1989, 2000; Singh 1994; Marothia 2002, 2024). In particular, communities—especially in India and other developing countries—have historically been the main users and custodians of these commons. However, over time, challenges such as weak property rights, ineffective institutional frameworks, increased control by government departments at the state and central levels, and the decline of local governance systems have led to widespread degradation of these resources, often transforming them into open-access resources (Marothia 2002- Ch-31, 2010).

Yet another threat is looming large over humanity. The rapid and extensive rise in fossil fuel energy use since the Industrial Revolution has led to severe negative externalities, particularly affecting the environment and ecosystems. While fossil fuels have driven economic growth and industrialisation (IEA 2020, Smil V. 2017), their combustion releases vast amounts of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, contributing significantly to global warming and climate change (IPCC 2021, EPA 2023). This has led to rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and shifting climate patterns, affecting agriculture (FAO 2021), infrastructure (UNEP 2022), and human health (NOAA National Centres for Environmental Information 2023, IPCC 2022). Additionally, fossil fuel use causes widespread air pollution, water contamination (USEPA 2023), and acid rain (WHO 2022, USGS 2022), which harm both the environment and public health (WHO 2021), especially in densely populated or industrial regions (UNEP 2021, Lancet 2022).

Beyond environmental degradation, the ecological impacts are equally alarming. The extraction and burning of fossil fuels destroy natural habitats (IPCC 2023), fragment ecosystems, and accelerate biodiversity loss (WWF 2022, IUCN 2024). Ocean acidification (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA 2024) caused by excess CO_2 threatens marine life, while land degradation from mining and drilling operations contributes to species extinction. These consequences are often disproportionately felt by vulnerable communities and future generations who have not contributed to the problem, highlighting issues of environmental injustice (UNDP 2023). Overall, the unchecked use of fossil fuels has imposed significant unaccounted costs on society and nature (IMF 2021). It potentially threatens, notwithstanding the laudable Sustainable Development Goals, the safe and healthy existence of humanity (United Nations 2023, Iyengar 2022).

It has become necessary for humanity to take a relook at how natural resources and human interface should be altered to move towards sustainable existence.

III

COMMONS RE-IMAGINED

Ostrom's extensive and influential work, as well as that of scholars following her thesis, has also been critically examined. There has been a recent shift in understanding and defining the commons. A major criticism of the Ostrom School of thought is that it is largely a 'goods-based approach'. Euler has argued that one needs to go beyond the object part of the commons. Euler, drawing from the literature, points out that essentially commons arise out of a social construct by communities. Euler calls it 'commoning'. It is abstract first and then concrete. Commons is the social form of tangible and intangible matter that is determined by commoning. He further argues that if commons refer to something that is neither the state nor the market, or even beyond state and the market, 'then the reference to the social practices may provide a good starting point'. Euler agrees with Meretz's formulation that the social practices prevalent in commons are commoning[xi]. Combining the aspects of social forms, Euler conceptualises that the commons is a social form (tangible and/or intangible) matter that is determined by commoning. With this formulation, it is made clear that social forms that are determined by other social factors are not to be considered commons. This includes, for example, production processes that involve commoning but ultimately aim at selling the products (e.g. in cooperatives). With the term social form, the way of relating to the matter is included. As the conception of commons presented here depends heavily on commoning, it is now time to develop an understanding of these social practices[xii].' The key dimensions of commoning are usage of resources, needs satisfaction, voluntariness, peer relationships, self-organisation, inclusiveness, and mediation. Thus, Commoning implies organisation and being responsible towards the resource use and maintenance. Commoning practices can vary significantly based on societal structures and individual experiences.

For David Bollier, the 'concept of commons is a transformative social paradigm that offers alternatives to neoliberal economic systems through community-based management and mutual support for shared resources[xiii]'. Ostrom and others have conducted empirical research to argue that privatisation, in terms of individual property rights, and/or centralised control of the state, granting limited and exclusive use access to selected goods from the common pool resources, are not the only alternatives, but there are instances where communities have been traditionally using, conserving and managing common pool resources. Privatised CPRs and the CPRs under the state do not offer the communities any stake in governance. Euler and Bollier suggest a paradigm shift where the commoning is not a physical governance arrangement. It is a thought and a perception to look at the entire physical and non-

physical world around us. The use, conservation and governance under this paradigm will be qualitatively different. Commoning is a movement.

According to Bollier, the commons movement is a transformative approach to addressing societal crises by reclaiming shared resources and fostering community governance. It emphasises mutual support, participatory control, and cultural practices to protect resources like land, water, and knowledge from privatisation and marketisation. The movement seeks to reverse neoliberal trends, promoting inalienable resources and sustainable economic practices through community-driven alternatives. Central to the commons is the concept of "commoning," which regenerates social connections, challenges consumerist culture, and cultivates ecological and human values.

By re-embedding markets within societal needs, the movement envisions a post-capitalist economy with institutions like community forests, local currencies, and cooperatives. Innovations such as open-value networks, blockchain-based governance, and cooperative finance models support these efforts, though access to credit remains a challenge. The commons framework addresses inequality, ecological sustainability, and governance by prioritising basic needs, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship. Community land trusts, cooperative goods, and shared infrastructure like energy and Internet access reduce reliance on profit-driven systems. Historically, marginalised groups, such as African-American cooperatives, have used commons to build dignity and resilience. Governance shifts toward decentralised, participatory models, with the "Partner State" concept supporting commons initiatives. Globally, two billion people rely on commons for daily needs, yet these systems are often overlooked. The movement fosters solidarity across diverse groups, from urban activists to indigenous communities, offering a critique of neoliberalism while demonstrating practical, scalable alternatives. The future of the commons depends on collective creativity, driving new systems of governance and economics for a more equitable, sustainable world.

Bollier is focused on countering the neo-liberal discourses under which the state is minimal and its presence is abhorred. Entire economic activity is under the market vortex. In real-world situations, the free market principles don’t work, and monopolies and monopsonies evolve that distort just allocations and distribution. Dominant market initiatives crowd out public solutions that would solve the problem for everyone, and do so without the elite’s blessings[xiv].

Research based on empirical studies on commons and commoning of commons recommends collective action by the communities. It is recognised that mobilisation and organisational forms in communities will differ and be unique to their physical environment and socio-cultural ethos. Of course, there is immense scope for learning from one another. The ultimate goal is to try the pathways in use,

conserve and manage commons that will take us to ecologically sustainable survival of most living organisms, including humans.

The Commoning discourse is crucial and timely in addressing the challenges humanity faces. The loss of vital ecosystem services for agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry, and other resources essential for our survival is under threat. The state and the market lack sustainable solutions. Commodification and consumerism hinder sustainable resource use by prioritising profit and individual consumption over ecological balance and collective action. Humanity, for the most part, remains stuck in this situation. Obsessed with limitless material prosperity and falsely promising the have-nots that they will also attain similar levels of material wellness, there is an underlying belief that there is no alternative to the free market and minimal state intervention. The major impacts of this approach include resource overexploitation (e.g., deforestation, overfishing), inequitable access, erosion of collective stewardship, and environmental degradation (e.g., soil erosion, biodiversity loss), disrupting vital ecosystem services. To address these issues, sustainable pathways include promoting collective governance (e.g., community-based resource management), shifting consumer culture toward mindful consumption, decommodifying essential resources like water, and strengthening local, circular economies. Policy reforms, cultural shifts, and community initiatives are necessary to prioritise ecological and social well-being for resilient resource management. Additionally, Commoning must be re-imagined.

IV

RE-IMAGINING COMMONING THE COMMONS: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In the Indian cultural ethos, land, water, forests, agriculture, and domesticated animals are not seen only as material resources. From the Rigveda, the earliest authentic religious text, we see reverence and prayers dedicated to nature. The Earth is regarded as Mother Earth, nourishing all living beings, and is thus connected with Dharma. The word does not refer to institutional religion. The universe and living organisms are made of five elements: Earth (Prithvi), Water (Jala), Fire (Agni), Air (Vayu), and Space (Akasha). Just as we conserve and nourish our bodies, nature also needs to be preserved and cared for. The Indian cultural ethos considers commons-land, water, forests, and cultural practices-as a shared gift of nature used with gratitude and maintained through collective stewardship, reciprocity, and reverence for nature. Tribal communities continue to hold nature in deep reverence, recognising it as both provider and protector. Across Asia and possibly globally, indigenous communities revere and practice community governance, equitable access, and sustainability over individual interests. In India, practices such as sacred groves, community-managed irrigation, and festivals embody this ethos, fostering social cohesion and cultural identity[xv]. Sacred groves are unique common-pool resources with distinct socio-cultural, ecological, and political attributes, traditionally governed for centuries through community-based, soft institutional arrangements (Marothia,

2022). Despite challenges like privatisation, empowering communities can help revive sustainable practices aligned with modern priorities such as climate action and social justice. Rivers in India are revered and worshipped as sacred entities. Water bodies and common lands, especially in dry regions[xvi], and tribal cultural landscapes have historically been protected through strong soft/informal institutional arrangements for their conservation, maintenance, and use[xvii].

Thus, commoning need not be imagined afresh; it exists. Festivals, religious functions and rituals reflect the concept of commoning. A variety of materials is required to perform the ritual, ensuring biodiversity in general and agro-biodiversity in particular. The Indian ethos celebrates the commons through storytelling, festivals, and collective practices that reinforce community bonds. The report Our Commons: Celebrating Commoning and Community Stewardship[xviii] highlights how diverse regional examples-from India's sacred groves to urban digital commons-reflect a pluralistic approach to shared resources.

The Indian ethos of commoning, as explored by scholars like Ostrom, Euler, and Bollier, needs to be communicated in local languages to reach communities effectively, as English-based academic work often remains inaccessible to stakeholders who matter. The indigenous knowledge and practices of community governance of the commons also need proper documentation and dissemination among stakeholders from communities to civil society organisations and governments. Anupam Mishra's book in the Hindi language, *Saaf Maathe Ka Samaaj*[xix], Documents community-driven water conservation and management practices, sacred grove management, and grazing lands, particularly in Rajasthan, highlighting their historical success until modern pressures like population growth and growing individualism disrupted them. Mishra critiques state policies and market-driven commodification of water, which ignore its ecological and cultural value. He argues that modern development has shifted community mindsets, treating natural resources as commodities and prioritising material gains. To revive commoning, Mishra emphasises empowering local communities, strengthening social bonds, and rethinking individualism to restore sustainable, collective resource management.

Based on Indian culture and ethos, Satish Kumar advocates for a sustainable way of life in his book Soil, Soul, Society: A New Trinity for Our Time. This book presents a holistic philosophy for sustainable living through a new trinity-Soil, Soul, and Society-that replaces anthropocentric worldviews such as those of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, and fraternity), or the American Declaration of Independence (life, liberty, pursuit of happiness). Kumar argues that humanity's well-being is deeply connected with the health of the planet and its diverse species, emphasising reverence for nature, spiritual fulfilment, and communal harmony. Soil represents the natural world, the foundation of life. Without soil, there is no food or life. Clear evidence is there that millions still collect and consume food items from

the commons, including forests. (Chopra & Dasgupta, 2002; Jose Luis Vivero-Pol et.al. 2019, Marothia, 2001, 2002). Kumar challenges the modern dismissive view of soil as mere "dirt," highlighting its intrinsic value and our dependence on it. It is Prithvi, one of the Panch Mahabhoots. Satish Kumar states that farmers who work with soil should be deeply respected. He links farmers and reconnecting with the earth, citing the etymological connection between "humus" (soil), "human," and "humility." Nature, including trees and animals, has inherent rights, and humans must act as stewards, not exploiters. The human body, too, is not only a material entity. Soul refers to the inner spiritual dimension of all beings, not just humans. Kumar emphasises self-realisation through slowing down, meditation, and practices like gardening or cooking, which connect us to the universe's totality. He warns that spiritual poverty-losing touch with one's soul-is the greatest poverty, unfulfilled by material possessions. Caring for the soul fosters wisdom, compassion, and inner peace. For Satish Kumar, society has a broader meaning. It envisages humanity as part of a global "one-earth society." It is not limited to narrow nationalism or institutional religion. It is about mutual interest taking precedence over ego-driven self-interest. He advocates for compassion, forgiveness, and peaceful negotiation to address social issues like poverty, deprivation, and conflicts. It is a novel perspective—original yet rooted in tradition. The book draws heavily from the philosophies and actions of Buddha, Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and E.F. Schumacher. This is the concept of commoning.

Satish Kumar's trinity of soul, soil and society (2024) can also be presented in the Sanskrit terms Vyakti (individual), Samashti (society), and Srishti (creation) to reflect clearly the Indian cultural and religious ethos, aligning with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of harmony and trusteeship. Vyakti represents the human, Samashti encompasses all living organisms, and Srishti denotes the entire cosmos. While conflicts may arise among these entities, Gandhi's framework emphasises achieving harmony through human self-regulation, guided by Truth and Non-violence. Non-violence, the pathway to eternal harmony, is supported by values like Brahmacharya (self-control), Asteya (non-stealing), and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness). These principles are based on the philosophy depicted in the first verse of the Ishavasya Upanishad[xx], which urges renunciation of material greed and living as trustees of the world's resources.

Gandhi's Theory of Trusteeship, rooted in non-violence, redefines ownership, positioning individuals, the state, and markets as caretakers of wealth for societal benefit (Kalelar Ravindra 1960). This socio-economic philosophy promotes equitable wealth distribution, reducing inequality without coercion, and fostering cooperation between capital and labour. Individuals are encouraged to embody moral responsibility, ensuring resources serve the common good. The Upanishadic verse underscores this ethos, advocating detachment from material possessions to support a harmonious existence.

This framework of commoning the commons transforms individuals into trustees, emphasising a journey from being to becoming. Though idealistic, it envisions a non-exploitative society where ethical and spiritual values guide economic practices, harmonising Vyakti, Samashti, and Srishti. Gandhi's distilled wisdom, derived from his experiments with Truth, offers a practical yet profound approach to creating an equitable, non-violent world. The concept of commoning of the commons gets a holistic treatment.

V

COMMONS GOVERNANCE: PATHWAYS TO INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATIONS

The Commons face threats globally. Conceptually, the idea of commoning is innovative. However, the institutional arrangements will have to be innovated afresh. The traditional institutions that exist by way of community management are severely weakened. They are being forced out by the market forces and coercive state. The nexus between monopolistic private players and the state in controlling common-pool resources (CPRs) involves collusion, where powerful corporations and governments dominate shared resources, such as water, forests, or fisheries, for profit. This leads to privatisation, regulatory capture, and overexploitation, marginalising communities and harming the environment. Consequences include weakening of communities' control over use and management, inequity, resource depletion, and social conflict. Solutions include transparent governance, community-based management, anti-monopoly regulations, and accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable and sustainable resource use. In India, too, the nexus between monopolistic private players and the state in controlling common-pool resources (CPRs) is evident with several recent cases highlighting this issue. Large private conglomerates and the state-controlled and regulated Special Economic zones facilitate the private players in the country's port sector. The partnerships grant long-term concessions, giving private players near-monopolistic control over critical coastal resources, which are CPRs. Favourable state regulation put the small players and communities at a great disadvantage[xxi]. Absence of strict regulation or weak enforcement puts the natural resource in serious jeopardy. Groundwater is a critical CPR. Large infrastructure companies, bottled water companies, and large agricultural companies overexploit groundwater at the cost of farmers and rural communities. In mineral-rich states, Odisha (Padel Felix 1999, 2010), Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, private companies secure exclusive rights to mine minerals and access forests and rivers. Lack of transparency in such dealings keeps communities in the dark, only to realise later that they have de facto lost all access and customary rights. The state crushes organised protests by communities.

There are instances where common lands have been transferred to private players, as in the case of Gujarat Special Economic Zones. The compensations offered are inadequate, and there is hardly any consultation with the local communities. Pastoralists suffer the most in the process. India's coastal fisheries,

another CPR, face pressure from large-scale commercial fishing operations supported by state policies. In states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, industrial trawlers, often backed by influential players, dominate fishing grounds, reducing access for artisanal fishers. Government subsidies and lax regulation of deep-sea fishing exacerbate overfishing, threatening sustainability and livelihoods. For the last 30 years, the privatisation push has been a major reason for promoting monopolistic companies. Once promoted, they influence policy lobbying or political connections, leading to favourable laws or weak enforcement. For example, environmental clearances for mining or industrial projects are often expedited for large corporations. It is resulting in community exclusion, sidelining the tribal and local communities and environmental degradation due to overexploitation.

To cite an example of how the state overrides the environmental and ecological concerns in water projects, the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India, has gone against the recommendations of the Centrally Empowered Committee (CEC) appointed by the Supreme Court to look into the Ken-Betwa River Linking Project (KBLP)[xxii] The proposed Daudhan Dam threatens the Panna Tiger Reserve by submerging 6,017 hectares of forest, including 4,206 hectares of core tiger habitat, endangering a high-density tiger population, and disrupting wildlife corridors. It will destroy 4.3 million trees, with an economic loss of ₹1,260 crore, and impact 10,500 hectares of biodiversity-rich habitat, affecting species like vultures, gharials, and Mahasheer fish. The ecosystem's uniqueness makes restoration impossible. The CEC Report has argued that the project's economic viability is not carefully examined vis-à-vis the alternatives. The KBL Project, with an estimated irrigation cost of Rs. 44,983 lakh per hectare, far exceeds sustainable alternatives like micro-water harvesting and drip irrigation. Outdated water availability data (2003-04) ignore increased demand and climate change, casting doubt on claims of surplus water in the Ken basin. Unaccounted costs for conservation and rehabilitation further undermine the feasibility.

Procedurally, the report highlights violations of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, as the National Board for Wildlife ignored critical sub-committee findings. The Environmental Impact Assessment is outdated, omitting key impacts on water flow, resettlement, and the Ken Gharial Sanctuary. The CEC recommended halting the project, suggesting a scientific reassessment and exploration of less damaging alternatives like water harvesting and crop diversification. Socially, inadequate rehabilitation and lack of community awareness exacerbate concerns.

It is clear from the above discussions that the existing local institutions for managing commons are not enough, although they are still being used with effect in protesting, organising and managing commons. In the case of Forest Commons, a significant breakthrough was achieved in 2006 with the enactment of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, by the government of India. The Act recognises and vests forest rights in Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers, addressing

historical injustices and promoting social justice and conservation. It acknowledges the rights of these communities to live in and cultivate forest land, access resources, and manage forests sustainably. The Act aims to empower these communities, ensure their livelihood security, and integrate conservation efforts.

The Act has incorporated an institutional innovation in the form of granting rights of claims, management, and regulation to the Gram Sabha. It is different from the Gram Sabha of the Gram Panchayat under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. The FRA, 2006, recognises and empowers the hamlet or village (not co-terminus with the Gram Panchayat). It contains elements of the principles of Commons governance designs suggested by Ostrom, updated for the 21st century. Its components include the following. Clearly defined boundaries, Collective-choice arrangements, Monitoring and accountability by users, Graduated sanctions, Conflict-resolution mechanisms, Nested enterprises in complex systems, recognition of rights by external authorities and Adaptation and learning mechanisms.

Ostrom and others have formulated the principles from the empirical studies conducted globally. Agrawal et al. have reviewed such studies, and there is literature available to understand community-based initiatives, both successful and otherwise. A generic term that has evolved for such initiatives is Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM). Some of the known initiatives are: water governance efforts in India, Nepal, and Kenya. India's experiment with Joint Forest Management (JFM) is a well-known experiment (Bhattacharya P. et.al. 2010) with both successes and failures[xxiii]. Big countries such as Mexico and China, and smaller countries such as Cambodia, Alaska, Fiji, and Namibia have also shown promise. Political, social and institutional contexts contribute significantly and sometimes decisively to the success or failure of CBNRM.

Euler and Bollier see a lot of scope in introducing the idea of Commoning of the Commons. Bollier has elaborated it well. He calls it 'Promise of Commons.' Working with this theme and building capacities around it has the potential to clear pathways for institutional innovations at the community and government levels. Bollier visualises it as a movement that needs to be triggered.

The Core concept of commons does not alter in the Euler-Bollier scheme. It is seen as a dynamic process of community governance based on the spirit of cooperation embedded in communities' culture of sharing the gift of nature in the form of land, water, forests, fisheries and the environment. The process, when followed in letter and spirit, leads to the commoning vision. Scholars and activists have documented such processes to counter the argument of the 'Tragedy of the Commons'. The extension in thought is what leads to the Promise of Commons. A major initiative to work on the concept of 'Promise of Commons' is being undertaken by the Foundation of Ecological Security (FES)[xiv] in our country. FES is working in 11 states with partner organisations, including governments and national and

international funding organisations that are interested in improving the health of commons and thereby conserving nature. The Promise of Commons aims to reclaim shared resources from the centralised state in nexus with oligopolistic market players, to feed market demand and also create demand[xxv]. The goal is also to safeguard the interests of the future generation[xxvi], and promote participatory control to control external harmful interventions.

Euler and Bollier's concept of the commoning also hypothesises that creating cultural impact fosters social connections, regenerates relationships with nature, challenges consumerist market culture, and creates spaces for human values, prioritising engaged action over rigid ideologies.

The Promise of Commons, visualised as a movement, also has an economic vision aimed at reintegrating markets within societal needs by creating community forests, local currencies, and cooperatives to establish a sustainable, mutual-benefit economic system. Commons-based institutions, such as open-value networks, stakeholder trusts, and leveraging technology, are also part of this approach. Some initiatives may explore cooperative finance modes to generate financial resources. The commoning approach has the potential to reduce inequality and promote ecological sustainability. It envisions possibilities for de-commodification, mutualisation, reducing reliance on profit-driven markets, and making basic needs of the local population accessible and affordable. It also offers a broader scope for addressing racial, gender, and economic inequalities, as well as the dignity of labour, and the empowerment of women, children, and marginalised groups. Additionally, it aligns with the philosophical view of Satish Kumar that commoning pathways encourage people to see nature as a living organism that directly supports the survival of approximately two billion people worldwide. This model can foster decentralised, participatory governance, with the "Partern State." The Promise of Commons movement is increasingly recognised as a growing movement.

In the Context of the discussion above, the initiatives in India under the FRA 2006 facilitate and promote the Promise of Commons movement. An example of using the commoning concept, an experiment in Gujarat, is discussed. A civil society organisation, ARCH, has successfully organised tribals in selected villages of Dediapada block in Narmada District, in South Gujarat. The People's organisation, guided by ARCH, struggled for years to register claims of Individual and Community Forest Rights with success. Their brief experience in improving the forest health is given here in brief.

Under the Forest Rights Act, Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights enable Gram Sabhas to manage and protect forest areas. In organisation villages, Gram Sabhas are drafting Management Plans for sustainable forest use, establishing rules, and creating fire lines to prevent forest fires. By June 2024, these plans will be submitted to the District Level Committee. Currently, 24 villages are surveying and

preparing draft plans with organisational support, which will remain a key focus this year. Since 2015, NABARD has supported various initiatives, starting with forming five Farmers' Producer Organisations (FPOs) in Dediapada. In 2018, NABARD's Wadi program engaged 500 farmers across 16 villages, followed by the Krishak Samrudhhi Yojana (KSY) pilot to double farmers' incomes. ARCH's outstanding KSY implementation earned recognition in 2021. In 2023, farmers began earning ₹30,000–50,000 from mango sales, despite some crop losses due to unseasonal rains. NABARD sanctioned another Wadi program for 300 farmers, with 150 already planting mango and lemon saplings. Monitoring and preparing the remaining 150 farmers is ongoing. In 2022, NABARD approved a watershed development program for Mohbi and Sagai villages. With strong community participation, interventions like 6,700 m³ of Stone Farm Bunds, 2,180 m³ of Earthen Farm Bunds, and two pukka check dams were completed in under two years. These efforts enhanced water harvesting and farmer incomes. Remaining watershed work will be completed in 2024-25, demanding continued intensive efforts[xxvii]. ARCH used the satellite imagery as evidence to prove the areas cultivated and areas under forest cover. It used the GPS technique to measure the plot boundaries. The community members were trained to use a GPS instrument. Leveraging technology, government, and banks for finance mobilisation has been successfully demonstrated.

Another example that has created a global impact is the Mendha-Lekha village experiment in a remote tribal village in Gadhchiroli district in Maharashtra[xxviii]. It exemplifies Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj, or village self-rule, through participatory democracy, collective resource management, and sustainable development. Home to approximately 500 Gond tribals, this village transformed from struggles with unemployment, alcoholism, and exploitation into a model of self-reliance and equitable governance since the 1980s, under the guidance of Gandhian activist Mohan Hirabai Hiralal.

At the core of Mendha Lekha's governance is the Gram Sabha, a decision-making body that includes at least one adult male and female from each household. Operating on consensus, it ensures decisions reflect the collective will, managing forest resources, development projects, and social issues like liquor prohibition. This inclusive approach empowers women, who hold veto power, fostering gender equality in decision-making.

In 2009, Mendha Lekha became one of India's first villages to secure Community Forest Rights (CFR) under the Forest Rights Act (2006), gaining legal control over 1,800 hectares of forest. This enabled sustainable bamboo harvesting, generating significant income—approximately Rs 10 million annually by 2011-12—equitably distributed for infrastructure, education, and healthcare. The village's forest management prioritises conservation alongside economic benefits, balancing community needs with environmental sustainability.

Inspired by Vinoba Bhave's Gramdan movement, in 2013, villagers donated all 200 hectares of their agricultural land to the Gram Sabha under the Maharashtra Gramdan Act (1964), eliminating private land ownership. Five per cent of the land was allocated to the landless, while the rest is cultivated under hereditary rights, preventing sales to outsiders and strengthening community cohesion. This collective ownership model ensures equitable access to resources and reduces economic disparities. Study Circles, or Abhyas Gats, are integral to informed governance. These groups analyse issues from diverse perspectives, producing reports to guide Gram Sabha decisions. This practice enhances transparency and participation, ensuring decisions are well-considered and inclusive. Social reforms include a liquor ban, women's empowerment through equal participation, and economic measures like linking development to government schemes such as NREGA for year-round employment. Each household contributes 10 per cent of its income to a community fund, reducing reliance on moneylenders and fostering financial independence.

In February 2024, Mendha Lekha was officially recognised as a Gram Panchayat, affirming its governance model. Its success has inspired 90 neighbouring villages to form a Maha Gram Sabha by 2018 for collective action on shared challenges. The village's sustainable forest management and self-rule have attracted attention from researchers, NGOs, and policymakers. However, replication faces obstacles, including resistance from forest bureaucracy and Naxal influence in the region. Mendha Lekha's experiment demonstrates the potential of community-driven governance to address socio-economic challenges while preserving cultural and environmental integrity. Its emphasis on consensus, equity, and sustainability offers valuable lessons for decentralised governance, though scaling this model requires overcoming systemic barriers.

The FES team has experiments in community stewardship where the concept of commoning the commons can be identified[xxix]. For example, in Mandla, Madhya Pradesh, tribal communities like the Baiga, Gond, Kol, and Pradhan rely on dense forests for food, fodder, and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), sustaining their livelihoods despite limited agricultural land. Forests provide uncultivated foods such as mushrooms, tubers, and wild fruits, which are critical for household nutrition during scarcity, reducing dependence on markets or public distribution systems. The practice of seed conservation and exchange of native crops like maize and finger millet preserves genetic diversity and ensures crop resilience against climatic uncertainties. Women play a key role in sharing indigenous knowledge of seed preservation. The *Apna Khaan Paan*, *Apna Sammaan* campaign, launched in 2021, celebrates these traditional food systems, promotes sustainable forest produce consumption, and fosters cultural pride through forums like PESA campaigns and Gram Sabhas. It emphasises community governance of forests, enhancing food security and livelihoods while promoting seed sovereignty.

In Rajasthan's semi-arid grasslands, communities are regenerating degraded landscapes by collecting and distributing native grass seeds suited to local conditions. Overgrazing and inappropriate afforestation had eroded traditional ecological knowledge, prompting villages in Udaipur to focus on species like Sehima nervosum and Dichanthium annulatum. Women-led efforts identified supply and demand sites, with community bylaws ensuring sustainable seed collection and equitable distribution. The initiative, supported by the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), has created a market for native seeds, generating income (e.g., INR 1,67,250 from 750 kg in Reechwara) and supporting ecological restoration. The Rajasthan government's recognition, including plans for 150 Vanaspati seed banks, underscores the initiative's scalability.

The Kalyanpura watershed in Bhilwara, Rajasthan, demonstrates community-led restoration in a semi-arid region. Facing water scarcity and land degradation, the community, with FES and Gram Panchayat support, mapped Commons and implemented soil and water conservation measures. Ecological assessments from 2009 to 2022 show significant improvements: biomass increased from 2.21 to 12.04 t/ha, water tables rose, and biodiversity (birds, butterflies, reptiles) flourished. These changes enhanced fodder availability, doubled cropping areas, and improved resilience to droughts, with pollinators like bees boosting agriculture. Community governance fostered unity, seed sharing, and engagement with external institutions, strengthening adaptive capacities.

Long-term social-ecological monitoring across 150 sites in seven Indian states reveals that secure tenure and community governance significantly improve ecological outcomes. Biomass on community-managed lands increased by 81 per cent (17.8 to 32.2 t/ha) from 2015 to 2024, compared to 48 per cent on unmanaged lands. Village committees, like Village Forest Protection and Management Committees, enforce rules on access, harvesting, and conflict resolution. In Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, communities combat forest fires through awareness and collective action. In Gujarat, regulated fodder collection ensures equitable resource use. In Madhya Pradesh, communities remove invasive Lantana camara, while in Odisha, rotational monitoring (thengapalli) protects forests. Rajasthan's grazing regulations promote regeneration, with fees supporting community funds.

The Dandasingha haat in Odisha's Angul district, revitalised by the Charmallik Anchallik Bikash Parishad since 2014, has transformed from a neglected market to a vibrant economic hub. Community contributions, including bamboo and labour, enabled infrastructure improvements, increasing vendor participation from 20–25 to over 100. This enhanced access to nutritional food and livelihoods for marginalised groups, demonstrating the power of commoning in strengthening local economies and food security.

FES has also compiled a compendium of 77 caselets that document the commoning of the commons[xxx]. The major heads under which the compilation has presented the caselets are: Land and Water Commons, Struggles of Commoning, Commons and Livelihoods, Commons and Gender, Commons and Culture, Commons and Food, and Commons and Biodiversity. The spread is all over India, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tripura, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and neighbouring countries Nepal and Bangladesh.

The case studies point towards the Promise of Commons, but the number is small compared to the scale of the problem. Moreover, it is not enough that through commoning the commons we care for about two billion people on Earth. The concept of commoning must be understood in a broader context. A person who envisioned the commoning of nature, humans, and society was Gandhiji. Of course, the terminology he used reflects his times and aligns with his vision and understanding. From him, harmony between Vyakti Samashti and Srishti can be achieved when the individual enjoys responsible freedom and considers the welfare of others a priority. In his words, 'I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and, through India, the world also, then sooner or later, it must be recognised that people will have to live in villages, not in towns; in huts, not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live peacefully in towns and palaces. They will then have no choice but to resort to violence and untruth. I believe that without truth and nonviolence, there can only be destruction for humanity. We can realise truth and nonviolence only in the simplicity of village life, and this simplicity is best represented by the Charkha and all that it signifies. I must not fear that the world today is heading in the wrong direction. It may be that it will do so, and like the proverbial moth, burn itself out in the flame around which it dances more fiercely. But it is my sacred duty, until my last breath, to try to protect India and, through India, the entire world from such a fate.

At the village level, for him, commoning for him is not only of natural resources, but the entire village, neighbouring village area, people and nature at large. He calls it Village Swaraj. Village Swaraj, as envisioned, is a self-sufficient, cooperative village republic that balances independence and interdependence. Each village prioritises growing its food and cotton for cloth, maintaining reserves for cattle, and providing recreation spaces. Additional land is used for cash crops. Villages feature essential infrastructure like theatres, schools, public halls, and clean water systems through wells or tanks. Education is compulsory up to a basic level, and all activities are ideally cooperative, rejecting caste hierarchies and untouchability. Non-violence, Satyagraha, and non-cooperation serve as the village's guiding principles. A democratically elected Panchayat of five qualified adults governs annually, acting as legislature, judiciary, and executive, without conventional punishments. Village guards, chosen by rotation, ensure safety. This model allows

villages to function independently of external governance, emphasising individual freedom and local democracy.

An ideal Indian village, envisioned through the lens of Village Swaraj, embodies self-reliance, dignity, and community welfare. Such a village prioritises perfect sanitation, with cottages built from local materials sourced within a five-mile radius, ensuring ample light, ventilation, and courtyards for vegetable gardening and cattle housing. Dust-free lanes, accessible wells, houses of worship, a common meeting place, and grazing commons foster a clean and cooperative environment. A cooperative dairy, primary and secondary schools emphasising industrial education, and Panchayats for dispute resolution form the village's core. Self-sufficient in grains, vegetables, fruits, and Khadi, the village harnesses its resources to double collective income under intelligent guidance, not for commercial gain but for community prosperity. Villagers, envisioned as intelligent and free, contribute manual labour, living free from dirt, disease, idleness, or luxury. Modern amenities like railways, post, and telegraph are feasible, aligning with the principles of Village Swaraj: supremacy of man, full employment, body labour, equality, trusteeship, decentralisation, Swadeshi, self-sufficiency, cooperation, Satyagraha, religious equality, Panchayati Raj, and Nai Talim. The greatest challenge lies in overcoming villagers' reluctance to improve their conditions, fostering a community of empowered, self-reliant individuals capable of standing tall globally. This vision of an ideal village reflects a harmonious blend of tradition and progress, where human dignity and collective effort create a resilient, thriving community that can hold its own against the world.

It is interesting to note that Gandhiji spoke the language that present-day researchers and activists are speaking about the commons. It is important to note in the context that it is the human habitat in nature that has to have commoning of all types of natural resources. If there is one concept that comes nearest to commoning, it is Gandhiji's concept of trusteeship. The sense of 'private' and exclusive ownership of any type of resource needs to be given up. Natural wealth and created wealth, albeit with great human ingenuity, entrepreneurship, and effort, belong to all. Gandhiji, due to his preoccupations in the political struggle for freedom, could not conduct Gram Swaraj experiments. However, his follower, and an erudite scholar of Hindu Scriptures, Vinoba Bhave, experimented with the Bhoodan and Gramdan scheme. The Gramdan, especially, was the commoning of the commons. He asked the village people to donate excess land so that it could be redistributed to the landless in the village. He undertook Padyatra all over the country[xxxi].

Gramdan, a participatory model of village governance, emphasises collective management of resources through the Gram Sabha, where every adult resident is a member. Vinoba Bhave visualised the concept in the late 1950s. Interestingly, the organisation suggested by him for managing land resources in a village was a Gram Sabha. Unlike revenue villages, where the Revenue Department controls land,

Gramdan villages vest governance rights in the Gram Sabha, including management of donated land, uncultivated land, grazing areas, and community spaces. The Gram Sabha oversees Bhoodan land distribution, allocating 1/20th of donated land to the landless, and maintains complete land records, eliminating the Patwari's role in revenue administration. It handles revenue collection, land transfers, water charges, and dispute resolution, with the Bhoodan Gramdan Board as the appellate authority. The Gram Sabha collects 1/40th of individuals' income for development and relief and ensures that the land distributed is legally owned, operable, and bankable. Gramdan villages, recognised as special decentralised units under the Gramdan Acts in various state governments, hold all rights of Panchayats, receive development grants, and elect leadership every three years by consensus or a two-thirds majority. They maintain their voter lists, can register as cooperative societies, and their office bearers have legal status under the Indian Penal Code. Gram Sabha judgments are final, and it can formulate governance rules. Functionally, it ensures employment and land access, promotes cooperative farming, develops grazing lands, undertakes afforestation, and supports cottage industries, banking, and village industries through bodies like the Khadi and Village Industries Commission. A Gram Kosh fund supports development, and the Gram Sabha can collect dues or request legal recovery. I have discussed the case study of Mendha Lekha, which has followed the provisions of the Maharashtra Gramdan Act, 1964.

The then Prime Minister of India, Jawahar Lal Nehru, speaking at the Development Commissioners' Conference in 1959, had lauded the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement, saying that he agreed with Vinonaji's ideal that land should be held in common by the people. The Bhoodan movement had great significance for what it had achieved and for the new psychology it created about land and landholding and about the 'terrific passion for private possession of land'. He added that Gramdan villages offered the best chance of putting the idea of cooperative endeavour into effect, in view of the fact that susal difficulties arising out of the individual ownership of land did not obtain there. In the wave of the Bhoodan and Gramdan movement, 1952-57, in 14 states, 2932 Gramdan villages came into existence. In the years to follow, the Gandhi-Sarvodaya movement ebbed in the country, and the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement also practically folded. The state Acts were passed, Bhoodan Boards were constituted, they still exist on paper, but for all practical purposes, it has been relegated to the background.

One can clearly see that before the concept of commoning evolved among Western scholars, the Commoning idea had not only gained currency in India, but significant experiments were also undertaken. FES has initiated a fresh study of the status of selected Gramdan villages in different states. Besides implementing the other programs to achieve the Promise of Commons, the studies would provide new insights for more innovations in institutions and assess the scope to revive the

Gramdan institution, which was an impressive organisational innovation in those times.

VI

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reimagining the commons and their governance, as explored in this paper, calls for a transformative shift in how humanity perceives and interacts with shared resources. The commons-encompassing natural resources like land, water, and forests, as well as intangible assets like knowledge and cultural practices—are not mere commodities but living systems that demand reverence, collective stewardship, and equitable management. The historical trajectory from foraging to industrial societies has reshaped human-nature relationships, often prioritising exploitation over sustainability, leading to ecological degradation and social inequities. Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" highlighted the risks of individual pursuits, but Elinor Ostrom's work demonstrated that community-based governance can sustainably manage common-pool resources through cooperation and locally designed institutions.

The concept of "commoning," advanced by scholars like Euler and Bollier, reframes the commons as a dynamic social process rooted in community practices of mutual support and responsibility. In the Indian context, this aligns with the cultural ethos that views nature as sacred, as reflected in practices like sacred groves, community-managed irrigation, and Gandhian principles of trusteeship and Village Swaraj. Satish Kumar's trinity of Soil, Soul, and Society further emphasises a holistic approach, integrating ecological, spiritual, and communal values to foster sustainable living. Innovations like the Forest Rights Act (2006) and experiments in villages like Mendha-Lekha and Dediapada illustrate the potential of community-driven governance to restore commons, enhance livelihoods, and promote ecological resilience.

However, challenges persist. The nexus between state and market forces often undermines community control, leading to privatisation, overexploitation, and marginalisation of vulnerable groups. Institutional innovations, inspired by Ostrom's principles and the "Promise of Commons" movement, offer pathways to counter these threats. Initiatives like those of the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) and community-led efforts in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha demonstrate scalable models of commoning that prioritise equity, sustainability, and cultural integrity. Gandhiji's vision of Village Swaraj and Vinoba Bhave's Gramdan movement provide historical precedents for reimagining commons as shared wealth managed through participatory democracy.

To realise the "Promise of Commons," a global movement is needed-one that transcends neoliberal paradigms, fosters decentralised governance, and leverages technology and cooperative finance to empower communities. This requires policy

reforms, cultural shifts, and the revitalisation of traditional practices to ensure equitable access and sustainable resource use. By embracing commoning as a movement, humanity can forge a path toward ecological balance, social justice, and a harmonious coexistence of Vyakti (individual), Samashti (society), and Srishti (creation), ensuring the commons remain a shared gift for current and future generations.

ENDNOTES

i. The Enlightenment project was a transformative intellectual and social movement dominant in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe that emphasised reason, individualism, and progress. While it has had a profound and lasting impact on the world, it has also been subject to criticism and debate.

ii. Capra Fritjof. 1982. The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture. Bantom Books. New York, p 51.

iii. Reproduced in U. Shankar. 2001. Environmental Economics. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. Originally published by Hardin Garret. 1968. "Tragedy of the Commons", in Science, 162(3859), 1243-1248.

iv. Smil Vaclav. 2022. How the World Really Works. Penguin Random House, U.K.

v. Ibid. Chapters 1 and 2.

vi. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/04/forests-ice-age/ Accessed 18-7-25.

vii. FAO. 2022. Land Statistics and Indicators 2000-2: Global, Regional and Country trends. FAO Statistical Brief 71.

viii. Hardin, in U. Shankar. *Op.cit.*

ix. Johannes Euler 2018. "Conceptualising Commons: Moving Beyond the Good-based Definition by Introducing the Social Practices of Commoning as Vital Determinant", in Ecological Economics. 143 (2018) 10-16.

x. Ostrom Elinor, 1990. *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge University Press.

xi. Euler Johannes. 2018. “Conceptualising the Commons: Moving Beyond the Goods-based Definition by Introducing the Social Practices of Commoning as Vital Determinant”, *Ecological Economics.* 143(2018) 10-16.

xii. *Ibid.* p12.

xiii. Bollier David. *Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm.* https://base.socioeco.org/docs/davidbollier.pdf

xiv. Anand Girdharadas. 2020. *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World.* Penguin Random House, U.K. p 8.

xv. Agrawal, Arun, Erbaugh, James, and Pradhan, Nabin, 2023. “The Commons”, in *Annual Review of Environment Resources* 2023. 48: 21.1-21.28.

Marothia (2022) underscores that inadequate recognition of indigenous farming systems (IFSs) and traditional institutions contributes to challenges in managing Common Pool Resources (CPRs). The study examines CPR–IFS linkages in tribal villages of the Bastar Plateau, documents key IFS characteristics, and assesses CPR regimes in sustaining livelihoods, concluding with priority policy and research directions.

xvi. Mishra Anupam. (1993) Aaj bhi khare hai Talaab. National Book Trust, New Delhi.

xvii. Mishra Anupam. (2006). *Saaf Mathe ka Samaaj*. Penguin India, New Delhi.

xviii. *Our Commons: Celebrating Commoning and Community Stewardship*. Foundation for Ecological Security, Anand 2024. Visit www.fes.org

xix. Mishra Anupam. 2006. *Saaf Mathe ka Samaaj.* Penguin India, New Delhi. R*ajasthan ki Rajat Boonde.* 2021 Edition, Rajasthani Granthagar. Jaipur.

xx. ईशावास्यम इदम् सरवम् यत्किंचित जगत्याम जगत,

तेन त्यक्तेन भुंजिथा मा गृध कस्यसविद धनम।

Ishavasyam idam sarvam yatkinchit jagtyaam jagat,

Ten tyakten bhunjhitha maaGrudha kasyasa vid dhanam.

Whatever there is changeful in this ephemeral world, all that must be enveloped by the Lord? By this renunciation (of the World), support yourself. Do not covet the wealth of anyone.

xxi. Academic and research writings are hardly available. But the media coverage indicates the trend. Large port projects, supported by favorable regulations, have led to land acquisition and displacement of local communities. For example, the **Vizhinjam Port project** in Kerala, developed by Adani, has faced protests from fishing communities over environmental degradation and loss of access to fishing grounds, which are critical CPRs. The Hindu, "Kerala fishers protest against Vizhinjam port project," 2022. Similar case is that of Mundra Port. Effect of privatization and inland infrastructural development on India's container port selection dynamics - *ScienceDirect*(September 2020.

xxii. Centrally Empowered Committee Report No. 23 (30 Aug 2019 on KBLP-) to the Supreme Court of India, New Delhi questions water "surplus" claims in the Ken Basin, notes overstated benefits, major unaccounted ecological costs (Panna, Ken Gharial, 2.3M+ trees), ignored alternatives, and warns the project may be unviable; arguments draw heavily on Gopal & Marothia (2015, 2016).

xxiii. https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/rap/files/meetings/2017/49

xxiv. More about FES at www.fes.org

xxv. Alfred Marshall, the master craftsman of the consumption theory had to say, "Although it is man's wants in the earliest stages of his development that give rise to his activities, yet afterwards each new step is to be regarded as the development of activities giving rise to new wants rather than of new wants giving rise to new activities", in Diwan Romesh and Lutz Mark (Editors), 1985. *Essays in Gandhian Economics*, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi.

xxvi. World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). 1987. *Our Common Future.* Oxford University Press.

xxvii. ARCH. 2024. *Annual Report 2023-24.* Action Research in Community Health and Development (ARCH), Dharampur Centre, Valsad, Gujarat.

xxviii. https://ceecec.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Mendha-Lekha-Using-Self-Governance1.pdf The full case study can be accessed from www.fes.org

xxix. FES. 2024. *Commons Tales: Compendium of Stories*. Present at the Commoning the Commons Conference 2023. Celebrating Community Stewardship.

xxx. For a detailed account, see Iyengar Sudarshan. 2007. "*Bhoodan* Movement as a Gandhian Approach to Resource Distribution and Development", in *Gandhi Marg*, Volume 28, No. 4. January 2007. Pp 402-21. Iyengar Sudarshan. 2012. "*Gramdan* to *Gram Swaraj*: Insights from Rajasthan Experiments", jointly with Parul Tina Doshi and Hari Desai in *Gandhi Marg*, Volume 34, No. 1.

xxxi. Daddha Siddhraj. 1957. *Gramdan: Latest Phase of Bhoodan.* Sarva Seva Sangh, Varanasi. P 4. www.vinoba.in for various books and articles.

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