

**NETWORK OF RURAL AND AGRARIAN STUDIES  
SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

**20-22 SEPTEMBER 2018**

**CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF GUJARAT  
GANDHINAGAR, GUJARAT, INDIA**

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**WHITHER RURAL COMMONS**

**STATE POLICY, NATURAL RESOURCES, AND AGRARIAN  
CHANGE**

The importance of commons such as forests, grazing lands, water bodies, and fisheries cannot be underscored enough with their multiple contributions to fulfilling a variety of needs of rural people, including food, fodder, fuel, medicines, building materials, and artisanal raw materials, to name a few. Starting with Garrett Hardin's (1968) work that brought to the policy forefront the Tragedy of the Commons to Elinor Ostrom's (1990) pioneering work on governing the commons, the commons have been at the centre stage of debates on development, sustainability and environmental challenges.

In India, the pioneering work of NS Jodha (1986, 1990, 2000, 2001) has been instrumental in shaping the understanding of the commons or common pool resources (CPRs) as they are called. Others have looked at forests (Agarwal 1986), grazing lands (Damodaran 1988), and alienation of forest-dwelling adivasis from their habitat (Sharma 2011). In the last two decades, the commons have been interpreted in a global sense with the issue of the

knowledge commons associated with seed saving and biodiversity gaining prominence (Herdt 1999, Kloppenburg 2005, Patnaik et al. 2017).

Broadly the study of commons has focused on the **management and governance of common pool resources in the face of degradation**. The commons have faced threats from direct state appropriation (both the colonial and independent state through the forest department, for instance) and the marketisation and privatisation of resources including enclosures by powerful individuals within the community and / or by corporate interests aided by a pliable state. Another front of conflict has arisen between forest dwelling adivasi groups and wildlife conservationists in terms of access to forest resources. At the same time, those arguing for community level governance and management of CPRs have had to contend with caste, class and gender hierarchies in shaping access to the commons and influencing the nature of governance. Barring a select few monographs looking at village level institutions shaping the governance of common resources (Wade 1998, Brara 2006), there has been little systematic engagement with this issue in the field of agrarian studies recently.

The **sixth international conference of the Network of Rural and Agrarian Studies (NRAS)** proposes to bring back the issue of the rural commons to the forefront of current debates on the future of agriculture and the transformation of rural India. Whereas past conferences have looked at the multiple definitions of the rural and the agrarian (Bhopal 2014), the transformations of the rural through new technologies and new market arrangements (Allahabad 2015), the relationship between urban and rural flows of resources and people (Bhubaneswar 2017), this conference seeks to bring together scholars to **rethink the relationship between the commons and the rural - spatially, physically, socially, economically, culturally, and even philosophically**.

Beginning with colonial enclosures of the forests and the overtaking of commons such as grasslands and water bodies by the colonial state, independent India continued with similar policies, especially of labelling

many CPRs as 'wasteland'. With the growth of intensive agriculture the threat to the rural-commons intensified over the last several decades, and post-liberalisation, the growth in corporate and industrial interest in water, land, forest and fish resources has worsened the situation in terms of both inequity and conservation of CPRs.

The Indian state has been the conduit for both preserving the commons (through wildlife and forest conservation projects) and destroying them (through the facilitation of enclosures like SEZs, mining leases, and exclusive water rights, to name a few). Various experiments in community led management of common pool resources, such as joint forest management (JFM) committees have had mixed results, with the state apparatus and local politics playing a crucial role in shaping outcomes.

Given the growing degradation of natural resources globally, with the growth of extractive economies (mining and real estate), increasing usage of chemicals in agriculture, the loss of biodiversity through monocultures, besides the increasing pressure on rural populations having to survive on already degraded lands, the idea of the rural-commons can be a useful frame through which to understand these transformations.

The contemporary agrarian crisis is shaped not only by the immediate needs for socioeconomic survival; it has brought forth several moral, ethical and political questions to the forefront. The sustainability of natural resources poses existential **dilemmas on questions of ownership, on the relationship of humans to 'nature', and on the very framing of 'nature' through the lens of a 'resource'**, to name a few. With the rural itself being marginalised in favour of the urban, both, spatially and culturally, what does this mean for the rural-commons?

The conference will invite papers on the following themes with an announcement for an open call for papers online. Around fifteen papers will be selected after review by the NRAS core team.

### 1. Interpreting the *Rural-Commons*

This theme proposes to examine existing debates around natural resources using the framework of commons, while critically engaging with the definition of the commons itself. Is there a rural-commons? In what ways can knowledge flows and resource flows be linked through this idea? What are the spatial, social, cultural and political implications of using this category? How is the idea of 'ownership' or property shaped or transformed through this formulation? In what ways can this be drawn upon to think of conserving the soil, water bodies, or seeds by going beyond conventional boundaries of property or technology shaping their use?

### 2. Natural resources, Cultural practices: Appropriating the Commons

This theme proposes to examine the various ways in which the idea of the commons has been appropriated by various actors, including the state, the market, and 'communities' themselves. What kinds of ideas are called upon to shape and justify the use and governance of commons (for instance, efficient management, sustainability, accessibility, affordability, conservation, productivity, profitability, indigenoussness, to name a few)? What have been the implications of these forms of governance for rural people's livelihoods and for conserving or preserving the resource in question? What are the everyday lived realities of people under such governance regimes?

### 3. Technologies and Markets: Commons as a Political Project

This theme proposes to bring together work that looks at the ways in which technologies and market arrangements have shaped the discourse and practice around managing commons. One of the important pathways for this has been the impact of global climate change on rural and agrarian societies and the possibilities of mitigation and adaptation that have been proposed. Although considered to be 'technical', such arrangements are inherently political interventions which shape and / or constrain the possibilities for

future action. What is the underlying knowledge politics that is framing the ways in which the commons are understood and proposed to be managed?

#### 4. Rural and Agrarian Change in Western India

Given the conference is to be held in Gandhinagar, and as is the custom with every NRAS conference, we propose to devote one session to research on rural and agrarian change in western India, broadly focusing on the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Goa. Past NRAS conferences have been held in Bangalore, Chidambaram (Tamil Nadu), Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh), Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh) and Bhubaneswar (Odisha). At each of these, scholars have engaged with specific issues arising from the broader region including a panel with farmers.

#### 5. Current Themes in Agrarian Studies: Agrarian Crisis, Farmers' Movements, Environmental Degradation and Changing Patterns of Migration

Building on work presented at earlier conferences of the NRAS, we would also seek papers on the larger issues facing rural India today, including the rise of a variety of farmers' movements in the last two years, the growing ecological and agrarian crisis, and shifting patterns of migration, to name a few.

#### **Mentorship and Outreach Workshop**

This international conference will be accompanied with the fourth NRAS Mentorship and Outreach Workshop. The mentorship workshop is primarily meant for young researchers who are at an early or advanced stage of their PhD work. Around ten researchers will be selected for the mentorship program and will be given an opportunity to get one-on-one feedback on their proposals.

#### **Tentative plan:**

Opening call for papers: 15 May 2018

Last date for abstract submission: 28 June 2018

Selection of abstracts: 10 July 2018

Last date for sending confirmation to attend the conference: 30 July 2018

Last date for final paper submission: 10 September 2018

Conference dates: 20-22 September 2018

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