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# Marginalized community, space of commons and autonomy: The case of the Deccan Development Society in South India



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## 1. Introduction

Community seed banks (CSBs) can be described as 'locally governed and managed, mostly informal, institutions whose core function is to maintain seeds for local use' (Vernooy et al., 2015: 2). CSBs function through the collective activity of a group (Lewis and Mulvany, 1997; Sthapit, 2012; Vernooy et al., 2015) with functions determined according to objectives set by the community, including conservation of agrobiodiversity, seed security, access to seeds and food sovereignty (Demissie and Tanto, 2000; Jarvis et al., 2011; Lewis and Mulvany, 1997; Shrestha et al., 2013; Vernooy et al., 2015).

Various studies on CSBs have analyzed the community based management of seeds and its effects on agrobiodiversity conservation (Bezabih, 2008; Shrestha et al., 2005, 2006, 2013; Vernooy et al., 2015), with most of the empirical research on CSBs reported in the grey literature of reports and NGOs briefings (Vernooy, 2012). A recent study looked at functions of CSBs in different contexts and factors that influence their viability using 35 cases and theories from on-farm conservation literature (Vernooy et al., 2015). In this study we analyze the functioning and governance<sup>1</sup> of CSBs by women of the Dalit caste (lowest caste), which has historically been oppressed and remains economically poor, socially and educationally backward (Chatterjee, 2012). This paper

employs a socio-political approach in examining the collective resistance of the community through community seed banks (CSBs) strengthening commons in south India. It will help in establishing the relations between resource governance and marginalized communities, while also contributing to the literature on commons and CSBs.

Specifically, the research reported here focuses on the ways in which women from a marginalized community have organized CSBs as a common-pool resource (CPR) in defense of their local food system based on millets. While millets are generally considered to be neglected (research) and under-utilized (commercial potential) in the mainstream food supply chain, they are vital for those who depend on them for their food and livelihood (Mal et al., 2010). To critically analyze the Dalit women's CSBs practice, this paper describes CSBs organizational structure, characteristics, functioning and governance. It reflects on the multiple socio-political and cultural dimensions operative in the struggle of the Dalit women, borrowing from studies on seed networks as sites of contestation (see Aistara, 2011; Bezner Kerr, 2013; Da Via, 2012), and it refers to debates on new commons dimensions of governing seeds as commons.

The paper structure is as follows. First, ideas about commons and CSBs practices are outlined and the research methodology is detailed. Then, an overview of the context of resistance to establish CSBs is presented, together with a trajectory towards culinary resilience. Next, the main part of the text describes the development and functioning of the CSBs studied, with a focus on how this creates a social space of commons through lived experiences of the community. The paper concludes with broad issues of commonisation of seeds by reflecting on development of the spaces of commons and culinary resilience by the community.

## 2. Theories of commons, CSBs and their practices

Community based efforts to maintain common resources have drawn the attention of many scholars over the past few decades (Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006; Baland and Platteau, 1996; Benkler, 2004; Cahir, 2004; Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom et al., 1994; Wade, 1988). Scholars of Common-pool resources (CPRs) have particularly highlighted the relevance of managing commons through

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<sup>1</sup> Governance here refers to the process whereby people work collectively in groups for maintaining moral, legal, political and financial aspects of the community at the same time being accountable for their actions (Sthapit et al., 2015).

effective governance to avoid any tragedy of the commons (Agarwal, 2001; Berkes, 2006; Gibson et al., 2000; McCay and Acheson, 1987; Ostrom, 1990). They have particularly analyzed institutional arrangements for managing CPRs as an alternative to state controlled or privately operated systems. In this study, we analyze CSBs as forms of resistance by constructing a CPR providing insights into the processes of commonisation of seeds.

In order to study collective action, Oakerson (1986, 1992) developed a taxonomic framework further developed by Ostrom et al. (1994) in their Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework.<sup>2</sup> This framework became the dominant paradigm in studies of commons, emphasizing institutional factors that lead to successful governance of resources. Although IAD is a systematic framework, it neglects historical and political factors affecting community governance over a resource (Agrawal, 2003; Whaley and Weatherhead, 2014).

The use of IAD framework for studying CSBs is however limiting for two reasons. First, CPRs are embedded within larger cultural systems and social relations (Beitl, 2012; Wagner and Davis, 2004), functioning within the broad socio-political and cultural context in which they are situated (Aistara, 2011; Bezner Kerr, 2013; Da Via, 2012; Vernooy et al., 2015). These political and cultural aspects will be neglected by using the IAD framework as the IAD framework focuses on institutional mechanisms which will further prevent a holistic understanding. Second, seeds managed as commons in the case of CSBs exhibit both tangible and intangible characters, such that they may be referred to as new commons (below). As Hess (2008) emphasized, the characteristics of a resource needs to be given special attention while analyzing new commons governance. Hence, this paper adopts a socio-cultural and political analysis of the functioning of the CSBs rather than focusing on institutional mechanisms through the IAD framework, which will limit the understanding of the political factors affecting a community governance of this new commons.

Indeed, debates on commons have placed importance on the characteristics of the shared resource. Some scholars have looked at commons as shared tangible natural resources (agricultural land, forests and water) (Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006; Andersson et al., 2014; Baland and Platteau, 1996; Gibson et al., 2000; Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988), while others have considered commons as shared intangible natural resources (knowledge, climate and internet) (Benkler, 2004; Boyle, 2003; Cahir, 2004; Holman and McGregor, 2005; Litman, 1990). These scholars mostly focused on issues of governance and the management of shared resources based on their characteristics as either tangible or intangible (the former as territory-based with a defined community and the latter with fluid boundaries). The conventional division of commons as either tangible or intangible was challenged by Hess (2008: 38), who emphasized new commons as evoking '*a sense of awakening, of reclaiming lost or threatened crucial resource*'. In addition to this, Halewood et al. (2013) emphasized that most of the new commons are manmade, geographically unlimited and with non-confining membership. The case of CSBs is similar, with commons comprising seeds and networks, the later manmade, geographically unlimited and with fluid membership, so intangible, and the former exhibiting a complex mix of both tangible and intangible properties.

Unlike traditional (natural) common resources, seeds are not static and are not geographically fixed. First, the physical (tangible) character of seed, such as the ability to reproduce, combines with biological varietal traits (intangible). Seeds also have history of

travelling long distances through informal networks (Almekinders et al., 1994; Chambers and Brush, 2010; Coomes, 2010; Pautasso et al., 2013) and associated stories (intangible). For example, indigenous knowledge of cultivation, conservation and use of seeds that is passed on through generations as regional farming lore is nevertheless a dynamic system comprising of knowledge commons. This mix of culture, value and biological character makes seeds conserved in CSBs different from other traditional resources. Therefore, the study of CSBs requires engagement at two levels of governance and functioning, at both individual and community level.

At the community level, many scholars have analyzed seed networks as a form of resistance. Aistara (2011), for example, analyzed seed saving and exchange practices among Costa Rican farmers as creating a space for resistance, and Da Via explained seed networks in Europe as 'a concrete expression of the *practice and politics* of re-peasantization' (Da Via, 2012: 230), while Bezner Kerr (2013) described on-farm seed saving activities by Malawian small holder farmers as a form of achieving food sovereignty. In addition to maintaining resources as commons, seed networks also imply an active source of resistance to off-farm produced seeds. It is from this perspective of seed networks as resistance that this paper focuses on the collective activities of a marginalized community in relation to a community seed bank project with its own, specific members' socio-cultural identity (Srinivasulu, 2002). Dalit women, who make up the community studied here, moreover, are doubly disadvantaged. As Dalit they are marginalized and as women they are marginalized, so as both they are marginalized among the marginalized (Manorama, 2008; Rege, 1998). With their collective activities of resistance expressive of the embedded social relations and cultural systems of both caste and gender they represent a unique case. Summarizing, this study is informed by theories of commons and practices of seed networks that emphasis resistance as well as governance for a better understanding of the collective activities of a doubly marginalized community.

### 3. Research methods

The case study method is applied here for a holistic analysis of the constructive resistance of Dalit women which makes it '*a specific and complex phenomenon (the 'case') set within its real-world context*' (Yin, 2013: 321). It has limitations in relation to generalization, since the case is specific (to the particular place, community, food). However, the contextualized in-depth study of this marginalized community as unit of analysis provides information not only about this specific initiative of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), but also about the context in which their struggle is situated. Thus, this case may resonate with other sufficiently similar cases.

Data was collected both from primary and secondary sources. Interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and participant observation comprised the primary sources, while published and unpublished documents, reports and official websites comprised the secondary sources. Thirty interviews were made, all in the local language (Telugu) with a translator. Key informants from the DDS were interviewed in September 2013 for information on the management and functioning of the CSBs. Identified through their involvement in the project, the key informants had all been associated with the DDS for ten to fifteen years. Most of the respondents were marginal farmers with less than one hectare of land, on which they practiced mixed cropping.

Each DDS community seed bank is managed by a women's group known as *sangham* (voluntary group), with one woman appointed as its head. To gain in-depth information about CSBs and

<sup>2</sup> The IAD framework provides guiding principles to analyse common property institutions for their sustainability and robustness.

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