

The Commons, Community and Education

- By Seetha Ananthasivan

Imagine a world where every community or neighbourhood shares a strong sense of pride, roots and responsibility about the place it is located in, its schools, places of worship, playgrounds, the sources of its food and other commonly held resources.

Imagine a way of life where all people - farmers, traders, parents, teachers, children and everyone else - spend some time working together in groups, looking after the roadsides, parks and nearby lakes or forests if they are lucky enough to have them. Where the community is concerned about not exhausting their natural resources and also about the hygiene of the place and hence will not allow landfills and rubbish heaps to develop - therefore they learn to be a zero-waste community... well, you get the idea - you can develop the scenario indefinitely, adding on jam sessions, community radio and yoga to solar cooking, backyard biology, and anything else you want.

If this utopia were possible it would surely mean one thing - that such communities of people care about their future, about living sustainably on Earth. Today, with climate change being the buzz word, large organisations and influential thinkers are applying their minds to mitigating and adapting to climate crises. Amongst other things, a major part of the solution to living sustainably according to many of them are that human societies need to a) avoid exhausting our natural resources b) therefore stop being consumeristic

societies governed by free markets, media and big businesses c) build consciousness about our relationship with Earth, Nature and each other and d) get back to smaller communities linked more strongly to local food producers. In other words, think global, live local. Communities and caring for the Commons is the way to go.

Since we can only start from where we are now, and the present is a far cry from an ideal way of living on earth - several people from Gandhiji and Schumacher to the IPCC and an increasing number of eco-thinkers and eco-philosophers have been advocating practical methods that help transition in various ways towards a more sustainable way of life - focusing on intermediate technology, transition

The concepts of commons and community do not seem to get the importance they deserve in public debate or private conversations today.

But there is an important reason for understanding and owning up of the 'commons' - it would be essential to deal with crises like climate change and environmental pollution.

towns, organic agriculture, slow food and slow travel, educating citizens to vote for green politicians, ecological education and more.

Here I would like to focus on ecological education in schools so that tomorrow's adults are responsible towards their commons, actively changing their perceptions of the word "home".

What is the 'Commons' ?

Traditionally, the commons have been of small-scale natural resources. Even today, about two billion people are said to depend upon the commons of tanks, rivers and seas, forests, fisheries, wildlife and other natural resources for their everyday subsistence. Hence for about a third of the world's population, the commons is a matter of daily experience, they need no definition or elaboration. However, for most of us who are part of the educated 'elite', particularly in cities, the commons like roads, water supply, electricity etc are merely taken for granted. We who are the educated urban citizens are the ones who need to understand the importance of commons, and what, in the first place, are the commons

The Economist Peter Barnes describes commons as a set of assets that have two characteristics: they're all gifts, and they're all shared. A shared gift is one we receive as members of a community, as opposed to what we receive individually. Examples of such gifts include air, water, ecosystems, languages, music, holidays,



money, law, mathematics, parks and the Internet.

While ‘commons’ refers to spaces and resources that are collectively shared between people in a community, there is no commons without community and no community without commons. Even an online community shares common cyber space; and resources, say a forest, becomes ‘commons’ only when a community shares it. Most often ‘commons’ is understood to be a pastoral reality – like common grazing grounds, and also tanks, rivers, forests and atmosphere, to be shared, used and looked after by people of the place. We also have the cultural commons – the pool of knowledge, music, art, architecture and creativity of the culture. Today the internet and its products such as the wikipedia and open source software also can be called commons of the world community of internet users.

The concepts of commons and community do not seem to get the importance they deserve in public debate or private conversations today. ‘Community’ is often used to refer to one’s caste or regional belonging, like ‘the tamilian community’ and perhaps in English speaking India the word is too

similar to ‘communal’. But there is an important reason why the understanding and owning up of ‘commons’ would become significant in the future – because it would become essential to deal with crises like climate change and environmental pollution.

The undervaluing of the commons

‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ – was an idea that was popularized in the 1960s by Garrett Hardin. It referred to a situation where commonly held land is inevitably degraded because everyone in a community is allowed to graze livestock there. It was embraced as a principle by many economists and leaders to argue for property rights, to take over commonly held resources and achieve efficiency and ‘development’ through large organisations; people being thrown off the commons became an acceptable casualty. Subsequently, the overwhelming belief in the power of the free market for economic growth has led to the further undervaluing of the commons.

During the tectonic shifts in societies during the last two centuries, the people

and governments have pursued progress and struggled for survival at individual and collective levels – often ignoring the importance of the commons and communities. Formal education stresses the need for data collection and conceptual understanding rather than experiential learning – to illustrate, children in schools and colleges study the history and geography of the world, but not that of their own common spaces; they learn science and that ‘man is a social animal’ but are often unable to apply scientific ideas to their own commons or take up projects that will help preserve them. In fact our education system hardly mention commons or community in the text books that are prescribed.

Why Education about the Commons of the Earth?

To start with a clichéd euphemism – we urban dwellers live in a concrete jungle, ie., we are born, grow and live in spaces that are not our natural habitat. Our connect with nature is limited to a few trees surrounding our building and some green spaces. Wouldn’t that be reason enough to learn experientially about our

'nature' commons to re-connect to a more natural way of life?

Today, Schools and text-books are designed to unthinkingly celebrate and focus on the cultural commons of knowledge and ideas only, such as of maths, science, literature, economics and so on. The ways in which some of these ideas have been responsible for destroying eco-systems and sustainability – ie. the commons of the Earth - are not highlighted or dwelt upon sufficiently. Examples are plenty: Issues of the Green Revolution, mining in Geography, the making of steel in science or of Adam Smith's famous 'Wealth of Nations' in Economics.

With this excessive focus on reductionist science and ideas that have supported modern development, schools and colleges seem to be totally divorced from any idea of being a part of a community or of co-owning 'the commons' in the locality – the commons of a place on earth. The idea would seem unrealistic if not impossible to most people.

Yet there are compelling reasons why we need to re-think education to include opportunities that help the next generation re-discover the relationship with their commons. A few of these are outlined below:

1. Climate change

The positive response of an increasing number of thinkers and experts around the world to crises like climate change seem to be to re-imagine and revive communities and commons. Farmers markets, green schools, village self-governance and a range of communities in real ground and cyber space are sprouting up around the world; pioneering schools and colleges are attempting to help children to be part of the change to deal with the ecological crises that the world is in the throes of.

While advocacy, activism and political campaigning would not be possible for most young students, awareness building, dealing with attitudes to commons and experiencing physical work with commons in the vicinity are definitely possible. Without such experiential learning about the commons, most children will perpetuate the apathy that we as adults often have towards local and

global ecological issues

2. Reviewing Economic myths and mantras –

Till 2008, many winners of the Nobel Prize for Economics were strong advocates of unrestricted markets and their selection for the prestigious award fueled the rise of the market theory and neo-liberal globalization as the be all and end all of economics since the 1980s.

Policies based upon this narrow worldview sparked the rise of corporate power and the diminishment of government's role in protecting the commons. Right-wing thinkers – and leaders in the developed and developing world - scoffed at the possibility of the sharing of resources in a way that maintains the common good, arguing that privately owned property is the only practical strategy to prevent destruction of the commons.

Along came Elinor Ostrom, a professor at Indiana University (Nobel Prize winner, Economics, 2008) and the myth of the Tragedy of the Commons, which came in the way of people's movements to revive the importance of the commons got shattered – at least in Academia. Elinor Ostrom explains, "What we have ignored is what citizens can do and the importance of real involvement of the people involved,"

Ostrom's research refutes the principle of the Tragedy of Commons once-and-for-all, with the real life experience from places like Mongolia, Nepal, and New Mexico. "When local users of a forest have a long-term perspective, they are more likely to monitor each other's use of the land, developing rules for behavior," she says. "It is an area that standard market theory does not touch."

The message here in the above example of the breaking of a myth in economics is just this: when will such learning and knowledge reach the children in schools and not just those who may be doing doctorates in Economics? Education about the commons is essential because, otherwise, the unverified assumptions of various fields of knowledge continue to cloud the thinking of our future generations.

3. Values and Attitudes: Shifting classroom structures

The greatest teacher of sustainability is Nature – ever since life stumbled upon Earth about three and a half billion years ago, life has continued without any help from a species called humans – who came in, incidentally, only 2 million years ago. So how do we teach children ideas of sustainability, which will be critical for the future? The only logical answer would be learning from Nature, the greatest expert in the field.

But the complexity of learning from Nature can never be handled through text books. Students need to learn sustainability experientially, by directly engaging with the commons around them, through outdoor classes, by working with the community they belong to, and learning the values and attitudes required for working together.

Moving away from the completely top-down structure and control of decision making within the classroom, is essential for students and teachers to learn attitudes of co-operation and decide on plans and action collaboratively. Such attitudes would be easier for teachers and administrators of schools if they own up commons within and near the school. To 'own up', for example would be to set up an organic garden, clean up the surroundings, save water, become a zero waste community. In fact a large number of schools around the world are learning ecological education through organic gardens. In the UK alone 'Organic Schools' has worked with more than 5000 schools to set up organic gardens.

As Michael K. Stone says in his book 'Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability' that promotes eco-literacy in schools, "The sustainability of a community depends on the health and inclusiveness of the network of relationships within it. Within these networks students develop the values and attitudes they will carry into adulthood." Schools also teach how to interact with the world. They have the opportunity to model sustainable practices through the ways in which they provision them with food, energy and other basic needs. They set examples by how they relate to the larger communities of which they are a part.

Who will take the initiative?

Today, the contemporary struggle of concerned citizens and communities is to find new methods to exert power over government bodies, institutionalize community action and ways of sustaining the commons and thus protect them from being taken over by the State and the Market. New legal entities and practices are needed at all levels— local, regional, national and global. Children getting sensitized to the commons and the importance of community to manage them is essential for sustainable living in the long run.

If it is accepted that education about the commons is important for the future, who is to take initiative to make it happen? Education, being a State subject, Governments will certainly resist changes, even if they are for the long term public good. The hope with which this article is being written is that individual teachers and heads of institutions will take the initiative to provide opportunities for 'real life projects' and other direct and indirect learning to help children own up their commons, wherever they live. Many schools have already begun doing so: whether they work with ecoliteracy, ecological education, organic gardening – the end is the same – to own up commons and community, and not just deal with environmental education through books (if at all). Resources are aplenty to help us begin if we wish to. (see box)

It all boils down to one question – what is home? Is it something within a physical gate where the our house or building is? Does it include the roads and maybe the parks nearby? The river from which we get water? The air we breathe? The other living beings that share our home? Once we decide what home is, we may be determining the future of our modern civilization.

Seetha Ananthasivan is the Founder Trustee of Prakriya Green Wisdom School which has been focusing on being an ecological education from its inception, 13 years ago. Those interested in knowing more may contact her at seetha.bhoomi@gmail.com



(video available on the youtube)

This video documentary shows the story of how Cuba used the power of community to become the first country to have attained sustainable development. Cuba faced the crisis of Peak Oil, because of sanctions imposed on it by the US and other countries, which reduced global trade by 80%, and imports of oil became almost nil. There were also sanctions on the import of food, medicines, finances and other essentials.

It is a tribute to the human spirit that Cuba did not give up – by giving up high energy buildings, by importing bicycles and most of all through organic agriculture made possible by communities working together. Cuba is today famous for its urban agricultural movement where gardens of public buildings and every available space has been used for growing food.

Cuba is like a lab experiment – it has already experienced an energy famine – which all countries will soon face in a few decades; and it has shown how co-operation and human relationships - how the power of community can help not just to survive but even thrive under such cataclysmic changes.

The World awakens to Ecological Education

Several organisations are committed to fostering the sense of commons and community in schools. Here are some resources you can look up:

www.greenschools.org (India)
www.ecoschools.org.uk (UK)
www.centreforecoliteracy.com (USA)
www.organicsschools.com.au (Australia)
www.organicgrowersschool.org (North Carolina, USA)
www.edibleschoolyard.org (Berkeley, USA)
www.gardenorganic.org (UK)