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Political Economy of Permaculture

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The picture

Permaculture for the rural and poor women of arid Banaskantha is not an environment or agriculture issue, but it is an economic and political issue. Here, by economy we mean the informal or self-employed economy, as 80% of the rural poor women are a part of the self-employed economy. Here, by politics we mean politics of power over day-to-day decisions of living and working. We do not mean the politics of political parties who have by-and-large almost always failed to reach these rural and poor women. By permaculture we mean any local initiative by the local women to revive or recover or rebuild local ecological or environmental assets of land, soil, and vegetations with local labour and local resources. Having agreed to the definitions of economy, politics, and permaculture, we will try to understand their interplay through the past seven years of experience of Self Employed Women's Association, (SEWA), working with 40,000 rural poor women in the 64 villages of arid areas of Banaskantha district in the Western State of Gujarat, India.

The setting

Banaskantha is known for its deserts and poverty. Repeated visits of droughts are marked with occasional floods. Most of the population – men, young and able – migrate with cattle, in search of fodder and water, leaving the women and children behind without work or water. The past fifty years of development efforts of the independent India's government agencies have largely remained ineffective and without results. But there is hardly any community present and organised to demand effective and sustained development.

SEWA's experience

Self Employed Women's Association, (SEWA), a representative body of more than 200,000 women of the informal sector, has been involved in the struggle of the poor women to fight deserts and poverty. SEWA's approach is to organise women around the world of work. SEWA believes in the joint action of struggle and development

of labour and cooperatives. In Gujarat, SEWA works in the 9 out of 18 districts. Established in 1972, SEWA will celebrate 25 years of its existence in 1997.

Since 1988 SEWA has been involved in the struggle of the local women of Banaskantha to generate local economy and regenerate local ecology. The women try to generate local economy through 72 DWCRA Groups of handicraft and artisan workers, gum collectors, and salt farmers; 15 dairy cooperatives; and 75 savings and credit groups. It must be noted that all these groups conduct activities that are environmentally friendly, are led by women, and are economically viable. The women try to regenerate local ecology through their efforts of building water harvesting structures, watershed management, augmenting traditional water sources, wide-spread nursery plantations, soil conservation efforts, and agro-forestry. In short, it can be summarised that for the poor families of the area the woman's capacity to work, her health, her knowledge, and her skills are almost the only resources to count on for survival. SEWA's efforts in Banaskantha are to recognise this and try to harness this precious potential of women in leading their families out of poverty. The response of the local women can be summed up in what Ranbai of Anternes village said: "we want work, work, and work. If we have work, we live. If we have work we eat. No work, no future".

Let me recount some of the measures we have taken to promote permaculture in Banaskantha.

- **Food security system:** Shakti Packet, an alternative food security system initiated, designed, and run by and for the poor rural women of the six desert villages, unreached by the government's Public Distribution System or the profit driven market forces, is unique. It bridges the existing profit-oriented food market with the alternative access, consumption, and production patterns. It is still in the making, and details keep on changing while more experience and insights are gained. But the access and ownership of their own source, supply, and distribution of food for the 300 women is encouraging. The levels of savings and nutrition of the women and their families have gone up. Now, finally, the government is offering to handover its own PDS shops to local women to run it. The mainstream interests joining the "marginal" forces!
- **Fodder security system:** Fodder is food for the animals. And animals are mobile assets of the desert and arid area communities. They are non-polluting, life-long income-generating assets. And they remain outside the planning framework. In Banaskantha, where seasonal forced migration is widespread, the local women initiated the Fodder Security System in ten villages which acts as a buffer to the droughts and famines. Saving additional fodder for the lean months is not a new idea. But its implementation is. There were examples where the supply of fodder maintained the production of milk by the cattle which the local dairy was unable to buy. Now attempts are being made to move on from distribution to ownership of fodder production sites by the women. It will start with production on farms and move on to become an integrated fodder-water-soil conservation farm.
- **Reviving milk co-operatives:** Women do most of the work of cattle care but the milk co-operatives are owned by the men. And when a co-operative goes

defunct hardly any efforts are made to revive it. Like a consumable good it is disposed off and new is made. SEWA decided, and revived the 15 defunct cooperatives by first feminising them: that is, women members joining and taking over the management of the cooperatives. They have in the short time of two years made the co-ops viable by adding integrated services of fodder, seeds, vet and health. Permaculture promotes multiple forms of organisms. In the wasteland of economic plunder, promotion of multiple forms of organisation is easier. Corporate dominance should be balanced by introducing cooperatives and self-help groups capable of dealing with the market forces.

- **Water as regenerative input:** Augmenting existing and new, traditional and modern, decentralized and centralized sources of water in arid areas has regenerating impact, not only on the local ecology but also the economy. The living and working conditions both improve, especially for the women. There is a new regional water supply scheme of the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board, (GWSSB), funded through Dutch aid. All aspects of the supply of piped water, the way it is now, may not be desirable but the fact remains that if there is a pipe it must bring water to the women. This is a question of accountability. This is a question of performance. Investments already made, assets already created, must perform and give results. The women's Pani Panchayats, Water Committees, demand so. They also oversee the use and reuse of water which is a scarce resource. The women can not just be occupied with the use of water. They, in their own way, found themselves involved in augmenting existing wells and ponds; reviving traditional structures; reforming existing ponds into rain-water harvesting structures; and now, since past one year, taking up integrated watershed management that includes soil conservation and leveling, matching, contouring, protective hedges, and rain-water recharging. The scope of work is increasing.
- **Gum collection:** In an arid area women cut the last few trees to cook their food. No fuel, no food. That is the reality. The most common tree in an arid area is Babul. It is thorny and hardy. It also secretes gum. But there was no market for gum. So SEWA organised the women in groups to collect gum, which was linked up with the forest development corporation which purchases gum. Collecting gum became an income generating activity. It was in the interest of the women to collect gum. That means gum producing trees have to be maintained. It also means more trees means more gum. So more trees were planted. Now 150 women maintain such desert forests to collect gum. From distribution to conservation was not an easy journey. But the difficulties were worth the outcome.
- **Salt farming:** The area is arid. The soil is saline. There is no water. The underground water is saline. So the women decided to turn the disaster into a development opportunity. They harvested the underground salty water to farm salt. Though the market linkages are yet to be fully satisfactory, and the global economic forces have local impact, the production of salt is very well worked out. The income is rolling in which can be far more regular or secure. Some changes in the positive direction are taking shape.

- **Planting trees:** Importance of vegetation in any permaculture activity needs hardly any introduction. The scale may be of interest. Each year more than 300 women raise 100,000 saplings in the arid areas of Banaskantha. The effort is like a drop in a big ocean. But the number of drops have increased. Some areas are facing a mild drizzle! That is the plus point of most of the permaculture activities. The efforts, however small, can add up. By planting one tree each day you can create a forest in two years. By producing one shoe each day you can not build a shoe factory.
- **Handicrafts and artisans:** Handicrafts? What does that have to do with permaculture? First, they are the local skills and knowledge. Second, they are the local arts and crafts. Third, they provide items to use for living. Fourth, the materials used are eco-friendly and have no side effect or environmental hazard. And, also, it provides supplementary income at family level to add to other incomes from farming or forestry.

Economics of the poor women

Whatever the economists or the development experts may say, in our experience, much greater attention must be paid to the poor women working in the informal sector of the rural economy. We do not have to reach them. We have to start from them. This is SEWA's approach. Therefore, any economic planning or intervention has to be in tune with the needs of the informal sector rural poor women.

Now what are their major concerns that are direct and measurable ? Let me enlist them from our experience in Banaskantha :

1. Any economic intervention must provide work that will lead to higher wages, lead to sustained work, that will lead to home-based work, that will lead to meaningful work.
2. The approach has to be to build the above mentioned work security. But it must be first built at local, at micro, at family level and later may add up to the macro level work security. Do not start with the structure. Start with the elements of the structure.
3. Prefer work that is based on local labour markets, and local use of the surplus if any.
4. Focus on asset formation. That is, productive asset, asset that is economic asset, asset that is ecological asset, asset that is human or social asset. Prefer asset production over consumption. Economies based on consumption expand fast but also collapse fast. Economies based on asset formation – economic, social, physical, or environmental – last longer, can absorb the shocks of disasters and conflicts.
5. Take economic decisions in favour of the domestic economy over regional economy, settlement economy over State economy, survival economy over consumption economy, and environmental economy over industry economy.

The above list of income-generating and ecology-generating activities can be enlarged, but we will for now focus on the above as far as the economy is concerned.

Politics of poor women

The politics of political parties to gain control over the State is of no interest to us here. Because, to the parties, the poor and rural women are of no interest beyond once-every-five-years for votes. I think too much attention is paid by those who are in favour of the poor and women in bringing women in to the mainstream of politics. But is it worth it ? Our interest has been in bringing the mainstream to the poor women. Let them come and join us.

But is it possible ? And what do we do to achieve this ?

1. We have to shift our attention from the State to the citizen. That is, let us not bother what the State does. Let us focus on the women as citizens.
2. The shift in attention in favour of the individual would be such that the individual, in our case poor and women, gain greater control over their day-to-day life of work and living.
3. In this group formation, cooperatives or self-help groups or Panchayats are of great use. Prefer them over parties.
4. Build leaders. Not leaders who can lead a nation or a large party following. But leaders who can lead their own life on their own, on their own moral values, as per their own political belief. A need for great leaders shows lack of day-to-day and operational leadership. That is, it shows that most individuals are not capable of taking well thought out decisions on their own.
5. We do not try to say that the politics for the poor women should be reduced to their poverty-removal needs only. That is there. But also, in addition, and simultaneously, investments must be made, opportunities offered, to let them participate in the larger democratic processes. And here we do not mean "Participate" as a method or tool of doing things but as a culture of consultation and accommodating considerations.

Sure, here also the list can be enlarged and improved upon. But the basic aspects are covered as far as the poor rural women are concerned.

Permaculture for the poor women

Allow me to define what I think is the relevance of permaculture to the rural poor women. It may be a different point of view, at least on the surface. But it makes sense to the women we work with, and therefore, to us.

1. That such a permaculture activity must show immediate, adequate for making a living and sustainable results. That is, the rain-water harvesting must have enough water in the pond so that the women can use it. In other words, the gains must be for the present, and not deferred to the future. We can afford to wait, they can not and should not.
2. The efforts must start with the women in the centre. That is, the choice between feeding the women and their families and loss of local species must be in favour of the food for the families. Once the people have food, they will be

open to revive or retain or rehabilitate local species. Otherwise, the women will never get interested in the permaculture activities.

3. As and when possible, the preference should be given to the local or traditional methods of agriculture, irrigation, or forestry. Even when it conflicts with the international ideas on permaculture. The reason is that we know very little, even now, about the local variations in the global wisdom on permaculture.
4. Population as a limiting or negative factor needs review. As there can never be too many trees or too many flowers, there can never be too many human beings. Every human life is sacred. The potential of any human life to contribute to the revival of our earth is limitless.

The challenge is not in reducing the number, but in finding the people, especially the poor, meaningful and sustainable work. There can not be enough children harvesting water, there can never be enough youth channelling the solar power.

5. Permaculture must be based on the frugal or austere or what we call Gandhian way of living. However environment-friendly, limitless consumption, even of organic food or solar energy or harvested rain-water will not work. Levels of consumptions of the well-to-do must fall.

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