

Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai

From the Selected Works of Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan

2010

The Beauty of Ownership

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/hippu/33/>



KARIKA

IGIDR Students' Newsletter

Vol. 3

2009-2010

Contents:

Message from Dean	1
Editorial	1
Interview: Dr. Subir Gokarn	2
Would We?	5
The Time That Was	6
Politics of Baywatch	7
The Local Train Experience	8
Musings	9
The Beauty of Ownership	10
Bad Music Junkie	12

Message from Dean

I am very happy to see the revival of *Karika* -- the student's newsletter. It definitely showcases the impressive range of creative talent of students at IGIDR. The mix of articles, the interview, reflections, musings, other short pieces, and poetry --- all make it very nice reading. I liked it all and am sure that everyone else at IGIDR will like this edition of *Karika*. My best wishes to the editorial team and the contributors.

K.V.Ramaswamy
Dean of Academic Affairs

Editorial Note

The revival of our newsletter, *Karika* this year has been a slow but rewarding process. Our endeavour has been to present a mélange of articles in this edition, covering reflections, opinions, public policy and poetry. The issues raised in the subsequent pages involve both 'economic' and 'non-economic' concerns, marking a major shift in *Karika*'s journey.

The past few years have been an interesting phase for this subject of 'Economics'. The events surrounding the sub-prime crisis and the credit crunch that followed --- causing what has come to be termed as the 'Great Recession' --- have raised deep questions on our understanding of how the economy works and raised doubts on the dominant economic philosophy(ies) of the day. The inability to understand the dimensions of the crisis in its full magnitude seems to have dented the image of 'economists', raising uncomfortable questions about their role in society. On a positive note, this has allowed dissenters and skeptics within the profession to put forward strong arguments for change. The debate among top economists about the right path ahead for this relatively young discipline has indeed been fascinating.

Closer home the paradox of a relatively resilient macro-economic performance contrasts sharply with the rise of the Maoist menace, which supposedly draws sustenance from discontent against rising inequities, in a vast 'Red corridor' ranging from the southern districts of Bengal to Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. Yet, as students of social science we remain blissfully unaware of the dynamics behind this metamorphosis of sleepy hamlets into bloody battle-fields. In the absence of independent research and unbiased documentation, we are forced to accept the propaganda being churned out by both state and non-state actors.

Times of change have often helped men in their most creative pursuits and maybe this will be one such turning point for this discipline as well. It is our fond hope and wish that the days to come will witness a changing paradigm in social science research in the country and IGIDR being one of the premier economics institute will be at the forefront of this change.

Hope you enjoy this issue.

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Editorial Team

The Beauty of Ownership

Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan

Ph.D. Scholar

Development is of the people, for the people and by the people. I believe, earlier the public policy strategists did not emphasize much on the third clause i.e. "by the people". So, in a sense, development is externally supplied. People found schools, hospitals, parks etc. have been set up in their locality in which they have not played any direct role. So there is a prevailing feeling that they do not 'own' these services. Thus these 'everybody's property' ends up becoming 'nobody's property'. Only those who have higher sense of ethics take care of these properties. But such high-minded mortals are few and far between. The large majority needs that psychological drive of the 'me factor' - *I care, because I own.* Such indifferences and carelessness are reflected in the popular slogans like "*Government ka maal, darya mein daal*".¹

In economics this kind of phenomenon is studied as 'Tragedy of Commons' - the term coined by Garrett Hardin in his 1968 paper. The *paan*-spit corridors of government offices, stinking public toilets in railway platforms or choked drains in cities are all manifestations of common property left orphaned and uncared. Now, the question is can this tragedy of commons be prevented by conferring ownership?

In his seminal work on poverty-oriented energy strategies for sustainable development, Amulya K N Reddy demonstrated an alternative paradigm of "Blessing of the Commons" through Community Biogas Plant System in a PURA (Provision of Urban-amenities in Rural Areas) village. According to this school of thought, the price that an individual/household pays for not preserving the commons far outweighs whatever benefits there might be in ignoring the

collective interest. In other words, there is a confluence of self-interest and collective interest so that the collective interest is automatically advanced when individuals pursue their private interests.

I have experienced similar examples of such successes in community ownership in the endeavours of PeFSSSED (Peoples' Foundation for Scientific Socio-Economic Development – www.pefsssed.org). We had undertaken the School Building Construction Project in the tribal belt of Raigad district of Maharashtra. We were to facilitate the school building construction works under the *Sarva Siksha Abhiyan* of the Maharashtra Government. The Government had prepared a budget for a standard hexagonal building. By perusing the budget one could find that Government not by chance, but by design, had given space for *peoples' participation*. In fact, the budgeted amount was falling short of the market cost of construction. The difference accounts for part of the labor charge, which the Government expected that villagers would provide against nominal wage. Thereby, the government expects community ownership would automatically develop for a public property like school, and this is essential for any effort to bring about long-lasting development.

So, the key to development of any community is with the community itself. Government or NGOs, you or I- all are of secondary importance in this venture. We are just facilitators. It is the community, which needs to participate both directly and completely for success of any developmental attempt, and which in turn paves the way to a developed state. Today, the road that leads to the site of the school at Tawarwadi village of Panvel is an 'imagery of peoples' participation'. The village Tawarwadi is on the top of a hill. And there was no road for movement of vehicle to deliver the construction material. So people of the village organized themselves and built that road of half a kilometer length without any labor charge. PeFSSSED made the villagers realize that the upcoming school would be their own, so they need to

¹ Here, my intention is not to say we, the people are stupid. When government emphasizes on maintenance, we do respond to the same positively. However, in general, we do not take the first move. Some of us neglect, many of us ignore and each one of us adjusts to the ill-maintained public services.

exercise their ownership through direct involvement in the construction effort.

Some may think this is a strategy by the implementation authorities like government or NGOs to walk away from part of their responsibility and transfer the same to a community. But in my view, this is not so. In case of public goods, at times 'maintenance' becomes as important as (if not more than) the initial installation; and a community has a bigger role in it (in a *preventive* sense). I will have a higher stake on the tree, which I have watered. An increased sense of belongingness to the public property through community ownership is expected to increase the civic sense. However the essence of community ownership should not be confused with the false sense of ownership corporate firms like to exhibit to make their labor force work harder; and get rid of the same labor force ruthlessly when the market does not do well. But all corporate bosses are not those deceptive suckers. Some are gentlemen. I was fortunate to get one during one of my prior employments. One day during lunchtime, my

then boss shared the thumb rules he had followed as a manager.

"When the project is credited with success, the appreciation goes directly- without slightest delay- to the person(s) who is(are) responsible for the same (It's a 'hit' - You Did It); and when the project is blamed for any failure it is shared by all the members of the project (Its a 'miss' - We share it)".

Hold on! Is it not a fact that most often reverse happens, particularly in government! When it hits - all of us together crave for recognition. And when it misses – each one of us disowns, and the blame game usually starts. So, we, the people in general, must learn to value ownership and imbibe the same into our work culture and lifestyle.

The Swedish development economist, Gunnar Myrdal, once said that - Give a man a handful of sand, but tell him that it is his 'own'; he will turn the same into gold - that's the beauty of ownership.

