

Aamchi Mumbai: Capital, Commons, and the City(zen)

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Abstract

Recent debates and discourse on the urban commons though meager as yet, have thrown up interesting new issues for debate beyond those elaborated in the scholarly and activist discourse on ecological or resource commons, as well as cultural and knowledge commons. With stalwarts like David Harvey entering the fray, the privatization, appropriation and commodification of ecological and civic commons in cities is being linked to processes of neo-liberalism, entrepreneurial governance and their urban impacts. As Harvey puts it succinctly, “what is so interesting about the concept of the urban commons is that it poses all of the political contradictions of the commons in highly concentrated form” (Harvey 2012: 80).

Based on long term field work in Mumbai – India’s commercial and financial capital, and its largest and most densely populated / built-up metropolis – this paper will attempt to recast the debate on urban commons. On the one hand, the term *aamchi* Mumbai (*our* Mumbai) refers to the popular nativist and chauvinist slogan of right wing political parties whose agenda is to exclude working class migrants who flock to the city in large numbers aspiring for a better future. On the other, the term is also popular among migrants of all hues and classes who stake a claim to the city, its cultural and spatial commons, and who exemplify the slogan of the right to the city by continuously (re)producing the commons. Simultaneously, capital, even as it commodifies and privatizes the urban commons, also extensively uses the commons for competing in the market place, making profits, and for accumulation. Seeking to uncover and map a variety of scales at which the commons are created, used, and transformed, the talk maps and describes diverse spaces and practices related to the urban commons in contemporary Mumbai. Creation of commons for parochial purposes end up expanding and enhancing access to ecological and civic commons, even as neo-liberal and developmentalist agendas create temporary commons providing limited sources of livelihood to the poor. Capital is seen to crucially depend on civic commons as well as commoners for capital accumulation, despite its constant attempt to expropriate commoners from public spaces. Deploying the concepts of urban public goods, symbolic public goods, and urban commons, the paper charts a complex physical and symbolic topography of the urban commons that is constantly created and transformed by multiple forces, contestations, and struggles related to capitalist expansion, aspiration led mobilities, everyday survival, and citizenship. The paper summarizes key illustrations and arguments from an ongoing book project inspired by an earlier paper that mapped the ‘commoning’ of private and public spaces in the Mumbai metropolitan region (Parthasarathy 2011).

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1. Introduction

The commons has now begun grabbing increasing attention from urban studies scholars, as it has from environmental studies researchers turning their attention to socio-ecological systems in cities. As in the case of earlier debates on the commons in rural areas which largely focused on natural resource commons, the urban commons debate has also been a source of new hope of urban social-spatial reorganization – away from neo-liberal myopic urban visions, and exclusionary forms of urbanism and urbanization. There have been a few cautionary voices as well, urging us to beware of mistaking legal-juridical terms for empirical reality and practice, and emphasizing the need to adopt more nuanced views of the role of the state, market, and people's movements in engaging with the commons. Likewise academic scholarship has also stressed the need to interrogate concepts, theories and methods in studying the commons including but not restricted to terms such public space and public goods, notions of the private, forms and implications of enclosure, and the need to differentiate between commons and practices of commoning.

This paper attempts to extend the cautionary note to counter the considerable hype that is built around new citizen initiatives, state strategies, public claiming of urban spaces, and the new-fangled celebration of digital media interfaced smart city projects. In doing so the paper draws from over a decade of field work in Mumbai – Indian largest urban agglomeration in its west coast – and its commercial, financial, and entertainment capital. Struggles over right to the city in Mumbai by migrants from all over the country reflect a claiming of the city as commons, against violent nativist / chauvinist movements which attempt to exclude them from the city, its infrastructure, culture, politics, and economy which owe their origins, evolution, current status and vibrancy to a large cosmopolitan migrant population. These claims and counter claims reflect cultural, social, and symbolic commoning practices of generations of migrants, practices that transcend and link different scales of space and time. At the same time these contestations are influenced by elite and middle class led visions of the city which are at once exclusive and politically fraught with elitist notions of citizenship, democracy, aesthetics, and urbanisms. Reflecting neo-liberal urbanization and entrepreneurial urban governance, the resource commons and civic commons in the city no longer offer the even meager and unstable sources of livelihoods they used to offer in the past; new claims on urban space encroachments on commons from real estate, mafia, infrastructure, recreation and tourism, and bourgeois environmentalism consistently marginalize the lives and livelihoods of the urban poor, and exposing cities to hazards and disasters. These processes however do not constitute simple trajectories of privatization of commons, but involve complex exchanges between formal and informal sectors of the economy transcending the private, the public, and commons dependent agents, actors, institutions, and firms.

Ongoing collaborative work by this author is attempting to tease out normative, juridical, and practical aspects of commoning of private and public spaces, privatization of commons, and the role of public-private

partnerships in ecological degradation of the commons, and social marginalization of the commoners in the Mumbai region and other geographical regions. Previous work documented the temporal and temporary appropriation of public spaces by commoners as an aspect of the urban poor's strategies to eke out livelihoods. Earlier work also attempted to develop an alternative resource based imaginary of Mumbai city from the perspective of commoners which include fishers, pastoralists, and the urban poor foraging and hunting in the commons interstices of the city's spaces for food, fodder, and fuel. The objective in this paper is to explore through a range of case studies, the complex, complicated, and conflicting ways in which commoning practices play out in urban space involve a diversity of scales, economic actors, ethnicities, spaces, and temporalities; the focus is on commoning and how it is both a strategy for survival of the urban poor and a mechanism of socialization of the costs of accumulation by capital. Both private and public spaces and resources are subjected to commoning practices temporarily and permanently, and these are linked to processes of 'accumulation by dispossession' and the attempts to 'annihilate space with time' (Harvey 1990), which juxtapose the rich, poor and the middle classes, native and migrants, capital and the working class, formal and informal sectors in time and space to create new spatialities of commoning and privatization of space and resources.

The paper offers three sets of analyses and interpretation of distinct but inter-related socio-spatial practices of commoning that involve the creation, appropriation, occupation, claiming, and use of public, private and symbolic goods. The first relates to conflicts and contestations over life, space, livelihoods, and culture between migrants and 'natives' over citizenship rights and right to the city claims. The second analyses the implications of and links between capital accumulation and commoning of civic spaces in the city. The third interprets the above two processes and struggles by deploying an overarching lens of the 'city as commons' which is employed in India by the rural and urban rich in using the city as a source of capital accumulation, and by the migrant poor as a source of empowerment, as a vehicle to enhance their capacity to aspire, and as a site that enables them to meet their basic survival needs.

The fieldwork for this paper has been ongoing since 2006, and involves site specific case studies, participant and non-participant observation, informal interviews, and key informant interviews. Interviews with key stakeholders, and content analysis of media reports and media columns, along with archival research also provided the data for this research.

2. Naming, Claiming, and Celebrating (in) the City: Commoning and Mumbai's Multipli(city)

Since the 1960s, Mumbai has had several political outfits such as the Shiv Sena and its offshoot Maharashtra Navnirman Sena which have pursued an aggressive nativist agenda, often violently targeting a shifting immigrant population from different parts of India, whilst also adopting a Hindu nationalist position against minorities. In and out of power at the municipal and state levels, they have successfully campaigned to change the name of city from the Portugese Bombay (the Good Bay), to Mumbai after a local goddess Mumba Devi. Bombay / Mumbai is a city of immigrants and was built by immigrant traders and business people from all over the subcontinent, since the British developed it as a port, an entrepot, and commercial / industrial city in the early decades of the 20th century. The nativist campaign to claim the city for the people of the state of which it is its administrative capital – Maharashtra – is hence ironic also because historically the city was just a group of fishing villages with little or no contact with the rest of state when it was ruled by various rulers until the advent of British rule and their suzerainty over the local kings. The East Indian community with a much longer history who occupy much of the city's commons, and have control of

its heritage *gaathan* precincts by virtue of their status as 'original inhabitants' along with the *Koli* fisher community refer to the city as Mobai. North Indian immigrants, who constitute a significant proportion of the city's working class and informal sector employees, prefer the term Bambai. Migrants from south Indian states use the word Bombai in claiming the city, with Malayalee migrants who constitute the largest and oldest white collar educated and skilled workforce in the city and adopting the nativist Aamchi Mumbai (*our Mumbai*) as the name of one of their Malayalam language FM radio stations. Thus the term Aamchi Mumbai while seemingly inclusive, has come full circle from being used by Marathi speaking natives (who are also immigrants to the city) to exclude other migrants from other regions and linguistic zones, to being used by these non-Marathi migrants in claiming the city as their own. As I have argued elsewhere (Parthasarathy), the city takes on agency, but the city also provides agency to diverse groups in their struggles for social mobility, emancipation from oppressive social structures, and search for livelihoods and employment.

A significant outcome of contesting claims to and processes of re-creating the city, is the ways in which public spaces are commoned permanently and temporarily, and new common places come to be created initially to cater to specific ethnic groups, which eventually become urban commons even if they are legally recognized as public goods. Continuous streams of migration, especially from rural hinterlands have led to the evolution of a new type of cosmopolitanism, perhaps even a de-cosmopolitanization, as rural migrants bring their own concerns and attached brands of politics; political parties in order to attract migrant votes (or mobilize 'natives' against migrants) change both their styles of political mobilization as well as agendas and ideologies; urban spaces are transformed owing to the everyday practices of rural migrants; and rural / regional festivals are revived / transformed and performed in cities as communal events and as part of political survival and resistance strategies. It is important to bear in mind that rural-urban population flows also represent flows from culturally distinct regions even if these distinct cultures belong to a common 'great tradition'. These cultural forms that migrants bring interact and mix with local cultures, or respond to local cultural and political / economic structures and domination and get transformed in the process. 'Native' cultures may also respond either by taking up migrant cultural forms and transforming them in the process, using them for entirely new purposes, or seeking to thwart the practice or spread of external ideas, religions, customs, mores and ways of life. All of these can be observed in the politics of commoning that surround cultural events and religious festivals as they are practiced in Mumbai.

Mumbai is perhaps India's most cosmopolitan city, with over 50% of the population hailing from other Indian states. Hence over several decades, groups from other states have gradually introduced public and community celebrations of cultural and religious events and festivals into the city with important implications for space use during festive seasons; these have emerged as a significant source of conflict between activists of chauvinist and nativist political parties and 'outsiders'. Until a decade ago, the major public celebration of a religious festival in India was the Ganesh festival lasting for ten days during August-September. The festival itself became public during India's national movement as part of efforts to unite Hindu's in the freedom struggle (Cahsman, 1970). Immigration from outside the state gradually introduced the Navaratri – celebrated publicly by the Gujaratis as Dandia – public song and dance events, and by the Bengalis as Durga Puja – usually occurring in October. The extensive commoning of public space – streets and lanes being completely blocked for extended periods during these festivals – brought with it several consequences aside from inconvenience to users of roads. Competitive claims over public space soon began, as members of different political parties, local factions, youth groups, castes, and religions began to celebrate these festivals separately, as well as begin celebration of other events hitherto not celebrated publicly. These included regionally specific cultural / religious festivals. Existing studies on the Ganesh festival usually link it to Hindu cultural or right wing mobilization (Kaur, 2001), but a closer examination of

festival spaces reveals overt and less obvious political uses not necessarily related to religion. Caste and residential segregation being very much a part of urban settlement patterns in Indian cities, dalits have for long been excluded from these festivities, as well as birth anniversaries of political leaders. Political parties seeking to enter the political landscape of the city – such as the largely *dalit* supported Bahujan Samaj Party from north India, also make use of festival spaces, and compete with other parties in claiming and commoning such spaces for political mobilization. Festival events thus are also important public spaces which link the city's residents including its migrants to other regions of the state and nation and create a trans-local commons spanning culture, region, village, language, economy, and political mobilization.

The city itself becomes subjected to commoning in multiple ways, with multiple overlapping claims that define, redefine, and re- as well as co-create the public spaces of the city, its civic commons such as streets, parks and gardens, playgrounds, empty lots, and water bodies. Resource based place-making as an aspect of commoning by ethnic groups is evident in the Chhat puja – originally a rural festival from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which has suddenly become popular over the last few years in Mumbai. While practiced earlier in an isolated way by individuals and families, it has now become a community event occupying large space in and around Mumbai's Juhu beach - notwithstanding the impurity of the sea as opposed to the ritual purity of the river for Hindus. The scale of the celebration and the public patronage and support for the Chhat puja by Mumbai politicians of north Indian origin leaves little doubt that the sudden popularity and public observance is aimed to counter the very public violence against north Indians in Mumbai by activists of nativist political parties. Persisting rural-urban linkages and their political ramifications quite clearly imbricate informal uses of public space in this case also, but more significantly convert Mumbai's beaches from a recreational commons to a politico-religious commons. From the opposite side, the nativist brigade, in aggressively pushing the public celebration of the Ganesh festival, has created new infrastructure in the form of beach and lakefront promenades, as well as artificial ponds for the immersion of Ganesh idols at the end of the ten day festival. These places were created with the financial support of the municipal corporation, and have become recreational spaces, spaces which are used by young couples seeking some 'together' time, and as spaces for exercise by an increasingly health conscious population. Beyond their status as juridical public goods which are used as symbolic public goods, such places have become commons with a quasi-legal status, subject to common rules and norms of management and use determined by local neighbourhoods, political power, negotiation, and simply customs of everyday use.

Beyond the political and religious status of such commoning practices, these commons also become subject to capital's penetrating accumulative pressures. Indian and multinational companies begin sponsoring such politico-religious events, and use festival spaces to advertise their products and services. Seasonal and cyclical commoning of public space by groups and communities supported and legitimized by the state, political elites, and the corporate sector has thus emerged in a significant manner over the last decade in Mumbai. Frequently violating norms for use of public space, they take on the character of commons, as regulation and management is through negotiation, acceptance, self-management, and processes of inclusion / exclusion, entitlement / non-entitlement.

Capital Accumulation, Neo-liberal Urbanism, and Informal Livelihoods: Temporal and Temporary Commons in Mumbai

Globalization and the transformation of the urban economy, its infrastructure, work and commercial spaces creates new times-space Opportunities in the informal sector for the urban poor catering to the poor as well

as the middle classes. While Harvey's ideas of accumulation by dispossession and annihilation of space with time are well known, these urban processes also have implications for the creation of temporary, temporal, and long term commoning of civic spaces such as streets and roads, spaces temporarily closed for infrastructure construction, and liminal spaces adjacent to malls, office complexes, railway stations etc.

Street vending has always had a major role in the economies of Asian cities providing cheap goods and services to various sections of the population. Despite the rich ethnographic and quantitative studies on street vending and hawking in Mumbai and other cities, there has hardly been a focus on the temporal and temporary commoning of public spaces and the links between street vending and the formal economic sector whose production is retailed through in the urban civic commons and public spaces. Several key areas can be identified wherein time and space are conceptualized and made use of in innovative ways by actors involved in street vending and hawking. While the global flow of capital may impact cities in the periphery and subject urban processes to its domination, for the poor outside of the formal sector, global flows of capital, culture, commodities, and images also create and offer opportunities for livelihoods albeit of a very basic kind, and these opportunities are primarily created through processes of commoning, such that capital gets to infiltrate markets both through formal and informal channels. A major aspect of urban restructuring and development of new urban spaces in Mumbai has been the emergence of office and work spaces servicing the global economy – call centres, business process outsourcing (BPO), and production of components, spare parts, and accessories for major multinational firms. Demand factors of necessity play a major role in location as well as choice of products or services provided by street vendors and hawkers. But global economic linkages also introduced new work hours and offered jobs to new entrants to the labour force in the Call Centres, BPOs, and software firms, all of which either work at night to cater to clients' time zones or introduce new work hours different from local work timings. These firms also employ a very large number of young and unmarried workers who may not live with their families. A host of services particularly related to food, but also other personal services are offered by street vendors in locations close to either the offices or the residential enclaves where such workers live. A temporal commons thus emerges on public spaces in clear violation of municipal regulations but through an understanding that is reached and that creates shared urban commons on the basis of negotiation between global firms, workers, vendors, municipal officials, and rule enforcement officials. Street vendors often modify their timings to provide services at particular hours when demand peaks. New vendors and hawkers gain economic opportunities as the 'time-space compression' at a global level lead to a 'time-space expansion' locally, with an extension in working hours of staff in these firms providing a 24 hour market for select goods and services in specific enclaves, i.e. an expansion in the time that (public) space can be used to eke out livelihoods.

The emergence of time specific hawkers and vendors in both older (Santa Cruz Export Processing Zone, set up in the early 1970s) and newer (Godrej and Hiranandani call centres, BPOs and software clusters that emerged in the last decade) globally linked economic enclaves in Mumbai provide clear evidence of time specific opening up of urban spaces, and a commoning of land use in public spaces hitherto unused for economic gains by the informal sector. Offering goods and services especially in the food sector, these hawkers and vendors start early in the morning as office workers grab a bite before going to work, or during night shifts. Interviews with hawkers revealed that while some of them were new to the trade, several of them shifted their own work hours from the day time to nights and early morning for two major reasons. One was the relative freedom with which they could operate unseen by municipal authorities. The second was the higher prices that workers in these sectors were willing to pay. It is not only capital which compresses time-space in its search for quicker returns to its investment. Less skilled, less politically powerful, and less educated workers in the informal sector also perceive and significantly use time to shore

up their livelihood strategies by commoning public goods temporally. Despite the tendency of the city's elite and middle classes, as well as capital to dispossess the urban poor of their livelihoods by periodically clearing the streets of vendors and hawkers, the same capitalist process also creates scope for and winks at commoning that subsidizes its workforces in new outsourcing sectors where the primary objective of shifting jobs to countries like India is to save on labour costs. Urban commons in this instance becomes unconsciously an aid to the capitalist strategy of keeping wages depressed by subsidizing workers' food costs which otherwise would be higher. Again, notwithstanding capital's strategy of privatizing the commons and privatizing public spaces, sections of capital make significant profits through sale of goods that are retailed through informal street vendors and hawkers. This can also be seen in the many urban infrastructure projects of the city such as its metro rail works, flyovers, freeways, and highways. In each of these cases, as spaces get blocked for months if not years for infrastructure development, blocked spaces get commoned by informal street vendors and hawkers. Getting temporary access to public space, over which there is little or no municipal or legal oversight during project construction, informal economic actors find opportunity in commoning such spaces in collaboration with political leaders, the police and municipal officials. As in the previous example, the formal sector uses these spaces to retail their products furthering their own process of capital accumulation. Thus, projects which are aimed annihilating space with time (Harvey), simultaneously create temporary barriers and bottlenecks for capital and people, and new opportunities for capital accumulation and profit making.

On the other hand, commoning of civic spaces such as streets also takes place due to monopoly capital; as large numbers of malls come up in a social context of large scale income disparity and poverty, retail workers in the mall, as well as customers spend time shopping and window shopping in an air-conditioned environment but prefer to eat cheaper food sold by street hawkers just outside the mall; these have emerged as a response to high food prices in the mall which themselves are due to the political economy of real estate in Mumbai, and the practice of extracting monopoly rent by mall owners and retailers in the malls. Thus even as malls are accused of dispossession the livelihoods of the urban poor, they return with a vengeance to commonise civic spaces outside the same malls, sometimes supported by the same political leaders who assisted in the original dispossession caused by the malls.

Yet another commoning practice through which urban civic spaces are commoned directly and indirectly by capital is with reference to parking spaces. Mumbai city as with most Indian cities are notoriously short of parking spaces, since these were not historically planned for in subsequent urban development plans. Thus large corporate firms who hire, own and run buses for their employees park these on streets by paying bribes to municipal and traffic police officials, effectively commoning such spaces during non-operating hours. Similar is the case with schools and education institutions that run buses for their students. Logistics and transport firms likewise take over large stretches of the city's road for parking when these trucks and commercial vehicles are not being used. A large section of the city's working class ekes out its livelihood by owning and driving light commercial vehicles which offer intra-city transport of goods to commercial and industrial firms. Characterized by self-exploitation, and always on the verge of bankruptcy, they subsidize capital by offering a cheap source of transport; costs are further reduced by parking vehicles on streets on a permanent basis. A large number of firms in the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector also routinely bribe traffic police to park illegally while delivering goods so that the last mile connectivity costs can be reduced. Such spaces as evident from my research become effectively blocked for parts of the day and get commoned by capital itself, benefiting both formal sector firms, and informal sector actors in street vending and hawking. Yet another sector which uses illegal night parking on a large scale are the thousands of taxis and autorickshaws which commonize the streets for parking as well as for cleaning and washing their

vehicles, often using public resources such as water allocated to public toilets. Both public and private owners and operators of transport use subsidized and free water resources meant for the urban poor effectively commoning both civic spaces and water resources which then enter the capital accumulation process, subsidizing and socializing private costs with public funds.

Commoning the City: Cautionary Perspectives from Mumbai

In previous work (Parthasarathy 1997 and 2015), I have argued that provincial rural elites in India seek to acquire power in the cities because of which the city becomes a stake in rural struggles, but also provides agency to both the rural rich and poor peasants and landless labour. The city provides agency by first providing access to resources, power, and institutions in the city - these could be institutions pertaining to the judiciary and to the bureaucracy which despite corruption work in less arbitrary ways; the city provides access to political parties and leaders willing to take up their causes. The city is thus a site of symbolic public goods (Vijayendra Rao 2005), and diverse claims to the city by rural regional migrants is as much about the commoning the city in symbolic and political terms, as about livelihoods, and escaping poverty and caste oppression. Through social and political movements, the city also enables networking and scaling up of smaller social and political movements. The city provides access to the media and gives greater political visibility political demands of the rural poor who also constitute the urban poor in India. On the other hand for the dominant castes in the rural areas, in the face of a crumbling rural economy, and increasing difficulties in extracting surplus using feudal forms of exploitation, the control of the city, access to wider political power, and administrative mechanisms of government are important to fund or subsidize new economic activities both in rural areas and in cities (Parthasarathy 2015). These groups are frequently castigated for treating the city and Mumbai in particular as a 'milch cow'. For them as well, the city is a commons, though in the Gareth Hardin sense of an open access commons from which resources (political or financial) are taken, but no effort is made to sustain such resources, or to design normative principles for using, extracting, and maintaining resources in the city. A former Chief Minister of the state hence referred to Mumbai as 'India's wild west'. Similar examples of converting urban commons which provide ecosystem services such as marshes, mangroves, salt pans, and other coastal zones in Mumbai, into open access systems include using such spaces as storage sites for coal, or locating garbage dumping grounds in such ecologically fragile commons. Commons are literally 'wasted' in such cases, both denying access to fisherfolk who depend on such resource commons, and creating new health hazards for neighbourhood communities.

In many ways for rural elites and poor, for the upper castes and the lower castes the city is not just a place which offers an alternate livelihood, and a source for income generation, the city constitutes a symbolic public good. For the rural rich it's a source of political power, a symbolic public good at a higher scale which helps them to overcome the constitutional barriers of maintaining power through extra-legal means back home in their villages. For the rural poor, it is a space where they can realize their utopias, a place where they hope to lose their identities in the anonymity of the crowd, a place where they hope that achievement will be valued more than ascription, but above all spaces of justice and empowerment, where they can conceive of or deploy a politics of resistance using mainstream political strategies, not just alternative ones. The contestation over naming the city then is not simply a struggle over symbols, it is a struggle over the city as a symbolic public good, it is a claim to the city as a commons for everyone, and for specific groups which try to appropriate it. The nativists attempt to set boundaries, exclude 'outsiders' and reserve symbolic public goods and state resources for people from within the state identified linguistically. The migrant ethnic

groups on the other hand create new symbolically identified commons as a strategy for countering nativist attacks; in an alien setting where they may not have access to their own public spaces, commoning helps them to grab public spaces temporally, assert their identity and claims to the city as citizens of India, with freedom to follow and practice their religions and cultures.

For capital, Mumbai for a long time constituted an appropriate site for capital accumulation – because of its large skilled and disciplined workforce, availability of finance, its cosmopolitanism, and relatively better law and order situation. These constituted its symbolic commons, much before other cities in India began competing for investments. Conversely entrepreneurs of all hues, and skilled workers looked upon the city as a place of opportunity, substantially contributing to migration. For the aspiring small scale and informal entrepreneurs, and those seeking to own income generating assets – taxis, light commercial vehicles, small manufacturing equipment, and small retail – Mumbai has a large and efficient fiduciary network consisting of credit cooperatives, and cooperative banks which offer easy finance. This is the symbolic financial commons that the urban migrant poor and lower classes depend on.

As with the ritual, cultural, and political commons, and the temporal commons that are the site for informal sector workers, symbolic public goods as commons bring together rich and poor, the powerful and those seeking empowerment, into shared strategies of commoning the city. Harvey (2012) agrees with Hardt and Negri (2009) in stating that “the metropolis (itself) that now constitutes a vast common produced by the collective labor expended on and in the city”. In much of the recent literature in urban studies from a broad left perspective, the privatization, appropriation and commodification of ecological and civic commons in cities is being linked to processes of neo-liberalism, entrepreneurial governance and their urban impacts. However as Harvey puts it succinctly, “what is so interesting about the concept of the urban commons is that it poses all of the political contradictions of the commons in highly concentrated form” (Harvey 2012: 67). This paper has attempted to recast the debate on urban commons in this light. We have shown that capital, even as it commodifies and privatizes the urban commons, also extensively uses the commons for competing in the market place, making profits, and for accumulation. Seeking to uncover and map a variety of scales at which the commons are created, used, and transformed, this paper and the larger research project has sought to map and describe diverse spaces and practices related to the urban commons in contemporary Mumbai. Creation of commons for parochial purposes end up expanding and enhancing access to ecological and civic commons, even as neo-liberal and developmental agendas create temporary commons providing limited sources of livelihood to the poor. Capital is seen to crucially depend on civic commons as well as commoners for capital accumulation, despite its constant attempt to expropriate commoners from public spaces. Deploying the concepts of urban public goods, symbolic public goods, and urban commons, our research charts a complex physical and symbolic topography of the urban commons that is constantly created and transformed by multiple forces, contestations, and struggles related to capitalist expansion, aspiration led mobilities, everyday survival, and citizenship. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, we must not only interrogate the circumstances, conditions, contexts in which urban commons emerge, but also the practices through which commoning or urban public space and symbolic public goods occur. This research tells us as Gidwani and Baviskar (2011: 42) argue, the commons “exist as a dynamic and collective resource – a variegated form of social wealth – governed by emergent custom and constantly negotiating, rebuffing, and evading the fixity of law”. However this paper also argues against one of their positions that “commons thrive and survive by dancing in and out of the State’s gaze, by escaping its notice, because notice invariably brings with it the desire to transform commons into state property or capitalist commodity” (p.42). In fact practices of commoning take place right under the nose of

the state, with its consent, mostly in violation of norms and laws, and that commoning occurs in association with capitalist commodification and capital accumulation.

Harvey has pointed to the commons literature tending to focus largely on the local, and the small scale, that it is unable to deal with the problem of scale, and large scale (national / global) resources. Within such a perspective, commons researchers such as Linebaugh (2008) have suggested that commons involves “being-in-common; that they are characterized by collective practices which are based on local arrangements, are “equalitarian, incorporative, and fair” (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011: 42). Further, he suggests that commons need communities. Our research however contradicts this view, by pointing to processes of commoning that are not necessarily based on communities, that are created amidst situations of conflict, that are linked to profit and accumulation motives, and hence may not be egalitarian, inclusive or fair. Having stated this, our research also shows diverse, unequal groups benefiting from processes of commons, temporally and temporarily, even though larger structures on domination and inequality do not transform in the short run.

If with Gidwani and Baviskar (2011: 43), we argue that “the distinctive public culture of a city is perhaps the most generative yet unnoticed of urban commons”, then this public culture as symbolic commons is not necessarily a progressive one, it is one in which processes of capital accumulation and majoritarian domination are integrally enmeshed. Unlike Neson 1993, Linebaugh 2008, DeAngelis 2007, and Bakker 2007, our research suggests that ‘commons’ does not stand opposed to ‘commodity’; as Gidwani and Baviskar (2011: 43) also accept in the end, “where commons (and the communities that sustain them) are relay points in the social life of commodities”, they “may subsidise and supplement capital accumulation, as this paper has hopefully shown. This happens in part because capital not only tends to privatize but also needs to socialize its costs, reduce its private costs, so that capital is subsidized both by labour, and by the state. Moreover, the theoretical distinction that is often made between public spaces and public goods on the one hand and commons on the other, tends to become blurred in actual practice. In actual practices of commoning, while space and resources are treated as collective, they are not necessarily non-commodified, as commons literature suggests. If commons are to be a useful entry point for us to understand contemporary urban practices, then a more critical rather than celebratory account of commoning ought to be an essential feature of our analysis.

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