

Post: A journey to India, Dec. 2018

Invited by „Actionaid India“ I had the opportunity to participate in two outstanding events:

- (1) „Actionschool“ organised on the Campus of “Osmania University” in Hyderabad. Young researchers, activists together and experts discuss in a three weeks’ seminar issues of basic interest. I had the opportunity to participate one week in the seminar and
- (2) a conference in New Delhi on 200 years of Karl Marx and the commemoration of Samir Amin, who passed away in August.

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This year's Actionschool subject was "**Urban Commons and Right to the City**": "The course unpacked what constitutes Urban Commons, and how the understanding of the concept can be applied in the context of cities and urban spaces. The course used the commons approach to look into the different parameters of Urban, and embed it into the Right to City approach. The discussions focussed on how resources for collective use should be accessed in a regenerative manner to sustain urbanism." (see: booklet for the course).

Urban Commons in India are of another dimension than in Europe: Indian Mega-Cities are not very different from European cities in their structure. But they are completely different in size and in their social composition. Thank you Sandeep Chachra, Pritha Chatterjee and Divitha Shandilya to give me the opportunity to learn about Urban Commons in India!

India is one of the fastest growing economies of the world. But according to United Nation's [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDG) programme in 2011-2012 270 millions or 21.9% people out of 1.2 billion of Indians lived below poverty line of \$1.25 (no new data are available). And this situation didn't change much. Today estimated figures show about 300 million citizens living below poverty line. In big cities about 30% of the inhabitants are living under such conditions. They are working poor: street-vendors, domestic workers, waste-pickers, construction workers, and others, women, men and children trying to secure a livelihood, living in slums or even without any shelter in the streets. The inner Indian migration process from rural to urban areas continues by different reasons (privatisation of common land, political disregard of the needs of rural populations, natural disasters, bad harvests and others).

Here are some of the examples how initiatives of working poor fight for their right to the city:

Indu Prakash Singh, working since many years against poverty and homelessness in Indian big cities reports on campaigns of the working urban poor, fighting for dignity and reclaiming themselves as "**city-makers**". They are heroes to save the common urban spaces. City-makers fight for dignity, for shelter rights and residence permits and the campaign is now active in over 20 cities, including Delhi. (www.gcssfs.org/InduPrakashSingh)

The SWaCH wastepickers cooperatives in the cities of Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad were successful in setting up cooperatives for door-to-door waste collection and waste processing instead of dumping. In Pimpri-Chinchwad in collaboration with SNDT Women's University SWaCH enabled 1500 women-wastepickers to become service providers for households in Pune city. This considerably improved their conditions of work and upgraded their livelihoods, effectively bridging the gap between households and the municipal waste collection service. The initiative brought together two interests – the waste pickers' interest in upgrading their livelihood and the municipality's interest in sustainable SWM. (www.swachcoop.com)

Gayatri Nair from Tata-Institute Hyderabad reports from **The traditional fisher communities of Mumbai - the Kolis**. The example shows that commons traditions may come into conflict with other initiatives. **The Koli** came into conflict with the entry of migrant labour in fishing in the highly urbanised space of Mumbai, and the conflict between local

(Koli) and migrant labour which surfaces around the question of access to common resources, in this case the seas. Gayatri is analyzing the complex interplay between the commons, the city and the community, questions about how the fish-workers should organize. Until the political consciousness of the community shifts from hostility towards migrants to questioning the path of development the fisheries is on, the dispossessed Kolis will be pitted against the dispossessed migrants. (www.Tiss.edu/Gayatri Nair)

One of the most touching projects I ever visited is “**Shaheen**” (**the Falcon**) in the area of Sultan Shahi in the old city of Hyderabad: Founded by Jameela Nishat, the poet, women of “Shaheen” since 16 years are fighting against child abuse and for the empowerment of girls and women in this very poor Muslim area. Activists from “Shaheen” themselves suffered from all dimensions of abuse and violence and learned to speak out and to develop their own narratives for dignity and hope. They created their songs within the traditional “cavalli” expressing their vision. They advocate in schools to empower girls and boys - as literacy is the key to unlock the cycle of poverty. And they offer training in life skills and help young women to become leaders and help them to set up small businesses. The specific mission of “Shaheen” is to save girls from one of the most terrible abusive practices, the so-called “child-marriages” (when elderly men from the Arab peninsula come in, give some money to the families for the right to abuse very young girls for a while in a hotel – and then disappear). “Shaheen” is helping girls to negotiate with their families to end this practices. Within one year “Shaheen” women were able to stop 156 child-marriages in the area. The biggest challenge they say is to change the mindset of the people. (www.shaheencollective.org)



And a final look at the wonderful campus of **Osmania-University** with it's broad parkways and institutes: midst this environment exist **nine slums** still populated with families who's ancestors where construction-workers in the early 20th century on the campus... 4 years ago people from the slums formed smaller groups of 10 members and they met every Monday, they started with empowerment strategies, and when in 2016

the big flood destroyed their homes they could organise some support. They too developed their own narrative and created “cavalli”. And they learned skills to produce some goods (b.e. soap and shampoo), they formed assemblies with democratic structures, they worked on water- and electricity-problems and a childrens’ parliament is established. As most of the women are working as domestic workers in families (7 days a week without any free time), they started a Union of domestic workers and they already got guarantees for some free time. (www.msihyd.org)



By the way: very very often women fighting against misery immediately invest in the education of their daughters and sons.

And there is a short video on Actionschool. You find it under <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WalwcdABUv8>

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New Delhi. At the conference on “Contemporary Capitalism and World of Work” at Jawaharlal Nehru University, organized by Actionaid India I meet with Hameda Deedat (Unionist from South-Africa), Paris Yeros (Brazil), Mamdouh Habashy (Egypt) and students from the JNU, and have the privilege to listen to the the famous Indian philosophers and intellectuals like Amiya Bagchi, Prabhat Patnaik, Utsa Patnaik and activists like Medha Paktar. The main focus is the heritage of Marx’ theory and it’s

importance for today's analysis of capitalism – focussing on globalization and financialisation as well as “platform-economy”. Many of the speakers refer to Rosa Luxemburg and her definition of continuous “primary” accumulation processes as principle of capitalism. Yes, there are massive changes in the form and dimension of capitalist exploitation – but the mode of production is still the same. The dialectic between human and nature turned into the danger of the complete destruction of the planet and the traditional industrial work disappears – but workers do not disappear and informalisation of work is still growing. The challenge is to focus on today's composition of working classes, including working poor and rural communities and the basic role of women for change.

A special session of the conference is dedicated to the commemoration of Samir Amin. (There is a wonderful video publicly launched on dec.18). Samir's last idea is the promotion of a new “Internationale” focussed on the Global South but open to all leftist forces fighting globalised capitalism. “Social movements are not enough for change” he said. This idea can become a new base for strategic debates!

At the end of the conference the new book “Reclaiming Africa” was presented, edited by Sam Moyo (who died in 2016), Praveen Jha and Paris Yeros (Springer, 2019).

