

**Sociology and Resource Management**  
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**Module - 03**  
**Understanding Urban Commons**  
**Lecture - 15**  
**Urban Commons and Political Ecology**

Welcome back everyone to the course on Sociology of Resource Management. So, today I will be starting with the last lecture of urban commons which I personally feel would be very enriching, a very enriching learning experience for all of you, because this is a new approach that we would be talking about and essentially all this while in the last four lectures on the urban commons I had actually taught you about the different kinds of urban commons, what are their services, what kind of ecosystem services they provide what kind of provisioning services they provide, what is the uniqueness of each of them and we have also talked about different cases from different cities of India expanding on the uniqueness of the urban ecological commons on each of the cases, on each of the cases of the cities.

So, what I intend to do in today's lecture is to introduce you to a very interesting and innovative concept of framework that is known as the urban political ecology and this might sound a little dense to hear for the first time, but believe me that with examples and with elaborations, it would be one of the most interesting approaches that you can actually learn about and apply when you, in the future you undertake if you are interested to undertake any kind of research on environmental humanities.

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So, let us begin. So, broadly the things that we would be covering in today's lecture are the ones that you can see here. So, before going on to discuss what urban political ecology is, I would be talking a bit about what political, what exactly is political ecology, how the term has been introduced and what are the implications, what are the larger implications of the term, where in what context these are used and then I would be also talking about the restructuring of the urban environment and in what cases when exactly we can apply political ecology as a conceptual and analytical framework for the urban, for the urban commons and to give you an example, I would be using a very interesting case and this is a bit sociological. So, I would be explaining the role of the middle classes in the city towards the making of the urban environmental consciousness and in this making of the urban environmental, the predominant urban environmental consciousness how we can use political ecology, urban political ecology as an approach and then I would be also talking about some cases for example, I would be talking about examples from Kolkata, the street vendors the hawkers its actually an ongoing Madhubarna Dhar, she is actually doing a very interesting work right now exploring the urban political ecology framework with the environmental consciousness of the city, the growing environmental consciousness of the city and she is primarily talking with numerous street vendors from different parts of the city of Kolkata to know exactly what environment means for them.

So, this is a very interesting study and I would be trying to give a snippet of what exactly she is doing in her research what work, what she has done till now; I think that would be a very relevant case in point to talk about urban political ecology.

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The slide features a white background with a blue and black decorative border. The title 'What is Political Ecology?' is centered at the top. To the right of the title is a small photograph of a hand holding a green plant with yellow flowers. Below the title is a bulleted list of five points.

### What is Political Ecology?

- Political, economic, social and cultural forces affect and are affected by ecological and environmental trends. (Minch, 2011)
- Human institutions penetrate the natural world and nature.
- Who suffers the most?
- Political ecology deals with social justice, exploitation of the state, participation and power.
- It is not always clear what is natural and what is built?

So, as I was telling you that first we need to understand what political ecology exactly is and in explaining about political ecology, one thing that I would like to mention in the beginning is the fact that political ecology as the name suggests deals with power relations, political nexus in the sphere of environmentalism, in the sphere of environmental thinking and it is a very interdisciplinary branch of study which is used by multiple disciplines right now in different ways as they are enhancing their research and environment.

But the most basic and fundamental definition of political ecology is that, it studies the relationships of power, hierarchy and the role of different kinds of political institutions, different kinds of political intermediation in thinking about environment in different kinds of environmental concerns. So, for example, which are the voices that are often heard while making claims to the environment and which are the voices that are left behind.

So, these kinds of questions are very critical questions that are often asked in the broader discourse of political ecology. So, I would be as I do, I would be introducing you to a couple of readings and I would also be sharing those readings to you. So, for instance

here I am very interested to discuss the work of Michael Minch with you who says that political ecology is the study of the intersection and relationships.

So, listen to this carefully because this is a bit of a dense concept, but it's very interesting once you understand this political ecology is the study of the intersection and relationship between the political, the environmental and the ecological. So, just think about the dynamism of the different areas or the different issues that are coming into the fore when we are talking about political ecology.

It is talking about the ecological, it is talking about the broader environment, it is talking about the political nexus. So, it is sort of it is a very very social concept on the other hand I would I would say that apart from being a very interesting framework in itself I feel that it brings together a very brilliant nexus of issues and it is very relevant considering the nature of the current environmental crisis or the environmental challenges that we see in the city.

So, this this also goes without saying that environmental challenges as you know, particularly in the developing countries like India are not only environmental, but they are also political and social in their content in their nature. So, political ecology he says, it helps understanding how the political, the economic, the social and the cultural forces affect and are affected by the ecological and the environmental trends and I will also introduce a bit of the inception of the term and here he says that, although the term political ecology was termed long back by Frank Thone in 1935.

So, it is quite an old and traditional concept, but the term was revived by Eric R. Wolf in 1972 and mind this carefully because in many cases I have seen that there is there is a mistake where people think that the term has been introduced for the first time, had been introduced for the first time by Eric R. Wolf in 1972 which is actually wrong Eric Wolf revived and reintroduced the concept - he did not coin it, but the term was coined in 1935 by Frank Thorn.

So, and it is also very interesting to know that there is no very stringent agreed upon definition or conception of the term political ecology. So, there are several ecologists and environmental social scientists who are of the opinion that it is actually not a concept, but it is actually a very critical analytical framework which is sort of - which brings into its fold a lot of very different aspects in the field of environmental studies. And

according to this paper by Michael Minch many political ecologists conclude that without stronger forces of participatory democracy, international, political and economic cooperation and some forms of global democracy and governance nature will continue to be exploited and ruined beyond sufficient retrieval and a sustainable future will elude us.

Political ecology worries about the exploitative power of global capitalism and its very partner that is globalization. Political ecology engages with the environment in numerous ways from the large cultural and transnational domains for example, concerns about climate change or the spread of disease to the exercise of political power.

For example, questions on resource allocation and degrees and kinds of acceptable pollution and impoverishment to the natural. For example, what to make off and do about species eradication or rainforest depletion. So, as you can see that political ecology is concerned or rather I can also use the word - that it is also anxious about the ways in which power is sort of becoming very entrenched in multiple domains of nature.

So, on the one hand as we can see that the global forces of international capitalism are being considered as a very big and critical assault to the natural resources and there is a very very broad and I would say a very far-fetched nexus of international agencies, international capital agencies who are, whose sort of actions no matter how much harmful they are very in a very strong manner, they are embedded within the, within the larger environmental challenges the ways in which we are encountering environmental crisis.

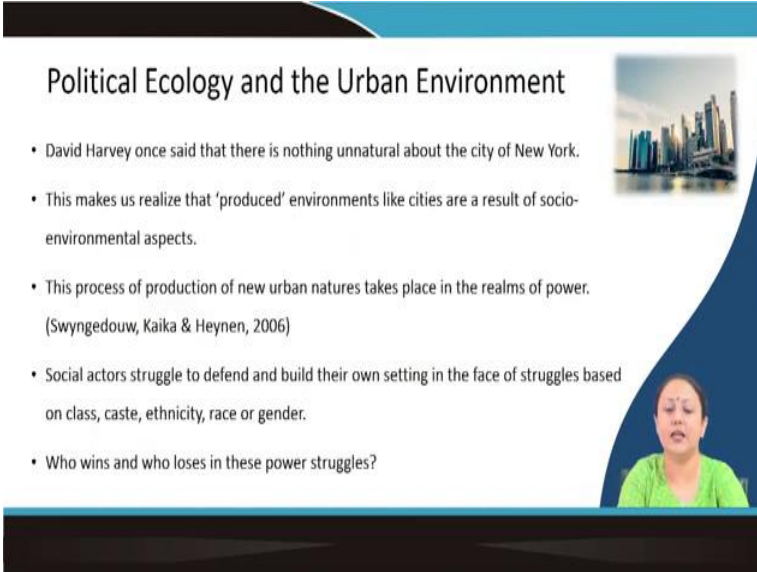
So, on the one hand political ecology urges us to think about ways in which we can integrate environmental thinking with that of social justice and on the other hand political ecology basically warns us to be a bit careful about these very damaging international nexus of corporate capitalism that is looming large or that is causing a lot of damage and it is actually increasing the challenges on the environment day by day.

And because it believes that because the duties of justice towards human beings cannot be separated from nature, considerations of nature itself become necessary when determining what we owe to other persons. Another major question is as I was telling you that who suffers the most and why.

So, for example, when we talk about any kind of natural hazard, any kind of environmental catastrophe - who are the people who are suffering the most? Is it only because of the effects of the catastrophe the effects of the natural calamities that they are suffering or is it because of the improper institutional and social arrangements that they are suffering?

So, we need to ask these questions that whom to blame the most for these kinds of consequences, who are bearing the most critical brunt of the environmental challenges that in many cases are manmade that are caused by our own very activities in different economic spheres. And this answer is not very simplistic its quite a complex question and so is the answer and this has to be understood within the context of social exploitation, injustice participation and power.

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**Political Ecology and the Urban Environment**

- David Harvey once said that there is nothing unnatural about the city of New York.
- This makes us realize that 'produced' environments like cities are a result of socio-environmental aspects.
- This process of production of new urban natures takes place in the realms of power. (Swyngedouw, Kaika & Heynen, 2006)
- Social actors struggle to defend and build their own setting in the face of struggles based on class, caste, ethnicity, race or gender.
- Who wins and who loses in these power struggles?

The slide features a blue and white color scheme. On the right side, there is a small image of a modern city skyline with tall buildings. In the bottom right corner, there is a small inset video frame showing a woman with dark hair, wearing a green top, speaking.

Now, as I was telling you that you must have got a sense of what exactly political ecology is, the fact that political ecology explains the power relations that are inherent within the environment within environment at large and now what we can do is that, we can try placing political ecology in the context of the urban.

So, there is again a very drawing on political ecology itself several urban ethnographers, urban anthropologists, urban environmental social scientists are trying to draw political ecology into studies of the urban environment. So, basically we can say that urban political ecology provides a very helpful perspective to understand how natural or

ecological processes are increasingly seen as being intertwined within the socio-political dynamics.

As we all know by now that the cities are global hubs of different kinds of economic cultural and social activities. So, how there is again a very interesting quote by Swyngedouw, Kaika and Heynen, they say that the “production of the city through the social environmental changes results in the continuous production of new urban nature.”

So, is nature only the built form of ecology that we see around us? Is that the end to nature? Is that the end to thinking about nature or is it that nature in the city is actually rather a very broad sort of, a very broad character which it can incorporate within itself different kinds of issues so, not only ecological which are not only ecological in content, but which can also be very strongly social and cultural.

And all of these processes take place in the realm of the power as social actors struggle to defend and build their own settings in the face of the power struggles based on class, ethnicity, race or gender. So, David Harvey who is an extremely influential urban theorist and who talks about the he talks about different things, but one of his major overarching ideas on the urban is the right to the city.

So, how rights different kinds of rights - of the privileged rights, of the underprivileged are defined and determined in the city. So, David Harveys ideas about the city about for instance he draws in examples from New York actually makes us realize that produced environments like the cities, we can actually say that cities are produced environment because a lot of it is actually manufactured rather than being natural. Produced environments like the cities are specific historical results of socio environmental processes.

And again, here I quote from a very significant work of Swyngedouw in 2006, who points out, that, “urban political ecology entails the material circumstances that constitute urban environments as controlled manipulated and serve the interests of the elite at the expense of the marginalized groups. It teases out who wins and who loses out in power struggles and this makes urban political ecology perspective highly significant for different kinds of studies.”

Environmental knowledge thus becomes a kind of organized information intersected by power relations rather than being neutral facts devoid of political connotations. There is another study by Anna Zimmer who states that urban political ecology already features a broad portfolio of topics as I was telling you that the scope of this subject is extremely broad.

So, it covers a broad portfolio of topics that mirror the diversity of political ecological perspectives in the city. Several more issues from urban transportation systems, decentralized energy production, rainwater harvesting or questions of thermal insulation, to consumption patterns of urban population etcetera will be of very interest in studies of urban political ecology.

I would also if I get time I would be quoting a bit of an example from another work, but at this point I would also like to quote a very interesting article by Amita Baviskar that was written in a journal called Seminar where she actually elaborates in the context of the Delhi, that how power relations around the environment work in the city and she actually says that these kinds of power hierarchies are embedded within the environments of the city through something that is known as the popular civic concern.

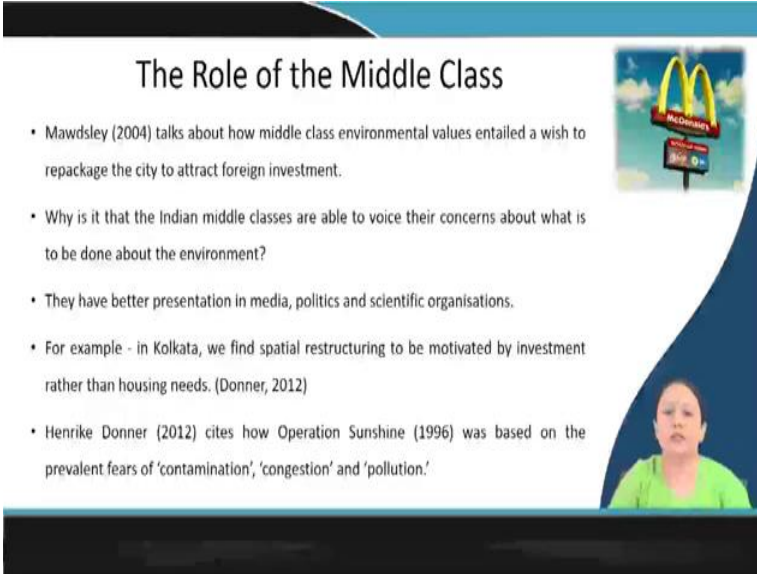
So, what is civility all about and what role environment plays in the definition of civility? This is a very interesting question to ask. So, is a slum or a pavement or a group of pavement dwellers in the city; are these sites very welcoming sites for these people who are concerned with the civility for these people, who are concerned with civic order in the city, for these people the middle classes as I was talking about, for these people for the middle classes who are extremely concerned about orderly places in the city?

So, what do they think about the environment? Is environment only about the trees, the wooded groves, the lakes, the reservoirs or is the environment for them the city, the very city in itself, the broader city in itself and the entirety of its physical and built space. So, she goes on to say that for these people, for the people who are so, much concerned with the civic order of the city people whom she terms as the Bourgeois environmentalists - the ugliness of production must be removed from the city smoke stack industries affluent producing manufacturing units and other aesthetically unpleasant sites that make the city a place of work for millions should be discreetly tucked away out of sight, polluting some remote rural wasteland so must must workers whose labour in these industries be




banished out of sight. Even people whose services are indispensable for the affluent to live in comfortable lives - domestic workers, vendors and sunrise service providers should live where their homes do not offend the eyes, ears and noses of the well to do.


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The Role of the Middle Class

- Mawdsley (2004) talks about how middle class environmental values entailed a wish to repackage the city to attract foreign investment.
- Why is it that the Indian middle classes are able to voice their concerns about what is to be done about the environment?
- They have better presentation in media, politics and scientific organisations.
- For example - in Kolkata, we find spatial restructuring to be motivated by investment rather than housing needs. (Donner, 2012)
- Henrike Donner (2012) cites how Operation Sunshine (1996) was based on the prevalent fears of 'contamination', 'congestion' and 'pollution.'





Now, let us talk about. So, all this while we were talking about the middle class. So, we will also learn about some very interesting examples to situate urban political ecology as an approach in the understanding of the commons and one very important angle here is the role of the middle classes in the city exactly what I was talking about drawing on Amita Baviskar's work and they are very elite visions of the city environment.

So, Emma Mawdsley who again is a very influential thinker on an urban environmental studies talks about the history of the colonial rule in India when the middle classes started embracing western education and the ideals of rationality and science. However, after independence the powerful sections within this group developed an appetite for global culture and western lifestyles.

In unison what middle class environmental values entailed, and here this carefully was a wish to repackage the city in order to attract foreign investment and to clean up the environment without lack of concern for the poor and for the environment. She goes on to talk about how the Indian middle classes consolidated power to assert a disproportionate influence in shaping public debates on environment through strong representations in the media, politics and other organizations.

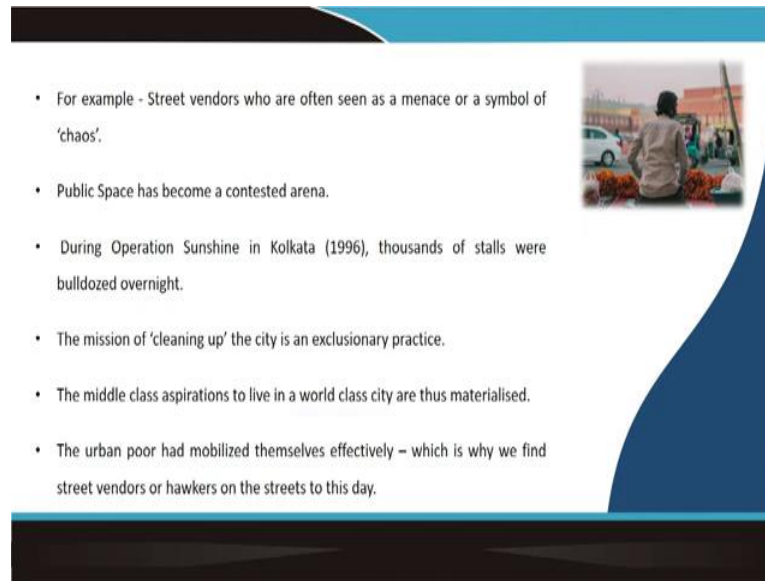
Only by analyzing the middle classes would we be in a better position to think about the poor and the social injustice that is meted out for them. It is thus of great significance that we understand what environment might mean for both the middle classes and the urban marginals. So, as I was talking about the field work of one of my students on the street vendors of Kolkata and the larger environmental thinking in the city let me elaborate a bit upon that work drawing and on that work that my student Madhubarna is doing.

Kolkata which is all as all of you know which is the capital of West Bengal grew rapidly as a colonial center until the colonial authorities decided to make Delhi the province of the capital. However, partition had deprived Kolkata of its hinterland and pushed millions of people to the now Indian side of Bengal with the majority of them settling in Kolkata which was experiencing a severe economic crisis.

The- similarly, as we were talking about the middle classes. So, the idea of the global city right now has become quite influential and widespread among the middle classes in the city of Kolkata to the extent that privatization of large stretches of land may often go unchallenged. Urban restructuring indicates progress and road widening invited more claims to a global city. As can be observed the second phase of this reorganization is a process of wild suburbanization, with several amenities to satisfy the lifestyles of the affluent middle class.

So, there are several areas like many of you might have heard about areas like Salt Lake, New town and Rajarhat which are right now being subsumed within the models of global city and mega city and these kinds of developments as you can see it's very similar to other cities as well are largely mimicking global special restructuring at the expense of the urban poor in the city of Kolkata.

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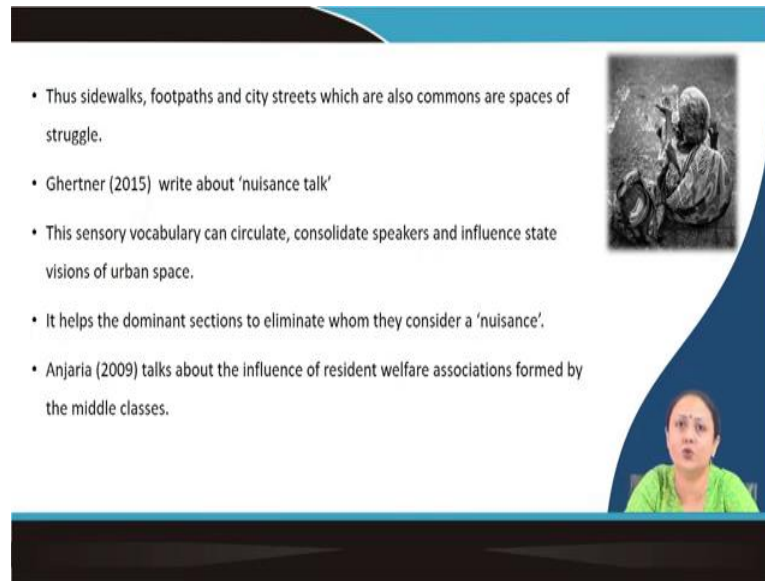
- For example - Street vendors who are often seen as a menace or a symbol of 'chaos'.
- Public Space has become a contested arena.
- During Operation Sunshine in Kolkata (1996), thousands of stalls were bulldozed overnight.
- The mission of 'cleaning up' the city is an exclusionary practice.
- The middle class aspirations to live in a world class city are thus materialised.
- The urban poor had mobilized themselves effectively – which is why we find street vendors or hawkers on the streets to this day.

So, during the Operation Sunshine which had been a very critical and very remarkable movement of the street vendors and the pavement dwellers in 1996 where they at large resisted in collectivities they resisted a massive demolition and eviction drive by the state by the state government in order to pull them out of the spaces where they are residing right now.

So, it is a very tragic incident, if you go back and if you hear, if you get time to read about these specific incident you will get to know that during this time thousands of stalls from the city were overnight bulldozed and this was actually a part of the larger mission of city cleaning which was done in an extremely exclusionary manner and the larger aspirations to live in a very spectacular, a very beautiful kind of a mega city.

And this was also the time when the urban poor had actually mobilized themselves effectively and as a result of which we can now find that the street vendors have reestablished through their rights on the city through unions, through different collectives, through different ways.

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- Thus sidewalks, footpaths and city streets which are also commons are spaces of struggle.
- Ghertner (2015) write about 'nuisance talk'
- This sensory vocabulary can circulate, consolidate speakers and influence state visions of urban space.
- It helps the dominant sections to eliminate whom they consider a 'nuisance'.
- Anjaria (2009) talks about the influence of resident welfare associations formed by the middle classes.

And I would also suggest that as a part of this work Madhubarna also reading different works like that of that of Partha Chatterjee 'politics of the governed', where Chatterjee talks about the ways in which the people who are governed the people who are the subjects of governance organize themselves in order to roll back the efforts of the state to evict them to disenfranchise them, to dispossess them.

So, right now as Madhubarna is doing a couple of interviews rounds of interviews with different street vendors, she is actually coming up with very interesting definitions about the environment from these street vendors who do not actually by environment they do not always imply big trees large parks well-manicured lawns and all.

But by the environment they actually mean the city, in itself, where they are positioned for generations and they are actually practicing these kinds of occupations for generations and it is actually the different parts of the city in itself may be a sidewalk, maybe a footpath, maybe a place with a very dense foliage of street trees - these are actually the places which are considered by them as ideal spots to sell their products and very integrally through very different kinds of interviews we are actually coming up with very interesting notions of environmental thinking, that is embodied in these kinds of narratives that we are actually getting from them.

I would again go a bit conceptual and a very similar understanding in this context is also provided by Asher Ghertner who is again one of the most influential urban theorists right

now and Ghertner writes about something that is known as the 'nuisance talk.' So, the everyday depictions of the informal settlements as being dirty, uncivil and 'out of place' through speech acts constructs particular objects as nuisance.

This sensory vocabulary is very powerful since it can circulate, consolidate speakers and is also able to influence state visions of urban space. By simply pointing out annoyance or disgust about something they are able to direct what is to be done about them. The urban elite thus try to eliminate the poor whom they consider to be a nuisance and construct them as obstacles to the world class city making process.


In this work, he also finds the 'culture of illegality' as being a part of the nuisance stock which associates the squatters, hawkers and other sections of the urban poor with vote bank politics. According to Bandyopadhyay, the questions of proper use of footpath as a public space gradually came to be framed by the right of the pedestrian against the encroachment of the hawker. Who are the citizens who can claim legitimacy to the streets?

Similarly, Anjaria talks about how resident welfare associations formed by the Indian middle classes render political claims of street hawkers as illegitimate and reconfigure the nature of citizenship. This these civic activists draw on an abstract category of citizens and claim to speak for the universal interests of the city.

At the very micro level such practices take away both voice and power from the informal actors. It must be understood that the middle class do not wish to exclude these population completely, but in a way they seek to regulate them. In one of his works, Anjaria states that the hawkers are often looked at as eye source that prevent Indian cities from becoming world class cities.

He believes that it is hard to talk about hawkers without using these dominant discourses that are used to describe them. This is why the hawker is a 'symbol of the chaos' in the city living in the fear of displacement and being subsumed under reasonable rent seeking by the predatory state at regular intervals, the hawkers navigate uneasy terrains on the streets to sustain their occupation.

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**Conclusion**

- ✓ Human institutions penetrate the natural world and nature.
- ✓ 'Produced' environments like cities are a result of socio-environmental aspects.
- ✓ Nature and cities are not opposed to one another.
- ✓ Urban commons have become spaces of power struggle.
- ✓ The political ecology perspective helps us to raise questions about social justice and equity.

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So, I think. So, before going on to the conclusion and summing up, I would just like to in the light of what we discussed about today's lecture, and the references that I would be sharing with you, I would like all of you to look a bit critically onto the urban - onto the different types of urban ecological commons when you read about them. So, always remember that the making of the urban ecological commons.

So, for instance very often we see that in the cities the making of parks, the making of green spaces, for instance, is extremely exclusionary and I have already for instance discussed about cities like Bangalore which earlier had very vibrant networks of water bodies lakes and tanks and these actually were considered to be urban ecological commons these were used collectively by the communities for numerous purpose.

But right now as you can see that these same commons are becoming enclosed spaces. So, for instance many of the lakes they have become fenced, they have become enclosed and no longer we can see that the erstwhile activities, the traditional activities of the communities who are who used to stay in the adjoining villages are actually allowed.

But these activities actually had very critical ecosystem, provided very critical services for the commons in itself. So, for example, grazing provided with free manure for the lakes in the earlier days if we see and several others like that. So, the approach that is now adapted in several cities in order to conserve nature in order to restore nature in order to conserve the urban ecological commons is not the ideal and it is not, this not a

very socially institutionalized way of sort of thinking about nature in the long-term thinking sustainably about nature because these kinds of exclusionary practices in themselves would be very critical and they raise very important questions about social justice and social inequality that which are very important components of the larger thinking about sustainability in itself. So, I think that political ecology is a very interesting and it is a very useful framework in point which can help us understand these kinds of issues the ways in which the urban the urban nature is made and remade.

And political ecology actually helps us to probe deeper into such issues of justice, power and inequities that is associated with the making the conservation and the restoration of urban nature. So, to sum up - human institutions penetrate the natural world and nature in itself. Produced environments like cities are a result of social environmental impacts. Nature and cities are not opposed to each other urban commons have right now largely become spaces of social and political struggle. The political ecology perspective helps us to raise questions about social justice and equity.

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So, I would be expecting that all of you would go through these very important and useful readings on the cases and concepts of urban political ecology for further understanding.

Thank you and we would meet again in the next class with a new module.