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**Networking Equivalence?:
Gender, the philosophy of praxis and spaces of
encounter in the Climate Caravan, Bangladesh**

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Networking Equivalence?: gender, the philosophy of praxis and spaces of encounter in the Climate Caravan, Bangladesh: Paul Routledge

Today I examine the gendered politics of national and international networking amongst peasant farmer's movements in South Asia based upon my critical engagement with the Bangladesh Krishok (farmer) Federation and the Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (Women Farmers' Association), on a Climate Caravan organised in Bangladesh in 2011 as an organisational, educational and solidarity building platform for social movements concerned with the interrelated issues of climate change, food sovereignty and gender. This was particularly pertinent to farmers' movements in Bangladesh because..

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The country is located in the 'tropic of chaos' (Parenti, 2011) where the impacts of climate change, poverty, and violence converge and considered to be one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change and sea level rise (IPCC, 2008). The majority of the Bangladesh's population are poor and dependent on agriculture, and are thus more vulnerable to the impacts of changing climatic regimes, particularly flooding.

Eighty per cent of Bangladesh consists of floodplains of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna and other rivers, which sustain 75 per cent of the country's 160 million people (in 2011) (Brouwer *et al* 2007). Rising sea levels along its coast are occurring at a greater than the global rate, and the coastal region is particularly vulnerable to cyclonic storm surge floods. Climate change exacerbates these weather events and has severe effects on peasant agriculture already faced by economic challenges of neoliberalism, landlessness and indebtedness. For social movements such as the BKF and BKS, the challenges of climate change fold into existing conflicts over access to key socio-environmental resources such as land to which the poor have been largely excluded.

The BKF's political ideology and practice is informed by the work of Antonio Gramsci (Interview, Dhaka, 2011), and so I draw upon Gramscian understandings of political organisation and solidarity in order to examine networking strategies both within Bangladesh and beyond.

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For Antonio Gramsci contesting hegemonic thought and social relations within society initially requires subordinate groups to create their own consensual legitimacy or counter-hegemonic presence in civil society through a war of position that involves what Gramsci termed a philosophy of praxis: the spread of alternative norms and values in the various spheres of public life, the primary aim being to fashion a collective political will—a 'popular common sense' (Karriem, 2009) — that focuses upon two primary terrains of struggle, raising consciousness and political organisation (Boggs, 1984). Political organization involves a spatial politics that generates encounters, exchanges and solidarities between folk locally and translocally.

In so doing, what Purcell (2009) terms 'networks of equivalence' are fashioned, where equivalence implies simultaneous unity between different social movement actors - as in shared concerns and campaigns - and multiplicity - as in different actors' interests, politics, identities etc. However, attempts to fashion equivalence continue to founder because of gendered inequalities and exclusions that permeate peasant social relations in Bangladesh. As a result, I will argue that the philosophy of praxis as it applies to South

Asian contexts needs to be rethought in the light of ongoing insights from feminist analysis.

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The Bangladesh Krishok Federation and Bangladesh Kishani Sabha: Occupation and Food Sovereignty

The Bangladesh Krishok Federation (BKF) was established in 1976, and the Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (Women Farmers' Association, BKS), in 1990. They are now estimated to have collectively 1,500,000 members

In 1987 the national government introduced a Land law which enabled landless people to occupy and farm fallow (*khas*) land. Because of government inaction implementing this law, since 1992, the BKF and BKS have organised landless people to occupy approximately 76,000 acres of *khas* land involving more than 107,000 peasants.

In opposition to the liberalization of agriculture, the BKF and BKS argue for the importance of food sovereignty practices. In so doing, they resist neoliberal constructions of common sense and valorize peasant knowledges and ways of (subsistence) farming.

Definitions of food sovereignty vary between organizations and activist networks, have changed over time, and contain inconsistencies. However, common themes have emerged such as direct democratic participation and agrarian reform, implying peasant control over land, biodiversity (commons) and means of (food) production. These have acted as a point of encounter, common interest and solidarity between farmer's movements and international farmers' networks such as *La Via Campesina* (the peasant way, LVC) to which BKF and BKS belong

The Climate Caravan's philosophy of praxis sought to educate and mobilise vulnerable peasant communities about the effects of climate change, and facilitate movement-to-movement communication and sharing of experiences and strategies concerning food sovereignty and gender relations. It intended to deepen and extend networks of grassroots movements in South Asia and build international solidarity around specific campaigns concerning these issues. This was achieved through different spaces of encounter: the workshops, seminars and rallies that formed the primary engagements of the Caravan; the villages that the Caravan visited, and the buses that constituted the Caravan itself.

The Climate Caravan comprised three buses travelling in convoy containing eighty activists: fifty-five BKF and BKS activists from various districts from Bangladesh, and twenty five activists from various international grassroots movements and groups visiting eighteen villages in twelve districts of Northern and Southern Bangladesh.

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Concerning raising consciousness, the Climate Caravan attempted to create awareness amongst peasant communities and nurture dialogue between them and Climate Caravan participants: A Caravan participant from Nepal argued that:

The Caravan is about reaching as many people as possible through popular education and organising and inspiring communities. It creates awareness about the neoliberal system and climate change and acts as a platform for networking and solidarity (Interview, Rangpur District, 2011).

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The Climate Caravan events contributed to altering the consciousness of peasant community members through education and acted as a motivation for communities to

respond to climate change. After a workshop in a cyclone-affected Patuakhali District, community participants commented how little they had known about climate change before the Climate Caravan:

People had thought that Cyclones Sidr and Aila were a curse from God rather than an outcome of lifestyles in the Global North. The Caravan has motivated people to respond to climate change in their communities (Interview, Patuakhali District, 2011).

This is important because, in the past, the belief that cyclones and other extreme events are acts of God has contributed to the reluctance of coastal residents to respond to cyclone warnings, resulting in fatalities (Haque, 1995; Alam and Collins, 2010; Paul and Dutt, 2010).

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Concerning political organisation, the Climate Caravan helped to increase the organizational strength of the BKF and BKS through the increased cohesion between movement members from different districts in the country (Interview, Dhaka, 2011). This was facilitated through the Climate Caravan bringing different activists from different districts onto the Climate Caravan where they met with fellow BKF and BKS activists in other districts. As one BKF activist commented:

The Caravan was able to make a bridge between people in the North and South – who are facing different types of extreme weather events - to facilitate greater mutual understanding (Interview, Barisal District, 2011).

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The Climate Caravan also contributed to the fashioning of solidarity between movements. The importance of the participation of peasant activists from other countries was recognised by a BKF activist who commented:

The presence in communities of activists from other South Asian countries and from countries in the Global North, was important in that it showed that the problems of those communities was of concern to others, and that the voices from the community were valued. This generated the feeling that local villagers were not alone in their struggle (Interview, Patuakhali District, 2011).

International participants felt that it had provided an opportunity for activists to share experiences from their different movements' struggles and national contexts; explore how they might create longer term solidarities, in particular bi-lateral campaigns with the BKF and BKS; fashion joint campaigns with other movements; and take their experiences back to their own countries and struggles (Interviews, North and South Bangladesh, 2011). A female Indian activist argued:

The Caravan is a resource. We have formed relationships, deepened networking ties, and we have begun to plan future actions together. I think it was encouraging for communities to see an international presence, and that others care about the problems of people in Bangladesh and want to learn from them. This is solidarity (Interview, Satkhira District, 2011).

While the Climate Caravan provided a productive space for generating future networking strategies – e.g. activists from India, Nepal and Bangladesh decided to organise planning meetings in 2012 concerning a more extensive caravan through all three countries in 2014 - attempts to 'network equivalence' both within Bangladesh and internationally were also confronted by place-specific gender relations to which I now turn.

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Writing about women's participation in the Kerala Fisherworkers' struggles in India, Nayak referred to their ongoing negotiation of oppressive gender relations as 'the struggle within the struggle' (1990: 147). As Sylvia Federici (2004) observes, gender relations are determined in a social system of production that does not recognise the reproduction of peasant labour power as a source of capital accumulation.

This is particularly important for the politics of land occupation in Bangladesh since the first acts after land has been occupied involve housework, i.e. the logistics of where to sleep, eat, wash and defecate (Interviews, Barguna District, Bangladesh, 2009; see also Caffentzis, 2012). While men and women are active in the initial claiming of space, women become particularly important in consolidating the occupation through socialization processes such as food related practices (e.g. seed saving) (Pionetti, 2005; Escobar, 2008; McMichael, 2010). Women are engaged in triple labour that includes domestic duties, economic activities and peasant activism (see Datta, 2007).

However, in the context of peasant activism, Sultana (2009a: 349-351) has shown how gender and class inequalities in Bangladesh concerning women's labour, mobility, autonomy, and decision-making powers get manifested in different levels of participation. The inclusion of women in decision-making is undermined by the social relations of kinship and marriage as well as patriarchal household dynamics.

Further, male and female activists bring their own forms of gender consciousness into political work that, as a result, entails the articulation of gender roles, meanings and practices (Pulido 2006).

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Nevertheless, Bangladeshi women activists are conscious of their subordinate situation and pose ideological challenges – through their own political organization - to the inequalities of resource distribution and control, and authority (of male family members) (see also Agarwal, 1994). Hence, the BKS' list of demands include the abolition of the 'present master-slave relationship between men and women' which would include freeing women from 'domestic slavery' and 'economic slavery...of married life of women through the participation of both men and women in social production' and 'the participation of women in all spheres of social...life' (BKF, BKS and LVC 2011: 17-18).

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However, despite the commitment of both the BKF and BKS to women's empowerment and rights – evidenced by the inclusion of gender issues in the Caravan - women's participation continues to be marked by a politics of (in)visibility which is placed. Discussing women's activism in Gujarat, India, Desai (2012) argues that women's visibility is most pronounced at movement rallies and marches where they are frequently mobilised *en masse* by movements. However at village-based movement decision-making meetings, women's active participation declines markedly because gendered positions of subordination often reinforces social norms of who can speak at public meetings.

Gendered responsibilities influenced the level of women's participation in the Climate Caravan - when and where women were able to participate - and over-determined the form of their participation. In most of the Caravan seminars and workshops, men comprised no less than seventy per cent of the participants, although there were significant levels of female participation at the four public rallies. The timings of Caravan meetings were frequently inconvenient for women, owing to the gendered division of labour that positions them as housewives (rather than workers or activists)

and requires them to cook for the family as well look after children. Even when women attended workshops and seminars, they frequently had to leave early for the same reason.

During a workshop where female participation consisted of 95 per cent of the participants because the majority of men in the village were working in the fields, women commented that they felt empowered by being able to speak in front of a predominantly female audience, and articulated an acute awareness of the problems that confronted them and what they required to overcome them.

Most of the discussions in the workshop centered on the economic difficulties facing women in the villages (e.g. concerning landlessness and debt) and in particular how women's action was constrained by everyday social relations, as one peasant woman noted: "we need greater decision-making power amongst village women so we can participate more in our community". Another peasant woman noted the difficulties of balancing work and activism, as well as the need for more women-focused initiatives: "land occupation activities are important but they take time away from our work activities. We need more direct interactions with women from other villages so that we can share knowledge and build solidarity".

As Feminists have long argued, because the body is the mediator of social relations, it is also the site of struggle. Solidarity thus gets constructed from the embodied experiences of women. Therefore, the analysis of hegemony within the peasant struggle in Bangladesh needs to commence from what Mohanty (2003) refers to as the bottom-up reading of marginalisation that begins not with the landless peasant, but rather the body of the landless peasant woman. The philosophy of practice in Bangladesh must directly address and challenge how patriarchal hegemony is established (and can be challenged) "in the overlapping spaces where home and work; public and the private, state and society converge" (Mitchell et al 2003: 433). This would significantly contribute to a politics of visibility of peasant women.

Beyond the rallies, much of BKS women's participation in the Caravan was either placed in the kitchens that cooked the Caravans' food, or was compromised by family responsibilities. While sourcing and preparing food is crucial reproductive labour – and is recognised as such by BKS activists – the gendered division of labour reflects the predominance of gendered organisational models of leadership within South Asian peasant movements that favour charismatic males (e.g. see Featherstone, 2003) and continues to compromise the level of women's participation in spaces of discussion and education such as the workshops and seminars. This was noted by a prominent BKS activist:

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The Kishani Sabha contributed a lot to the Climate Caravan, through the participation of local leaders. We purchased food and did the cooking. I was involved in cooking but this was an important part of the Caravan...this is practical food sovereignty. We expected more female participation but we did not get as many as we expected. Some leaders were invited to come with the caravan team but they could not make it; many women leaders from the North were not able to join caravan team because of family problems. We tried to organize more community involvement but the schedule was tight and we did not always have enough time. We had limitations on the caravan but other Kishani Sabha leaders were also involved in workshops and seminars. The Kishani Sabha does not lead so much as the Krishok Federation but it was successful (BKS activist, interview, Patuakhali district, 2011).

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However, the levels of participation of some of the international female peasant activists were far greater than that of BKS activists. Ten of the twenty-five international activists were women, several of whom spoke at nearly all of the events. In part this reflects power inequalities between those responsible for transnational organizing and those at grassroots level. The international activists' were relatively better off economically, had higher levels of education (many also spoke English), and were better connected politically (for example amongst those international activists participating were a female Nepali Member of Parliament, and senior party and movement activists), and socially (many were on Facebook and all had email accounts) compared to those male and female activists in the villages that the Caravan visited. This reflected the reality that much of the process of constructing solidarities between (Asian) movements falls to a few individuals who conduct much of the routine (international) organisational work, mobilise resources and facilitate communication and information flows. Further, because of its reliance on cyber-connectivity and travel, transnational solidarity work privileges urban, middle class educated elites (Desai, 2005).

While attempting to engage and communicate with peasant villagers, the Caravan in part reaffirmed certain socio-economic boundaries that separated many of those on the bus from those off of it. Those women who were active on the Caravan as international participants were women who were older (past procreative age and caring commitments), single or widowed, or women with adult daughters or daughters-in-law who were able to do domestic work (Lingam, 2008). Nevertheless, the presence of such women in active speaking roles can be empowering to women in the villages that the Caravan visited, as noted by a woman in a workshop in Bogura: "it was good for us to hear from women from different countries and struggles, it gives us courage to fight for the Kishani Sabha". However, while such (transnational) exchanges can broaden solidarities, it is only through local and national-level activism concerning the politics of the reproductive sphere that solidarities can be deepened (Desai, 2005).

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As others have argued, while Gramsci's political programme for social change is rooted within the everyday life of production it does not theorise women as (re)productive subjects. 'Colonizing divisions' (Mies, 1986: 210) between men and women based upon the gendered division of labour in Bangladesh persist, and vitiate against equivalence both within movements and within the villages that they organise. Discourses of solidarity such as articulated by activists on the Climate Caravan can mask, or indeed suppress, gendered inequalities and hierarchies.

Solidarity building is as much about connection as disconnection (Mohanty, 2003). Fashioning equivalence requires dealing critically with the problems that arise from collaboration and this involves drawing attention to shortcomings and contradictions as well as internal – and often unspoken - hierarchies (Nagar and Raju, 2003; Sangtin Writers Collective and Nagar, 2006).

At a more profound level, the philosophy of praxis in Bangladesh must "interfere with the spatial regimes of patriarchy" (Beaulieu, 2010: 69) and this requires a deeper engagement with the "the messy fleshy" aspects of everyday life associated with social reproduction (Katz, 2001: 13) in homes, fields, villages and the gendered relations of peasant lives expressed through the spaces of activist encounter such as those of created by the Climate Caravan. Women continue to need to articulate their own struggles against oppression and exploitation and not suppress them in the interests of peasant unity. While Bangladeshi peasant women have the BKS from which to organise, male popular common sense needs to be rooted in the reality of women as workers and

activists and as the producers and reproducers of peasant labour power (Mies et al. 1988).

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Gramscian politics tends to pose its antagonism against an external opponent (such as the state), rather than focusing upon the internal power/gender relations within social movements: those very spaces where collective struggle also needs to be focused (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2007). For the BKF/BKS this implies an understanding of the mutually constitutive character of the political economy of agriculture and the cultural politics of gender in Bangladesh. For example, women have a key role on the conservation, propagation and germination of seeds (Akhter, 2007). Such practices pose important challenges to the corporate control of agriculture and are therefore key in any struggles over food sovereignty, thus vitiating for an equal role for women in decision-making concerning agricultural issues.

A war of position thus requires a conscious prefigurative content that places the politics of social reproduction at the forefront of peasant struggles. It will also necessitate women's empowerment through joint dialogues between men and women, however difficult and potentially harmful *in the short term* to peasant solidarity between the BKF and BKS .

The BKF and BKS need to analyse how women activists have to (re)negotiate their daily lives to accommodate the demands of activist labour (e.g. attendance at meetings and rallies), in order to examine how the spatial dimensions of activist practice might be socially productive and open to transformation, and in so doing, transform other spatial and gender practices. Women's empowerment is comprised of resources (e.g. land ownership), abilities (e.g. education and training) and achievements (i.e. the extent to which gender inequalities are transformed) (Kelkar, 2009; Hillenbrand, 2010). This will require the BKF/BKS addressing both the lack of independent funds for the BKS and the two key constraints on female mobility, namely women's lack of personal income, and the sexual division of labour (e.g. gendered routines). At a practical level, rather than women taking the burden of other women's activism (e.g. by looking after the children of female activists when they attend rallies), the men of the BKF could take on temporary childcare and cooking responsibilities.

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However, women's participation in solidarity-building initiatives such as the Caravan is not enough. Rather, it is the character of that participation and its potentially transformative effects on women's mobility, self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, and consciousness that are key. Hence the transformation of gendered routines must be a clear priority of the BKF. This is because, as Sara Koopman (2011: 280) argues, social transformation must take place "from all sides", even if that requires utilizing (male) privilege to enable it.

The BKF can take the lead on this, because the process of land occupation requires the development of solidarities between women and men and this generates opportunities and spaces of possibility for such transformation. While the BKS has women cadre emerging from their ranks they remain lacking in English language skills, which is crucial as the *lingua franca* of transnational social movement organising in Asia. This is recognised by both BKF and BKS and is beginning to be addressed by six-month activist training programmes in English language, computer and movement organising skills for women and men, particularly to increase women's active involvement in international activist encounters.

Everyday struggles against gender oppression underlie struggles for land and

food sovereignty, and responses to climate change. At local and national levels of organising specific workshops and tools are required to enable women to describe, share and analyse their daily economic and gendered experiences and relate these to movement activism. Triple labour is a co-responsibility of men and women and this is as true in Bangladesh as it is amongst activists in the Global North where environmental justice activists continue to ignore the reproductive sphere (Buckingham and Kulcur, 2009). The struggle to incorporate a gender perspective within landless peasants movement that includes an acknowledgement of both women's subordination (as an integral element in capitalist exploitation) and the gendered character of knowledge remains "long, full of contradictions, advances and retreats" (Gramsci, 1971: 334). However, it is only through such struggle that emancipatory social relations between men and women can be fashioned, and equivalence nurtured, extended and networked.