

Film Review

Gupta, Pankaj H. 2009. *Apna Aloo Bazaar Becha: From subsistence ecology to the market*. DVD.

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As I watched the 30 minute cultural documentary *Apna Aloo Bazaar Becha* I had Michael Specter's recently published book, *Denialism*, on my mind. Both filmmaker Pankaj H. Gupta and Specter address the issue of genetically modified seeds, but from very different – and telling – perspectives. Specter wants his readers to be persuaded that there is no compelling evidence to prove that food from genetically modified seeds is harmful to individuals. It's advice for consumers. In contrast, Gupta's characters frame the harm of genetically modified foods in terms of community dissolution. Communities have withered where markets and corporate seed products have replaced traditional seed saving and gifting. That is what is happening in Jardhargaon, Garhwal, India, the location for Gupta's film. How fitting that US author Specter, writing for a US audience, would focus on individuals; while Gupta, telling the story of a rural Indian village, would focus on community. Community is at the heart of *Apna Aloo Bazaar Becha*.

Gupta's film should be lauded for eschewing a propagandist, ideological point of view espousing the advantage of commons practices in favor of a complicated portrait of a community's dilemma. Market practices have reached Jardhargaon for a variety of reasons, from corporate expansion seeking new customers in the form of farmers that have not yet converted to cash crop production, to the aspiration of young people who have left behind their village and the tradition of subsistence farming to venture out to cities like Bombay. We see several young men admit that wages in the city are low and that jobs – like dishwashing – can be demeaning. Yet, the promise of a new, if not better, life beckons. Elders who watch their children leave lament the loss of the traditional practice of passing heirloom seeds from generation to generation through marriage customs in the form of dowry. Their common wealth – seeds and food – is losing value. Elders in

the community are mournful that their heirs no longer treasure their inheritance. Perhaps more tragic, though, is the loss of community and “home” that the seed customs symbolize.

While women, who do most of the farming, lament the loss of the “kind and loving” spirit of the village and complain that “only money works now”; they also don’t romanticize the hard work required to sustain the subsistence life. Subsistence work is relentless: fetching water, cleaning the cowshed, taking dung to fields, leveling the fields, planting, weeding, harvesting, getting back home in the dark to feed a large family, washing the utensils and sleeping only two hours before beginning again. Yet, the market economy has only replaced one vexing problem with another. Now the village can’t feed itself. The investment in tools, fertilizer, pesticides, transportation, and other capital to grow cash crops transforms a village that once thrived through barter into an indebted society. Farmer and activist Vijay Jardhari quotes a mountain saying to point out the absurdity: Sold your potatoes in the market and bought it [sic] back at a higher price.

The film has moments that humanize the tension between preserving or relinquishing traditional communal practices in the face of globalization and market expansion. So much of the tragedy of this village is captured in what we learn from an elderly couple who tell us that they see no reason to accept an offer for a new dwelling and that they no longer visit with their children who left the village. They are simply waiting to die, and the image of the two, forlorn and crouched in the doorway of their home, he with a vacant stare, communicates the literal and metaphorical poverty that has spread throughout a village that is now bereft of its sense of community.

Bhutan tracks its people’s Gross National Happiness, an index that acknowledges that economic metrics cannot fully capture whether or not we humans are fully fulfilled. *Apna Aloo Bazaar Becha* leaves me wishing that more nations subscribed to a Gross National Happiness index alongside Gross National Product. Otherwise, globalization will continue to fail to account for the full scope of community, destroy commons practices that enrich lives and support sustainable systems of survival, and leave people like the families of Jardhargaon alone to fall through the cracks.

Apna Aloo Bazaar Becha is more a portrait of a dilemma than of a place or of people. While it is animated by gorgeous footage of the Indian countryside and mountains, and incorporates interviews with a diverse range of residents who offer a variety of perspectives on the changing traditions in the community, the mode of the film is more akin to ethnography than any other documentary form. Audiences looking for a character-based story will not find it here. Audiences, and especially educators, looking for a complex representation of how markets provoke the dissolution of commons practices and community will find a useful aid in *Apna Aloo Bazaar Becha*.