

Political Economy of Water and People's Protests

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Massive rally by on the 1st April 2006 by CITIZEN'S FORUM constituted of Institute for Community Organisation Research, Promoting People's Participating In Water Governance, Apli Mumbai, Civic Political Cells of Andheri, Shehri Vikas Manch, Ashankur, Yuva, India Centre for Human rights and Law (ICHRL), Surakhsa, Jeevan Dai and Harit (Green) Vasai Movement was against April Fool strategy of the Bombay Municipal Corporation vis-à-vis poor people in the communities in K East ward. The rally got converted into a public meeting in which all participants unequivocally demanded: WE WANT TO HAVE A SAY OVER OUR WATER AND MANAGE IT OURSELVES.

In what may be its first step towards privatizing water in the city, Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has appointed a private consultant, a company named Castalia from France, to study water supply management in Andheri (K-East ward) and recommended 'a better system' for billing and collection of dues. It is at behest of World Bank that has identified the K east ward to implement a Pilot Water Distribution Project.

After this survey, the BMC will outsource the collection of bills for the area to another company. If the pilot project works, it will be extended to the rest of Mumbai.

Water is Our Common Present and Future:

We plan our cities near water; we bathe in water; we play in water; we work with water. Our economies are built on the strength of water transportation - and the products we buy and sell are all partly water, in one way or another. Our daily lives are built on water, and shaped by it. Without the water that surrounds us - the humidity of the air, the roughness of the river's current, the flow from the kitchen tap - our lives would be impossible. In recent decades, water has fallen in our esteem. No longer an element to be revered and protected, it is a consumer product that we have shamefully neglected. Eighty percent of our bodies are formed of water, and two thirds of the planet's surface is covered by water: water is our culture, our life.

Ancient practices of water harvesting, catchments and distribution had guaranteed for years water supplying to the countries and the towns all over the Mediterranean. They were rooted in society and the environment, thus becoming as a part of the local knowledge able to create the identity and the harmonious management of landscape. Variety of water systems, such as the vavs in Gujarat and

Rajasthan, wells in North-South and Western India, Pukurs in Orissa, Bengal and the North East have been acting on its functionality and on its beauty as well. Current risks of water shortage, desertification and degradation of soils from global warming, the increase of demography and urbanisation and the agricultural industrialisation are high. Studying, innovating and reusing the traditional water systems is a fundamental contribution to the water resource management based on local sustainability and also the recovery of aesthetical values of the monuments which are a further resource for people, but need adaptation to a changing socio-economic context to be fully successful.

Planning and Policy Making about Water:

Those who are executing mega projects for dams on river Ganga or Narmada have not bothered about loss to local communities who face displacement, workers who are treated as slaves and are forced to work in inhuman conditions without adequate remuneration and essential survival needs. They are bothered about water supply for industries and rich peasants. Commodification of drinking water by private companies is encouraged so that upper income group with purchasing power can buy safe drinking water. In Delhi, even the middle class has joined Water Workers' Alliance against capitulation of Delhi Water Commission to the dictates of World Bank and the MNC, Suez Company. Privatisation in water sector has also encouraged massive retrenchment of workers in the water departments of municipal corporations. Multi National Corporations manufacturing Soft drinks are having ball. Traditional communities lives are threatened and poor people are brutalized and criminalized. In response to this, the affected people have started asking who suffers and who gains as a result of these inequities. In Tehri dam affected areas, people settled in the lower parts of Himalayan valley are facing shortage of water as the dam is built in the upper area.

In Mettur, Tamil Nadu, where communities lack drinking water but industries draw plentiful supplies from the Mettur reservoir, G Madheshwaran of the West Gonur Farmers Welfare Association asks, "How is it that there is always plenty of water for industries but never enough for people's basic needs?" Yamunabai Uikey of Bazargaon village in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, where villages sometimes get water once in 15 days, observes the colossal amounts of water being supplied to the neighbouring water park and 'snowdome'. In the suburbs of Bangalore, Dalit women have to walk for 4 kilometers to get one pitcher of water and slum dwellers are charged Rs. 600/- per month for water supply. In Kerala, Coca Cola Company was given water supply at throw away price. In Chattisgarh, Mahanadi river water was leased to private corporation and traditional fisher-folks are banned to fish and local communities are banned to construct bore-wells.

Global Experience:

In 1992, the UN General Assembly designated March 22 as "World Water Day" to draw international attention to the critical lack of clean, safe drinking water worldwide. It is a time when we are encouraged to pause and consider the largest public health issue of our time - the global scarcity of clean water. Despite the apparent abundance of clean water in the US and most of the developed world, more than 20% of the Earth's population lacks clean, safe drinking water. This world water crisis isn't confined to one particular region of the planet, though the crisis is most severe in developing nations and particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Poverty, health, education, and economic growth all are impacted by the lack of clean water and sanitation in these communities, creating a perpetual struggle for basic survival.

The facts are mind boggling. More than 1 billion people world wide- 20% of the planet's entire human population lack access to clean, safe drinking water. According to the United Nations, this

world water crisis leads to the death of more than 4,500 children every day and is a leading cause of poverty. This year, with the help of Starbucks, Ethos Water, and leading non-profit organizations decided make World Water Day an event to raise consciousness about critical global problem of water and to highlight the extraordinary ability of every individual to make a difference. The first World Water Forum (WWF) was held at Marrakech in 1997, the 2nd at the Hague in 2000 and the third in Kyoto in 2003. the fourth WWF took place on 22-3-2006. It was addressed by the President of Mexico, Vincent Fox Quesada who made an opening statement, "Water is our common present and future, it is the invaluable heritage of our children."

Material Basis for Water Conflicts: Water conflicts in India have now percolated to every level. They are aggravated by the relative paucity of frameworks, policies and mechanisms to govern use of water resources. These conflicts are over contending uses for water, issues of ensuring equity and allocation, water quality, problems of sand mining, dams and the displacement they bring in their wake, trans-border conflicts, problems associated with privatisation as well as the various micro-level conflicts currently raging across the country. Effective conflict resolution calls for a consensual, multi-stakeholder effort from the grassroots upwards. Read the articles on water conflicts in Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), one of the most influential policy magazines shaping development in India.

Water has become a vital resource for economic growth and sustainable development. Southern India is currently engaged in conflicts involving shared water resources. This case study focuses on the Cauvery River Dispute. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, both Southern Indian States, rely on the Cauvery River for their water supply. Failed monsoons in 1995 ignited old debates between the two states over water access. The dispute is still in progress as the states battle out their arguments in the Supreme Court. The issue becomes more complicated and intense due to the displacement of local farmers who depend on the water from the Cauvery River for their livelihood. Crops are withering, and tempers are inflamed. Threats of violence have transformed into aggressive protests ending in death, and still there is no solution.

Caste, Class and Gender:

Because women are largely responsible for water collection, as well as for most of the agricultural work (around 70%), it is they who determine which water source is used. Time and energy expenditure are major reasons why the source nearest home is frequently selected. Before pumped water became available, water-borne and water-related diseases were prevalent and trips to water sources long C up to 8 km in the dry season. The study was carried out to ascertain how education could optimize the health benefits of a pumped water supply, particularly since the incidence of diarrhoeal disease in the rural India is very high. In India, water has always been associated with purity and purification. But in rural areas, it has also served to make class and caste distinctions more rigid. In rural Maharashtra, as in most other parts of India, class and caste positions usually go together, and in times of drought, awareness of caste and class privileges, and their associated discrimination, become further entrenched. So in drought-ridden villages which are supplied with water by trucks every few days, it is usually the headman who is supplied first, followed by other prominent residents, and lastly the lower income groups. Water scarcity may even be created, or intensified, through the use of caste and class power by richer farmers.

Although women are normally responsible for collecting water for their households, in times of scarcity it comes under the control of men of higher castes or classes. Another way in which water scarcity transforms gender relations is through male out-migration and desertion. Patriarchal relations and the low position in the caste and class hierarchies deny women these options, but leave them with the responsibility for ploughing the land, and managing an extended family. Women's

relations with other women are also changed by water scarcity. More time spent collecting water can mean less “personal” time for women, so that the use of the water site as a common meeting place gradually declines.

Other negative changes in ecological conditions likewise affect the relationship between women and communities. A tribal grassroots organization has recently established a link between the revival of witch-hunting practices and local deforestation. Extensive forest loss has resulted in the disappearance of various medicinal herbs, plants and roots, which has led to increased disease and mortality. This in turn is being attributed to the practice of witchcraft by women, especially widows and deserted wives, and campaigns to hunt and kill such women are currently under way.

What, indeed, are the political and economic pressures, pulls and vested interests that exploit and perpetuate water inequities in India?

There is increasing evidence that global commercial interests, international aid agencies and national governments are conspiring to transform water from a public resource into profitable enterprise. Several international corporations are waiting in the wings to expand a \$ 287 billion global water market into India. There is a huge market being exploited by the packaged water industry, and it’s growing at 40% per annum. The government is increasingly dependent on aid for water infrastructure projects from institutions like the World Bank. As liberalisation and free markets are the guiding principles of these agencies, they are pushing full cost recovery and reduced public control. This is shifting the flashpoint for water conflicts from agrarian basins and rural areas to the cities, where the battle is on for the control and management of municipal water supplies.

A recent controversy over a World Bank loan of 150 million dollars (EUR 127.4 million), spread over a period of six years to improve Delhi’s water supply is postponing the decision by the Government in New Delhi. Parivartan, a voluntary organisation based in Delhi obtained and publicised several official documents of the ‘Delhi Water Supply and Sewerage Project’ that records deals between the state utility, Delhi Jal (Water) Board (DJB) and the Bank. Several voluntary organisations, residents’ welfare organisations, experts and citizens have come together in Delhi to form the ‘Right to Water Campaign’ (RWC) to oppose this project.

The battle is also bringing to the public consciousness the polarised debate over water as an economic good, a commodity that can be priced, and water as a social good, a basic need and a fundamental right. This has meant that where earlier only activists or engineers questioned water and infrastructure development policies, the middle class householder now questions the *status quo*, along with the slum-dweller and the environmentalist.

If there is a positive side to the water inequity it is this, that the middle class too are beginning to be aware — as prices keep rising, as the water table sinks ever lower, as the need for tanker-supplied water goes from occasional emergencies to regular to every day — that water problems connect them to the poor who they see standing in line for hours or who have to buy water at prices far higher than they do.

We must question the paradigm that India’s water policies and institutions are built on and to examine how our fundamental right to water is exercised, how the government ensures that it is upheld, and how the political economy operates to walk roughshod over that right.

Reasons why the CITIZEN’S FORUM opposes privatization are as follows:

a. It leads to increase in rates of water

- b. Privatisation could undermine water quality
- c. Water companies are accountable to its shareholders and not the consumers
- d. Privatisation fosters corruption
- e. Privatisation reduces local control and public rights
- f. Private financing costs more than government financing
- g. Privatisation leads to loss of jobs
- h. Privatisation is difficult to reverse
- i. BMC has not run into a loss in its management of water

Conclusion

Water is a right of all people. It is a basic human right of the people. Every individual must have water for personal consumption and for livelihood activities. There should be no distinction amongst individuals and groups of people as far as availability of and access of water is concerned. We recognise that the availability of water is not infinite. It is limited. It is therefore necessary to have a rational and long-term plan for conservation, renewal, augmentation, and management of the water resources of the country. The plan must be democratic, socially just, and environmentally sane. Mini and micro projects suitable to the area, planned (in cooperation with experts and central planners), executed, controlled and managed by local collectivities must find sufficient importance in the policy. The people have right over water but this is the right to access and use. It is a stewardship and usufruct right. It is not a monopoly right of ownership or control.

e. Women shoulder the major responsibility in collecting and transporting water for personal consumption. Their participation and opinions in the planning for water must have a priority. There must be no privatization of water supply. Any privatization is denial or restriction of access and thus a violation of the basic human rights. Capacity to buy must not become the right to wastefully utilize water.

The CITIZEN'S FORUM has demanded:

- a. The citizens of K East Ward be consulted at every stage in the management of water.
- b. There be transparency from the side of the Government and the people's right to information be respected.

The Human Rights approach makes it imperative that:

- Access to water is a basic human right that is essential for achieving gender equality, distributive and social justice, sustainable development and poverty alleviation.
- Governments are ultimately responsible for the provision of basic human needs, including adequate water and sanitation to women and their families.
- Ratify the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), remove reservations and ensure its implementation to the fullest.

- Recognize the polluting of water and environmental resources in war and conflict situations as a crime against humanity.

P.S.

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