

Women and Water: Issues of Gender, Caste, Class and Institutions

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An introduction to this collection of papers on women and water.

The papers in this issue of the Review of Women's Studies examine the relationship of women to water, setting it in the institutional environment of gender relations and state policy. Despite the policy initiatives and attendant programmes to expand access to water users, given our hierarchical society, the conversion of drinking water into a private good where the market plays an important role in who can benefit and who pays the cost adversely affects women and the lower castes and classes. While power and authority are nominally granted to women to manage water resources in the new decentralised governance structures on the assumption that domestic water supply is the legitimate domain of women, there remain many questions. To what extent does women's representation in decision-making bodies empower them or does it only reinforce traditional social hierarchies in subtle ways? Does the emergence of women's visibility in the public sphere hold the promise of emancipation and greater gender equality? As the experiences narrated in some of the articles here demonstrate, decentralisation of power and authority with the launching of panchayati raj in local communities has varied consequences at the field level.

The assignment of work to women related to the supply and management of domestic water puts the onus on them to be efficient without the needed technical knowledge and skills. There is often a euphoric and romantic recital of the traditional knowledge of water management, which is not supported by any empirical or historical data. However, some remnants are there of remembered practices of community managed systems like tanks and artificial lakes that harvested rain water and bunds that were built to contain river overflows.

There certainly were community managed systems, but claims of social equity for such practices cannot be sustained because the dalits were also excluded from equitably sharing such village resources. While many caste households had a well, the lower castes could not draw water from these wells.

Before going into the question of women's links with water, the issue has become important because we are at a time in history when we are facing a crisis of shrinking water resources, mainly due to overexploitation. When water becomes a scarce good, the more privileged inevitably find ways to maintain access. It is therefore useful to gauge the extent of the water crisis before we see where women stand. In scarcity situations, access becomes tightly controlled whether it is food or water. For the urban upper classes who have 24-hour water supply it is hard to imagine what working class people go through. One can also not understand what the rural poor women experience. A report

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prepared by 24 United Nations agencies for the World Water Forum had this to say:

One-fifth of the world's population lacks access to safe drinking water (that is 1.1 billion people); 40% have no access to basic sanitation; 41% pay bribes to falsify meter reading to lower bills; 30% pay bribes to get repairs done; and 12% pay bribes to get new connections.

An estimated 66 million rely on groundwater with fluoride content and face serious health hazards like bone deformities, worm infestations, encephalitis, dengue, etc.

India is among the high risk countries where two out of five live in vulnerable areas. Quality of and access to water are poor. India is among the countries where atmospheric contamination from industrial pollutants is very high. By 2030 the demand for irrigation which already claims 70% of our fresh water resources, will increase further.

Ramaswamy Iyer (2010) concludes that what is wrong with our water management is that mismanagement due to intermittent, unreliable, unsafe, inequitable water use; intractable water conflicts; poorly functioning major and minor irrigation projects; unreliable service inequities; Alarming depletion of aquifers; and inefficiency in water use.

Other reports reinforce this crisis scenario. Take J Broscoe and R P S Malik's (2006) concerns. They advocate massive state investment in water as a public good. Fourteen per cent of all blocks in the country, according to the authors, overexploit water. It is not as if we are blessed with abundance. The report points out that 60% of our land consists of hard rock, like our Deccan plateau. Fifteen per cent of India's food is produced by mining non-renewable groundwater. The report advocated a legal framework which could limit the right of people to pump as much water as they want on the lands owned by them. One way the authors felt water use could be monitored is by creating an efficient and vigilant aquifer management association.

Other committees too took cognisance of our water situation. The Vaidyanathan Committee in 1992, recommended pricing of irrigation water in graded tariffs. Populist measures like free electricity led to indiscriminate digging of tube wells. Janakirajan and Moench (2006) say that unless the State undertakes proper planning, ensures good administration, sorts out legal dimensions of centre-state relations in water use and is concerned about sustainable economic growth, ensuring adequate supply and quality cannot be done. Many cities like Bangalore have established water adalats. All these are measures in the right direction but ensuring accessibility to water and management of this dwindling resource is not empowerment but an additional burden. While women no doubt have a greater role in management and decision-making, how they actually function depends on gender relations within the household. Paradoxically, as against our assumption that women's entry into the public sphere "empowers" them and promotes gender equity/equality, the gender relations within the household appear to determine the outcome in the public sphere.

The papers in this review cover diverse ground – from a historical delineation of colonial practises and ideology to the impact of decentralisation and the effect of commodification of water on women.

Margaret Zwarteen in her article "Questioning Masculinities in Water" argues that irrigation came to be a masculine domain as a consequence of engineering becoming a man's profession. The

engineering profession is still heavily dominated by males serving as experts, managers, planners and policymakers. Through the colonial bureaucratic tradition, masculinity and engineering was linked. Irrigation texts do not explicitly exclude women, but professional irrigation identity and men came to belong to each other at symbolic and metaphoric levels. The other articles also buttress this argument, of the difference between irrigation and domestic water. Yet, the conditions, processes and men's historical and contemporary domination of irrigation profession has received no scrutiny. "Assuming men's centrality with their visibility, we need to examine institutions, cultures that sustain gender inequality within and between genders, along with race and class", Zwartveen suggests that documenting gendered patterns of water work and water use, rights and responsibilities is a first step in recognising women's importance as water actors.

Kathleen O'Reilly in "They Are Not of This House": The Gendered Costs of Drinking Water's Commodification" narrates a drinking water project in Rajasthan. Community participation involved villagers paying for water. Household paid for all members (other than for girls) on the premise that girls get married and go away. What would be the wider implications of girls not being asked to pay? The author thinks that this fails to acknowledge girls' subjectivity. The village makes a collective payment for girls through the payment by families who have sons. Strangely, what appears as a liberal value can be interpreted as reinforcing prevailing gender values. The project plan in this case accepted a gender division of labour by making women care for tap replacement, bill collection and other maintenance problems. There is an in-built ambivalence on women's participation. Girls' non-payment, a daughter-in-law's exclusion, the limited role of married older women – all these unwittingly play into the reproduction of gender inequality.

Deepa Joshi in her "Caste, Gender and the Rhetoric of Reform in India's Drinking Water Sector" uncovers the guidelines formulated in 2002, which required the handing over of responsibilities from the State to a diverse combination of state-private-community institutions for the planning, management and delivery of water services that users were willing to pay for. This approach ignores the fact that communities are not homogeneous and are composed of conflicting and cooperating segments of ethnic, religious, caste, class and gender categories. Women's responsibility for carrying and using water exemplify universal patriarchy, which results in certain structural and symbolic inequality between men and women. Dalits are debarred from using fresh water in nullas; menstruating women are also forbidden to fetch water from the village's fresh water source as they are seen to, "pollute" the source. Water has been the traditional medium of exclusion. The reason for a lack of understanding of how caste and gender play a part in water use is because officials think of gender and caste as two distinct categories. Caste Hindu men are dominant in water users' association. Joshi concludes, rightly, that official intent in relation to basic rights is mere paper declaration. To correct centuries of inequality would require affirmative policies that are supported by systemic changes in attitudes, work cultures, organisational priorities, resource allocation and monitoring systems. Transferring operational costs and managerial responsibility to voluntary groups of women reduces costs to the State but does not give real gains to women.

Seema Kulkarni in her paper "Women and Decentralised Water Governance: Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward" recounts the history of decentralisation in India, its motive forces and effects on women. She connects this to the women's movement which brought prominence to gender issues. There was then an attempt in official policy to enable women to participate more in the public sphere.

Those who propagated rights-based approaches to policy hoped that decentralisation would bring more transparency, accountability and equity. On the other hand, those who stood for minimising state interventions saw this as an opportunity to promote market-determined supply-demand outcomes. Women, it was hoped, would benefit with an improved outreach of services. However, given the prevailing patriarchal order under which women were largely held responsible for care and nurture of the household, they were not given space or voice in the public sphere. From the experiences of some water projects, decentralisation fails to meet the larger objectives of giving a voice to women. Unless value systems change, institutional initiatives will not achieve desired ends but will be subverted at the implementation stage by the culture of the people. Yet, Kulkarni is optimistic that bringing women into the public sphere does strengthen their self-image and confidence. In the water projects like *pani samitis* one can see this transformation. Constraints on women's greater participation in *pani samitis* were the timing of meetings that were at times when women were busy or they were held at male spaces where women were not comfortable. The incorporation of women into the water systems opens spaces for them. This is the positive side of the effort. The power of traditional authority in the community such as of landed gentry and upper caste representatives often gets inscribed into the local government structures. Women need better information networks and knowledge to negotiate these terrains.

The standard unitary model of the household is now replaced by the notion of a collective, both cooperative and fractious. The men and women within the household may have different preferences and, depending on the balance of power, they may choose differently. The household's choice in turn can influence the balance of power. Women getting into male spaces will depend on the household intra-gender relations but those intra-household gender relations can change as a result of women's increased space outside the household. A household's balance of power influences its choices, but the choices in turn can affect the balance of power, according to Basu (2004). This is manifest in the domain of decision-making and control. Women's say will vary depending on the domain. It is easier to wield this within the household, if action falls within this domain. This may be true, but the gradual numerical presence of women in the public sphere will bring out changes in both private and public domains.

Institutions set the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. They delimit conventional do's and don'ts of human activities in a given situation and environment. Institutions are a set of laws, contracts, organisations and informal rules of conduct; they uphold certain norms, values and customs that facilitate the relationships between the individual and groups (North 1990). Experience shows, as in those cases cited above, that there are possibilities of innovation in collective action to surmount the risk of violating accepted conventions, to have better ways of doing things, to learn and educate

ourselves to provide public goods in a more efficient and equitable manner. After all institutions continually regenerated.

Women's agency is critical in this endeavour. Sen (1985) defined agency as "the ability to act on behalf of what you value and reason to value. Cleaver took it further; he (2007) defined it as the capability to be the originator of acts. A distinguishing feature of being human is that it has relational existence and insofar as it has a social context, agency facilitates the collection and translation of individual agency into collective agency and action, transforming the process into a functioning agency both at the individual and group level.

Alternative Views

There are some who now argue that treating water as a public good does not address problems of distribution and equity. Water has the characteristics of an "impure" public good. Public goods are those that benefit not just an individual but once provided can benefit others as a free good – for example, roads. Why is it an impure public good? It is a common pool resource that is non-excludable yet in actual consumption it has a competitive element. Mehta (2006), using a human development approach, makes a case for moving away from regarding water purely in bio-physical terms to focusing on socially constructed scarcity. We need to disaggregate users and their entitlements and to look at the politics of distribution within a political economy. If scarcity is constructed as a lack of supply or an excess of demand, the solution is to increase supply or organise more efficient use. As indicated above, in the name of efficiency, water, enterprises have been privatised. Mehta uses Sen's notion of entitlements and capabilities: Water is an essential source of well-being and is a right. Well-being is multidimensional, including income, public provision of goods and services and access to common property. It also has intangible dimensions such as clean air, water, dignity, self-respect and autonomy. If we see water as a "right", the citizen is put in apposition of capability and to function in that area, water markets are then not the best way to facilitate equity. The peculiar feature of water is that it cannot be "produced" like food. It can only be stored or transported or recycled.

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