

Caste, Gender and the Rhetoric of Reform in India's Drinking Water Sector

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Recent analyses indicate a historic loss of equity in the shift in India's drinking water policy from a welfare-based, free supply mode to a market-oriented demand-led approach. However, a complex entwining of caste and gender has consistently defined water allocation and access among users and entrenched fractures in the structure and culture of the policy-implementing and regulatory institutions. Contrary to popular assumptions, both official welfare-based supply and recent neo-liberal policies and interventions hinge on a tokenistic, segregated and apolitical mention of gender and/or caste concerns which, when translated into action, have often reinforced existing inequities. Based on the above observations, this paper argues that subsequent changes in domestic water policies have only served to exacerbate an enduring unequal social order around water in India.

Recent concerns about the loss of a historic focus on equity in India's drinking water policy relate to neoliberal "demand-led guidelines" piloted in 1999 and formalised as policy in 2002 (Cullet 2009). The market-oriented approach required the handing over of responsibilities from state water institutions to diverse combinations of state-private-community institutions that were to plan, manage and deliver water services that users were willing to pay for. Assumptions had been made in the new policy that ability and willingness to pay would reflect water needs and translate into voice and choice in water management. Additionally, it had been presumed that domestic water sector agencies and actors aligned in new institutional arrangements would somehow coherently address the technical and social wrongs identified in earlier arrangements. Cullet (2009) and several others report negative outcomes for those marginalised by poverty and caste in the implementation of the new approach.

Cullet's insightful analysis however, adds to the countless claims of success or counter-critiques of the roles of community, state and/or other institutions in managing water in India. Polarised analyses tend to eulogise certain institutional arrangements over others (Mollinga 2010). In "prying open the black box that exists between policy prescriptions...and poverty" (Mosse 2004: 641), in this paper I argue that regardless of policy and corresponding institutional arrangements, disparities by caste and gender have been consistently reproduced as water governance and management changed hands from community to state to recent neo-liberal institutional arrangements in India.

Multiple factors determine water equity in different local contexts. In this paper, I focus on the complex interrelationships between gender and caste, given the historic role of these factors in defining a persisting inequality in India (Joshi and Fawcett 2006; Kapoor 2007). Tamang (2002) writes of the politics of developing poor third world women which she argues, conveniently "efface ethnic, religious gendered differences among heterogeneous communities and construct an [illusory] category of women – generically poor, backward and needy yet willing, capable and committed" to making projects work. This analysis applies well to the drinking water sector. Despite the obvious "sociocultural vector of a complex gendered, caste-based discrimination against untouchable, Dalit women", little attention has been paid to interplays of caste, gender and water in India (Kapoor 2007: 609). Disparity by gender is not only deeply cross-cut by many social vectors, it is also never absent

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(Whitehead 1979). However, assumptions continue to be made in the sector that inequalities exist “only” at the household/ community levels, ignoring the complex intersection of gender and caste which serve to restrict opportunities and access to education, skills, occupations and positions for women and some men in water implementing and policy organisations (Joshi and Zwartveen 2011).

In this paper, I discuss the interplay of caste, gender and water using two intersecting lines of analysis – first, complex caste and gender disparities across multiple institutional levels from the household to policymaking forums; and second, a consistent reproduction of these disparities as water governance and management changed hands from community to state to recent neoliberal institutional arrangements. Acknowledging that institutions, regardless of their policies and policy processes, are essentially extensions of, and hence sites of reproduction and reiteration of the prevailing social order helps avoid polarised analyses (Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1996). A historical overview helps to track persisting “old, as well as new forms of oppression” (Rajagopal 2004: 5229).

The geographic setting for the primary research presented in this paper is a group of mountain villages in the state of Uttarakhand in the Central Himalayan region, known popularly as Kumaon. I occasionally refer to primary and secondary data from within and outside the drinking water sector in other states, i.e., Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. The data for this paper are derived from longitudinal primary research implemented between 1998 and 2004. The methodology for the analysis presented in this paper can be categorised as ethnography, or simply as “deep hanging-out” with the researched community and other institutional actors (Hausner 2006: 325). For obvious ethical reasons the names of all individuals as well as villages mentioned in the primary research data have been changed (in agreement with the researched community).

Caste, Gender and an Unequal Water Order

There are distinct differences in the experiences of caste- and gender-based inequity, even though both are outcomes of the same principles and these inequities converge in complex intersections, making disparities by caste and gender difficult to segregate (Joshi and Fawcett 2006). For example, Kapoor (2007) reports how dalit women, burdened both by their sexuality and caste, interpret sexual atrocities by caste Hindu men as acts of caste dominance. The simplistic interpretation and segregation of caste and gender in drinking water policies and strategies does little justice to the reality of a “complex gendered caste-based discrimination” in India (ibid: 609). In this section, I try to outline community-level experiences around domestic water for women in general, and for dalit women in the Kumaon region in particular.

Women’s responsibilities for carrying and using water at home exemplify aspects of a universal patriarchy which results in certain structural and symbolic inequalities between women and men. In discussions, an elderly woman in Mala village said to me:

They say in the cities now, you can push buttons and clothes will be washed, water filled and food cooked. Tell me, as a woman, are you still pushing these buttons yourself? (2001: personal communication).

In my interactions in the mountain villages in Kumaon, I observed a sharp gendering of water responsibilities which happens around adolescence, when young girls are drawn to the numerous tasks at home, while their brothers and males of the same age are released from tasks considered domestic and feminine. Only unique personal situations coerce young men to perform domestic water-related work. In Chuni village, Anand Agari aged about 16, is one of the few young men who regularly fetches water, cooks food, washes clothes, sweeps and mops the floors, etc. His mother is unable to see in both eyes and his two elder sisters are married. Anand’s mother is deeply pained at her son’s situation and the poverty of the household which she believes makes Anand a “lesser” man.

The cementing of water responsibilities in these mountain villages happens on marriage and then the tasks are binding for women, continuing well after their bodies are bent with age and physical exertion. A ritualistic visit to the family spring, the ceremonial fetching of water home the day after the wedding makes this task *binding* from here on. Laxmi Devi of Chuni village recalled:

Oh there is nothing better than *jawani* [youth]. To throw a *chunni* [scarf] around the neck and skip along crooked paths. The biggest advantage of youth is the sheer physical strength of the body. There is work, but it is not binding. My daughter Janaki may cut some grass and fetch some water today but she does not have to bother about how to cook and clean for the family day and night.

Mohini Devi of Chuni village explains:

My mother-in-law is very old, yet I expect her to help me with some housework – a small fill of water from the spring. If I had an elderly father-in-law I would not make such demands on him.

When adult men assist their wives at home, the local constructs of male hegemony are violated, but the women are the first to be blamed. The few men who assist their wives with work at home are usually those in paid employment. Having fulfilled the masculine demands of being the breadwinner, these men can brave gender role reversals. Gyan Singh is one of the many unemployed men in Mala. His bitterness in being unable to find paid employment is reflected in his dominance and violence over his wife Anandi. During one of the meetings he argued, “Am I so much less a man that I should now help my wife with the housework?” In extreme cases of individual poverty, the poor amongst men may undertake some of the essentially feminine tasks, like carrying water, outside the confines of their homes. However, in contrast to women, these “lesser” men are paid for such work.

In my discussions locally, women indeed saw water-related tasks as theirs. They knew no other option. “Good women” are those who perform these roles well. The local non-governmental organisation (NGO) claimed that women in Mala were empowered and quoted the context of these women travelling out of their homes to meet and reprimand local administration for various issues. Yet these same women seemed to have changed little their gendered relationships with the men within their homes. They were angry, confused and uncomfortable in a role-play

exercise where they were asked to imagine reversal of gender roles. "We don't like this. Men can help a bit but why should they carry water, cook food and wash dirty utensils and especially wash our clothes? We will not allow this" (2001: personal communication).

Several decades of gendered interventions in the sector have made little dent in women's tasks of "carrying water" home (O'Reilly et al 2009: 381). No water project, however rhetorically grounded in gender, applauds or encourages the sharing of unequal gendered water burdens. Instead, as Molyneux (2007) mentions, there is a contrary feminising of these tasks and a layering of additional project-related burdens on women.

However, along with age and social status, caste in particular intertwines with the entrenched local patriarchy making some women far more constrained than others in the meeting of their water burdens.

Gendered-Caste Complexities and Water

The residents of Chuni village in the mountains of Uttarakhand claim that their water-abundance is due to the water goddess, or Jal Devi, revered in a temple located at the foot of the village. She is praised for ensuring that water flows around the year in the springs and along the narrow irrigation canals or *guls*. Upper caste Khanka Kshatriya women in Chuni reported water abundance. "Whatever else our problems, we are water-lords (sic) here". In the same village, the dalit Agari women said (2002: personal communication):

Ask us what water scarcity is – it is to not bathe in the summer heat, after toiling in the fields. It is to reuse water used in washing vegetables and rice to wash utensils, to use this water again to wash clothes and then to feed the buffaloes this soapy water. Water scarcity is to sit up the whole night filling a container glass by glass as it trickles into our one small spring. We often don't wash the utensils and just wipe them with a cloth. We feel so dirty and unclean in the summer. We do not wash our clothes for weeks, just rinsing them with a little water. These people say, we are dirty and smell. But how can we be clean without water?

The age-old social hierarchy in Hindu society has historically positioned dalits as eternally polluted, feared to pollute sacred water sources (Joshi and Fawcett 2006). The fresh water underground springs (*naulas*) of these mountain villages are not accessible to the dalits. In these mountain villages and elsewhere, dalits have historically lived in hamlets distanced from the main village and the primary water sources, which were also areas where the main village temples were situated. "Good dalits" are those who keep away from these "sacred" areas. These sites are also forbidden to caste Hindu¹ menstruating women until they are purified on the fifth or the seventh day. When the water level suddenly drops or sources dry up, it is rumoured that the water was polluted by menstruating caste Hindu women and purification ceremonies are performed to absolve the pollution. To blame the dalits would justify their access.

In my discussions in Chuni, both dalit men and women spoke of their experiences of caste disparities. The men spoke of their "lesser-men" status, of how *even* caste women younger than them in age looked down upon them, offered them food or water from a distance, required them to wash their own² cups or plates, etc.

Dalit women spoke of burdens outside and within the house, and above all, the practical challenges of finding and carrying water home in water-abundant Chuni – of the perils of stealing the cool, sweet water from the *naulas* on hot summer days; of how the consequences of stealing are minimised by sending out young children to "steal" water, and then beating them severely in a faked expression of guilt, if caught; of ceremonies performed by caste families to "purify" the *naula*, if discovered. Water governance and management has changed several hands in Chuni since India's independence, but little has changed by way of the dalit women's access to water.

In water policies as well as in popular discourses, not only is caste insulated from gender, little attention is also paid to the complex way these questions manifest themselves in the structure and culture of water organisations. Concerns relating to caste and gender equity have remained limited to "old forms of oppression" faced at community levels. There is a resounding silence on the reproduction of these inequities in the implementing and policymaking arenas. Prising open the spaces in the different institutional arrangements for managing water, longitudinally over time, in this paper, I try to assess the cultural resilience to a reordering in terms of gender and caste of these supra-community water domains.

Evolving Institutional Arrangements to Manage Water

India's drinking water management, governance and policy context evolved from community to colonial to centralised state management to more recent "fluid, fast-changing terrains" of "neo-liberal prescriptions" (Baviskar 2007: 3-4). In this paper, I focus on three specific periods – precolonial or "traditional" water management, centralised state interventions and recent neo-liberal interventions.

Precolonial traditionalism describes "harmonious traditional communities, ecologically sensitive resource users...of women as primary keepers of a special conservationist ethic" (Sinha et al 1997). Yet, as Mosse (2008: 941) argues, these stories were mostly "veins of myth and memory". Colonialism shifted the ownership and management of water from the community to centralised state water institutions, a practice that continued in a subsequent nationalisation. The effectiveness and appropriateness of the state's role in water management is much disputed. On the one hand, arguments presented by authors like Cullet (2009) conjure notions of a welfare state and its official intent to address the fundamental right to water. Others like Shiva (2001) find little to applaud in the state, "...institutions constituted to achieve colonial economic and political ambition, and now intervening through policies, rules, laws, investment, and technology to facilitate privatisation and globalisation". Rangan (1997) identifies that in the absence of adequate anthropological and ethnographic accounts of the functioning of different state institutions, there are only blanket arguments for and against the state's role. Here, I discuss what I observed in the late 1990s – a limited understanding and application of gender and caste concerns in official implementing and policy organisations. The final section in this paper builds on analyses of equity in the ongoing neo-liberal approaches to managing drinking water in India. Cullet and others point out

the negative outcomes to the poor and those marginalised by caste. I build on these analyses from the perspective of an enduring complex caste-gender disparity at the household, community level as well as formal organisational levels.

Romanticising the Community in Water

"Traditional or pre-colonial Indian society is generally eulogised as far less burdened by gender, economic and environmental exploitation" (Sinha et al 1997: 67). However, there are few "real" accounts of water rights and management tracing prior to independence. Sengupta (1985) reports that in a feudal zamindari system which prevailed historically but was formalised during colonisation, landlords had likely exclusive ownership rights over all natural resources; there was no recording of the rights, if any, of tenants. Narratives of collective action or equitable governance, as well as women's inherent knowledge of nature (water) are drawn from later critiques of the "perceived" damage and loss of traditional technical ingenuity from exploitative colonial bureaucracies and an autocratic centralised state.

In the different veins of praise for traditional environmentalism, the uniqueness of Hindu culture is acclaimed, in particular the sacredness and femininity of water (Shiva 1989; Agarwal and Narain 1997; Rawat and Sah 2009). Agarwal and Narain's (1997) seminal anthology on traditional water systems in India noted a mutually beneficial entwining of Hindu ritualism and conservation which served to conserve both the source and the system. Praising the technical ingenuity and common ownership of freshwater springs (*naulas*) in the central Himalayan region of Kumaon, Agarwal (1985: 13) went as far as to claim that "there were few caste and class barriers in the Himalayan villages which prevented people from working together as a community". Similarly, Shiva (1989) uses classical Hindu texts to evoke visions of a divine femininity and inherent links between women, nature and nurturing, especially in the Kumaon Himalayas (Sinha et al 1997). In contrast, colonially introduced technologies were blamed as being "western and alien", ignorant of traditional wisdom and locally exploitative (Sinha et al 1997; Shiva 1989).

Analytical critiques of "traditional environmentalism" identify that while traditional systems were, for obvious reasons, grounded in ecological rationality, the same cannot be claimed of equitable governance. Joshi and Fawcett (2006) describe in extensive detail the ritualistic exclusion of dalits from water sources and systems; and of women in traditional water management and governance – both activities also justified as culture and tradition. More contextually, women in Chuni village could not recall a period in history when women were consulted or involved in the planning and design of water systems. In contrast to the presumed "ecological radicalism of women" Sinha et al (1997: 78) describe in the Kumaon Himalayas "gendered labour relations maintained inequitably by cultural coercions". Similarly, dalit households in Chuni village cannot recall when they were ever considered an inclusive part of the whole of the village community. Indeed, water was *the medium* of exclusion. After dalit artisans built the traditional *naulas*, these structures were sanctified and purified [sic] of their "polluting touch". Thereafter, dalits and women when cyclically impure were denied access to these

"revered" water sources (Joshi 2001: personal communication). Unequal access to the available water has persisted in Chuni and other neighbouring villages, legitimised by religion and culture, and here, the dalits in their minority are unable to challenge this deep-rooted social inequality. Nandi Devi Agari asked me, "What can we do? Will you come with me to the Khankas' *naula* while I take out water in the open, in daylight, in everybody's knowledge?" (2001: personal communication). However, she realised the futility of her idea. "You sympathise with me, but you are here today and gone tomorrow". Conflict and defiance are not the preferred solutions for her.

Official policy in India gave prominence to disparity by caste and also wrote "gender" into drinking water policies. However, caste was disaggregated from gender and the apathy to both issues in policy and implementation arenas watered down the welfare intent of pre-reform official guidelines. As responsibilities changed hands from the community to the state, little changed by way of equity in Chuni and in the neighbouring villages.

State Ownership and Management of Water

A clause giving priority coverage of drinking water supply to dalits and the next higher order caste group (shudras) in the caste ladder (jointly identified officially as scheduled castes or sc) was applied in policy in the early 1980s. This acknowledged a debilitating lack of access to drinking water for the lower castes which was said to be furthered by deep-rooted caste connivance between local officials and villagers of identical castes (Agarwal 1981). However no strategies were identified to challenge this deep-rooted connivance. It is therefore no surprise that after two decades of prioritised access, Tiwari (2006) quotes official data from the 2002 Census to show how dalit households continue to have reduced access to and also travel significantly longer to fetch drinking water. There were numerous accounts of continued connivance between caste villagers and officials in Chuni. In an ironic twist to policy concerns on caste-based inequity, official funds were consistently used to divert the meagre water resources of dalit households to meet the emerging needs of the dominant upper caste community.

Having gradually lost her traditional water source (*naulas*) to meet the needs of upper caste villagers, Deepa Devi Tamta, an elderly dalit widow was asked to travel to the district headquarters in Pithoragarh to influence an official project for this village. "I had to stay in Pithoragarh for three days to ask for what was really mine. I was *taught* to tell the officers that I was a *poor Dalit widow without water*." When the scheme was approved the water was diverted to a neighbouring caste hamlet, leaving Deepa Devi and her daughter-in-law to travel for one and half hours (one way) to the source to fetch water (2001: personal communication).

A later and flawed interpretation of "gender" in drinking water policy provided little scope for meaningful change. Policymakers in New Delhi understood women and caste as two separate and distinct categories. The purpose of including women was driven by the need to address efficiency: "[W]omen being the biggest users, collectors and handlers of water have a major role to play in rural water management as caretakers, health educators and

handpump mechanics" (Ghosh 1989). A water committee of women members is given the responsibility for keeping all the handpumps in the village in a clean and sanitary condition. The more literate, extrovert and eager women are chosen and trained in domestic health education. Women are given an honorarium of Rs 200 per year for maintaining 10 handpumps (ibid). Fortunately, there was little incentive or requirement for field engineers to *involve* women in such ways, as despite the changes in policy, tangible, quantitative targets *alone* were used to track progress of water supply interventions.

Compared to the relative inaction and inattention to involving women in water projects, a much more visible antagonism was evident around the affirmative action policies on caste and gender, including reservations in jobs and promotions for women and members of scs which were announced nationally and made applicable across sectors and agencies. Caste Hindu men have been dominant actors in official water institutions, which are characterised by their relative absence of women engineers, and in the limited presence of dalit men and women only in their traditional "polluting" roles as cleaners of toilets, office sweepers, etc (Joshi 2002). Despite several years of an affirmative legislation, I found no dalit male (leave alone women) engineer in the field locations that I visited in Uttar Pradesh (of which the Kumaon region was a part then) and Orissa in 2001 and 2002. Prasad (2008) reports discrimination and oppression of dalit (male) officers in public spaces elsewhere. I did however observe a gradual representation of women as engineers in these organisations but the pace of women's entry varied across states (Joshi 2002). For example, affirmative reservation in jobs for women was not operational in Uttar Pradesh until 1997. Discussions with the lone female engineer among 4,742 permanent staff revealed how she had "survived" by adopting a masculine identity:

I have only one child. I could not have afforded to have a larger family and keep working. I had to work harder than most male colleagues to prove my worth as an engineer. I could manage because of the enormous support given to me by my family (Saraswat 2000; personal communication).

Caste and class privileges had enabled this lone woman to study engineering and to balance work and personal commitments. The perceptions of her male colleagues were different, "she got away from difficult field postings because she was a woman...life is easier for her within the organisation" (2000: personal communication). Two years after the adoption of the affirmative policy by the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Organisation in Orissa, the number of women engineers increased from one to eight (out of a total of 591). However, technical and cultural constraints compounded the situation for women engineers, creating problems of various scales. Lack of a separate toilet with a regular water supply resulted in a challenging situation for the two women engineers in the State office, especially during their menstrual periods. There was little option for these women, but to accept these constraints as an outcome of their social "waywardness" in choosing to work in such masculine spaces. On another scale, a younger female engineer tried to mask her femininity by dressing in a dull, unnoticeable manner especially after her request for a field posting was viewed with

disdain and she was identified as being "too bold". Male colleagues arrived late to work and left work late in the evenings and sympathised with their female colleagues' inability to work together with them by saying, "after all a woman's place is at home". It was another matter that both in Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, none of the women engineers were dalits.

The representation of women and dalits thins as one moves up the institutional hierarchy. In 1997, there were no dalit senior officers and only two non-dalit women in national decision-making positions relating to the rural drinking water sector. Caste and class advantage that enable some women to reach such positions means that not only do they have few shared "problems" with dalit and poorer women, but that they are more able to adopt masculine traits that come with the job. When asked about gender issues in the water sector, the principal advisor in the Planning Commission said, "Gender is a popular Western concept; that does not work for *our* rural women" (Mishra 2001: personal communication).³ The sole woman director at the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission was amused when asked if she experienced any constraints in the dominantly male organisation. "Why should I experience any constraint? Being a woman does not affect my performance in any way differently from that of others [men]. If we as women have chosen to work [in offices], we cannot expect different organisational norms for us" (Veeraswamy 2001: personal communication)⁴. Correcting centuries of inequality would require that affirmative policies are supported by systematic changes in attitudes, work culture, organisational priorities, resource allocation and monitoring systems (Ramachandran 1998). Unfortunately these changes did not happen in the drinking water sector. As Iyer (2007: 23) notes, the official intent in relation to basic rights to water has been no more than a "mere declaration on paper".

Mosse (2008: 946) points out that the "twenty-first-century neoliberal reverse 'rolling-back' of the state focuses [ironically] on the 'revival' of community [read women] water management", however the intent was primarily to enhance economic efficiency. Transferring operational costs and managerial responsibilities to *voluntarily participating* women significantly reduced the costs of delivering water with few real gains to the women themselves (Clever 1997). Thus, contrary to Cullet's concerns on a loss of equity, the emphasis on involving women and dalits is much more prominent in neo-liberal approaches to managing domestic water. These approaches with purpose, homogenised women as a group, deliberately masking the deep fractures caused by caste and other disparities.

Ineffective Public Sector, Supply-Driven Approaches

In the 1990s, internal and external reviews were beginning to highlight the obvious poor performance of state water supply institutions. Disenchantment with the supply-driven, public-utility-managed rural water supply was influenced significantly by a review of the sector led by the World Bank in 1998, in partnership with the Government of India. The review report gave a broad-brush analysis of the faults in the supply-driven approach. However, rather than attempt to analyse or correct these drawbacks, the report called for, "[a]n urgent shift from supply-driven to demand-oriented approaches...an explicit engagement of

non-government stakeholders in sector activities – with an aim to achieving financial viability of service delivery” (World Bank 1998). The report advocated the multiple social and financial merits of a demand responsive approach (DRA).

The DRA takes into account that rich men, rich women, poor men and poor women may want different kinds of service. DRA provides information and allows user choices to guide key investment designs, thereby ensuring that services conform to what people want and are willing to pay for. In exchange for making contributions, in cash or kind for a satisfactory service, the stakeholders have a voice and choice in technology type, service level, service provider and management/financing arrangements (Dayal et al 2000: 2).

Swajal Project: The Forerunner of Sector Reforms

Official commitment to the reform agenda was also influenced by a World Bank financed project, Swajal (1996-2002) which piloted the DRA principles (Cullet 2009). Even as the project was hardly underway, claims were being made about its innovative nature and “demonstrated” outcomes of financial and social sustainability. There was an overwhelming belief that, in place of over-staffed, corrupt, politicised state government implementing organisations who practised an inflexible technology, NGOs and private consultants would empower village communities, especially women, and provide evidence of the effectiveness of community [paid] ownership of water infrastructure (World Bank 1996). In the skilful weaving of pricing water with community participation, the Bank chose not to review past evidence from reforms in forest management in India, which showed that transfer of ownership to communities did not ensure better long-term sustainability or wise(r) management, and in many instances reinforced the marginalisation of poorer households (Rangan 1997). Other evidence, that all NGOs are not innately more receptive than state bureaucracies to the problems of the poor in general and especially to those of poor women, was also conveniently ignored (Agarwal, B 1989, 1997; Locke 1999; Sarin 1996).

The Swajal Project Management Units in the state capital and project districts were staffed with officials from various government departments and private consultants. Local NGOs were contracted as support organisations (SOS) to facilitate the establishment of village water and sanitation committees (vwscs) which were to implement the project, under the supervision of private consultants, contracted as service agencies (SAS). The project made a significant effort to employ women, though no measures were adopted to employ dalits – men or women. However, all the women hired were assumed to be gender experts regardless of their skills and background. For example, a young woman employed as the “Women and Development Specialist” in a district office had recently completed her doctorate on theoretical aspects of nutrition and had little knowledge of or insight on gendered inequities or the water sector. The situation was similar for female staff hired in local SOS. Training in social development, provided in the form of quick courses (one to a few days) in community development and gender, was expected to equip the staff to address and achieve the project goals of equity and empowerment. To expect newly trained staff to address entrenched social inequities was a tall order; especially as there were pressing demands to focus on meeting rigidly defined and

monitored project targets. The examples below illustrate the outcomes of a careless incorporation of caste and gender disparities, despite the project’s ambitious goals of empowering the community.

Staff in newly formed NGOs and service agency consultants candidly explained that the project required:

...identifying villages with undisputed, adequate water sources that can be developed; selecting village water and sanitation committees who would agree to the terms and conditions of the project, including cost-recovery; and ensuring that women are involved in project tasks – all of which were designed to ensure timely completion of project activities specified in the extensive technical guidelines (2000: personal communication).

However, exclusion of the marginalised was also deliberate. The most respected local NGO working on the project was widely known for its commitment to community and the environment. But its founder members were all brahmins, the highest caste order. While the organisation boasted of a critical mass of female staff, women only filled the ranks and files of lower order field staff; and there was a remarkable absence of dalit staff members. The organisation prided itself on its “informal” structure – characterised by living and eating together. The only two junior dalit male staff were conspicuously absent in such gatherings. On discussions around caste issues, junior staff candidly spoke of how they “avoided” eating food or drinking water offered by dalit communities. At higher levels within the organisation, issues of discrimination were brushed aside as being anecdotal, including the incident mentioned below of complete exclusion of the lone dalit household in a landmark project village.

A key project criterion was the representation of 30% women and 20% SC members in the vwscs. While the numbers were actively monitored, there were no mechanisms or indicators to assess equity in, and effectiveness of representation. It was ironical that in Mala village – the first flagship project village to complete implementation – Bina Devi, head of the lone dalit single-adult household, was not only excluded from every project benefit, but her water source was also appropriated by the project, with no connection (leave aside compensation) provided to her. Many reasons were provided for the exclusion – the upper-caste committee members claimed that her home was outside the village boundary; others pointed out that as a single-woman headed household she would be unable to attend meetings; some indicated her lack of interest in the project given her inability to make the required payments. Senior NGO staff claimed to be unaware of this “anecdotal” fact. While the SA staff rigorously monitored the technical infrastructure, there were no consultants to assess equitable participation. Field staff admitted candidly, “To insist on her representation would have antagonised the dominant higher caste community in the village and hampered timely completion of the project” (2000: personal communication). Talking to me one evening, she shouted at some boys who were foraging in the nearby clearing where the scheme water source was located. “See how they ran off. That land belongs to me. All of us women in the village have stretches of land between the fields and the forests where we graze our cattle and collect firewood. The water source was located in my land. I was promised a connection – but that remained a story.”

The project also served to sharpen the differences between the poor and not-so poor women and caste and dalit women. Local staff was quick to point out that the efficient treasurer, Maya Devi, was instrumental for the timely project completion in Mala. Maya Devi, a caste Hindu woman whose family was among the better-off in the village, was also the most vocal in declaring that no wrong was done in excluding Bina Devi from project benefits. Such incidences were not anecdotal but indicative of a systemic boldness in relation to the entrenched inequities, leading some feminist NGOs to discontinue their association with the project (Govinda 2009). Dalit women and men in other villages were also limited in their participation, knowing their boundaries of social decorum. In neighbouring Hilay village, some male dalit members did manage to get nominated to the committee, but their participation in the project was clearly experienced as inadequate. Hari Ram, a dalit representative in the committee said to me:

I only add dalit colour to the committee. My selection does not mean that I can challenge or influence anything done by the larger community. Today, as you see, was a vwsc meeting. It was planned in conjunction with a ceremony in the house of the village teacher, who is upper caste. I cannot attend the meeting in his house, as this is not socially acceptable. When we dalits cannot sit and smoke the hookah together with the higher caste men, how can we plan together? (2002: personal communication).

Sector Reform Projects and the Swajaldhara Programme

The official Sector Reform Projects (SRPs) were announced while the Swajal project was still ongoing. The new policy guidelines drafted in the Water Supply and Sanitation Office of the World Bank, on behalf of the Rajiv Gandhi Mission closely mirrored Swajal policies. On paper, the SRP placed huge emphasis on user communities to function as management and financing institutions, as this was presumed to promote voice and choice. The piloting of reforms failed to take off in some states; in others, there were strange stories of the corruption of paid participation. A mandatory 10% user contribution was the parameter used to confirm participation. Andhra Pradesh outnumbered applications from the rest of the country. Local newspapers, however, reported that these initial investments had been made by local politicians, contractors and even engineers in order to secure pilot funds. User communities were being issued receipts for their proxy contributions (Prasad 2003; Joshi 2004).

Hastily-driven projects and a lackadaisical identification of the marginalised resulted in confrontations between various caste and class groups. In a "prioritised" tribal habitation in Andhra Pradesh, the sole dalit family was excluded from the scheme's benefits. Different reasons were offered by others and Soranna⁵ himself for the exclusion. "He begs from us, how can we ask him to pay Rs 500? He can still fetch water from some communal stand-posts – why does he need more water?" Soranna insisted that he was never asked, never consulted. The demand-led approach argues the need to hand ownership back to communities. Soranna had to revert "ownership" back to the government to gain access to the water.

I can now access water only from the tank built to water animals. Even to use this water, I had to fight and argue that this was built by mostly government funds and it is a government resource, and I have the right to access it (Joshi 2004).

Barely a year after the reforms were announced, the pilot initiative was scaled up to a countrywide programme, Swajaldhara. Cullet (2009) illustrates in elaborate detail the outcomes of the programme for dalits and poor marginalised families. Most troubling are his accounts of a deliberate, caste-based exclusion, where regardless of their willingness or ability to pay, dalits were *still* excluded from the system by the social elite, in direct violation of the equal voice and choice claims of the demand-led approach. Sangameswaran (2010) reports of the political drive to popularise the new demand-led approach of new schemes – of piped water which would enable women "...to throw away once and for all the pots that they use to carry water" (in the words of a zilla parishad official, as quoted in Sangameswaran 2010: 66). What is less clearly mentioned is that "the project itself would provide only for the main pipelines to be laid; the cost of the connections to the individual houses would have to be borne by the concerned households". Given the blatant and masked discrepancies, there is little doubt that the poorer women, especially poor dalits, will continue to "carry water home" for a long time to come. Here I want to point out that these insightful analyses, however, disassociate caste and gender disparities, hence missing out on the impact on dalit women, who, as Govinda (2009: 46) puts it, lie at "the bottom of caste, class and gender hierarchies".

The Swajaldhara guidelines had been declared as non-negotiable. However, the ambitious plan to universalise the demand-led reform agenda seems to have been somewhat derailed. The current Eleventh Plan (2007-12) guidelines acknowledge the basic right to water, however the approach to pricing water remains. The emphasis now is on flexible cost-sharing arrangements between the central, state, and local governments, markets and user communities. As before, women's engagement in water projects continues to be defined by the efficiency approach but there is little mention of inequity by caste. In keeping with the picture of an economically booming India, the focus is on improving adequacy and quality (Government of India 2007). Meeting these needs for a growing Indian middle class in the face of competing inter-sectoral demands might yet result in new compromises to the detriment of the most marginalised. This concern stems from the fact that, as in past policies, there is no need identified in policy to change the culture of water institutions. In the seemingly illogical, cyclic shift of drinking water responsibilities from the community to the state, with scant attention to entrenched inequity, little change in favour of equity can be anticipated.

Conclusions

As Jackson (1993) mentioned, the early feminist romanticising of women's special association with nature backfired, and with reason, in the development positioning of links between women and water. A popular view of an assumed group of homogeneous women as harbingers of success in drinking water projects is common in narratives of success in community, state and new liberal institutional arrangements. Reducing inequity by enabling/requiring men to share women's often perilous water tasks, and/or enabling women and men to identify and address deep-rooted sociocultural disparities would not have served the overriding efficiency goal of water projects. Women's participation in water

supply provided an easy and relatively reliable way to “make projects work”. Indeed, it is for this reason that neo-liberal demand-led projects seem focused on “engaging women” far more than welfare-based supply-driven approaches. This view of involving women has persisted in evolving policies, resulting in the situation in which fundamentally diverse policies and institutional arrangements have produced strangely similar outcomes of a persisting inequity.

Along with (read caste) women, dalits (read men) are occasionally invited to engage in community level participation even while fears around dalits polluting water sources remain unresolved. When social identities and responsibilities limit engagement or result in ineffectual representation, the victims are readily blamed for their disinterest. The case studies presented in this paper show higher caste women actively obstructing the participation of dalit women, competition between dalit and

other minority tribal communities, and a dismal absence of, and an ineffectual engagement of dalits, especially dalit women, in community and other institutional water domains.

Reforms that can transform entrenched inequities require a drastic political overhaul, not only in the formulation of implementable policies, but equally in the structure and culture of policy and in implementing and regulatory institutions. Policy reforms on caste and gender in India's drinking water sector have been little other than rhetorical changes in policy on paper. The national initiative on affirmative legislation on the representation of women and dalits is commendable, however the viewing of caste and gender as segregated categories has served to restrict affirmations for dalit women and ironically they miss out on both gender and caste benefits. The drinking water sector is an excellent example of flawed policies which have sustained the convenient fractures of a divisive society.

NOTES

- 1 Given their eternally polluted status, dalit women are less prone to such temporary restrictions. However, most dalit households practise some form of temporary seclusion in their attempts to emulate the caste Hindus.
- 2 It is considered extremely derogatory to expect “guests” or non-household members to wash the utensils in which they were offered food.
- 3 Name not changed.
- 4 Name not changed.
- 5 Head of the dalit family referred to earlier.

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