

Priya Sangameswaran, *Neoliberalism and Water: Complicating the Story of 'Reforms' in Maharashtra*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2014, xiv + 323 pp., ISBN 9788125054917 (Hardbound).

Farhat Naz, *Socio-cultural Context of Water: Study of a Gujarat Village*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2014, xxii + 255 pp., ISBN 9788125054306 (Hardbound).

Aidan A. Cronin, Pradeep K. Mehta and Anjal Prakash (Eds.), *Gender Issues in Water and Sanitation Programmes: Lessons from India*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2015, xviii + 321 pp., ₹995, ISBN 9789351500650 (Hardbound).

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In the recent past, the social sciences have witnessed a massive upsurge in literature on water to which these three books are timely and welcome additions. The books reviewed here explore the changing dynamics of water as a natural resource. They do have a few overlapping concerns but the difference in their vantage points make the books stand apart from one other. The first two are extensions of and partly revised versions of the PhD dissertations of the authors. While Priya Sangameswaran has written with a political economy perspective, Farhat Naz has employed a sociological/anthropological orientation. The last book under review is an edited volume exploring the gender aspects of water and sanitation programmes in India.

*Neoliberalism and Water* unfolds the complexities of reforms in the water sector, in this case of Maharashtra. Partly, the book also depicts the overall implications of reforms in post-liberalisation India. The book covers a range of issues related to water, urban and rural drinking water, irrigation, public-private debate, to name some of them. The text unpacks the nuances around terms and concepts such as piped water, 24x7 water, commodification, entrepreneurship, water entitlements and so on.

The introductory chapter distinguishes between the two discourses on water at the international level, namely the Global Environmental Management (GEM) discourse on water and a rights discourse. The GEM discourse concerned with deforestation, desertification and biodiversity has three messages—scarcity, security and water as an economic good (pp. 4–5) pitching for privatisation in the water sector. On the contrary, the rights discourse based on the UN General Comment No. 15 (2002) and UNHRC (2010) makes Right to Water and Sanitation legally binding. To my mind, the book is not able to take account of the blurring boundary between the conceptual categories of rights, needs and wants around water. The way the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are making a case for water as an economic good (GEM discourse) and the proximity between the UN and WB-IMF is a case in point and India is no exception to it.

Sangameswaran makes a crucial point with help from Cullet (2006) that the water sector reforms (WSR) have included measures that restrict the role of the government, as well as those that seek to increase government control (p. 14).

The contradiction between centralisation and regulation, on the one hand, and decentralisation and deregulation, on the other, is underlined in the Indian context.

The second chapter links two kinds of waterscapes—rural piped water systems and a 24x7 water supply in cities and links them around the debates about the village community and urban governance. It rightly argues that ‘any waterscape is the site of interplay of a variety of social, ecological, political, technological, economic and cultural factors’ (p. 54) which tend to shape each other and in this process the larger development debates play an inevitable role. The author stresses that the politics of exclusion and the political economy of property relations should be seen together and cites the example of water distribution networks embodying different norms of water supply for rural and urban areas.

The third chapter, titled ‘Mediated Decentralisation’, focuses on three discourses—self-sufficiency, depoliticisation and expertise with the help of new demand-driven rural drinking water projects such as Jalswarajya (funded by the WB) and its implications. I would especially like to draw attention to the discourse of expertise. In the Jalswarajya project, there were experts on areas such as groundwater management, accounting, tribal development, health and sanitation, gender, community development and many more. The non-technical actors are often private actors appointed on a contractual basis (p. 113) and often range from young graduates to journalists. The nature of expertise and their commitment for the cause of decentralisation could be easily questioned in such instances. The fourth chapter sets the debate around three newly popular and confusing concepts—commercialisation, commodification and the pricing of water. It begins by stating, ‘the question whether water is a right or an economic good has polarised a lot of discussion around water’ (p. 120) and goes on to explain the complexities around entitlements and pricing of water. While highlighting Bakker’s concept of water as an ‘uncooperative commodity’ (p. 160), the book establishes that the biophysical nature of water as a resource is an impediment to its commodification. The author strongly makes a case for complexities of the how of pricing water or converting water into a commodity in a country like India.

While discussing different meanings and normative associations of privatisation, the book uses a combination of governmentality and anthropological approaches. It outlines the changing justifications for privatisation and the new modes of working put in place by private actors. It also cites the role of some NGOs to show how civil society can question certain aspects of privatisation. The book clearly demystifies the merits of privatisation in the water sector, that is, instead of competition among private players bringing the prices down and thus beneficial for the users/consumers, there is a possibility of concentration and consolidation leading to fairly oligopolistic economic structure of water utility companies (p. 209). At present, two French companies Ondeo (Suez) and Vivendi (Veolia) are controlling about 70 per cent of the global privatised water markets (Swyngedouw, 2005). Overall, it cautions for carefully drawing the lines between decentralisation and privatisation as well as entrepreneurialism and neo-liberalism (p. 254). Similarly, the author mentions the linkages between rights and citizenship, law and the judiciary and also the need to go beyond the law as a contested domain affected by broader policies and other social forces.

*The Socio-cultural Context of Water* is based on an ethnographic study of a watershed development project in a Gujarat village named Mathnaa (pseudonym used by the author). The book critically examines the issue of water scarcity which are leading to conflict in the society. The author used a participant observation method, which is prone to tilting the research findings in favour of the community with whom the researcher stays, and this work is also not an exception. Another major weakness, mentioned by the author herself, is that the book merely captured the everyday lives of the Mathnaa people and thus missed the larger picture of water management at the Gujarat state level (p. 22). Many a times, the reader may feel the strong presence of author's own location in society guiding the nature of research. For instance, how her identity was sometimes beneficial and at times counterproductive. It helped her in gaining respect among the Harijans as well as Brahmins.

The introductory chapter states that the book is divided into two parts, each one containing four chapters. But, the basis of organisation is not mentioned. The first four chapters cover broad issues ranging from water management in India across time and space, images of community in community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and Gujarat's water planning policy. The second half of the book delves into the socio-cultural and political aspects of water in Mathnaa with special reference to the use of CBNRM in the case of water. The second chapter maps the changing nature and orientation of community as an institution from pre- to post-colonial India. Another chapter, covering the Gujarat water policies, highlights the issue of 'communitarian ideals' by policy makers and social researchers and the factors such as local politics, caste, class, gender and power relations actually shaping the ground reality of water management. The fifth chapter, titled 'The World of Water in Mathnaa', brings attention to social exclusion and gender power relations in landholdings and water ownership-cum-access (p. 126). The book rightly underlines the issue of caste hierarchy affecting the access to water in rural areas.

*Gender Issues in Water and Sanitation Programmes: Lessons from India* is the product of a national conference, Women-led Water Management organised by the S.M. Sehgal Foundation in partnership with UNICEF India in November 2012. The conference not only brought governmental and non-governmental organisations together but also specialised agencies, businesses and educational institutions working towards sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in rural India. While compiling various field experiences, the book calls for the need to have an institutional reform to acknowledge women's actions, their differentiated needs and opinions in the area of water and sanitation. The book, documenting both quantitative and qualitative information on gender issues, is divided into four sections and sixteen chapters including introduction and conclusion. The first section titled 'Conceptual Underpinnings' draws attention to issues like vulnerability from water shortages, capacity-building initiatives. The chapters in the second section on 'Case Studies: Water' maps the gender differentials prevalent in the rural milieu, the high fluoride burden and tribal women and the experience of the Jalswarajya project with respect to gender and

governance. The third section contains case studies in sanitation sector, namely, women-led total sanitation and the role of ASHA in sanitation. The last section concludes by sharing lessons from this volume and the additional key actions required in India to address scale, quality and sustainability (p. 293).

The book provides lot of quantitative and qualitative data through charts and graphs such as gender-framework based on six categories, namely participation, access to services, control over benefits to women, governance and operation and maintenance and management (pp. 29–31); the gender impact analysis by taking up case studies of watersheds in Andhra Pradesh (pp. 106–107), etc. A chapter titled 'Innovative Approaches in Communication' elaborates on the Pan-in-the-Van solutions to address key barriers for women's participation. This approach has four steps—a participatory health hygiene analysis and environment building; an on-site panchayat level camp; strengthening local delivery mechanisms and institutions; and community review and follow-up mechanism. Between 2009 and 2012, such camps were organised in 80 panchayats across five districts of Madhya Pradesh with encouraging results (p. 262).

As mentioned in the beginning, the first two books under review have some converging and diverging views on water. Starting with the convergence, I would like to mention three points. First, both the books take cognisance of water as a multidimensional resource and its dynamic nature. Second, the issues of decentralisation and privatisation partly remain central to the authors in varying degrees. Third, a case study method has been used by both of them. To mention a few stark differences, while Sangameswaran has done more of a macro-study with a political economy perspective, Naz uses a micro-lens for her anthropological engagement. The overall tone of the books set them much apart from each other. *Neoliberalism and Water* makes liberal use of David Harvey's framework, especially concepts like 'accumulation by dispossession' and shift from the 'managerial city' to 'entrepreneurial city' (Harvey, 1989, 2003) and thus is quite vocal about criticising neo-liberal reforms in the water sector. On the other hand, Naz's narrative style focuses more on power mechanisms in everyday social life in the case of Mathnaa village without bringing any general understanding on water. Overall, Sangameswaran's work appears more nuanced and provocative.

By recounting only the success stories of projects for women empowerment in the water and sanitation sector could be seen as one of the limitations of the edited volume. Overall, the book narrates that the burden of drinking water and sanitation is more on women and it is at the cost of not only their health and education but also their economic, social, cultural and political involvement. It strongly argues for the need to have gender participatory processes integrated into government programmes.

The first two works are based on thorough research and reflect a deeper understanding of the respective issues chosen by them. These books are interdisciplinary in orientation and, thus, will be of interest for a large number of students and scholars engaged with the social sciences. While the edited volume lacks theoretical rigour, it will also be found useful by researchers, NGOs and government organisations' functionaries working in the water and sanitation sector.