



# Women's water rights

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## 'Rights to water are the inalienable right of every human' — why do globalization, privatization and destructive, modern forms of production threaten the rights of women in particular?

**W**ater is the most vital resource for survival. Women's economic contributions to water provisioning are an invisible yet indispensable part of every developing society. Women's water rights are, therefore, the foundation of all, not just women's, economic development.

Water rights are multidimensional — access to and availability of water are influenced by many interrelated areas, including ecology, economics, and property.

A 'patriarchal water order' is one in which women's water rights are eroded, water is treated as a commodity, and rights to water are defined through rights to capital or political power. In a patriarchal water order, no responsibility is taken for destroying those water resources which women need for survival. The social and ecological costs of destruction are externalized.

An ecological and just water order is centred on women's water rights. In such an order, water is a vital ecological resource, gifted by nature but shaped by human culture and society. Rights to water are the inalienable right of every human and every species and the responsibility to internalize the costs of water destruction lies with those who engage in socially and environmentally destructive action.

Women's water rights are increasingly under threat from globalization, water privatization, increased pollution and more destructive systems of production and consumption, which are different dimensions of a patriarchal water order.

### Water depletion

The drying up of rivers, streams, lakes and wells is a man-made rather than a natural disaster. It is the ecological outcome of a patriarchal water order which devalues water and those who provide water to society — women. Rivers are drying up because their catchments have been mined, deforested or over-cultivated to

generate revenue and profits.

Groundwater is drying up because it has been over-exploited to feed cash crops. Village after village is being robbed of its lifeline — its sources of drinking-water — and the number of villages facing water famine is in direct proportion to the number of 'schemes' implemented by government agencies to 'develop' water. Since women are the water providers, disappearing water sources have meant new drudgery. Each spring and well drying up means longer walks for women for collecting water, and implies more work and less survival options.

Water depletion is caused by wasteful patterns of production and consumption. From water-prudent, women-centred technologies, humanity has moved to water-wasteful, industry- and capital-centred technologies. Automobiles do not merely guzzle gas, they guzzle water. Forty thousand gallons of water are required to produce a car's steel, 3000 to grow 1lb of beef.

### The 'value' of water?

The globalization and privatization of water is leading to water being assigned only a market value. Since men control the market, market values exclude women's values and undermine women's water rights. Diverse cultures have different value systems through which the ethical, ecological, and economic behaviour of society is guided and shaped. It is often stated that the roots of environmental destruction lie in our treating natural resources as 'free' and not giving them 'value'. But the meaning and substance of 'free' and 'value', and the relationship between them is multiple and complex — spanning different cosmological, social and economic domains.

'Free' can mean free of human control, free to be wild, self-organized and autonomous. This is the cosmological meaning of freedom. 'Free' can imply



Paul Harris

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accessible without control and regulation. This is the socio-political definition of 'free'. 'Free' also means without a price. This is the market definition of 'free'.

'Value' can refer to sacred value, which implies non-violability and respect of integrity. 'Value' can also refer to social value such as the value of a resource in the commons. Value can also refer to tradeable value exchange value of price. This value is restricted to the market.

Normally, the cosmological meaning of 'free' is associated with the spiritual meaning of 'value' as sacred. Because nature is seen as 'free', the divine has been perceived in nature — water, rivers and oceans have been treated as sacred. The social/political meaning of 'free' is related to the social/political meaning of 'value'. The commercial meaning of 'free' is related to the commercial meaning of value. The recognition of nature's 'value', therefore, can take place at many levels: the cosmological, spiritual valuation leads to a rejuvenation of spiritual traditions; the social valuation leads to a recovery of the commons; and the commercial valuation leads to the privatization, marketization and commodification of all resources.

The proposal to give market values to all resources as a way of solving the ecological crisis is like offering the disease as the cure. The reduction of all value to commercial value, and the removal of all spiritual, ecological, cultural and social limits to exploitation is the shift that took place at the time of industrialization.

This shift in economic value is central to the ecological crisis. It is reflected in the

change in the meaning of the term resource — its root is the Latin verb, *surgere*, which evoked the image of a spring that continuously rises from the ground. Like a spring, a resource rises again and again, even if repeatedly used and consumed. The concept thus highlighted nature's power of self-regeneration and called attention to her prodigious creativity.

Moreover, it implied an ancient idea about the relationship between humans and nature — that the earth bestows gifts on humans who, in turn, are advised not to suffocate her generosity. In early modern times, therefore 'resources' suggested reciprocity along with regeneration.

## What price life?

The marketization of common resources is based on a number of myths. The first is the equivalence of 'value' and 'price'; resources can often have very high value but no price — for example, sacred forests and rivers. Similarly, the idea that life is sacred puts high value on living systems and processes, and thus keeps them from being commoditized.

There is a second myth in the dominant trends of marketization: that common-property resources tend to degrade, so that 'privatization' is a frequent policy prescription for solving the problems caused by overusing resources under open access and common property.

Economic growth takes place through over-exploitation of natural resources which creates a scarcity of natural resources in nature's economy and the survival economy. However, in nature's economy, the currency is not money, it is life. The increased availability of financial resources cannot regenerate the life lost in nature through ecological destruction.

The neglect of the role of natural resources in ecological processes and in people's sustenance economy, and the diversion and destruction of these resources for commodity production and capital accumulation, are the main reasons for the ecological crisis and the crisis of survival in the Third World. The solution seems to lie in giving local communities control over local resources so that they have the right and responsibility to rebuild nature's economy and, through it, their sustenance.

## Recovering the commons

A socially just and ecological sustainable water order is at the centre of many



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movements fighting to ensure that everyone has a right to water. The Pani Panchayat and Mukti Sangarsh movements are leading the way for the ecological and equitable use of water. Ecological principles ensure equity, since limiting water use to protective irrigation makes it possible to distribute water equally to all.

The Pani Panchayat movement launched in the Pune district of Maharashtra, is an example of a people-centred effort to create an ecological and equitable system of water use in a drought-prone area. It sprang up in 1972 when Maharashtra faced severe drought. The government was focusing on relief schemes and rapid exploitation of water resources; the movement leaders realized that the focus had to be soil and water conservation, plus strict water control.

Experience with government-initiated irrigation schemes has demonstrated the conflict between the survival needs of the community and the big farmers' drive for profits. Sugar cane has become the most important cash crop in Maharashtra; it requires a large amount of water and diverts water both from the survival economy as well as nature's economy.

The central idea of the *panchayats* is that, in a drought-prone area, no individual should be deprived of a rightful share of the limited water resources. To ensure this, the *panchayats* treat water as a community resource, not as private property. Further, people's water rights are based on the number of family members, not on the size of landholdings. While members of the *panchayat* were free to decide how to use their water allocation, sugar-cane cultivation was banned completely as being inconsistent with the principles of responsible resource use. A suitable *patkari*, or water distributor, is appointed to assure fair, day-to-day allocations of water.

The Mukti Sangarsh movement was launched between 1982-3 when striking textile workers returned to their villages to find that drought, continual crop failure, and water shortages were plaguing the people of Khanapur *taluk*. The government proposed to lift water from the Krishna to irrigate sugar plantations in 30 villages — but the people had their own ideas.

Over 500 peasants from Balawadi village met and came up with a proposal to grow fodder for four months of the year on 2000 acres of their land, and provide it free to the entire *taluk* — if the

government would provide water.

On 25 September 1985, 1000 peasants marched to the *taluk* office to press their demands. The main thrust of the proposal was that it is possible to distribute water equitably to irrigate food crops if irrigation water is not diverted to the cultivation of water-intensive, perennial cash crops like sugar cane. On 27 October, the Mukti Sangarsh movement organized a conference on drought eradication: V.M. Dandekar, Chairman of the Maharashtra Drought-Relief and Eradication Committee, argued that a scientific reformulation of the Takari Scheme could provide water for 250 000 hectares instead of the proposed 90 000 hectares for sugar-cane cultivation. The obstacle? The sugar barons.

Dandekar proclaimed, 'Water is the wealth of the nation. It is now necessary to fight those who don't and won't understand that it is a matter of social justice to provide it to as many families as possible'. A politician supporting the sugar lobby stated, 'We will not give one drop of water from sugar cane; instead a canal of blood will flow. Cane and sugar factories are the glory of Maharashtra'.

On 5 March 1989, the people of Khanapur *taluk* gathered at Balawadi to inaugurate the Baliraja Memorial Dam, built with people's resources to meet people's needs. Popular participation has excluded corruption and delay, and has shown that people are capable of managing their own affairs. The next step is to ensure equitable water distribution through social and collective control over usage. For example, it has been agreed that sugar cane will not be cultivated. The aim is to plant mixed tree species on 30 per cent of the land, with protective irrigation for staple grain, to ensure an economically and ecologically sound alternative to the policy for creating a water crisis through the expansion of sugar-cane cultivation.

Indigenous systems of water management evolved highly complex mechanisms to ensure equitable water distribution in spite of unequal landownership. The solution to man-made water scarcity, as well as the conflicts that such scarcity generates, lies in recognizing that water is a common resource and can be sustainably and equitably managed only on the basis of collective control and decision-making — in which women play a full part. ■



Sugar-cane cultivation in Tamil Nadu.

Ron Gilling/Panos Pictures

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