

## Putting Cultural Politics into Water Policy<sup>1</sup>

---

Amita Baviskar

Associate Professor, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, India.

---

The struggle in the Narmada valley brought home to me how questions of knowledge and power permeate every aspect of our work. How do we decide what the important research questions are? To whom do we address our answers? What forms of knowledge do we value? How do institutional power and academic discourse, notions of audience and expertise, act as filters, selectively shaping the production of knowledge and its relation to practices in the world?

That these are very critical questions is evident when we look around us. We live in a world where conflicts over natural resources are writ large upon the landscape. Be it the struggles between farmers and corporate firms for land for dams, mines, SEZs, or the debates around climate change or genetically modified crops – the big dramatic crises as well as the small, everyday battles for water, shelter or land – all testify to the salience of ecological conflicts in our times. The centrality of these conflicts, and even the instances when they are seemingly absent because they are managed by stable regimes of extraction, requires that we closely examine the relations between nature, culture and power as they shape our lives and the biophysical world we inhabit.

In this talk, I'm going to argue that the questions of nature, knowledge and power that have so far been addressed through the lens of political ecology would benefit from being studied through the lens of cultural politics. Political ecology, like its progenitor political economy, has tended to trap us into forms of economic determinism (the notion that everything is reducible in the last instance to pre-existing, usually economic interests). What political ecology tends to give us is 'stakeholder analysis': a matrix of actors with pre-formed interests, who do not change even though they relate to each other in dynamic situations, actors who have no identity or being apart from their instrumental orientation to the resource in question. We know that real life and real people are not like that, yet political ecology persists in creating abstractions that ultimately founder on the rocks of reality. What we need is a mode of analysis that focuses on the full range of material and symbolic values in how water comes to be imagined, appropriated and contested. Such an understanding, I believe, is also more likely to enrich political practice and public policy on issues of social justice and ecological sustainability.

To look at how we might understand cultural politics, let me offer an example not of water but oil. The ongoing war in Iraq is now in its fourth year. Numberless Iraqi men, women and children have died – there is no official record of civilian deaths, a once-prosperous country is in ruins, its economy gutted and its territory divided up between warring factions. One can analyse the US

---

<sup>1</sup> The keynote address titled "Putting Cultural Politics into Water Policy" by Dr.Amita Baviskar at the opening ceremony of the International Conference on Water Resources Policy in South Asia in Colombo (17-20 December 2008) has been included in the first edition of SAWAS e-journal with the kind permission of Dr.Baviskar. This address is extracted from a longer essay which appeared as the Introduction to Baviskar, Amita. 2008. (ed.) *Contested Grounds: Essays on Nature, Culture and Power*. Oxford University Press: Delhi.

invasion of Iraq in terms of empire and capitalist control over a critical resource like oil, a resource without which the entire military-industrial complex (and large parts of the agricultural economy) would grind to a halt. Yet this explanation will not exhaust either what is at stake or the form that conflicts around natural resources take. The politics of oil has other meanings that are as constitutive of its meaning and power. To understand the extraction of this resource, we need to focus not only on the regime of rule of which it is part, a regime of rule involving technologies, rationalities and institutions, we also need to focus on how this regime of rule is made intelligible by a regime of truth that tries to organise understanding and experience.

The technologies of rule that develop around natural resources have most often been studied in terms of the imperial quest for stable regimes of extraction for profit. Wars of conquest and 'pacification' are followed by occupation and the coerced re-arrangement of relations of rule, production and exchange. In contemporary times, David Harvey describes this process as 'accumulation by dispossession'. Yet, profit – the economic calculus of private benefit (to US corporations like Bechtel and Haliburton who have contracts to rebuild Iraq) – cannot be separated from passionate attachment to more lofty ideals. In the Iraqi case, as in other colonial schemes, the violence of extraction is tied to ideas of Improvement. As John Stuart Mill declared 'despotism is the legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement'. Echoes of this view can be found in the Indian debate on displacement and dams. So U.S. military occupation is presented as a way to further the welfare of ordinary Iraqis through improved management of their polity and economy: occupation is good for you, for minorities and women. This conceit is underwritten by a key imperial ideology: the notion of stewardship, the idea that the 'more civilized' know best how to run the lives of subordinate peoples and manage the landscapes they inhabit.

Ideas of Improvement, based on constructions of cultural difference – discourses of race and nature, gender and nature (the savage adivasi who needs to be civilized, the village woman who needs to be saved from patriarchal tradition), are at work in creating the White Man's burden, a cultural orientation that continues to inform contemporary discourses of development. These ideas are implicit in the logic of economic planning and the goal of efficient resource use as best directed by technocratic experts, who lead the less-educated towards an enlightened, prosperous future. Democracy, of course, throws a spanner in these works: there is resistance from the material that makes up the machine as well as those it intends to use as cannon fodder. Regimes of rule and truth (like the Iraq war), must struggle to hold their own against unruly subjects and circumstances.

Constructing stable regimes of extraction thus requires not just brute force but also the mobilization of 'consensus' such that others be willing participants. Official narratives frame the 'problem' in ways that legitimize particular forms of action. The U.S. government called its project 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', a classic Orwellian instance of doublespeak. These are powerful representations. If the war in Iraq was about oil, as it indeed was, it was also about freedom and the war on terror, Arab nationalism and evangelical Christian fervour. One is no less real than the other. All have consequential effects. Just as, in the Narmada case, the notion of 'national interest', the idea of adivasis as ecologically noble savages, the belief in the sacredness of a river, or the belief that water should not run 'waste' to the sea, were all powerful concepts that organised different people's understanding of what was at stake – as much as the data on water flows, irrigation potential, submergence and displacement. How one interprets the facts, or even decides what is relevant data and what isn't, is shaped by ideology. Appreciating the inseparability of the material and the symbolic dimensions of the conflict helps us to understand that the political economy of a natural resource is meaningful only through the wider networks of cultural politics in which it is embedded.

## Political ecology and cultural politics

The *cultural politics* approach to natural resources attempts to undo some of the assumptions that govern *political ecology*. Political ecology's great strength has been its consistent focus on issues of social equality and justice at stake in conflicts over natural resources. This rich literature has examined social movements large and small that bring together diverse social groups, often address transnational audiences and use international and national regulatory and judicial institutions to defend threatened livelihoods against the incursions of state-led extractive development. However, while political ecology's analysis clearly identifies asymmetries of power, they tend to be viewed as the binary of civil society versus state, or to use Henry Bernstein's phrase, 'virtuous peasants' fighting against 'vicious states'. It is often assumed that the 'state' and 'communities' are separate, autonomous entities with self-evident interests that are clearly opposed. Now these assumptions have been shown to be flawed time and again and need to be replaced by more complex representations, which are indeed now emerging. But it is still overwhelmingly the case that political ecology takes at face value the simplified political representations that social movements must generate in order to mobilise. Yet this uncritical reproduction of claims, often intended as a gesture of solidarity, ignores the difficult, creative work of constructing political identities and alliances and transcending differences. In doing so, political ecology may not only miss the bus in terms of analytical purchase, it may also be complicit in the continued political marginalization of those excluded by dominant narratives of environmental movements (the plight of landless Dalits in the Narmada valley remains invisible if one sticks too closely to the narratives offered by social movements).

Identities and interests are not pre-given; 'stakeholders' don't simply exist to be fitted into a matrix of resource management. Identities and interests are mutually formed through the contingent, lived experience of historically-situated cultural practices. The adivasi fighting against displacement who, ten years ago was a farmer, a collector of forest produce, a mother, a worker on state drought-relief projects, and an anti-dam activist, might today be a panchayat leader, a migrant worker, a devout member of the Gayatri Parivar sect, a consumer of manufactured goods like fertilizers and saris, a voter in state and national elections, and so much more. These multiple and changing facets of her life, its criss-crossing affiliations, are not only intrinsic to how people live their everyday lives, they are hugely important for shaping collective action. However, political ecology tends to assume that cultural identities are pre-formed, derived directly from an objective set of interests based on shared locations in terms of class, gender or ethnicity that challenge nationalism and/or capitalism. (For instance, Bina Agarwal's enormously important work on gender and land assumes that women will always want rights to agricultural land; if they don't, it's either because of patriarchal dominance and repression or false consciousness. This assumes that a person is first of all an individual, with objective interests true for all times. But as Cecile Jackson shows, a woman may feel that her interests and her identity are best served by being *part* of a family or village and that her welfare is better gained by working *through* rather than against family and kin networks.)

Political ecology has also assumed that the primary significance of natural resources resides in their material use value. A forest becomes the locus of contention because its trees represent timber, fodder or fuel, material values desired by different social groups. Cultural politics suggests that natural resources have value within a larger economy of signification which crucially shapes their modes of appropriation. They are also resources for collective representations that exceed the concern with immediate material use. One only has to think of the deep spiritual meanings with which mountains and rivers in the Indian subcontinent are endowed – the connections between cosmologies and communities, the concern with the natural and social order that transcends the mundane – to realize the limits of a political ecology perspective. This 'social life of things' is well illustrated in David Mosse's study of village water tanks in Tamil Nadu where dalits mobilized to be included in the tank management committee. For dalits, many of whom were landless, it wasn't the material gains from controlling water that mattered as much as the symbolic capital of being part of an association that managed the village temple and tank, an institution from which dalits had

traditionally been excluded. The Water Users' Association mattered not so much because of the material resource it controlled, but because it was an arena where dalit aspirations for upward mobility and power could be pursued. As much as the material practices of cultivation, concerns about honour and respect, crystallized through a region-wide dalit movement, became central to water management.

Cultural politics thus embeds resource struggles within a larger symbolic economy where the 'roles' that resources perform are several. Thus Iraq's invasion, while securing oil, also serves as an object lesson to impress the rest of the world with U.S. willingness to act unilaterally. Nationalism and 'the greater public good' or, in the case of Delhi where tens of thousands of poor people were displaced from the Yamuna riverbed in order to make way for the Commonwealth Games Village, shopping malls and commercial developments – the idea of a 'world-class city', are some of the wider structures of meaning at stake in resource politics. Yet, political ecology often tends to unitary analyses that distil meanings down to the economic 'last instance', rendering resources only as sources of profit and subsistence, and not social life. And it is to social life, with all its complexities and contradictions, that we must attend to if we are to understand and challenge the inequalities and exclusions around water.

Finally, a cultural politics analysis would be incomplete if it did not also turn the lens around to look closely at ourselves – as academics, researchers, practitioners – and how our embeddedness in relations of power shapes our concern and knowledge about water. How do operations of power within the academy affect intellectual production? I am struck by the large amounts of scholarly literature produced in the last two decades on community-based natural resource management: joint forest management, ecodevelopment in protected areas, participator irrigation management. These are important areas of analysis, but the overwhelming attention paid to them stands in stark contrast to the neglect of other, equally important areas: for instance, the widespread privatization of water (Priya Sangameswaran's work) or the continued threat of large dams (hundreds of large dams are being built in north-east India -- one, the Upper Siang alone is designed for generating 11,000 MW, with huge submergence areas, and which will totally transform the entire Brahmaputra basin), but how many of us are working on this? Why do we focus more on fine-tuning the micro-practices of a village water-users' association than on the big transformations that are undercutting the conditions of possibility for such associations – the rapid extraction of groundwater by state-sanctioned players, corporate and non-corporate, or the increasing diversion of water to distant urban populations? I began by saying that the question of knowledge and power was central to cultural politics. I will end by saying that we must bring this self-awareness to constantly question what we do in the field of water policy, so that social justice and ecological sustainability become not just mantras to be chanted mechanically, but retain their power as talismans for our work.