

Pluralized Water Policy Terrain = Sustainability and Integration

Dipak Gyawali

Director, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal; dipakgyawali@wlink.com.np

The term 'policy' is a word sanitized for polite company: it really is about power and the formula for its use. Since power, like procreation, is best exercised in society invisibly, policy discussions are notorious for what is covert and vaguely implied than for what is overtly laid out for public view. As in the case with the other much bandied term 'stakeholder', which assumes that putting the village landlord and the village landless in the same room without acknowledging their power difference magically brings about a 'stakeholder consultation' that legitimizes development decisions, conventional 'policy' analysis does not interrogate existing power structures but assumes a status quo. In much of South Asia undergoing the pangs of change in the guise of modernization, the failure of development initiatives in water and other sectors, or at least hostility to them, can be traced to the drama of power exercise by those who have it, and resistance by those who do not. Such being the case, the questions of interest for water policy making and its deployment are: what are the various forms of power and its exercise; who does the exercising and how; and what does it mean for water management, or more bluntly, water politics?

Approached this way, the key issue around water conflicts is that of the exercise of power among elements within a society. In his classic study of power, Steven Lukes discusses three faces of power that influence public consent to its exercise (Lukes, 2005). The first is coercive with an implied or demonstrated punitive threat, and the second is persuasive through inducements. Lukes discusses at length the third type, which is its exercise in the moral or cognitive dimension that impose internal constraints "wherein those subjected to it are led to acquire beliefs and form desires that result in their consenting or adapting to being dominated, in coercive and non-coercive settings". In a similar ethos, British political philosopher E. H. Carr, in trying to define the new and emerging field of international relations at the start of the Second World War, also talks of three types of power: military power, economic power, and power over opinion (Carr, 1939), the third corresponding with the moral dimension of Lukes.

It is intriguing to note how classical South Asian thinking on the subject of power (*shakti*, as different from the actors (or *patras*) exercising those powers) maps onto the pluralistic scheme of Lukes and Carr (Gyawali, 2000, Thompson and Gyawali, 2007 and Gyawali, 2009). Samkhya philosophy distinguishes between coercive (often military) power exercised by the hierarchic solidarity of the state (*tamasik shakti*), the persuasive (monetary or organizational) power exercised by the individualist solidarity of the market (*rajasik shakti*) and the moral power wielded by the egalitarian ethics community (*sattwik shakti*). It is this third face of power, the ethical dimension – which Lukes talks about and which civic movements behind water conflicts are the vanguards of – that is often behind the power wielded by various ideologies. Many social or environmental activist movements do not wield military or monetary power: theirs is the power of critique exercised through moral outrage.

It would be a major error to think that these powers are exclusive to some particular social solidarity or even an individual actor: Samkhya is emphatic that these are *gunas* (or constituent subtle characteristics) which are found in varying mixes, from a perfect balance in rare cases to the dominance of one or the other trait in most. Similarly, each of the powers is inextricably intertwined with the others and cannot be viewed in reductionist isolation. Indeed, they have been compared to the wax, the wick, and the flame respectively in a lighted candle. The otherwise *tamasik* wax has to melt, rise up through the *rajasik* wick, and burst into self-sustaining *sattwik* flame to provide beneficial light all around. It is the higher *sattwik* purpose of a lit matchstick that drives the *tamasik* inertness with *rajasik* drive to provide for light in a dark room. Alone, the lit matchstick, the wick, or the wax, means nothing and leads to no benevolent end.

Using this concept, we can examine the mix of political powers enjoyed by the different actors as well as to explore how those powers are deployed to enhance the standing of each of them. Translating this concept into modern statecraft terms, the grossest form is *tamasik shakti*, that of brute force, represented by armed police or military might, which in its essence is the very definition of the state. More subtle is *rajasik shakti*, that which emanates from organized strength including networked markets and political parties. At the highest plane, capable of harmoniously balancing the two is *sattwik shakti*, the ethical force that humbles even mighty generals commanding large armies. It gets things done without the statesman having to use any *tamasik* threat or *rajasik* inducement. In the absence of statesmen in the society's body politic commanding such ethical weight, this role is filled by civic movements.

New thinking in the social sciences is beginning to move away from the closed hegemony of monistic thinking or/ even the dualism of 'mixed economy' state-bureaucratic centralism with free market liberalism. The most notable on this count has been what is called the theory of plural rationalities (or more widely Cultural Theory(CT)), which goes beyond monism or dualism in public policy (but avoids the infinitude problem that is the bane of post-modernist thinking). Summarizing Thompson (2008), its arguments can be briefly encapsulated as follows: the variability of an individual's involvement in social life can be adequately captured using two dimensions of sociality (or discriminators). The two discriminators – transactions symmetrical or asymmetrical and competition fettered or unfettered – generate four permutations of the ways of organising (see Fig. 1: in older formulations of CT, called *grid-group analysis*, 'transactions' were termed 'grid ascription' in the Y-axis and 'competition' was denoted on the X-axis by the term 'group affiliation', both of which were either strong or weak, high or low, positive or negative).

Group affiliation – with competition fettered and accountable or unfettered and unaccountable – captures the extent to which an individual is incorporated into bounded units. The greater the incorporation, the more is individual choice subject to group determination. Grid ascription – with transactions happening between equals (symmetrical) or ranked unequals (asymmetrical) – denotes the degree to which an individual's life is circumscribed by externally imposed prescriptions. The more binding and extensive the scope of the prescriptions, the less of life that is open to individual negotiation. In one sense, these two parameters are asking the fundamental questions of philosophy in human life: who am I (group affiliation)? And what should I do (grid ascription, or the context of pre-ascribed rules)? Depending upon a positive or a negative response to these two fundamental questions, the two discriminators together generate four basic ways of organizing (also called four social solidarities): *hierarchism* (high group, high grid), *egalitarianism* communards (high group, low grid), *individualism* (low group, low grid) and the *fatalism* of the conscripted (low group, high grid).

Symmetrical transactions and unfettered competition are the hallmark of the unbound and unranked realm of market individualism where risk-taking is the behavioural norm. It is risk-taking of entrepreneurs that brings forth innovations and new technological as well as

management solutions that drive the water and other markets. At the opposite end of the diagonal is the ranked and bounded world of bureaucratic hierarchism where transactions are asymmetrical and competition fettered. Within this management style, risk-managing is the norm with the desired objective being control over the process and outcome. Because much of water management debates have remained confined to these two diagonally polar opposite positions, the history of the last half of the 20th Century has resulted in the “market versus government intervention” pendulum swings that bedevils the sector.

What CT does is bring in the other two (often ignored) proclivities to the policy debate: the management styles of symmetrical transactions and fettered competition, which is the world of activist egalitarianism and civic movements; and that of asymmetrical transactions with unfettered competition that results in the fatalised world of conscripts. In the former, the need for keeping the group boundary intact as well that of risk avoidance often leads to alarmism and risk magnification, while in that of the latter, coping passively with whatever risk fate dishes out is the norm. While the previous two (markets and hierarchies) represented the stable diagonal, these latter two (communards and the fatalist masses) represent the ephemeral diagonal. Indeed, if one examines the nature of civic protests, they arise as a reaction to some perceived danger (whether loss of language, culture, habitat, water rights or other threats), which, if they have not been sensitively addressed by the powers that be, can bring down governments and the boycott of market products.

These groups disappear or lie dormant until catalysed into action by some such provocation from perceived external danger, and hence are seen as less stable a social solidarity than hierarchies and markets. It is also the egalitarian activists who catalyse the fatalist masses, who otherwise are passive and dormant, into some form of reaction. It is for these reasons that the conventional social sciences have mainly considered the first two, the world of bureaucratic socialism or that of free market individualism, but mostly ignored civic movements and the otherwise passive masses that only react (or more correctly are incited to do so by the other three) during elections and revolutions, whether of the market or the comrades.

As argued at the beginning of this essay, *rajasik* power is exercised by market individualism through its richness of networks and contacts. It believes in substantive rationality – “what is in there for me?” – and is moved to action, to take risks, only when the profit motive is strong enough. It is this drive that is the basis of precocious scientific and technical innovation by the market. *Tamasik* power is exercised by bureaucratic hierarchism following a procedural rationality: “Follow the rules and guidelines, and you can do anything within its limits; but infringe established procedures and you will be punished!” Activist civic movements are guided by a critical rationality whose basis is *satwik* power that comes with maintaining the moral upper hand. The many failures of markets or hydrocracies to assure equity and justice in water development projects form the grist to its mill of strident critique. While the fatalists are passive and do not actively cognize and strategize like the other three (if they did, they would no longer be fatalists), they too exercise their brand of power: it is the power to react and withhold consent. Mass boycotts of brand name consumer products or unexpected swings in elections are examples of the revenge of the fatalists exercising their reactive power; but then someone must have had to jolt them out of their fatalist stupor, and these are more often than not the activist egalitarians.

What Fig. 1 depicts is primarily the social construction of water using the CT framework, a similar framing having been done in the case of another natural resource – forestry – and the corruption therein, which in essence is an exercise of power but not in the sanctioned manner (Gyawali, 2004). Given that risk is socially constructed – and CT argues that it is only constructed in four specific ways – the very definition of what the problem is will be different. Thus in the current hyperactive global climate change discourse, the one problem of excessive greenhouse gas emission is seen as the result of too large a population growth by the hierarchs,

too much profligacy by the activist Greens and too restrictive a pricing policy by the market players. And if the three active solidarities of hierarchism, egalitarianism, and individualism differ in their very definition of the problem, one can rest assured that their proffered solutions and the technology choices they will make to achieve those solutions will also be distinctly different.

As an example of the application of the CT framework, Dixit (1997) has shown that the problem of silt in the Kosi river in Bihar too is defined differently: to the hierarchic department of irrigation, silt is a danger to be controlled since river waters are public goods; to the individualistic *zamindaars*, silt is a private good leading to opportunity for profit, whether through desilting contracts or other contracts if the high dam is built on the Kosi; to the activists of the Ganga Mukti Andolan, silt is a common pool good but attempts to control it or profit from it is a diversion from other evils in our midst, which is the high risk posed by high dams or the corruption in canal cleaning contracts; and finally to the fatalistic ryots, silt is one among a host of woes about which we can do nothing in this life.

Each of these ways is reflective of a particular worldview and a specific manner of organizing that consolidates that worldview, especially regarding their 'myths of nature'. For instance, individualism regards nature as infinitely bounteous, that nature is robust and takes care of herself. The only "scarcity" is due to the constraints imposed by governments and civic bodies that prevents the full exercise of human ingenuity to exploit nature and, if one item runs short, to find immediate substitutes. Opposed to this worldview is that of egalitarianism, which sees nature as fragile, tipped to depletion and collapse if left to market exploitation and lack of government concern. Control-oriented hierarchism, in an attempt to balance these two opposing positions, sees nature as robust but within limits, with those limits set through impact assessment rules devised by its in-house expertise. To fatalism, nature is capricious and could go any which way it might like a lottery and one just has to cope with what comes. Thus the four social solidarities define resources as abundant, depleted, scarce or like a lottery. Such a worldview is also a reflection on the distinctive exercise of power by the four social solidarities.

Hence, returning to Fig. 1, we see that, to market individualism which prizes freedom of choice and networking, water is nature's veritable cornucopia, a private good to be bought and sold in the market after ingenious processing, either as glamourized bottled water or tankers or privately owned tube wells. External management is an unnecessary constraint imposed on human ingenuity. On the other hand, to bureaucratic hierarchism, water gets defined as a scarce public good: it is scarcity, not abundance, that has to be managed through regulated government- or municipality-owned water utilities that decide who or which ranks and localities have the right to how much water and when, the entire set of procedures to be determined by their expertise-based establishments and protected by laws and regulations. To activist egalitarianism, water is a depleting common pool good, to be protected from pollution and misuse by markets and mismanaged municipalities, while to fatalism water is a lottery like life itself, a club good from which they are excluded because they do not belong to the club. Each of these co-definitions is all partially true expressions of the social construction of water that captures a part of the social reality: chose only one definition by discarding the rest and you discard the wisdom contained in them as well. And that would be a recipe for a potentially unpleasant policy surprise, which is clearly not a very sustainable situation to be aimed for.

What CT therefore proposes is not to choose one definition – of the market or of bureaucratic centralism or even a mix of the two as in the much-talked of 'public-private partnership'. What it asks is a more pluralized democracy that gives space to all the three active social solidarity voices of bureaucratic hierarchism, market individualism and activist egalitarianism depicted (Gyawali, 2003) as a three-legged policy stool in Fig. 2. It also insists that you cannot merge these perspectives into one: the best you can do is have them constructively engage between

themselves in a democratic terrain because it is the democratic engagement process, not the proceduralism of bureaucracies alone, that provides for integration. It also argues that the potential for strategy switching flexibility is the basis for sustainability, while inflexibility on this count is a recipe for disaster sooner than later.

It is this concept of inclusiveness in the CT framework which led to the suggestion (Gyawali, Allan et al, 2006) that the mantra of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) be replaced with CEIWRM. The CE stands for ‘constructively engaged’ policy discourse between votaries of the risk-managing hydrocracies, the risk-taking market innovators, and the risk-sensitising social and environmental activists. Since they each come with a different perspective on the problem and a different set of filters that lets in some and rejects other ‘facts’ pertaining to the problem, they would adopt a different choice of technologies to solve what they define as the problem. Only with all three social solidarities being given a place at the table can we be ensured that no information has been filtered out, no technological possibility ignored at the outset.

The A in the above formula refers to ‘allocation’, which is an intensely political process, not just for physical water allocation but also the allocation of budget between sectors as well as time and other resources. This recognition of the various types of water politics in all its *satwik*, *rajasik* and *tamasik* elements is what has so far been missing in the water policy discourse. Such recognition would also require a re-thinking of the very concept of sustainability in water management: to individualism, since nature is perceived as robust and bounteous, *all* development is sustainable, whereas to Green activism that perceives nature as fragile *no* development is sustainable. It is only bureaucratic hierarchism that thinks development is sustainable within the procedural limits of its EIAs. Under conditions of inherent scientific uncertainty, where a socially acceptable truth lies can only be discovered, not *a priori* in a hegemonic fashion but through a constructive engagement between all the social solidarities in a democratically open but essentially contested terrain. This pluralisation is the core message of CT for a ‘sustainable’ and ‘integrated’ water policy.

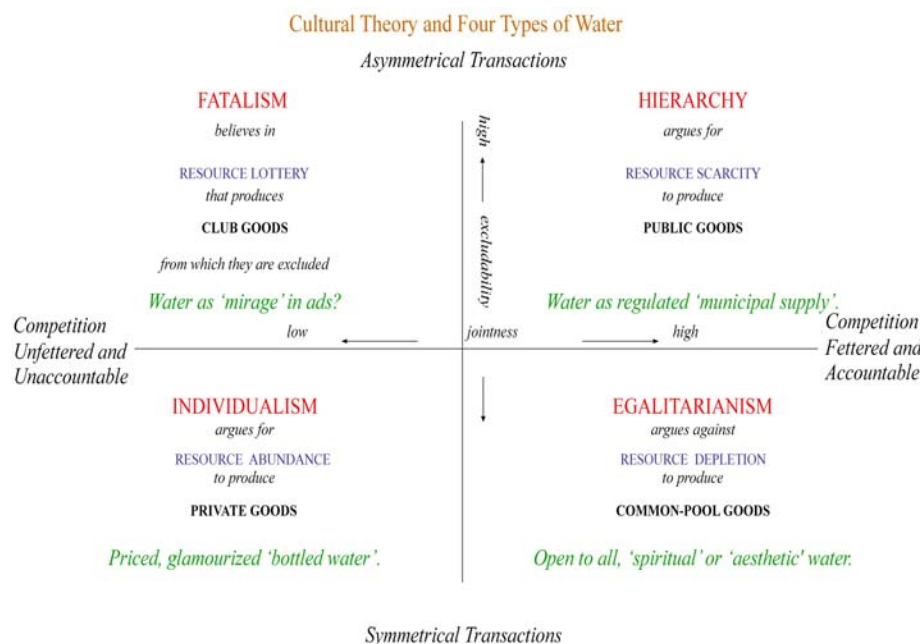


Fig. 1: Social Construction of Water Using Cultural Theory’s Two Discriminators

Constructive Engagement of Plural Social Solidarities

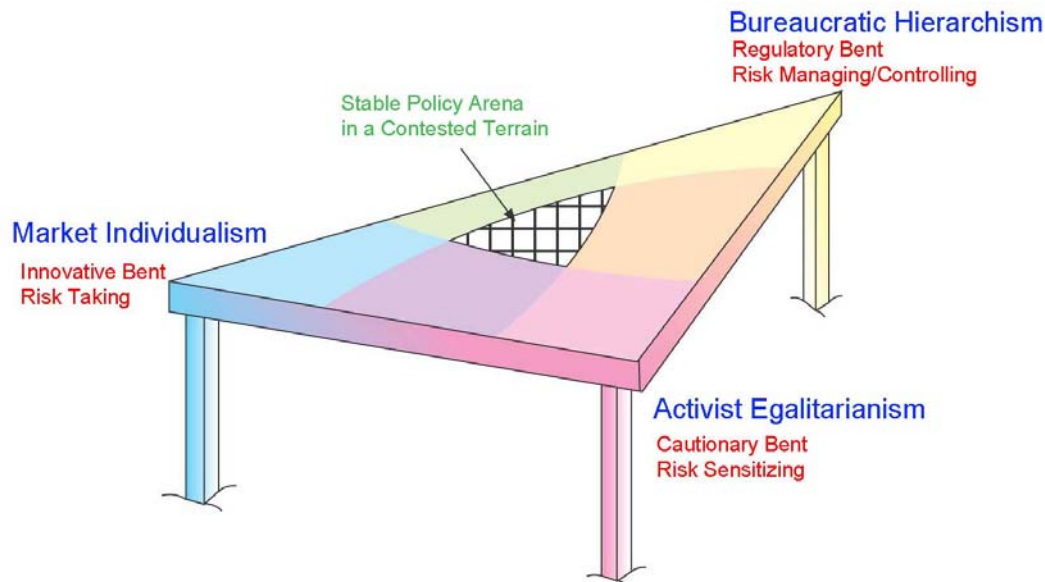


Fig. 2: Risk Proclivities within a Three-Legged Policy Terrain

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