

Waterscapes: The Cultural Politics of a Natural Resource

Ed. Amita Baviskar. Ranikhet, Uttaranchal, Permanent Black Pub, 2007, 374 p., ISBN 81-7824-176-5.

Sumathi Sivam

The problem of water governance in the global south has, for a longtime now been attested by the debates and discourses, which have been recorded in the annals of history. The governance of water has gained enormous global significance cutting across cultural, political and linguistic frontiers. This is evident from the burgeoning literature that unpacks the existence of water institutions, the role played by them in the management and distribution of water and the conflicts and tussles among them. The techniques and methods adopted by them to find solution to the existing problems that shows the kind of reform trajectory they choose to follow as well as the ideological stand that these institutions adhere to. The threats of cultural wars over water management and distribution cannot be minimized or understated. Water is so vital and integral part of human, animal and material existence that like language it has become the expression of our innermost desires and dreams.

So completely intertwined is water with life that dissolution of water (or we might say nature) from the matrix, is indeed unthinkable. Nor can any discourse on water be dissociated from the political economy of its geographical and ethnic entity. A discourse on water resources, its under-or-over exploitation is bound to touch a raw nerve of people, for the subject of water arouses heat and emotion.

The coinage "Waterscapes" in this context seems most relevant and appropriate and not exotic or eccentric as Amita Baviskar emphatically argues in her introduction to the book. Coined on the analogy of "landscapes" and perhaps "seascapes", "waterscapes" is bound to gain acceptance. The history of management of water or perhaps "waterscapes" has been increasingly recognized in the many scholarly forums which have been conducted worldwide.

The book under review entitled "Waterscapes" edited by Amita Baviskar contains twelve learned papers. The contributors of the book come from varied background such as Anthropology, Geography, Sociology, History, Environmental law and Governance. They cite original ethnographic and historical research which has a profound bearing on their analyses of wide ranging issues such as caste, participation, power relations, gender, role of state and market at different junctures while dealing with the management of water. While addressing these issues the contributors see the governance of water as a socio-economic, political, historical and cultural process which is deeply and intimately related to one other. In doing so, they have also turned the research focus to local institutions and ecology unique to each region. Thus by studying the local patterns on water discourses the scholars highlight the importance of the contextual approach to water governance.

The book is divided into three sections. The property rights of water and its commodification under colonial, post colonial and neo-liberal eras, have been one of the major issues discussed in detail in the first section of the book. The chapter by David Hardiman illustrates how the problem of water scarcity leads to construction of tube wells in north Gujarat which leads to over extraction and exploitation of groundwater by land owners (this was primarily on the basis of caste affiliations), depriving the non landowners who earlier enjoyed customary rights.

Navroz Dubash's work comprehensively analyses the shift towards mechanized irrigation in two of the villages in north Gujarat which was beset with problems. For instance it required credit which was closely involved with the stratification of society such as caste and status. Though economic assets and caste networks were important determinants to water access, they did not guarantee regular supply of water.

Donald W. Attwood draws attention to the evolution of famine relief work and the introduction of the employment guarantee scheme in the state of Maharashtra as a means to the problem of mortality. The construction of dams and canal system did ensure increased level of production but there was inefficient use of the resource owing to the challenges of in the realm of coordination, organization and cooperation in the management of water.

The aspects of "flux", "uncertainty" and "trans boundary issues" in the management of water that ensures sustainable and equitable use of the resource is well documented in Deborah Sick's article where she analyzes the role of state, private and common property regimes in the management of water in USA and Mexico borderlands.

The essays in the next section deal with the perennial problem of water scarcity and its impact on the local communities who earlier used to have community management of water. Written in a style which is lucid, the article by Lyla Mehta and Anand Punja describe how cultural links with the surroundings, the emotional and religious factors play a crucial role in assuring the "well being" of the resettled population emerging from big dam project. While raising the question of identity of the displaced population the essay at the same time explores the politics of place and position occupied by the new migrants. Arun De Souza, in his essay discusses the struggle for the construction of tank in rural Maharashtra. He has identified the chief actors with vested interests. By analyzing their role, ulterior motives and affiliation with political parties they strategically manage to dissolve the differences among the people for the purpose of development. The question of representation in village committees which falls under the domain of public sphere is elaborated in Rita Brara's work where she deals with participation of women and representation of castes in rural Rajasthan. Likewise Judith Carney's article depicts the role played by the women during the famine in Gamibia.

The final section of the book deals with water projects and how they transform the lives of the people. David Mosse's piece on indigenous tank irrigation system in Tamil Nadu gives a political and historical understanding of the resources rights and entitlements. He narrates how the contemporary revival of traditional water harvesting techniques provides a stage for the articulation of historical claims about state and civil society.

The decentralized management of resource in the state of Madhya Pradesh is analysed by Amita Baviskar. She shows the differentiated nature of the village communities and state bureaucracies that function under the structured inequality. A comparative analysis of water embankment technologies across the world under varied political regimes is a subject of Rohan D' Souza's article on flood control and politics of natural limits. In the opinion of Hugh Raffles, the cultural politics of water has its origin in the "individual biography" and "memory".

This book opens a new vista on the complexities of "waterscapes". Written from different perspectives, there is a common theme discernible in the essays namely the eternal problems of water governance peculiar to ethnic groups, geographical entities and political grouping.

Sumathi is a Research Associate at SaciWATERS. Feedback to this review can be sent to sumathi@saciwaters.org