

Politics and Power of Water: Dynamics of Caste and Gender in Manufactured Scarcity

Jahnvi Dwivedi

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Sociology, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, New Delhi, India, Email: jahnvi1996@gmail.com

Abstract

Scarcity of any kind is not only natural but manufactured, as put forward in the anthropological study on water scarcity by Lyla Mehta in Kutch Gujarat. Water cannot be seen just as a 'natural resource' that can be accessed by all but is to be seen and understood as a traditional medium of exclusion and social differentiation. Taking the specific instance of water, those at the margins of the social hierarchy are denied access to resources and are most affected during times of scarcity. Women are responsible for collecting water and managing the resources in times of scarcity for various household uses. This leads to women being seen as the "natural" collectors and preservers of water, but the primary users come from other members of the household, particularly men. The exclusion is exercised at the level of household, village community, water management institutions, and the state policy framework. The paper, through the review of literature, intends to look at how the social location of the household affects their access to water resources and the gender-based division of labour in the accessibility, maintenance, and users of water in times of scarcity that affects the position of the marginalised women. Further, the policy framework and decentralised mechanism adopted by the state negates the relational aspect of water that is not taken into account such is the case with the National Water Policy (NWPs). NWPs promote water as an 'economic good' without considering the differences in terms of access to water – caste, class and gender, which results in the naturalisation of the manufactured scarcity but also the gender-based division of labour.

Keywords: water, women, caste, scarcity, gender, policy

Introduction

One of the impending global problems is climate change at a larger level, contributing to water scarcity in particular. 'Scarcity' is not always unilateral and natural but multifaceted and manufactured. In this context, we need to place the

scarcity related to water and the formation of gender and caste hierarchies around it. Water cannot be seen just as a 'natural resource' that can be accessed by all but is to be seen and understood as a traditional medium of exclusion and social differentiation. Those pushed to the margins of the social hierarchy are denied access to water resources and are affected most during times of scarcity.

Access, affordability, and water users must be looked at from the intersectional lens of gender and caste. On the one hand, the more affluent have control over it. On the other hand, women are seen as the natural collectors and preservers of water but do not have much authority over the resources. However, the gender-based exclusion intertwined with caste can be channelised through various forms to control access to food and water in specific accounts for a prominent way. The issue of manufactured 'scarcity', therefore, is constructed on lines of gender and caste and further aggravated by the commodification of water.¹ The exclusion is exercised at the level of household, village community, water management institutions, and the state policy framework.

Globally, the countries that experience high water crises and stress accommodate over two million people, and about one-fifth of the world's population has no access to safe drinking water. An estimated 66 million rely on groundwater with fluoride content and face serious hazards like bone deformities, worm infestations, encephalitis, and dengue. India is among the high-risk countries where two out of five live in vulnerable areas. Quality and access to water are abject, one of the major reasons being the atmospheric contamination from the industrial pollutants. Further, Gender inequalities in access to water are huge and prevalent in many countries. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), women all over the world are lower on the HDI value. The case of women in South Asia is 20% lower on the index than men (UNDP, 2016), indicating how inequities impact them.

The majority of households, somewhere nearly three-quarters, do not have access to drinking water, placing the primary responsibility of collecting water on women and girls (UNICEF, 2016). In most developing countries, it is estimated that women walk for six kilometres on an average daily to collect water (UNFPA 2002) (IFAD, 2007). However, there are variations in the routine of water collection depending on the frequency. For instance, a study in 25 Sub-African countries estimated that women spend almost sixteen million hours daily collecting drinking water. In contrast, men spend six million hours, and children four million hours on the task (WHO/UNICEF, 2012).

¹ Translating water to an economic good involves the privatisation of water by pricing its supply in some cases; this results in the deepening of the already prevalent forms of inequalities and discrimination pertaining to access to water

Collecting, storing, and managing water resources are daily household chores. In the Indian context, a household is synonymous mainly with women. The women's rights and relationship over water in a patriarchal social structure is affected in twofold ways- shift of water into private good and the shift of maintenance from the private domestic sphere to become a strategy of targeting those belonging to non-dominant caste, class and gender. The crisis has remained inaudible despite the seriousness as the affected people remain invisible, inarticulate, and powerless.

The interventions to solve this crisis involve the decentralisation of water governance. This comes from the inherent belief and unquestioned assumption that women are natural conservers, preservers, and managers of water, also because women are mandatorily attached to domestic labour. The states move to transfer the operational cost and managerial responsibility to voluntary groups. This reduces the state's burden and provides no real gains to the women because the management does not contribute to "empowerment", as claimed by several organisations and institutions working in this realm, but is an additional burden on the women.

The paper, through the review of literature, intends to look at how the social location of the household affects their access to water resources and the gender-based division of labour in the accessibility, maintenance, and users of water in times of scarcity that affects the position of the marginalised women. Further, the policy framework and decentralised mechanism adopted by the state negates the relational aspect of water that needs to be taken into account such is the case with the National Water Policy (NWPs). NWPs promote water as an 'economic good' without considering the differences in terms of access to water – caste, class and gender, which results in the naturalisation of the manufactured scarcity but also the gender-based division of labour.

Intersections of Caste and Gender

Uma Chakravarti (2018), in *Gendering Caste: Through a feminist lens*, contextualises the deep hierarchical social setup like ours, and the explanations around the structures of the caste system give an over-emphasis on the ideology of the caste system. In other words, on its ritual aspect, excluding material conditions, questions, and power. This is a consequence of the understanding drawn from the Brahminical texts, evading the views of Dalit writers that provide a counter-narrative centred around the experiential dimensions of caste-based oppression (Chakravarti, 2018). In the sociological scholarship, the worldviews of Louis Dumont and Michael Moffat dominate precisely because they present the caste system as

one of the dominant and dominated consensual values. The popularity of this view comes from making it convenient for the upper castes to erase their location within the social structure. In contrast to this, the framework provided by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also falls within the 'purity' and 'pollution'. However, it is a hierarchal gradation of the caste, with the topmost caste yielding high status and the lowermost caste always being disadvantaged (Chakravarti, 2018).

In this context, we need to understand the socio-cultural oppression operating in the lives of non-dominant caste groups, particularly Dalit women. The consequence of caste-based oppression can be seen in the closure of access to resources for non-dominant castes, as those who dominate the means of production have also tried to dominate the means of symbolic production. This symbolic hegemony provided a foreground to control the standards by which rule is evaluated, as the outlook of lower castes is devoid. Therefore, contemporary struggles over resources for Dalits are simultaneous struggles over socially constructed meanings, definitions, and identities (Chakravarti, 2018).

Irudayam, Manghubhai, and Lee (2014), in *Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India*, contend, “to understand the reality of caste in Indian society in general, and the Dalit community and Dalit women in particular, an analysis of interlinking caste-class- gender dynamics is imperative” (Irudayam et al., 2011, p. 5). Uma Chakravarti’s (1993) and Sharmila Rege’s (2013) work on Brahminical patriarchy and theorising Ambedkar through a gendered lens indicates that he viewed caste and gender as entangled, but never just easily equated and how caste resides over sexual regulation and attempted to surpass the binaries of sameness/difference. Most feminists overlook the aspect of caste, and scholars of caste and Dalit critiques tend not to address the issue of gender and patriarchy. One needs to understand how women are constituted within patriarchal relations of caste and gender inequalities (Rege, 2013). A similar line of thought is reiterated in the works of Gabriele Dietrich (2001), who argues that the intersections of caste and patriarchy are developed during Dalit movements in which the violence by the state authorities and dominant castes against the Dalit women is highlighted and violence by Dalit men or intra-community violence is disregarded. (Dietrich 2001 as cited in Gorringer, 2018).

Jodhka and Shah (2010) in their work, *Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia*, contend that the institution of caste is specific to South Asia, where groups are not just treated differently as ‘majority’ or ‘minority’ but some are kept out “untouchables” and “polluting”. The differences based on caste cannot be seen as simple cultural and economic differences but account for what Ambedkar had argued, graded inequality, that exists at all levels

of social groupings (Ambedkar, 1987; Jaffrelot, 2005 as cited in Jodhka & Shah, 2010). This phenomenon penetrates to an extent where those discriminated against as outcastes or untouchables are also internally divided and unequal, making it difficult for those at the receiving end of the structural injustice to mobilise against the powerful.

Therefore, it institutionalises exclusion and discrimination in a complex and complicated manner, wherein untouchability is made to be persistent and prevalent in various forms ranging from residential segregation to taboos, physical touch, restrictions on inter-dining, having access to same water resources, physical movement, restricting to one's caste-based occupation. This not only reinforces untouchability as they are seen as a means resulting in social exclusion, economic deprivation, and a life of humiliation for those placed at the margins of caste hierarchy but is seen as a space through which dominant castes maintain their caste purity (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

The intersection of gender, caste, and class embeds the identities and livelihood strategies that shape and regulate access to resources, work, and opportunities. These intersections continue to guide the established social structures and empirical manifestations. Deshpande (2011) argues that the caste system “not only determines the social division of labour but its sexual division as well” (Deshpande, 2011, p.107). The caste system is a strict division of labour, and it would also assign domestic labour to women and mainly both domestic and public labour to Dalit women. One of the primary means to control the labour and sexuality of women is through endogamy. Caste not only shapes the gendered nature of labour but is also determined by regional identities, class, and how labour is understood in the popular discourse, which is subjected to change over some time. Thus, more constraints are imposed on women of a higher caste than those from a lower caste background (Deshpande, 2011, cited by Gorringer, 2018). Although there has been an alteration in the relationship between caste and gender, the relational aspect of food, water, and rituals, articulated by the mutual intermeshing of caste and gender, continues to be critical and feeds into the existing system based on rigid caste and gender hierarchies.

Multifaceted Nature of Scarcity

Scarcity is produced and reproduced in both the discursive and material realms. This feature and phenomenon of scarcity are well translated into the context of water scarcity. Scarcity of any kind is not only natural but manufactured, as put forward in the anthropological study on water scarcity by Lyla Mehta in Kutch Gujarat (Mehta, 2005). Water cannot be seen just as a ‘natural resource’ that can be

accessed by all but is to be seen and understood as a traditional medium of exclusion and social differentiation. This brings forth the need to focus on the relational aspect of water, where scarcity is socially and politically constructed, diverse knowledge systems of water scarcity, and social differentiation.

Nicolas Xenos (1989), in his work *'Scarcity and Modernity'*, consistently argues that certain aspects of modernity have promoted the universal notion around scarcity, which is considered an existential reality and the central premise of modern economic thought (Xenos, 1989). Neoclassical economics perpetuates the belief that a ubiquitous and permanent feature of the human condition accounts for scarcity (Mehta, 2005). This has resulted in a shift in the perception of scarcity from a temporally bound and spatially differentiated to a kind of 'open-ended myth' through which one seeks deliverance. Such unilateral and simplistic universalisation of the phenomenon of 'scarcity' leads to obscuring the ambiguities and regional variations (Mehta, 2005). Thus, these notions not only lead to the construction of unidimensional paths from 'underdevelopment' to 'development' but also result in the naturalisation and emphasis of water scarcity in state and popular discourse (Mehta, 2005).

Water scarcity is taken to be given in the discourse on water management in the policy agendas. Whether it be the supply-oriented notion that emphasises meeting the needs of domestic, agricultural, and industrial use or the contemporary demand-oriented notion where water is equivalent to an 'economic good', the universalisation of water scarcity is not questioned (Mehta, 2005). The state and private stakeholders tend to exploit, mismanage and expropriate water resources, leading to a division of interest vis-a-vis scarcity. Therefore, one needs to understand the relational aspect of scarcity, the reasons behind using certain interventions to deal with scarcity, and different state and political actors and institutional arrangements that benefit from an almost permanent state of scarcity (Mehta, 2005). The struggle surrounding scarcity is beyond muddling for water and includes concomitant struggles for meaning the assertion of different identities, choices, and strategies both at the individual and collective level (Mehta, 2005). Thus, there is a need to understand what scarcity means to different actors and the difference in the impact along caste, class, and gender experiences (Mehta, 2005).

The naturalisation of scarcity removes the state's responsibility to provide for the water resources. Suppose water scarcity is being faced due to natural causes and is not manufactured by the social-economic hierarchies. In that case, the state can abstain from taking action to remove such differences (Mehta, 2005). Natural scarcity needs the state to make provisions for water availability, but the manufactured nature of scarcity also requires provisions to ensure the accessibility

of the available resources.

Women as Custodians of Water & Gendered Impact of Scarcity

Far and wide, there is a significant relationship between women and water, as the latter acts as a resource that sustains life, guides the means of production, and acts as a cultural idiom of folklore, transcending space, time, physical and imaginary boundaries (Kulkarni et al., 2007). In the absence of land rights, women in rural areas find difficulty in accessing water for domestic use or irrigation purposes and being an active part of the decision-making at the household level. Indiscriminate withdrawal of the groundwater for agriculture, particularly cash crops or industrial purposes, has caused saline ingression, waterlogging, fluoride, and arsenic contamination of drinking water, forcing women in already scarce regions to walk further to find portable water (Kulkarni et al., 2007).

Gender relations largely reflect how power is distributed between men and women in the context of water. Formulating the rights, roles, responsibilities, allocation of obligation, and means through which value is given to each one of them, it is primarily mediated by other relations of power that construct inequalities—caste, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, disability, and age. These relations are dynamic and vary across different places, groups of people, and times depending on economic policies, reforms in laws, technological change, and the catalysing role of social actors who seek to transform inequalities (Kulkarni et al., 2007). Thus, gender relations are complex, but at the same time, relations are mutually guided by connection, cooperation, support, separation, conflict, and competition.

V. Geetha, in her work *Bereft of Being: The Humiliations of Untouchability*, points out that despite the variance in skills, domains of work, and priorities that rural men and women have, they share a mutual interest in bringing up a family and ensuring livelihood security through access to productive opportunities through agricultural activities. Although men across different social categories tend to have greater power and control over resources than women, their access to resources, opportunities, and endowments remains restricted compared to men. This brings forth the feminist critique to challenge and re-negotiate the gendered identities (Geetha, 2002).

The responsibility and liability of collecting water and managing the water resource in times of scarcity for various household uses are on women. This leads to women being seen as the natural collectors and preservers of water but still need to be considered the users, as they are often excluded while paying the water charges in many rural areas. This exclusion in many instances, is an undertone indicator of them not being considered as users of water. A study by Kathleen O'Reilly and

Richa Danju in Rajasthan found that the girls are not charged for water as they are not seen as household members until they get married and become part of their husbands' families. Thus, not counting them as the consumer of water until they are married (O'Reilly, 2011).

Women's rights and relationship over water are affected in twofold ways- conversion of water into a private good and the shift of maintenance from the private domestic sphere to the public becomes a strategy of targeting non-dominant caste, class and gender- Dalit and Tribal Women. The social exclusion based on 'pollution' defines which well or water resources and how a Dalit woman can use them for fetching water. Despite its seriousness, the crisis has remained inaudible because the people affected are invisible, inarticulate, and powerless. The water conflicts usually around the caste lines result in naturalising the gender-related division of labour concerning water (Mehta, 2005). Gender remains a subtle and more impenetrable dimension of difference about water and, in most scenarios, is submerged within the caste issues.

One of the common phenomena is that women have to stand in long queues to collect water from public taps or pipelines. In some cases, women spend sleepless nights, as the water pressure during the day is low. They have to divide their day between collecting water, household chores, and child-rearing activities. The scenario is worst, where the collection of water is supplemented by travelling long distances where the water resource is located. Women's burden due to being solely in charge of collecting water affects their health and well-being. Physical health is impacted by carrying heavy loads of water, including severe headaches, lower back pain, water-borne diseases like urinary schistosomiasis, and skin infections are the most reported. These conditions are supplemented by gender and caste-based violence, bringing forth the safety concerns associated with long travels to fetch water by the women. It is crucial to consider that sharing household tasks may be better in lower caste and Adivasi households. Moreover, men often have access to transport, and it is rare for them to head-load water (Kulkarni et al., 2007).

Access to water is also affected by the social attitudes that people hold towards female and male bodies. In a few cases, pregnancy and stigma around menstruation might constrain women's access to particular water resources (Upperman, 2000). This goes hand in hand with the gendered ideas about physical ability and strength; for instance- there are differences among men and women carrying water, respectively, having varied implications on their physical well-being. The access to water is further reinforced and shaped by gender-based division of labour and livelihood strategies. Lastly, the norms of purdah or veiling in the household and the village society restrict women's mobility and add to the burden of collecting

water (Sultana, 2009).

The interventions to solve this crisis involve the decentralisation of water governance. This comes from the inherent belief and unquestioned assumption that women are natural conservers and managers of water. S. Kulkarni in the work *Women, Water and Livelihoods: Towards evolving a gender-just vision for water*, contends that the state tends to transfer the operational cost and managerial responsibility to voluntary groups. This reduces the burden of the state and provides no real gains to the women because this management does not contribute to empowerment, as claimed by several organisations and institutions working in this realm, but is an additional burden on the women (Kulkarni, 2011). The conviction that the power to manage water resources should be granted to women is based on the presumption that domestic water supply is a women's realm. However, one needs to interrogate whether the representation of women in the decision-making frame is empowering or reinforces the existing established social hierarchies in subtle ways. In many cases, improved water access does not account for ensuring emancipation on the enhancement of gender equality between men and women within the household (Ivens, 2008).

Accessibility to 'Commons': Social Location and Access to Water

Manufactured scarcity brings forth the politics of the accessibility of 'commons'/resources. Taking the specific instance of water, those at the margins of the social hierarchy are denied access to the 'commons' and are the most affected during times of scarcity. Access, affordability, and use of water need to be looked at from the intersectional lens of gender and caste, where the more affluent in society have control over it. The issue of manufactured 'scarcity' is aggravated by the commodification of water by translating it into an economic good. This results in the deepening of the already prevalent forms of inequalities and discrimination about access to water. The exclusion is exercised at the level of household, village community, water management institutions, and the state policy framework.

A rigidly closed caste system, based on inheritance and determined by ritual notions of 'purity' and 'pollution', evolved later when the core concern of the Hindu social structure became the maintenance of caste purity (Dumont & Pocock, 1959)—the interactions of water, caste, and gender in the dominant Hindu society. The notion of water being polluted by the touch of the 'impure' and purifying those who are 'polluted' is evident in the life constraints of Dalit women and men. Water is perceived to imbibe inherent purity and the capacity to mop up pollution (Murray, 1994). Water is also very prone to pollution by touch or association with things and is considered impure. For instance, it is explicitly stated that a well, or

any other source of still water, is polluted by a Sudra's touch. Manu elaborates on the rituals to be performed to purify such polluted water (Khera, 1997). Water and food cooked in water, offered or touched by the Sudras are polluting. Brahminical patriarchal practices, established through both caste and gender hierarchies and rendered invisible by being defined as a religion, custom, tradition, and honour, continue to contribute to social stability and salvation. Hence, community-owned resources- tanks, wells, lakes/ponds- exclude Dalits from equitable sharing of resources.

A growing body of scholarship has recognised the risk of rendering village communities harmonious and homogenous. This is challenging for policy implementation but also undermines attention from issues concerning differences. There is a requisite to see a village 'community' as a diverse body of different social actors having different, and often conflicting, perceptions of and claims over natural resources/ 'commons' (Mehta, 2005). These axes of difference are not static but somewhat fluid entities interlocked with each other both structurally and symbolically. It is through regularised practices and behaviour patterns emerging out of a body of written and unwritten rules within a community the 'knowledge' around water is produced and reproduced, where power relations are embedded, governing the access to and management of water (Mehta, 2005). Therefore, despite policies and programs to widen the access to water given in a hierarchical society, structural inequalities and its outcome being the shift and transformation of drinking water into 'economic' or private good have affected those who are rendered invisible, excluded, and form a fragment of 'Doxa'², those elements/ aspects of the social world and tradition that are silent, remain un-fragmented and implicit (Mehta, 2005).

The conceptualisation of 'resources' about the governance of water encircles the structures of inequality, discrimination, power relations, norms in society, and allocation of resources. In this context, Naila Kabeer (2000), in *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*, argues that gendered expectations and social norms guide the mobilisation of resources in society by groups or individuals (Kabeer, 2000). In some instances, how women participate in enhancing their water access depends on the assertion of rights and entitlement to access resources at the local level (Cleaver & Hamada, 2010).

The contemporary neo-liberal nature of water-related policies provides a foreground for incorporating feminist ambitions (Ahlers & Zwarteveen, 2009). Feminist scholars argue that privatisation and individualisation of resources reinforce

² Pierre Bourdieu, in his Outline of a Theory of Practice, uses the term Doxa to denote what is taken for granted or the 'domain of undiscussed'.

gendered inequalities deeply rooted in and reproduced by favouring men's access to resources like water and land (Ahlers & Zwartveen, 2009). In the context of contestation for the right to access and use water, Harvey's (2003) accumulation by dispossession provides a ground and framework to understand the privatisation of water as a part of the capitalist modifications and transformation process. The outcome of these processes is the de-linking of collectives to individualisation of knowledge and property. This impetus of privatisation, along with deregulation and liberalisation in the water sector, is transformed as an objective of the state's policies (Harvey, 2003 as cited in Ahlers & Zwartveen, 2009). A feminist critique questions the conceptual abstractions that may reproduce and reify binaries like private and public, nature and social or human (Ahlers & Zwartveen, 2009). Moreover, it calls for an association of the 'local' struggle for water to greater economic and historical trends and a critical understanding and acknowledgement of how these struggles are moulded through discourses and meanings (Ahlers & Zwartveen, 2009).

Governance of Water: National Water Policies and the Question of Gender Equity in Water Management

Indian policymakers and planners consider the development of water resources as fundamental to economic development. It is in this context that Jayal (2001), in his work *'Reinventing the State: Emerging of Alternative Models of Governance in India in the 1990s'* argues for the emergence of several models to ensure enhanced participation of people in the process of management and development (Jayal, 2001). The first model focuses on the imperative to roll back the state delegated by the agenda of globalisation and economic reforms. The second model is based on contesting state practices, projects, and discourses through social movements contending for radical participatory democratic politics. The third model of the governance of water is carried out through NGOs by taking on the development functions imitative of state initiatives in this field or the task of implementing state programs and policies as a public service contractor. The fourth model is based on the state and community partnership. The fifth water governance model is the decentralisation of local management of water-related services (Jayal, 2001).

The existing governance for water and the political economy of the state ensure provisions for, industrial units, urban domestic users and landowners, placing small and marginal small-scale farmers, urban poor, and those residing in remote rural areas at a disadvantage, who are not able to meet their needs of access to (Ballabh, 2007). The expansion and increase in water usage for industries, agriculture, and urban areas resulted in the water shortage downstream. Agriculture results, at times, in the degradation of the quality of groundwater and

its over-extraction due to the excessive application of pesticides and fertilisers. The governance of water has failed to conserve and preserve water in consonance with social justice and equity in water resource allocation (Ballabh, 2007). One of the prominent ways in which the failure of governance of water is addressed is by the involvement of people and transferring the management of water resources to the institution by people, mainly Non-governmental organisations. These organisations have played a critical role in finding workable solutions and alternative technologies, but this has failed to impact and mitigate the crisis due to a lack of human and financial resources (Ballabh, 2007).

Thus, the crisis of governance and management in all its aspects is marked by inefficiency, inequity, and unsustainability, which leads to conflicts in terms of access to water, which is reflective of socio-economic inequalities, power asymmetries (Mehta et al. of Water Scarcity, 2003). Water governance arrangements are set by dominant economic trends and policies at the global and national levels (Ahlers & Zwarteveen, 2009). Ahlers (2005) argues that “assumptions underlying such ‘neo-liberal’ policies include ideas that economic rationality and efficiency are the most suitable governing paradigms for water management, neglecting important social factors shaping access” (Ahlers, 2005, p.58). In the last two decades, the shift in the policy where water is treated as an economic good has resulted in prioritising the use of water as generating income and overlooking non-productive usage (Harris, 2009).

The planning and governance of the water are under the purview of the Ministry of Water Resources and the Government of India. For this purpose, the ministry framed the National Water Policy (NWP) in 1987 and reviewed and updated it in 2002 and 2012. A critical study of the policies by a feminist scholar highlights that the policies are gender-blind. Tanusree Paul (2017) has critically analysed water policies through a gendered lens in her work, *Viewing National Water Policies through a Gendered Lens*. Paul (2017) says that the policies look at water as an economic good and, thus, try to ensure its efficient use through pricing. The pricing of water leading to the conversion into an economic good contradicts the objective of achieving equity. The policy states, “The unique needs and aspirations of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, women and other weaker sections of the society should be given due consideration” (Ministry of Water Resources, 2012). The policy is silent on how these ‘unique’ needs are to be addressed. The latest NWP 2012 states that “water resources projects and services should be managed with community participation”. It encourages the public-private partnership (PPP) through democratically elected local bodies to improve the delivery of services, maintain the standard of services and regulate the prices (Ministry of Water Resources, 2012). “Institutional economic approaches to collective action in natural resources

management (NRM) traditionally overlook the role of gender and power in environmental change” (Rap & Jaskolski, 2019, p. 84)

The NWP 2002 and 2012 also advocate providing statutory powers to the Water User Association, which will be encouraged to participate actively in the planning and management of water resources. The NWP 2012 shifts the state's role from being a service provider to the regulator of services through the transfer of such services to community associations or the private sector (Paul, 2017). The NWPs have focused on increasing water availability but have failed to examine accessibility. The scarcity of water is not just a function of less availability but also less accessibility. Multiple issues of accessibility emerge when seen through the lens of caste, class, and gender. The problem of needing access to an improved water source forces women to travel long distances. The NWPs have failed to look at the scarcity from a gendered perspective. “Women’s special concerns related to water remain subsumed under that of the 'household', which is the officially recognised social unit in all the NWP documents” (Paul, 2017, p. 78). The rights and entitlements provided at the household and community level do not consider the socio-political forces that lead to unequal access to resources. This is based on the assumption that the resource benefits are shared equitably among the household members. The true picture is different. The power hierarchies at the household level undermine women’s roles and access to resources. “Systematic and socially constructed gender differences skew the distribution and use of resources in favour of men both within the household as at the community level” (Paul, 2017, p. 78). “Finally, it requires attention to the fact that women are not a homogeneous group but that characteristics such as age, caste, and class further define their roles, responsibilities, and opportunities.” (Ivens, 2008, p. 66). Even amongst the women, the issue of water scarcity is not encountered at the same level. The intersectionality of caste and class with gender cannot be ignored as it determines access to spatially distributed natural resources such as water (Rap & Jaskolski, 2019).

NWPs have a constant theme of social justice and the principle of equity and claim to ensure improved access to water in rural areas. However, they fail to recognise the complex, intertwined socio-political nature of Indian society, especially the gender hierarchy. The decentralisation and community participation approaches focusing on demand management introduced in the 1990s are the basis for defining domestic water policies. The management framework is focused mainly on achieving efficiency, and the relation between the principle of equity and efficiency is yet to be proved (Joshi, 2005). Access and the decision-making powers regarding natural resources are highly gendered. The policy stresses community participation and decentralisation but does not address gender inequality in decision-making or

the exclusion of Dalits. It does not provide the support needed for changing and strengthening their position. This leads to the failure to provide water to the ones who are most vulnerable and require it the most.

The relations of inequality among the users of water are well reinforced by development initiatives that strengthen the agency and empower some and weaken others. “The drinking water sector is an excellent example of flawed policies which have sustained convenient fractures of a divisive society” (Joshi, 2011, p. 63). The commitment towards gender- sensitivity usually gets translated into involving women in water projects, especially management institutions. Ivens (2008) argues for the need for an empowering participatory approach to designing and implementing programs to achieve sustainable gender equality. In the context of empowerment and agency, Naila Kabeer contends that “agency is not just about potential ability to exercise choice, but about the real effects these choices can have for the well-being of those involved” (Kabeer, 2000, p.28).

Paul (2017) also argues how the NWP 2012, unlike NWP 2002, does not call for women’s participation explicitly, and this might lead to severe impacts as the way men and women experience participation is very different. Participation of women in the decision-making process will not only increase efficiency and effectiveness but lead to an increase in the self-esteem and confidence of women. Ivens (2008), looking at the relationship between agency, autonomy, and empowerment, mentions that the case studies have shown that decision-making participation strengthens women’s empowerment and leads to some changes in decision-making at the household level (Ivens, 2008). The National Water Policies are embedded within the framework of Women in Development (WID). Women have been incorporated into the policy to enhance efficiency and economic productivity. Paul argues that the water accessibility to each ‘household’ has been provided as this would save much time for women, which they can utilise for other productive work. Access to water needs to be ensured to improve the quality of life, irrespective of how the time saved by the women will be used (Paul, 2017). Thus, policy issues on water need critical analysis and a feminist perspective to unravel the concepts and language of the mainstream water policy that finds its root in the neo-liberal framework that stands in contrast to the feminist framework of addressing social inequities and inequalities in relation to water.

Zwarteveen (2011), in her work ‘*Questioning Masculinities in Water*’, points out that irrigation and hydraulic bureaucracy are essential sites for establishing hegemonic masculinities and gendered power. The robust association between water governance and management and masculinities put forth an answer to the questions regarding the rigid nature of change. This allows for the naturalisation of

identities associated with engineering by connecting them to male bodies and, in contrast, opposing femininity (Zwarteveen, 2011). This is suggestive that the domain of hydraulic bureaucracies is where particular masculinities are performed. Fraser (1997) “Currently in water management and engineering, gender continues to be a key principle of cultural-valuation differentiation, with the authoritative construction of norms that privilege traits associated with masculinity, and the simultaneous pervasive devaluation and disparagement of things coded as feminine” (Fraser 1997, p.20 as cited in Zwarteveen, 2011).

To date, the explicit questioning of gendered identities, structures and symbolisms is not considered as requiring explanation and discussion concerning water. Power is legitimised by control over water, which is associated with men and masculinity (Zwarteveen, 2011). The concerns regarding structural inequality are seldom addressed or considered and mostly go unheard of, and this reflects the linkage between men and organisational power, authority, expertise, and prestige (Zwarteveen, 2011). In this context, it is essential to move beyond the static and apply feminist studies of technologies, masculinities, and organisations to understand how gender operates and is mutually shaped by professional identities. This could be a step towards creating more significant space for women engineers in the water sector, contributing to unravelling crucial elements of the cultural politics of water.

Cleaver & Hamada (2010), in their paper, *"Good' Water Governance and Gender Equity: A Troubled Relationship"*, provides a framework for comprehending the governance of water. They argue that there is skewed attention on the incorporating gender-sensitive apparatus of water delivery, for instance committees and technologies that cannot ensure gender-equitable outcomes. It is essential to overcome the failures of water governance – corruption, inability to meet the needs of the marginalised section, and absence of accountability and responsiveness to ensure good governance of water (Cleaver & Hamada, 2010). It is asserted that good governance of water might have a pragmatic impact on gender relations as it would ensure equal assertion of rights by people and negotiation and allocation of water based on a partnership to ensure sustainable management of water supplies (Cleaver & Hamada, 2010). The discourse around the governance of water negates the question of gender, and the dimensions that might shape access and control of women over water are not taken into account. This can be partially due to the narrow focus of water policies and programs on service delivery, overlooking the wider contexts that affect and shape such interventions (Cleaver & Hamada, 2010). Therefore, they rely solely on disadvantaged or marginalised women and men to claim their rights or equitably manage the governance of water. Instead, the focus should be on reshaping water governance along the lines of equity by considering the issue of access and control of water resources (Cleaver &

Hamada, 2010). That must include the intervention with the perspective of development to broaden its scope, not limit its approach by just focusing on the 'mechanisms' of access, and not establishing a link with a broader social context (Clever & Hamada, 2010).

Conclusion

Taking into account the prevalent scenario around the relationship between women, caste, water, and governance that has psychological, economic, social, and political impacts on women. Women from marginalised backgrounds continue to be denied the ownership and use of water but bear the burden of the accountability of arranging for water. Thus, the relational aspect of water that permeates and contributes to the maintenance of inequalities of the hierarchical social structure needs to be critically analysed, as it is imperative to understand water scarcity as a re-emerging symbol of gender and caste-based exclusion. The literature on water captures the elements of caste and gender in terms of access to and use of water. However, there is no mention of sub-caste discrimination within the non-dominant caste communities. Apart from physical well-being, an essential aspect of health largely ignored is the mental pressure and burden that women and those, especially from marginalised communities, experience. It can be understood in terms of the feelings of uncertainty and constant helplessness associated with access to water where it is scarcely available.

References

- Ahlers, R., & Zwartveen, M. (2009). The water question in feminism: water control and gender inequities in a neo-liberal era. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 16(4), 409-426.
- Ballabh, V. (2007). Governance of Water: Issues and Challenges. In V. Ballabah (Ed.), *Governance of Water: Institutional Alternatives and Political Economy* (pp. 3-17). SAGE Publications.
- Banerjee, S., & Ghosh, N. (2018). Introduction. Debating Intersectionalities: Challenges for a Methodological Framework. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, pp. 19, 1-17.
- Bhattacharjee, A. (2012). Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices. *Textbooks Collection*.
- Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy In India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27(14), 579-85.
- Chakravarti, U. (2018). Understanding Caste. In U. Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste* (pp. 7-24). SAGE Publications.
- Chakravorty, B. (2019). Pani Sahejo Pani [Recorded by B. L. Conservation)].

- Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CunSjB7nVOE>
- Cleaver, F., & Hamada, K. (2010). 'Good' water governance and gender equity: a troubled relationship. *Gender & development*, pp. 27–41.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 46(6), 1241–99.
- Dumont, L., & Pocock, D. F. (1959). Pure and Impure. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*.
- Geetha, V. (2002). *Gender*. Calcutta Stree publications.
- Geetha, V. (2009). Bereft of Being: The Humiliations of Untouchability. In G. Guru (Ed.), *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (pp. 95-107). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gorringe, H. (2018). Gendering Caste: Honor, Patriarchy and Violence. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, pp. 1–10.
- IFAD. (2007). *Gender and Water: Securing Water for Rural Livelihoods*. International Fund for Agricultural Development.
- Irudayam, A., Maghubhai, J., & Lee, J. (2011). *Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Ivens, S. (2008). Does Increased Water Access Empower Women? *Society for International Development*, pp. 63–67.
- Jayal, N. (2001). Reinventing the State: The Emergence of Alternative Models of Governance in India in the 1990s. In N. Jayal, & S. Pai, *Democratic Governance in India: Challenges of Poverty, Development, and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Jodhka, S. S., & Shah, G. (2010). Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(48), 99-106.
- Joshi, D. (2005). Misunderstanding Gender in Water: Addressing or Reproducing Exclusion. A. Coles, & T. Wallace, *Gender, Water and Development* (pp. 135-144). Berg Publishers.
- Joshi, D. (2011). Caste, Gender and Rhetoric of Reform in India's Drinking Water Sector. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(18), 56-63.
- Kabeer, N. (2000). Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. In R. Shahra (Ed.), *Gendered Poverty and Well-Being*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Khera, K. L. (1997). *Index to History of Dharmasastra by Pandurang Vaman Kane: Comprehensive Guide to Hindu Rites and Rituals*. New Delhi: Mushiram Manoharlal.
- Kulkarni, S. (2011). Women and Decentralised Water Governance: Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward. *Economic and Politically Weekly*, pp. 64–72.
- Kulkarni, S., Ahmed, S., Arya, S., Joy, K. J., & Paranjee, S. (2007). *Women, Water and Livelihoods: Towards evolving a gender-just vision for water*. SOPPECOM.

- Kulkarni, S., Joy, K. J., & Paranjapee, S. (2007). Gender Issues in Water Governance: Review of Challenges and Emerging Strategies. In V. Ballabh (Ed.), *Governance of Water: Institutional Alternative and Political Economy* (pp. 61-75).
- Manju, S. (2008). Participation of rural women in household and farm activities. *Indian Journal of Agricultural Research*, p. 42.
- Mehta, L. (2003). Contexts and Construction of Water Scarcity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(48), 5066-72.
- Mehta, L. (2005). *The Politics and Poetics of Water: Naturalising Scarcity in Western Ghats*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited.
- Ministry of Water Resources. (2012). *National Water Policy 2012*. Government of India.
- Murray, M. J. (1994). *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- NITI Ayog; UNDP. (2015). *Human Development Report Bundelkhand 2012*. NITI Ayog.
- O'Reilly, K. (2011). 'They are not of this house': The Gendered Costs of Drinking Water's Commodification. *Economic and Politically Weekly*, 49-55.
- Paul, T. (2017, December). Viewing National Water Policies through a Gendered Lens. 2(48), pp. 76-84.
- Purdie-Vaughn, V., & Eibach, R. P. (2008). Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities. *Sex Roles*, 59(5-6), pp. 377-91.
- Rao, A. (2009). *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Rap, E., & Jaskolski, M. (2019). The lives of women in a land reclamation project: gender, class, culture and place in Egyptian land and water management. *International Journal of Economics*, 84-104.
- Rege, S. (2013). *Against the Madness of Manu*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology. (2005). *Water and Women*. National Commission for Women.
- Sharma, M. (2017). Dalit Memories and Water Rights. In M. Sharma, *Caste & Nature: Dalit and Indian Environmental Politics in India* (pp. 161-211). UK: Oxford University Press.
- UN WATER; UNESCO. (2019). *The United Nations World Water Development Report – 2019: Facts and Figures*. United Nations.
- Xenos, N. (1989). *Scarcity and Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Zwarteveen, M. (2011). Questioning Masculinities in Water. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40- 48