

Book Review

International Conference on Political Economy of Water: A Social Work Response

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Name of the Book: International Conference on Political Economy of Water: A Social Work Response

Name of the Editors: Balakrishnan, G., & Vesvikar, M.

Name of the Publisher: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle.

Price: £47.99

ISBN: 978-1-4438-8886-8

The book under review contains multiple hues of one of the basic elements of nature-water. Experts in the field of social work and rural development amongst many others have contributed insightful research papers on the necessity of water as a resource and the myriad socio-economic-political situations that surround it. 'Political Economy of Water' has various themes included within it. It speaks of successful participatory systems for water in urban and rural areas respectively, water as a basic human right as well as women's rights in isolation, water as the root cause for fatal diseases, water as depicted in the Vedas and the political complexities that arise due to water or the lack of it.

It is noteworthy that the book begins with a paper on the water-related concerns in prisons. As mentioned in the paper itself, the state considers the prisons as unproductive institutions that house the unwanted sections of the society. Although India is legally bound to provide clean and sufficient water to all its citizens despite their social status, the under-trials are barely paid attention to. The author highlights the need for stronger policies directed at prison health and hygiene as well as the prevention of overcrowding and long-term incarceration.

The next paper deals with full cost recovery mechanism - that is, providing water to urban communities at affordable

prices by reducing the maintenance and operation costs. All of this has to be done alongside a public that possesses democratic powers and enjoys a tariff system based on their repaying capacities. Contrary to this, another contributor explains how the North-East has been struggling due to mega dam sites and the power holders who have usurped their cultural rights, political autonomy and decision-making rights. This paper tries to understand the problems faced by the people of the North East due to violations of environmental norms and commoditisation of human freedom and values with specific reference to dams.

The case studies of three brilliant initiatives by the Government of Gujarat, Kerala and a field action project based in Mumbai have found a place in the book's community participation feature. Water and Sanitation Management Organisation (WASMO) has ensured that there is access to water for everyone regardless of gender, caste, tribe or religion. According to the author, the state government's decision to shift its focus from 'providing to facilitating' has led to the coverage of most villages with adequate supply of water by either local or regional sources. Similarly, the Jalanidhi Project in Kerala involves the inclusion of relevant stakeholders into the decision making process, build their capacities and empower them to manage their own rural water sources with the NGOs in the community merely facilitating the process. Another game-changing initiative that started off as a field action project of the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan is AROEHAN. Although it set about addressing the malnutrition woes of children in the Mokhada tehsil of Thane district, it shifted its focus on the issues of water scarcity in that high rainfall region. Soon, they were introducing innovative tools such as Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) to raise consciousness among the villagers. They now have water-sufficient and tanker-free villages, farmers

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possessing enough work to avoid migration, democratic gram sabhas and reduced malnourishment cases. These case studies are a highlight of the book as each one of them throws light on the capacities of an empowered public.

Stemming from a revolution in the field of social work with reference to voluntary organisations, it is not surprising to find a paper on the role of voluntary social workers in resolving water woes of the renowned Mumbai slums. The author highlights the innate skills possessed by the professional social workers and compares them with the 'leaders' who have emerged from the local communities itself. These voluntary 'social workers' work solely to give back to their society and therefore, have a better grasp of the situations surrounding them. Bringing clean drinking water to the suburbs of Mumbai (Mrinal Gorhe), water-shed management programs to heal a drought-prone area (Anna Hazare), the very popular Chipko Movement (Sundarlal Bahuguna) and Medha Patkar's establishment of National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM) on dams have all found a special mention in this paper.

There is another aspect focussing on the mismanagement of water resources that leads to water pollution and thereby causing a massive disease burden. These papers have scarcity of water at its core and discuss about the deadly flow of industrial effluents and untreated sewage that pollute the water and contaminate it to a level that there is barely anything left for consumption. Due to this scarcity of clean water, nearly 18,000 children die every day, mostly from preventable diseases. The author presents many more such statistical figures that are staggering and make the reader wonder about the big river-cleaning initiatives that act as baits in every party's manifesto but never take off.

What was once considered as the source of all life in the Vedas by the seers is now divided between race, gender, caste, class and religion. The author talks about the Rig Veda that has theories on water being the reason behind the evolution of the universe. However, it is disheartening to see privatisation and defective management leading to minimal access to water, especially for the marginalised sections of the society. It can be compared to another chapter that highlights populist economy and political responses in water sector. The author brings forward the fact that although the Maharashtra government receives up to two crore rupees each year for sanitation drives and eco-friendly mechanisms, merely 1.88 percent of this amount is used on watershed development and other ecologically insensitive ventures. With so much money flowing in and the Vedas to support the innate importance of water, it is a shame that we are the victims of disastrous

water management schemes, corrupt officials, weak governing systems and unwilling politicians. It is a result of the same insouciant approach of our state that the farmers of our country end up choosing suicide as a recourse. Like the author points out, the farmers are always considered to be brave men but it is the severe water mismanagement by the power holders during a drought that pushes them to the brink of suicide every year.

The paper titled 'Water Policy: A Human Rights Approach' receives a special mention as it is an interesting read for social workers and minority activists. It shows how Dalits, the most marginalised section, are denied access to water primarily because of the caste system that is suffused into the Indian society. Besides the Dalits, the issues related to water stretch to another vulnerable group: women. In a feudal and patriarchal country like ours, it is an apathy creating fact that women are discriminated against, even for water. Needless to say, their health gets affected and they have to struggle to gain access to this basic resource. The author insists on the pressing need for a gender-sensitive approach to water management to ensure women's access to safe, sufficient and affordable water for their domestic and productive requirements.

This book is a must read for all stakeholders in the field of social work and not just students pursuing graduate and post-graduate programs. The papers presented are a reminder of what our society lacks while planning for social and economic development. It also discerns among the varying degrees of availability and accessibility of the natural resources in our country. The compilation of the papers in the book has been done after a careful and deliberate appraisal of what would bring out the issue in the best possible manner. Overall, 'Political Economy of Water' is a good tool for comprehending and critically analysing the bare facts concerning one of the most critical resources available. It has the potential to act as ammunition for water activists fighting for positive policies in the direction of safe and clean drinking water for all. It cannot be emphasised enough that water is fundamental to life and health and it is a blatant truth that water is becoming scarce with each passing year. As social workers, our focus should be on its conservation and we should create systems and mechanisms that fulfil the people's need for water and maintain the groundwater level as well. We may not have age-old reservoirs anymore but we can surely develop viable social work intervention models that help us revive what the Vedic seers considered as the source of all being.