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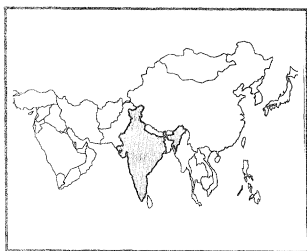
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Women and water in rural Maharashtra

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1. Agarwal, A. and S. Narain (1985), "Women and natural resources", *Social Action* Vol. 35.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE PAPER CONSIDERS what water scarcity means for poor rural women and how responses to such a scarcity can address other aspects of women's struggle. It illustrates this theme through a description of the inadequacies in government response to water scarcity in the Pune district of the state of Maharashtra in India, especially in understanding and addressing the needs of those who were responsible for water collection (a task undertaken by women). It also describes the community based 'water councils' set up in many villages which improved poorer groups' access to water but also gave no special consideration to women's water needs and rights. The final section discusses how a scarcity of water and other ecological resources have the potential for both encouraging and hindering women's movements fighting for access to production conditions (since women have little or no control over land and water for crop production) as well as for new self-definitions which break existing oppressive moulds.

In 1972, a male member of India's Planning Commission admitted in a public lecture that if men had to fetch water, all the country's 230,000 villages would have had drinking water after 25 years of planned economic development.⁽¹⁾ These last years of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1991) is a good time to make known to those who take Indian rural women for granted the facts about their condition of life and their struggles - a subject which is inextricably connected with that of water.

Access to water has always been an important symbol in Indian society. Water signifies many things - a poor woman's forgotten dream, a politician's promise, the government's benevolent intentions and its not-so-benevolent planning, the essence and expression of a Brahmin's caste purity, and a rich farmer's wealth and power. Yet water has not been given the attention it deserves. State policies gloss over the issue and the Planning Commission has pushed the date for providing water to all the villages further into the future. Even ecologists and feminist critics of development do not dwell much on water, save for brief references in discussions of general issues such as drought and deforestation or the invisibility of women's work. This is significant because drinking and household water is a "women's issue" wherever water is collected with difficulty and effort - be it queuing at 2.00 am at the lift pump in an urban slum or walking five miles a day over difficult terrain in the countryside.

This paper is a study of water scarcity and what this scarcity means for poor, rural women in the Pune district of Maharashtra. The

2. Editors' note: see Bhatt, Chandni Prasad (1990), "The Chipko Andolan: forest conservation based on people's power" in *Environment and Urbanization* Vol. 2, No. 1, April, pp. 7-18 for more details of the Chipko movement.

3. "Although grass roots struggles are seemingly local episodes, their reverberations are global in import, if only because survival on the local plane is impinged upon by forces which are non-local in origin local struggles are part of the process of global transformation currently underway." - Shiva, V. (1986), "Ecology movements in India", *Alternatives* Vol. 10, pp. 256-257.

4. This term (rather than the more common "sexual division of labour") is used because the "sexual division of labour" has come to be understood in a somewhat static way. By switching the term around, the author hopes to address the fluid, changing and culture specific tasks which men and women perform in any given society.

5. Leacock E. and H. Safa (editors) (1986), *Women's Work: the Division of Labour by Gender*, Bergin and Garvey, New York; Sen, G. (editor) (1987), *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions*, Monthly Review Press, New York; Beneria, L. (1982), *Women and Development*, Praeger, New York; Mazumdar, V. (1982), "Another development with women; a view from Asia", *Development Dialogue*, No.2; Tinker I. (editor) (1990), *Persistent Inequalities*, Oxford University Press; Dube, L., E. Leacock and S. Ardener (editors) (1986) *Visibility and Power*, Oxford University Press, Bombay.

6. See note 1, page 308.

fundamental premise is that neither the situation of rural women nor the problem of drinking water (and ecological conditions generally) can be understood without reference to one another. How women relate to water and water scarcity, and how the social construction of water scarcity is itself based on images of women, are different aspects of the same general process. "Drought" is a social construct that can be used to understand (or conceal) a varied set of phenomena that have natural or social origins or both. For example, women cannot "experience the drought" but they can and do experience acute scarcity of drinking water. Similarly, the women of the Chipko movement did not "experience development" but rather the shortage of cooking fuel, and recurring floods during the monsoon rains.⁽²⁾ It is thus through a focus on specific, local issues, as experienced by women themselves, that their non-local origins and implications can be better understood.⁽³⁾

Water scarcity is one of the most important of these issues. Water is a condition of production whether used for irrigation or for household purposes. Yet the division of sexual labour, the low status associated with women's work, and government apathy about the conditions under which human life is produced, mean that the production of crops is regarded as more important than the production and sustenance of life.⁽⁴⁾ Therefore, a focus on women's role in the production and maintenance of life, is a way of questioning and subverting misplaced priorities and raising the question of how women's access to and control over water and other production conditions can be achieved.

II. WOMEN, ECOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

TWO BODIES OF literature contain information about rural women in India - those on women and development and those on ecology and ecological movements. The former has made progress in understanding the nature and implications of the division of sexual labour as well as the impact of economic development on women's lives. Feminist studies in India (and the Third World generally) have successfully redefined the concept of work to include women's work.⁽⁵⁾

Besides agricultural work, women are solely responsible for collecting fuel, fodder and water for their households. These tasks consume between four and six hours a day, depending on the region. In recent years, depletion and destruction of resources have made these tasks extremely difficult, often costing women their health and sometimes their lives. One woman suffered a prolapsed uterus because she had to carry too much water too far during the drought in Madras in 1983. Since there was no one to help her, she continued to carry water after her operation.⁽⁶⁾ The drinking water situation is generally grim. Walking several miles a day to get water, then returning home with two or three large full pots takes from three to five hours, depending on the terrain and the proximity of the water source. The water available to poor women is of poor quality. In Kutasa village in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, for example, polluted water has led to an increase in infant mortality in recent years. Furthermore, it is harder to get firewood suitable for cooking and women have had to use biomass products such as cowdung cakes, waste crops, and weeds for fuel. These sources of energy are not only inefficient but also unhealthy. The toxic fumes emitted during cooking were identified in Gujarat as the main cause of

7. Battiwala, S. (1983), "Women and cooking energy", unpublished manuscript.

8. Shiva (1986), see note 3; Omvedt, G. (1987), "India's green movements", *Race and Class*, Vol 28, No. 4, pages 29-38; Parajuli, P. (1989), "When subalterns speak: the politics and pedagogy of ecological movements in Jharkhand, India", manuscript; Agarwal and Narain (1985) see note 1.

respiratory disease, a leading health problem for women and girls in India.⁽⁷⁾

The general finding of the literature on women and development is that the backbreaking work of women and the division of sexual labour are the primary causes of women's subordination in the family, the community, and society. These studies have established the connection not only between the invisibility of rural women and their work, but also their marginalization in the planning process.

One drawback of this literature is that it tends to divide women's lives into two different spheres, production and reproduction, or "work" and "family life". Because the focus of development studies is "women's work", what women do becomes mixed with who they are and what they want and desire. This kind of descriptive research, which concentrates on women's "roles" in the labour force and household, has little room to take up issues such as domestic, state, religious and social violence, or issues of caste and class, except where these issues impinge directly on women's work or family life. Hardly any material on women's world views, aspirations, and goals, and how these have changed historically, can be found in women and development studies. Another drawback is that such studies are centred on a search for causal, even unilinear, relationships between two entities, "women" and "development".

The second body of literature, that on ecology and ecology movements in India, also provides valuable accounts of the destruction of natural resources and its connections with women's lives.⁽⁸⁾ This research first appeared during the Chipko movement, and grew thereafter, which is probably the reason why it attempts to transcend a "victim" approach by describing women and the poor as potential harbingers of a new era of an ecologically conscious existence.

These and other works on ecological degradation in India acknowledge that women are the worst affected by the destruction of natural resources. But they do not provide specific information about water scarcity, other than to point out that it is widespread, and that it is more difficult for women to collect water. There is a tendency to consider household water scarcity as an effect of drought.

The main recurrent theme of these writings is that the social costs of ecological scarcity in India are borne by the poor, the lowly and the marginalized. The main beneficiaries of "development schemes" are the state, the multinational corporations, and urban and rural entrepreneurs.

Writings on India's ecology and ecological movements depict a conflict that is centred on the use of nature for profit versus the reclamation of nature for survival. Contrasts between the forces of capitalism and the needs of the people are sharply drawn: the destruction of humans and nature versus sustenance and survival. Such conflicts are also represented as struggles between two world views, one based on hegemonic, western science, the other on indigenous knowledge and ecological consciousness.

Precisely at this point, there is some ambiguity. No one explains how "ecological consciousness" is acquired, whether naturally by rural people simply because of their precarious existence, and/or because of the severe and direct threats arising from ecological disasters, or in other ways. And once acquired, can this consciousness be regarded as permanent and unchanging? The point has actually been made that when survival is threatened, poor people, including women, may also become ecologically destructive, either indirectly, by seeking employment in the cash economy responsible for

ecological destruction, or directly, for example, by being forced to uproot plants to stave off hunger. There is also the practical question of where women and the poor in general, working 16 hours a day, find time and energy to mobilize, organize, and engage in sustained struggle against ecologically destructive forces.

It is fair to conclude that while the literature on women and development is distinctly pessimistic, the emergent writings on ecological movements are often characterized by a kind of romantic idealism. This article tries to steer clear of both tendencies, and to focus instead on giving a more accurate picture of the complex relation between women, development, and natural resources.

III. DECONSTRUCTING WATER SCARCITY, RECONSTRUCTING RURAL WOMEN

MAHARASHTRA IS A highly populated and politically important state in western India. The birthplace of the Indian renaissance during the 18th century, as well as of key political revolutionaries during India's freedom struggle, Maharashtra has a political and historical legacy which is evident in the frequency of peasant riots and the abundance of leftist and women's organizations. These protests have been closely linked with ecological disasters. Between 1970 and 1973, years of severe drought and famine, rural men and women were very active in organizing themselves, and the strength of sheer numbers was soon evident. Over five million people were involved in the rural workers' strike at that time, which compelled the government to create employment and to pass a law granting equal wages for equal work of men and women. Since then, despite the steady growth of mass-based organizations such as the *Shramik Sanghatana* (Toilers' Association) and the *Shetkari Sanghatana* (Peasants' Association), and autonomous women's organizations and environmental groups, ecological struggles in Maharashtra have been sporadic and issue-based. Likewise, the struggles of poor women for water have been confined within their immediate locality. The scarcity of drinking water remains acute in more than one third of the state of Maharashtra, but still the issue has not been able to command the attention it deserves.

The main reason relates to the way that water scarcity is perceived by the state. Government documents and state policies explain water scarcity (and drought) as arising from "natural causes". Attributing water scarcity to "natural causes" is an effective way for the government to absolve itself of any serious responsibility other than the provision of short term relief measures. The implication is that, if water scarcity is "naturally" caused, it will be resolved "naturally" as well. In general, the attitude of the government is apathetic and fatalistic. A government official, who did not wish to be named, told me that the solution to the scarcity of ecological resources was ultimately in the hands of God.

The government's approach to the issue of water scarcity is extremely fragmented. Maharashtra's Departments of Rural Development, Irrigation and Water Supply are not only situated in different locations but are funded differently and have different priorities. This lack of an integrated approach to planning makes it possible for the state to ignore connections between the increase in tubewells of rich peasants and the drying up of common wells: increases in sugar cane

cultivation and shortages of household water; and encouragement to "cooperative" sugar mills and the formation of a powerful social and political elite.

The issue of drinking and household water receives low priority not only by the state government but also by the central government. In the water supply schemes both at the central and state levels, water scarcity is not regarded as seriously as crop failure. Household water scarcity is categorically subsumed under concerns about drought; and, by a backward chain of logic, policies formulated to tackle drought are assumed to also address drinking water scarcity.

In their elaborate plans for the provision of water supply, neither the central nor the state governments mention women at all. The census does not include time spent by women to get fodder or water as "work". As the boundaries of state jurisdiction are currently drawn, neither rural women nor drinking water scarcity are subjects of concern in their own right. As mere appendages of larger categorical entities, household water shortage is conflated with drought, while concerns about women (both rural and urban) are often coupled with those about children and the disabled.

In effect, the state does not acknowledge the existence of women, especially rural women, in any other light than as child-producing objects or machines. The same patriarchal values which lead individual men to ignore the contributions of women in their households (at the same time being aware themselves of their own dependence on these contributions) form the cultural and ideological background for state policies that are anti-woman.

IV. GRASSROOTS ALTERNATIVES: FROM FACT TO FICTION

THE WATER ISSUE has been raised periodically by environmental activists and women's groups. This section discusses one of these efforts, that of the *Pani Panchayat* (Water Council), and of some women's organizations in Pune district.

The *Pani Panchayat* was the idea of V.B. Salunke, a Pune based engineer who was deeply moved by the plight of the rural poor. The drought of 1972 killed a number of villagers in the district, and adversely affected crops and trees for the next several years. Salunke moved to a village called Naigaon, starting his water council experiment there. Since then, it has been adopted by 50 other villages. The Naigaon experiment consisted of lifting water from the nearest water site with the help of electric pumps, and then transporting it to the village by means of canals and pipes so that it could be shared by the villagers. Salunke attempted to achieve not only a technological transformation, but also a social one, based on egalitarian principles for the equitable distribution of water.

The Water Council was composed of one member from each family (nearly always male) and was based on the following principles:

1. The project was financed partly by a percentage of the villagers' money, payable at once or through fixed instalments.
2. Sugarcane and other high water use cash crops were not to be grown.
3. All members of the Council had water rights, even if they were landless.

4. These rights were not transferable, and unused water rights, as in the case of a family moving away from the village, would revert to the Council.
5. Regardless of the number of acres owned by each member, s/he was allotted water just sufficient to feed her/himself and the family. This worked out to one-half of an acre of irrigated land per person (equivalent to one fifth of a hectare). A family of five would be entitled to two and one-half acres (one hectare) of irrigated land.

These principles have done much to ensure that water is shared equally. Women benefit from the scheme as they do not have to walk miles to get water. It would appear that a movement like *Pani Panchayat* would have the potential of helping women gain access to production conditions and in recognizing them as producers. However, the ideology of the Water Council does not acknowledge rural women in their own right. Women appear as "family" of the male members of the Council. Traditionally, only men can own land; and, under the Water Council scheme, only men can hold water rights. Although landless men can have water rights, women, who are traditionally landless, cannot. Moreover, the workload of women that have adopted the Council plan has not lessened. In Shinewadi, for example, women reported to me that their workload has not decreased at all because the men had delegated some of their own tasks to women, arguing that since women did not have to spend time fetching water, they had a lot of "free time" at their disposal.

Women's organizations such as the *Stree Aadhar Kendra* (Women's Foundation Centre) and the *Samajwadi Mahila Sabha* (Socialist Women's Organization) are doing extensive work in rural areas. Women activists have a profound knowledge of water scarcity in their own regions, the manner in which it affects rural women, and of grassroots efforts to overcome drought. The critical question is whether to focus on general issues or on specific issues which reinforce women's subordinate status in society. Women's organizations currently tend to focus on the latter. They do not deny the interconnectedness between women and ecology, but assume that women's awareness of themselves and their oppression as women is a prerequisite to empowering them to struggle for access to water.

By contrast, a more dialectical approach to women and water scarcity is portrayed in *Pani* (Water) a film made by Sumitra Bhawe. *Pani* depicts the unified struggle of women to get a well dug in their village. The village is typically drought-ridden while irresponsible development policies have decreased ground water levels. The village well has dried up, and the women have to walk far over hilly areas to obtain water. A woman is battered by her husband for attempting to ration his use of water, and is forced by him to get more water after sundown. The woman sets off with her pots and her six-year-old daughter, but in the dark the child slips, falls into the dry well, and is badly injured. Following this incident, Kushakaki, a sensible village elder, mobilizes other women, and the struggle for drinking water begins. The contours of the struggle are finely drawn, beginning with the strong, silent stare of a heavily pregnant woman when admonished by her husband for sending his old mother to fetch water, to the sarcastic exchanges between women and the men ("if men had to get water, a well would have been dug here long ago"), and culminating in the victory of both Kushakaki's knowledge of her terrain ("I know that there is water right here. This is where we have to dig.") and the unified struggle that the women are able to offer. In

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a brief 30 minutes, this amazing film manages to depict a number of struggles - between men and women, between women and village authorities, between women and the state, between activists and the state - and also to highlight the interconnectedness of the themes.

V. IDENTITIES AND IDEOLOGIES: EXPLORING WOMEN-WATER CONNECTIONS

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN people's identity and natural resources can be traced back to nature worship in Ancient India during the Vedic Age. Some gods like fire and air were invariably male, while others, like water, were female. The easy interchange between the properties of humans and nature suggests a recognition of a symbiotic existence with nature, and people's awareness of themselves as another natural form.

The water element in nature has been associated with female qualities. *Ganga* (Ganges), the primal source of water, was regarded as the eternal purifier, and the provider of salvation, a form of bridge between this world and the next. The water element was also associated with great power, being the source of both creation and destruction. Fetching water for household use as an activity closely linked with women's daily lives is deeply embedded in Indian folklore, mythology and literature. Numerous references can be found in popular, regional folk songs and dances, and religious stories, in which bringing water is depicted as a wonderful and liberating task. In contemporary times, the growing alienation between people and nature is clearly manifest in the adverse conditions under which women have to obtain water, and also in the lack of an integrated approach to the question of water scarcity. Fetching water is neither a liberating task, nor does it ensure power to women within or outside their homes.

How then do women relate to water under present conditions, which are far from liberating? What kind of links can we make between the transformation of ecological conditions and changes in women's choices and strategies?

Since the water element has been associated with purity and purification, water has served to make the class and caste distinctions more rigid in rural areas. In rural Maharashtra, as in most other parts of India, class and caste positions often go together. In times of drought, the awareness of caste and class privileges, and the associated discrimination, are intensified. In drought-ridden villages which are supplied with water by trucks once every three days or so, it is not uncommon for the trucks to go to the house of the sarpanch (headman) first, then to other prominent characters of the village, before it reaches the Dalit vasti (settlement of the downtrodden). Water scarcity is created (or intensified) primarily by the use of caste and class power by richer farmers. Thus, although women normally have the responsibility of collecting water for their households, when drinking water is scarce, it comes under the control of men of higher castes and/or classes. Gender distinctions, like those of caste or class, are intensified, along with women's awareness of their gender.

Another way in which water scarcity transforms gender relations is through male out-migration and desertion. Patriarchal relations and the low position of women in the caste and class hierarchies deny them these options. Instead, the social structure of the village gets

transformed, since women often have to plough the land, and manage a large, extended family.

Women's relations with other women are also altered by ecological scarcity. Longer hours spent collecting water can mean less time for women, and the water site as a common meeting place gradually disappears. Furthermore, changes in ecological conditions are linked to changes in the relationship of women to their communities. The Kashtakari Sanghatana in Dahanu, a tribal grassroots organization, has recently connected the revival of the horrible anti-women practice of witch-hunting to deforestation in the area. Excessive deforestation has resulted in the disappearance of several medicinal herbs, plants and roots, which has increased disease and infant mortality. Deaths and disease are being attributed to the practice of "witchcraft" by women, especially widows and deserted wives. Campaigns to hunt and kill such women are currently underway.

As in the case of migration, access to water for women can imply both a liberation and a form of upward mobility. In Shinewadi, a village under the Pani Panchayat scheme, it appeared that the Shinewadi women's presentations of self were less deferential and more confident than those of women in other areas experiencing water scarcity. Another activist helping with the acquisition and instalment of borewells in villages near Karjat noticed a similar change in the poor women of that area. She told me that access to water had made women more confident and outgoing. The other change which occurred in this village was the feeling of cleanliness and superiority experienced by some after they had access to water.

VI. CONCLUSION

THIS PAPER HAS outlined some of the connections between changes in ecological conditions and women's identities. Alienation from production conditions deeply affects the coping methods, life-views, and struggles of women. Since the process of alienation of women from water resources is both slow and invisible, drastic or overnight transformations cannot be expected.

Struggles of women to gain access to ecological resources, or to escape the trauma of ecological disasters, have the potential to enhance women's awareness of their oppression as women. The acquisition of gender consciousness is strongly related to the struggle for ecological resources; often women have to confront and defy the men within their own families and communities when they participate in these struggles. The film *Pani* illustrates this clearly: once the women mobilize to have a well dug in their village, the wrath of the menfolk descends on them. Daily, in the course of their work, they are harassed. Digging a well is ridiculed as a whimsical and illogical notion. Another constraint on women's participation in struggle is the perception of women's defiance as a moral violation of "true womanhood". Activism on the part of women, especially without the involvement of men, threatens to divest them of their identity as women.

Yet, despite their oppression, rural women still maintain real and potential sources of power which they can use against men. The sources of women's power, and the forms in which they are manifested, change with ecological conditions. And these conditions in turn, change depending on the level and forms of women's power. Ecological crises provide not only the pretext and context for struggles by women redefining their identities but also much of the content of

these struggles. Scarcity of water and other ecological resources have the potential for both encouraging and hindering movements of women fighting for access to production conditions, as well as for new self-definitions which break oppressive capitalist and patriarchal moulds.