Special Issue

“Urbanization & periurbanization: Challenges for water governance in south Asia”
Guest Editor

Dr. Vishal Narain
*Public Policy and Governance at MDI, Management Development Institute, Gurgaon.*

Dr. Vishal Narain is Associate Professor, Public Policy and Governance, MDI, Management Development Institute, Gurgaon. He holds a PhD from Wageningen University, the Netherlands. His academic interests are in the inter-disciplinary analyses of water policy and institutions, urbanization and rural-urban transformations, water rights and irrigation reform. His research has been published in several peer-reviewed journals like Water Policy, Water International, Environment and Urbanization and Mountain Research and Development.

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Neoliberalism and Water: Complicating the Story of Reforms in Maharashtra

Priya Sangameswaran, Orient longman, 2014.

Aditya Kumar Singh
Student, MA (SDP), TERI University

The book under review is an analysis of the complication of reforms in the water sector in Maharashtra. Priya Sangameswaran, the author, is Assistant Professor, Development Studies, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. She holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, U.S.A.

This book illustrates the remoulding of urban and rural drinking water supply and irrigation with reference to various sub-sectors and institutions in the state of Maharashtra. The author has tried to describe the processes of water governance and their relationship with the economy. They are analysed through a prism of neoliberalism, which works in combination with other processes, namely, decentralization, commercialization, commodification, and pricing.

The book comprises six chapters. The introductory chapter presents the data on which the book is based. The author starts with a birds-eye view of the discourses on water and development – GEM (Global Environmental Management) discourses, water sector reforms, their key elements, and general features.

The latter half of the chapter is on the principal concern, water reforms in Maharashtra. It touches on each sector individually: urban, rural, and irrigation. While providing the reader with a holistic outlook of the scenario, the author has also given critical remarks about it. She demonstrates the links between reforms and neoliberalism, and how neoliberalism and water reforms create a convoluted environment.

The author uses an anthropological approach with a ‘focus on processes, meanings, and subjective dimensions’, although it was ‘not possible to do ethnographies (in the strict sense of the word)’ (p. 50). The primary data collection was carried out between November 2006 and May 2008, and follow-ups were done until 2010. Developments after that are explained in a postscript.

Chapter two describes the shift to 24x7 water supply in cities and piped water in villages in Maharashtra. The author compares the waterscape of rural and urban spaces, generating an appealing understanding about the similarities and differences as well as the relationship between the two. She highlights the importance of political support in the success and failure of certain schemes. For instance, the BJP-Shiv Sena party rallied on the slogan of ‘Tanker Mukti’ (Freedom from tankers), and by 2000 Maharashtra was tanker-free and moved towards piped water.

Priya Sangameswaran describes the important strands like community, entrepreneurialism, vision of development, and their varying perspectives of water management in urban and rural contexts.

Neoliberal water reforms are demand driven. She explains this through an interesting case study from a village in Shahapur Taluka of Thane district. Under the Jalswarajya Scheme, community lunches were organized for the purpose of capacity building, but the villagers started getting their food from home and used the lunch money for the contributions to be made by them. The author argues that, firstly, they were not closely knit with each other and, secondly, the initial contribution at individual level was against their understanding of community living. (p. 65).

Chapter three focuses on discourses of self-sufficiency, depoliticization, and expertise, and the implications of these discourses for (processes of) decentralization. The three discourses are discussed individually.

The author explains that any number of inferences derived from the stress on self-sufficiency are not necessarily problematic, and changes have to be evaluated as much in symbolic terms as in material terms. In this context she refers to Coelho (2006): ‘the policy of eliminating public stand posts that was justified by a high-ranking official of the state government in terms of a more ambitious vision of promoting private water connection and private toilets in slums’ (p. 94).
Secondly, the author points out critically that desirability of attempts to be ‘apolitical’ is itself questionable, that either the decentralized institutions can co-opt with local powers or a newer form of politics will develop.

Thirdly, knowledge has inherent power dimensions and expertise is a created hierarchy within the knowledge domain of water reforms. As the author explains: ‘The experts were often young graduates of Masters in Social Work programmes’. At times, there were also people from other backgrounds (p. 113) and ‘the sector reforms in water have led to a change in the character of experts who now range from old government actors to newer private actors, and from those who focus on technical aspects of water provision to those dealing with its social and economic aspects’ (p. 117).

The author argues that the discourses of self-sufficiency, depoliticization, and expertise are not smooth and simple. Instead, they will burden rural and urban bodies with all the responsibilities of a project, since they may not have sufficient resources or mechanisms to provide basic services. Another tricky issue is to find the right combination between the decentralizing and regulatory tendency, as well as the division of labour and accountability. Lastly, decentralization has been more widely accepted, despite its fewer benefits, than centralization.

Chapter four brings out the other important processes that are part of water sector reform (i.e. commercialization, commodification, and pricing). These processes represent the most disputable facet of reforms in the water sector as well as the one most closely associated with neoliberal ideologies.

In tying the three ideas together, Priya Sangameswaran concludes the chapter by arguing convincingly that neo-liberalization has left nations with the dominant ideology of water as something that is commercial, and needs to be commoditized and priced. This hegemony has led to a particular perspective of water at a symbolic level as well.

Chapter five highlights the necessity for a more nuanced approach to privatization. It further draws attention to the difference in old and new forms of privatization and their interaction with newly emerging processes. The author explains that the problem of privatization discourse is the projection of itself as the only means of providing affordable water supply. It negates the discussion of other alternatives. In her opinion, the relationship between the public and private in the context of neoliberal development would also necessarily be complicated.

The understanding of such complexity is carried forward to the reading of chapter six, where the author concludes in uncertainty about the developments in the reforms of the water sector: ‘Whether such a more nuanced and progressive politics comes up in all instances of neoliberalisation of water and whether a new language and discourse of alternatives develops as well as what kind of a re-formed water sector these would lead to, remains to be seen’ (p. 279).

Much to its credit, the book provides both the eagle’s and worm’s eye view. It is indeed a timely contribution. However, the book leaves much to be desired in the style of writing. Information-based text can perhaps be written in a lively and lucid style. It is important to keep in mind that the target audience is referring to this book mainly in order to gain information and understanding. The use of simple language and comprehensible explanation of a complexity is indispensable.