

## **Access To Water And Gender Rights In India: Contextualising The Various Debates Through The Study Of A Mountain Village In Sikkim**

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### **Introduction:**

Principle 3 of the Dublin Principles 1992<sup>1</sup> recognises the important role women play in the provision, management and safeguarding of water all over the world. The crucial role of women in making provisions for drinking, sanitation and other domestic purposes in households in rural India is also a very well known fact. Due to the lack of proper access, it is also well known that women travel many kilometres and for the greater part of a day to ensure the fulfilment of the daily domestic requirement of water.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, while it is the prerogative of the government to ensure that the population in general do not suffer from lack of water, it is also expected that such initiatives be taken keeping in mind the difficulties women face due to lack of proper access to water. In spite of these issues being well known, the Draft National Water Policy, 2012 do not recognise the needs and difficulties of women with respect to access to water.

In this paper, the author has looked into the various debates that exist in India with respect to the right to water of women in India and tried to analyse these debates through a field study of women in a mountain village.<sup>3</sup> The aim is to understand whether any differences occur in the difficulties faced by women in the context of a change in topography with some alteration in cultural underpinnings. Although the study is not representative of all mountain areas and its women, it has yielded interesting insight into some common characteristics of such areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development , 1992 as adopted in the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE), Dublin, Ireland, organised on 26–31 January 1992

<sup>2</sup> See generally Kuntala Lahiri-Dutta, “*Water, Women and Rights*” in Ramaswamy R. Iyer (ed.) *Water and the Laws in India* , 275

<sup>3</sup> For an important insight into role of mountain women in traditional mountain communities and the scope of their involvement in development of mountain areas, see ICIMOD Report No. 57, 2010 titled “*Gender Perspectives in Mountain Development: New Challenges and Innovative Approaches*”.

### **Methodology:**

The author has used doctrinal research for conducting a literature review of the major existing narratives to form a background of the study. Subsequently, the unstructured interview technique was used to conduct a qualitative study of the data collected and compare them with the narratives understood through the doctrinal study. The interview was conducted in two villages in South Sikkim. The villages of Ahley Ward (no. 4) and Dumigaon Ward(No. 5) fell under the administrative Block of Assangthang Sambung (GPO) in the Namchi South District area. The villagers primarily belong to the ethnic mongoloid groups of Rais, Mangars, Lepchas and Bhutias with a few families that belonged to the scheduled castes and following Hindu and Buddhist religions.

These villages were selected due to their proximity to the town of Namchi, which is the administrative headquarters of the South District and which has historically had water access issues. These villages were also selected on the basis of their lack of modern State supply of water as opposed to adjoining villages. Much of these issues will be discussed later.

### **Preliminary Framework Adapted After the First Field Visit With Respect to Water Access:**

The villagers were interviewed specifically with respect to access to water for drinking and other domestic purposes. In much of the households, there were state provided facilities of water harvesting tanks for collection of water which the villagers used primarily for washing, irrigation of kitchen and corner gardens, feeding cattle, sanitation and other purposes except drinking. The water was considered not safe for drinking because it was rain water and fell stagnant for a long period of time during storage. They had also not tried any methods of water purification although they spoke of some villages near by using alum and lime to sanitise the harvested rain water for drinking.

The villages had also been provided with newly set up by the Agriculture and Horticulture Department to harvest rain water for irrigating vegetable and fruit gardens/orchards.

Hence, the provision with respect to drinking water was the most neglected. The villagers informed that with respect to drinking water, the State leaves it upon the villagers to find a source of drinking water and then puts the onus on the villagers to apply for a network of ensuring the supply. The first village of Ahley Ward had not been able to create/find a source creating difficulties for at least twenty six families living above the level of the only *Dhara* source in the whole mountain slope. However, the families below the *Dhara* source did not face difficulties as they used personal plastic CVC pipes to channelize water to their individual homes. Hence, the focus of the interview became of the difficulties of women above the *Dhara* source.

With respect to the other village in Dumigaon Ward, which had about seventy six families and of which about ten were interviewed, the village had the same nature of State provided provisions with respect to rain water harvesting. However, the village had water sources at frequent intervals towards a downward slope of the mountain. Hence, the whole village, was somehow able to manage drinking water through the use of personal CVC pipes. Also, the village had a perennial source of water at the top of mountains in the form of two *Kuas* namely *Dumi Kua* and *Bar Kua* of which the latter supplied the major quantity of drinking water.

Both the villages however faced similar patters with respect to availability of water on a seasonal basis with the months of January till about May being the harshest period when natural water sources in the mountains dry up due to depletion of the water table. It is in these periods that the debates of water access and management and role of women could have been studied best. However, the interview in the village of Ahley Ward revealed substantial findings which the author felt did not vary with those in the harsh periods of water scarcity because the villagers have to depend on the *Dhara* all year round for drinking water as well as the use of collected water for sanitation and other domestic purposes. Much of the findings were similar to the findings relating to water availability and access of people of Dumigaon Ward during the periods of water scarcity through natural sources.

Hence, the comparision of the existing debates with respect to role of women and water access was made by highlighting some major issues with respect to drinking water in the following areas:

1. Collection of water:
2. Use and management:
3. Role in policy decisions relating to making provisions for water both through traditional methods and formal methods through the intervention of the State:

### **Contextualising The Gender Narrative of Indian Women in General in Respect of Mountain Women:**

#### **1. Collection of water:**

Studies of role of women in collection of water done in the plain areas of India project a traditional picture of a long line of women in colourful clothes said to have walked miles in search of portable water. The interview as well as observation of these two villages revealed that in these mountain villages, collection of water is almost an equally divided task with no gender differentiation. Much of the cause for this was relegated by the villagers to be to the mountain topography wherein men are able to cover the distance faster and with a bigger load. Hence, if a woman made a trip to the *Dhara* to and fro carrying a ten litre *gagri*, a man was more efficient because he could carry two at a time.

Hence, the responsibility with respect to collection was of availability of time free from daily subsistence work, farm work and other commitments, regardless of gender. However, keeping in mind the physiological differences between men and women and the still persisting traditional domestic role of these women, their workload did not seem less in totality. Hence their relief depended on the good nature and benevolence of the male adult members of the household.

However, the interviews did reveal a section which was a casualty to the difficult access to and availability of water- children. Most households had school going children and because some were too young to help in farming or in the kitchen, the responsibility of water collection fell on their young shoulders. Regardless of gender, children in these villages were responsible for collection of water before leaving for school and after coming back from school. Regardless of the economic status of their parents within the village community, children are expected to stock up water to be used by the parents for domestic use. They found recycled, five litres plastic Jerry Cans the as the most convenient modes of water carriage for drinking during periods

of the day which could have been spent on study, preparation for school curriculum or play. Children travel an average of six kilometres up and down the mountain to collect water.

## **2. Use and management:**

Women in India have been delegated the traditional role of not just collection of drinking water but also its use and management. This is because women do most of the domestic work and hence, ensuring economical use of water falls on their domain. This also includes educating children about water use.

In this study, the findings were mixed in this aspect rather than being entirely projected towards women. Due to the active involvement of women, men and children in water collection, the knowledge about its efficient use and management in daily use is prevalent because collection of water in a mountainous topography affects the decisions of all. However, in comparison between men and women, it is the women who still ensure that water supply in the household subsists and this is continued through the use of the labor of children first. Hence it is not entirely the prerogative of the women to manage and educate about the use of water but a collective responsibility learnt through knowledge about its difficult access.

## **3. Role in policy decisions relating to making provisions for water both through traditional methods and formal methods through the intervention of the State:**

It is also an accepted fact that exclusion of women in policy making as well as their involvement in the management of water as well as in its access in India in general. This has been attributed to the lower status women enjoy in Indian households and the traditional roles they are relegated to within the households. Hence, their involvement in matters outside the spheres of the domestic domain is very little and insignificant. Hence, when it comes to issues involving the mobilisation of access to water in the village level as well as their active involvement in ensuring better drinking water facilities is almost absent.

Within the framework of traditional methods of access to water, women have been actively involved. Even in mountain villages, the study revealed that resourcing water from natural sources has been the prerogative of women too. Although in the villages, the sources of drinking water has been in existence since a long period of

time with the villages having evolved around them, women have been actively participating in ensuring their sustenance. Mountain Women have been most instrumental in preservation of these sources through the observance of festivals like the *Nag Panchami*, *Sansari Puja*, *Indra Puja* etc., wherein the water sources are worshipped, keeping intact the traditional observance of sacredness of water as a resource, even in the historical absence of positive water laws.<sup>4</sup>

State monopoly in providing networks of drinking water facilities has excluded these women to a huge extent because representation of women in policy making by Panchayat and District level bodies involved in water related issues is non-formal. Infact, these villages lack any formal water management bodies and any representation in water issues to government officials is made by male members. This creates a huge possibility of exclusion of gender sensitive issues as is seen in the case of provisions of rain water harvesting. For e.g., the rain water harvesting tanks are set up by male *mistris*/masons and any breakage or maintenance work is difficult for women to undertake in case of any damage. Hence, there is a dependence on male labour for the same.<sup>5</sup>

Although women and men equally understand the relevance of a good source of drinking water supply, State provisions in ensuring the supply should include women in policy making because the study revealed that maintaining a steady supply of water on a daily basis in the household was their prerogative, regardless of through the use of adult male labour children. Hence, they are the first in the line of efficient water management and ensuring a steady supply of water in the house was a reflection of their being properly domesticated women, an important component of a mountain woman's place in a household.

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<sup>4</sup> See Alka Jain, H. Birkumar Singh, S. C. Rai and E. Sharma, "*Folklores of Sacred Khecheopalri Lake in the Sikkim Himalaya of India: A Plea for Conservation*", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2004), pp. 291-302 wherein the authors write about the traditional practice of attributing sacredness to water bodies and which have been passed down through generations. This sacredness of water bodies have been able to act as very important conservation tools in the absence of any positive laws for environment management and conservation, which only started after the merger in the early 1980s in Sikkim.

<sup>5</sup> See Bina Agarwal, "*The Gender and the Environment Debate: Lessons From India*", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 119-158. She writes that introduction of new techniques of environment management means that women have to forgo their role of being keepers of traditional conservation knowledge and could enhance their gendered alienation within the patriarchal set up.

## **Conclusion:**

Lynch and Maggio write that "...[I]n contrast to their lowland counterparts, in traditional mountain cultures, women often retain a high level of responsibility and control over natural resources and over finances derived from the exchange or sale of goods and services. In many traditional mountain communities, women are also the primary stewards of indigenous knowledge and natural resource management".<sup>6</sup> This observation is apt in the case of villages where the field study for this paper was undertaken. However, it was also observed, as mentioned above, that with the introduction of modern techniques of water management, leaving women sensitive issues within the new frameworks might not be conducive to their traditional role as primary water managers.

With changes in rural economic set up, abandonment of farming as a source of livelihood and increasing migration of men to urban mountain towns as well as the plain areas like Siliguri etc., women become primary caretakers of both land and sustenance in these households. Hence, policy implementation should take into consideration women as well as children and their ease in access to water.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Owen J. Lynch and Gregory F. Maggio, "*Mountain Laws and Peoples: Moving Towards Sustainable Development and Recognition of Community-Based Property Rights- A General Overview of Mountain Laws and Policies with Insights from the Mountain Forum's Electronic Conference on Mountain Policy and Law,*" at Mountain Forum in conjunction with Center for International Environmental Law Washington, DC, USA. Available at <http://www.mtnforum.org/>, last visited at 25.08.2013

<sup>7</sup> This is an increasingly frequent phenomenon in the recent years along the Greater Himalayan region of Sikkim, Nepal etc. influenced both by shortage of water for agricultural as well as domestic purposes as well as fuelling neglect of the sustenance of traditional modes of water management. See generally Soumyadeep Banerjee, Jean Yves Gerlitz, and Brigitte Hoermann, "*Labour Migration as an Adaptation to Water Hazards: Cases in China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan*" in N. S. Pradhan and Ors (ed.) "Role of Policy and Institutions in Local Adaptation to Climate Change Case studies on

The field study revealed a move away from the traditional roles of women in Hindu families, which can be attributed to the need for and necessity of women in active involvement of daily activities in both laborious and non-laborious activities of a mountain village. This is not a surprising trend since mountain women have been customarily and by law given an enhanced status comparatively influenced by environmental factors although the degrees may vary in various regions.<sup>8</sup> Many are formal village level State employees and some are actively involved informally in economical and developmental activities that are taking place around the villages in the form of constructions of road, public buildings etc. Some women even mentioned the active participation of men in traditional roles of cooking and cleaning the house and hence, meaning that men do have a very clear idea of the impact of water scarcity in daily running of the household. Hence, active participation of both men and women in implementation of water policies and mobilisation of their common intellectual resources should not be a problem even if these policies are projected as gender sensitive.<sup>9</sup> Water conflicts in these two villages have been historical and unique to each village. In the village of Dumigaon Ward, the conflict has been not in the procurement of water from the *Dumi kua* but in the sharing of water from the upstream *Bar Kua*. The single water navigation system facilitated by the villagers through the use of PVC pipes and water tanks and taps provided by the provided means that upstream water users have a monopoly and power in the release of water for downstream consumption. Even women play an important role in this village level water politics where they are equally responsible for monopolising and polarising water accessibility.

However, this is not prevalent in the village of Ahley ward as access to water is difficult for all because of the downhill location of the main natural source. Hence, in the former, village level water management committees could be incorporated outside the Panchayat and local

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responses to too much and too little water in the Hindu Kush Himalayas”, [ Kathmandu: 2012], ICIMOD

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Wymann von Dach, “ *Integrated Mountain Development: A Question of Gender Mainstreaming*”, Mountain Research and Development, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Aug., 2002), pp. 236-239

<sup>9</sup> See Susanne Wymann von Dach at 237 and 238.

See Nitya Rao, “ Women's Rights to Land and Assets: Experience of Mainstreaming Gender in Development Projects”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 40, No. 44/45 (Oct. 29 - Nov. 4, 2005), pp. 4701-4708 at 4704 where non-recognition of conscious gendered differences in development projects leads to lack of initiative on the part of women to express continued involvement in the projects. Hence their involvement must be structured within the plans of the projects.



governance set-up with significant involvement of women from upstream and downstream households for fair allocation of the water.<sup>10</sup>

Since both villages face acute water shortage during a part of the year, not only drinking but sanitation and hygiene also become an issue. Interestingly, some of the villagers mentioned that in the past few years, men and women have driven around in search of water and even visited the downstream Rangit river embankments nearby Jorethang to wash clothes and bathe. They mentioned that for them, in those times, it was as if petrol was cheaper than water but they were forced to make the economic compromise for the sake of sanitation and hygiene.

Also, due to lack of proper use of water harvesting tanks and scarcity of flowing water for bathing purposes, women, especially in Ahleygaon ward, visit the *Dhara* to bathe in the open. This, the women mentioned, was an extremely awkward decision, but one borne out of desperation, and has been continuing for a long period of time but which they wished would change with proper supply of running water to bathrooms which have been constructed with the help of State funding. Not to mention, poor hygiene due to water scarcity is an issue with men and children too in both the villages.

Also, there is water swapping and 'stealing' from water supplies provided to nearby villages and which are both consensual as well as thorough stealth. These result in not only loss of revenue to the State in the form of water taxes but also possibilities of conflicts in the village.

Hence, community tanks fed by State provided drinking water supplies, community rain harvesting tanks specifically for collecting drinking water, water treatment facilities in these community tanks, education and mobilisation of both men and women in sanitisation of harvested water could ease the water crisis in these two villages. Economical use of water during Monsoon when both the natural sources as well as harvesting tanks provide abundant water and sharing of water in the community during harsh seasons needs to be encouraged. This can be effectively managed by setting up rules and regulations of water use, both of natural sources as well as harvested.

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<sup>10</sup> ICIMOD reports the active involvement of mountain women in ensuring effective management of water resources in its report titled "*Local Responses to Too Much and Too Little Water in the Greater Himalayan Region*" (2009) in a study conducted in some mountain areas of Pakistan, India, China and Nepal.

The villagers, both women and men seem to be aware of the impact of climate change on water availability both through the print and electronic media as well as their inherent ability to watch weather changes borne out of their farming background. However, intensive education and mobilisation in efficient water use and conservation through modern techniques for times of scarcity was much seen. The conclusion is this aspect is that women in these villages are lucky in that they do not need to fight gender defined roles to become involved in water management at the community level, like their counterparts in the plains of India. Their main barrier at present in technological and modern water management techniques for which they need to be educated at the same level and alongside men as equal partners to gain access to water.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pradyumna P. Karan has written in 1989 that “The cultural barriers to the flow of information to women are real. Women in the Hindu Nepalese communities may be considered loose or immoral if they talk with unfamiliar men..... Opportunities for women to obtain agricultural, natural resource, and conservation related skills are limited by culturally influenced beliefs and social practices. For environmental conservation and planning, it is important to incorporate women...” Although there is a substantial change in the involvement of women in community activities in this age, the latter observation with respect to policy being gender neutral and lack of involvement of women seems still relevant and true in the context of water policies and needs to be changed. See Pradyumna P. Karan, “*Environment and Development in Sikkim Himalaya: A Review*”, Human Ecology, Vol. 17, No. 2, Human Ecology in the Himalaya (Jun., 1989), pp. 257-271