

Reflection

WHEN THE SOURCE OF LIFE BECOMES A COMMODITY

K. P. Sasi♦

“In the beginning there was just water...
All this world is woven, warp and woof on water” (Upanisad).

“We made from water every living thing” (Koran, 21:30).

“For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me
the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken
cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

All religions had an inherent respect for water. Apart from the organised religions, indigenous systems of faith recognised water as a spiritual entity. Water bodies were worshiped. In India, the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Brahmaputra, and most of the rivers were worshipped as Goddesses.

Water is the source of all life. All life on earth can move only if there is water within them. Most of human body as well as of all other species consist of water. “There is no life possible without water. Water is a part and parcel of the living machinery,” said the discoverer of vitamin C, Alber Szent-Gyorgi.

Yet, water is one of the most threatened entities on the earth. The rivers, lakes, wells, ponds, and even ground water are dying. Modern development saw water as a mere object to be used as a resource for commodity production. With globalisation, the status of water transcended from a resource for commodity production to a commodity in itself.

Water as a commodity is today one of the most profitable business – more profitable than oil or software. The world water market is controlled by a handful of multinationals. Apart from controlling the world’s water, they can also control the governments. International institutions and bodies like the World Bank, ADB, and the WTO actively facilitate this process.

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What were the changing perceptions of water by human civilization? What are the major implications of these changing perceptions? What are the human, social, cultural, and spiritual costs? It may be difficult to go to these questions in detail in an article like this. However, this attempt is to perceive and evaluate some of these questions.

Till the era of industrialisation, nature was considered more or less as a source of life. With industrialisation, the human perceptions on nature began to change. Nature as a source of life slowly began to change to that of a resource for commodity production. This vision on nature became so strong that even today many social as well as environmental activists speak about protection of 'natural resources'. A philosophical vision of nature as source is very different from nature as a resource.

Industrialisation as well as colonisation changed the character of public perception of nature. The power of industry and the power of the empire demanded the loot of natural 'resources'. Commodity production was built on this loot.

In India, even for the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who described large dams as 'temples of modern India', the perception of water was that of a resource which can strengthen the development of industry as well as agriculture. Nehru could not have dreamt of water being sold in bottles as a commodity. However, the new model of development he envisaged laid the foundation for the transformation of the civil society's perception of water. They recognised that rivers could be utilised for progress, even if the gods protested. Thus, the free flowing rivers in India were invaded by large dams. *Adivasis* and the local populations were displaced. A new generation of victims of progress emerged in India. Water became a sheer resource.

The public perception of water as a resource is in direct co-relation with a Western development model followed by Jawaharlal Nehru. The irony of the situation is that the public in the West is clearly dissatisfied with their development model and many of them are looking for solutions in the Eastern spiritualities. In spite of the fact that the civil society of the West has been the beneficiary of colonialism in the industrially developing world and their administration has tried to protect their own nature much better than their counterparts in the developing world.

The water services in most of the countries were recognised as a state responsibility till 1990s. Since then the developing countries are being

pressurized to privatize the water services by the global powers and their institutions like the World Bank and ADB. Financial or infrastructural Aid from these financial institutions is being tied to economic liberalization. The solutions provided by these institutions to solve the water crisis are to put a 'price' on water. However, in reality, it means that the economically powerful may pay nothing or close to nothing for water, while the poor will pay through their nose.

The exploitation of nature is multiplied several times today with globalisation consolidating nation states as a single unified market. It works under a false notion of unlimited growth, with market as a central institution above all human action. Under this world view, everything that has a use value has an exchange value as a commodity. Everything can be bought and sold. Love, fresh air, water, health, education, culture, political decision, and what not – everything is made available in the open market. What is not marketed may not have any value. In other words, value is determined by exchange value alone. Water has, thus, become a commodity. When life supporting mechanisms are sold in the open market, how can life sustain?

The central argument to defend this intensified invasion of the market economy over nature is that, if water is not 'priced', it will be wasted by people. Thus, in order to make people realise the value of water, services that are normally a responsibility of the governments become profitable actions of the corporate world. The implication is that those who have the capacity to buy water can use water and those can't buy cannot use water. Thus, access to water will be denied to a large section of the human race. Forget the human beings. How about other species? Which currency should the elephants, monkeys, and crocodiles use to get water from the corporate world in future? How can modern state or the corporate world, both institutions unilaterally set up by one of the species in this planet assume ownership of something that belongs to all species of the present, past, and future?

According to Vandana Shiva, "by reducing water to an 'economy' and further reducing the water economy to 'a market economy', the World Bank's world view makes water privatization and commodification inevitable. In this world view, there is no 'water ecology', no 'water culture', no 'water democracy'." In this article, she goes on further: "In spite of privatisation having failed in country after country, and in spite of

community based approaches having been successful in different parts of India, the World Bank is aggressively pushing for water privatisation, the dismantling of community rights, and the enclosure of the water commons.”

Water is a common necessity, common not just for human beings, but for all species on earth. It is a fundamental right guaranteed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. However, with globalisation, the number of countries as well as the number of people facing the water stress in India is on the increase. The main conflict between the institutions of globalisation and the growing number of poor in the world is based on the notion of right versus commodity. If you consider water as a right, then it is the responsibility of the governments to provide water to those who have no access to this basic need. If you consider water as something that can be bought and sold, then it is a resource as well as a product for the global corporate giants to make big money. The central question to those in power, thus, is ‘how can you sell a human right?’

“Wars of the 21st century will be about water,” says Ismail Sergeldin, a former Vice President of the World Bank. The water war is on. At the moment, the fight is between the corporate world, international financial institutions, and the governments, on the one side, and the local communities, poor people, and a large number of species who do not respond through the language of human race, on the other. But the character of this war will change very soon, if the rest of humanity does not make active intervention at this stage. The future war will be between communities, between regions, between states, and between countries. The tension between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka over Cauvery is only the tip of the iceberg of this future crisis. What is conveniently forgotten is when river Cauvery is shrinking, the effort is not to protect the river, but, surprisingly, to divide it. Further, what is also bypassed by many, especially those in power, including both the state executive and the judiciary, is the fact that Coca Cola is even now being provided with one million litres of free water from this river every day, even when the water privatisation debate is gaining momentum.

From Plachimada (Kerala) to Varanasi (UP), where local people are fighting against the global corporate giant Coca Cola and from sold river Sheonath in Chattisgarh to the banks of Ganga in the eastern UP, people are asking one simple question. The system which provides respect and

status to global corporate invaders can be changed only through active dissent of the affected world. The dissent is growing. Hundreds of struggles against the commodification of water have emerged. The struggle is to retain life and the source of life. Says Vandana Shiva: “We need to build water democracy, not water markets. We need to defend the rights of communities, not corporation. We need to conserve water not consume and destroy it. We need to design India’s water future on the basis of people’s vision, not that of the World Bank.”