

An Analysis of Drinking Water Supply through PPP: A Dalit Perspective¹ in the Context of Sustainable Development Goals

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“A Dalit boy, Veeran Ahirwar (9), drowned in a well after a teacher denied him access to a hand pump to drink water in Damoh district, Madhya Pradesh”.² In another instance, “an area named Harijan Sahi, more than 60 SC families live in this village. According to Dalit families of this village, the villagers are receiving drinkable water through a water project taken up by the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) department. The drinkable water pipeline of this project also exists in the area inhabited by Dalits. But it is alleged that for the past two years no water has been supplied to the area where Dalits reside.”³ “For over two years, a Dalit family at Lakshmipura-Bhandu village in Mehsana district (Gujarat) has been struggling to build a toilet for itself but can’t do so, owing to the alleged opposition to it by some local upper-caste people”.⁴ There has been repetition of such incidents against Dalits throughout the country, over twenty-five years of economic reform.⁵

The immediate goal of the reform was to fix the balance-of-payment crisis, but transparency, accountability, and efficiency were promised under good governance. Following the ‘Libertarian’ philosophy, which advocates for a ‘free market economy’ without any regulation from the State, the Indian government in 1990 decided to change the policy from ‘Import Substitution Industrialization’ (ISI) to an open market. The decision was a ‘minority’ decision. The majority of stakeholders were apprehensive about the outcome of the reform and its implications for the deprived section. The reform policy was merely talking about the trickle-down effect and silent about delivering justice. The initial effort was to restructure the Indian economy and gradually integrate it into the world economy. The most important step in this direction was to withdraw the state from several areas of the economy and push for private capital to drive the economy. Today, almost all the sectors have been opened up for private players; even sectors like defence⁶, railways, education, and mining have not remained untouched.

At present, the developmental process is entangled in a peculiar situation derived from the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) framework on the one hand and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the other side. The paper has focused on how the institutions, both public and social, and implementing agencies include/exclude Dalits from equitable and just delivery of drinking water. For this paper, the author has taken Isabelle Fauconnier’s (1999) idea of equity in the context of privatisation of water and sanitation as access to water, capacity to pay for it and access to planning and decision-making in the services. This paper examines the ground reality of access to water by Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in two gram panchayats of two blocks of Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh and the oncoming challenge of user charges. Gram

¹ Author is grateful to the SAMARTHAN’s (Bhopal) staffs for their help in conducting fieldwork in two gram panchayats in Sehore district.

² HT Correspondent, “Dalit Boy Denied Water from Handpump...from well” *Hindustan Times*, March 9, 2016, Bhopal.

³ Staff Correspondent, “Dalits denied access to piped water”, *The Hindu*, 30 September 2014,

⁴ Parimal A Dabhi, “Dalit family can’t build toilet...”, *The Indian Express*, 5 February, 2016.

⁵ These events are not noted as caste violence by National Crime Records Bureau (India).

⁶ Ministry of C. & Industry pushed for increasing the capping on FDI in the military sector to at least forty-nine percent. Today, FDI up to twenty-six percent is permitted in the arm sector and the department of Industrial policy and promotion’s (DIPP) recommendation to increase it to seventy-four percent.



panchayats Rala and Dondi belong to Nasrullahganj and Sehere blocks. The paper has used Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews with significant administrative officials and panchayat representatives to extract the relevant information. However, as women respondents were fewer in number, there has been a gender imbalance in the information.⁷ This could be a weakness of this paper.

PPP in Drinking Water Sector in India

Memon and Butler (2004) considered PPP as a form of privatisation. The poor performance of the State agencies in delivery of services and lack of funds to further invest in creating infrastructure and its Operation and Maintenance (O&M) have been the catalytic rationale behind the introduction of PPP across the globe. Since the beginning of economic reform, the thrust has been on laying the foundation for a better environment for the private players in water supply. Collection of water tariffs and O&M costs from both urban and village areas was the basic requirement.

The Dublin Conference (1992) set the tone to treat water as commercialise goods rather than public property. Hence, the conference advocated monetising the water sector in third-world nations. It proclaimed that water has a monetary value and must be framed as an economic good. It also argued that accessibility of water and hygiene are fundamental rights of an individual. This was the victory of capital environmentalism. Karen Bakker (2007) explains it as “advocates of market environmentalism in the water business argue that water is a progressively declining resource, which must be valued at full economic and environmental charge if it is to be apportioned to its highest-value uses, and accomplished advantageously by private industries whose responsibility to users and stakeholders is more direct and influential than diminished political answerability practised by citizens via civic representatives.”⁸

Market environmentalists have been consistently making an effort to direct India’s policy on water supply. Eighth Five Year Plan mentioned that “wherever house-service connections are known, it is recommended that a suitable water tariff is levied and realised whereby O & M becomes self-sustaining to the extent possible. Corporate endeavour for production and maintenance of drinking water assignments should be cheered and mobilised to the maximum extent feasible”⁹. However, this Plan duration did not see much private investment as the chance of recovery of investment was less.

According to the Union govt., monetisation of water has been announced in three phases. In the mid-1990s, when many multinational projects were taken up, they proved unsuccessful; around the start of the millennium, the jump in PPP in WASH subsided; and lastly, post-2005, some success was noticed. These PPP ventures in the 3 stages mostly came under 4 divisions of the water value chain: a) Bulk Water Generation, b) Treatment (Desalination, wastewater), c) Distribution of Water, d) Network Rehabilitation. The most popular scheme about PPP mission was Swajaldhara, where it was foreseen that 90 % of the fee would be shouldered by the administration and the residual 10 % by the public. Also, it notes that O&M should be handed over to private companies, which would be paid by consumers through a user charge.

A study (Preeti Sampat: 2007) showed that the policy for water and sanitation at the international level shaped our domestic policy; Swajaldhara replaced a supply-motivated tactic with a demand-driven one. The demand has to come from the village committee, after villagers have reached a consensus to share the capital cost initially and O & M cost later. Swajaldhara enforced the village committee with lots of responsibility. But

⁷ How much information women have is another question author thought off as women least participate or allow to participate in panchayat’s meetings. Most decision about the water such as place of hand pumps, community toilets, water security plan, etc. were taken by the male members of the village’s committee.

⁸ Karen Bakker, The “Commons” versus the “Commodity”: Alter-Globalisation, Anti-Privatisation and the Human Right to Water in the Global South, *Antipode*, 2007.

⁹ Vol. 2, Eighth FYP, Chapter: Housing, Water Supply and Sanitation, Planning Commission, GoI, 1992.

control of the Village Committee by the upper caste may affect the accessibility of water to the poor and marginalised sections, which was substantiated by the field work in Rajasthan.

But the disappointing result of PPP in the water sector did not deter the government from further this agenda. In fact, the government declared that PPP is nothing close to privatisation. “Under PPP, water is not privatised, but the service (or supply) is put in private hands”¹⁰. 12th FYP put water in the economic service category. National Water Policy (NWP, 2012) calls for privatisation of water facilities to recover the O&M cost. The draft policy recommended the eradication of all types of aids on water for agrarian and local purposes, but says “subsidies and incentives” should be given to profit-making private industry for reprocessing and reclaiming treated wastes. After meeting the livelihood necessities, water should be treated as economic goods. Progressive tariff charges should be used.

Table 1 Area-wise allocation of amounts under Sub-Mission for Urban Infrastructure and Governance

(in Rs. Cr.)					
Sr. No.	Sector	No. of Projects Sanctioned	Cost of projects sanctioned	ACA Committed	ACA released
1.	Drainage/Storm Water Drainage	73	8,40,0.07	3,46,1.65	2,24,8.55
2.	Water Supply	157	20,48,5.89	10,08,8.19	6,68,8.80
3.	Sewerage	112	14,98,0.02	7,14,2.10	4,12,5.94
4.	Solid Waste Management	44	1,97,2.86	1,02,2.62	62,1.72
5.	Preservation of Water Bodies	4	11,6.70	6,8.61	3,9.12
Total		390	4,595,5.55	21783.19	13724.15

Source: jnnurm.nic.in

Dalit and Drinking Water in Sehore District

It has been recognized that corporate bodies in the water sector advocate for either privatisation or services under PPP. The paper looks at the impact of such policy decisions on water justice. The study district is located

¹⁰ Position Paper, “The Water and Sanitation Sector in India”, Department of Economic Affairs, GoI, 2009.

32 kilometres from the State Capital, Bhopal and stands on the foothills of the Vindhya Range in the central of the Malwa region. Administratively, the district is constituted of eight revenue Tehsils and five Blocks having 499 Panchayats, 1008 revenue villages and 1270 habitations. Sehore has a population of 13 lakhs, which is 1.8 per cent of the state's population as per Census 2011, an increase of 21.51 per cent over the previous Census. The concentration of population in the study subdivision in 2011 is 199 individuals per sq. km, compared to 164 people per sq. km in 2001. Nearly 80% of the residents of the district lives below the poverty line. The district has 22% Scheduled Caste concentrated habitations (279) and 16% Scheduled Tribes concentrated habitations (207).

Table 2: Drinking Water Scenario in Sehore District of Madhya Pradesh (as on 2016)

S. N	Blocks	Panchayats	Villages	Habitations	Number of SC Concentrated Habitation	Number of ST Concentrated Habitation	Fully Covered Drinking Water Habitation Scenario	Not Covered / Partially Covered Drinking Water Habitation Scenario	Slipped Back Drinking Water Habitation Scenario
1	Ashta	135	275	354	156	12	267	87	1
2	Budni	63	137	141	5	38	101	38	3
3	Ichhawar	70	141	184	32	66	155	27	12
4	Nasrullaganj	87	165	195	7	79	119	34	18
5	Sehore	144	290	396	79	12	239	155	18
Total		499	1008	1270	279	207	881	341	52

Source: Habitation level data provided in <http://indiawater.gov.in/imisreports/nrdwpmmain.aspx>

Availability of water bodies is highly dependent on groundwater. For irrigation, industry and drinking water, groundwater is considered the main source, irrespective of the information that the district has a few non-perennial rivers like the Narmada and Chambal Rivers. About 62% of watering of fields in Sehore was from groundwater, although the aggregate of irrigation in Sehore is very low; only 27.5 per cent of all land is being watered. The aggregate number of wells and tube wells in Sehore during 2005-06 was 33048 and 14698, respectively.

On the matter of water for drinking purposes, Sehore town and outskirt areas are mostly supplied from underground water. There has been a steep increase in underground water development in Sehore. The phase of groundwater expansion in the district during 2004 was 62 %, which has raised significantly from 1997 assessments. However, the level of groundwater expansion has reached 81% in the district and Astha block of



the district. The Net annual groundwater available in the Sehore District is 752.55 MCM, and the draft from all uses is 469.80 MCM; total groundwater accessible for impending use is 274.18 MCM. The Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) in Sehore district claims that drinking water services cover 90 % of its population. The traditional patterns of drinking water through handpumps capture 81 % of the total population, followed by Piped Water Supply at 14 % and Open Well at 2.86 per cent. The coverage is uniform across various segments of citizen, including SCs, STs, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the General category of population. However, the field experience shows a completely different picture altogether.

Rala is a gram panchayat. It has five villages, i.e. Rala, Sarvarganj, Chitikheda, Pardi, Okwalia. Within Rala, there are one SC and one ST habitation (*tolas*). The gram panchayat has an ST woman, Smt. Chinta Bai as *sarpanch* and Manohar Patel, a backward caste, as *up-sarpanch*. Decentralisation of power, resources and decision-making was the aim of the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts, which envisage PRI as a tool for inclusive development. The PRI Act has also earmarked seats for SC/ST and women.¹¹ But, in this case study, an ST woman *sarpanch* told the author that she is just a rubber stamp. She has never been consulted for any decision taken by other members. Empowerment is a distant dream for these sections. The Banerjee and Duflo (2011) argument that women leaders almost always make a difference could not be verified in this case. This village has a population of approx. 4000. Out of a total 2175 have voting rights. It is a fully covered settlement with portable water network and Handpump (HP) water supply, claimed by the government.

But, during the field visit, SC/ST habitations neither have HP nor have PWS. Women have to carry water for cooking and other purposes from a roadside HP which is 0.5 km from their habitation. The inclusive approach of the National Rural Drinking Water Programme is compromised in this sample study. PRI members argued that due to absence of a road, the bore vehicle was unable to enter the SC/ST habitation. So, they have provided HP near their locality. When enquiring about Piped Water Supply¹², the PRI members argued that due to lack of water pressure, PWS does not reach the habitation. In any case, the villagers pay Rs. 100 per month as user charges to meet the recurring cost, and once SC and ST habitations get covered by PWS, they have to pay user fees.¹³ In case of non-payment, they are liable for disconnection.

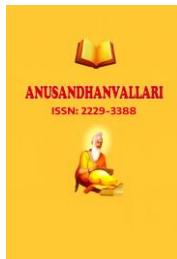
Another gram panchayat, Dodi, has a total population of 1469. The population is divided into two *tolas* (habitations), i.e. Ratikheda and Dodi. This panchayat has two Dalit wards but no tribal population. This village has 10 landless families, and 25-30 families are beneficiaries of land reform and holders of *patta*. It has 18 HP, but only 8 are operational. The author was told that in summer only two HP would remain functional. Depleting groundwater is a major problem in this village. All 18 HP procured by PHED are not capable of pulling out water, as they are INDIA II-mark HP, which cannot pull water below 150 feet. The water charge has decreased even below 300 feet, making all HP fall under the slippage category.¹⁴ This causes major obstacles for the

¹¹ Expert Committee headed by M.S.Aiyar on “Leveraging Panchayat Raj Institutions for effective delivery of public goods and services” argued to stop the circular movement of reserved posts to 2-3 terms to motivate better work and provide capacity building of third tier leadership

¹² 3 per cent (1 per cent for SCs/STs villages) capital cost sharing by the community is refundable. The total money is ‘Fixed Deposit’ in State account. 1/5th of amount along with incurred interest shall be given back to GPs in a span time of 5 years. Our Sample district Sehore have village like Dondi which is ready to deposit 3 per cent of their contribution. In Gram Sabha meeting villagers have assented for contribution. 5 GPs of Raissen district have already deposited contribution. Source: Interview with PHED official, Bhopal

¹³ Break-up of recurring expenditure for O&M of a tap Water System are – Rs. 4000/4500 p/m for a Pump Operator; Rs. 1000 p/m for electric bill; and Rs. 500 for O & M. Source: Interview with PRI officials of Rala GP, Nasrullahganj, Sehore

¹⁴ With the involvement of SAMARTHAN in this village villagers are able to formulate their demand for PWS. PHE responded their demand positively and PWS is under way.



villagers. To ward off the water scarcity, during fieldwork the author got to know that villagers agreed to pay user charges. The secretary of the Dodi gram panchayat said that, as villagers are ready to pay, the administration is planning to have household PWS. But they added a caveat that PWS, initially, will be extended to those who are able to pay, and the user fee depends on the number of household connections. But this puts the Dalit community at the receiving end. As an economically weaker group, they have to depend on groundwater sources which remain dry most of the year. Women and younger male family members have to move far to fetch water. Dalit community lack both logistics and social capital to negotiate with water deficit. They cannot go to anybody's house and take water. They have to depend on the benevolence of the other community for help. Here, water deficit is reinforcing the caste hierarchy and subverting the democratization process at the grassroots.

Critique of the Mode

In the countryside, before Swajaldhara, implementing the World Bank (WB) and Union govt. review, the Union govt. had introduced the Sector Reform Pilot Projects (SRPP) in the year 1999 with the implied tactic of these restructurings grounded on the supposition that "resident will be eager to preserve and operate tap water supply only if they are owners of the assets; had been indulged in the projects throughout from choosing constructions to fixings and repairs; know that the administration will not preserve the structure; had appropriate amount for upkeep and had to pay for O & M of the system. These reforms were to be applied on a smaller scale in chosen villages in sixty-seven districts in twenty-six States in India, which perhaps embodies the world's major government-supported yet need-based countryside drinking water programme. South Asia (WSP-SA) and UNICEF had provided formal support to the RGNDWM for the Sector Reform Pilot Projects¹⁵. Later on, all the reform initiated under Sector Reform was placed under Swajaldhara. A case study of Swajaldhara in 18 districts of Rajasthan showed that introducing share capital investment and O&M costs hampered the prospects of the poor to access water.

This study concurs with the report findings of Swajaldhara in Rajasthan. One can derive from this story that the official explanation did not reflect the caste discrimination at the grassroots level and presented the issue as a technical fault. The author learnt that upper castes opposed and stopped laying a pipe through their land to supply water to Dalit and Adivasi hamlets. Secondly, they have to share the capital cost, pay for the user charges and O & M once they start availing piped water supply. Now, if we consider the financial situation of SCs/STs in Madhya Pradesh, it is really bad, with 43 per cent and 59 per cent poverty levels, respectively¹⁶. When asked that it would not be possible for common people (read SCs/STs) to contribute to O&M and capital costs as well, officials remarked that "when they can have a mobile phone, why can't they pay these costs". In fact, they hold the view that marginalised populations have developed a taste for freebies and do not care what they get. "It will discipline them", said an official. Liberal interpretation of Article 21, Right to Life, of the Constitution by the Highest Court of India brings Safe and clean drinking water under its purview. It is the right of an individual. Hence, the State cannot charge its citizens while performing its Constitution-bound duty.

Previous experience of introducing PPP in water supply in the urban sector has shown that it is not as efficient as had been promised and also lacks the ability to mend the social gaps. Hubli-Dharwad project, funded partially by the World Bank, promised to supply 24/7 water supply. But continuous water supply depends on other factors such as an adequate and reliable source of water supply. Such a mechanism also needs a high degree of outflow regulation and constant upkeep of pressure, which consequently calls for big resources and better O and M. It has higher cost implications. Once, 24/7 water supply costs more; it has a negative impact on social equity, as in

¹⁵ Preeti Sampat, Swajaldhara or 'pay'-jal-dhara: Right to Drinking Water in Rajasthan, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2007.

¹⁶ Madhya Pradesh Rajya Ajeevika Forum, Annual Action Plan, 2012-13.

the case of Hubli-Dharwad. Hubli, in a pronounced slum that is part of the demonstration area, slum-dwellers highlighted that most households had not been given regular supply (as of July 10, 2007) because they had been unsuccessful in standardising their connections. Also, public stand-posts were removed from the area. Hence, D. Raghunandan claimed that 24/7 water supply is a myth. The project was reason for discontinuation on non-payment, abolition of public standposts, an upsurge in water bills and privatisation of water to agriculture schemes.

In the case of urban water supply, we have seen that privatisation or PPP has hampered the chances of the poor. Similar criteria of capital cost sharing and O&M cost would hamper the rural poor's access to water. In India, where 77 per cent of its population lives on Rs. 20 per day, 11th FYP recognised that rural communities are *not averse to paying charges* for a reliable supply¹⁷. It also suggested that the community should bear O&M costs. 12th FYP concurs with the proposal of O&M. In the countryside, the Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC) has a role in collecting user fees from the beneficiaries.

In this context, it is important to look at the SDGs' idea about the provision of water. Goal six of the SDGs aims to provide 'clean water and sanitation'. The goal has eight targets to meet the aim. The targets 6.1 and 6.2 are important for the purpose of this paper. These are as follows:

- a) By 2030, attain total and unbiased access to safe and affordable drinking water for all citizens;
- b) By 2030, realise access to acceptable and justifiable WASH for everyone and abolish open defecation, with distinctive consideration to the requirements of women and girls and those in susceptible positions

Universal approach has been spelt out in the provision of water and sanitation. However, it is not free from flaws – one general and other specific to India. The general problem is about the financing of goals, especially in developing countries. Earlier, third world economies were reliant on aid from Global North nations. Now, under the SDGs, it is estimated that each member country increases its own resources through the private sector, expansion in tax collection, and clampdown on unlawful monetary flows and fraud. For the fulfilment of the SDGs, India needs \$565 billion per year till 2030 to achieve all the set goals. The amount is high and requires private players to invest. Hence, user charges, O&M fees and sharing of capital costs will continue, making provisioning less accessible to Dalits and Adivasi in India. It repeats the same mistake of Swajaldhara. Secondly, SDGs do not take into account caste as a deciding factor in access to the service. Target 6.2 focuses on women, girls and vulnerable sections, but generalisation would be a problem in the case of India. It is known that women and girls from Dalit, Adivasi and Minority communities have to face more obstacles than any other group members.

To showcase the deficiency, activists' and scholars' concerns about caste-based discrimination had organised a protest rally in New York on September 26, as the UN SDS (Sustainable Development Summit) 2015 was in progress. It was an irony that the Permanent Mission of India to the UN celebrated Dr B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary juxtaposed with a UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur for minority issues recording the plight of Dalits in India. Although the report irked the Indian government, caste is yet to find a place in strategic design. In 2016, the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR) wrote an article on "Human Rights in the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". Section 4.3 on "Measuring discrimination" states that the endorsements by the Special Rapporteur inspire states to think and include caste-related indicators. Moreover, DIHR endorses that "development of specific indicators and data collection initiatives should be considered when defining additional national indicators and approaches to supplement the global framework. Such an approach could imply, for example, the development of indicators to address caste-based discrimination".¹⁸ Government of India has continued with the old strategies, SCSP and TSP, to deal with

¹⁷ 11th Five Year Plan, Page 5.

¹⁸ <http://idsn.org/un-2/post-2015-agenda/>. The website accessed on 14 July 16.

injustice involved in the delivery mechanism. However, this has proven insufficient. Hence, hoping for a miracle from SDGs without making implementing agencies and staff sensitive to caste discrimination will be a mirage. Also, the economic framework within which SDGs are operational in developing countries is also a problem. The neo-liberal economy has a tendency to beget inequality in society, which consistently needs strategies like SDGs to mitigate that.

Conclusion

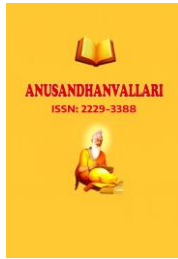
It is crystal clear that as privatisation was not the panacea for all the problems, so is the PPP. “It is also observed that PPPs lead to inequalities in society by increasing the salaries and perks for PPP consultants, officials and lawyers of the private companies. This often translates into decreasing salaries and benefits to public sector employees, sometimes even leading to retrenchment of lower grade public sector employees, who are then again hired by private corporations at lower salaries without benefits. With the inclusion and insistence on payment of high user charges for the services delivered, PPPs also lead to reduced access to services for the poor and the marginalised sections of society.”¹⁹

In general, the government has to face a number of challenges vis-à-vis social justice if PPPs are introduced in the sector of rural drinking water. PPPs will increase out-of-pocket expenditure, which certainly puts Dalits and Adivasi in the back seat. PPPs do not address the availability, magnitude and equity issues with the supply of water for everyone in the project areas. There is increasing evidence to show that PPPs seem to be a manifestation of a perverse form of privatisation where the government bears the losses and profits incurred by the private sector.

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