



Like water for justice [☆]

Deepa Joshi ^{*}

Water Conflicts in South Asia, Water Resources Management Group, Wageningen University, The Netherlands



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2014

Received in revised form 26 February 2015

Keywords:

Water
Environment
Injustice
Essentialisms
Darjeeling
Water supply

ABSTRACT

The narrative of environmental justice is powerfully and passionately advocated by researchers, practitioners and activists across scale and space. Yet, because these struggles are multifaceted and pluralistic, rooted in complex, evolving “socio-material-political interminglings” the concept is difficult to grasp, and even harder to realise. Recent literature raises concerns as to what makes for environmental injustices, how injustices are defined, classified as urgent and/or critical, by whom and why, how they gain political attention, etc. This paper draws attention to these issues by contrasting the largely untold, nonetheless entrenched and enduring “old” water supply injustices in the Darjeeling region of the Eastern Himalaya in India with articulate contestations relating to the speedy advancement of “new” hydropower projects here. Water supply problems in the Darjeeling region are particularly wicked – nested in fractious ethnicity–identity political conflicts. These complex local realities tend to obscure the everyday challenges relating to water as well as render these problems spatially anecdotal. What happens – or does not – around water here is certainly unique, yet comparison to other struggles in other settings show that locational and environmental politics provide critical evidence to question the several implicit universalisms in relation to water justice.

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Introduction

Water and justice are thoroughly entangled and for very good reasons. Boelens (in press) points out how ‘worldviews, water flows and water control practices are interwoven’ and ‘since ancient times... [demonstrate an] elite subjugation’. Farias (2011, p. 371) similarly notes that the social, economic and environmental ills relating to water are rooted in history, but argues that these injustices are essentially diverse, reflecting complex evolving ‘socio-material-political interminglings’. Sikor and Newell (2014) draw attention to the universal core issues of justice inherent in

diverse environmental struggles, which, as they point out are nonetheless difficult to define in narrow terms and frameworks because of their temporal, spatial and other contextual specificities. This paper relates to the need to ‘critically interrogate the universalizing and globalizing tendencies in asserting and invoking environmental justice’ in the face of great plurality in perspectives, theories and practice (Sikor and Newell, 2014, p. 155).

This paper reflects on these contradictions taking the case of latent old and blatant new water injustices in Darjeeling district in the lower Teesta basin of the Eastern Himalaya. In conclusion, the paper analyses whether and how water injustices can be defined and pursued within narrow domains relating *only* to water, or even to certain sectors of water, when water wrongs are essentially complex and riveted in nested political, social, economic injustices (see Map 1).

Darjeeling district, which is located in the State of West Bengal in India has been embroiled in over four decades of a contentious conflict for a political separation from West Bengal through the creation of a new state, Gorkhaland. Wenner (2013) articulately describes the multiple dimensions of the conflict as a strategic construction of an “imaginative geography”. Ethnic tensions are claimed between a minority Nepali community in a majority Bengali populace of the State of West Bengal. The Nepalis of Darjeeling (incidentally a majority community within the district) express a commonly-held perception that they are stigmatized by

[☆] I am interested in analysing the drivers and processes of policy reforms, understanding how policies evolve within different institutional cultures and the structures and power hierarchies which shape practice. I have researched the gendered impacts of development interventions and have conducted water-equity policy research. I am also involved in education and research capacity building initiatives in South and South East and Africa on the above issues. My current research looks at how climate change discourse reshapes environmental policy and interventions, and thereby justice. An ongoing research looks at the re-emergence of large dams as climate-mitigating “clean energy” hydropower projects in the climate-vulnerable Eastern Himalaya. The research focuses on how these developments overlay with complex, contextual dimensions of ethnicity, gender and democracy.

^{*} Address: Wageningen University, Droevendaalsesteeg 3a, 6708 PB Wageningen, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: deepa.joshi@wur.nl



Map 1. The proposal for Gorkhaland.

the rest of India as being from Nepal, not fully Indian citizens (Wenner, 2013). There is also antagonism relating to an economic and development neglect by the West Bengal administration, post-independence. The conflict is popularly presented by local politicians as a “*mato ka prashna*” (the land/identity question), an outcome of a tyrannical control of local land, water, forest resources by an outsider alien Bengali dominated State of West Bengal (Sarkar, 2010, p. 114). A separate state of Gorkhaland is thus presented as a panacea to all forms of wrongs and injustice prevalent in the region. However, as I will describe below, while a tyrannical “alien” State is readily blamed, the Gorkhaland conflict appears to reproduce principles of the coercive State in a region that is criss-crossed by historical and ethno-political injustices (Wenner, 2013; Chettri, 2013).

Local politicians point to the enduring water supply crisis as a key marker of the politico-spatial injustice: ‘... in terms of infrastructure, ... nothing has been added to... the water supply... [to] whatever the British had planned [then] for 3,000 people in Darjeeling town, [even though the population] is over 3 lakhs [300,000]’ (Wenner, 2013, p. 209). The under-investment in the region by the West Bengal administration is aggravated by the fact that, ‘although the Himalayan region is a source of countless perennial rivers, paradoxically the mountain people depend largely on [groundwater] springs for their sustenance’ (Tambe et al., 2012, 62). Access to groundwater is not easy in these hard rock mountain aquifers. Water supply governance here contradicts popular “fixed-position, theoretically normative claims” of justice and solidarity as being synonymous with certain specific institutional models’ (Castree, 2011, p. 45). In the Darjeeling region, community, state and market-based approaches to manage water operate as hybrid systems. These hybrid arrangements of water delivery are nested in entrenched political, social, economic injustices and symptomatic of a democracy deficit evident in the wider political, social and economic setting. Not only is it impossible to identify “a certain, right institutional approach” to managing water, water supply injustices are also obscured by other competing political priorities.

But not all water injustices remain unnoticed. Since the early 2000s, the Teesta basin in the Eastern Himalaya has been the target of ambitious hydropower development plans. These developments are fuelled in part by the global re-positioning of large dams producing hydropower as climate mitigating green development; as

well as by national interests relating to energy needs for economic growth (Ahlers et al., 2015). The hydropower projects have drawn attention of national and regional environmental activists, who question dam construction activities in the climate-vulnerable Eastern Himalaya waterscape; as well as skewed human-environment implications as a consequence of dam construction. Several reports highlight the procedural and distributional aspects of injustice: the institutional modalities through which environmental clearances and contracts have been awarded to private and public sector hydro-power entrepreneurs with scarce local community consultation; as well as the short- and long-term livelihood risks and challenges for marginal project-affected communities (Dubey et al., 2005; Bhattacharya et al., 2012; The Asia Foundation, 2013; Huber and Joshi, 2013).

What I discuss here is the fact that the contestations against dam building in the lower Teesta region of Darjeeling district are largely led by scientists, researchers and activists, who Holifield et al. (2009, p. 364) would describe as being ‘independent, “placeless” in the sense of not being from the area, and therefore likely lacking a certain intimate familiarity and [situated] attachment’ with the socio-political history of the region. Locally, there is an intriguing silence and inaction, both in relation to the enduring water supply crisis, as well as over recent contentious development of mega hydropower projects. The silence makes for an interesting contrast on the one hand with the articulate “outsider-led” contestations of hydropower projects as well with four decades of an intense internal political conflict for a separate state of Gorkhaland, a conflict essentially positioned as an “ethnoenvironmental injustice” (Anthias and Radcliffe, in press). What are the reasons for this silence? Why do recent contestations against dam building miss out on noticing the enduring old water supply injustices? In asking these questions it is interesting to reflect on Forsyth’s (2014, p. 230) analysis that, ‘So far, environmental politics does not consider deeply enough how or with whose concerns, justice is... [framed and] applied’.

In sum, water problems in the Darjeeling region appear embedded in ‘historically entrenched configurations of unequal spatial developments and legacies of socio-political contestations’ (McFarlane, 2011, p. 380). At a workshop organised locally in 2012, a participant expressed, ‘*The problem is not water – water is only one manifest of everything else that is wrong here. Solutions need to emerge here locally and they need to go beyond water*’. This makes for a valid point to review the tenacious links between justice, locational and environmental politics which are often overlooked in a narrow conceptualisation of water governance or injustice.

Methodology

Having spent my childhood and young adult life in the region, water as well as political problems here are not new to me. I recall how the toilets at school were flushed only once in a while, a few times in a week. At home, I remember bathing over a large water tub, reusing the water to wash clothes and then re-using that water to flush the toilets. The possibility to bathe only once a week posed serious practical and social handicaps to me as a young adult. However, I was sufficiently privileged by class. Like many others, we were accustomed to paying someone, women and men, boys and girls to carry water for us from far off communal sources. When I look back local concerns relating to water were actually elitist concerns. For many others less privileged, water was only one of the many problems at stake.

Several decades later, local residents in the Darjeeling region still struggle with these water problems: water in the tap once in every 7–8 days, the same long lines for collecting water from municipal taps and other sources, and conflicts every morning over

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