



(Re-)Conceptualizing water inequality in Delhi, India through a feminist political ecology framework

Yaffa Truelove

Department of Geography, Cambridge University, Downing Site, Cambridge CB2 2EN, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Feminist political ecology
Water
Inequality
Gender
Urban India
Criminality
Environmental politics

ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how a feminist political ecology (FPE) framework can be utilized to expand scholarly conceptualizations of water inequality in Delhi, India. I argue that FPE is well positioned to complement and deepen urban political ecology work through attending to everyday practices and micropolitics within communities. Specifically, I examine the embodied consequences of sanitation and ‘water compensation’ practices and how patterns of criminality are tied to the experience of water inequality. An FPE framework helps illuminate water inequalities forged on the body and within particular urban spaces, such as households, communities, streets, open spaces and places of work. Applying FPE approaches to the study of urban water is particularly useful in analyzing inequalities associated with processes of social differentiation and their consequences for everyday life and rights in the city. An examination of the ways in which water practices are productive of particular urban subjectivities and spaces complicates approaches that find differences in distribution and access to be the primary lens for viewing how water is tied to power and inequality.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

On any given day in Delhi, India, residents across the city depend on a variety of informal, and often illegal, techniques and practices to access water and sanitation. Although Delhi reports relatively high levels of water running through its piped infrastructure, the water supply is characterized by such unreliability that even some of Delhi’s more elite neighborhoods average only 0–2 h of running water per day (Zerah, 2000; Sagane, 2000). For example, official data estimate that the municipal water supply provides 250 l per person per day, yet a combination of unequal distribution, “missing or wasted water,” and chronic unreliability leave many households’ water and sewerage requirements unmet (DJB, 2007; Delhi HDR, 2006; Zerah, 2000; Kandra et al., 2004).

Research on Delhi’s water elucidates the broad range of everyday “compensation” practices that residents utilize to access water and sanitation facilities, including staying back from work to access water, walking miles in search of sanitation, and procuring water from illegal and informal sources (Zerah, 1998, 2000; Haider, 2000). The meanings and consequences of such practices challenge scholars to grapple more fully with the complex ways that social

power, identity and subject formation¹ are tied to the regulation of water resources. Water is closely linked with gender, class, and religious identities and is embroiled in competing understandings of the urban environment and the state (Batra, 2004; Coles and Wallace, 2005; Bapat and Agarwal, 2003). As such, the meanings and consequences of water practices vary considerably, shaping power, rights and citizenship in the city (Swyngedouw, 1999, 2004). While urban political ecological (UPE) analyses have given attention to the socio-environmental processes that produce water inequality in the city, such studies have been more inclined towards analyzing the production of class and distributional dimensions of inequality on a city-wide scale rather than illuminating how multiple social differences are (re)produced in and through everyday water practices (Swyngedouw, 1995, 2004; Bakker, 2000, 2003; Gandy, 2008; Kaika, 2003).

This article contends that a feminist political ecology (FPE) framework is particularly useful for analyzing everyday dimensions of resource inequality through directing attention to the

¹ Identity and subjectivity, while often used interchangeably in literature, stem from two theoretical strands. Subjectivity comes from a Foucauldian approach to power that gives less attention to human agency, but rather attends to the discursive rendering of subjects. Studies of identity are more inclined to acknowledge how human agency interacts with a variety of other (discursive and structural) forces in shaping identities (Silvey, 2004, pp. 498–499). In this article, I analyze how discourses and practices shape subjectivities, but also attend to the agency of urban dwellers in creatively navigating their lives and identities.

E-mail address: yt275@cam.ac.uk

ways daily practices are produced by, and productive of, gender, class and other social power relations. In particular, through examining the embodied consequences of water and sanitation practices, I will argue that an FPE framework enables a re-conceptualization of water inequality to more fully include inequalities associated with processes of social and spatial differentiation and their consequences for daily life in the city. Feminist approaches to political ecology are particularly useful for understanding the production of, and inter-connections between, scales of analysis, specifically revealing how everyday practice is tied to the construction of scales such as the body, household, and city at large. An understanding of the ways in which gendered and cultural water practices are productive of particular social differences disrupts a framework in which distributional differences and “access and control” become the only means for understanding how water practices are tied to power and inequality.

Understanding the ‘everydayness’ of water is particularly important and timely given recent global efforts to create a unified discourse of how to solve global ‘water problems’ (Goldman, 2005, 2007). For example, Goldman (2007) demonstrates the ways that international discourses on water are converging to serve the narrow interests of international water companies, primarily supporting privatization as the key mechanism for providing ‘water for all.’ Internationalized discursive formations on privatization serve to promote a nearly uniform set of proposed solutions for addressing highly diverse water problems that range from irrigation water shortages in India to inadequate water flows in townships in Johannesburg, South Africa. Goldman reports an alarming lack of debate and difference within forums such as the World Commission on Water and the World Water Council, illuminating how a limited set of global actors and interests dominate international water doctrine and policy, and are congruently able to wield a powerful influence on both the state and even local water-related NGOs (Goldman, 2007). The silencing of a diverse range of ideas, opinions, and actors within international water forums ultimately sidelines the complex ways that place specific dynamics and daily lived practices shape drastically different waterscapes. By attending to embodied experiences, this research seeks to further understand how urban water regulation is experienced within the unique context of Delhi’s urban geography.

The article stems from qualitative fieldwork conducted in Delhi, India between January and August of 2008. Everyday water practices are predominately carried out by girls and women (Agarwal, 1992; Bapat and Agarwal, 2003; Haider, 2000), and this group also faces a unique set of obstacles with regard to sanitation. I worked with women whose socio-economic class gave them little financial recourse to invest in purchasing water or water-related technologies, conducting 40 interviews with women either living in slums, or former slum-dwellers who have moved to a resettlement colony. Three focus groups (one from each colony studied) and participant observation included men in order to gain data across gender groups. The research specifically took place in two slum settlements in South Delhi and one recently developed resettlement colony on the periphery of Delhi. The two slum settlements are classified as illegal within government discourse, housing short and long term slum-dwellers who have no legal rights or ownership over their homes. The resettlement colony consisted of legal housing lots established for some of the families who lost their homes in recent slum demolitions. However, many families in the resettlement colony were unable to access legal deeds to a house, becoming homeless squatters on land far outside of Delhi’s urban center.

Lastly, while the experiences of slum and resettlement colony residents differ, the inclusion of a resettlement colony in the research helps to further capture the range of experiences and practices that women engage in to supplement water insufficiencies

across Delhi’s diverse land space.² The two slum colonies in South Delhi were made up of Hindu families, spanning multiple caste groups; participants from the resettlement colony included both Hindu and Muslims, although the connection between water and religion in Delhi requires further ongoing research. Data from each colony illustrates the ways that the conceptual scope of water inequality can be broadened and deepened by attending to the ways that practices are tied to space, identity, and local politics that serve to produce gender, class and other social differences.

2. Gaps and intersections between UPE and FPE

By focusing on the politics of water, and critiquing purely technocratic approaches, urban political ecology (UPE) scholarship offers a critical framework for dissecting how water is connected to social power in the city. Through employing the concept of ‘socio-nature,’ or the idea that environments (in this case urban) are both socially and ecologically produced, urban political ecologists focus on the ways that resources such as water are shaped by social relations of power, not just “natural” or “scientific/technological” factors (Heynen et al., 2006; Gandy, 2002). Gandy states:

Water is a multiple entity: it possesses its own biophysical laws and properties, but in its interaction with human societies it is simultaneously shaped by political, cultural, and scientific factors (2002, p. 22).

It is through dissecting the links between control and access to water and social relations of power that scholars demonstrate the ways that urban waterscapes are never socially, nor ecologically, neutral (Swyngedouw et al., 2002, p. 125).

For example, recent UPE research seeks to tease apart the historical social power geometries that shape urban water flows, and thus who benefits, and who is disadvantaged, from particular water regulation mechanisms (Bakker, 2003; Kaika, 2003; Swyngedouw, 1995, 2004). By placing class and water distribution differences in the center of analyses, this scholarship is particularly useful in illuminating the production of uneven waterscapes, including the production of inequalities in water access, control and pricing for urban residents. For example, Swyngedouw’s work on Guayaquil, Ecuador illuminates the exclusions inherent in the organization of Guayaquil’s public water that work to continually marginalize and disempower the urban poor, primarily migrants (Swyngedouw, 1995, 2004). While he notes general ecological limitations on the availability of fresh water resources in the region, Swyngedouw finds the aggregate water supply in the city to be nonetheless sufficient for providing high per capita water levels. Tracing the politics that have shaped city decisions concerning the infrastructure of the piped water supply, Swyngedouw uses a Marxist-informed analysis to reveal the mechanisms that locate privileged middle and upper class homes with subsidized, low-cost city water, while the poor remain disconnected and continually dependent on expensive privately vended water supplies. The state’s discursive deployment of a ‘productivist logic’ authorizes priority to be placed on water production and transmission over problems associated with maintenance, organizational reform, and water treatment.

In terms of conceptualizing water inequality, critical urban political ecology examinations of water have largely focused on detailing how social power relations serve to produce class and community-wide distributional inequities within the regulation of water in cities. However, by conceiving the politics of control

² Baud et al. (2008) reveal that poverty in Delhi may be highest in areas that are not slums. My focus on slum women is not intended to suggest that they constitute the most impoverished group.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5074331>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5074331>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)