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"Traditional" women, "modern" water: Linking gender and commodification in Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the connections made between women and water in a Rajasthani drinking water supply project as a significant part of drinking water's commodification. For development policy makers, water progressing from something free to something valued by price is inevitable when moving economies toward modernity and development. My findings indicate that water is not commodified simply by charging money for it, but through a series of discourses and acts that link it to other "modern" objects and give it value. One of these objects is "women". I argue that through women's participation activities that link gender and modernity to new responsibilities and increased mobility for village women involving the clean water supply, a "traditional" Rajasthani woman becomes "modern". Water, in parallel, becomes "new", "improved" and worth paying for. Women and water resources are further connected through project staff's efforts to promote latrines by targeting women as their primary users. The research shows that villagers applied their own meanings to latrines, some of which precluded women using them. This paper fills a gap in feminist political ecology, which often overlooks how gender is created through natural resource interventions, by concerning itself with how new meanings of "water" and "women" are mutually constructed through struggles over water use and its commodification. It contributes to critical development geography literatures by demonstrating that women's participation approaches to natural resource development act as both constraints and opportunities for village constituents. It examines an under-explored area of gender and water research by tracing village-level struggles over meanings of latrines.

Keywords: Water; Gender; India; NGOs; Development; Latrines; Commodification

1. Introduction

On a highway leading into Jaipur, Rajasthan's (India) capital city, a large billboard displays Company X's promotional campaign featuring a married woman in a white lab coat holding a bottle of mineral water. This housewife/scientist advocates clean, hygienic Company X brand water for (her family's) health. Playing upon familiar tropes, Company X's spokeswoman represents urban, modern womanhood—a concerned middle-class mother with scientific savvy and the good sense to protect her children.[1] Although the development project that is my case study is headed by a non-governmental organization (NGO), not a CEO, its marketing strategy bears significant resemblance to the advertisement of Company X. Project staff meet their village constituents in the form of experts, aiming to convince

[1] She wears two obvious symbols of marriage: red powder (*sindoor*) in the part of her hair and a red dot (*bindi*) on her forehead. In Rajasthan as elsewhere in India, a couple is expected to produce children soon after marriage (Padmadas et al., 2004), so the ad's indication that she is married implies that she is also a mother.

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them likewise of the need for clean water and hygienic practices. While no one wears a white lab coat, discussions between staff and village women are replete with images of modern, scientific housewifery (see also Berry, 1997). The overt message carried by fieldstaff is about water and health, but with it, I suggest, travels a process whereby staff seek to "remake" village women, through a women's participation component, into modern consumers like the woman in Company X's advertisement.

This paper seeks to fill a gap in feminist political ecology, which often overlooks how gender is created through natural resource interventions, by concerning itself with how new meanings of "water" and "women" are mutually constructed through struggles over water use and its commodification. Unlike previous work on (a) how shifts in the utilization and meanings of natural resources have specific gendered implications (e.g., loss of access to forest resources is felt most keenly by women) or (b) how gendered struggles are constitutive of environmental interventions and change (e.g., men's control of women's labour leads to conflicts affecting agricultural production), the focus of this paper is on how shifts in constructions of gender have implications for natural resources. The research indicates that water is not commodified simply by charging money for it, but through a series of discourses and acts that link it to other "modern" objects and give it value (e.g., project fieldworkers arriving in private jeeps in an area where almost no one has their own vehicle). One of these objects is "women". It is argued that through women's participation activities that link gender and modernity to new responsibilities (e.g., serving on village water committees) and increased mobility (e.g., attending public meetings) for village women involving the clean water supply, a "traditional" Rajasthani woman becomes "modern".[2] Water, in parallel, becomes "new", "improved" and worth paying for. Water's commodification depends on reconfiguring gendered connections to water that add value to women and water.

After an introduction to my case study and methods, I discuss the discursive and practical underpinning of the project's women's participation agenda. Women are targeted as those with the most at stake in the arena of water provision but are allowed only limited roles within the project. In the empirical section I show how village women subvert categorization and notions of their powerlessness through actions and words that challenge the particular forms of gendered modernity project staff seek to establish. I demonstrate how links between water, latrines and women have been imagined and reworked by project staff and local users. I then discuss water's commodification as negotiations between staff and villagers over meanings of water, village women's practices, and competing visions of modernity.

[2] "Traditional" and "modern" are categorizing terms that I put in quotes to indicate awareness of how power-laden these terms are. Even when they are not in quotes the reader should bear this in mind.

2. Case study and methods

In 1997, I travelled in northern India visiting NGOs that were tackling issues of women and water. Eventually I was introduced to the staff of a large drinking water supply project in Rajasthan's three most northern districts (Churu, Jhunjhunu and Hanumangadh) that was just beginning field operations. Fifteen women employees (out of a total staff of 70) had recently been hired for implementation of the women's participation component. As I studied this project over the next 5 years, I came to understand that many project staff believed that access to clean water was a key to mobilizing village women's participation and hoped that their activities within the project would lead to empowerment. I also learned that for other project actors, women's participation was a minor focus and of little importance. In addition to these two general positions were village men and women's own ideas about development and empowerment which both coincided and diverged from the project's agenda.

This project of Indo-German economic co-operation was established to provide drinking water at German quality standards to local residents of Rajasthan's saline water belt, where groundwater is too salty for drinking. The project area covered nearly 20,000 km^2 and is estimated to cost more than $170 million dollars (Fig. 1).

Water flowing from the Himalaya in the north to the Thar Desert of Rajasthan through the Indira Gandhi Canal is tapped, treated and piped into area villages. Phase One of the project covered 378 villages and two towns with a 24-h supply at public standposts (taps; Fig. 2). Unlike the pre-existing GOR water supply, villagers are expected: (a) to pay for water based on a division of the total bill by village

Fig. 1. The Our Water project area. (Map courtesy of Dick Gilbreath, University of Kentucky Cartography Lab.)