



On water users' repertoire: Market rationality and governmentality in Peeth village's water supply, Rajasthan (India)



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ABSTRACT

This article extends recent micro-political debates on how market rationality reworks water users' social relationships in rural water supply governmentality. Based on empirical research in Peeth village of Rajasthan, the article looks into water users' principal repertoire, i.e. accounts of discourses, with a core emphasis on particular forms of meanings, subjectivities and social relations produced as the neoliberal market rationality transmutes to water users' system of knowledge. This paper asks: what principal interpretative repertoire is frequently drawn upon in the village water users' narratives, and what relevant meanings are constituted through this repertoire? Through such repertoire and associated meanings, what respective practices, subjectivities and social relationships are re/produced within the village water supply? The findings contend that, with the introduction of private water supply into Peeth village, what appears to be the principal water users' repertoire – contamination – is reconstituted to integrate the notions of efficient use of technology and bodily health. The reconstituted contamination repertoire attaches a new meaning to 'safe' water and rationalizes the institutionalization of individual responsibility to self-care. The findings shed sharper light on the interplay between market technologies of government and self-regulation in producing domains of difference, through which subjects constitute, shape and actively resist the political, social and material aspects of market rationality in the village's water supply. The discussions broaden the interlinkage between the ideological and political economy in constituting and rationalizing a new form of capital (specific ability to decontaminate) with a new form of power to define and regulate water supply practices and social relations in the Peeth village.

1. Introduction

Peeth is one of the major rural villages in the Dungarpur district, Rajasthan India. It accommodates approximately 2000 households¹ with a total population size of 7000 people. The village comprises a highly stratified social environment of small and medium sized landholders, as well as low and high caste Hindus²; the former being the majority (approximately 70%).³ In 2006, Dungarpur district was named one of the country's 250 most backward districts⁴ for its severe economic and social conditions. Like much of Rajasthan, Peeth's residents depend on ground water for their survival. However, rapid decline of the water table and high-levels of contamination constrain the ground

water situation in the village. In fact, the entire area of Dungarpur has been declared (except for Aaspur village) as a dark zone⁵ by the government of India (HDP, 2008). According to Dungarpur district's Ground Water Board (2013), the fluoride level in the district is often beyond the recommended 1.5 mg/l and could go as high as 5.35 mg/l at times.

Until recently, the only form of water supply service in Peeth was two *panchayat*⁶ wells with electronic submersible pumps, reservoirs and gravity-based piped distribution systems (hereafter called the public supply). The public supply depends on natural filtration and solar purification processes to decontaminate ground water. Public hand pumps and household tube-wells⁷ also supplement the public supply in

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¹ FGD; (15.05.2016).

² FGD; (15.05.2016).

³ FGD; (15.05.2016).

⁴ There are 250 districts in India labelled as most backward districts based on their socioeconomic conditions. Dungarpur is one of the twelve districts in Rajasthan currently receiving funds from the Indian government's Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF); (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2009).

⁵ The Indian government categorizes areas with an excessive depletion of ground water table as *dark zones*. In Dark zone areas extraction of ground water for private domestic or commercial use is prohibited.

⁶ Village level administrative organ.

⁷ Small scale household wells traditionally constructed and financed by the household.

the village, but only for domestic uses other than drinking. Residents pay a monthly fee of 50 Rupees per household for the public supply service.⁸ However, Peeth's public supply is characterized primarily by severe water supply shortage (availability of water only for 2–3 h, twice or thrice a week), old pipe systems (rusty and broken), frequent contamination (bad taste, smell and odor especially during the rainy season) and ill health conditions resulting from the poor quality of the water.⁹

In 2005, the state of Rajasthan passed the Groundwater Rational Use and Management Act, which pushed for neoliberal market reforms to ground water use in order to challenge ground water scarcity in the state. According to Birkenholtz (2013), the Act comprises four major market based solutions for ground water problems; "...define and establish individual entitlements to groundwater; set clearly defined and transferable property rights; increase supply and efficiency through technological expansion, including more efficient irrigation systems and surface water dams; and localise governance through the establishment of water–user associations" (Birkenholtz, 2013, p. 213). Following the Act, in 2012, the first organized private water supply was initiated in Peeth in the form of a business-nonprofit partnership (hereafter called 'the private supply') between Primal Waters (hereafter referred to as the company) and a non-profit Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) wing of HDFC-ERGO (below referred as the non-profit). Primal Waters is a national level private company engaged in developing small scale water filtration plants (below referred to as the machine), whereas HDFC-ERGO is an international financial institution comprised of Housing Development and Finance Corporation of India and ERGO international insurance group. The private supply was launched to provide cheap and affordable water to Peeth's residents. The company operates with a vision of 'water for all' and has engaged in rural water supply in different states in India. The company has gained considerable credit and popularity from a number of multilateral, development and state agencies for its small-scale community based purification technology and decentralized business model. The business model has allowed the company to maintain water prices between 6 and 10 Rupees per 20 L in most states.¹⁰ Since its establishment, the private supply has managed to enroll 300 water user households in Peeth.

How market rationality inscribes itself in water users' system of knowledge and the respective role it plays in shaping and conducting users' practices has been a significant aspect of recent studies on rural water supply governmentality (see, for example, Bakker, 2007, 2010; Birkenholtz, 2009, 2010, 2013; Loftus, 2009; Sultana, 2009; O'Reilly, 2010; Harris, 2008; Ray, 2007; Hellberg, 2014; Jepson and Brown, 2014). Yet, the specific forms of water users' practices and social relationships constituted and reproduced through market rationality still call for a more nuanced examination in a sense that market rationality does not completely displace existing modes of relations but reconstitutes them through attaching new meanings that shape supply practice in a specific way (Birkenholtz, 2013). The fact that private supply is a recent practice in the village makes Peeth's water supply an interesting case for researching newly produced meanings, subjectivity and social relations as market rationality transmutes to water users' system of knowledge. Moreover, despite the success story of the private supply, the fact that the majority of Peeth's residents are still served only under the public supply (hereafter referred to as public users) contributes to a complex setting for understanding the multiple rationalities and subjectivities that constitute and legitimize water supply practice in Peeth.

This article follows a Foucauldian understanding of discourse: not as

a language, but as a system of representation (Hall, 1992: 291). Central to Foucauldian understanding of discourse is the production of knowledge and meaning, and the constitution of meaningful practices through discourse. According to Hall (1977), nothing exists outside of discourse; even material reality takes on meaning and becomes an object of knowledge through discourse. Accordingly, the analysis looks into water users' interpretative repertoire (flexible instruments of discourses that people draw on to construct meanings about aspects of the world) (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The respective research questions are (a) what principal interpretative repertoire is frequently drawn upon in the village's water users' narratives, and what relevant meanings are constituted through this repertoire? (b) Through such repertoire and associated meanings, what respective practices, subjectivities and social relationships are re/produced within the village's water supply?

2. Political rationality: technologies of government, subjectivity and self-conduct

Recent work on water supply in the South has emphasized the interrelationships between rationality, subjectivity, identity politics and self-conduct (see, for example, Legg, 2006; Bakker, 2007, 2010; Birkenholtz, 2010, 2013). Much of this work advances Foucauldian concepts of governmentality. With significant focus on knowledge production, strategies and technologies of government and individual's self-wish to self-conduct, governmentality scholars also document how political rationality produces grounds to render subjects governable (Kooy and Bakker, 2008; Lemke, 2000). What Foucault calls rationality is the political knowledge articulated to constitute subjects and regulate their possible fields of action (Gordon, 1991). Rationality refers to the process of logical interpretation of particular ways of knowing, or politics of truth. These are not some absolute truths that can be discovered and accepted, but particular types of rules that each society accepts specifically or as a whole; according to which the true and false are separated, and specific effects of power are attached to the true (Foucault, 1988, 1985).

In this sense, a political rationality is not neutral knowledge representing the governed reality. Rather, it is an element of government itself that produces a discursive field, in which the act of government becomes rational (Lemke, 2000). It is through this political rationality that multiple technologies of government are reproduced and legitimized (Gordon, 1991; Foucault, 1991). In other words, political rationality produces the legitimate ground for specific forms of strategies, meanings, vocabularies, forms of representation, organizing and ordering to take effect in regulating subjects' conduct (Murdoch and Ward, 1997). The individual's perception of freewill and his/her autonomous capacity to make sense of self (and other) is also central to the concept of political rationality. Foucault described this as subjectivity: the individual's self-wish to self-conduct or self-regulate (technology of self) through actively resisting and reshaping political rationality and constituting self as a subject of government (Neale, 1997).

In rural water supply, much research have shown how the neoliberal market rationality, re/produces transnationalized politics of truth. For instance, Goldman (2007), Caufield (1997) and Babb (2005) discuss how the politics of *state failure* (to provide water for its citizens) and *private supply* (to intervene in place of the state) is mobilized as the conventional rationality to constitute water in its commercial/market sense and to produce and enroll the poor as homogenized subjects of neoliberal government. Asthana (2013) documents how market political rationality constitutes technology, and its private management, as an instrument of government. She examines how market rationality produces private actors as the appropriate agents to mobilize and manage technology in water supply; which, in turn, provides private actors the upper hand in producing domains of references that are used as legitimizing accounts for different forms of conducts and practices

⁸ FGD: (15.05.2016).

⁹ FGD: (15.05.2016); FGD: (19.05.2016) the most common water related diseases are anaemia, diarrhoea and skin rash.

¹⁰ <http://www.sarvajal.com>; FGD: (05.06.2016).

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