

Leela Fernandes

Governing Water in India: Inequality, Reform, and the State

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Since the last decades of the twentieth century, “decentralization” and “privatization” have been the central principles guiding water reform in many countries of the Global South. The question of how these agendas turned out in practice in India has been under-researched. Has the private sector managed to displace the state in water governance since the onset of reforms? How decentralized has water governance become? Leela Fernandes’s book *Governing Water in India* answers some of these questions. The book points out that, judged by the yardsticks of increased private participation and the extent of decentralization, the Indian water reform efforts were a spectacular failure. Private capital has hardly made any direct inroads in water management in India. According to the World Bank’s own estimate, by the end of the first decade of reforms, the water sector accounted for only 5 percent of total private investment in infrastructure (73). Meanwhile, the process of decentralization, quite contrary to its purported aims, has led to state centralization and an exacerbation of inequalities in access to water. At best, the reforms have served to redistribute institutional power within India’s water bureaucracy, offering greater control over the resource to some state institutions such as the water

utilities of large cities at the expense of less endowed urban and rural entities. These changes, the book contends, must be understood as a process of interaction between the historical legacies of water bureaucracies and the imperatives created by the dominant model of economic growth in post-liberalization India. In this sense, the relationship between the state and private capital remains important for the governance of water, albeit only indirectly.

Tamil Nadu's water bureaucracy provides the case for the book, and the arguments are elaborated over five empirically rich chapters that bring out in a compelling fashion the complex and contradictory impulses generated by the process of water reform. In doing this, the work makes a very important contribution to the scholarship on global water reforms by broadening its empirical focus to include both urban and rural uses of water and the study of the post-liberalization Indian state more generally.

The move toward enacting institutional reforms began under the aegis of the World Bank in the 1980s, a time when water governance in the country was a fragmented institutional field. The postcolonial developmental state did not have the levers for absolute centralization of water at an all-India level, and centralization had instead taken place at the level of state governments. The Public Works Department (PWD) was the main repository of centralized state authority on water, itself a legacy of the institutional advocacy of the colonial-era irrigation bureaucracy. The unraveling of the reform process reconfigured the relationships of control at both the central and state levels. If anything, far from a withdrawal of the state, there was increased activity. As Fernandes rightly points out, the emergence of the first national water policy in India itself can be traced to the onset of such reforms in the 1980s (82). By making infrastructure financing conditional on reforming local water governance, the central government also emerged in the subsequent decades as an important driver of the reform process. Indeed, the reform rhetoric of "decentralization" has only gone hand in hand with the increased reliance of local bodies on intergovernmental financing (85). In Fernandes's own words, "the Bank's model of reform has itself produced key nodal points that facilitate the state's centralization of water resources" (81).

State centralization continues at the subnational level too and is chiefly driven by the imperatives of India's new economic policies to promote investment in new industries, and the resultant pressures of urbanization. This has resulted in greater competition between different Indian states for water resources on the one hand, as well as between different uses of water on the other. This is amply brought out through the examination of the role of Tamil Nadu's water bureaucracy in three instances of water sharing with neighboring states of Karnataka (Cauvery dispute), Andhra Pradesh (the Krishna project), and Kerala (the Mullaperiyar Dam) (chapter 3), while the urbanization of water governance is analyzed through the working of the Chennai metro water and sewerage board (chapter 4), which now regulates water resources beyond the territorial limits of the city into the peri-urban areas. Through these cases, Fernandes highlights how both reforms and the regulatory gaps they have entailed at different levels create space for state centralization, while also promoting the emergence of institutions such as water markets and water mafias, as in the case of Chennai. The key message from the book is that, when it comes to water, state centralization happens at multiple spatial scales, and therein lies the key to understanding the complex and contradictory processes of contemporary water governance in India.

Fernandes's work also brings out the limits to bureaucratic agency in water governance, moving beyond commonly held assumptions that Indian water bureaucrats are essentially corrupt and inefficient. For instance, the Water Resources Organization of the Tamil Nadu PWD has had a clear diagnosis of how unplanned urban development was affecting water resources at least since the 1990s but has often found itself helpless in the face of an economic model that privileges lucrative urban development (151–52). Similarly, the book also draws attention to the crucial dimension of how the bureaucracies (both the PWD and the Chennai metro water) have themselves been victims of retrenchments and staff reductions over the reform period (175), creating thereby a space for the greater involvement of the private sector.

In thus providing a convincing analysis of water governance that seamlessly traverses the urban-rural divide in a historically sensitive way, Fernandes's book provides the right balance of complexity and coherence that an undertaking of this magnitude requires. If the work had addressed how concerns around water pollution, water quality, and wastewater management are implicated in these processes, the work would have been richer, and its contemporary relevance greater. This book would be extremely useful for a wide range of social scientists and humanities scholars interested in water, and to political scientists, and sociologists interested in understanding the post-liberalization Indian state. Beyond academics, policy analysts and advocacy groups would gain fresh ways of thinking about the governance of water from reading the book.

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