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BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by : Usha Ramanathan, LEAD Journal

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Barun Mitra, Kendra Okonski and Mohit Satyanand eds, *Keeping the Water Flowing: Understanding the role of Institutions, Incentives, Economics and Entrepreneurship in Ensuring Access and Optimising Utilisation of Water* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007).

In the 'therefore-land' created in this book of articles on access to water and its economics, the field is swamped with many, and varied, problems. The solution is incredibly easy: privatise, and introduce the market to water. The public sector has been inefficient because it hasn't achieved universal coverage, privileges the elite, does not provide the incentives to optimise use, and is influenced by the politics of the day. Therefore, privatise, let the markets command the changes. The public sector has been inequitable in leaving the urban poor largely unprovisioned. Thus, the poor end up paying more rather than less for water. Therefore, privatise, and let the urban poor pay into the market. Governments are inefficient and corrupt. Therefore, privatise. There has been an emphasis on quantity over quality; therefore, privatise. Inspired by Hardin and his Tragedy of the Commons: "Resources owned collectively or even by governments, in practice `85. are owned by no one." (page 28); therefore, privatise, and create property rights in water. Water is a scarce resource; therefore, privatise.

This is the prescription reiterated in at least 11 of the 14 papers comprising this volume. This should come as no surprise since the sponsor of the volume is the Liberty Institute which declares itself to be "dedicated to empowering the people by harnessing the power of the market". The papers do not quite contain arguments or explanations for adopting the market : and, they do not explore the consequences, or the capacity for remediation, if that solution were itself to become the problem. There is a facile dismissal of concerns that have been raised about corporatising the source and resource of water, and surrendering the equity obligation of the state to the market.

Yet, from these texts emerge useful indicators of what ails the system. The paucity of incentives to re-use waste water, the emphasis on quantity of water and neglect of quality, and inappropriate parameters employed in costing water have, for instance, been identified as problems. Flittingly, there are references to the extended damage that can be visited on natural resources arising from government's exercise of the power of eminent domain. When Andrew Morriss writes: "Only a government can create a disaster of such a magnitude, for only a government can seize property rights on such a scale without paying compensation", he is referring to the destruction of the Aral Sea which represents "perhaps the largest environmental disaster relating to water in modern times." (page 66) Only, it must be added in a quick postscript, Morriss would have the power of the state replaced by the market.

The Tirupur experience with private markets for water, and the attempt at public-private partnership in bringing in a scheme that will serve the needs of industry by bringing 185 million litres per day across 55 km from the Cauvery, was preceded by extensive pollution of the Noyyal river which flows through the town, and consequently of the aquifers in the region. Projecting this as an argument for the market doesn't work. The seriousness of pollution, the degrading of the land due to pollution getting into the aquifers and the plight of the marginal farmer and the farm labourer are, to cite some examples, sidelined in narrating the scheme that is unfolding to keep industry supplied with water, and which will continue to produce hazardous effluents.

This implicit acceptance of the contamination of the town in pursuing a version of development is not unique to Tirupur. In Tamil Nadu, again, Cuddalore is facing a similar fate, and resistance is growing. Uncritical appreciation of the changes being introduced is disappointing and, when located in a text that focuses on the market, even misleading.

The editors evince a deep distaste for the 'top-down' approach. Ambrish Mehta's description and analysis of the 'rain catchers' of Saurashtra is in a different paradigm. The movement to use community enterprise to improve the water situation in the state, by augmenting total water storage and improved utilisation of the stored water, (page 168) had "farmers, NGOs and local activists" as its protagonists. Scepticism has yielded to enthusiasm, and well recharge and check dams have diverted the disaster that drought brings with it. In 2000, the state too threw "its weight behind the initiative" of water conservation (page 167) in a move that has challenged the power and control of the state over the community's interest and rights. This does not conform to the market mantra, and challenges the notions of ownership and property rights that informs much of the rest of the volume; so it is dismissed, in the

Introduction as "institutional arrangements (that have) evolved in their specific context, but it might not work elsewhere".

Proponents of the market take on the criticism that corporatising and marketising water will put profits before the concerns of the poor. The poor, in fact, pay, and often more than high-end users. The illegality of the settlements of the urban poor, in slums and shantytowns, has meant that they can be, and often are, excluded from the provision of services by the state. They, therefore, rely on private initiative and end up paying a lot more than the better-endowed who inhabit legal dwellings.

There is truth in this, as anyone familiar with illegal settlements will attest; however it is not that the problem has not been accurately identified. The problem is the proposed solution. The cynicism that accepts illegality and impermanence as the lot of the poor, but gets excited that the paying poor can be handed over to the market, is disturbing. It leaves the unequal citizenship of the urban poor intact, while converting the disadvantages of being poor in the city into an opportunity for profit.

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