

Water Privatization, Pollution, and Profit



VANDANA SHIVA discusses the world's water crisis and her book "Water Wars." This article is abridged from an interview from "In Motion" magazine.

The book "Water Wars" is a synthesis of thirty years of my engagement with communities defending their eco-systems and resources. They are called environmental movements but they are also anti-poverty movements because in the South, the forces that make people poor are the same forces that destroy their resources. In fact, it's because their resources are either destroyed or taken away that people are left poor. It's a perspective from the rich and the powerful who would like to take the resources of the poor away and make it look like a solution to poverty through globalization, financial inputs, etc.

The first movement that taught me about water was the Chipko movement in the early 1970s. Women came out in the Himalayan villages hugging trees and said: "We won't let them be logged. You'll have to kill us before you kill our trees." (The women practiced satagraha - non-violent resistance, and interposed their bodies between the trees and the contractors' axes, thus becoming the environmental movement's first tree huggers.) They were laughed at and the government said: "Logging is a big revenue in these regions," and the women said: "Forests do not bear timber and raise them as revenue." Their real yield is water and soil conservation and fresh air. People used to laugh in the early '70s. But, by the early '80s, our forest policy had changed to recognize that the first function of catchment forests was water conservation, not revenues through killing and logging the trees.

Water lessons

We got a logging ban in the High Himalayas because of this direct action over a whole decade. Ordinary village women, no education, not one word can they write, but they taught the world one of the biggest water lessons. They taught me my big water lesson that as you log the forest you get floods and droughts. Springs dry up. That's where the water crisis comes from.

The next lesson I learned was when I was commissioned by the Ministry of Environment to look at the impact of mining in Doon Valley. From a typical sort of bureaucratic-agency scientific perspective, the impact of mining was the superficial impact you can literally see with your eyes. But when I started to visit the villages for surveys, the women said: "It's about water." That's

what made me realise the limestone was the aquifer, it was the water body that conserved water that would have been conserved, and stored by a twenty thousand million Rupees, investment in a water storage system. That's what nature and the limestone belt and the mineral deposits were doing for us. It is the women's lessons in hydrogeology rather than the scientists' lessons in geology that taught me about mountains and mining and how mining too is linked to water.

Dams

Then, in the same period, the early '80s, one by one our rivers started to get dammed - Survernarekha, Narmada - and I started to go to every local community that was protesting against displacement to help them put together their assessments, including the early assessments and impact of the Narmada dam, and training the younger generation of activists who then built a massive movement called the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

I learned during that period, that dams are built on the assumption you augment water. All you do is re-direct water. You do not increase the flow of water in a river you merely store it and divert it to places where you can create commercial agriculture, feed industry, feed big towns. And meantime the areas that were getting water through the river, the wells that were being recharged by that river, the fisheries that were being supported by that river, are killed. That cost is never taken into account.

Industrial agriculture and the World Bank

It was during that time that the violence in Punjab taught me that industrial agriculture was a very big water destroyer. The economics of industrial agriculture had always been posed as higher productivity. The reason given was you needed these seeds and crops, these chemicals to produce more food. But not with respect to land because you are not producing more nutrition per acre. Many crops were being destroyed to create monocultures. Densely mixed farming produces far more per acre. But the most

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important thing - water - was never considered. Five times more water is used in industrial agriculture for growing the same amount of wheat and rice than indigenous agriculture. With respect to scarce water you actually had an inefficient revolution.

In the early 1990s, women in the coastal areas started to destroy shrimp farms. They called me to help them when they were arrested. I did the studies to file a Supreme Court case in their defence and they showed that for something simple like shrimp landing on a plate in North America - no one realises that for one acre of a shrimp farm two hundred acres of ecosystems are being destroyed. The waters are being made saline. Seawater is being polluted.

The World Bank gave money to pump water from the ground so that today there are places where water is being pumped from a thousand to five thousand feet. I remember two regions in particular where I did surveys for governments when the water started to get scarce and they were wondering: "Why is there no water?" I said, "Show me your plans. Show me your policies." I started reading and found at a certain point the World Bank had said: "Stop growing millet. Start growing sugar cane. Stop growing subsistence crops. Start growing cash crops." And that shift to very, very water-demanding crops, all World Bank requirements, lead to groundwater being mined and creating water famine. My dream is one day to make a bill for genocide to the World Bank because more than any other agency it has destroyed the hydrological systems of this planet in its arrogance and blindness.

Market paradigm v. ecological paradigm

The World Bank only looks at returns on investment. It drags countries into borrowing. It forces loans on them and then wants to maximize return on loans. Well, loans don't come out of stable ecosystems. Loans come out of cash crops. Loan payments, interest payments. They are squeezing out loan re-payments by killing water systems and people who depend on them.

The ecological paradigm focuses on the water cycle and recognizes by its very nature that water is a renewable resource. If we respect that cycle and do not interfere in

it it's going to give us abundance forever. But we have to function within it. We have to be bounded by it. Within that binding we have limitless water forever.

The market paradigm doesn't look at the water cycle.

It begins with cash. It begins with finance. It's: "How can I invest if I have money to extract water as a raw material and put it into something else that will generate more cash?" When that paradigm starts to create water crises that same paradigm comes up with a second solution, which it is now offering here at the WSSD (World Summit on Sustainable Development). It's a big offer. "We will now privatize water and commodify it." Water is being exploited because it is being treated as valueless, "Therefore, we will put a price on it," but value and price are two very different things.

When you function in an ecological paradigm you value water but you don't price it.

Because it is in fact priceless. In a market paradigm you price water but you don't value it.

Water rights and indigenous communities

Communities have always recognized two things. Firstly, that which we need for survival should never belong to an individual. It should be the common wealth. Second, it should be managed as the common wealth. Therefore, community structures of responsibilities have to be put in place; the rights are derived from collective responsibility; they are secondary. The collective responsibility is primary.

If you do not build that storage tank to harvest your monsoons in low-rainfall areas you are never going to have water. And you can't build a tank alone. You have to do this collectively. Common property is what has allowed tanks built in India four thousand years ago to still supply water to people. The tanks are marvels of engineering that cannot be reproduced by any engineer today - some a hundred square feet; some might be a square mile, depending on the topography. But in very dry areas, 600, 700 millimeters - they have been the lifeline in dry regions.

Once you harvest it together, then the only way to make that tank serve you is to have a common regime of what will be grown. If one individual grows sugar cane and drains that tank dry that is the typical tragedy of the commons that Garret Hardin (*The Tragedy of the Commons* by Garret Hardin - 1968 *Science*) talks about.



D. Jackobsen - UNICEF

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But that is not typical of the commons. That is typical of the destruction of the commons.

The tragedy is that Western individualized, atomized societies and their academics have imposed on the rest of the world this very false idea that commons by their very nature must degrade. But it is privatized property by its very nature that must ecologically degrade because it's being managed for highest returns, rather than ecological maintenance.

Public-Private Partnerships & Coca Cola

There are three negative consequences of public-private water projects. The first is it inevitably leads to the privatization of the state. Voluntary agreements are no more part of policy, or debated through transparency of parliamentary debates. Executives, individual bureaucrats in power, usually with a kickback or a bribe, sign off something that does not belong to the state-water. It is not the property of the state. Water belongs to the people and the earth. It is a community resource, common property. Common property cannot become state property. But private-public partnerships assume water to be a state property, to then be privatized to a private corporation. But the very action privatizes the state and stops it being a public entity. That to me is the single most crucial damage that it does.

Second, it takes what is a community resource and transfers it into a monopoly right. A distortion. First, a monopoly of the state and then a monopoly of the corporation that takes over. The third damage it does is it leaves no accountability system either within a public-oriented state regulation or commons-oriented community regulation to regulate use. Following are just two examples of how this functions.

Someone signed away rights to Coca Cola. Where do they get their bottled water from? Why are they able to enter the market in such a big way with their Aquafinas and their Kinleys etc. They are capturing the market because they are getting the water for free. How do they

get the water for free? Because somewhere someone wrote a contract with them. That was a private-public partnership. They get a piece of land. They start drilling deep - a thousand feet, two thousand feet deep where there is no pollution. They are not purifying water. They can't manufacture water. They steal water.

In the state of Kerala, for example, in a region with such high rainfall it has never had water scarcity, within one year of a Coca Cola plant coming, pumping up 1.5 million liters a day for bottling water, three lakes went dry, rivers went dry. The tribal women started to protest. Three hundred of them are now in jail. We organized a meeting against water privatization three weeks ago - they couldn't join us because they were in jail. These are the consequences of private-public partnership.

Another example is the case of Suez getting the privatization contract for water in Delhi. Where does it get the water? By stealing it from the Ganges. Not purifying the Yamuna, which is polluted, but stealing it through a dam that was built at public cost, and a hundred thousand people displaced. This is a bigger disaster than Narmada, it's just not been in the world news so much. They divert the water out of irrigation, 635 million liters a day.

Those bureaucrats who signed those contracts never had those rights. That is why private-public partnerships are in my view illegal, both constitutionally and in respect of natural rights. So we are going to file cases on all of these issues. Water has to be governed by natural law, not by the law of the market.

☐ The above article is abridged from a September, 2002 interview of Dr Shiva by Nic Paget-Clarke published in In Motion Magazine, 6 March 2003. Dr. Vandana Shiva is founder of both the Research Foundation for Science Technology and Ecology, an independent public industry research group, in India, and Navdanya, a grassroots conservation movement.

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BOYCOTT COKE

Join a huge, growing movement seeking to punish Coca-Cola for their damaging influence across the world. On 15/2/2005 the Plachimada community in southern India celebrated 1000 days of resistance against Coca-Cola. For the past year the Coke plant at Plachimada has been closed because of the determined resistance of Adivasi women, and the Perumthi Panthayal (local government) which served notice to the company and went to the High

Court. The Kerala High Court ruled Coca-Cola mining of the community's ground water was illegal, creating severe water shortages for the communities in the vicinity, polluting groundwater and soil and distributing toxic waste as fertilisers to farmers in the area. Water scarcity and pollution of land



and groundwater has had a dramatic impact on the largely agricultural based community. On 20/1/2005, thousands of people across India surrounded 87 Coca-Cola and Pepsi plants to serve notice to Coca-Cola and Pepsi to 'Quit India' on grounds of violating Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the right to life. For more information on Coca-Cola boycotts currently running see www.indiaresource.org and www.killercoke.org and www.colombia.org.uk - abridged from The Ecologist, March 2005