



WATER WIVES: A HARSH CONSEQUENCE OF WATER SCARCITY FOR WOMEN IN MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT

A Report from the IPCC (United Nations) has revealed that women are more susceptible and vulnerable to the adversities of the environment. In one of such instances in India, the acute water scarcity in the State of Maharashtra has further aggravated the problem for women. Due to the extreme shortage of water, men marry multiple times because a greater number of women in the house will imply that more drinking water could be fetched. Such wives are known as 'Water Wives'. This practice first originated in Village Danganmal situated in the Shahpura Taluka of Thane District of Maharashtra, where one needs 12 hours to fetch water, and because presently over 19000 villages in Maharashtra have no access to water, this practice became more pervasive with time.

The present study aims to explore the problem of water scarcity in context with the women in the region and the process of 'dehumanization' and 'co modification' that they are subjected to and the circumstances that have led to the current state of affairs.

Keywords: *Water Crisis, Women, Maharashtra, Water Wives, Dehumanization, Ecofeminism, Danganmal*

1. INTRODUCTION

Water is the most essential and indispensable resource that sustains life and livelihood. However, in the recent times, the scarcity of water has become an alarmingly growing concern across the world. Specifically in India, the situation is quite critical as 600 million people face water scarcity which is nearly 43% of the total population in India.

India has been facing a constant water crisis as it possesses just 4% of the freshwater resources of the world, even though 16% of the world's population resides in India (Kumar, 2005).

Besides, changing weather patterns and repeated droughts further aggravate the crisis.

For this reason, nearly one third of the 700 Indian districts face acute water shortage, out of which, as many as 256 districts have reported 'critical' and 'over exploited' groundwater levels (Central Ground Water Board, 2017).

This scarcity is expected to aggravate further in the near future as the demand for fresh water is projected to be twice its availability by the year 2030 and if the current trends continue, then India could experience a drop of 6% in its GDP due to water scarcity (Niti Aayog 2018).

The Government of India, the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and the cities of Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai have been facing serious water crises, of which, Maharashtra faces the most critical situation in terms of water crises followed by Gujarat and Karnataka (Upadhyay, 2019).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the present study, the research design used is would be partially exploratory and partially descriptive in nature. It is exploratory because it tries to seek new insight in the area which has not been explored by researchers so far. Also, the study is descriptive in nature as it describes the life conditions and hardships faced by women living in village Danganmal of Maharashtra.

Furthermore, the research method used is the content analysis method through which newspaper articles, documentaries, government records, etc. were referred and analysed.

2.1. Water Crisis in Maharashtra

Maharashtra is a state in the south-central India. It is situated in the Peninsular region of India. Maharashtra is the third largest Indian state in terms of area and the second most populous state of India.

Maharashtra has been facing a water crisis of unprecedented measures.

Following years of drought, the rivers' currents have ebbed, water in dams and reservoirs has depleted and over-exploitation of groundwater has raised concerns over the long-term availability of water.

The water levels in the reservoirs and dams is extremely low.

Maharashtra faces acute problem of water shortage because 35% area of the state is drought prone and receives very less and irregular rainfall.

Nearly 50% of the water that is used for the irrigation purposes is sourced from wells, and this has resulted in the steady decline in water tables in Maharashtra.

A study conducted by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water revealed that 80% of the districts in Maharashtra were drought prone and 20% districts were highly prone to floods every year.

2.2. Water Crisis and its Impact on Women

A Report from the IPCC (United Nations) has revealed that women are more susceptible and vulnerable to the adversities of the environment. Women are believed to be the worst victims of environmental degradation. Especially in the regions where the water supply is either insufficient or unsafe, the effect on the lives of women and girls is disproportionate as the primary responsibility for collecting water is usually carried by women and girls which is often very time-consuming and arduous.

Nearly 200 million hours are spent annually by girls and women while walking to fetch water and this work done by them is entirely unpaid. (Ray, 2007)

It further creates social issues like a lower level of literacy in women as many girls drop out of school to be additional hands in water collection. This in turn aggravates the social oppression faced by them.

Ban Ki-moon, the Former Secretary-General of the United Nations quoted that "Water scarcity is directly proportional to socio-economic challenges faced by even young girls drop-out in schools due to harassment in carrying water. The intervention is therefore required to solve the global problems of access, equity and sustainable use by active inclusion of women's knowledge."

Besides, this further deprives women of sanitation facilities, physical and mental health. Carrying as heavy as 20 kg water containers on their heads and backs has profound impact on their physical health, deforming their spines and leading to problems during pregnancy and childbirth and other long term health problems.

Spending long hours in the course of collecting water considerably reduces the quality of life of the women and their whole fate is shaped by the scarcity of water.

In one of such instances in India, the acute water scarcity in the State of Maharashtra further aggravated the problem for women. Due to the extreme shortage of water, men marry multiple times because a greater number of women in the house will imply that more drinking water could be fetched, even when polygamy is a punishable offence in India (other than for Muslim men). Such wives are known as 'Water Wives'. This practice first originated in Village Denganmal of Maharashtra, where one needs 8 to 12 hours to fetch water from a nearby well or dam reservoir, and because today over 19000 villages in Maharashtra have no access to water, this practice became more popular in other nearby villages too with time.

The present study aims to present the problem of water scarcity in context with the women in this region.

2.3. Water Wives: A Unique Solution to Mitigate Water Crisis in Denganmal

Denganmal is a small parched village in the Konkan Region of western Maharashtra. The village is located in the western ghats along the west coast of Peninsular India, around 185 kilometres away from capital city of Mumbai in Shahpura Taluka of District Thane of Maharashtra. It is a small isolated hamlet with a population of nearly 500 individuals and 100 families residing in thatched roof houses made up of mud and wooden beams.

It is situated on hilly terrain. Temperature in Denganmal remains fairly low around 35 to 26 degrees Celsius in summers and 28 to 16 degrees Celsius in winters due of its proximity to the Arabian Sea, which is why the weather is extremely it is humid here. However, the weather is incessantly hot here because of the Rocky Terrain of the place.

Denganmal under the 'monsoon-shadow' arc of the state, therefore it perpetually receives scanty rainfall. The village faces annual draughts in summers which causes the well to get dried up and the cattle also dies.

The crops that are cultivated also those with low water requirement such as Pulses and Millets, i.e. Urad, Nachni (Ragi), Vari and Bhagar. These are cultivated in the farming months of June to November, when the region experiences scanty rains. Most men work as the farm labourers and earn minimum wages. Vegetables are usually consumed only once a week or once a fortnight as the nearest weekly market is 25 kms away at Kasara town.

Besides, there are no water pipeline connections to supply water to the village. There are only 2 sources of water available for the village, i.e., a well at the foot of the rocky hill which is nearly 12 kilometres away from the village and the reservoir of Bhatsa Dam built on Bhatsa River which is 8 kilometres away from the village. Bhatsa Dam is located in the major source of water for Mumbai and Thane (Rode, 2010).

Due to the absence of taps and water connection in the village, the water has to be fetched manually.

And with accordance to the pre-ascertained gender roles and stereotypes, in Danganmal village too, women bear the sole responsibility of collecting water. They have to walk for a long distance for hours to fetch water from the well or the dam reservoir and this to and fro journey takes around 8 to 10 hours each day.

Besides collecting water and other resources like fodder, firewood, food, etc, other household responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, looking after the children, etc. are also expected to be fulfilled by women and discharging all other duties along with spending long hours fetching water, is very difficult and nearly impossible.

To overcome this problem, the village has come up with a unique solution to cope with the problem, i.e., Polygamy. Men of the village marry multiple times as a greater number of women in the house would imply that more water could be fetched. The first wife would do all the household work like cooking, cleaning, cattle rearing and raise children and the 'other' wives would be responsible for fetching water ("Water Wives", 2015)

Marrying twice or even thrice for water has been a norm in Danganmal from the past many years and these second and third wives are commonly known as 'Water Wives' or 'Paani Bai' as the sole purpose of their marriage is so that they can fetch water for the household.

These women who get married to become the 'water wife' of a household is usually a widow, divorcee, destitute, infertile or from a poor family backdrop, such that her dowry could not be paid by her family. Therefore, in order to regain their marital status be accepted back as a part of the society, these women choose to become someone's second or third wife and spend their entire life walking miles to fetch water for the household just in lieu of the label of being married, as there is a huge social stigma and taboo attached to the women who are widowed, divorced, abandoned or unmarried. For this reason, this practice has been accepted and supported by the village panchayat and local authorities as it is believed to provide support and rehabilitation to the poor and destitute women. Also, while the first wife should be necessarily an unmarried woman of the same caste, these conditions do not apply to the 'other' wives as the water wives may be from the lower caste as well (Siddiqui, 2018).

But it is worth consideration that just for the sake of the label of being married, these women choose to become someone's second or third wife and lead a life of a great difficulty, where, life is not easy for these women even after marriage. The price that they pay in lieu of this label is quite huge.

Such a woman leads a life where her value and importance in the family is as good as a water pipeline. Her life utility is no more than just supplying water to the household, just as a tap or water pipeline. Therefore, her identity is reduced to merely being a commodity. This process is called 'commodification' and since, she is deprived of all the conditions that a human being deserves, she is subject to 'dehumanization' also.

For this particular reason, such a wife is known as 'Paani Bai' in the native dialect of the region, which reinforces her inferior status in the house as compared to the first wife.

She leaves home at the break of the dawn and returns as the sun sets. She walks miles through the hilly terrain through the mud tracks in the scorching heat carrying as heavy as 15 litres of water in aluminium pots.

Even when once in a while, the government water tankers arrive in the village with nearly 1000 litres of water, the quantity remains largely insufficient which further instigates ugly fights between women. They can be seen abusing, beating, hair-pulling one another.

She is entitled to only marginal space and rights in the family. The power relations, the status hierarchy, rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities of the first and the 'other' wives are sharply defined and clear-cut. Therefore, there is no reason for any sort of conflict or domestic dispute as their roles do not overlap and it has been observed that there is a considerable level of harmony and cooperation amongst the wives. Rather, at times it has been observed that the first wife herself suggests or compels the husband to marry for another time so that she can get some relief from the arduous task of fetching water.

The first wife holds the pivotal role in the house. And usually only the first wife is entitled to marital rights as a wife and only she is allowed to share sexual relations with the husband and bear children. The 'other' wives are not allowed to share intimate relations with the husband as long as the first wife is alive.

Also, a water wife is not entitled to a share in the property or assets of the husband. She is expected to be contented with the basic necessities and subsistence that she is provided and the roof that she has over her head and the social standing that has due to this marriage.

In a few cases all the wives had separate kitchens and rooms under the same roof or the hut had been split up using a curtain or a piece of cloth or canvas sheets.

In many of the cases, these women are not even allowed to eat with the rest of family or participate in religious functions or festivals.

Moreover, the adverse effects on the health of these women are profound. Majority of them have an extremely low haemoglobin levels and suffer from anaemia, repeated miscarriages, bone deformities and routine back and neck pains. Also, they face difficulties while conceiving, childbirth and pregnancy and also suffer from shifted menstrual cycles. Also, due to the heavy weight that they carry on their heads, women here are going bald. Infant mortality rate is also high due to malnutrition in women. There've been cases where women were forced to go to fetch water just a few days after the birth of their child.

These women are largely subjugated and discriminated against. Their emotional well-being also remains neglected. They face incessant humiliation within the family and in the community. They are considered worthless which in turn leads to the 'Dehumanization' of these women.

2.4. Water Wives: The Multifaceted Contributing Factors

In context of the case study of village Danganmal and the malpractice of 'Water Wives' prevailing therein, the problem is just not limited to the environmental crises. Although the root cause of this malpractice is the acute water crisis, but there are other issues too that come to light.

On one hand, it highlights the alarming situation of water crises and the problem of environmental degradation. Over-exploitation of ground water resulted in the depletion of water in the dams and reservoirs. Meanwhile, insufficient and irregular rainfall, especially in the monsoon-shadow regions led to annually recurring droughts. This is one of the primary reasons that instigated the malpractice of 'water wives' in the village.

Besides the environmental crisis, political and administrative failure and ignorance has further aggravated the problem. Danganmal is a small, isolated hamlet. For this reason, it has long been a non-priority for the policy makers and the administration. Though the situation therein can be well mitigated through adequate and pro-active and efficient policy making and implementation of the existing policies.

For instance, in the year 2019, state government of Maharashtra implemented the Maharashtra State Water Policy under which the official records claim that each day, 6,290 tankers are being supplied water to 4,920 villages and 10,506 hamlets. However, in reality, these water tankers arrive in the only once in a while, and even when they do, the water is not sufficient to fulfil the needs of the entire population of the village.

Jalyukta Shivar Abhiyan was a scheme launched by the Maharashtra state government in the year 2014 after Maharashtra experienced consecutive droughts every year. The scheme aimed at mitigating the problem of water scarcity in the drought-prone villages of Maharashtra in a systematic manner by decentralizing the water bodies, increasing the level of groundwater, rejuvenating the water storage capacity of dams, tanks, dams and other water bodies through people's participation, etc. However, the scheme was later withdrawn and scrapped in 2019 as it performed poorly due to corruption and improper fund allocation.

Therefore, none of the relief and developmental policies have actually reached to the relief of Danganmal on ground.

Secondly, it is also alarming that despite the fact that Polygamy has been strictly banned under the section 11 of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and section 4 of the Special Marriage Act 1954, and despite being a punishable offence under the section 494 of the Indian Penal Code, amounting to imprisonment upto 7 years and fine, the cases of these water wives have been outside the purview of law from the longest time and have never reached the courts of law. The local leaders have been aware about the situation but they did not intervene as they believed that the easiest and cheapest solution in this particular case was to allow the continuation of the practice of water wives, rather than heavily investing in the laying down of the water pipeline. Danganmal, being an isolated village/hamlet, ever attracted much attention of the local governments, administration or the media, which is why, the tradition of water wives is going on smoothly.

Thirdly, it is thought worthy that why do these 'water wives' even agree to enter into such a marriage in which she has no respect, value or rights. She is a mere commodity of utility, as good as a water pipeline for the household. In the Indian context, marriage is considered to be extremely necessary for members of the society, which is absolutely normal as marriage is an important institution of the society as it ensures social stability. But the problem is that it has become an obligatory part of an individual's life, especially women, such that a woman who is unmarried, divorced or widowed are stigmatized in everyday life and considered as incomplete by the society. She loses her social status in the society and is subjugated or even considered inauspicious at times. This is the reason why these 'water wives' accept this life of humiliation, just in lieu of the title of being a married woman.

2.5. Suggestions

The root cause of the malpractice of 'water wives' is the absence of water connection to the village whereas the Bhatsa dam reservoir is merely 8 kilometres away from the village, even when the dam is one of the major suppliers of water to Mumbai which is nearly 100 kilometres away from the dam. The entire problem can be resolved just by extending water pipelines from Bhatsa Dam Reservoir to the village.

Hilly and rocky terrain may be one of the obstructions in this course as it involves more cost, heavy machinery and a huge labour force and since Denganmal is sparsely populated, the government may not have considered the construction of water pipelines to be economically viable. However, considering the marginalization of women of the village, government needs to take a strong step towards the problem.

Polygamy is a punishable offence and the same should be strictly enforced in the region. The local authorities should keep a close check so that this practice does not continue further. Also, the women who have been working as 'water wife' under inhuman conditions should be provided rehabilitation by the administration if she wants to withdraw from the marriage.

Families living in the hamlet should be provided an opportunity to migrate to some other place and rehabilitation and livelihood should be guaranteed to them.

The situation can be well mitigated through adequate and pro-active and efficient policy making and implementation of the existing policies. New policies should be formulated to help the all the isolated hamlets and villages mitigate the water crises or the existing ones can be extended to cover the isolated draught prone regions.

3. CONCLUSION

The plight of women in village Denganmal is strongly proves the contention that women are more susceptible and vulnerable to the adversities of the environment. Women in Denganmal, especially those who are merely 'water wives' of the husband lead a very marginal life due to the scarcity of water. Their entire life revolves around this deficiency. The impact of water crises on the lives of the members of the village is so profound that the institution of marriage is being guided by this scarcity. However, the problem is multi-faceted. Besides the environmental factors, the inaction and ignorance of the policy makers and the local authorities have also contributed to the prevalence of the malpractice of polygamy in Denganmal. Social factors have further aggravated the problem by attaching stigma and taboo with the women who are unmarried, widowed or divorced. This stigma forces these women to lead a life of humiliation where they are deprived of even basic respect. Their worth is equivalent to that of a tap or water pipeline. But this commodified and dehumanized life is readily accepted by her in lieu of the label of being married so that she can be accepted by the society.

The crisis that India is heading towards in the near future is even more alarming and dangerous as it has been predicted that by the year 2030, 40% Indians will have no access to drinking water.

Central and the State government need to make certain policies to address the problem of water crisis with in-depth gender and feminist lenses. Also, it is high time that priority should be given to gender inequality and gender sensitization and the gender roles associated with water should be ended.

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