

**Voices from the Village**  
**An Alternative Paper for the Alternative Water Forum**

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Discourse on gender evolved from the 1970s feminist movement in the North, directed against sexual discrimination. Feminism challenged the nuclear family stereotypes of male breadwinner and dependent female housewife. Variations across societies point to the fact that division of labour is socially assigned, rather than biologically innate. Such assignments emerge from cultural and psychological connotations of social identity: men as ‘masculine’, women as ‘feminine’.

Post-colonial thinkers perceived gender theory as essentially ‘white’ in its orientation. As a product of western humanism, feminism was seen as unable to represent the movements against inequality which were occurring in various social, political and economic contexts in the South. The critique denied the existence of a universal sisterhood of women, pointing to diversities of race, caste, colour and class which must be given prominence as central variables in the definition and application of gender.

Addressing gender called for a critical analysis of:

- social structures and the constraints they impose
- of the gendered division of labour
- of the gender hegemony of social identities and functioning
- and of the division of social, political and economic privileges

It was recognised that, just as gender is never pure, it is never absent. Moving beyond family and kinship into all spheres of social organisation, it dictates a mutual reinforcing of gendered penalties and privileges.

## **WATER**

Great claims of gender success are made in the theory and practice of drinking and/or domestic water projects. Such claims were hinged on women’s increased involvement in drinking water projects. Analysts point to this as a gross misinterpretation of gender as sex. ‘...separating and isolating women as the central problem, from the context of social relations’ (Baden and Goetz, 1988). Rather than establishing equality, the purpose behind this was to ‘harness’ women’s social roles in water management to ensure the economic efficiency goals of water projects (Davidson, 1994). Overwhelmingly, it was claimed that where women were involved, water projects were highly successful: where they were not, projects failed to reach their objectives.

In a well-intentioned attempt to avoid the import of the ‘western model of the household’ by the South, the Women in Development approach talked of the need to integrate women in productive development: resulting (Boserup 1970) not only in economic efficiency, but also in increased social equality. Boserup’s claim of women’s potential for economic growth presented an attractive and hitherto unused source of willing labour, available to the structural adjustment economic reforms popular during the 1980s and 90s. This was especially so in the water sector, where lateral eco-feminist thinking talked of women’s special relationship with natural resources. The need to involve women in water resource management was conveniently misinterpreted as ‘the involvement of women in water projects’ (INSTRAW 1989).

It was assumed that women would gladly and voluntarily participate as, in return, they would be rewarded by improved access to drinking water and better health of the family (Leach, 1996), with side-benefits of extra time to pursue productive activities. Indeed women did contribute to the efficiency of water projects, but analysis reveals that they gained little by way of furthering equality in unequal gender relations. Although, by the late 1980s, the term ‘women’ was being replaced by ‘gender’, little had

changed in reality (Guijt, 1993). Water projects still parroted women's involvement and the goal was still – to maximise efficiency.

More recently, 'involving both women and men and meeting the needs of both women and men is the new gender focus of water projects' (Gender and Water Alliance, 2000), but the overriding approach remains the same: economic efficiency of water development interventions. The questions – 'Which men? and Why now? and What gender equality privileges will come from bringing men in?' are yet to be asked to the water sector (Pearson, 2000).

Issues of other cross-cutting social variables are, if at all, at best loosely addressed. They form the peripheral laces, in the gender frills of water projects. The focus of analysis is still the household and the community. The singular, composite image of the generically 'poor third world women', much argued against in drawing up gender theory, is still the primary image of women.

What is true and what is false – the writings of gender theorists or the interpretation of gender in water policy documents? Which of these matches most closely the realities of the life of women and men and the way they access and manage water?

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Chuni, in the Himalayan foothills, features a dominant single-lineage Kshatriya caste group, which traces its ancestry to the man who purchased the entire village. Of these, the central Khanka family divides into 3 branches, and is related by marriage to the Bisht and Basnayat families.

Of the 37 households who are members of the dominant caste group, either by direct descent or by marriage, two thirds inhabit the two lowest, water-rich hamlets of the village.

I'm just thankful that we live in such a beautiful village where there are no problems with water – Chuni is known as the village favoured by the Jal Devi, the water goddess and we Khanka women have water at our doorsteps. No matter what other problems we have, we are water *lords* here

Of the other Khanka relatives, one group benefits from the only successful piped water scheme in the village, whilst the remaining households, in water scarce hamlets, have managed to acquire extensions of clean water from other hamlets.

My name is Saraswati Devi. I'm an old widow now, and I've had a hard life. Seven children, and an uphill struggle over the rocks to get water from the naula, endless trips every day. Even when my husband was home from the army, he didn't have time to work out a way to make it easier. But now, I've got water at home, in my own courtyard and life is so easy – all thanks to my wonderful relative, head of the second Khanka family, when he was elected headman of the village. He persuaded the officials to pay for water to be brought from another part of the village, and piped direct to my house.

The water supply department in Pithoragarh approved the plan on the grounds of Saraswati Devi's plea that she was, "*an old widow without water*", without coming to check how this arrangement would affect those, from whose hamlet it was being drawn.

Other families, originally settled to provide agricultural labour for the Khankas, are still socially inferior to the dominant group, despite changes in land-ownership patterns. The four mixed-class Airi families have little voice in making decisions.

The other Airi families up here have asked me to tell you about our difficulties with water. The only thing is, I'd be glad if you'd keep what I say to yourselves – our neighbours, the Bishts, are powerful people and I don't want to upset them. Being high up the mountain slopes, there's not much water here – just a gad. It's a steep climb down to it from our houses, over rough terrain, and it's difficult to get clean drinking water from it at the best of times. The Bishts live further down than we do – well below the gad. So, anyway, when the village headman, who is related to them decided to pipe water from the gad to a tank to serve our hamlet, he took it down to the Bishts and put the tank beside their houses. This was fair enough –after all, you can't make water flow uphill, can you. The trouble is, the Bishts don't like it if we use the tank too much. They think it belongs to them.

Wouldn't it have been fairer if they'd put the tank BESIDE the gad? Then all the families would have had the same distance to walk to get to it?

Who knows? I don't. It's the Khankas who make these decisions. But what I'd like to ask is whether anything could be done for us? We have to make so many journeys to the gad every day – and in the dry summer months, we make trips all night, men, women, children all of us. Is there anyone who could speak on our behalf? We're not a priority, you see – even for the political leaders.

The mixed-caste Goswami family were given land in a water-scarce upstream location by Khanka family 2, along with two Dalit families who were granted smaller homesteads, given their occupations as artisans. Despite official ownership of land and therefore water, the Goswamis and Dalits have little control over their rights to water, given their inferior positions in the village social order.

I'm Jay Nath Goswami. Please don't repeat what I'm going to tell you to the Khankas! We used to have two really good naulas up here, And a gad for the cattle. Then 30 years ago, the head of Khanka Family 2 ordered that the gad water should be diverted to serve his Basnayat relatives. Ten years later, they took the water from the naulas for Saraswati Devi. We were left with just a little dribble of water – and I couldn't do a thing, even though it was illegal. We cannot survive here by arguing with the Khankas.

The Khankas violated official legislation in taking decisions on water and used their authority to manipulate official policies. They legitimised their actions by securing official permission and resources to divert water. They knew that the sanctioning authorities had little interests in coming to Chuni to assess the situation for themselves and that the Goswamis and the Dalit family would not protest.

Water is polluted, for the higher castes, by the touch of Dalits

I'm Deepa Devi Tamta. It certainly hasn't been easy for us, as Dalits, trying to manage as Jay Nath's neighbours, and losing our water to the Khankas. The Village Head told me to go to Pithorogarh and ask the officers there to approve a scheme to pipe water from the *gad* to our hamlet. I had to stay in Pithorogarh for three days to ask for what was really mine. I was taught to tell the officers that I was a *poor Dalit widow without water*. Then there was another struggle, to stop Jay Nath putting the tank in his own courtyard. I told him, “This scheme was approved because of me, my widowhood and my Dalit status. I have no objections to the tank being built in your courtyard, but it will constrain you. I will wash clothes, take a bath, gargle water and spit it out. Will you like this *polluted* water to spill on your courtyard?”

Even now, it's not satisfactory – the system clogs up with mud and stones in the summer, and I have to go to the gad itself. It's not so bad for the Goswami women – Jay Nath managed to improve their *naula* so they can get drinking water from there. But of course we can't touch it. When one of my kids tried it on a few years ago, the Goswamis made a huge fuss – threatened to stop employing us and then emptied out all the 'polluted' water into the field and performed a religious ceremony to 'purify' the *naula*.

In another water-scarce hamlet, one Khanka household of two adults uses one *naula*, whilst a second *naula* is shared between the thirty individuals of eight Dalit households. In summer, the Dalit families' source becomes grossly inadequate, yet because they cannot themselves access the other *naula*, they are reduced to asking the Khankas to give them water. This task is grudgingly performed, as it takes time out of the couple's busy daily routine as school teachers. They expect the Dalit women and children to perform various household tasks for them in return for their 'generosity' and the efforts they expend. The Dalit women confided their resentment at this inequity to the researcher, a Brahmin.

What can we do? Will you come with me to the Khankas' *naula* and I will take out water in the open, with everybody's knowledge? – On the other hand, it wouldn't do any good. My neighbours are important to me, no matter what they do. I need their support for my family's daily existence. You sympathise with me, but you are here today and gone tomorrow.

Conflict and defiance, even in the face of social injustice, are not the preferred solutions for her. Yet these Dalit women face the greatest burden in all Chuni in terms of unequal allocation of water and water responsibilities. They left their work in the fields and at home when they heard someone was inquiring about water.

Ask us about what water scarcity is – it is not to bathe in the summer heat, after toiling in the fields. It is to reuse water used for washing vegetables and rice to wash utensils, to use this water again for washing clothes and then to feed the buffaloes this soapy water. You should see how weak our buffaloes have become, drinking soapy, dirty water! Water scarcity is to sit up the whole night filling glass by glass as water trickles into our *naula*. It is to sit and wait for someone from the Khanka household to come and give us some water. It is to walk up and down their path, calling a little, waiting a little, hearing them say they are busy and also knowing that our own tasks at home are left unattended. It is to steal water stealthily, taking care not to wet the ground, for fear of being suspected. It is to feel the guilt of stealing, thinking perhaps we should not have done, and again to think, "Why is it like this?"

We often don't clean the utensils and just wipe them with a cloth. We feel so dirty and unclean in the summer. These people say that we Dalits are dirty, that we smell. But how can we be clean without water? We do not wash our clothes for weeks, just rinsing them with a little water. Even if we go down the steep hillside to the gad, half a mile away, the water there decreases in the summer, too, and there are many households sharing it. Being outsiders there, we can only ask for what is left over.

There is a distinct and unequal division of labour between women and men. All year, most women work for 15-16 hours a day, collecting fodder and small firewood, cultivating the fields, depositing animal dung in the fields, fetching water, cooking, washing, cleaning the house, looking after the cattle, the children and the old and sick at home. The notion of appropriate masculine and feminine roles and responsibilities is strongly established. Housework is women's responsibility and good women are those who perform all the designated tasks at home, willingly and diligently. Men who assist at home become objects of ridicule for violating the local constructs of male hegemony.

Personally, I blame their wives. What a shame to sit and watch their husbands work! Their homes are *destroyed* and so will their daughters, who learn from them.

As in most places elsewhere, women are primarily responsible for fetching and managing water for domestic use, yet these roles are not innately ordained. Both little boys and girls help meet family water needs but the responsibility for fetching, using and managing water is increasingly imposed on girls as they grow up. The burden of water-related work is assigned to young women on marriage, when they move to live with the husband's family.

The first ritual a bride performs when she enters her husband's home is to fetch water for the family from the local *naula*. The groom is supposed to accompany her, but usually, his visit is just symbolic. They tie his paper crown, which was used during the wedding, to the bride's head, and she goes alone to the *naula*.

From this point on, water-related tasks are a responsibility, not a choice, and women look back on their youth with nostalgia.

There is nothing better than '*Jawani*' (youth). To throw a *chunni* (a scarf) around the neck and skip around along crooked paths. Yes, there is work, but it is not binding. My daughter Janaki may cut some grass and fetch some water today, but she surely does not have to bother as to how to feed the family day and night.

This gendered role does not diminish with age. Whilst men's socially allocated responsibilities are often withdrawn in old age, leaving them free to enjoy a continuing position of authority in the household, women's water obligations continue until, physically, they can no longer meet the demands. Mohini Devi recognises the inequity:

My mother-in-law is very old and bent with age, yet I still expect her to help me with some work, even if it's only a trip to fetch drinking-water. It is as if we women have ourselves defined that women must work to live. If I had an elderly father-in-law I would not have dared made such demands on him.

The ritualism of pollution, ascribed to Dalits, is also applied cyclically to women on the first four days of menstruation and for 21 days after childbirth. At these times, women of all castes are not permitted to access still water sources, such as the *naulas*, and this impacts upon their sanitation and hygiene needs.

Women have got to keep to the rules and stay away during their monthly impurity. We've had a lot of trouble with this. You can always tell when an impure woman has been to the *naula* – first white snakes appear in the *naula* and then it starts to dry up. That's why it's so important that women mustn't pollute the water sources.

What about Dalits? Don't they sometimes access water illegally?

What an outrageous idea! I don't think we should start suggesting something like that. See, the *naulas* are sacred sites, the abodes of goddesses and pollution by the Dalits will not be tolerated. It leads to madness, destruction of the home, their livelihoods. Who would want that? Not the Dalits themselves. No, it's the women I blame.

Women's universal gendered responsibility for providing and managing water at the domestic level renders them primarily vulnerable to the lack of adequate, appropriate and reliable water sources but, whatever the provision, the roles and responsibilities do not change.

We're lucky here in this hamlet, with piped water to every house. Water has come closer, so we no longer face the problems of walking up and down. But the tasks do not change: we remain responsible for all the water work at home. In fact, now that there is water at home, men do not even wash clothes as they bathe here at the tap and leave the clothes for us to wash. Also, since the water is so close, children, rather than men, fetch it from the taps when we are unable to do so. We hear that in the cities, pushing a button gets many things done, like cooking food and washing clothes. But women will still have to push the buttons for getting the housework done. That will never change, will it? You tell us!

Despite their central responsibility for fetching and using water, women, regardless of their caste and class, have historically remained excluded from the domains of decision-making, planning and delivery

management, which function in the public space. Since the socially determined constructs of femininity define that women's place is at home, women's access to decision-making and public performance is discouraged and suppressed.

We have never been involved in constructing or designing water systems here in the village. That is men's work. We did not know what pipes were and that water could be carried through pipes. We do not know about rights to water. Land belongs to men. We do not know if we can say that a water source belongs to us. Decision-making in public is men's task. That has never been our work, how can we go and talk about water with our elder males.'

This also explains why systems of water delivery have not traditionally been planned and built to meet women's water needs. Men are essentially responsible for agricultural water use and men also design, manage and build all water delivery systems, so irrigation systems are constructed to meet their needs. Yet parallel systems for delivery of domestic water are rare. Existing social inequities in resource management are thereby severely reinforced.

A walk across Chuni village reveals that the socially stratified village community does not view or treat their water resources as a common good. Those disadvantaged by caste and class have historically been deprived of water and isolated from decisions related to water management. Their voices are stifled, even when what takes place in the form of local water development interventions impacts negatively upon their water needs and rights.

There is a centrality of gender inequality in water allocation, management and use. Women's responsibility for providing and managing water at the domestic level is socially imposed, legitimised by religion and culture and therefore difficult if not impossible to deconstruct. Yet, gender issues in water management cannot be observed and analysed in isolation. The social reality of the complex interplay of inter-related factors of caste, class and gender in relation to water allocation, management and use indicate that women in certain disadvantaged social groups are impacted upon more severely than others by the lack of adequate, appropriate and reliable water.

What happens when water projects plan for addressing gender, by involving women, in ignorance of these diverse factors of inequality?

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The SWAJAL project for the delivery of domestic water and sanitation schemes in rural areas was implemented between 1996 and 2002 in 1,000 villages, including four which neighbour Chuni, within a similar social and geographical setting. A prestigious project, planned and supported by the World Bank and managed by the Department of Rural Development, Government of (then) Uttar Pradesh. Its strategic objectives were to raise living standards in rural areas, to empower women, to strengthen community representation, and to test the effectiveness of the Demand Responsive Approach.

Serious attention is paid to targeting the poor and addressing gender: equated, in policy documents, with women's involvement. Although norms are set for representative participation in decision-making with fixed proportions for the inclusion of women and Dalits, there is little attempt to identify the poor within the community. Programmes of non-formal health education and income-generating schemes for women are integral, with the stated intention of empowering women to challenge gender stereotyping through economic independence, on the assumption that women's participation will ensure both project efficiency and women's empowerment. What is not explored is the complexity of contradictions between these two policy aims.

Mala Village is heralded as the success-story of the project. The first village to complete the programme, Mala was visited by a high-ranking World Bank official in a ceremony to celebrate the achievement.

A glance at the map reveals instantly how far this achievement diverged from some of the project's fundamental aims.

### **Bina Devi's Story**

In Mala, the lone Dalit household is headed by Bina Devi, a single woman. One of the poorest HHs within the community, Bina Devi was ironically excluded from all that the project had to offer, despite the fact that she genuinely qualified for every one of the project benefits.

Despite the obvious norms for her mandatory inclusion in the Village Water and Sanitation Committee, she was not represented there. Bina Devi herself said she was not called for any project meetings and was unaware of what was happening and when. Women committee members claimed: "The house is not within the village boundary," or, "We called her but she did not come." The male committee president disagreed: "It is in the village, but she is a single woman and she does not want to/cannot attend meetings." The diligent and enthusiastic woman treasurer was among the most vocal in pushing for Bina Devi's exclusion from all project benefits. In the local reality, Bina Devi's touch and mere presence is considered polluting. Field staff admitted candidly, "To insist on the Dalit woman's representation would have antagonised the dominant higher caste community in the village. This would hamper completing the project in time, which was our major responsibility."

An analysis of the sewing training in Mala – the income generation programme – revealed that only richer women, with their own machines to practise on, had benefited. Poorer women's bitterness at realising their inequality was clear: they said that Bina Devi was better off in not being able to attend the training in the first place.

Under project guidelines, both rich and poor households pay the same amount to access improved water services but, by paying extra, richer households can access private standposts, enabling them, for example, to irrigate their kitchen gardens throughout the year. This facility is denied to poorer households, who share water from a common tap-stand. The dangers of letting a socially inequitable community operate these demand responsive approaches were hugely evident.

Bina Devi's household was excluded from the improved water supply scheme and the subsidised sanitation specially determined for poor HHs. Living alone with two children, socially and geographically isolated from the main village, her small terraces of rain-dependent agricultural land would have benefited enormously from a reliable and adequate water supply.

The greatest irony in this story of exclusion is that Bina Devi's own Naula was situated on the land she owns and uses to collect firewood. It was **this** source which was tapped to supply water for the whole village. The Committee members had originally promised that Bina Devi's family would have access to the piped water. She comments: "We were not asked, we were told, and the fact that we could not stop this, perhaps points out our position in the village. Any other HH would have objected to this plan, if the water was in their land. I was still hopeful. I so wanted to connect to others in the village, I feel so very lonely and alone. But the promises, as always' did not hold. I now 'share' water from another source."

When she demanded a standpost near her house she was initially told she must pay for an individual connection, although her isolation was not by choice, but the result of the practice of social segregation common in the mountain villages. After consultation with her husband, who works away, she agreed to pay charges but since all this had taken a year, she was told that she must now pay double the charges and also buy the pipes to connect to her house. On her husband's visit, they bought the pipes and carried them

the 4 kms from the road head, but were told again on several flimsy grounds that it was not possible to provide a connection. Various theories of connivance are quoted locally to explain why the family could not be included. Clearly, this indicates that ability to pay does not guarantee access if social and political barriers to equitable water access and control remain ignored.

Her source of water now is a cement tank that is fed water diverted from a gad. This source is **shared** with a Brahman family, who live in a nearby hamlet. In the monsoon season, the water flows out from the tank through an open tap, and, as long as Bina Devi does not touch the tank and the tap, she can use this water. In summer, when the gad water decreases to a trickle, the tank does not fill and water needs to be scooped out of it. Then, Bina Devi has to wait for the Brahman woman to give her water. When the Brahman woman is cyclically impure, the men in her family access water and then give what remains to Bina Devi. It does not matter whether Bina Devi is menstruating or not, she is eternally impure and therefore cannot touch the tank and the tap. When there is not enough water for two families, Bina Devi has to walk down to the river, a kilometre away, across a steep hill. This makes an enormous demand on her work, energy and time.

Could Bina Devi not do anything? “But who do I ask? Mine is the lone scheduled caste family in this village? Who will listen to me? We have no money to do anything ourselves. My husband works in Bombay in a private factory and his salary is so low that he can barely manage to send some money home or even come home. What point is there for me to say anything?”

Most of the ambitious goals of the Swajal project were not achieved, which points to the numerous limitations of the Demand Responsive Approach. We did not talk of those here. We focused on the Swajal policy goal of empowering women, and how far this was translated to empowerment of the the most vulnerable woman in the village – the only Dalit.

Projects like these seriously underestimate and misinterpret the reality of the complexity of gender relations. Effectively involving Bina Devi would have challenged the moral and social basis of inequality in the village and this would have seriously hindered the swift and prized completion of the project. The choice lies in how far completing projects to a rigid timescale obscures the possibility of completing projects well.

The irony is that the Swajal project was declared successful enough to influence the piloting of Swajal type projects in 58 districts in India. These are being implemented now, with the same level of understanding of ‘involving the community and addressing gender’.