Rural Drinking Water Reforms in Maharashtra: The Role of Neoliberalism

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Even as the recent financial crisis has led to a questioning of the ideological regimes that have been dominant since the 1990s in India, the processes that have already been set in motion — for instance, as a result of reforms in the water sector — are yet to be completely understood. This paper attempts to draw on the critical literature to understand the role and meaning of neoliberalism, particularly in the context of the rural drinking water reforms in Maharashtra. While the influence of neoliberalism cannot be understood as something that determines the course of the reforms in an absolute sense, its varied and often insidious channels of operation imply that its influence cannot be taken lightly either. This, in turn, has implications for the kind of political position that one takes on the reforms as well as for future research directions.

Since the late 1990s, the arena of rural drinking water in India has seen a number of changes, which have been acclaimed as well as critiqued. One major set of critiques focuses on the influence of neoliberalism, particularly in the provenance of reforms. However, it is the contention of this paper that the role of neoliberalism in the reforms is best understood only in conjunction with many other factors that feed into the reforms. More specifically, neoliberalism is not an omnipotent entity that completely determines the course of the reforms, but one which acts more by exerting pressures and imposing limits; further, a number of factors at a variety of scales both help and hinder the mediation by neoliberalism. This more complex understanding of neoliberalism draws on a broader neoliberal critique and helps suggests further areas of research. The discussion in this paper focuses on one case study, viz, the state of Maharashtra in western India, and particularly, draws on examples from the World Bank-financed Maharashtra Rural Water Supply and Sanitation “Jalswarajya” Project (Jalswarajya henceforth).  

1 Changes in the Rural Drinking Water Arena

The major change in the rural drinking water arena in recent times is the shift from what is known as a “supply-driven” approach to a “demand-driven” approach. This involves, as well see later in this section, a thrust towards greater decentralisation. At the central level, the government of India first systematically introduced such reforms in rural drinking water in 67 pilot districts covering 26 states in 1999 via the sector reforms programme, and then scaled up the reforms via the Swajaldhara scheme in 2002.  

The nature and extent to which these reforms have been adopted by individual states has varied, as also the kind of processes that have influenced the uptake of the reforms. My focus here will be on the trajectory of reforms in the case of Maharashtra.  

In Maharashtra, there was initially an emphasis on individual village-based schemes. While regional rural schemes (RRSS), i.e., schemes that cover multiple villages, did exist, they were taken up in a big way from the late 1980s, and particularly, in the mid
to late 1990s. RRSS have a number of advantages over individual village-based schemes – for instance, they involve economies of scale, and quality problems are perceived to be lesser. These advantages, along with the significance given to RRSS in the Maharashtra Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project (funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID), and implemented from 1991 to 1999), contributed to the emphasis on RRSS. The scale of these schemes also tied in with the “big is better” notion common to water projects (Vaidyanathan 1999) as also to a whole host of other developmental interventions. This was because RRSS typically drew water from large dams, more specifically from the 5% in these dams that is earmarked for drinking water. As in the case of water for irrigation, getting “canal water” for drinking is associated with ideas of modernity and development (and is therefore, a source of pride for many villagers) and is also considered to be a symbol of political power.

However, the large-scale uptake of RRSS in the 1990s cannot be explained without a reference to the changes in the political regime in the state and the consequent changes in the water policy, in particular, the goal of “tanker-free Maharashtra” of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Shiv Sena government and the stricter water supply norms that were put in place by this government. In 1995, a coalition of the BJP and the Shiv Sena formed the government at the state level, ending a long era of Congress domination in the state. In a bid to carve out a niche for itself, the new government decided to give priority to certain subjects; one such area of priority was water and sanitation, and in particular irrigation and drinking water. In the realm of drinking water, a master plan consisting of a number of detailed proposals was adopted in 1996. Among the proposals, perhaps the most important one, at least politically, was the one to make Maharashtra free of tankers by the year 2000 (the so-called tanker-mukti yojana), i.e., to ensure adequate drinking water for all so that water did not have to be supplied via tankers, especially in summer months or in the years of low rainfall. Water supply norms were also made stricter, e.g., the supply rate was increased from 40 to 55 litres per capita per day, and water sources were supposed to have a dependability of 95%. Both these factors combined to make RRSS the best option for the provision of drinking water. For instance, making Maharashtra free of tankers was supposed to be easier with schemes that covered a large number of villages. Similarly, the criterion of 95% dependability effectively meant that groundwater sources were ruled out and that surface water schemes would have to be taken up.

The RRSS thus acquired prominence as a result of a number of factors; in turn, they also led to the establishment of a particular kind of institutional set-up, where a parastatal agency called the Maharashtra Jeevan Pradhikaran (MJP) came to play an important role. MJP had, within its purview, individual villages and regional rural water supply schemes (whose capital outlay was more than seven and half million rupees) as well as urban schemes. After MJP constructed and tested a scheme, it would be handed over to the concerned local authorities to operate and maintain (GOM 2001). Note also that once MJP’s presence was established, it was in its interest to perpetuate RRSS. This was because it charged a commission of 17.5% on the total costs of each scheme to meet its overhead costs and other administrative expenses, and the high cost of RRSS (as compared to individual village-based schemes) meant a higher commission for MJP. But the tanker-free programme ended in 1999, when the BJP-Shiv Sena government was succeeded by a Congress coalition, and with that began the decline of RRSS and of the role of MJP. The tanker-free programme was a failure partly because of the huge financial outlay it required and partly because of the problems associated with the RRSS such as high costs, lack of willingness of local authorities to take over the schemes, and inequities between head-end and tail-end villages. There was a general disillusionment with large-scale schemes and smaller-scale solutions; more specifically, individual village-based schemes of water provision, began to be proposed as an alternative. There was also a need felt to critically examine the existing arrangements for the provision of water; this led to the setting up of the Sukthankar Committee in 2000, with the mandate of preparing the road map of water reforms in the state.

Along with this shift in the scale of organisation of water systems also came the shift from a supply-driven approach to a demand-driven approach. The shift was motivated – at least on paper – by the aim of strengthening the decentralisation process (in accordance with the 73rd constitutional amendment) and the belief that following such decentralisation, local communities would sustainably manage their resources (GOM nd). The demand-driven approach was formally adopted by the government of Maharashtra in 2000, although the timing of actual implementation differed across schemes. As a result, water projects are now (supposed to be) taken up as and when the concerned local body expresses its need and desire for the same, as against when higher-level government bodies decide to do so (as used to be the case earlier). More specifically, it is the gram panchayat that now has to approach the zilla parishad for drinking water schemes. Further, decisions about the kind of scheme, the implementing body (whether it should be the gram panchayat, the zilla parishad or an NGO), as well as about the technical service provider (whether it should be MJP, the zilla parishad, or a private party) rest with the gram sabha. This is a contrast to the pre-2000 situation, where both the need for drinking water and the manner of its provision was determined by state departments, parastatal agencies such as MJP, zilla parishads and panchayat samitis. Thus, the responsibility of state government authorities at higher levels is considerably reduced, and restricted to providing technical help and finance after approval of the village scheme. District level authorities – such as the rural drinking water department of the zilla parishad – are no longer in charge of the construction and maintenance of the schemes. On the other hand, villages are now vested with greater responsibility and powers (with the gram sabha being the focal decision-making body); they are also expected to contribute to 10% of capital costs (5% in the case of tribal villages) and bear the entire responsibility (including the financial costs) of maintenance of the scheme after completion. A major role is to be played by village water and sanitation committees (VWSCS), who are elected by the gram sabha and are technically sub-committees of the gram panchayat; they would have funds directly devolved to them, maintain...
accounts separately (from the general accounts of the gram panchayat) and plan and implement the scheme autonomously. Although the shifts from RRS to individual village-based schemes and from supply-driven to demand-driven schemes are distinct processes, they are inter-related and have fed into each other. For instance, problems of cost-recovery and lack of maintenance of RRS have contributed to a greater emphasis on these aspects in the demand-driven schemes. Similarly, mobilising greater participation by villagers as well as recovery of costs by users – both important in a demand-driven approach – are believed to be easier in smaller-scale schemes such as individual village-based ones; this in turn, strengthens the move away from RRS. Currently, demand-driven schemes in the state include the German KfW-funded Aaple Pani, which was initiated in three districts in 2002 and the World Bank-funded Jal Swarajya adopted in 26 districts in 2003; the remaining four of the 33 districts that have zilla parishads are implementing the sector reforms programme of the government of India (GOI 2006). As a result of these schemes, the existing institutional arrangements in the water sector are undergoing transformation; for instance, the role of older institutions/actors (such as the gram panchayat and the gram sevak) has been redefined and new actors have emerged (e.g., private technical service providers and VWSCs). Similar processes are at work in other parts of the country too wherever reforms have been adopted in rural drinking water in the form of the demand-driven approach (for instance, in states like Uttarakhand and Rajasthan).

The changes in the rural drinking water arena have met with two kinds of reactions. On the one hand, the schemes have either been hailed as positive attempts towards change that would overcome the shortcomings of earlier schemes (GOI nd), or at least elicited a certain degree of hope and optimism, particularly when first introduced, that local people might manage water resources better than the government (see, for instance, Menon 2004). On the other hand, scepticism has also been expressed about how many aspects of the reforms (the recovery of costs, the long-term implications of water supply norms, questions of participation and capacity-building) would work out on the ground (see, for instance, Krishnan 2003 and Alwani 2006). In fact, as the new demand-driven schemes have begun to be implemented, strong critiques have emerged, centred around the cost-contribution clause, the discourse of depoliticisation that has often accompanied the setting up of new institutions such as VWSCs, the presence of a large number of private players, the lack of attention to local inequalities and power dynamics, the (perceived) withdrawal of the state, and the speed (and often non-transparent manner) in which far-reaching legal changes are being made. Such critiques are often (albeit not always) linked to the provenance of the reforms, with the demand-driven approach being seen as one more manifestation of neoliberal policies and as stemming from donor conditionalities and/or particular kinds of water discourses at the international level such as the Dublin principles (ICWPE 1992) that consider water to be an economic good.

The focus of my paper will be on understanding the role of neoliberalism in rural drinking water reforms in Maharashtra. In order to do this, I draw on the broader critical literature on neoliberalism, which is the subject of the next section.

2 Neoliberalism at Work: Some Critical Strands

The critical literature on neoliberalism has taken a variety of forms, as is evident both in discussions of the general ideology and broad set of policies that neoliberalism has come to represent as well as in the discussion of specific measures in individual sectors. In this section, I discuss four different strands in this literature, drawing partly on water-related work, and partly on the more general literature (especially, where the water-related literature is just emerging). While these strands of critique cannot always be neatly separated, it is, nevertheless, useful to distinguish between them because each has its own contributions as well as drawbacks. Interestingly, while a lot of work in these strands (particularly, in the context of water and other natural resources) has emerged from critical geography, many of the issues they grapple with have parallels with the debates in development studies, particularly the anthropological and sociological approaches that emerged in the 1990s as a response to the post-development critique.

One strand consists of political economy approaches (embedded to a greater or lesser extent in Marxist and neo-Marxist theoretical traditions) that focus on the structural similarity of seemingly disparate changes in different arenas related to water (privatisation of urban drinking water systems, the introduction of water rights in irrigation, the emphasis on cost-recovery principles) and in geographical regions spanning Latin America, Europe, Africa, North America and Asia. For instance, reforms such as the privatisation of water have been viewed as one more instance of “accumulation by dispossession”, and therefore, as feeding into a process of global accumulation (Harvey 2003; Swyngedouw 2005). While this is clearly an important contribution, the emphasis of these attempts on a single metanarrative has led to concerns that the messiness of actual trajectories in specific locales is not adequately captured. Perhaps even more critically, there is concern that such a position would result in an exaggeration of the power of the very forces (neoliberalism, globalisation, and so on) that are the subject of critique (Gibson-Graham 2002). As a result, there has been a move towards case studies which offer more nuanced descriptions of the diverse actors and processes that are involved in any process of “neoliberalisation of water”. This constitutes the second critical strand on neoliberalism. Often based on empirical work, this strand focuses on the concrete negative effects (distributional, environmental, and so on) of what are perceived to be neoliberal changes in the water sector. Such empirical studies also help to draw attention to the historically and geographically contingent nature of the reform process, thereby questioning the use of a singular metanarrative to explain all ongoing changes in water (Castree 2005). For instance, Bakker’s (2005) analysis of the attempts in England and Wales to convert water into an economic good brings out, among other things, the contradictions inherent in the introduction of competition and cost-reflective pricing and the mixed impacts of the subsequent (re)regulation of the water industry. But case studies such as these also lead to a number of questions. One question
raised by the case studies – and one with which this paper is partly concerned – is about the relative importance of neoliberalism vis-à-vis other influencing factors. If one accepts that neoliberalism is just one of many factors that influences the shape that reforms take in specific locales (even if it is an important one), what does this imply in terms of an understanding of the working of neoliberalism, of attempts to theorise it, and the kind of spaces that are opened up for change? A second (and related) question is whether the differences across the cases are ones of degree or of kind (Castree 2005). Or as Castree (ibid) puts it, does one understand local manifestations of neoliberalism as just variants of a pure form, or is each manifestation a unique form of neoliberalism? The latter position would risk losing sight of the commonalities between different cases; the former would involve defining criteria by which different cases of nature’s neoliberalisation can be deemed similar, a task that is by no means easy (Castree 2005, 2008a, 2008b).

The remaining two strands, which are relatively new in the water arena, respond to the above critiques. The third strand uses a Foucauldian governmentality approach and focuses on the interrelation between specific neoliberal policies, their underlying ideologies, and how policies encourage individuals and institutions to conform to certain norms. Mansfield (2007), for instance, emphasises how private property relations – considered to be critical for the functioning of markets – require individuals to not only act in new ways, but to become new kinds of subjects; thus owners of property are made to be efficient, profit-seeking, rational individuals. Hart (2004: 92) points out that the concept of governmentality “decentres the state as a monolithic source of power”, and opens up a variety of other sites for examination. Such sites could include apparently mundane practices such as best practices, audits, contracts, benchmarks, and so on (Larner 2003). Thus implicit here is a much more complex meaning of neoliberalism, one that goes beyond economic policies that aim to decrease the role of the state or to increase that of the market, neoliberalism, which has been held by many critics as “the causal factor” and (2) the meaning of neoliberalism and its various manifestations/modes of operation. The first point also focuses on the nexus between knowledge and power, a question that has been discussed in the water context in India, for instance, by Dharmadhikary (2008).

But reservations have also been expressed about an exclusive use of governmentality approaches, stemming mainly from concerns about not portraying neoliberalism as a singular, omnipotent entity and of acknowledging both the contested nature of the practices it involves and the mixed effects that it could have in any particular locale (Larner 2000). Another critique is that governmentality approaches to neoliberalism show how conditions are set so that people will be inclined to behave in particular ways, without always explaining whether and why people actually do this. For instance, Kipnis (2008), writing in the context of a comparative analysis of audit cultures, expresses concerns that using a conceptualisation of “neoliberal governmentality” as an explanation for contemporary changes in processes of government might mask a wide range of more ambiguous governing actions as well as the fact the outcomes of such techniques of governmentality are often “non-neoliberal”. This has resulted in calls for combining the insights of governmentality approaches with ethnographic methods and anthropological approaches. In the context of urban water, for instance, Ekers and Loftus (2008) point out the need for a focus on everyday hydraulic practices (among other things) in order to understand the operation of hegemony and the maintenance of subtle forms of rule.

The fourth critical strand on neoliberalism pays a careful attention to the cultural constitution of the state – how people perceive the state, how their understandings are shaped by their particular locations and their encounters with state processes and officials, and how the state manifests itself in their lives (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 11). Ethnographies of the state (including of assorted state and parastatal institutions) are critical in the context of debates about neoliberalism and globalisation where the question of the changing role of the state is an important one (see, for instance, Coelho 2006). In the rest of the paper, I draw on insights from these four strands to understand the working of neoliberalism in the provenance of drinking water reforms in rural Maharashtra and to indicate further areas for research.

3 Provenance of Water Reforms

Analogous to the reactions that rural drinking water reforms in Maharashtra and India have evoked (as mentioned in Section 1), concerns have been expressed about the changes in other uses of water (urban drinking water, irrigation) as well as the broader economic reforms undertaken since the 1990s. In terms of the provenance of the economic reforms, for instance, one set of reactions sees the reforms as a response to the failure of the welfare state and of top-down technocratic approaches put in place by it, and therefore, hail the reforms as a much needed change. There is also a second, more critical, set of reactions that see the reforms as a direct outcome of the pressures of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and of the influence of neoliberalism, or as involving the role of (changing) rural and urban elites (see, for instance, Corbridge and Harriss 2001). The question of provenance, whether in the case of the broader economic reforms or the reforms in the rural drinking water sector, is not just a matter of intellectual curiosity or of understanding to what extent the reforms are justified or what the relation is between (presumed) intention and (actual) impact. At stake in this question is also (1) the problem of how one would characterise the relative role of different factors that feed into the reform process, and in particular, the role of neoliberalism, which has been held by many critics as “the causal factor” and (2) the meaning of neoliberalism and its various manifestations/modes of operation. The first point is related to the concerns raised by the first two strands discussed in Section 2, and the second point relates to the third and fourth strands. In this section, I consider the two points – the role of neoliberalism and the meaning of neoliberalism – in the context of a discussion of the provision of reforms in the rural drinking water sector in Maharashtra. I do this by posing (and responding to) two questions about the relation between neoliberalism and rural drinking water reforms in Maharashtra.
First, in the absence of the global and national shifts towards neoliberalism, would the move towards individual village-based and demand-driven projects still have occurred, would it have taken a different form, or would things have remained more or less the same? Such a post facto counterfactual reflection risks being highly conjectural, but it is, nevertheless, a useful exercise. Given the increasing disillusionment with both R&SS and the supply-driven approach, some change would probably have taken place. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the precise nature and degree of emphasis on many elements of the reforms have also been influenced by neoliberal ways of thinking and doing. For instance, cost-recovery from villagers (which is one of the more controversial aspects of the reforms) is likely to have been adopted even without the presence of neoliberalising influences, because of the poor financial performance of R&SS, the precarious fiscal situation of the state, as well as the emphasis on decentralisation. But the seriousness with which it is being undertaken in the current schemes (in contrast to similar attempts in the past, which did not meet with much success), can be explained only with reference to the existence in recent times of a general macro-climate in which cost-recovery is increasingly emphasised (manifested, for instance in central-level policies, international water formulations, and conditionalities of international financial institutions), which, in turn, can at least partly be attributed to neoliberal ideologies. Thus while the centre still holds that water is an economic and social good, it is also increasingly beginning to hold that some of the problems in the drinking water sector (such as lack of sustainability) are due to the perception of people that “water is a social right to be provided by the government, free of cost” (GOI 2003-04: 136). This, in turn, has translated into an emphasis on cost-recovery which is evident in many aspects of demand-oriented project such as, for instance, the various procedural requirements and norms in Jalswarajya (e.g., final approval of the village action plan is contingent on the collection of the capital cost contribution).16

One way to understand the effect of neoliberalism then is that, while it is by no means the only factor responsible for the current water reforms and some change would have taken place even in its absence, it does mediate the effects of the various other processes feeding into the reforms, albeit not to the same extent in all cases. That is, neoliberalism can be thought of as “determining” the reforms in the sense of setting limits and exerting pressures (à la Williams 1983), without the implication that it controls or limits the reforms in an absolute sense. Further, in trying to understand the kind of limits/pressures that neoliberalism exerts, it is useful to keep in mind a point that Gupta (1995: 382-83) makes in a different context, viz, that “...one cannot expect to find visible transnational dimensions to every grassroots encounter...” and instead, think of neoliberalism as complexly mediating what happens at the grassroots, sometimes through multiple relays, sometimes through more direct linkages. I give one example here of what such complex mediation might mean. Goldman (2006) discusses how “water for all” has become hegemonic in the water discourse at the international and other levels. Various manifestations of this can be seen, one among which is the growing emphasis on 24/7 in the context of urban India (see, for instance, WSP-SA 2003). The equivalent of this in the rural context seems to be piped water, which is justified both in terms of a developmental vision, and the emphasis on cost-recovery. In Jalswarajya, for instance, the concept of piped water was the basis of a development vision that was often used in the official discourse of the project, in which, to use the words of at least one zilla parishad official in Thane district, “women would be able to throw away once and for all the pots that they use to carry water”.

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<th>Pp viii + 364</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>Rs 295</th>
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This served as an important motivational/inspirational point for many villagers and NGOs, particularly in the initial stages. At stake here is also the fact that billing and recovery of water charges is believed to be easier in case of private provision of water to houses (or individual household connections), which is only possible via piped water. But the vision of piped water left out the fact that the project itself would provide only for the main pipelines to be laid; the cost of the connections to the individual houses would have to be borne by the concerned households. This led to considerable disillusionment among many people about the project in general and about the idea of piped water for all, in particular in the later stages of the project.17 Interestingly, in spite of such disillusionment, there also seems to be a slow “internalisation” of the discourse that water is a resource for which people need to pay enough to ensure full cost-recovery, among many villagers, bureaucrats and others involved in the water sector (Kulkarni et al, nd).

I now turn to the second question about the relationship between neoliberalism and drinking water reforms in Maharashtra. In the absence of the various other international/national/local factors that have influenced the reform process, how would neoliberalism have functioned? Would it have operated in a more unhindered manner (which would mean that the other factors act as countervailing forces) or would it have not been taken up to this extent or even at all (which would mean that the other factors have, advertently or inadvertently, played a facilitating role)? As Castree (2008b) puts it, the relation between various processes (whether neoliberal or not) could be complementary or contradictory. In the case of the reforms in the water sector in Maharashtra, both explanations would hold good, as we will see by considering the case of the conditionalities of the World Bank and other multilateral funders whose willingness to finance large-scale investment in the water sector was contingent on the adoption of particular reforms by the state.

While external funding existed in the pre-reforms period too, there have been a number of changes in the nature of multilateral funding in the early part of the 21st century which led to a shift away from large, often supply-driven schemes. First, the increasing critique of big dams as well as of excessive centralisation led to an emphasis on water interventions undertaken on a smaller scale and which involved the participation of local people (Vaidyanathan 1999). Second, cost recovery became an important component of all interventions and this was deemed to be easier in individual village-based projects. Third, the sectoral mode of operation of the World Bank20 meant that any changes that were undertaken – be it in the scale of organisation of water systems or the emphasis on the economic dimension or a more participatory approach – were sought to be extended to all interventions in the water sector (including those not funded by the World Bank). But unlike what is sometimes believed, acceptance of the reforms implied by the changed funding policies was not an easy process at the level of the Maharashtra government. By the end of the 1990s, multilateral institutions which had been approached by the state government for financial assistance (such as the World Bank, DFID and KfW), all pointed out that the state lacked long-term plans/objectives, and insisted that future lending would be conditional on major long-term policy changes being undertaken. However, the then ruling BJP-Shiv Sena government was reluctant to do this because it felt that any attempt at changing policies at that stage might come in the way of their tanker-free programme, which they were reluctant to risk given that elections to the state assembly were imminent. When a Congress alliance came to power in the 1999 elections, it was willing to undertake the required policy reforms.19 This willingness was due at least in part to the precarious fiscal position of the state, a state of affairs for which the BJP-Shiv Sena government and some of its schemes like the tanker-free programme were held responsible. Interestingly, even today, the reaction/claim of politicians and bureaucrats in response to critiques of the conditionalities or charges of accepting “neoliberal reforms” is that the decision to accept the reforms was a strategic one to get access to the loan, and that in practice (e.g., in the nitty-gritty of rule formation and actual implementation), they will be able to work around the undesirable aspects of the reforms.20

Whether or not this claim can be realised, what follows from this discussion is that there are both areas of complementarity and of tension amongst the various factors that feed into the water reforms. The discourse of the World Bank is not all-powerful, but was first hindered and then strengthened by factors at the state level. This is important to keep in mind to ensure a greater analytical accuracy, i.e., to not ascribe everything to neoliberalism, thereby missing out important processes as well as to attribute responsibility to the concerned actors, and to potentially open up spaces for a progressive action. Writing about the Plachimada struggle in Kerala, for instance, Aiyer (2007) points out that although the struggle has been posited as a struggle by a community against the practices of a transnational corporation (Coca-Cola), it also need to be treated as part of an unfolding agrarian crisis, which even while related to globalisation and neoliberalism, involving local, regional and national dynamics. In the case of the water reforms in Maharashtra, attributing the reforms to the conditionalities of international financial institutions alone would take away from the agency and responsibility of the state. But a more complex account of the provenance of reforms would mean that the space that the central as well as the state governments have to negotiate would be taken into account. For instance, as the reforms have currently worked out, there has not been a temporal gap between the introduction of pilots in the form of the sector reform programme and the large-scale upscaling to the demand-driven approach, even though the pilots met with a number of problems, such as the fact that there were not enough NGOs who could play the supportive role that they were assigned. Although these problems should have resulted in attempts to take stock of the new approach and to proceed with greater caution, what happened instead was the opposite, leading one of the persons involved in the experiments to sarcastically comment that “the patient died, but the operation was successful”.

4 Conclusions

Let me summarise the main argument of the paper. Two interrelated points have been made, first that neoliberalism “determines” the current water reforms in Maharashtra in the specific sense of influencing/mediating a number of elements involved in...
the reforms, and second, that a variety of other factors are also at play, which both help and hinder the working of neoliberalism. This is an argument that seems fairly simplistic and obvious, but it is also one that yields, on further reflection, a number of implications that would be relevant not just for a study of water reforms in Maharashtra, but also any change in which neoliberalism is believed to have a role to play.

One implication of the discussion in this paper is that any debate about neoliberalism and water reforms needs to go beyond both a “neoliberalism is responsible for all ills” position without either underestimating it or taking an “apolitical” position. Determining when a focus on neoliberalism becomes excessive both in the sense that it detracts attention from other contributing factors and ends up feeding further into the hegemony of neoliberalism is not easy, but this needs to be done. At the same time, whatever focus there is on neoliberalism would need to capture the complex routes by which ideas and ideologies are transmitted from the global to the local via the influence of a variety of planned and unplanned mechanisms at different scales (as in the case of the concept of piped water in Jalswarajya).

A second implication is that the position that one takes on the changes themselves is not obvious. For instance, should the “village-based approach” or “demand-oriented approach” be rejected entirely because its adoption is at least partly as a result of neoliberalism? Or, is there some “neoliberal” component of the reforms that we should reject, while retaining other (non-neoliberal) elements, assuming first that one can even make such a separation and then that the desirable/undesirable coincides with the non-neoliberal and neoliberal? This question becomes particularly important in the light of the fact that there was some need felt for changes to the earlier system of water provision, and returning into it may not even be the preferred option for many.

Another complicating factor is that the ongoing water reforms do not fit into neat narratives of a move from state control to local/community control or of the privatisation and commodification of a once public service. For instance, while the process of decentralisation underlying the new demand-oriented approaches has facilitated the withdrawal of the state in certain respects (and this, in turn, is sometimes seen as a neoliberal influence), decentralisation also opens up potentials for social and political change (e.g., via the introduction of social audits).

The third implication is about the kind of research that is required. While there is already a fair amount of research under way, including research that focuses less on outcomes and more on the kind of processes that have been set in motion, there is room for further work, particularly in terms of the new actors in these projects and the role that they play, as well as the new kinds of subjectivities that are emerging. For this, the third and fourth critical strands of neoliberalism discussed in Section 2 would be useful. A combination of governmentality and anthropological approaches would help, for instance, in the theorisation of the complex appeal of concepts such as choice, empowerment and freedom (Larner 2003). In the new kind of rural drinking water projects that have come up in Maharashtra and in India, this would translate into a focus on how the project creates particular notions of “empowerment” and “deserving citizens”, as also the varied reasons for their acceptance/adoption by villagers (at least in some cases) such as the fact that these notions offer a new justification for continual discrimination against particular groups of villagers. An ethnography of state institutions at different levels would help to situate the rural drinking water reforms in the context of broader changes taking place (such as, for instance, the commercialisation of MJP and thereby also help understand the relation between older and emerging actors.

NOTES
1. The paper is based on a combination of primary and secondary data collected in the course of an ongoing study of reforms in the water sector in Maharashtra. Primary data include interviews with state government officials, selected rural local bodies, private and other non-state organisations and individuals working in the arena of water, and brief visits to five villages in Thane district, where the Jalswarajya project is being implemented. Secondary data include important policy documents and legislation related to water and water reforms in Maharashtra.
2. However, a number of individual elements of the reforms (e.g., the cost recovery principle) can be found in the Eight Five-Year Plan (1992-97) as well as in the World Bank-initiated drinking water and sanitation project (Swaaji) in Uttar Pradesh in the mid-1990s (Sampat 2007).
3. While I describe the pre-2000 situation briefly, the bulk of the discussion in this paper will focus on the post-2000 shift along with the reasons for and implications of the same. For a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the pre-2000 scenario in rural drinking water in Maharashtra, see Datar and Kumar (2001).
5. Interview with a state government official, 21 June 2007.
6. There are a number of reasons for the emergence of the BJP and the Shiv Sena in the 1990s, not the least of which was the growing importance of place and religion-based identities in many parts of the country. For a brief account of some of the points of appeal of Shiv Sena, see, for instance, Palshikar (2004).
7. The 1990s saw the Shiv Sena expanding its base from the urban centres of Mumbai and Thane to rural parts of Maharashtra; hence its focus also expanded beyond the original concern with the rights of Marathi-speaking job speakers to include issues that would be more relevant for rural populations (Palshikar 2004). It is in this context that the emphasis on drinking water and irrigation must be seen.
10. This is the broad decision-making process in demand-driven schemes such as Jalswarajya; however, there are differences about specific aspects across various schemes.
11. This is because the village is seen as a naturally occurring social unit where feelings of “community” are either already in place or can be “produced” and therefore, contributions of labour and capital will be more easily forthcoming. Similar arguments have been used in other arenas too and have contributed to the emphasis on community-based efforts in all developmental interventions. For a brief review of notions of “community” in development practice and the implications thereof, see, for instance, Moore (1997).
12. See Sampat (2007) for a discussion of some of these critiques of demand-driven approaches in water, particularly in the context of the Swajal-dhara scheme in Rajasthan, and Cullet (2006) for a discussion of the legal aspects of the changes.
13. Such an argument is, of course, not unique to discussions of neoliberalism, but is also found in other arenas. For instance, in response to the post-development focus on development as a project of rule, the anthropological approach to development emphasised the need to understand the actual accomplishment of rule in line with a Gramscian understanding of hegemony where there is an emphasis on the partial and unstable characteristic of even dominant strategies (Li 1999).
14. For instance, there were earlier attempts to get people to contribute 10% of the capital costs of water supply schemes, but this was slowly reduced and then deleted (Alwani 2006).
15. Interview with a member of the Reforms Support and Project Management Unit on 23 March 2007.
REFERENCES


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