

Saurabh Gupta

Politics of Water Conservation

Delivering Development in Rural
Rajasthan, India

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Saurabh Gupta
Chair of Social and Institutional Change
in Agricultural Development
University of Hohenheim
Stuttgart, Germany

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Acronyms

ARAVALI	Association for Rural Advancement through Voluntary Action and Local Involvement, Jaipur
CAPART	Centre for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology
CBNRM	Community Based Natural Resource Management
CD	Community Development
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIDA	Canada India Village Aid
CII	Confederation of Indian Industries
CIVA	Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action
CPR	Common Property Resources
CSE	Centre for Science and Environment
CTAE	College of Technology and Agricultural Engineering
CVH	Contour Vegetative Hedge
DDP	Desert Development Programme
DFID	Department for International Development
DNRM	Decentralised Natural Resource Management
DPAP	Drought Prone Area Programme
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
DWD&SC	Department of Watershed Development and Soil Conservation
EAS	Employment Assurance Scheme
EED	<i>Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst, Germany</i>
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
FPC	Forest Protection Committee
GED	Gender Environment and Development
GoR	Government of Rajasthan
GoI	Government of India
GO-NGO	Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations
GVM	<i>Gram Vikas Manch</i>
GVK	<i>Gram Vikas Kosh (Village Development Fund)</i>

ICR	Implementation Completion Report
ICCO	Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IIM	Indian Institute of Management
IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
IWDP	Integrated Watershed Development Project
JFM	Joint Forest Management
LKB	<i>Laha Ka Baas</i> (name of a villiage)
LS	<i>Lok Samiti</i>
MKSS	<i>Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathana</i>
NCAER	National Council of Applied Economic Research
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIE	New Institutional Economics
NRD	Natural Resource Development
NSM	New Social Movements
NWDPRA	National Watershed Development Project for Rainfed Areas
OBC	Other Backward Classes
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PAWDI	People's Action for Watershed Development Initiatives
PHC	Primary Health Care
PIA	Project Implementing Agency
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SPWD	Society for Promotion of Wasteland Development
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SWC	Soil and Water Conservation
TBS	<i>Tarun Bharat Sangh</i>
UC	Users Committee
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN-IAWG-WES	UN- Inter Agency Working Group on Water and Environmental Sanitation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VDC	Village Development Committee
WB	World Bank
WCD	Women and Child Development
WDT	Watershed Development Team
WED	Women Environment and Development

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book is about the politics of development in rural India. Its key aim is to explain development governance (distribution and control of resources and power) in rural Rajasthan, the driest and the largest province in India. I address this issue by examining recent initiatives by an array of state, non-state and transnational actors to increase the availability of water, food, fuelwood and fodder through soil and water conservation or ‘watershed development’ in Rajasthani villages.¹ ‘Watershed Development’ is a term used by rural development experts to describe technical approaches to check water and soil erosion in rain-fed areas in order to increase the productivity of land, and to meet the local requirements of food, fodder and fuelwood. This includes treatment of both arable and non-arable lands in a given watershed area through a wide range of physical activities, such as drainage line treatment by building a series of loose stone check dams and other structures to prevent water and soil erosion, farm bunding, construction of small water harvesting structures or development of pasture lands.

Water is the lifeline of rural economic and social systems, especially in arid and semi-arid regions of India, where agriculture is heavily dependent upon rainfall and the means of secured irrigation are severely limited. Development strategies (in colonial and post-colonial times) have focused on ensuring the availability of water (for irrigation and drinking). However, three significant shifts in development practice and policy have taken place in the past two decades. First, the state has gradually lost its privileged position as the leading agent of development prompting a substantial expansion in the role of non-state actors in rural development.² Second, there has been a rise in concern for ‘sustainability’, ‘participation’, ‘traditional knowledge’ and ‘decentralised management’ of natural resources (water or pasture

¹ Watershed is an area which drains rainwater to a common point. For project purposes, generally a micro-watershed of about 500 ha is undertaken as a basic unit for treatment by the project-implementing agencies (particularly in governmental watershed projects).

² The state, however, remains the most powerful actor in terms of (financial and material) resources in the arena of rural development.

lands), within academic and policy circles. Third, investments of money and resources by the state and non-state actors in rain-fed or ‘ecologically fragile’ regions of India have increased in the wake of limits to further increase in agricultural productivity of irrigated lands, and deliberate efforts (especially on the part of the Indian state) to reduce regional disparities in the post ‘green revolution’ era.

These changes have drastically altered the politics of development in rural India, as they have in large parts of the developing world where the majority of populations are dependent on rain-fed agriculture for subsistence and livelihoods.³ Besides bringing in large sums of money and resources from diverse sources (foreign donors, national and provincial governments, private philanthropists, firms, etc.) to the villages of Rajasthan, they altered (created new or modified existing) institutional forms and practices for the governance (control and management) of common property resources, including village pastures, community forests, ‘wastelands’ (uncultivable lands), watershed drainages, rivers and streams, which are all very crucial for the daily sustenance of village residents. We also witness the expansion of an *assemblage* of development actors or agents — the national, provincial and local governments in India; international, national and local NGOs; international development agencies and donors; research organisations; development consultants and academics — whose common concern is securing the availability of water, fodder and fuelwood.⁴ For heuristic purposes, I treat this array of actors as a ‘watershed development regime’, and one of the main objectives of research presented in the book is to understand the nature and power of the watershed development regime in Rajasthan, especially from the early 1990s until 2005, the period of its growth and consolidation.⁵

The various constituents of the watershed development regime have diverse interests, varying forms of power and authority and collaborative or competing

³ See Hinchcliffe et al. (1999) for case-studies on participatory watershed development projects in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia.

⁴ Li (2007) uses the analytical category of ‘assemblage’ in the context of community forest management in Indonesia. She (ibid: 263) argues that community forest management is an assemblage that ‘brings together an array of agents (villagers, officials, activists, aid donors, scientists) and objectives (profit, pay, livelihoods, control, property, efficiency, sustainability and conservation)’. Likewise, we can treat ‘watershed development’ as an assemblage that brings together a range of state and non-state actors with diverse agendas and motives.

⁵ More on ‘development regimes’ later in the book, but for now, the definition by David Ludden can be instructive. Ludden (2005: 4042) offers the following definition: ‘A development regime is an institutional configuration of effective power over human behaviour, and that also has legitimate authority to make decisions that affect the wealth and well-being of whole populations. It includes an official state apparatus but also much more. A development regime includes institutions of education, research, media, technology, science and intellectual influence that constitute a development policy mainstream.’ It is in this sense that I use the concept of ‘development regime’. However, I highlight the *heterogeneous* nature of development regimes in the contemporary times and also include non-state agents of development as integral part of the development regimes. In Rajasthan, the Department of Watershed Development and Soil Conservation was formed in the early 1990s, and the entire watershed-related activities were delegated to rural local bodies in 2004–2005.

agendas. In the process of water conservation and watershed development projects, the agents of development (holders of money, knowledge and authority) interact with the recipients of development — differently positioned rural social groups divided along the lines of caste, class and gender. While rainwater harvesting practices and governance of village commons for collective sustenance have been going on for centuries in several parts of rain-fed regions of India, ‘watershed development’ as a ‘scientific’ approach for a ‘comprehensive’ treatment of a given watershed area through a mix of soil and water conservation techniques (contour bunds, drainage line treatment, enclosures, check dams, etc.) is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Most NGOs that are involved in improving the productivity of private and common lands (for crop, fodder and fuelwood) and increasing the availability of water by preventing run-off use the term ‘watershed development’ to denote their project activities. However, some grassroots and activist organisations engaged in building small water harvesting structures consciously refrain from employing the term ‘watershed development’ to describe their activities, because they claim that their approach is not based on ‘technical’ or ‘expert’ knowledge and that they promote ‘traditional knowledge’ in their rainwater harvesting activities. This indicates that naming the programme itself is a way to signal affirmation of mainstream expertise-driven interventions, or conversely to maintain an outsider status with respect to the mainstream. It also shows the internal tensions and heterogeneity within development regimes in recent times.

The motive and rationale for undertaking watershed development activities by different agents varies considerably even though they are all concerned with better availability of water for food, fodder and fuelwood in the countryside. While the prime concern for the Ministry of Agriculture (of the Government of India) is an increase in the crop yield of rain-fed areas, for the Ministry of Rural Development, it is tackling rural poverty in dry lands by generating employment opportunities. For international agencies (like the World Bank), ‘sustainable development’ of ‘eco-fragile’ regions is the main motive to sponsor watershed projects, but for certain grassroots and activist organisations, people’s control over local resources is the driving force for supporting such programmes.

Being quintessentially a land treatment activity, watershed development work is inherently biased towards those who have larger stocks of land and cattle. Undoubtedly, increase in groundwater level or fodder favours those with initially higher endowments in absolute terms, and individual cultivators are generally more interested in the activities which can ensure them direct benefits through increase in crop yield (such as farm-bunding to prevent erosion of topsoil or lift irrigation from anicuts or wells). However, watershed development activities offer something for everyone, irrespective of their initial endowments of land and cattle. The gain for landless or near-landless people is primarily residual in the form of wage employment