

The Fight for Water: The Bolivian experience

In the year 2000, Cochabamba, a province in Bolivia, grabbed international headlines when its people successfully thwarted attempts to privatise water. In fact, after seventeen years of political policies of privatization in the country, the only thing left to privatize was water.

Bolivia, where any forms of resistance to privatisation was unknown, the government contract in November 1999 giving unfettered ownership of all water resources to a TNC called Bechtel, a California based company, galvanized the local people cutting across all segments to stage a concerted struggle resisting it. Turning freely available resource like water into a commercial commodity was simply unacceptable to the people. Sharing the experiences of that movement, which ultimately led to scrapping of the private contract, is Oscar Oliviera, executive secretary of the Federation of Trabajadores Fabires of Cochabamba (a company managed by people). Recently on a visit to India, participating at the Asian Social Forum, Oscar Oliviera tells Rinku Pegu that some form of social control should be established over the natural resources, which belongs to the people.

Did the legislation privatising water in Cochabamba come as a surprise to the people?

Prior to the new legislation, the government had announced many times that it was going to privatise water resources in order to better the availability of water, which is very scarce in Cochabamba. Consequently the government did two things. One it passed a law aimed at governing the water resources and secondly a contract was signed conferring the distribution rights to a private company for forty years. In other words both were to act as means of transferring the ownership of water to private companies. In fact the whole process of drafting the contract, which was signed with the private company was done in a very secret manner, totally lacking in transparency. Not even the members of the Parliament were privy to the content of the draft sanctioning water privatization.

What reasons did the government put forward to undertake privatisation of water?

It was basically that the government did not have enough money and resources to improve either water situation or existing infrastructure. Therefore bringing in

private capital through commodification of water would increase its chances of availability, the government argued.

What happened to the peoples basic right of access to water with privatization?

Soon after privatization, there was a steep hike in water cess from 30 to 300 per cent. People in Couchbamba on an average earned an income of about \$80 to \$100 per month; situation was that people were asked to pay in Dollars (due to fluctuating exchange rate of the Bolivian currency). Earlier on, before the inset of privatization, the state owned company could distribute water only for fifty-five per cent of the population. Another twenty five per cent had heir own bore wells while the rest was supplied by water cooperatives. After the new contract was signed these cooperatives were incorporated into the private company. More importantly sources of water like river, springs, reservoirs, which were not only used by the peasants but were also part of the culture were also privatized. In some areas, the private companies forcibly started dismantling water resources like wells and bore wells owned by individuals.

In what forms did the protest against privatisation take shape?

In such a situation where water was commercially exploited for private profit to be sold in the market, people were forced to struggle, to protest and get down on to the streets. What happened is that people cutting across all sections formed a coalition in order to organise effectively. Peasants, workers, farmers, and urban middle class all came together to forge a huge collective.

How were the farmers affected in particular?

As was the practice, sources of water like rivers and lakes and their distribution were put under common uses and customs. The concept was based on the assumption that as these resources was owned by peasants and farmers collectively, each should have equal access. But under privatisation, ownership of these water resources were taken away from them and given to the private company. Basically, what the new law did was to actually prevent the peasants and farmers from using the water freely as they have doing for generations. Indeed, the farmers were the worst affected and given their condition it was not surprising that the protests against privatisation of

water were first initiated in the villages and later on the workers and general people joined them.

A TNC was made the owner of water resources through the process of a permit that was given for a particular area. The company would raise the prices of water, which automatically hit poor peasants, as they could not afford it. So the farmers decided that they would rather sell their labour rather than buy water. Water becoming a commodity was unimaginable for the peasants, they could not even think of it as they treated water at par with air they breathe. It was akin to saying that you pay for the air that you breathe.

How did the people organize and mobilize against the new law?

When the political parties and parliamentarians, who yielded power could not oppose the privatisation of water effectively, the people realised that they had to find an alternative on their own. This was the driving force, which propelled people to mobilize and massive struggle was launched under the banner of Defence of water and life. The whole movement, which lasted for five months from November 1999 to April 2000, was very physical involving blocking of roads, highways, occupying plazas, squares. There were huge demonstrations involving over tens of thousands of people. The coalition which was forged consisted of all kinds of people right from the street vendors to the relatively well off covering 70 per cent of the population. In fact the protest started in the very first week of the implementation of water privatization.

Was there any rioting?

One of the singular characteristics of this movement was that not a single windowpane was broken. The politicians and government did try to scare the urban middle class with the threat of looming rioting and looting but why would people indulge in these when the issue was water.

What made the government relent to the demands of the people?

Towards the end, during April 2000 there was eight days of complete blockade. Prior to this were small days of closure and blockade; however the final battle call was given during April. The people resolved not to budge until the government scraped the water privatisation law and Bechtel left Couchbamba. In fact the police reprisal in the final days of the struggle was so harsh that two people died and whole lot of people beaten and thrown into jail. Meanwhile, the government imposition of martial

law by declaring an emergency further galvanised more people to participate. Indeed when people from other provinces inspired by the Couchbamba experience began to adopt similar ways for their own set of demands, the government relented for the sake of stability. Lest the situation gets out of hand in most parts of the country, the government not only scrapped the contract with Bechtel but also implemented the alternative.

Can you elaborate on the new alternative?

The new law had turned water into a commodity giving a monopoly to the multinational in the control over water management. For example, the farmer, which always considered water as a collective found that water was given to private ownership. In the alternative it was decided that Water Panchayats would have complete control for -ever over the water resources.

How is the water panchayat managed? And how do they operate in a water scare area a like Cochbamba?

As far as the rural side is concerned farmers have regained complete control over the water sources. In the urban areas management of water is completely in the hands of the people. We do not want either a state owned enterprise or private enterprise. In the latter form water becomes the private property of individuals while in the former it becomes the property of politicians and political parties. Therefore we have adopted a model, which recognizes social control. In Bolivia so far there have been no participation of the people with the entire system being opaque. Therefore, we have set up three clear goals. One is to have a Board of Directors in which majority of the members are directly elected by the people, also we have worked out the management system of the firm which will ensure efficiency, transparency and participation linking to social justice. None of these four pillars would figure either in the government or private management. And the third mission, which we are in the process of building up, is the participation of people, in which they themselves decide how much tariffs would be imposed, and allocation of resources. In that sense ours is not a social or an economic project but a political one.

Where does the role of government figure in the new scheme of things?

The governments role has been primarily been limited to an executing agency. This is how it works. The Board comprising of seven directors, which has been formed is to prepare action plans. But for these plans to get under way, they have to be first

approved by the public assemblies in the villages. And only after its approval by the respective assemblies will the Board sanction for their implementation through the government staff.