

Source of Life for Sale – Panel discussion on Right to Water at the India Social Forum, New Delhi, November 2006

For the Indian Social Forum held at New Delhi in November 2006, VAK held an event on the issue of water viz., **“Source of Life for Sale-Water”**. The event was held in joint collaboration with FIAN- India Chapter (Food First Information and Action Network). It was visualised that the program would look into the areas of the neo-liberal economic model and the resultant transfer of precious natural resources from the public to the private sector. The result is that almost everything on our planet is up for trade. The event also looked at the role of the World Water Forum and its impact on the National Water Policy of India, which has been almost dictated by the World Bank to the Government of India. The policy has one major flaw that it completely bypasses the community rights. The program also took up the issue of groundwater exploitation and linked to it is the concept of ‘virtual water’ and the growth of cash crops which need more water and thus lead to perpetuating debilitating conditions for the common man or the farmer.

The Supreme Court in India has ruled that the government holds water in India as trustee on behalf of its people and thus in the public trust. During the passing of the National Water Policy 2002, the Prime Minister even emphasised the need to “ease exclusive control by the government machinery” over water resources so that “we can make a paradigm shift to participatory, essentially local management of water resources”. But the National Water Policy as we have it today makes no such shift and speaks of communities only as an afterthought. Thus if we grant absolute ownership of water to the state, the latter would be its owner and then we- the rest of the community- would have to concede to the state being free to regulate this resource- the resource which is our source of life.

It is these issues of human right on water that reflects on the country's food adequacy and security situation. The session would discuss the National Water Policy 2002 and how it bypasses basic rights of communities in India, virtual water trade that is being taken up the country through encouragement given to export oriented cash crops and violations of human right to food and water.

The Consultation aimed to initiate a process of sharing, and discussions on the critical issues concerning water in different corners of the country. The discussions encompassed issues of availability and accessibility, social justice and people's rights in access and utilisation

of water and sustainability. The key issues were rights and controls – over sources as well as management. The questions of alternatives thus feature strongly in the campaign. We also attempted to formulate a shared critique of the National Water Policy. The consultation was an interactive session and would share experiences and critical reflection to seek commonalities and build solidarity on a national level.

The issues raised by the Second World Water Forum at The Hague in March 2002, made up of the World Bank, the water TNCs, and the development agencies of the developed countries and the World Water Council were discussed and attempt was made to create a common understanding of these institutions and its roles. The discussions encompassed issues of availability and accessibility, social justice and people's rights in access and utilisation of water and sustainability. The key issues were rights and controls – over sources as well as management. The questions of alternatives thus featured strongly in the presentations and an attempt to formulate a shared critique of the National Water Policy was made. The interactive session shared experiences and critical reflection to seek commonalities and build solidarity on a national level.

Apart from holding such discussions Vikas Adhyayan Kendra is actively involved in the campaign against privatisation of water at Mumbai. VAK has been actively providing resources, materials including intellectual resources to spearhead the campaign in awakening mass consciousness against the ill-effects of the privatisation of water. This has been done through publication of books and other materials, propaganda stuff and also conscious involvement of people from VAK in developing a strategy in combating the BMC's effort to privatise municipal waters.