

Everyday politics of management of water commons in Eastern Vidarbha, India

Rashmi R Mahajan and Bejoy K Thomas¹

-- DRAFT FOR COMMENTS, NOT TO CITE --
This version – June 20, 2019

To be presented at XVII Biennial IASC Conference 'In Defense of the Commons:
Challenges, Innovation, and Action'
Lima, Peru, July 1-5, 2019

¹ Mahajan is a PhD candidate with ATREE, Bangalore, India and Manipal Academy for Higher Education, India and Thomas is Fellow with ATREE.

Acknowledgements and author contributions: This article is part of RRM's doctoral research. RRM and BKT conceived the study, RRM conducted field research and analysis, RRM and BKT wrote the article. The authors wish to thank Manish Rajankar for valuable insights on the field site, Shrinivas Badiger and Priya Sangameswaran for inputs on the research, and the respondents of the study for their time.

Correspondence to: rashmi.mahajan@atree.org (Rashmi R Mahajan).

Introduction

Access to and use of water is a highly contested and inherently political process (Mollinga, 2008a, 2008b). While the problems around inter- and intra-basin water management and large projects such as big dams receive immediate attention, the issues in small-scale water management at the level of microstructures such as small dams and irrigation tanks tend to be less conspicuous and do not attract as much interest. The general perception of politics relates to governments and political parties contesting elections and their governing styles (Kerkvliet, 2009; Leftwich, 2004). Politics also has a negative connotation in the sense that it is considered as a reason for creating divisions among individuals or groups. De Souza's (2007) research in a village in Western Maharashtra, India, showed that when people referred to politics, they either meant it as factional politics based on petty personal differences or the interference by the politicians. However, politics is not confined to this restricted view. It has a broader meaning. As Leftwich (2004, p.103) argues, 'politics comprises all the activities of co-operation, negotiation, and conflict, within and between societies, whereby people go about organising the use, production or distribution of human, natural and other resources in the course of the production and reproduction of their biological and social life'.

Kerkvliet (2005, 2009) distinguishes between three types of politics - official, advocacy, and everyday politics. Official politics is a form of politics which involves authorities and organisations who contest, make policies and rules, implement and change rules regarding the allocation of resources. Advocacy politics involves confronting or supporting the authorities and organisations or policies formed by them. This confrontation and support can come from opposition groups, activists or individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by the changes. Everyday politics nevertheless is different as 'it involves little or no organisation.' Kerkvliet (2009) characterises everyday politics into four forms – support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance. Support is an enthusiastic endorsement of any rule or a system. Compliance is also a form of support, but it is mainly a consequence of having no choice than 'willing' support. Modifications and evasions are actions that convey indifference to the system. Everyday resistance is different from direct resistance as it need not involve confrontation. It involves small and mundane acts which are indirect and show opposition to the system. Through these four forms, people articulate their understanding of the system with which they interact on a daily basis and negotiate their interests. Though everyday politics might not involve organised expression, it can affect the other forms of politics, i.e., official and advocacy politics (Kerkvliet, 2005, pp. 22-23). Applied to the case of water management, everyday politics is defined as the 'contestation of day-to-day water use and management' (Mollinga, 2008a), referring to negotiations that happen routinely at the 'local' level. Local level negotiations may involve management of minor irrigation tanks, groundwater access or distribution of water through canals from a dam hundreds of kilometres away (Mollinga, 2008b). These local water management processes are constantly shaped and reshaped by social relations of power (Mollinga, 2001). The lens of everyday

politics is useful in providing insights into how the uses of water resources are shaped and contested on a routine basis.

Mollinga (2001, p.747) notes in case of the South Indian canal irrigation system that everyday politics of water distribution occurs at three different levels – the outlet command area level, the distributary or secondary canal level, and the main canal level – shaping the relationships between farmers, irrigation agencies and politicians. Barnes (2014,p.3) breaks the narrative which focuses on the international politics of world’s longest river, Nile, and demonstrates how Egypt’s water resources are managed through ‘daily practices of accessing, monitoring, and manipulating the flow of water’. On similar lines, Suhardiman (2016) looks at everyday class politics in water distribution practices in rural Java, arguing that if policy reform aims to improve irrigation performance, it needs to take into account existing agrarian realities. Related to these are also other scholarly treatises that have looked at issues of power and politics at the community level. Shah's (2003) research on tank irrigation in southern India pointed out that technologies were not devoid of politics and social relations of power shapes how technologies are historically produced and redesigned. Mehta (2005) pointed out that scarcity need not be a mere natural phenomenon, but the social and power structures influence how water resources are accessed and used.

Governments across the world have promoted and implemented community-based water management (CBWM) projects devolving responsibilities to communities to manage water and other natural resources (Kumar, 2005; Menon et al., 2007). Community has come to be viewed as an alternative to the State and market to address development and natural resource management issues (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006; Sangameswaran, 2008). Research on common property resources (CPR) management also supported community-based initiatives (Olson, 1965; Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988). In India, several scholars and practitioners called for the revival of traditional water management systems. They documented traditional structures and systems and claimed that communities could manage their natural resources better if they are left to them. The failure of the State in managing these resources gave an impetus to the call for involving communities more in taking charge of them (Agarwal and Narain, 1997; Mishra, 1993; Paranjpye, 2004). As a result of this, a number of initiatives were implemented in India under Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) and Integrated Watershed Development to manage water resources (Baviskar, 2004; Joy et al., 2004). Empirical evidence on the performance of these programmes was mixed, with some projects and initiatives demonstrating success while several not matching the expectations.

One of the reasons for lack of success pointed out by studies critically assessing the success and failure of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) initiatives was that the ‘community’ was viewed as a homogeneous entity and oftentimes romanticised. The diversity among communities in terms of caste, class, gender and race and the resulting tensions were not considered adequately (Menon et al., 2007) while implementing CBNRM

projects. The diverse constituencies among communities have different cultures and histories as well as different stakes in the current resource endowment (Mosse, 2003). These constituencies or actors negotiate with each other and bargain at multiple levels to maintain their interests and in such situations the relative influence and power that one may have over the other matters (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Menon et al., 2007). The general evidence from studies suggests that those actors with better bargaining abilities and power are likely to establish their interests over others (Schneegg, 2016), shape institutions (Kashwan, 2016a, 2016b) and influence outcomes. Nevertheless, not many of these studies have attempted to look at how people negotiate through the complexities of micro-power structures on a routine basis, and here the notion of everyday politics comes handy as an analytical scheme (Mollinga, 2001; Wilshusen, 2009).

This article uses the notion of ‘everyday politics’ at the scale of CBWM to analyse how different actors with varying interests and power maintain access to water. We draw upon Kerkvliet (2009), discussed earlier, and apply the four stages of support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance to analyse how farmers and fishers articulate their interests in managing a common water resource, namely the *Maji-Malguzari* irrigation tanks in eastern Vidarbha region in Central India. The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section gives a brief overview of the study area and research methods. The major actors around the *Maji-Malguzari* irrigation tank system are introduced next. In the subsequent section, we illustrate the interactions between these actors through the lens of everyday politics. We offer a few conceptual pointers by way of conclusion.

Study Area and Research Methods

Selection of Study Sites

Fieldwork for this article was conducted in two districts, viz., Bhandara and Gondia, in the eastern Vidarbha region of Maharashtra in central India (Figure 1) between July 2016 and March 2018. These two districts are well-known for a large number of man-made tanks called *Maji-Malguzari* tanks and CBWM practices since the period before Indian independence. District Gazetteer of 1908 records and applauds the tank system of these districts (Russell, 1908). Bhandara and Gondia districts are in the same agro-climatic zone, i.e., eastern Vidarbha high rainfall zone and are part of the Wainganga river basin, which is the largest river in the region (GoM, 2004). The average annual rainfall is between 1100-1400 mm, and the primary source of rainfall is the south-west monsoon (Paranjpye, 2004; Velankar, 2011). 90% of annual rainfall is received between June and October (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2016, 2017).



Figure 1. Study area

Agriculture is the primary occupation and paddy is the main crop under cultivation. Paddy is cultivated twice a year, depending on the availability of the water for irrigation (Paranjpye, 2004). The low permeability of soil in the region reduces the recharge rate for wells (Phansalkar, 2003). Limited rainfall period and geological conditions unfavourable for groundwater extraction explain the presence historically of a large number of tanks and their importance in irrigation. According to Rajankar and Dolke (2001), there were 43,381 tanks in Bhandara and Gondia district until the end of the 20th century. At present, the number of tanks is declining, and the use of borewells (deep groundwater wells) for groundwater pumping has been increasing gradually over the past three decades.

Study sites were selected in two stages. In the first stage, a list of perennial tanks (irrigation potential more than 35 Ha) was prepared using 24 toposheets, QGIS, Google Earth and available list of *Maji-Malguzari* tanks. These tanks were further categorised based on their catchments (forest, agriculture, and settlement). In the second stage, 25 sites were selected for

visits from the list of tanks. During the visit, interviews were conducted with farmers and fishers, the physical conditions of the tank structure, its catchment and command area were observed, and general data on demographics and agriculture was collected. Following this, five study sites were selected for detailed study that fulfilled the following conditions – village or set of nearby villages where (a) one or more *Maji-Malguzari* tanks are still in physically good condition and are in use throughout the year (b) farmers and fishers both are dependent on the tanks to support their livelihoods (c) informal water management committees, and fisheries cooperatives are in working condition. All five study sites included more than one village. Three additional study sites were selected as case studies as these sites had unique settings complementing insights from the first five study sites. In total, fieldwork covered 14 villages in and around eight *Maji-Malguzari* tanks.

Research Methods

Data was collected using multiple methods, including a survey of 139 farm households and 64 fisher households (N=203), 22 focus group discussions (FGDs) and more than 50 interviews. Household surveys were conducted in 12 villages comprising of the five study sites. In the other three villages selected as case studies, interviews and FGDs were conducted.

The farming population was divided into large (> 10 acres land), medium (between 5-10 acres land) and small (< 5 acres land) farming households. The fishing population was divided into landholding and landless fishing households. The sample for the household survey was selected from these categories using stratified random sampling. Interviews were conducted with farmers, fishers, government officials, local researchers, and politicians. FGDs were conducted with farmers (n=12), fishers (n=9) and field personnel of a local NGO (n=1). Various documents such as government resolutions, policies, district gazetteers, land records, and books on regional history were consulted. Data collected from field observations, informal conversations and participation in village events such as meetings of the *gram-sabha* (village assembly), water management committees and fisheries cooperative society also were used for analysis.

Actors around the *Maji-Malguzari* Tanks

Maji-Malguzari tanks are one among the many traditional water harvesting systems in India (Menon et al., 2007) such as the community-owned irrigation system *Kuhl* in Himachal Pradesh and the *Phad* system in Western Maharashtra. Several of these systems have been documented and touted as an alternative to centralised and large-scale water management by scholars and practitioners (Agarwal and Narain, 1997; Mishra, 1993; Rajankar, 2011a, 2011b). *Maji-Malguzari* tanks are mainly located in Bhandara, Gondia, Gadchiroli, Chandrapur and parts of Nagpur districts of Vidarbha. Many of these tanks are documented

to be built around 250-300 years ago. Most of the tanks were built by *Kohli* community in the region with some contribution from other communities such as *Ponwars*, *Gonds*, *Kunbis*, and *Brahmins* (Paranjpye, 2004; Rajankar and Dolke, 2001).

The term *Malguzari* comes from *Malguzar*, who were the revenue collectors. All the village commons such as forests and tanks were under their administration. Their primary responsibility was to collect revenue and submit a fixed amount to the king, keeping surplus value for themselves (Paranjpye, 2004; Rajankar and Dolke, 2001). *Malguzari* continued during the British period, and the tanks were renamed *Maji-Malguzari* (ex-Malguzari) after Indian independence and the abolition of *Malguzari* in 1950 through the Madhya Pradesh Abolition of Proprietary Rights (Estates, Mahals, Alienated Lands) Act. Following abolition, tanks came under the jurisdiction of the government. After the formation of the state of Maharashtra in 1960, the responsibility of tanks was divided between different government bodies such as state irrigation departments and the *Zilla Parishad*, or the district council, the top level council in the three-tier *Panchayati Raj* local government system in India. Tanks with irrigation potential of less than 100 Ha were allocated to the minor irrigation department of *Zilla Parishad*, and tanks with irrigation potential of more than 100 Ha were allocated to state irrigation department (Kimmatkar, 2012).

Irrigation Before and After the Abolition of Malguzari

Though *Malguzari* tanks were primarily built for irrigation, they gradually became an arena for other livelihood activities such as fishing as well as extraction of vetiver grass, lotus, other aquatic roots and water chestnut. Local people used tanks for domestic activities such as washing and drinking. Though tank water is not used for human consumption anymore, it is an important water source for washing and maintaining livestock. During the *Malguzari* period, village level committees looked after the maintenance of tanks, and tank water distribution was done under the supervision of the *Malguzar*. The irrigation arrangement has been documented in the literature to be very efficient in terms of distribution (Paranjpye, 2004; Rajankar and Dolke, 2001; Vishwasrao, 2010). Nevertheless, if it was equitable or not is a matter of detailed and separate inquiry, which is not covered in this article. After taking over the tank ownership, government irrigation departments began to modify many old structures to increase the water holding capacities of tanks and rebuild the canal structures using modern engineering techniques. However, they could not manage the expanse of work, considering a large number of tanks. After independence, people who were entitled to tank water in *Malguzari* period received free irrigation rights called *Nistar* rights. These mainly included farmers from higher land-owning castes such as *Kohli*, *Kunbi*, and *Ponwars*. Free irrigation rights are documented in the *Nistarpatrak* (record of *Nistar* rights) of every village in addition to free use of water for cattle and domestic purposes (Rajankar, 2011b). These rights are applicable only during *Kharip* (monsoon) season. Farmers who do not have free irrigation rights have to pay an amount to the irrigation department to get water for irrigation. In the case of some tanks, a small number of farmers have signed agreements with the

irrigation department to get water for irrigation. The decline in revenue generated due to free irrigation rights eventually led to the government losing interest in tank management. At present, irrigation department is expected to form and register water user associations (WUAs) for tanks with irrigation potential of more than 100 Ha, but many villages have only informal water management committees (WMCs). These committees look after basic maintenance of tank structures, canals, and water distribution. They appoint one or more water distributors called *Pankar* for water distribution every season depending on the workload at a time. WMCs only include farmers who have tank irrigation rights. Farmers hold meetings when decisions regarding repair and maintenance of tank or water distribution are required. Officially, committees cannot operate tank irrigation gates without prior permission from the irrigation department. Villages, where the majority of farmers have access to water from dams, do not have WMCs and tanks are in a neglected state with severe encroachment in the tank bed.

Fisheries in Maji-Malguzari Tanks

Dhinwar, an indigenous community dominates fishing occupation in eastern Vidarbha region. *Dhinwars* are categorised officially by the government as Nomadic Tribes – B, different from the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe classification that the government uses for under-represented groups. Some of the *Dhinwars* are also cultivators, but their landholding size is insignificant compared to other cultivating castes. The average landholding for a farmer in our sample is 7.89 acres (Max. 35, Min. 0.5), whereas for the fisher it is merely 0.63 acres (Max. 3.94, Min. 0.25). Verification of land records and consultations during FGDs confirm this. Fisheries were not commercial as it is now till the 1970s. Several fisheries cooperatives (FCs) were formed and registered with the government fisheries department beginning from the 1970s to promote livelihoods opportunities through inland water fisheries (Velankar, 2011). Fishers have formed FCs in several villages. Some societies have members only from one village while other societies have members from two or more nearby villages. Fishers have to pay a fixed amount of lease to the government bodies such as *Panchayat Samiti* or fisheries department which organize auctions of the tanks. Paying lease to *Panchayat Samiti* or fisheries department depends on the size of the tank entered in government records and the irrigation department it is associated with. This lease is renewed every five years to continue fishing in the leased tank. First preference is given to the FC closest to the tank. If fishers are unable to pay the lease, the tank is leased to other societies or private contractors. After the formation of FCs, fisheries department introduced Indian Major Carps (IMCs) to increase production from fisheries which replaced the native freshwater fish species. At present, fishers buy or produce fish seed or fingerlings and put them in the tank every year. Fishers make huge investments for the lease process, purchase of fish seed or fingerlings and maintenance of equipment such as the fishing gear. The lease rate is 350 Indian Rupees (5 USD) per Ha for tanks leased out by the government. However, when tanks are leased out by farmers, the lease rate is high and could be in the range of 300,000 Indian Rupees (4300 USD) for five years. Fishers keep 50 per cent of income to cover the cost of all the fisheries-

related expenses, and several FCs have incurred debts in the efforts to maintain them. Fisheries is the second most important occupation around the *Maji-Malguzari* tanks, but fishing rights are still not recorded in the *Nistarpatrak*. It is only through the formation of FCs that fishers have emerged as a significant group trying to assert and claim their rights.

In addition to farmers and fishers, irrigation, revenue, agriculture, and forest departments are also associated with the management of *Maji-Malguzari* tanks. Catchments of several tanks include large areas of forests which are under the jurisdiction of the forest department. Revenue department and agriculture department have stakes in command areas of tanks (Rajankar, 2011b). The primary interest of all of these departments is revenue, and in practice, they do not seem to consider the tank system, which includes the catchment, tank and the command area as an integrated system. This scattered understanding of the system and isolated interventions have affected the management of the *Maji-Malguzari* tanks.

Everyday Politics in Water Management

As we saw in the previous section, there are various actors and institutions which have different stakes and interests in the *Maji-Malguzari* tanks. Amongst them, farmers and fishers are directly dependent on the tanks for their livelihoods. Historically the use of water for irrigation has been privileged over all other uses. Many older villagers reiterated the point during conversations that the *Malguzar* had the final word in every tank related decision, which included water distribution and permission for fishing during the *Malguzari* period. For water distribution, the first priority was always given to the *Malguzar* farms and remaining water if any, was provided to other farmers. Fishers had to take permission from the *Malguzar* and also had to share a portion of the catch with them². Abolition of *Malguzari* took away the several privileges that the *Malguzars* enjoyed, but it did not change the hierarchical and feudal nature of the village communities and the management of its commons. Most of the farmers who have *Nistar* rights (free irrigation rights, as noted earlier) still dominate decision making regarding water distribution and management. Most of these farmers are descendants of *Malguzars* and also have relatively bigger landholdings. Some of them are key players in the local political scene and have strong political connections. In most of the villages where fieldwork was conducted, we found that the heads of the water management committees were large farmers. When the water level in the tanks is low, the priority is always given to farmers with *Nistar* rights. Farmers without *Nistar* rights have to depend at the mercy of those with rights, and the chances of them getting water are highly uncertain. In addition to these issues, the committees in all the villages do not work with the same effectiveness. In some villages, members are very active and make sure that work is done at the right time while in others, everyone expects the committee president and secretary to take care of every task. If water is not provided at crucial timings, farmers breach the canals. This gives rise to conflicts between different farmer groups.

² FGD with landholding fishers in study site K, 4 April, 2017.

More significant is the conflict between farmers and fishers. Farmers' use of water is consumptive, while fishers' use of water is non-consumptive. Farmers want to extract the water to the level possible while fishers want to maintain a certain water level for the survival of fish stock. Fishing is mostly done between February and June. Farmers are not supposed to access water below an outlet of the irrigation canal as it has been reserved for fisheries according to government rules. However, this rule is broken in several places as the main months of fishing coincide with the time when there is less water for irrigation in tanks and the second crop of paddy requires large volumes of water. This creates tensions between farmers and fishers. In one rare case, it had escalated to the level of physical violence³. At least a few farmers consider irrigation to be the topmost priority and think that they are doing a favour to fishers by letting them do fishing in the tanks. A medium farmer from village W1 noted '...first preference should be given to farming. The secondary is (fisheries) business... if there is water remaining, then only they should breed fish...'⁴. A politician also suggested during the interview that irrigation rights gain priority over fishing rights⁵.

In addition, water management committees formed by farmers and fisheries cooperatives formed by fishers are both plagued with corruption issues. Fishers in village K3 accused the head of their cooperative for taking advantage of ignorance of poor fishers and using the money for personal benefits. Many times water management committee members give tank repair and construction work directly to private contractors without discussing with farmers and other villagers, thereby earning kickbacks from such deals⁶.

Nevertheless, these issues and regular occurrences of conflicts do not entirely stop irrigation or fisheries activities, or a less powerful group does not always accept the unfavourable circumstances as a given. Farmers and fishers negotiate amongst themselves to resolve the conflicts and avoid losses. For the fishers, fisheries are crucial but only one of the livelihood options as it does not provide work and wages throughout the year⁷. They supplement it with other livelihood activities. Some fishers have small areas of cultivable land and need water for irrigation which they buy from neighbouring farmers if required. Also, several fishers have been historically working as labourers for large and medium farmers. Even though the national rural employment guarantee scheme in India (or MGNREGA as it is popularly known) provides work, in many villages, it does not provide work for the mandatory minimum number of 100 days of employment as promised by the government. Also, the time and the nature of work are decided by the dominant groups in the village. Fishers need employment as labourers, and farmers need labourers during the different stages of farming. Farmers are also dependent on fishers for tank gate repair and maintenance as they possess swimming and underwater work skills. Besides work, they interact with each other in

³ Field visit in a village in Gondia district, 9 July, 2014.

⁴ Interview in village W1, 26 September, 2017.

⁵ Interview in Sakoli, Bhandara district, 23 February, 2018.

⁶ Information from fishers, village K3, 1 November, 2017.

⁷ FGD with fishers, study site O, Gondia district, 8 December, 2017.

different social arenas such as village and household ceremonies and rituals and have interpersonal ties with their several generations having lived alongside in the same villages. Thus negotiations happen in various ways depending on the complexities of situations and relations.

We illustrate below the different forms of engagement and interactions between the different actors around the *Maji-Malguzari* tanks, following the four modes, viz., support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance, as proposed in Kerkvliet's (2009) framework of everyday politics which we introduced earlier.

Support

As we noted, there are inequities and conflicts amongst the various actors who have stakes in the same resources. Yet, when their interests coincide, they put their differences aside and come together. An example is the ethnographic research by De Souza (2007) in western Maharashtra, India, where villagers worked together to campaign for a long-standing demand for tank construction for irrigation, going beyond the micro-politics of caste, gender and factionalism. Similarly, we observed that depending on the situation, fishers and the different groups among the farmers agreed to work with each other, in spite of their generally diverging priorities, demonstrating what we could characterise as 'support'.

In village K1, the elected legislator (Member of the Legislative Assembly or MLA as is known in India) promised to implement a scheme which will lift and transfer water from a nearby dam to the *Maji-Malguzari* tank in the village. Farmers and fishers welcomed this unanimously. If the scheme was implemented, there would be water available throughout the year. The prospect of having water in the tank throughout the year made the otherwise conflicting groups forget differences regarding water management and distribution. Nevertheless, this will not reduce existing inequalities in water distribution, nor is it helpful in reducing wastage of water. FGDs with the farmer groups and the fisher groups in the village had clearly shown that they do not take decisions regarding the operation of the tank together and blame each other for mismanagement.

We also observed that farmers and fishers come together to support government ownership of tanks when they see that the village committees do not have enough financial resources to maintain them. In village K2, small farmers and fishers endorse the current system where the government is the proprietor of the tanks. They believe that the presence of the government helps control the dominance of large farmers who have the *Nistar* rights. In this instance, fishers and small farmers support each other against large farmers. At the same time, when we asked who should have the ownership of tanks in village W1, different groups farmers who were arguing against each other responded unanimously that it should be the government and farmers. In the words of a farmer, '...if fishers are given the ownership, they will say that their fish will die even if there is plenty of water and will not allow us to

irrigate⁸...'. Thus, depending on the context, fishers and the different groups of farmers strategically come together and articulate their interests, even as they fundamentally diverge.

Compliance

Compliance is a restrained form of everyday politics oftentimes confused as the support of the system. People comply with the system for various reasons including maintaining relations and getting access to resources such as money, assistance or work, even when they are not fully supportive and have disinclinations towards the system (Kerkvliet, 2009). Understanding the socio-political histories of contexts such as the *Maji-Malguzari* system and the dynamics between community members can give us a better understanding of the difference between support and compliance.

Fishers in village K1 stock fish in a small waterbody near the *Maji-Malguzari* tank of their village when the water level in the tank goes down. A person from the *Malguzar* family owns a farm near this waterbody. He pumped water from this waterbody when summer paddy in his farm did not get enough water from the *Maji-Malguzari* tank and his personal borewell. As a consequence, fishers had to empty their fish stock from that waterbody to avert losses. Fishers complied with the situation because whenever they had faced water shortages, they could borrow water from his borewell.

We found several instances where people complied not only because they wanted to maintain good relations but also because they did not have the resources or ability to fight back. This was the case with a woman farmer in village W1, who stopped getting water to her farm because of her neighbour. This woman has 2 acres of land. Earlier, she used to get water from the tank to her farm, which is at a distance from the canal through flood irrigation from the land adjacent to the canal. The person owning land next to the canal deepened his land and began cultivating sugarcane. The deepening of land prevented water from flowing across to the woman's field anymore. The helpless woman was asked by the neighbour to either deepen her land, which she could not afford or sell the land to him. The WMC refused to intervene in the matter, and the woman was forced to purchase water from her neighbour.

In village W2, *Maji-Malguzari* tank is leased to private contractors by the WMC. The irrigation department left the tank embankment construction incomplete because of some legal issues. The WMC took the initiative and with the help of the villagers completed the work. The tank is in a strategic location, and because of the completed embankment, it could store a large quantity of water. As a result of this, the WMC got the upper hand in making all decisions regarding the tank. They decided to make a huge increase in the lease amount to use it for tank maintenance. The small group of fishers from the village, who used to lease the tank earlier, could not afford it anymore, and the tank was leased to private contractors.

⁸ FGD with small farmers, village W1, 17 September, 2017.

Fishers had to comply with the decision because they did not have the financial means to pay the higher rates, and more importantly, their interests are accorded lesser priority compared to the powerful farmers. One elderly fisher said ‘we could not raise the issue in front of the villagers as all of them have spent money on the construction. Asking them now to lease the tank at our price may invite public insult’. Another woman said in the same meeting ‘Nomadic Tribes (*Dhinwars*) did not get any preference...they were afraid of what people would say if they broach the subject⁹...’ Fishers in village Z faced a similar situation. The *Maji-Malguzari* tank in this village belongs to a family of farmers, unlike most other villages where tanks belong to the government departments. The family that owns the tank takes all decisions related to the tank and leases it out at higher rates to a private contractor, bypassing the local FC. Private contractors are at their discretion to hire fishers from outside the area, and the FC is not in a position to make a case on behalf of the local fishers. Another issue is with respect to the lease rate for tanks, which is fixed on the basis of the water spread area as entered in official records. These records have not been updated for several years. Water spread areas of tanks depend on the amount of rain received in that particular year and in many cases the area has reduced because of encroachment. However, the rates fixed by the government remain unchanged. The lake area is not measured periodically, and rates revised accordingly in spite of repeated demand made by the fishers.

The examples above suggest that compliance is generally seen on the part of less powerful, but it could be the other way around too. In two of the villages where we did fieldwork (K1 and W1), *Gram-Panchayat* (village council) did not take action against people who encroached land inside the tank bed because they feared that doing so would turn people against the council and they would lose the next elections¹⁰. ‘There were discussions as well as heated arguments (during the village council meetings), but those who have encroached are the ‘main’ people in the village’, one small farmer commented. Thus, those in authority also have to compromise and comply to protect their interests and maintain relations and power.

Modifications and Evasions

Modifications and evasions happen when people do not support the system, on the one hand, but cannot resist it, on the other. Instead, they find ways out when they realize that the system is not strong enough to take them to the task.

Both WMCs and FCs have certain rules for efficient and smooth functioning. In the case of WMCs, a *Pankar* is appointed in every village. Depending on water availability in the tank in a given year, time and route of water distribution are decided. Farmers are expected to wait for the *Pankar* to inform them of their turn and monitor the field during their turn. But some farmers get impatient and breach the channel. It is difficult to monitor such breaches and

⁹ FGD with fishers, village W2 , 28 February, 2018

¹⁰ FGD with small farmers, Village K1, 6 May, 2017.

prove that the breach was done on purpose. One farmer from village W1 said ‘People do not agree that they broke the law. They say that the canal breach just happened and they did not do it¹¹’. In the case of village S2, canals do not reach all the farms. Everyone who receives water for irrigation is expected to pay a nominal fee every season for upkeep and maintenance of the tanks and canals. However, several farmers do not pay the fee, and since no one can stop water from coming into their fields, they free-ride without worrying about the consequences. We observed that farmers violated the rules and used engines to pump water when the water level in the tanks went below the irrigation canal gate. The irrigation department has prescribed limits for the area under summer paddy, and in most cases, the actual area cultivated exceeded this.

In the case of FCs, fishers are supposed to do group fishing according to the rules, and in some cases, FCs offer a monthly pass to do fishing but only to catch native species. However, some members of society do individual fishing without permission. All these unpermitted activities are done in the night when the chances of being caught are rare. When asked about consequences if one is caught breaking the rule, a fisher answered, ‘if that happens, we offer a ‘drink’ to the *Pankar*, and the matter is settled’¹².

Resistance

Resistance can take confrontational or non-confrontational forms. In the former, people rebel against unfair rules or laws made by institutions which govern the management of natural resources, as seen in demonstrations and strikes, which can at times turn violent. In the case of non-confrontational resistance, people do not support or comply with the rules, but they resist them through persistent non co-operation and disobedience (Kerkvliet, 2009). The following are illustrative.

It has been a practice for the fishers to ‘gift’ the government employees a portion of their catch out of compulsion so that the officials do not raise procedural objections and trouble the fishers unnecessarily. We observed fishing in village K1 where irrigation department officials stayed back for a couple of hours expecting that the fishers would give them a portion of the catch as usual. While this did not happen, they tried convincing the FC secretary, but he kept on ignoring them until they had to return empty handed. In village B1, however, the resistance took a confrontational mode. There were two irrigation canal gates installed in the tank embankment. One gate led to the lands of large farmers, leaving other farmers with water short in supply. The farmers organised themselves and sealed the first gate with concrete at night. The irrigation officials had to rush to the site and mediate between the farmers to resolve the issue.

¹¹ FGD with small farmers, Village W1, 17 September, 2017.

¹² FGD with small farmers, Village K1, 6 May, 2017.

While these may appear as isolated and localised instances, as Scott (1985) and Kerkvliet (2009) have argued, a closer look into how such instances of everyday resistance happen and evolve can offer valuable insights into how more visible forms of violence and rebellions occur.

Concluding Observations

As we noted at the outset, the central tendency in water management and water conflicts literature has been to focus on the bigger and the larger issues, both in terms of scale at which these happen (inter-basin, trans-boundary) and the structures that are at the centre of the debate (mega-projects, big reservoirs). Furthermore, social sciences literature in general and critical social research, in particular, has given overwhelming attention on dichotomies (State v/s civil society, farmers v/s labourers) and analysis of power differences between the different actors. In this article, we have tried to go beyond these characterisations and offer a complex picture of interdependencies between actors and strategising of interests using the analytical frame of everyday politics.

While the notion of ‘power’ is helpful in articulating the interests of farmers and fishers and analysing the engagements between them, it does not offer a fuller picture. As we observed through multiple instances in the case study on contestations around the *Maji-Malguzari* tanks, even when the farmers are in a position of relative control and power, they are forced to negotiate and accommodate the interests of the fishers, who are indispensable for farming activities. Further, the farmers are not a homogenous entity, and among the farmers, the interests of the small and the large farmers oftentimes diverge. In the analysis of engagements between actors with different interests and social conflicts, we need to go beyond articulations of power to ‘a focus on the entanglements of everyday practices’, as Routray (2018) argues.

References

- Agarwal, A., Narain, S., 1997. Dying Wisdom: Rise, Fall, and Potential of India’s Traditional Water Harvesting Systems (State of India’s Environment, Volume 4). Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi.
- Agrawal, A., Gibson, C.C., 1999. Enchantment and Disenchantment: The Role of Community in Natural Resource Conservation. *World Dev.* 27, 629–649.
- Barnes, J., 2014. Cultivating the Nile- the everyday politics of water in Egypt. Duke University Press.
- Baviskar, A., 2004. Between micro-politics and administrative imperatives: Decentralisation and the watershed mission in Madhya Pradesh, India. *Eur. J. Dev. Res.* 16, 26–40.

- De Souza, A., 2007. "Our Village Puts Aside Politics for the sake of development" - Fluid communities and stable claims, in: Baviskar, A. (Ed.), *Waterscapes - The Cultural Politics of a Natural Resource*. Permanent Black, Ranikhet, Uttaranchal, pp. 139–168.
- Department of Agriculture, M. state, 2004. Maharashtra Water Sector Improvement Project-proposal for agricultural support services component.
- Directorate of Economics and Statistics, G. of M., 2017. Gondia District socio-economic review.
- Directorate of Economics and Statistics, G. of M., 2016. Bhandara District Socio-economic Review.
- Joy, K.J., Paranjape, S., Kirankumar, A. k, Lele, R., Raju, A., 2004. Introduction, in: *Watershed Development Review: Issues and Prospects*. Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Environment and Development, Bangalore, pp. 1–13.
- Kashwan, P., 2016a. Integrating power in institutional analysis: A micro-foundation perspective. *J. Theor. Polit.* 28, 5–26.
- Kashwan, P., 2016b. Power asymmetries and institutions: landscape conservation in central India. *Reg. Environ. Chang.* 16, 97–109.
- Kerkvliet, B.J.T., 2009. Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours). *J. Peasant Stud.* 36, 227–243.
- Kerkvliet, B.J.T., 2005. *The power of everyday politics- how vietnamese peasants transformed national policy*. Cornell University Press.
- Kimmatkar, M., 2012. Study of Maji-Malguzari tanks of Eastern Vidarbha (marathi).
- Kumar, C., 2005. Revisiting "community" in community-based natural resource management. *Community Dev. J.* 40, 275–285.
- Leftwich, A., 2004. The Political Approach to Human Behaviour: People, Resources and Power, in: Leftwich, A. (Ed.), *What Is Politics?* Polity Press, pp. 100–118.
- Lemos, M.C., Agrawal, A., 2006. Environmental Governance. *Annu. Rev. Environ. Resour.* 31, 297–325.
- Mehta, L., 2005. *The politics and poetics of water: the naturalisation of scarcity in Western India*, First. ed. Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, India.
- Menon, A., Singh, P., Shah, E., Lele, S., Paranjape, S., Joy, K.J., 2007. Introduction, in: *Community -Based Natural Resource Management: Issues and Cases from South Asia*. Sage, pp. 1–27.
- Mishra, A., 1993. *Aaj bhi Khare hain Talaab*. Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi.
- Mollinga, P.P., 2008a. Water, politics and development: Framing a political sociology of water resources management. *Water Altern.* 1, 7–23.

- Mollinga, P.P., 2008b. Water Policy- Water Politics, in: Scheumann, W., Neubert, S., Kipping, M. (Eds.), *Water Politics and Development Cooperation*. SpringerVerlag Berlin Heidelberg.
- Mollinga, P.P., 2001. Water and politics: Levels, rational choice and South Indian canal irrigation. *Futures* 33, 733–752.
- Mosse, D., 2003. *The Rule of Water : Statecraft, Ecology, and Collective action in South India*. Oxford University Press.
- Olson, M., 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*.
- Ostrom, E., 1990. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Paranjpye, V., 2004. Water- Bhandara, the lake district, Maharashtra, in: *Seeds of Hope- Case Studies*. Planning Commission and Lokayan.
- Phansalkar, S.J., 2003. *Understanding underdevelopment: Characterizing Regional development in Vidarbha With special focus on water use*. Nagpur.
- Rajankar, M., 2011a. Traditional Water Management Systems of Eastern Vidarbha : Community Conservation-1. *South Asia Netw. Dams, Rivers People* 9, 5–8.
- Rajankar, M., 2011b. Traditional Water Systems of Eastern Vidarbha-II : Current status. *South Asia Netw. Dams, Rivers People* 9, 14–17.
- Rajankar, M., Dolke, Y., 2001. Decline of a Grand tradition, in: Agarwal, A., Narain, S., Khurana, I. (Eds.), *Making Water Everybody's Business- Practice and Policy of Water Harvesting*. Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, pp. 30–32.
- Routray, S., 2018. *Everyday state and politics in India*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Russell, R.V., 1908. *Central Provinces – District Gazetteers (Facsimile Reproduction) Bhandara District -Volume A*, reprinted. ed. Gazetteers Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai.
- Sangameswaran, P., 2008. Community Formation, 'Ideal' Villages and Watershed Development in Western India. *J. Dev. Stud.* 44, 384–408.
- Schnegg, M., 2016. Lost in Translation: State Policies and Micro-politics of Water Governance in Namibia. *Hum. Ecol.* 44, 245–255.
- Scott, J.C., 1985. *Weapons of the weak- everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Shah, E., 2003. *Social designs : tank irrigation technology and agrarian transformation in Karnataka, South India*, 1st ed, Wageningen University water resources series ; 4. Wageningen University, Halle/Saale.

- Suhardiman, D., 2016. Linking Irrigation Development with the Wider Agrarian Context: Everyday Class Politics in Water Distribution Practices in Rural Java. *J. Dev. Stud.*
- Velankar, R.A., 2011. Village Tanks and Community-Based Management in Gondia District, Maharashtra State, India.
- Vishwasrao, N.P., 2010. Sustainable Water Management in Semi-Arid India : Learning from the Gond and Kohli Indigenous Communities. Critique. The University of Adelaide.
- Wade, R., 1988. Village republics : economic conditions for collective action in South India, First. ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wilshusen, P.R., 2009. Social process as everyday practice: The micro politics of community-based conservation and development in southeastern Mexico. *Policy Sci.* 42, 137–162.