



Water Sovereignty for Tribal Communities

Water is the basis of life. It has a unique significance in the life cycle of humans, animals, plants and all living things. According to the United Nations, access to safe water is a fundamental human need and therefore a basic human right. Yet 785 million people worldwide still lack safe water^[1]. It is rightly described by the UN that access to water and sanitation for all which is Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals contributes to the achievement of most of the SDGs.

Over the years, water continued to be used for various purposes such as for drinking, cleaning, agriculture and for other reasons. This invaluable resource has been collected by various communities by various means. But since it has been used for drinking and livelihood purposes, it has been treated like a commodity, which later also created the space for its marketization. But in reality, water is the soul of living beings, not any commodity and soul cannot be commercialized.

For ages, the tribal communities have conserved our forests, rivers and other natural resources. They have been the true custodians of mother nature. These communities in true sense were dependent on nature for fulfilment of their daily needs having no dependency on external environment. In particular, water plays a vital role in their lives and their control over water resources has been an essential element of tribal sovereignty, which fundamentally includes its control over water quality including regulation of its contamination. They had traditional methods and practices of water conservation and harvesting. But nowadays even they are facing several challenges in terms of water sovereignty. Water scarcity for both drinking and livelihood among tribal communities in central India is one of the key issues faced by them. Owing to various development works, the consumption of water has increased and the sources of water also got contaminated. Development in terms of modernization is acceptable but water sovereignty should not be compromised. Moreover, the area where the tribal communities in Central Western India live is usually a hilly terrain owing to which water retention of rain water is poor, resulting in soil erosion and flushing of soil nutrients. Their farming is mostly rainfed and crop failure is a usual phenomenon.

There are enormous opportunities for the government, civil societies and individuals to protect water, development of new water resources with clean and safe water. Traditional methods of water conservation and harvesting need to be identified, encouraged, revived and replicated in other areas. Water governance could be effective if reinforced at local, regional and national level to ensure the reliable delivery of water for prioritized usage.

Succinctly, as long as water is used as a commodity, one cannot think of bringing its sovereignty. If it was considered as a component of nature, then only its sovereignty could be protected.

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^[1] <https://www.undp.org/blog/understanding-value-water-sustainable-development>