

CONSTITUTION OF NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY IN PARTICIPATORY IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT: IMPLICATIONS AND OUTCOMES IN INDIA

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Abstract

After four decades of experimentations and dismal outcomes of implementing Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) policy and programs to improve the viability and sustainability of bureaucratic irrigation systems, neoliberal governmentality is being institutionalized through crafting legislation for legalizing Water User Associations (WUAs) for augmenting involuntary farmer participation. The neoliberal governmentality project with its top-down approach experienced unsuccessful outcomes despite legalizing Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) due to non-enforcement of the legislation by the state.

Keywords

Irrigation Management Transfer, Participatory Irrigation Management, Water User Associations, Legislations.

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Background

The area under irrigated agriculture expanded rapidly around the world in the Post-colonial era largely governed by government bureaucracy. Contrasting to the consequences of a group of users in pursuit of their respective individual interests resulting in the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968), centralized control and an all-powerful bureaucracy were considered suitable for the management of irrigation water with a high degree of discipline (Uphoff and Wijayarathna, 2000). Such bureaucratic control is justified because natural resources are common and public property and state regulation could be appropriate to protect and judiciously benefit from these resources (Duruigbo, 2006) and extensive irrigation necessitated centralized management and guided collaboration, subsequently fostering enhanced political unification (Wittfogel, 1957).

Contradictorily, findings from the last quarter of the 20th century demonstrated that government bureaucracies struggled to ensure a consistent, stable and sufficient water supply throughout the system, providing equitable and reliable access to all users (Hooja, 2006; Dasthagir, 2016). Concomitantly, the growing population, rising demands for the products of irrigated agriculture, and competing demands for water for other uses mounted pressure on bureaucracies to manage irrigation systems efficiently, against decreasing government financing irrigation escalating expenses of operation and maintenance of aging and degenerating irrigation infrastructure lead to adoption of neoliberal institutional reforms for Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) in about 60 countries of the world (Munoz et al., 2007). Since the irrigation government bureaucracy has managed the design, operation and maintenance of major and medium irrigation systems, the neoliberal initiative has promoted the development of mechanisms to facilitate communication and coordination between farmers and the irrigation agency. Thus, the neoliberal institutional reforms promulgated to evolve partnerships between organized water users and the officials and staff of government bureaucracy in the governance of these irrigation systems (Gulati et al., 2005).

Paradoxically, while neoliberal governmentality offers possibilities for water users and bureaucracy, such as increased agricultural production, secure food supply, optimal water use and sufficient upkeep of irrigation systems, the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) has labeled IMT a 'paradox' in the irrigation sector after three decades of implementation. Based on 108 case studies from Asia, the IWMI asserts that successful IMT instances are significantly outnumbered by failures (Amarasinghe and Smakhtin, 2014).

The Inquiry

Foucault posits that neo-liberalism has surfaced as a political agenda, aiming to infuse an economic rationality into the political realm and all other facets of modern life (Burchell et al., 1991). For Michel Foucault, Governmentality refers to “activity that undertakes to conduct individuals throughout their lives by placing them under the authority of a guide responsible for what they do and for what happens to them” (Foucault and Rabinow, 1997), while governmentality is to be understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior. Thus, governmentality involves bringing subjects together by force, nurture or by providing freedom or discipline to achieve specific goals.

In consonance with Foucault, the agenda of IMT for engendering Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) constituting Water User Associations (WUAs) for collaborating with government bureaucracy operated through legislations under neoliberal directives (Rap and Wester, 2017). Under emergent conditions of constituting governmentality in managing irrigation across the world, this article endeavors to examine the contemporary challenges in incorporating neoliberal governmentality through the implementation of legislation for IMT. In India, since irrigation is a state subject, each Indian state has ratified legislation for legalizing PIM (Kulkarni, 2011). Thus, this article makes a pioneering attempt to apply Foucault’s theorization of neo-liberalism as a particular form of power called ‘Governmentality’ in the constitution of the post-bureaucratic governance in irrigation and the concomitant mechanisms of subject-formation in augmenting farmer participation and devolution of bureaucratic authority in Indian irrigation.

Implementation of Neoliberal Governmentality in Indian Irrigation

The endeavor of neoliberal governmentality to manage irrigation was conceived and executed to enhance the efficiency of irrigation systems across Asia, Africa and Latin America, guided and financially supported by global development agencies. For example, the success of an irrigation project significantly hinges on the active involvement and collaboration of farmers. Consequently, forming a group, such as a farmers’ association, is advisable and should ideally be initiated by the farmers themselves or facilitated with the assistance of the government to aid in achieving the objectives of the irrigation project (ADB, 1973). Likewise, water should be treated as an economic good with farmers and other stakeholders assuming a greater role in water management (Keating, 1993).

IMT serves as a pivotal element in providing impetus to the Blue Revolution to address the impending food crisis. Aligning with neoliberal declarations in the

final decade of the 20th century, irrigation development policy underwent a significant shift. The emphasis transitioned from viewing the state as the exclusive owner of natural resources to acknowledging local user organizations in managing shared property resources. The IMT policy attributes the transfer of responsibilities in managing irrigation systems from government agencies to private entities, typically to WUAs through neoliberal approaches (Dasthagir, 2021). This encompasses the shift of operations and maintenance tasks among other responsibilities

Global development agencies propagated the transfer of responsibility to farmers as a precondition for funding irrigation development projects. To internalize such innovation among users, several strategies viz. study tours to user-managed irrigation districts, building effective Farmers' Organizations, formation of user associations, training farmers for a variety of new functions etc. were employed to propagate the process of management transfer. Certainly, the neoliberal governance model was institutionalized differently across various countries: as "Turnover" in Indonesia and the Philippines; "Management Transfer" in Mexico and Turkey; "Takeover" in Columbia; "Joint Management" in Nepal; "Privatization" in Bangladesh; "Disengagement" in Senegal; "Post Responsibility System" in China; "Commercialization" in Nigeria; "Self-Management" in Indonesia; and "PIM" in India and Sri Lanka. Governments, upon receiving funding for irrigation development at the national level, consistently adhere to the guidelines set forth by development agencies. At the implementation stage, the staffs of bureaucracy play a pivotal role in these projects, diligently and reliably executing the directives to facilitate reforms in irrigation management (Gulati et al., 2013). Therefore, the conceptual design and implementation of IMT, embodying neoliberal governmentality, established WUAs to bolster irrigation management and enhance system performance.

Over the past several decades, India's water sector has experienced pivotal transformations, necessitated by challenges spawned from globalization, technological advancements, economic pressures and population booms. The shift in evolution veered the course from traditional water management approaches to innovative tactics, aligning with emerging demands and complexities. Institutional and policy changes, notably through the National Water Policy (1987), the National Water Policy (2002) and the National Water Policy (2012) have guided alterations but also displayed uncertainties, especially concerning groundwater utilization and rights. While the transition from water resource development to a more all-encompassing water resource management is highlighted and there is an emphasis on inclusivity and engaging stakeholders in water governance (Dasthagir, 2024), ongoing external pressures and concerns for sustainability persistently influence

and mold the country's policy and institutional modifications in the water domain (Gany et al., 2019).

The trajectory of neoliberal governmentality envelops in IMT institutionalized over four decades in India can be portrayed in two generations of PIM:

1. The first generation of PIM in the last quarter of the 20th century included: 1st phase of creating outlet base water user organizations from the 1970s – 1980s, 2nd phase of pilot projects implementing PIM across different states from 1985 – 1990 and 3rd phase of transfer and turnover of irrigation systems to WUAs in early 1990s (Pant, 2008).
2. The second generation of PIM involved the creation of a legislative framework to legalize involuntary user participation. This phase commenced with ratifications of PIM legislation by Andhra Pradesh in 1997 and was followed by several states viz. Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Bihar etc. in the first decade of the 21st century (Mollinga et al., 2007)

Thus, the first generation IMT included initiatives and efforts to engender governmentality through the promulgation of policy and implementation of programs and projects across states in India. Outlet committees and farmer councils or water cooperatives as registered farmers' associations at the tertiary and secondary levels of irrigation systems were created as 'arms of the government' to operationalize governmentality in Indian irrigation (Mollinga, 2009). Contradictorily, countering pervasive failure and degeneration of these users' organizations, social scientists and development planners advocated crafting legislation to legalize multi-tiered WUAs (Dasthagir, 2022). Accordingly, the second-generation institutional reforms in Indian irrigation are characterized by enactment of legislation by state governments to constitute and operationalize WUAs in the governance of irrigation systems.

While user engagement in planning and management is vital, crafting rules that adequately incentivize ongoing, active participation and adopting a top-down approach that mandates transparency and stakeholder empowerment through capacity development are crucial to ensuring sustainability in PIM (Chattopadhyay et al., 2022). However, extensive research, including case studies and cross-jurisdictional comparisons sought to identify elements of successful PIM implementations in specific locales (Cooper et al., 2023). On the other hand, sound irrigation governance is found to enhance public irrigation system performance, with institutional/regulatory mechanisms and service delivery showing a positive correlation with irrigation efficacy and agricultural productivity,

highlighting opportunities for optimizing resource utilization and bolstering agricultural outcomes (Kannan et al., 2019)

Conclusion

As propounded by Foucault, neoliberal governmentality is encapsulated in IMT by rolling back government bureaucracy and up-scaling multi-tiered WUAs for the subjection of bureaucrats as well as farmers in accordance with the roles and responsibilities prescribed by the legislation ratified by the nation-states. Indeed, neoliberal governmentality uniformly, universally and unilaterally offers the blueprint design of PIM with the modern, rational democratic principle of collaboration and coordination between bureaucracy and farmers.

Concomitantly, in the disguise of seeking local solutions to global problems of food and agriculture, the advocacy of the neoliberal paradigm to incorporate global solutions to local problems of managing irrigation largely reinvented the often proved unsuccessful strategy of the big-bank, top-down approach of revamping governance in irrigation. Consequently, the interventions to constitute governmentality not only a faced indigenous irrigation institutions, customary practices of farmer contribution and the role of traditional authority in irrigation but also proved to be experimentations on levels, modes and forms of organizing farmers and the extent of partnership between farmers and bureaucracy instead of contributing to the viability and sustainability of irrigation systems. Thus, prioritizing the promulgation of policy, program and legislation for institutionalizing neoliberal governmentality is less likely to find solution to the escalating water crisis and unsustainability of irrigated agriculture.

Conversely, these evidences counterpose the proposition of subject formation by Foucault as governmentality in managing irrigation greatly emerged as an advocacy to replicate the blueprint design of the particular form of efficacious user organizations across the world, without due consideration to the variation in the physical-technical features and socio-cultural characteristics of users and managers of the irrigation systems subjected to institutional reforms culminating in the failure of neoliberal governmentality project in Indian irrigation. The status quo of bureaucratic governance in irrigation persists with the unabated degeneration of irrigation systems succumbing to the livelihood of farmers - enquiring 'What do we do without water?' in agriculture. Thus, although as propounded by Foucault the penetration of neo-liberalism as a political program crafted national and state policy and legislations in irrigation, the historicity, contextuality and local requisites are more likely to produce contradictions in the assimilation of rational principles and practice of governmentality in Indian irrigation.

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