The politics of rural–urban water conflict in India: Untapping the power of institutional reform

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ABSTRACT

Animating the contemporary politics of water governance in India is a combination of institutional path dependence and a neo-liberal restructuring that has extended the ability of Indian cities to establish new forms of water entitlement in rural and peri-urban areas. This paper explores the politics of rural–urban water conflicts that are occurring in this changing political context. Building upon Schlager and Ostrom’s conceptualization of operational and collective choice rules, it examines the role of agrarian institutions (primarily in the form of land rights) in shaping the politics of rural–urban water transfers in Mumbai and Chennai, two of India’s largest and fastest-growing cities. By doing so, it makes the case that Mumbai’s ability to secure water entitlement has been facilitated by an institutional legacy of prior appropriation that has been applied in a context of weak and limited tribal authority over land and resources. Chennai by contrast has become far more dependent upon the commodification of water in the form of quasi-market and allocation contracts, reflecting the riparian rights of commercial farmers in the Chennai region. The paper generates theoretical and empirical insights about the ways in which variations in urban and agrarian institutions affect the politics of rural–urban water allocation.

1. Introduction

Few issues have attracted as much controversy and debate in recent years as the global race for rural resources and agricultural land (e.g. Saturnino, Hall, Scoones, White, & Wolford, 2011; Feldman & Geisler, 2012; Fairbairn et al., 2014). Although considerable attention has been paid to the impact of large-scale land acquisitions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, scholars have become increasingly interested in the impact of growing urban demand for land and resources (Feldman & Geisler, 2012; Satterthwaite, McGranahan, & Tacoli, 2010; Seto, Fragkias, Guneralp, & Reilly, 2011; the Economist, 2014). According to one study carried out by Seto and colleagues (2011), urban demand for land increased by 58,000 sq km, an area the size of Holland, between 1970 and 2000; the fastest rates of increase were in India, China and Africa. According to another, the world’s urban population is expected to grow by 3 billion people by the year 2050, raising a number of pressing concerns about the sustainability of rapid and unplanned urban growth (UN, 2012).

Explanations for the rapid and often unchecked urbanization of nonurban spaces have been associated with the liberalization and globalization of economic production and trade; as the world economy has become increasingly dependent upon regional supply chains and low wage labour, cities like Bangalore, Shenzhen and Dhaka have come to occupy important niches in the global production of software, textiles, electronics and other global goods and services (Brenner & Schmid, 2013; Brenner, 2013; Leaf, 2011; Robinson, 2005; Roy, 2009, 2010, 2011; Sassen, 2001; Webster, 2011). At the same time, the spatial relocation of capital has entailed processes of speculation, inflation and outright dispossession that have displaced marginal populations from hitherto low-value areas surrounding wetlands, waterbodies and peri-urban fringes (Johnson & Chakravarty, 2013; Satterthwaite et al., 2010; Roy, 2009, 2010; Webster, 2011; Leaf, 2011; Narain, Khan, Sada, Singh, & Prakash, 2009; Vij & Narain, 2016). Moreover, the global shift from high- to low-income centres of production and consumption has precipitated a surge in demand for nonrenewable and renewable resources, raising concerns about the environmental sustainability of contemporary development pathways (Schandl, 2016). Within the water sector, increasing attention has been paid to the social, political and environmental implications of rural–urban...
water transfers and conflicts (Bruns, 2005; Saleth & Dinar, 2004; Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan, 2005; Molle & Berkoff, 2006; Crase & Gandhi, 2009; Shah, 2016b). In many instances, local and national efforts to improve urban access to clean and reliable water have entailed intra- and inter-basin transfers, involving groundwater extraction and the construction of new dams, diversions and reservoirs (Saleth & Dinar, 2004; Bruns, 2005; Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan 2005; Molle & Berkoff, 2006; Crase & Gandhi, 2009; Shah, 2016b). However, rural–urban water diversions have created conflicts, particularly between cities and rural areas (Bruns, 2005; Saleth & Dinar, 2004; Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan 2005; Molle & Berkoff, 2006; Crase & Gandhi, 2009; Shah, 2016b).

Institutional theories of collective action and resource conservation suggest that competing sectors and users can resolve inter-spatial resource conflicts when they have credible information about the costs and benefits of resource decisions and (crucially) when they have an opportunity to decide the rules of the game (Ostrom, 1990, 2010; Schlager & Ostrom, 1992). Particularly important in this regard is the notion that resource sharing arrangements are dependent upon the wider legal and political environment that determines the conditions under which individuals and groups of individuals and groups may use resources, extract benefits from using resources and prevent others from doing so (Hall, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Schlager & Ostrom, 1992; Sikor & Lund, 2008; Sikor, He, & Lestrelin, 2017). Equally important is the idea that local institutional arrangements (of rules, norms and property rights regimes) can thrive and survive when they are “nested” (Ostrom, 2010) within political systems that specify local rights for testing new approaches, sharing best practices and envisioning alternative policy futures that might be used in challenging ecologically destructive path dependencies (Ostrom, 1990, Chap. 3).

However, as Sikor and colleagues (2017) have recently pointed out, rules, norms and property rights regimes operate in a context of changing resource governance and demand, involving new actors, institutions and dynamics that are often overlooked in the (relatively static) institutional literature (cf. Hodgson, 2015). “New institutional” approaches to the study of environmental governance have long been challenged for understating the power of actors, interests and ideas in shaping the rules of “access, withdrawal, management, exclusion and alienation” (Schlager & Ostrom, 1992) that have bearing on resource allocation actions, decisions and outcomes (Johnson, 2004; Kashwan, 2015; Mosse, 1997; Sikor et al., 2017). Although scholars are now generally in agreement that “power matters” to the study of institutions and the environment (Bates, Grief, Levi, Rosenthal, & Weingast, 1998; Johnson, 2004; Kashwan, 2015; Mosse, 1997; North et al., 2013; Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Sikor & Lund, 2009; Sikor et al., 2017), there is little consensus about the ways in which we might go about theorizing and conceptualizing the study of power in the context of wider historical processes, such as globalization and neo-liberal reform.

For “early institutionalists” (e.g. Wade, 1988; Ostrom, 1990), power implied a kind of bargaining scenario, whose outcomes create new rules, norms and incentives for governing and protecting the commons (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994). For “later institutionalists,” (e.g. Cleaver, 2000; Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Johnson, 2004; Sikor & Lund, 2009; Hodgson, 2015; Kashwan, 2015; García-López, Kashwan, & Maclean, 2017; Sikor et al., 2017), power suggests a deeper web of social, economic and epistemic relations that shape and constrain the political conditions under which collective and political action may be expected to occur. As García-López et al. (2017, p. 2) point out, institutions are not merely rules, norms and “artefacts of cooperative bargaining,” but also “carriers of historical legacies, conveyers of state force, and a venue for struggles over state power,” raising critical questions about the ways in which different ideas, actors, and interests come together and/or diverge in a context of neoliberal reform.¹

Underlying this Special Issue on institutions, neo-liberalism and the environment is an assumption that globalization has created or reconstituted new forms of power that have important bearing on resource governance processes and outcomes but are as yet poorly understood. Hodgson (2015), for instance, highlights the role that the state continues to play in interpreting and validating property rights and exchange within a changing capitalist economy. Sikor et al. (2017), on the other hand, consider the role of new actors and dynamics, including the role of international finance (e.g. payments for ecological services) in local resource conservation. Analytically, the recognition that environmental governance is contingent upon state power and the power of private (and increasingly global) capital draws our attention to the productive forces that drive the political economy of labour, capital and accumulation at the urban scale (Brenner & Schmid, 2013; Brenner & Wachsmuth, 2012; Brenner, 2013). In the context of water appropriation, it also raises questions about the ways in which and extent to which cities and local authorities are able to act effectively or autonomously in commanding “legitimate and effective” entitlement over water.

This article explores the politics of rural–urban water transfers in India. It starts from the premise that globalization and neo-liberalism have created new forms of urban demand for water but that the ability of cities to establish entitlement over water varies with the institutionalization of land rights and agrarian power on the one hand and the bureaucratic rationalization of an urban water administration on the other. Its empirical focus is on Mumbai and Chennai, two of India’s largest and fastest-growing cities. In comparing the two cities, it makes the case that Mumbai has been able to legitimate the diversion of water by asserting a right of prior appropriation that has effectively curtailed the rights of local farming and tribal communities in surrounding hinterland areas. Chennai, by contrast, has become more dependent upon the commercialization of water, reflecting the city-region’s historical and ecological dependence on groundwater. The implication is that state-led development models rooted in colonial laws, institutions and centralizing water management practices have provided the institutional basis upon which large cities have been able to establish control and access to water with new sectoral reforms adopted in the last decade.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 first develops a theoretical framework for understanding the politics of rural–urban water transfers, using Ostrom and Schlager’s (1992) property rights framework to understand the role of prior appropriation and riparian rights in water sharing institutional arrangements. Section 3 then explores the political economy of rural–urban water transfers in India. Sections 4 and 5 examine the fragmentation and consolidation of urban water governance in Mumbai and Chennai respectively. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper, highlighting implications for future research and policy.

¹ Neo-liberalism can be usefully defined as an economic doctrine that questions and challenges the ability of nation-states to regulate and control the social and environmental impacts of international trade and investment (García-López et al., 2017). Urbanization, on the other hand, implies processes of spatial, economic and political restructuring that create new patterns of wealth and capital accumulation while in the current historical context, rendering cities increasingly dependent upon the privatization and financialization of resources, institutions and public spaces for the purposes of regional economic development (Brenner & Schmid, 2013; Brenner, 2013; Søvndal, 2004).

Please cite this article in press as: Punjabi, B., & Johnson, C. A. The politics of rural–urban water conflict in India: Untapping the power of institutional reform. *World Development* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.03.021
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