

UNCOMMON GROUND  
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## A CONFLICT OF PARADIGMS

At summertime, thoughts turn naturally to water. For millions of citizens, especially women, it is a time of extreme shortage, and for ever more creative coping mechanisms. Many states have improved access to lifeline water, but there is still a long way to go.

In terms of total availability of fresh water, things are not going to improve. Even though water is a renewable resource, it is finite, and per capita availability of water in India has gone down from 6,008 cu. m. in 1947 to 1,820 cu. m. in 2001—it will dip further over the next 30 years. The idea of per capita water can be misleading because it does not explain inequity of access. A better indicator is litres per capita per day (LPCD), and this varies dramatically, with some citizens making do with as little as 30 LPCD and others enjoying in excess of 400 LPCD—the international basic accepted minimum is 50 LPCD.

Even as equity issues have to be addressed, the skyrocketing demand from competing interests for this limited fresh water has brought the issue to the centre of the debate on development, and rightly so. Yet it is an extremely, and sometimes unnecessarily, polarized debate in India, which comes from a conflict of paradigms.

It is important to understand these differing paradigms and their context in order to move towards some resolution

The demand for limited fresh water has brought the issue to the centre of the debate on development

and to prevent some of the escalating conflicts around sharing and managing our water resources.

Not so long ago, it was almost universally believed that water is a God-given resource, that it is plentiful and, above all, free. And while that perspective and the underlying values still hold good for many, an oft-repeated quote from a representative of one of the world's largest water companies—"God provided the water, but not the pipes"—serves to capture the deep divide over water.

If God forgot to put in the pipes, someone has to—if we want at least some modern amenities for all, and also to sustain the economy. But who

should do so—and how—is hotly contested terrain.

Is water primarily a social good or an economic good? The battle lines are fiercely drawn. One side broadly believes that water cannot be commoditized, that there should be no private interest in water, that citizens have inalienable rights over water, that the state in some form must own and govern water in trust for citizens. The other side argues that water is a social good but should also be recognized as an economic good, and that markets can play a positive role in the optimum use of this resource. This side believes in defining water rights and allowing trading of those rights between interests. It believes in proper pricing and regulation for managing water effectively for domestic consumption, agriculture and industry.

It is very hard to capture the nuances of these positions in a short article, especially since I am trying not to go into the merits of any but merely to highlight some differences, to deepen a reasoned discourse around these issues that will increasingly affect us all. I should add that not all views can be neatly boxed within one side or the other, so this is only a broad sweep argument.

The next paradigm conflict is one between centralized and decentralized models of managing water. Centralized models, often large engineering projects that require the building of big dams, irrigation canals and long distance piped water supply, are predicated on the idea of command and control efficiency, the strong role of the state as overseer of natural resources, economies of scale and redistribution of water across regions.

The decentralized model is based on

the principle of subsidiarity, and on the political philosophy of thinkers such as M.K. Gandhi and E.F. Schumacher. It aims for self-reliant communities, living within natural limits to the extent possible, and for participatory decision making on allocation and maintenance.

The tension between these two ideas is very palpable in India, with one side dreaming of interlinked rivers and the other of primarily soft engineering and local solutions.

Another conflict of approaches is between linear models and closed loop systems. This conflict has less to do with ideology and more to do with a crisis of understanding. Meanwhile, in our agricultural fields, our industrial plants or in our cities and towns, we use, pollute and release water, leaving downstream users to worry about any problem of pollution and waste.

Underlying all these paradigm conflicts are two others. One is between the anthropocentric world view and the biocentric one, between a merely human perspective and an understanding of the needs of other species and of environmental flows. The other is between the absolutists and the pragmatists.

With the water situation being as complex as it is, how can we move to a middle ground? Tough as it will be, we have to fashion a universal water ethic that can shape our policy and our practice in the dry days ahead.

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