



Emergence of Water as a Commodity in Nagaland: The Kohima Narrative

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Abstract

Nagaland a state in the north eastern part of India has seen in recent years an amplification of complex water issues. Despite all efforts made by the state government to increase its holding in the water sector, there are evidences of increasing resource constraints. This water stress situation can best be explained by the distinctive nature of tribal land ownership rights in Nagaland which directly impacts both water resource ownership and management. Development in water sector has been stalled frequently due to breakdown in talks between the government and the landowners over sharing rights of water resources. In the meantime, a rapid growth of population in urban centers leading to water stress has opened doors to water being commodified by private operators, to an unorganized market particularly in the capital city Kohima. Sandwiched between non delivery of the government and exorbitant rates offered by private distributors, citizens of Kohima are compelled to buy water at rates, highly disproportionate to their income. A recent study conducted by Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA), shows the state capita, Kohima as the second most unliveable city in the country. Multiple factors may have contributed towards this unsavory ranking. Nonetheless, the water crisis can make its stand as a leading cause towards it.

Key Words: Commodification, Land Ownership rights, Water management

I. Introduction

In recent years despite Nagaland receiving heavy rainfall during monsoon season, almost all of 16 districts of the state have had to deal with water stress albeit in varying degrees. The phenomenon has become more distinct and pronounced in larger towns and cities with a burgeoning population where resource constraints have become clearly

evident. Access to safe water drinking has become a luxury and out of reach for many, whether they live in towns or remote villages. The Government agencies are evidently under pressure, working within the confines of a fragmented policy on water having limitations in scope and reach. Any water supply project proposal needs consent and approval of all villages and tribes through which the water would flow. Evidently this is a herculean task and the Government has been unable to convince landowners to share water despite their best efforts. An attempt was made with great fanfare by the Government on 31st July, 2018 to introduce a new Tripartite Agreement on Augmentation of Water Supply to Kohima, but this project too has been stalled due to numerous problems. Despite Poilwa village (Peren District)- Khonoma village (Kohima District) agreeing to supply water from the Teupuiiki River and Dzupfu River, objections have been raised by Zelu Council (Manipur-Nagaland) asserting that the project cannot be allowed as the agreement was signed without consent and knowledge of the traditional land Powner Ze-Mnui (Yangkhullen) (Nagaland Post, November 14, 2018). The impasse between Government and traditional Landowners over water distribution rights is a longstanding issue and not uncommon. This has compelled an alternative network to emerge creating an unregulated water supply system in Kohima town where private water entrepreneurs are not able to keep up with demands. Exorbitant rates of water are fixed and customers from both low to high income groups pay out of compulsion. Expense on water is disproportionate to income for many and water is purchased at any cost as it is essential for their very survival.



II. Significance of the Study:

The study makes an attempt to understand the widening gap between demand and supply of water in Nagaland in the light of the impasse between traditional owners and the government over land & water resources. It underlines emergence of unregulated private water entrepreneurs in Kohima town and the significance of the role played by these agents in changing perception of water from a common resource to a commodity.

III. Objectives:

1. To analyze the distinctive nature of land ownership rights and emerging complexities in system of management, both traditional and governmental.
2. To find out the underlying cause for the emergence of water as a commodity in Kohima city.
3. To suggest reasonable solutions to make water affordable and accessible.

IV. Material & Methods:

This paper is based on primary data obtained through field study and interviews. Secondary sources involve annual governmental reports, planning & research issues, newspaper articles; published books, unpublished thesis and articles. The approach throughout the paper was descriptive and analytical.

Water has become a most pertinent issue all over the world. Water means right to life itself. Increase in global population and climate change has led to scarcity of water and to numerous disputes over control of water. This has become a global agenda whereby in most parts of the world, control of water to private interest is made at the expense of private citizens and democratic societies (Barlow & Clarke, 2002). A most critical issue is the debate concerning future of public and private spaces shared in water governance (Scott, C.A., Gouvello, B. (eds.) 2014). There are not one but many diverse viewpoints on conflict issues surrounding ownership of water and water privatization trends (Fishbone, A. (ed.) 2007). There is a call to resolve this debate by reframing and reshaping the understanding of involvement of government, different communities and private players in supply of water and to better resolve worldwide urban water crises and water management (Bakker, K. 2010). Many comparative studies have been made to assess the strengths and weaknesses of both private and public managed water utilities using empirical evidence (Schiffler,

M. 2016). However, rather than following an adaptable, sustainable model where water is governed and shared and not as a commodity; what is a disturbing prevalent global trend at the moment is the call for a centralized approach where water is treated as commodity and water privatization extended through private capital (Spulber & Sabbaghi, 2012).

Although this global agenda of privatization has also reached India's shores, a plethora of literature available on the topic suggests that all is not lost. There is a focus on current challenges posed by global commodification of water and emergence of corporations and conversion of water into a commodity sold for a profit leading to the disfranchisement of the world's poor, including that of those in India (Vandana, S. 2002). There is also focus and warning on escalating demands made on water sector in India due to Liberalization process with privatization trends (Joy & Janakarajan, 2018). The adverse effect on interests of marginal and vulnerable communities in India through the exploitation of Common Property Resources (CPR) has been highlighted and held under scrutiny (George, R.M. 2012). To be more specific, there is growing interest on the common theme of water insecurity induced by growing urbanization and climate change and its negative impact (Narain & Prakash (eds.) 2016). There is implication that water seen as a 'common' resource has been progressively monopolized and exploited and an offer has been made for an alternative agenda for reforms. However one drawback is, water issues pertaining to mainland India has gained the most attention.

As such, there is dearth of literature pertaining to the topic from the peripheral North East region. Although some have highlighted survival issues faced by some local communities of the North East and their predicament of being forced to accept environmental and developmental challenges (Basu & Roy, 2018); focus has been made primarily on problems faced by communities living along the major rivers of the North East region. For instance emerging water conflicts and resultant challenges faced by the communities along the major rivers such as Brahmaputra and Barak (Meghna) River have been brought to light (Joy, K.J. et.al. 2017). Even out of the few literature available, the issue of water as a commodity in other regions of north east has barely been mentioned.



The debate by academicians and environmentalists over the emergence of water as a commodity is extensive. But correlating it with the water context in Kohima town is an extremely difficult task. There is no literature on water privatization so far from the region. The only commonality shared is desperation for water in rapidly expanding urban centers' in Nagaland as is evident in other parts of the world. Together with this is the impending threat perception based on the experiences of indigenous communities around the world as they continue to lose their rights to water, which previously was a common good. There is therefore a need to explore this issue urgently.

V. Overview

Nagaland lies between 25° 10' N and 27° 4' N latitude and 93° 20' E and 95° and 15' E longitude in the northern extension of the Arakan Yoma ranges. The State with a total area of 16,579 sq. km is largely a mountainous region of the North East India, its altitude rising from the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam to an elevation of 3840 metres at Mount Saramati. The State has rich variety of forest and natural resource cover due to its unique geographical location and climatic conditions. Kohima the capital town of Nagaland lies in the Southern part of Nagaland. Kohima district covers an area of 3114 sq.km. Kohima city is placed at an altitude 4137 ft. above sea level. The main drainages around Kohima city are the Dzüza, Dzüla, Dzütürü and Dzücharü (Phesama).

The total population of Nagaland is 19, 78,502 out of which 71.14 per cent reside in rural areas and 28.86 per cent in urban areas. Kohima has the second largest population at 13.54 percent i.e. 365017 citizens, after Dimapur district (19.14 percent).

The implementation of the Article 371(A) of the Constitution of India in Nagaland gives certain provisions guarding the Naga Customary laws and procedure, including ownership of land and its resources, over the national statutes. Each Naga village owns and governs its resources that are within its jurisdiction. From times immemorial a Naga village has functioned with a definite territory with an equitable distribution of land and its resources (Ao, T., 1957). (Only in the case of the Konyak and Sumi tribe there was a slight deviation as these two tribes had Chieftainship rule with autocratic style of functioning). Within the villages again there is division among *khels*, (*'khel'* is a distinct Naga institution that brings together several clans within the village community) family and individuals. In smaller villages, entire forest or

water resources belong to the community, but in larger villages, ownership is claimed by different *khels*. (Alemchiba, A.1976). Thus, the onus of forest & resource management; to sustain, increase, enhance and strengthen forest area largely lies with the communities.

From times immemorial water considered a "public and common" good has seen the involvement of the different *khels* of the village in management and upkeep of the water sources. As a precious commodity, all water sources are jealously guarded by the different villages and tribes; there was not a single instance in the past where water was sold as commodity for a price (Alinger, E. 2015).

VI. The Kohima Narrative

Kohima district in Nagaland state of India is predominantly inhabited by people belonging to the Angami tribe with 58 villages (http: Kohima.nic.in>village-panchayats). The location of Kohima, the district headquarters denotes that forests and water resources in and around are under control of the Angami tribe with different villages having independent jurisdiction. 'Kohima Village, which is the largest village in Asia, forms the northeastern part of Kohima urban area (Census of India, 2011). Traditional land owners have a final say over the issue of water sharing or tapping in their land.

With rapid urbanization, the pressure of making portable water available to the citizens of Kohima has intensified. The urban population of the State is presently at 28.86 % with a decadal growth rate of 67.38% as per Census 2011. The national growth is 31.80%. The State has witnessed the highest growth rate of urbanization in the country during 1981-1991, 1991-2001 and 2001-2011 (Municipal Affairs Department, Annual Report 2017-2018). This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors such as natural growth of urban population, rural-to-urban migration and due inclusion of new urban areas as statutory towns.

Despite a high statewide annual average rainfall at 2000-2500mm and 1863 mm in Kohima, the government struggles to keep up with demands for potable water. Taking cognizance Nagaland Government drafted the Nagaland Water Policy 2016, outlining policy initiatives and presenting a need for comprehensive overhauling of the system, streamlining policy initiatives of each water sector department. Government reports claim that there has been a gradual increase in the coverage of drinking water supply in rural and urban areas under the stipulated norm of 40 litres per capita per day



(LPCD). However, reality points differently, in urban centres like Kohima the Public Health & Engineering Department (PHED) Nagaland has had to acknowledge that Kohima requires 10 million liters of water per day but receives only 1.2 million litres per day; indicating a shortfall of 8.8 million litres daily. (The Morung Express, June 6, 2015). Other news reports show water demand is around 18 million litres daily (MDL) which will increase to 31 MLD by year 2043. At present there are 18 reservoirs in Kohima ranging from 50,000 litres to 2 lakh litres but it amounts to supply of domestic water to only 40% of the population. The residents of 19 wards under the Kohima Municipal Corporation are therefore left to dependent heavily on the supply of water from private water suppliers who sell water at exorbitant rates.

There is evidence thereof of an emerging gap between the human right to water and traditional water rights- which are particularly important in places with indigenous population. For the government it's a struggle to attain overall development goals. According to the first Census of Water Bodies in India, there are 1432 water bodies in Nagaland, with 1,287 (89.87%) in rural areas and 145 (10.13%) in urban areas. 94% of these are privately owned. (The Morung Express, 23rd April, 2023). In effect the state Government has no land of its own and in order to accelerate pace of developmental activities, it has to acquire private land by paying financial compensation to land owners. However, even this process is complicated and tricky as most traditional land owners refuse to part with their inherited land.

Angami villages' ownership and control are determined both by community concerns and individual needs (Fernandes & D'Sousa, (eds.) 2001). Zapuvise Lhousa, an 85 years old elder from Mezoma village has explained why water sharing to Kohima town is a sensitive issue for Angami villages bordering Kohima town. Unlike other parts of Nagaland where dry (*Jhum- slash and burn type of cultivation*) cultivation is practiced, Angami villages are totally dependent for their sustenance on water intensive, terrace type of cultivation. Any disturbance in the traditional source disturbs the supply chain across neighbouring villages thereby taking away their livelihood.

The tussle between push for developmental by government and the reluctance of landowners to compromise with their traditional rights over land and water has indirectly created a vacuum. This potentially irreconcilable gap, a grey area, is where unregulated private entrepreneurs have emerged. Involvement of private sector companies in

infrastructure for drinking water supply in urban areas-involves what is technically called "private sector participation" (and not full privatization). Bakker calls them "small-scale private entrepreneurs" who run small scale water businesses – a mainstay in water supply access in most cities around the world. (Bakker, K. 2010). Kohima is host to a disorganized network of unregulated and unmonitored suppliers; selling untreated water through water tankers, private cable lines supply through gravity or pushcarts. It will be inapt and premature to address the Kohima case as full water privatization.

The water entrepreneurs have become a vital part of the water distribution system. They exist within and outside the purview of traditional land owners in and around Kohima city. In spite of supplying untreated water, the business has gone up. The demand is highest during November to April months when there is a severe water crisis. Gurung, a private water entrepreneur, started selling water in Kohima around the year 2000 when there were hardly 4-5 vendors; in recent times this group has radically increased and business has peaked with demand exceeding supply. It is imperative to say that the rate of water sold by private water distributors in Kohima amounts to one of the highest in the country. Kohima residents pay Rs. 3500 for 10,000 litres. Jaipur - Rs. 300 for 4000- 5000 litres (India Today, April 17, 2018). Chennai- Rs. 2,200 for 20,000 litres (The New Indian Express, April 22, 2017); Bengaluru-Rs 1000-1200 for 10,000 litres (<https://yourstory.com/2017/04/water-crisis-hike-price>, April 7, 2017); nearer home residents of Darjeeling a hill station facing acute water scarcity pays upto Rs. 1500 for 6000 litres.

The Water issue has affected many sectors in Nagaland, Kohima in particular. During 2013 session of State Assembly, assertions were made by the then PHED Minister that Nagas cannot have a capital without water; the Chief Minister also commented that the State Government would have no option but to shift the capital elsewhere because of acute scarcity issue (The Telegraph, July 17, 2013). The Education sector has also taken a hit. Many students in Kohima during lean seasons spent at least few hours daily in search of water in their vicinity having no time left for studies causing them much distress and inconvenience. Water woes have also had an overall adverse effect on the Tourism sector. The department has even organized meetings in Kohima with stakeholders and conducted seminars calling for sustainable access with themes such as "Tourism & Water: Protecting our common future" (The Times of India, September 27, 2013).



But year round dependence by hospitality sector on private water entrepreneurs at a steep water rate is compensated by enhanced tariff on room and food items; making Kohima an expensive city to live in. Cumulative factors such as these have affected the general environment of the society.

On 20th September 2016, Kohima, the capital of Nagaland was selected for the Smart City Mission under the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Government of India (Municipal Affairs Department, Annual Report 2018-2019). Two years later the department after doing an intensive survey deemed it the second most “unlivable” city in India. Its Ease of Living Index has ranked Kohima 110 out of 111 cities on August 13, 2018 (The Morung Express, 13 August, 2018). Multiple factors may have contributed towards this unsavory ranking; nonetheless, this study shows the water crisis makes its stand as a leading cause towards it. There has been an improvement in the rankings in recent years, however, a comparative study done recently on urban infrastructure facilities of Kohima, Dimapur, and Mokokchung Towns, Nagaland, has a telling story. It throws light on how staggering 91.4% respondents of a survey expressed their dissatisfaction with the water availability in Kohima town. Only 8.6 percent showed their satisfaction. (Tinurenla Jongkor, et. al. (2022).

VII. Findings:

1. Nagaland has seen the highest growth rate of urbanization in India during 1981-1991, 1991-2001 and 2001-2011. Kohima the capital city is seeing a rapid population increase with one of the highest rates of urbanization in the India.
2. 60% of Kohima residents are dependent on private water suppliers and private sources.
3. There is evidence of an emerging gap between the human right to water and traditional water rights in Kohima town. Water scarcity, a global issue, continues to be handled by traditional tribal customs and practices with a focus on community concerns and individual needs first.
4. This huge gap has led to the entry of unregulated private water entrepreneurs in Kohima town, selling water at one of the highest rates in the country. They have played a pivotal role in changing the perception of water from a common resource to that of a commodity.

VIII. Research Questions:

1. Developmental needs of Kohima as a capital town has led to emergence of water as a commodity. What would be the solution to make water accessible and affordable?

2. Traditional landowners continue to have control over forest and water resources.

What role can they play in regulating water supply?

3. Private water entrepreneurs have a service that is predatory in nature but essential for survival of thousands. How should their services be streamlined so as to avoid price escalation?

IX. Suggestions:

1. A regulation process needs to be set in place to determine price control- (Government system; a semi-government system or under the supervision of the traditional land owners).
2. A Kohima Water Board can be constituted as a regulatory body to issue licenses and to monitor quality. Filtration plants can be made available to the private water entrepreneurs for a small fee. Such initiatives can be introduced in other urban centres such as Mokokchung and Dimapur also.
3. Local traditional water conservation methods should not be undermined. Inclusive community centric programmes can be introduced even in urban areas.
4. Any mega water privatization project brought into Nagaland needs to be carefully studied and a collective decision arrived at by the indigenous local population on its feasibility in order to avoid displacement and disengagement from their ancestral lands as a price for development.

X. Conclusion:

It is in this crucible that the emergence of water as a commodity in Kohima gains coherence. Commodification of water is therefore a byproduct of the struggle between a need for development and position of tribals’ protecting their rights over ancestral land and water. It has emerged at a transitory point where rapid urbanization and its demands and the climate change situation, questions the hold of landowners over land and water resources. The issue visible and seemingly impassable remains. While the Government continues to find a common ground with landowners to obtain rights over water resources; it is the common populace who are affected the most.

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