

## **WOMEN, WATER AND LIFE**

### **A. Selvamani (India)**

#### **Introduction:**

Many early civilizations have flourished on river banks and perished in river floods. Water is an essential resource for not only Human life but also flora and fauna. Water is available everywhere! On the contrary there is no water to drink. Water has become politicized and commercialized nowadays. Multinational corporations exploit water to prepare soft drinks and for profit making. For the lack of water, the lives of poor millions, especially, the so called poorest of poor Indian women face acute problems in their daily lives.

India receives an annual rainfall 852mm of which a quarter goes to the sea and the rest falls on the surface. Erratic rain fall and poor water management, including relentless ground water extraction had led to water scarcity.

#### **Water Problems:**

Water is the main source of everything. If there is no food, we can live for many days but if there is no water we cannot live for even a few days. In India, women are not only carry out housework but are also involved in breadwinning for the entire family. If she goes to work, she loses access to water. If she retrieves water, she loses a day's wages. So the water problem becomes a woman's problem. In Salem District, 370,000 people live. A person needs 83 liters of water for drinking and cleaning herself or himself. A woman has to find water for the entire family's needs i.e., cooking, washing and cleaning. In rural areas, potable drinking water is scarce. In order to search and fetch water, women have to walk more than two kilometers for one or two pots of water. If she is a dalit woman, she faces the multiple problems of fetching water, while facing some times abuse by high caste people. This is because the water resources i.e. wells, bore wells, also belong to the upper caste.

With all the above difficulties, if she fetches a pot of water, it would not be enough to meet her personal as well as domestic needs. Last year, the Salem district received 11cm of rainfall. During this season, an acute water shortage took place. In the Salem district, 70 to 80 crore liters of water is wasted and simply falls into the gutter. Unsafe and contaminated drinking water leads to many contagious sicknesses, such as, malaria, diarrhea and jaundice and so on. Due to the scarcity of water, families are unable to

maintain personal cleanliness and hygienic problems occur. During menstruation women face multiple health related problems like vaginal diseases, bleeding, white discharge, urinary and reproductive track infections, ultimately leading to mental sickness as well. World Health Organization claimed women should be clean and hygienic during her menstruation period.

In rural areas, women are not using any sanitary napkins. They use ordinary clothes during the time of menstruation. Every time they have to wash, dry and change them. Since, there is a scarcity of water, she is unable to wash her clothes properly. Because of this situation, she faces health problems. When she is unclean, she can not go to work at nearby houses. Moreover, she is not allowed to do other housework as it is considered a defilement.

In the village, men, women and children attend nature's call in the open. After passing stools, they unable to wash themselves. Instead, they use small pebbles to wipe themselves. This also leads to bacterial and skin diseases. Therefore, water scarcity has forced women to face major problems in their daily lives. Lack of water also is a problem for food preparation. In that case, women are victims because they have to feed their children and the entire family.

Unequal water distribution leads to conflicts with neighbouring family.

Water contaminated by agriculture pesticides and industry make it unsuitable for other applications as well. Vested interest-politicians and entrepreneurs exploit water in urban areas. The municipal administration is responsible for supplying water to the urban population. Unfortunately, they do not have any clear policy concerning water for their citizens. This in turn leads to malpractice and mismanagement of water. Water has been sold to restaurants and hotels and some times for construction purposes.

### **Conclusion:**

Water, the main source of life has not been privatised. Nobody has the right to own water. Women's participation has to be ensured at all levels of water distribution policy and towards other water related issues. We borrowed these water resources from our children and we have to return them intact.