

BOOK REVIEW

Multiuse Wetlands Governance: Challenges and Institutional Choices, Dinesh K. Marothia, Routledge, London and New York, 2024. Pp. xxvi+318. (South Asian Edition, Rs.1595.00).

The importance of wetlands has been recognised since ancient times, as the bulk of them have multiple uses. They support human livelihoods and also serve as habitats for fish birds, and other wild life. They charge aquifers and replenish groundwater. They act like sponges and absorb excess rainfall, controlling flooding. They help in regulating climate, moderating heat. They have recreational benefits, facilitating swimming, boating, and bird watching. Just looking at them is a matter of great joy. They have inspired tons of poetry. The world would have been a ghastly desert without them. Wetlands are both natural and human made. Kings, feudatories, rich persons, and even rich sex-workers considered it to be a matter of great *punya* (spiritual merit), and a sure guarantee to wash off sins of bad *karma*, to construct tanks and wells, rejuvenate lakes, and dig river channels. Big temples in India invariably have tanks near them. Thus wetlands have acquired both practical and cultural/religious significance.

Yet, the irony is that humans themselves have exploited and abused them, and led to their degradation. Dinesh Marothia, a very well-known environmental and agricultural economist, has undertaken the enormous task of telling this gripping story of multiuse wetlands in India, especially Chhattisgarh, through this masterly book. He gives detailed account of their extent, their diverse types, benefits, their decline and its causes, the different institutional arrangements under which they are managed or damaged, the impact of these arrangements, and also discusses what could be done to revive them. What makes his account especially interesting is his in-depth case studies in Chhattisgarh. The book is not merely scholarly and insightful, it also reflects his passionate commitment to the cause of conserving wetlands, and his activism for it. The book, therefore, is not merely enlightening but also inspiring. This is what makes the book great.

Recognising the key importance of wetlands as also the threat to their survival almost all over the world, a Convention was held in Ramsar, Iran, in February 1971, which became well-known as Ramsar Convention. The Convention covers a wide variety of wetland habitats, including rivers, lakes, tanks, wells, ponds, marshes, coastal areas, estuaries, and backwaters. The Convention places certain obligations on the contracting parties (including India) for the wise use of wetland habitats. It is noteworthy, that the Convention is not for avoiding their use by humans for the sake of conservation, but insists only on their wise use. A wise use means sustainable use - a use which meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to use them. This largely depends on establishment of the right institutional structures and mechanisms for the governance of multiuse wetlands

(p.279). While ensuring that they provide water, food, energy and livelihood security to people, their management should also take care to see that the ecological integrity of wetlands including their capacity to support non-human life and biodiversity is maintained or improved. The Ramsar Convention is very particular about it.

Among other things, the book discusses how far the Ramsar Convention is followed in India. India does not have a wetland specific law or policy, as the book points out (p.247), but it has programmes both at the central and state levels for their protection and restoration. India framed the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2010, and brought the wetlands under the provisions of the Environment (Protection) Act 1986 as the regulatory framework for them. However, the 2010 Rules were replaced by 2017 Rules, excluding some types of wetlands like river channels, paddy lands, human-made waterbodies, and tanks constructed for drinking water, aquaculture, salt production, and irrigation. This is in spite of the fact that the excluded categories were a part of wetlands covered under the Ramsar Convention (p.248). Marothia observes further that though the excluded wetlands are small in size, they are more than half a million in number, and provide valuable ecosystem services and meet livelihood needs. They help in water storage, erosion control, aquifer recharge, and micro-climate regulation. (p.248). These excluded wetlands also need protection from abuse and degradation, through conscious management under some institutional arrangement, say, under village panchayats. The 2017 Rules, however, provide for state level Wetland Authorities to manage wetlands (ignoring excluded wetlands?). Probably, the intention behind the exclusion is to restrict to what is manageable by State Wetland Authorities.

The problem of manageability of a vast number of wetlands can be solved only through decentralisation, suggests the author (p.260). Wetland Authorities need to be created with people's (and NGO's) participation at the zonal and district levels, and a people's committee may be formed at all the village panchayat levels to oversee the use of wetlands. The author observes that degradation of wetlands can occur equally in all property regimes, - state owned, common, or private (p.9). Educating the local people about the multiple roles of wetlands and their sustainable use and involving them in management, however, can control the problem. It is also necessary to develop proper data base and information about the wetlands. An inventory of all wetlands has to be made, categorising them into different types at all levels, with their status assessed. Based on this information, a management plan should be devised for them (p.260).

What makes the task of managing the multi-use wetlands difficult is that different parties have different interests in them, and there could be competition and even conflicts between them. It is quite possible that the interests of a dominant party prevail over other interests, and a few uses may be side-lined yielding place to the uses of interest to the dominant party. This problem can endanger bio-diversity since plants, birds and other wildlife have no power over humans, whose interests may prevail. Among humans themselves, some uses prevail over others depending on whose

interests they serve. The interests of the weak may be subjugated. This is a political economy problem of environment (Nadkarni *et al.* 1989: 19-23, Nadkarni, 1996). It is this problem which makes sustainable management of natural resources quite complex. In the case of forests, the Forest Department is in charge of protecting the interests of biodiversity and wildlife, yet sustainably accommodating human interests. In the case of wetlands, a similar role may have to be played by the Wetland Authorities, who have to sustainably balance human interests with the non-human nature interests. Such a *conscious* political economy perspective would have further enriched the book. The case studies in the book, however, contain many illustrations of the play of political economy, like conflicts between farmers and fishermen over water sharing, encroachments, sewage flows, waste disposal, pollution of water due to washing clothes with detergents – making it unsuitable for quite a few other uses, and the like. The wetland managing institution has to balance the conflicting interests and arrive at a sustainable solution. This is a difficult task in a developing country, but it has to be faced in the long term interests of the world.

The book should serve as a guiding light in managing wetlands, and I congratulate Dinesh Marothia for writing such a valuable book.

REFERENCES

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