

Engaging with the Indian Waterscape: Need for knowledge and politics to come together to make a real difference¹

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I am very grateful to the Khoshoo Awards Committee for selecting me for the 2016 TN Khoshoo Memorial Award – an award instituted in the name of the illustrious Mr. T N Khoshoo. I am very happy and honoured to receive this award though I should confess that I was pretty shocked and surprised when Veena Srinivasan called me up to inform me about it as I do not consider myself much of an ‘award material’. And believe me it was not out of humility I wrote to Kartik Shankar saying I am more of a foot soldier in the water-environment-development sector and there are many others who have done much more substantial contribution. I know the imagery of a ‘foot soldier’ can be problematic at a time when everything in this country – from demonitisation to sanctioning of projects are being justified in the name of the soldier on the border! I take this award as a token of appreciation and affection from my own peers and fellow travellers.

Sharad, thanks a lot for that personalised intro about me. I am really touched. In fact what I have to say also moves pretty closely with what spoke.

My journey in the water-environment-development sector in general could be broadly grouped under three distinct phases and all these three phases have brought in new concerns, new collaborations and new understandings.

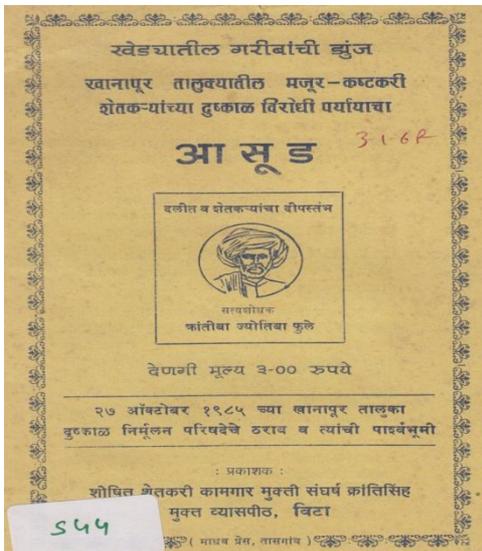
The journey began way back in 1983. After passing out from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, I along with Mani, who later became my wife, decided to drop out of professional “social work” and instead become full time political activists and work in rural Maharashtra. We moved to Sangli district and joined the then emerging mass movement – Mukti Sangharsh – as full time activists. In a way I would say I am also a product of the radicalised campuses of the early 80s, like many others of that time. The immediate context was the prolonged and militant textile workers’ strike in Mumbai led by Dr. Datta Samant.

¹ TN Khoshoo Memorial Award 2016 acceptance speech; 25 January 2016; Bengaluru

As the strike got prolonged many of the workers went back to the villages and many of them who come from the drought prone regions of South Maharashtra became labourers on the employment guarantee scheme (EGS) sites.

Mukti Sangharsh Movement first mobilised the EGS workers around demands like getting work and wages in time, confronting the rampant corruption, getting the statutory facilities and so on. As many of you know Maharashtra was the first state in the country to promulgate an Act to provide guaranteed employment to people during drought. While working with the EGS workers we realised that these workers are not landless labourers but landowning peasants very often owning 5 to 10 acres of land but cannot eke out a living because of drought and lack of access to water. It is here we realised that EGS cannot be the answer to drought; but we need to seriously engage with the question of water and water became one of the important pillars of the movement.

Mukti Sangharsh Movement worked on many fronts to address this issue. May be for the first time in India the drought affected peasants of Sangli district took out a demonstration to the Kolhapur Shivaji University, demanding that drought should be taken up as a serious



issue of their research leading to solutions. The toiling people undertook an extensive survey and study of the region and came up with a people's agenda for drought proofing, basically suggesting the type of work, including the sites in each of the villages that could be taken up under the EGS. These were primarily activities around water and soil conservation – or broadly in today's parlance watershed based activities, published in the booklet

Asud" – Whip – taking off from the famous book *Shetkaryanache Asud* (The Whip of the Peasant) by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule. This small booklet became the manifesto of the toiling people of the region for drought proofing. The people, under the banner of Mukti Sangharsh Movement, organised many struggles ranging from demonstrations, *rasta rokos* (road blockades), *jail bharos* (filling the prisons), hunger strikes, and so on, to force the government to implement the people's plans. Within a span of 3 to 4 years the movement

could change the character of EGS work in the region. As a side comment I would like to say that though Jyotiba Phule is widely known for his anti-caste and anti-patriarchy struggles and writings, unfortunately his insights into the lives of the peasants including agriculture and irrigation are seldom taken note off. I would earnestly request all those who are engaged or want to seriously engage with the rural issues of this country, and especially land and water issues, to read *Shetkaryanche Asud* by Phule. An English translation of this book is available. As part of the movement we also undertook a five year rigorous action research project on farmers' fields to understand water and biomass productivity, water required to meet livelihood needs, regenerative agronomical practices and so on. The results from this research helped us to come up with equitable water distribution norms, alternative agricultural practices, evolve an alternative strategy for drought proofing and also provided a scientific basis to peoples' demands.

The Baliraja dam struggle was another important milestone in the movement. Baliraja dam was widely known as the "people's dam". The struggle, started against indiscriminate sand excavation from river beds, soon became a movement around people's control over local natural resources. The people of two villages – Balawadi and Tandulwadi -- on either side of the river Yerala, a tributary of river Krishna, built a small 2.5 meter dam that, in a way, became the mascot of equitable water distribution.



The struggle against Uchanggi dam in Kolhapur district on the basis of a concrete alternative and forcing the government to accept it and reduce the height of the dam resulting in much lower submergence and displacement was another pioneering effort of the movement that gives valuable lessons in



the context of the anti dam movements. This movement which began in one tehsil of Sangli district has become a wider Pani Sangharsh Chalwal/movement and has grown to cover the entire drought prone regions of South Maharashtra forcing the government to re-structure some of the huge irrigation projects on more equitable, sustainable and democratic lines.

It also saw the coming together of political activists, people's science movement activists and pro-people scientists and technologists to conceptually engage with issues, experiment, and develop alternatives. I was lucky to be part of this collective and also gave me an opportunity to work with and learn from people like K. R. Datye, S. A. Dabholkar, my fellow comrades in the movement, especially Bharat Patankar, and my long term friend and colleague Suhas Paranjape.

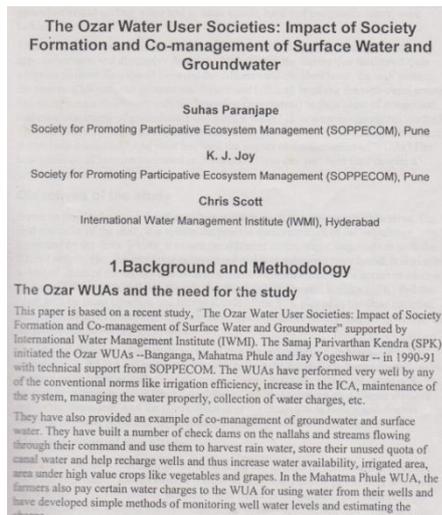
This collective effort could come up with some important insights/principles/elements that have shaped my thinking as well as work in the water sector. They include:

- one, integration of sources – local and exogenous and surface and groundwater
- two, equitable access to water – delinking land rights and water rights and access to water to be tied to livelihood needs
- three, water is not just an input into agriculture like say chemical fertilisers, but it is as important as land as a means of production
- four, to see agriculture as part of a broader biomass production strategy
- five, people's institutions for resource governance and management and so on

However, the biggest learning has been that knowledge and politics need to come together if we have to make a real difference.

The second phase is actually when we, including stalwarts like Datye, Vilasrao Salunkhe, R K Patil, S N Lele, Prof. Vaidyanathan, V B Easwaran and so on set up Society for Participative Ecosystem Management, SOPPECOM to be brief, in 1990-91 and ever since SOPPECOM has been my institutional space. SOPPECOM was set up primarily to pursue the elements of the alternative agenda that I talked about earlier in a more systematic and grounded manner and also to provide support to movements and grassroots initiatives.

One of the pioneering works of SOPPECOM has been in the area of participatory irrigation

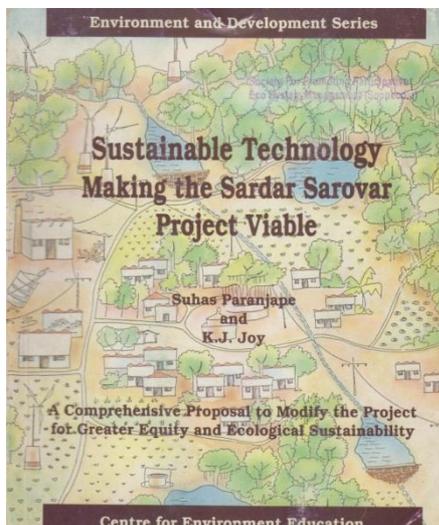


management. SOPPECOM set up the first Water Users' Cooperative Society in Maharashtra on a major surface irrigation project and demonstrated that the farmers can manage the irrigation water much better. It also worked with Samaj Parivarthan Kendra in Ozhar in Nashik district and helped set up WUAs on the Waghad irrigation project. The Waghad WUAs could go beyond the conventional roles of WUAs and became instruments of integrated use of local and exogenous water, surface and ground water and also volumetric supply and pricing of

irrigation water. Today the entire project is being managed by a federation of the WUAs.

The Waghad WUAs are to participatory irrigation management what the Hivre Bazar village is to watershed development.

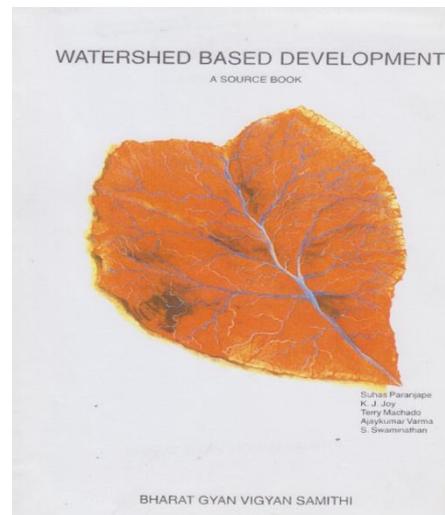
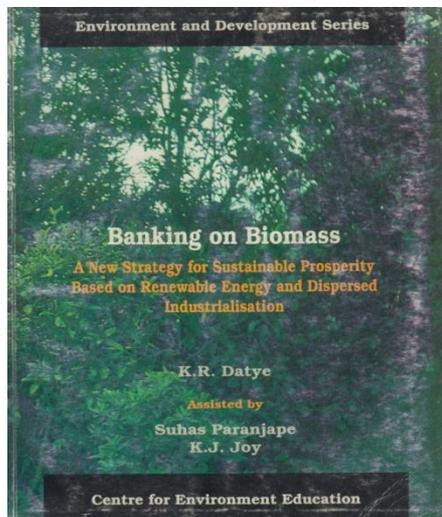
I would like to mention two important contributions that we made during this time. One is



the alternative proposal to restructure the controversial Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). We tried to apply the principles that I discussed earlier to the specific context of SSP. This was around 1995 when the conflict around SSP was at its height. The dam had come up to 90 meters or so and most of the high level canal had been also constructed. We essentially argued that the water share given to Gujarat could be fully utilised even at a lower height of the dam bringing down submergence and displacement by about two-thirds. This would be

made possible by reducing behind the dam storage and instead carry the monsoon and part of the post monsoon flows and fill the local storages. Integrated use of local and exogenous water in a definite proportion, equitable water distribution, bringing one-third of the service area of the project under permanent vegetative cover and participative management through WUAs are the other important elements of the alternatives. Though the alternative received favourable reviews, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which spearheaded the

movement against SSP did not support the alternative as they were not ready to leave their “no dam” position for their own valid reasons. Thus the alternative did not have a future and the rest is history.

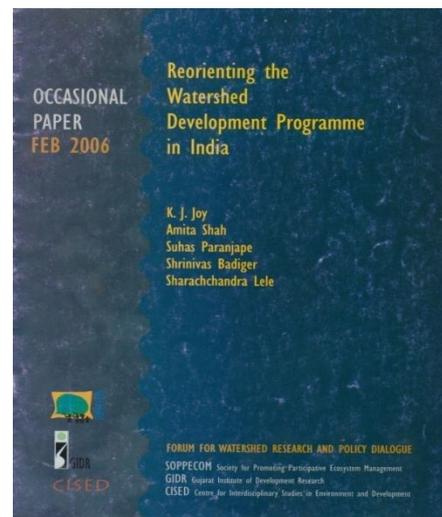
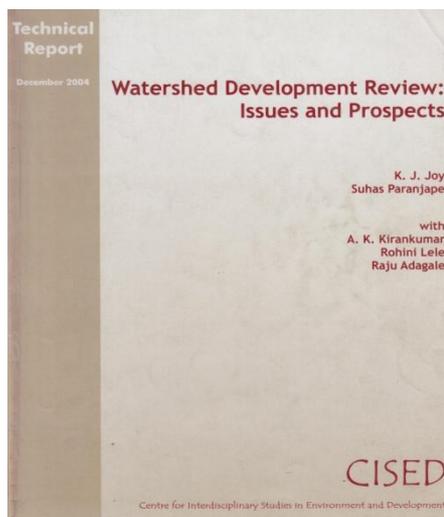


The second important contribution is our work on biomass – using biomass as a concept to tie together our concerns about improving primary productivity of the ecosystem, meeting basic livelihood needs like food, fodder and also creating a biomass surplus as input into a decentralised agro-industrial system creating substantial non-farm incomes. In the present day context of climate change – both in terms of adaptation and mitigation – the biomass based development strategy has a lot to offer.

SOPPECOM offered me a chance to collaborate with many other organisations. I spent about 3-4 years with Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi (BGVS) – a network of various people’s science organisations – as part of its resource literacy and watershed initiative. It is here I learned about participatory resource mapping (PRM) as an interesting tool for resource literacy enabling the village communities to make informed choices.

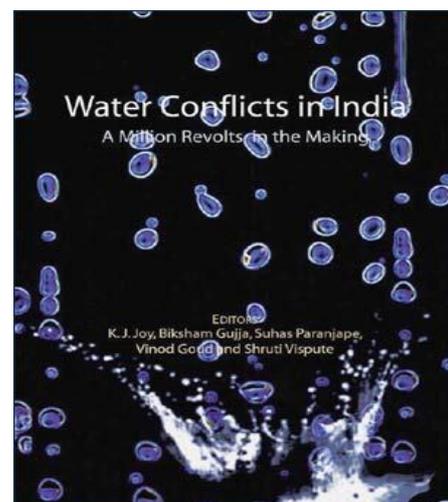
I could spend an year with the then Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Environment and Development (CISED) and had the good fortune of working with hard core academics like Sharad Lele, Srinivas Badiger, Ajit Menon and Esha Shah. Coming from a non-academic background it was pretty tough going for me at CISED and I should admit that for the first time in my life my blood pressure showed an upward rise! Nonetheless, it was a great learning experience for me especially in interdisciplinary research and at the end we did come out with a not so bad review report on watershed development in the country. More

importantly this report became the basis for a five year collaborative research initiative on watershed development called Forum for Watershed Research and Policy Dialogue. CISED, Gujarat Institute of Development Research (GIDR) and SOPPECOM worked together under this initiative. Some of the insights that we could generate under this initiative did flow into the review taken up by the Parthasarathy Committee and also could find a place in the Watershed development common guidelines that followed. With CISED getting integrated into ATREE I could get new friends and associates in ATREE like Veena, Bejoy, Jagdish, Priyanka and many others and I do hope this association would continue.



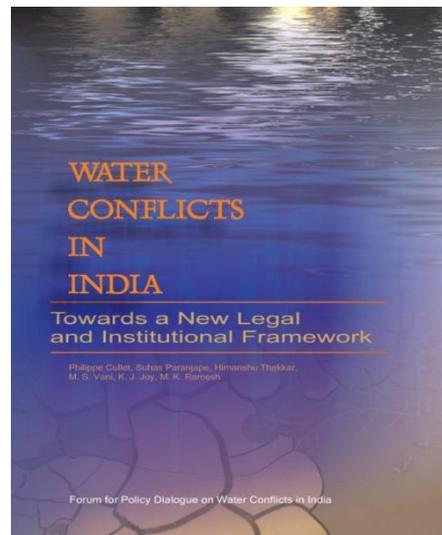
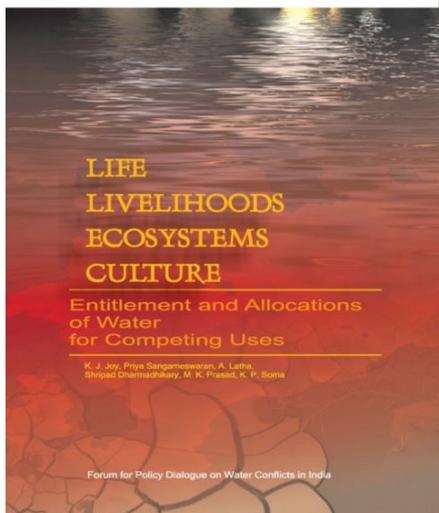
Another important association that I would like to mention here is the one with the Water Resources Group of the Wageningen University. The first person we got associated with was Peter Mollinga who was quite taken in by our SSP alternative. This association has continued and over the last few years we have been doing some work together on water justice issues. I am happy that Margreet from that group, though she is no longer with it, is here with us today.

The third phase is basically the work of the Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India (Forum in brief). It began as a small initiative of 6-7 organisations with initial resources provided by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) about 10 years ago. It was Biksham Gujja who got me into this. Today it has grown into a large network and has provided me and

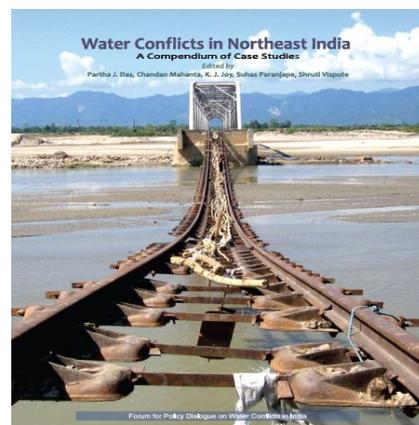


many others in the Forum a larger canvas to work. One of the important mandates of the Forum is to improve our understanding around different types of water related conflicts. This was, or is, one of the most educative experiences for me, as over the last 10 years or so we could document around 200 cases of conflicts across the country bringing together more than 300 authors – full time activists and first time writers to some of the big names in the water sector. Working with such a large number of people from diverse backgrounds in itself was an enriching experience.

Two important contributions that the Forum made to the water discourse were the reports of the two working groups it set up – one on the issue of water allocations across different uses which is a very critical issue in terms of contestations and conflicts and the second one on the institutional and legal framework around water and conflict resolution.



Forum gave me and many others an opportunity to engage with issues and organisations that otherwise we never would have known or worked with. For example we tried to understand the different types of water conflicts, especially those related to hydropower development in the Northeast. Though so many struggles are going on in the Northeast on hydropower there is very little visibility and engagement with these in the rest of the country. Forum, in whatever small way, tried to bridge this gap. In the process of working with some of the hard

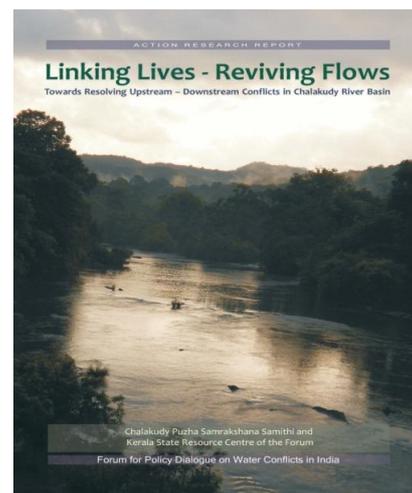


core environmentalists in Forum, for example my good friend Latha, I became much more sensitive to the issue of environment and the need to preserve environmental flows as part of basin planning became part of my core thinking and also an important theme in Forum's work.

It was also during this phase that I could get a couple of occasions to work with Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer – first when we were together in the group that drafted the first version of the water framework law and second when Janakarajan and I put together a conference in his honour.

All through my work I have been convinced that knowledge and politics need to come together if we have to make a difference in the real world. Knowledge is important and a necessary condition for change; but not a sufficient one. Knowledge has to feed into the political processes. I am not saying that all researchers need to become activists, of course if this happens I would be very happy, but at least we all can try to produce knowledge in collaboration with socio-political movements. Similarly, movements and activists need to engage with the knowledge and insights brought in by researchers, or even engage in the process of knowledge production itself in collaboration with researchers so that the activists can take more nuanced and informed stands on the various issues unfolding in the water-environment-development sector. This is all the more true at the present times of uncertainties brought in, especially by climate change.

My belief in the need to walk on both the legs – knowledge and politics – got further strengthened because of the work of the Forum especially the work Forum's Kerala State Resource Centre could do. They did a three year action research in developing an alternative hydropower operation strategy in Chalakudy river (Kerala) – a heavily dammed and diverted river – for the couple of upstream hydropower projects for



better downstream flows. They took this strategy to the basin MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) who in turn took up the issue with the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister instructed Kerala State Electricity Board to change its operations as per the alternative.

The need to politically engage has become all the more important in the present day with “development” at all costs being the dictum of the day. The space for both critical knowledge building and resistance against destructive projects seem to be shrinking in the country. This is all the more reason for knowledge and politics to come together and also to get both our knowledge and politics correct.

I would also like to use this opportunity to gratefully remember some of the pioneers in the water-environment-development sector with whom I had the opportunity to work with and learn from – persons like K R Datye, S A Dabholkar, Vilasrao Salunkhe, A. Vaidyanathan, R K Patil, S N Lele, Bharat Patankar, Biksham Gujja, Ramaswamy Jyer, Ramesh Borole, Suhas Paranjape, Vilas Gore and Seema Kulkarni and many others on whose shoulders I stand. I would like to make a special mention of my friend and colleague Suhas (Paranjape) with whom I worked, researched and wrote for more than 30 years. I acknowledge the support that I have received from my friends in socio-political movements and organisations (especially Mukti Sangharsh movement and Shramik Mukti Dal), civil society organisations, research organisations, and resource agencies. I have worked with or received support from so many friends in various organisations like BGVS, CISED, ATREE, GIDR, Water Resources Group of Wageningen University, International Water Management Institute and so on and so forth. Friends in Arghyam Trust have been providing financial and outreach support to Forum’s work since the last 7-8 years. Of course there are my colleagues – both past and present – in SOPPECOM and also in the Water Conflict Forum, especially the Steering Committee members. It has been nice knowing and working with all of you.

A word of appreciation to my family and close friends too – especially my parents, simple village folks and irrespective of not knowing what exactly I do, allowed me the space and freedom to live both my personal and professional lives on my terms; my siblings – an elder sister and two younger brothers and their families; my wife Mani, feminist and activist in the women’s movement, who taught me what it means to go beyond abstract notions of patriarchy and feminism and live “personal is also political” day in and day out and I do not claim that I have succeeded in this very much; our three loving daughters – Manasi, our

biological child, Latika and Tina who adopted us as their second set of parents; and the latest addition to the family, Nitin, our son in law; and our extended families and close friends.

Let me conclude with a quotation from Karl Marx fully knowing that it is not very fashionable to quote Marx nowadays, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it" (Karl Marx, "Eleven Theses on Feuerbach"; these words are also inscribed upon his grave). This is a quotation that has influenced me a lot, especially in my work as a researcher and activist. This also reminds us that both knowledge and politics are needed to change this world.

Once again my sincere thanks to the TN Khoshoo Award Committee and all of you for your appreciation and affection.