

BLUE COVENANT

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Too many books are coming out these days on water. In author's own words —In the first seven years of the new millennium, more studies, reports and books on the global water crisis have been published than in all the preceding century. This is because, as the World Water Institute has rightly declared "Water scarcity may be the most under appreciated global environmental challenge of our time".

Though publications on water are enormous, not all of them are meant for lay persons. Even those books that are meant for lay persons - many are not well focussed and bring out the issues in a lucid manner. In this perspective, the *book under review stands out as a well focussed work and enables the reader to comprehend the points at issue.

The introduction is perhaps among the best. The entire theme of the book is presented briefly: Chapter 1

The author makes a significant statement :

“More children are killed by dirty water than by war, malaria, HIV/AIDS and traffic accidents combined; The global water crisis has become a most powerful symbol of the growing inequality in our world.”

Desalination Plants :

Desalination plants will ring the world's oceans, many of them run by nuclear power; corporate-controlled nano-technology will clean up sewage water and sell it to private utilities, which will in turn sell it back to people at a huge profit; the rich will drink only bottled water found in the few remaining uncontaminated parts of the world, or sucked from the clouds by corporate-controlled machines, while the poor will die in increasing numbers from a lack of water.

She makes a point—people are running short of Fresh Water in all parts of the world. The facts about India are : seventy-five percent of India's rivers and lakes are polluted, they should not be used for drinking or bathing. More than 700 million Indians—two thirds of the population —do not have adequate sanitation, and 2.1 million Indian children under the age of five die every year from dirty water. The fabled Yamuna river—source of supply of Fresh Water to Delhi—is clinically dead. The coasts of Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata are putrid. The sacred Ganges, where millions come to worship, is an open sewer.

Ground Water

Ground water mining can be traced in great part to the famous Green Revolution and the use of flood irrigation to mass produce food.

While the "revolution" produced more food, it used way too much water and also depended on copious amounts of dangerous pesticides and fertilizers.

The story is repeated all over the United States, which is now dependent on non-renewable ground water for an astonishing 50 percent of its daily needs, Europe 65 percent.

The author has coined a term 'Virtual Water'. Water that is used in the production of food is "virtual" because it is not contained any more in the

product, even though a great deal of it was used in the production process. If a country exports a water intensive product to another country, it amounts to exporting water in a virtual form, although no water is technically being traded or sold.

Average people do not know that the world is facing a comet called the global water crisis... water policy is raised as a major issue in very few national elections, even in water stressed countries. In fact, in many countries, denial is the political response to the global water crisis.

Bush White House has rolled back more than four hundred pieces of environmental legislation and taken the United States back to a time before environmental consciousness.

Third world countries—most are helpless to police the big transnational oil, forestry and mining corporations fouling their water systems; some are in collusion with these companies to repress their own people.

India will triple its use of water for industry in the next decade. Similar is the situation in China, Brazil, Malaysia. Yet few political leaders have the courage or foresight to question this model of development.

But not only are political leaders following the false promises of a quick technological fix, they are abdicating the real decision making about the future of world's depleting water supplies to a group of private interests and transnational corporations that view the crisis as an opportunity to make money and gain power.

Chapter 2 is titled "Setting the stage for corporate control of water". The author makes out how water privatization is forced on the Global south. She traces the shift from a public to private model of water services to the rise of a neo-liberal market-based ideology first manifested in Margaret Thatcher's Britain, then adopted by Ronald Regan in the United States as a major component of his war against communism. By the late 1970s stage was set for an emerging global regime based on the belief that liberal market economics constitutes the one and only choice for the whole world, including the developing world.

A great deal of work, money and planning has gone into acquiring the 'manufactured consent' of the global ruling class to water privatization. World Trade Organization (WTO) was created in 1995 to administer a number of international trade agreements involving goods, food, patents, intellectual property rights and services, and enforces an extensive body of rules intended to limit the power of governments and increase opportunities for transnational business trade. Under the rules of one agreement GATT, water is included as a "good" and is subject to rules.

Global Water Partnership formed in 1996 to create a new water model. The World Bank, the UN and international development agencies fund this organization. GWP was instrumental in launching the controversial 2003 report 'Financing Water For All', which recommended using public funds to guarantee profits to private water companies operating in areas where they were meeting local resistance.

This concerted effort of various players to privatize water did not succeed due to the opposition to the World Bank and the almost twenty years of documented

case of the failure of privatization and growing opposition to the World Bank and the water service companies in every corner of the globe have revealed a legacy of corruption, sky-high water rates, cut offs of water to millions, reduced water quality, nepotism, pollution, worker lay offs, and broken promises.

Chapter 3 is titled “The Water Hunters Move on” :

The failure to control water distribution did not deter the TNCs from making a different effort. This is centered around purification of water, desalinization, manufacture of water from atmosphere, water generators etc. Here is a quote on Bottled water Industry:

In 1855, France’s Vittel Grande got a permit to sell its mineral water in individual containers. A few years later Perrier received a similar license. Plastic bottles came 100 years later. In the early 1970s about one billion liters of water were sold annually around the world. By 2006 consumption rose to 200 billion liters. US tops (32 bil) Mexico (20.1) China and Brazil (14 m each) Germany 12bl Pepsi & Coca Cola are leaders in America.

This is an industry that takes a free liquid that falls from the sky and sells it as much as four times what people pay for gas (Petrol).

For super luxury customer bottles sell for US \$ 40 and US \$ 75 for a liter bottle.

The water industry resembles the oil industry during its golden era.

How big is the global water industry? Water market is US \$ 400 billion annually (400000000000) i.e forty thousand crore dollars! There is no limit to the money to be made in water.

Chapter 4 is titled “The Water Warriors Fight Back”:

A fierce resistance to the corporate takeover of water has grown in every corner of the globe, giving rise to a successful water justice movement in Latin America—Nicaraguay Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, etc. Such movements are active in India, Indonesia, The Philippines, Australia, South Africa and several other African nations, USA and Canada and European countries.

In addition a coordinated and highly effective international water justice movement is fighting both the power of the private water companies and the abandonment by their governments of the responsibility to care for their national water resources and provide clean water to their people.

Water bottling companies are also facing resistance and law suits in India and Pakistan.

The last chapter is titled “The Future of Water” :

The author makes a significant statement : "The three water crises— the dwindling fresh water supplies, inequitable access to water and the corporate control of water pose the greatest threat of our times to the planet and to our survival. Together with the impending climate change from fossil fuel emissions, the water crisis imposes some life-or-death decisions on us all. Unless we collectively change our behaviour, we are heading toward a world of deepening conflict and potential wars over the dwindling supplies of fresh water—between nations, between rich and poor, between the public and the private interest, between rural and urban populations, and between the compelling needs of the natural world and industrialized humans”.

All over the world there are conflicts between different states of a nation (India, USA etc.) or between nations almost in every continent.

Water Refugees

Water scarcity has forced people in many parts of the world—to migrate. Water refugees can be found in Iran, Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, in northwest China, and many parts of Africa. Right now, villages are being abandoned but eventually whole cities might have to be relocated, such as Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, or Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan Province. Chinese scientists report that there are now desert refugees in three provinces—Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Gansu. Another four thousand villages face abandonment due to shrinking water supplies. In Iran, villages abandoned because of spreading deserts and lack of water number in the thousands. In Nigeria, thirty-five hundred square kilometers of land are converted to desert each year, making desertification the country's leading environmental problem. There, as elsewhere, farmers are forced to the outskirts of growing megacities' slums where they exacerbate the urban water crisis.

The meaning of the title 'Blue Covenant' is explained in the final chapter as an alternative water future.

Humanity still has a chance to head off these scenarios of conflict and war. People could start with a global covenant on water. The Blue Covenant should have three components: a water conservation covenant from people and their governments that recognize the right of the men on Earth and of other species to clean water, and pledges to protect and conserve the world's water supplies; a water justice covenant between those in the global North who have water and resources and those in the global South who do not, to work in solidarity for water justice, water for all and local control of water and a water democracy covenant among all governments acknowledging that water is a fundamental human right for all. Therefore governments are required not only to provide clean water to their citizens as a public service, but they must also recognize that citizens of other countries have the right to water as well and to find peaceful solutions to water disputes between states.

This, then, is the task: nothing less than reclaiming water as a commons for the Earth and all people that must be wisely and sustainably shared and managed if people are to survive. This will not happen unless people are prepared to reject the basic tenets of market based globalization. The current imperatives of competition, unlimited growth and private ownership when it comes to water must be replaced by new imperatives—those of cooperation, sustainability and **public stewardship.**

* BLUE COVENANT

The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water by Maude Barlow, The New Press, New York.