FILM REVIEW

Whose water is it anyway?

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Flow: for the love of water **(Steven Starr Production 2008). Director: Irena Salinas**

"Can anyone really own water?" is essentially the question to which this movie begs an answer. Made over a five-year period by Irena Salina, with interviews of experts from all over the world, *Flow* (also the acronym for "For Love Of Water") takes a look at the intersecting concerns about water. It finds human suffering, pollution, scarcity, corruption and corporate profit.

The opening shot is that of a puja on the banks of the Ganga, on the one hand a symbol of how sacred water is in Indian culture and on the other hand a poster image for polluted water. This visual paves the way for some unsettling statistics: of the (more than) 6 billion people on earth, a staggering 1.1 billion do not have access to safe, clean drinking water. Approximately 2 million, mostly infants, die every year from water-borne diseases – more deaths than from AIDS or war.

This is the setting for the water wars, the crux of the film. On one side are private conglomerates who say water is a valuable commodity to be controlled by the market. On the other are activists who argue that water is a basic human and environmental right.

The movie describes how profit-seeking multinationals have taken control of public water systems in developing countries, forcing the poor to pay for a resource that was once free. Unable to pay market prices, the poor resort to collecting water from stagnant ponds. Water pollution-related health adversities and the staggering death tolls add to the human suffering in poor communities of Mexico, South Africa, South America and India.

It is hard to miss the link between greed and human suffering. In an interview with an employee of a water company that devised pre-paid water metric systems, the speaker argues for the need to "change thinking and culture, that consumers should pay upfront for what they consume, we should not have to force them to pay". The CEOs of the water company giants Suez and Vivendi speak of the importance of public service, technical know-how, years of experience, and skilled management. In reality, cost recovery and profit maximisation are their credos, and these are pursued at the expense of the poorest of the poor who suffer the cost of such a "service". The vignette drawn by an ex-accountant of Vivendi is disquieting - that the only "service" these companies perform is making shareholders happy. Author and activist Maude Barlow exclaims that it is simply bad economics to promise to end poverty in developing countries by providing access to good quality water – but also promise hefty returns to shareholders.

Corruption and greed are motifs that run through the film. The US Environmental Protection Agency disregards public health concerns about the agrochemical atrazine and permits the manufacturer, Syngenta, to sell the carcinogenic chemical in the US. The irony is evident: a company banned in the European Union where it is based sells a whopping 80 million pounds of atrazine in the US. The murky politics of water do not spare the World Bank. The Cochabamba people in Bolivia fought a five year battle against the privatisation of water by the Suez and the World Bank. Audio snippets of an interview with a World Bank executive discussing the theory behind the "pro-poor" water privatisation policy play alongside visuals of Lake Titicaca, on the border of Peru and Bolivia, strangled with raw sewage; the lake was rendered unusable for thousands of La Paz - El Alto locals because of a diversion created by the Suez.

The solution for this water crisis in developing countries, says Berkeley researcher Ashok Gagdil, lies in financially viable, locally sustainable systems that are affordable even for those living on less than a dollar a day. Gadgil pioneered the ultraviolet water filtration system successfully launched in Andhra Pradesh villages. An environmentally friendly solution includes rain water conservation and harvesting, a practice revived by Shripad Dharmadhikari who also started a water literacy movement in Madhya Pradesh.

The message of this film is that the world is running out of safe drinking water, a scarcity compounded by multinational greed. The common man is urged to rethink the concept of bottled water. This whopping $400 billion, amoral industry that ranks third after oil and electricity, is essentially an unregulated market, fraught with misleading advertising that needlessly undermines the consumers' confidence in tap water. Bottled water, research has found, contains colonies of bacteria and harmful minerals that we are better off not drinking. Do we really know where our water comes from or what kind of "treatment" it undergoes?

And lastly, regarding the dirty politics of water, we are left to answer for ourselves the question: "who really owns water?" Are executives of the World Water Council, the World Bank, the International Monetary fund and multinationals the new global high commands of water? "We have wars going on over oil," one of the film's authorities says. "Water can be oil all over again."