

University of Fribourg/ Faculty of Science and Medicine/ Department of Geography

The effects of participatory irrigation on reconfiguration of power relations:
participatory management of Sitaganj Canal on the Sunsari-Morang Irrigation
System

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This thesis seeks to contribute to the literature dealing with power relations within irrigation management. Based on hydrosocial conceptions of irrigation, this work develops a Foucauldian vision of the irrigation “dispositif” in order to refine the understanding of the relational dimension of power in the intricate social, technical and natural reality of irrigation. By seeking to understand the effects of this “dispositif” on a preexisting social space, the rurality of the Nepalese Tarai, this thesis explores the encounter between the model of the water user association, bearer of its own logics of power, and the traditional power relationship that is patronage. In order to better explain the effects of this encounter, this work develops conceptual tools based on a critical realist approach. These tools allow the highlighting of processes of reflexivity, criticism and multiple ruptures, generating different but simultaneous social reconfigurations. By passing field data through the filter of these tools, this thesis shows how the participatory irrigation system is essentially political, in the sense that it favors a reproduction of pre-existing power relations, while opening up the potential to modify them. This work therefore concludes on the need to assume the political dimension of irrigation, in order to allow that future versions of the “dispositif” are able to reconfigure power relations to the advantage of the people excluded from the management of irrigation.

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