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The Wells Stay Waterless: Water, Poverty, and the Contradictions of Feminism in Contemporary

India.

Kirtika Suraj Patel

Author's note: This article explores the theme “Water, Waste, and Wellness” by examining how these three are deeply connected in the lives of Indian women. It argues that true wellness means the wellness of the masses, built on access to clean water, sustainable practices, and environmental justice. Today, the idea of wellness has been taken over by industries that serve the upper class, turning health and empowerment into commodities. The piece questions this imbalance and calls for a return to a form of wellness rooted in equality, community, and survival.

According to NITI Aayog’s 2019 Composite Water Management Index, around 600 million Indians face severe levels of water scarcity. Yet while millions of women walk miles before dawn to fetch a bucket of water in this country, industries built around “wellness” consume millions of liters each day to cater to modern Indian women, promising this illusion of empowerment through beauty and self-care. The contradiction is painfully conspicuous; it lays bare a fundamental dichotomy of feminism in India. Feminism in Indian cities now comes wrapped in gleaming comfort, confidence, and self-care through consumerism, while rural feminism continues to struggle and barter survival with scarcity.

While a woman from a village in Bundelkhand struggles to access basic water and sanitation, there are beauty salons in big Indian cities like Delhi, Gurgaon, and Bombay consuming considerable amounts of water every day, commodifying a fundamental need of every human. This article argues that water, a foundational requirement for life, is being deliberately consumed, lavished, and politicized in ways that perpetuate inequity. Through the lens of the beauty industry, menstrual products, and floriculture, it aims to reveal how capitalism commercializes womanhood while consuming the very resources women in poverty struggle to access.

The critique is not that of feminism but of its commercialized and heavily commodified mutation, the kind that confuses liberation with luxury. In the Indian frame of reference, true feminism cannot exist apart from water justice, equity, and ecological equilibrium.

The Capitalist Illusion of Wellness: How It Drains Water and Womanhood

Water scarcity in India is not a looming threat but a lived reality, and in most Indian villages water is not fetched; it is labored for. The NGO International Development Organization estimates that rural Indian

women spend 150 million workdays a year fetching water. It is a labor that goes unrecognized by policymakers and stays absent from the popular discourse of empowerment, yet it is essential for the survival of rural households and communities. Survival in rural India is not about choice or comfort; rather, it is an everyday negotiation of life itself against the deprivation of a rudimentary need.

Meanwhile, corporate feminism in India tells a very different story. Parallel to the reality of rural women, corporate feminism thrives in India through the commodification of empowerment. Luxury wellness treatments, high-end spas, and cosmetic products assure liberation through consumption, but these industries are highly water-intensive. Every face wash, moisturizer, or serum used in an urban woman's daily beauty routine is a product of intensive water use. According to an article in *The Economic Times*, India's beauty and personal care market was worth \$28 billion in 2023 and is set to reach \$34 billion by 2028. This meteoric growth is not a sign of empowerment; rather, it is a demonstration of how liberation has been rebranded as luxury. Feminism in urban cities is now being sold to those who can afford it. Every advertisement that tells women to "reclaim their confidence" through a new serum or beauty treatment reflects the same capitalist logic that isolates millions of women still compromising their existence against drought.

There is an India that invests in intensive water-based beauty products, and then there is another India that still walks miles and queues for hours at hand pumps, devoid of a basic humane need. The split is glaring; what it exposes is not two kinds of women but two realities of survival, one that is packaged and marketed as empowerment and the other that is endured in silence.

The beauty industry, therefore, becomes more than a commercial player; here it becomes a moral mirror. It forces us to confront how comfort and confidence in cities are aided by the deprivation of resources in villages.

Menstruation and the Water That Dissipates

On television ads, disposable sanitary pads are often marketed as symbols of progress, liberation from stigma, and discomfort. Yet their environmental and water footprint tells another story.

A recent life-cycle assessment published in *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* found that a single conventional sanitary pad consumes about 4.12 cubic meters of water across its life cycle, from raw material extraction to production, packaging, and disposal. Multiply that by India's 12 billion pads used

annually, as estimated by the University of Manchester, and the figure translates to 49 million cubic meters of water, enough to sustain millions of households for years.

WaterAid India's Landscape of Menstrual Products (2022) notes that over 80% of India's menstrual product market is dominated by disposable sanitary pads composed of plastics and super-absorbent polymers, both highly water-intensive to manufacture. Most are produced in large-scale industries where water is used not only in pulp processing but also in bleaching and cleaning cycles.

At the other end of the pipeline, disposal of these plastic pads adds to water pollution. Non-biodegradable pads, buried or burned in rural areas, release toxins and microplastics that seep into groundwater. Hence, what begins as wellness ends as waste, quite literally poisoning the very resource women lack and labor for.

Floriculture in India: A Sinkhole That Drains Not Just Water, but Women

The floriculture industry in India was valued at approximately INR 292 billion in 2024 and is expected to grow even bigger. In India's flourishing floriculture sector, the water demands are startling. In Karnataka alone, chrysanthemums have been reported to require up to 40,000 liters per hectare (and over 70,000 liters in summers) for crops like jasmine and marigolds. One horticulturist claimed roses use as much as 8 million liters per hectare. With nearly 300,000 hectares under floriculture cultivation nationally, the resource extraction is massive.

These figures must be treated cautiously, as peer-reviewed data remains patchy, but they help underline the broad dimensions of the industry's water footprint in a water-stressed country.

The irony is striking: women are the primary workers in these flower farms, often working under heavy pesticide exposure for wages just enough to survive, while their own villages face groundwater depletion due to over-irrigation on these farms. This is not just ecological injustice but also gendered injustice.

Women's labor sustains the luxuries of the bourgeoisie, deepening the very scarcity that governs their own lives.

Water as a Politicized, Economic Commodity

Industries flourish on the same water that rural women cannot access. These women are left to navigate the system alone, trading their survival to sustain the elite. In this state of affairs, water ceases to be a neutral

resource and becomes a politicized, economic commodity, packaged and sold to those who can pay the price.

Corporate feminism thrives under capitalism, auctioning empowerment as beauty products, sanitary pads, and flowers on Valentine's Day. Meanwhile, the rural woman walks miles with blisters on her feet for a bucket of water.

Feminism severed from water justice becomes the prerogative of the rich, not the liberation of the masses.

Empowerment Is Not Luxury

Empowerment cannot be equated with the consumption of luxury; it is measured by access to life-sustaining needs such as water, equity, and environmental balance. Locally driven women's movements such as the Jal Saheli program in Bundelkhand, the Nari Shakti Se Jal Shakti Initiative in Rajasthan and Maharashtra, Pani Panchayats in Maharashtra, and Women Water Champions in Rajasthan demonstrate that empowerment is relevant only when linked to survival, sustainability, and community.

Policies should serve the poor and marginalized; they must guarantee access to water and affordable, sustainable alternatives instead of disposable products that harm the environment.

The wells of India remain waterless, not because the country lacks water, but because access has been politicized, commercialized, and controlled to serve the agendas of a market-driven system. Feminism that ignores this truth risks becoming a valueless deception. True liberation begins where scarcity ends, at the wells, the rivers, and in the hands of women who have carried life forward for centuries.

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