

## The Source of Life for Sale

Across Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, local people speak out against commercial interests soaking up their water resources

English, 70 mins

Director K P Sasi

Producer Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai

☒ Over 20 years ago, when I was in school, I would have laughed at the idea of buying water at the price of milk. Water flowed free. There was a long line of taps in school, standposts at every important street-corner, mud pots near petty traders, and coolers and fountains in public places.

Now I buy and carry my PET bottles around with me whenever I travel. In most cities, public water taps are hard to find. And I dread the rusted leaky ones I do come across, amid heaps of dirt, in some corner of a suburb.

So, bottled water is the norm. Or worse, coloured water, water with fizz and possibly traces of pesticide sold at box-like shops, on hilltops and along seashores.

Despite film stars and cricketers pushing bottled water with a smile, I understand that many people find it an unnecessary market intrusion. Especially when the bottlers happen to be operating next door. These entrepreneurs dig holes into the belly of the earth and suck out the entire area's supply of groundwater. Ask the people of Plachimada in Palakkad, Kerala, where they caught a cola giant in the act and forced it to down shutters.

Or ask the people in 60 other places in India where local communities are engaged in a struggle to protect their water rights. A dozen such struggles form the theme of K P Sasi's new documentary ***The Source of Life for Sale*** -- a statement against the globalised sale of water and an affirmation of community rights over water resources.

In 70 minutes of vivid visuals and stunning soundbytes, panning Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, local people speak out against commercial

interests soaking up their water resources. "Can't they just bomb us instead" asks a local farmer in Plachimada, who has no farm left after the 'colonisers' sucked dry the aquifers and spread sludge all around. A tribal woman looks straight into the camera and says: "I take a glass of water to make my rice. Why deny me that?" Another company was trying to divert the Bhavani, the water source for a long line of tribal hamlets along its banks.

It is such direct, in-your-face statements that give Sasi's film its strength and documentary value. It's all about shared anger, anguish, hope. Not all fire and brimstone and sermons, but a film with a flow, a narrative, stunning visuals of rivers, rivulets, rain, waterfalls, ghats and more. There is even a sepia clip of an old film song sequence in which the actor Satyan rows along the Periyar in Kerala, calling it a shy girl. Similarly, a balladeer's song breathes life into the story of the Ganga . Cut to shots of the choked river, and you get a shock...

The film's tempo builds up gradually, from activist C R Neelakantan's description of rivers as the bloodstream of nature, to the angry outbursts of people denied water. Issues are starkly brought out -- the sale of a part of the Sheonath river to a water firm in Chhattisgarh; a human chain against the sale of the Malampuzha reservoir; tribal protest against the diversion of the Bhavani; struggles against the biggest cola multinational in Shivaganga, Tamil Nadu, and Mehndigunj in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

The digital format, multi-lingual content, beautiful camera work -- by Sunil Kupperi and Sajan Kalathil -- and a fluid style make this English-language film accessible and enjoyable even if you don't really care about water issues. And, enormously relevant and inspiring if you do. At the very least it makes you wonder what the government is doing whilst all this water-snatching is going on.

Ajit Muricken, who produced the film for Vikas Adhayayan Kendra, a Mumbai-based group that works on globalisation and community rights issues, says it's meant to be a campaign tool, an outcome of the shared concern of activist groups. Sasi, who has made several campaign films -- on the Narmada , pesticides, displacement -- and feature films, including *Ek Alag Mausam* on AIDS, calls *The Source...* his best work so far.

-- Reviewed by Max Martin

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