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ntensifying droughts and competing pressures on water resources foreground water scarcity as an urgent concern of the global climate change crisis. In India, individual, industrial, and agricultural water demands exacerbate inequities of access and expose the failures of state governance to regulate use. State policies and institutions influenced by global models of reform produce and magnify socioeconomic injustice in this “water bureaucracy.”

Drawing on historical records, an analysis of postliberalization developments, and fieldwork in the city of Chennai, Leela Fernandes traces the configuration of colonial historical legacies, developmental-state policies, and economic reforms that strain water resources and intensify inequality. While reforms of water governance promote privatization and decentralization, they strengthen the state centralized control over water through city-based development models. Understanding the political economy of water thus illuminates the consequent failures of the state within countries of the Global South.

Leela Fernandes is professor of international studies at the University of Washington and author of India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform and Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, Power.

“Brilliantly argues how centralization tendencies occur in the liberal economy of India at both the national and subnational levels.”—Nagesh Prabhu, author of Reflective Shadows: Political Economy of World Bank Lending to India

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