Negotiating Marginalities: Right to the City's Water

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Abstract Failure of water-related planning in Delhi can in part be attributed to the lack of inter-agency coordination and cooperation. This inability of state and city agencies to work together results in fragmentation of the state, and places potable water at the centre of politics in the city. This fragmentation and its consequences can be seen in Delhi's resettlement colonies, where government agencies attempt to create formal housing options for urban poor residents, formerly living in squatter settlements. These neighbourhoods have inadequate access to potable water and limited or no access to state agencies. This absence of the state in resettlement colonies renders the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as critical. Using potable water as the analytic, this article attempts to unpack the complex relationships between state agencies, NGOs and urban poor residents of resettlement colonies.

1 Introduction

This *IDS Bulletin* analyses various aspects of the 1990 New Delhi Statement. While this article does not engage directly with the statement (United Nations 1990), it critically examines how current planning strategies fail to respond to the overarching goal of the New Delhi Statement – 'Some for All' – and the consequences of these failures for the urban poor in Global South megacities. These cities, it is commonly accepted, have sufficient potable water to meet the needs of all residents and to successfully uphold the principles of the New Delhi Statement. However, in most Global South cities, including Delhi, more than 50 per cent of the residents have inadequate access to potable water (Zerah 2000). This contradiction is often attributed to increasing population, water scarcity, and urbanisation. Less attention is paid to the critical failures in water infrastructure planning that occur due to the very political nature of water in Global South cities. Thus, due to the contested nature of water, water-related planning in Global South cities produces sites of exclusions, illegitimacies and illegalities.

In Delhi (and other Global South cities), many factors contribute to the failures of water-related planning: using only technical solutions to respond to water-related issues, and thus depoliticising water access, supply and management (Bakker 2010; Kaika 2005; Swyngedouw 2004; Swyngedouw and Merrifield 1995); continually basing policy implementation on incomplete knowledge by excluding experiential knowledge of community residents (Gandy 2008; Mehta 2005); basing decision-making on universal/global discourses of 'water scarcity', 'future water crisis', overpopulation, and development (Mehta 2005; Swyngedouw 2004; Gandy 2008); basing policy and planning strategies on elite and middle-class interests, bypassing the poor (Truelove 2011; Baviskar 2003); and rendering current problems in water access as invisible and illegitimate. The failure to strengthen inter-agency cooperation leads to fragmentation in Delhi's water sector.

The fragmentation of the state in Delhi can be clearly seen in the 'planned peripheral developments', where planning attempts were made to create 'legal' housing options for the urban poor. These neighbourhoods lack access to basic amenities, including potable water, exposing the irony of planning – neighbourhoods that are being planned have limited or no access to potable water. In these so-called planned spaces, the absence of state provides non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with a point of entry, a ready-made service area, and a

captured population, resulting in the production and reproduction of the complex relations of power between the NGOs, state and urban poor residents. This article attempts to unpack the consequences of these evolving relationships for Delhi's urban poor residents, using potable water as the analytic.

My analysis derives from two years of fieldwork and research for my dissertation[1] that focuses on access to potable water in urban poor neighbourhoods of Delhi. Approximately 3 million of Delhi's residents live in slums and another 45 per cent of the city's 17 million residents live in unauthorised colonies, *jhuggi jhopdi* (JJ) colonies, and urban villages (Singh 2005). Most poor neighbourhoods of Delhi have limited and irregular access to potable water and have to depend on multiple sources, such as taps, tankers, public hand pumps and borewells, to meet their daily needs. This situation becomes worse in the new planned resettlement colonies where potable water is available only through public tankers or through few community hand pumps. This uneven, inadequate and unpredictable water supply causes anxiety, contestation for the limited water, and requires at least one person from each household (usually women) to delineate specific times for collecting and storing water. This inability of urban poor residents to access adequate quantities of potable water to meet their daily needs can be seen as a direct consequence of planning failures in Delhi's water sector.

2 Politics of water

Over 100 state and city agencies oversee municipal services in Delhi. These agencies report to different ministries, departments, and political parties, resulting in a severe lack of coordination and cooperation in the city's public sector. Figure 1[2] gives an overview of the various agencies involved in Delhi's water planning sector.

The two key agencies involved in Delhi's water sector are the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and Delhi Jal Board (DJB). These agencies often work at cross-purposes. Each year, MCD's Health Department conducts a survey to check water quality in the city and declares that DJB supplied water is contaminated. The DJB CEO, Ramesh Negi, in an interview with the *Times of India* (26 March 2011) argues that despite repeated requests, MCD is unwilling to conduct a

joint survey with DJB. He also contends that every year MCD deliberately takes samples from areas where there are no sewer lines and people use booster pumps and thus, water samples indicate contamination.[3] This annual discussion is indicative of the fragmentation, and its consequences for water management, supply and access. MCD, DJB and other organisations pass the blame for any inadequacies in water distribution and management to each other, placing potable water at the centre of Delhi's interagency politics.

The adversarial relationship between multiple public agencies involved in water management and supply are deeply rooted in the fragmented multi-party political structure of Delhi. While DJB leadership is Congress-led, MCD is ruled by the opposing political party, Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). These parties use potable water as a tool with which to improve their political standing in the city. Water provision for large urban poor communities, which serve as important vote banks, improves drastically just before city elections and then deteriorates again shortly afterwards. More tankers are contracted and more and more infrastructure is installed for only a few months. DJB, MCD and other agency technicians and employees have little control over the distribution or the decision-making.[4] Thus, water-related agencies are neither autonomous nor un-political. The opposing affiliations and overlapping responsibilities of multiple water-related agencies implicate the management and distribution of potable water in the splintering of Delhi's political landscape. The writing and implementation of policies at all levels of governments are affected by the lack of coordination between political parties, and consequently, their affiliate public agencies. Residents remain unaware of the various responsibilities of each agency, leading to a severe lack of accountability in the water sector, which is both spatial and scalar in nature.

An MCD councillor who attempted to increase water supply in her area by contracting extra tankers every summer, argued that, 'They [slum residents] are dirty and make life difficult for the rest of the neighbourhood. They are also not loyal. If they had voted for our party, I would have improved water supply. The current legislative assembly member is completely ineffectual but let them go to him.'[5] As a result,

water access in this neighbourhood is based on housing type. Residents of planned, higher income neighbourhoods have better water access to 'legal' water compared to the adjoining slums. Local politicians use access to potable water as a way to reward (and punish) residents trapped in the city's fragmented political structure. However, most inner-city slum residents locate alternate (and sometimes illegal) water sources to meet their daily needs. This inequality in access to water becomes rigid in resettlement colonies. These colonies are not a part of the regular pipe network of the city, placing them outside the purview of public agencies and at the centre of the politicised water supply, such that they lack autonomy and their access to water is completely dependent on the fractured state.

New Delhi, being the capital of India, is also at the heart of regional politics and conflicts, in which water becomes a critical tool. The water for Delhi's treatment plants comes from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana. The major share of this water (38 per cent) is obtained from the river Yamuna. The flow of the river in Delhi is restricted because of diversions upstream, mainly for irrigation in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Though located on the banks of the Yamuna, Delhi accesses the river's water from the Yamuna Canal fed by Tajewala Barrage in Haryana. In the dry season, very little water is allowed to flow beyond Tajewala Barrage.[6] Shiva (2001) argues that water scarcity in Delhi is constructed by promoting over-irrigation. Thus, interstate politics influence Delhi's water allocation, and water supply in the city becomes a game of probability and not certainty.

Delhi's downstream location also places the city at the centre of other political agendas. In the past, during local protests in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, water regulators controlling supply to Delhi were taken over, preventing surface water from flowing into the city's water treatment plants. This created 'water scarcity' in Delhi, and forced the central government to meet the demands of the protestors. With each such 'successful' protest, water becomes more and more contested and politicised, and the technical and policy responses are rendered inefficient in responding to the produced water scarcity.

These multi-agency and multi-scalar politics create room for corruption. Middlemen demand

money in exchange for helping residents navigate the splintered interdepartmental relationships. This fragmentation also increases the lack of participation and community engagement. As one agency develops ways to engage residents, other agencies undermine participation, or create factions, such that groups working with one political party are not permitted to benefit from the programmes initiated by any other party.

The breakdown in interdepartmental cooperation and coordination results in inadequate water infrastructure in the city. Parts of the city have no pipes, no public standpoints, no storage tanks or any other water infrastructure, and other parts of the city are adequately (and sometimes excessively) served by the city's water infrastructure. Thus, incomplete water infrastructure further results in uneven water delivery across the city. The consequences of the lack of interdepartmental organisation and coordination become even more acute for planned resettlement colonies.

3 Resettlement colonies: potable water in Savda Ghevra

Resettlement of informal communities is not a new trend in Delhi; it began 40 years ago during the emergency rule of 1975–7. However, to make Delhi the showcase of India's economic growth, resettlement of slums has gained impetus in the last decade. During the preparations for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, this trend also gained judicial and policy support (Bhan 2009; Dupont 2008). Bhan (2009) found that, during 1990–2003 approximately 51,000 houses were demolished in Delhi, at least 45,000 homes were cleared in 2004–07, and in late 2007, eviction notices were served to approximately three of Delhi's largest slum settlements. Currently, there are 52 resettlement colonies in Delhi housing approximately 2 million residents. These colonies are all located at the periphery of the city. In and around these colonies, 'ineligible' squatters have camped in temporary, informal housing. Tarlo (2000) argues that these informal camps around the formal planned colonies indicate failures of Delhi government's resettlement policy. The eligibility system for resettlement further holds that to live in the resettlement colonies, only slum residents who moved to Delhi before 1990 are eligible to receive 18sqm land on a lease of five or ten years, and for those who moved to the city during 1990–8, 12.5sqm of land is allocated

for five or ten years. Each eligible household has to pay Indian Rs7,000 (US$150) for the land (Dupont 2008). I argue that this also indicates the strategic way in which planning, rather than solving the 'slum problem', has relocated it in less visible parts of the city, even as it claims to have increased access to 'formal housing' for the urban poor. Resettlement colonies are indicative of a critical institutional failure, as these neighbourhoods become planned slums and residents deal with increased problems of accessing water, livelihood, transportation and food. Savda Ghevra is one such colony (Tarlo 2000).

In 2009–10, I conducted fieldwork in Savda Ghevra, a 250-acre resettlement colony on the northwest periphery of Delhi. Savda Ghevra is a planned neighbourhood, where the first wave of settlement began in 2006. The colony is built on agricultural land and is surrounded by fields and small villages. Currently, Savda Ghevra houses nearly 8,000 families from slums of North, West and Central Delhi. When developed fully, this area is expected to house 20,000 families, making it the largest planned resettlement colony in Delhi. I began fieldwork by familiarising myself with the site using direct observations in order to understand the daily patterns of behaviour, the physical environments of the site and the interactions between residents. I also conducted participant observations for several months in order to understand the themes and patterns of behaviour associated with collecting, storing, using, and draining water. My goal was to understand how the interactions with water affect the everyday social and behavioural patterns. I then conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with women from the community over a period of six months. I asked questions regarding the *social* (relationship with other residents, position in community, position in household, education for children), *economic* (ability to work, cost of water), *spatial* (choice of housing, place of employment), and *health* (water-related diseases, money and time spent at hospitals) related consequences of limited access to potable water, and also asked the women to comment on how water access had changed since resettlement. Additionally, I interviewed people associated with different NGOs and government agencies working in Savda Ghevra.

I found that, at the time when it was first settled, there was no planned or built-in water pipe network for Savda Ghevra. Potable water was (and continues to be) supplied only through tankers. The MCD Slum Wing has provided 23 community hand pumps and people have installed private pumps to meet their water needs. However, DJB found that the groundwater in this area is non-potable, thus the dependence on water tankers for potable water has continued. Five years after the initial wave of resettlement, there are still no plans to provide piped water or any water infrastructure for this community and, for approximately 90 per cent of the 8,000 households of Savda Ghevra, DJB tankers remain the only source of drinking water (CURE 2010).

The community residents have no ownership or control over when the water tanker reaches Savda Ghevra – if it comes at its regular time, whether it stops at its designated location, and over how much water it carries every day. The closest DJB office is approximately two miles outside the community, and thus, even as people are forced to depend on only the 'formal' and 'legal' water sources, they have limited access to public agencies. The inflexibility, unpredictability and unaccountability of this single potable water source render water collection as a severely contentious activity. As soon as tankers arrive, women, children and (some) men run towards it to ensure that they collect enough water to meet their needs. The desperation to access adequate amounts of potable water causes abusive verbal arguments, physical violence, and injuries to water collectors.

The formal system of water collection forces people in Savda Ghevra to attempt to meet their potable water needs using 'legal' and 'legitimate' sources. These classifications govern the life of urban poor in inner city squatter settlements and in the planned resettlement colonies. How residents fit in legal/illegal and legitimate/illegitimate categories becomes a way to withhold the right to the city's water and to its public institutions from the urban poor residents. Thus, in its attempt to create a world-class city, Delhi's fractured state manages to produce planned slums, where the state exists through its absence, and residents exist in an ahistorical space, without local or contextual knowledges. In these spaces of neglect and absence, NGOs emerge as

effective intermediaries between residents and public agencies.

4 Role of non-governmental agencies

It is argued that NGOs fill the void left by the public sector when it is unable meet the needs of residents. NGOs are seen as an important alternative to the bureaucratic, rigid and ineffective state (Fisher 1997; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Fowler 1991). The complicated and historically mistrustful relationship between urban poor residents and the state produces the space in which NGOs operate (Fisher 1997; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Ndegwa 1996). Thus, in a place such as Savda Ghevra where the state has abdicated responsibility for providing food, livelihood, and adequate and reliable potable water, the role of NGOs becomes critical, and their relationships with state agencies and with residents of the community become complex.

There is a diverse group of NGOs working in Savda Ghevra on issues related to education, food provision, livelihood, transportation, and water and sanitation access. Asha, Young Men's Christian Association of New Delhi (YMCA), Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), Child Survival India (CSI), and Center for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE) are some of the key organisations working in this neighbourhood. At least three organisations are working on water-related issues, such as improving access to potable water, providing information on how to filter water, and providing a bridge between municipalities and residents. Due to absence of the state, NGOs are often forced to partner with public agencies and take on the role of 'producer' for certain services, such as building toilet blocks, compost pits, managing public parks, and providing medical treatment. Thus, in their new role as 'agents of state' (Zerah 2010: 162), NGOs shift from their historic role, which was to become a source of information and support to communities (Zehra 2010).

NGOs are sometimes viewed as a part of the state. Residents of Savda Ghevra are unable to access municipal agencies, and view NGOs as the only accessible part of the public sector. This interchangeability between NGOs and public agencies in the eyes of the residents emphasises how people may be deriving their rights to access the city's resources from these organisations. Thus, even as the resettlement colonies remain

outwardly formal, the complex relationships between NGOs, state and residents contribute to the process of informalisation of the community. For Savda Ghevra, this complexity and its consequences are visible through the work of one NGO – CURE – in the community.

CURE serves as an example of an NGO which partners with the public agencies to work in Savda Ghevra as a part of the Sanjha Prayas initiative. This initiative aims at 'improving government–citizen partnership to advance better urban governance' (CURE 2010).[7] Sanjha Prayas focuses on refining service delivery in urban poor neighbourhoods, with a special focus on water supply, access and management. CURE, as a part of the Sanjha Prayas initiative, has attempted to improve access to potable water in Savda Ghevra. The organisation works with poor communities and with local governments on policy reforms, improved access to basic services, and inclusive and participatory governance. The NGO also works specifically with women and youth from the community, and with all levels of government – national, state and local on issues related to water, sanitation, power, education, livelihood, health care, and housing (*ibid.*). Facilitators from CURE conducted focus groups to determine the preferred location for 'tanker stops', and convenient water collection time. By establishing an onsite office in Savda Ghevra and having regular staff within the community, CURE has become one of the key sources of information and grievance redress for the people of Savda Ghevra. Residents walk into its local office when they are looking for work, food, housing or potable water. CURE employees have access to contact information for local technicians, political leaders and municipal councillors. Residents explain their problems to CURE workers, who then get in touch with the appropriate authority to address the issues.

CURE's entry into Savda Ghevra is at the moment of disconnect between the urban poor and the fractured state, and the work of the organisation is critical to the provision of basic services in the community. CURE and other NGOs in Savda Ghevra are attempting to ensure adequate access to potable water for residents. However, an unintended consequence of the work of NGOs is that they serve as the only link between the residents of places such as Savda Ghevra and the state. Thus, as residents become dependent on

NGOs, they do not mobilise or resist state programmes, and the process of informalisation in slums, and especially in resettlement colonies, continues. Even as CURE and other NGOs play a vital role in forming a bridge between residents and the state agencies, they also serve as the *only* link between the residents of Savda Ghevra and the state. This promotes continued passivity on the part of residents and continued absence of the state, further damaging the already fractured relationship between marginalised populations and state agents. In this way, NGOs unwittingly are contributing to the disjunctive governance at the planned periphery of the city and the urban poor residents, who already lack access to public agencies, are further marginalised and placed outside the purview of state agencies.

5 Discussion

Savda Ghevra is planned. Government agencies acquired land and began developing the neighbourhood three years ago before the first wave of resettlement in 2006. The official story is that Savda Ghevra is not a slum; it is more developed, more 'modern', and more organised than the informal settlements of Delhi. Savda Ghevra is said to have wider roads, more land area and better facilities than slums. However, the reality on the ground is different. Currently, Savda Ghevra has no water infrastructure and there are no plans in place to provide water pipes for this community. This 'formal' colony remains a part of MCD and the Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) slum and *jhuggi jhopdi* (JJ) department. An inversion of formality can be seen in Savda Ghevra, and in other resettlement colonies. While state agencies imagine resettlement colonies as a 'formal' part of the city; the residents are unable to access water, food, and employment in these neighbourhoods, and have greater access to the 'formal' state networks in their 'informal' slum settlements.

Resettlement colonies also mark a temporal disconnect in planning. As planning attempts to address a future water crisis, create a future world-class Delhi, and rid the city of slums in the future, it becomes impotent in the present, creating places such as Savda Ghevra. This temporal disconnect is especially visible in the water sector. In Savda Ghevra, as with any other informal settlement of Delhi, politics of water remain a critical part of life in the community. Access to potable water remains unpredictable,

irregular, and contested. Political leaders, public agencies, NGOs, and community organisations use water as a tool in interdepartmental, local and regional politics. In addition to these issues, residents retain no ownership over water or water sources, adding to the difficulty in accessing adequate amounts of potable water. As planning attempts to address 'informality' through resettlement, the current problems in the water sector are exacerbated. This informality within the 'formal' resettlement colonies is reinforced by the absence of public agencies in the community.

Thus, as planning failures deepen, slum and 'ex-slum' dwellers remain illegitimate and informal. NGOs function at this temporal, spatial and experiential disconnect in planning and play a critical role at the urban fringe. The role of NGOs in resettlement colonies has important implications for planning. As NGOs become the 'legitimate' intermediaries between the state and the peripheral urban poor communities they reinforce the illegitimacy of the residents, and the role of planning becomes a tool of the state rather than one for communities and residents.

This article demonstrates the need to rethink slum clearance and resettlement policies in cities such as New Delhi, and to imagine a new role for NGOs, where they begin to challenge state 'truths' of water scarcity, development, and ideas of 'world-class' and 'modern' cities. NGOs can encourage the politicisation of currently (and historically) depoliticised issues such as gender, and water access. NGOs can also focus on challenging the current political structure of places such as Delhi by increasing the autonomy of community residents. This will address the current skewed governance system in Global South cities.

My analysis also highlights how access to potable water varies due to social, spatial, and economic differences in Delhi. I argue that the New Delhi and other global statements do not engage with issues concerning water politics and inequalities that permeate all aspects of water supply, access and management in urban centres of the Global South. Thus, because of the problematic assumption that the state will attempt to meet the needs of all residents and not privilege the needs of some groups over others, the New Delhi Statement leaves out urban poor populations, such as those residing in Savda Ghevra, leading to a critical multi-scalar failure in water-related policy.

Notes

1 My dissertation titled 'Water Thieves: Women, Water, and Development in Delhi, India', examines the impact of planning strategies on water access in two 'slums' – one planned and the other unplanned – in Delhi, India.
2 Adapted from 'Multiple Agencies but no Accountability' – Accountability Initiative Blog, www.accountabilityindia.in/ accountabilityblog/1637-cpwd-pwd-ndmc-djb-multiple-agencies-no-accountability/ (accessed 3 May 2011).
3 MCD says 12 per cent of drinking water is contaminated (26 March 2011), *Times of India*, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ 2011-03-26/delhi/29192024_1_waterborne-diseases-drinking-water-water-pipelines/ (accessed 27 March 2011).
4 Personal conversation with DJB junior engineer, 8 December 2009.
5 Personal conversation with MCD councillor, 26 April 2010.
6 Constitution and Functions of Upper Yamuna River Board, http://uyrb.nic.in/ (accessed 28 April 2011).
7 Center for Urban and Regional Excellence, http://cureindia.org/ (accessed 3 May 2011).

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