

INTRODUCTION – A LITERATURE REVIEW: PLACING LITERATURE ON URBAN WATER SUPPLY IN INDIA IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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The Overly Focused « Water Literature » When Talking of Cities and Urban Services

To start with, it is important to place this short communication in the larger context of the Indian urban transition and of the urban reforms that have accompanied the liberalization of the economy and the political decentralisation at the beginning of the 1990s. The question of ‘the urban’ has become central to the national discourse and urban public policies have been a core element of the strategy for a rapid economic development especially since 2000. In this larger context, urban services are at the forefront, as the overhaul in the level of urban services - which remain non universal and of unreliable quality despite an increase in the penetration rates - is reiterated as a prime objective of urban reforms.

Consequently, the ‘literary production’ on the subject of water is a very interesting entry point to understand the nature of the debates and their shifts over time to urbanisation for two reasons: (i) first, due to its specificities, water opens up a range of questions involving socio-technical systems, institutions and governance, justice and rights, political economy, culture; (ii) second, since publications on water are very numerous (like in other countries), water is therefore a rich corpus to discuss urban India, even though this raises a biased understanding of the relationship between cities and urban services.

This presentation tries to make sense of an abundant literature, but it does not claim to be exhaustive. Urban services are at the crossroads of different forms of knowledge production that deserve to be qualified. A rapid conclusion will raise issues of international comparison.

Three Main Types of Knowledge Production on Water and The City

A first type of production remains prescriptive and normative. This is largely the product of the extensive documentation provided by international organizations (in India, mainly the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank), as well as government and consultancy organizations’ reports. I will not retrace the genealogy of this work, but there is some embeddedness between these types of literature (as illustrated by the proximity between two important reports on urban services with international publications: the Rakesh Mohan Committee on the Commercialization of Infrastructure in 1996 influenced by the World Bank Development Report of 1994 and the Isher Ahluwalia High Powered Committee on Infrastructure of 2011 influenced strongly by the 2010 McKinsey report on Indian urbanization).

This form of knowledge production is centered on solving the problems faced by the sector, assessing the levels of investments required and making recommendations in terms of institutional, financial and organizational reforms, with questions dealing from cost recovery, to the introduction of the private sector. Most of this work has also constructed a narrative of crisis that therefore requires a major overhaul of water systems.

A second type of production corresponds to the “grey literature” produced by NGOs, think tanks and activists, as well as social movements. This is often city-based, but offers extremely rich insights into questions of equity and justice (around tariff issues, lifeline tariffs), rights to the city (in particular literature linked to the process of resettlement and evictions), levels of services in slums and poorer neighborhoods, and has produced an anti-privatization literature.

Thirdly, the academic literature has also engaged with the topics mentioned above, but has provided more theoretical reflections. Almost all fields in social sciences (economics, public administration, urban studies, geography, social anthropology) have conducted research on the question of urban water, with the exception of political science that has traditionally been less concerned about urban issues in India.

Finally, I would like to mention that there is also a periodization in this topic (though this claim might be biased by my own trajectory into this literature). In the mid-1990s, the focus was on institutional changes and questions of access (estimating the demand, linking demand with willingness to pay and tariff increases), and was then followed by a debate on alternative technologies (part of it under Indo-French cooperation). A more recent turn has seen water used as an exemplary tool to understand what Ananya Roy calls the “idiom of urbanization”. Recent research provides a much finer reading of users’ agencies and a more ethnographic work of organizations (though Karen Coelho’s research was a pioneering work in this domain) aimed at unpacking the nature of the State, which is a larger trend in Indian urban research.

The next sections will be focusing on three main topics that I argue help classifying this literature in relationship with the larger theoretical and action-oriented questions that are debated in contemporary India.

Water Governance and Institutions

This first strand of work originated from a public administration tradition but was later taken over by research works inspired by neo-institutional economics. In this approach, institutions matter, and the focus is either on adequate reforms (prescriptive literature) or on analysis of the outcomes of reforms around the classic “good governance triptych” of privatization, participation and modernization of public action. Within this literature, the notion of institutions can vary with the inclusion of formal and informal institutions (depending on the authors and the discipline). This whole work derives from and is sustained by a dominating discourse of an urban crisis, a crisis of finance, skills, resources and management.

- 1) The scope of the research questions is wide, ranging from an understanding of organizations to an evaluation of the nature of incentives to be put in place to reform the sector. Production has focused on the question of:
 - Economic efficiency, in particular the issues of tariff and equity (especially in the 1990s), the willingness to pay and a better understanding of the demand;
 - Financial sustainability with works focused on public finance, financial status of municipalities, levels of investments required;
 - Operational efficiency, with a focus on best practices and work on indicators (especially by international organizations) but also research on the question of relationships that organizations have with users (including corruption) and the impact of reforms inspired by the New Public Management school that include simplification of procedures;
 - Technical solutions with some amount of research on the “non-networked” solutions;

Some of these research works provide a synthesis of the institutional set-up and reform agenda (MacKenzie and Ray 2004, Zérah 2006) and underline the lack of economic and environmental regulation, the limits of decentralization and the lack of autonomy of water departments of parastatals.

- 2) Though it is not an obvious choice to mention the rich anthropological work on water organizations in this section, there has been indeed a rich literary production focusing on the daily practices of street level bureaucrats (Coelho, Anand, and Bjorkman). This work describes how technical decisions are made, how rules are circumvented to enable service provisions. This production contributes strongly to unpacking the nature of the State but also contributes to the understanding of public organizations and their estrangement from the “Weberian bureaucracy” model.
- 3) It is also important to mention separately the debate on the role of the private sector. I would argue that this debate has been wrongly framed both by the prescriptive literature on “public-private partnerships” and the critical literature on “privatization”. Prescriptive literature has produced a range of documentation on international examples of public-private partnerships, has documented the failures of PPPs in India and has mainly looked at institutional concerns (regulation, tariff and political will) without understanding the manner in which PPPs were implemented on the ground. Critical literature has engaged, on the contrary, on questions of democracy, impacts on the poor, spatial segregation and cherry picking without considering the larger embeddedness of the private operators with the State. I would argue (but not in this paper) that the question of the private sector needs to be

understood over time to comprehend the manner in which the implementing of projects have evolved in relation to the larger State redefinition.

Water and Deprivation or Water and Poverty

Defining a poor/deprived neighbourhood is complicated. Often the situation is locally specific and mostly cannot be reduced to the notion of “slum”. I want to emphasize the importance of understanding the question of “water deprivation” in its many dimensions.

Literature has demonstrated the reality of a very multi-layered access to water supply (Zérah 2008) linked to variations in modes of access, different forms of legalities (and their relationships with tenure), types of physical resources available (role of groundwater for instance) and other resources available to users (social capital, access to the State...). This set of conditions leads to different coping strategies to ensure an adequate level of services. These coping strategies have been widely documented in different types of localities (slums, residential localities, peripheries) and have allowed a fine analysis of the types of brokerage involved, the costs borne by users and the articulation with official networks. This rich literature highlights the major differences between poor neighborhoods and planned settlements, or, to simplify, between the poor and the middle classes in large cities. However, it has not ventured sufficiently into the smaller urban settlements, thereby insufficiently addressing the question of poverty (in absolute and relative terms).

In large cities though, some of these works have been able to shed light on the notion of “poor” by bringing to the fore the differences in terms of vulnerabilities of certain groups, in particular women, scheduled casts and tribes, and religious minorities. The literature, classified here under the title of ‘water poverty,’ is important because it points to the notion of differentiated citizenship. Indeed, water is an important entry point in the literature in order to engage in the debate on urban democracy, which, in India, has been discussed around the notion of citizenship and urban citizenship as shaped by the important works of Partha Chatterjee on this subject.

Water and the Nature of the State

A main result deriving from research on the nature of the State relates to its flexibility and its contingency. Rules and norms are ambivalent and they are reshaped by various factors. The works of Nikhil Anand, Lisa Björkman and Karen Coelho are the most in-depth research studies that demonstrate the functioning of public organization and unpack the functioning of what is loosely called “clientelism” or “patronage”. Their work is part of a larger proposition by Solomon Benjamin of a porous bureaucracy characterized by permeable relationships between the political and the administrative sphere that can prevent access to services but provide services as well. Ambivalence, and ad-hoc decisions are central to the nature of the State, which prevents considering access to water as a right, but rather considering it as a favour to be claimed and captured.

Unpacking the nature of the State therefore necessitates a much better analysis of the relationships between agents, and studies other than the one mentioned above, have given a place to some aspects left aside by the institutional literature such as the relationships between high level bureaucrats and street level bureaucrats, the role of plumbers, the ambivalent role of engineers in following policy reforms, among other examples.

Conclusion: the Comparative Perspective

Though I have only given glimpses of what can be found in the abundant literature on this topic, there is a clear resonance with the knowledge production (and its forms) that prevails in other countries of the South. Ideas circulate very rapidly indeed. There are specificities that I think deserve mention:

- The incredibly diverse range of mediation through a large set of brokers located in formal and informal institutions (or at the liminal space between formal and informal institutions) and therefore the very large and diverse range of users’ strategies (that can be seen in some way as a form of agency – to be debated)
- Compared to other countries, what seems apparent in India is the lack of skills and competences in localities (and especially in smaller municipalities at times deprived of even an engineer – a point that needs to be made) and the

lack of diversity of skills and competencies (despite the socio-political inventiveness of engineers themselves) that are very different from the condominium experience of Brazil or the decentralized treatment plants of China for instance.



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