

Power and Policy Processes in Drinking Water Supply in Karnataka, India

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ABSTRACT *Susanna Ghosh Mitra looks into the ways power is negotiated and resisted within cities in India in the context of piped drinking water supply. Taking a World Bank-funded water privatization project in Hubli–Dharwar as a case study, she critically examines the regional- and local-level power dynamics underlying urban water management. The study uses the methodology of a discursive approach to policy processes and identifies the specific contexts in which power and politics is operating, together with the related discourses and representations of the environment through which people communicate. By seeing policy as a discourse, analytical attention is turned to the webs of power underlying the practices of different actors in the policy process.*

KEYWORDS *24 × 7 water supply; unaccounted for water; demonstration project, intermittent water supply; lifeline supply; volumetric tariff*

Introduction

Situated in southern Indian state of Karnataka, the twin city of Hubli–Dharwad (H–D) is the second largest urban centre (present population 1,200,000 – <http://www.hdmc.gov.in/cityprofile.php>) in the State after the capital city Bangalore. It is located on the national highway that connects two major metropolises – Mumbai and Bangalore. Since 2002, the State government has sought to transform H–D into a dynamic economic region following its strategy to promote secondary and tertiary cities as potential IT destinations. Hubli is an industrial centre largely oriented to agro-export industries; Dharwad is a major educational centre with a host of engineering and medical colleges. In 2004, H–D was selected for the Karnataka Urban Water Sector Improvement Project (KUWASIP) funded by the World Bank which initiated a '24 × 7' pilot water scheme in the city. The '24 × 7' model assumes that changeover to continuous water supply need not involve massive investments of bulk capacity augmentation and that current failures in water supply can be overcome by purely managerial measures and through reduction of leaks and losses. The implementation of pilot or demonstration schemes and the subsequent replication of successful models would enable improvements to be made at a manageable pace and for results to be disseminated to develop confidence, educate beneficiaries and engender stronger stakeholder support

(ADB, 2005 *Helping India Achieve 24 × 7 Water Supply Service by 2010*: <http://www.adb.org/Water/knowledge-center/Books/Helping-India-24 × 7.pdf>). The aim of this model was to prepare India for private sector participation (psp) in urban infrastructure services (Asian Development Bank, 2005: 7). KUWASIP in H-D was the first such structured approach towards introducing private sector participation in urban water supply in India.

Significance of the project also lies in the wider political economy of federalism in India. It was initiated at an opportune time when H-D was facing severe drinking water crisis due to occurrence of droughts in the region during 2001–2003. Since the Hubli Dharwar Municipal Corporation (HDMC) overburdened with debt was functioning without any financial stability, in April 2003, the State government asked Karnataka Urban Water Supply and Drainage Board (KUWSDB) to take up water distribution of twin cities. In addition, HDMC finances came under scrutiny of State bureaucrats – Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development and Finance Corporation (KUIDFC)(2) – who pushed for financial restructuring at municipal level in line with the overall State-level reform process undertaken under World Bank loans. Urban water policy reform of the State therefore may be interpreted as a strategy of re-scaling on the part of the regional government, in an attempt to adjust its actions to the imperatives of the global economy. The growing contribution of cities to national income, and their potential to act as growth engines had spurred the efforts of State governments to improve basic urban infrastructure and strengthen municipal finance. It is in this context that Indian cities, after years of neglect, were receiving renewed attention from policymakers at the central and regional levels.

This article is a study of the negotiation between regional and local actors while attempting to implement this new model of urban water management. It highlights the dominance of the neo-liberal paradigm that leaves little space for negotiation. Culture, health, lifestyle, cost-effectiveness – it is an all encompassing discourse that appeal to citizens eager to adopt a more ‘modern’ lifestyle to take part in the ongoing transforma-

tion of H-D and Karnataka in general due to the IT boom. It also highlights how the concerns of the marginalized groups are shaped and received, what spaces are available (become facilitated and actually get activated) and their sense of participation as a result of their interaction with the political elite. This paper argues that better democratic and pro-poor water policies are possible with transformations in city governance. The reforms in HDMC during 2004–2006 in terms of being more responsive to the poorer sections enabled countering the arguments of the dominant group through discourses of local identity, trust, credibility and mutuality.

The research presented here is based on information collected during study trips to H-D between 2006 and 2007, as part of my PhD research. Information was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Interviews were conducted with a cross-section of people including the State government, represented by the KUIDFC, HDMC councillors, a non-governmental organization, the engineers from HDMC and KUWSDB and a few households. The method for producing material has been both semi-structured and unstructured interviews, where the informants have been given the opportunity to express their view of the debate and also to identify key issues and gather personalized accounts. I also accessed documentary information on 24 × 7 project from KUIDFC office, Bangalore which is the implementation agency and from the World Bank website. Field-level data, especially communication material was obtained from HDMC office. I have also accessed material from some of the major Indian dailies like *The Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *The Hindu* and *Deccan Herald*.

Theoretical considerations

The central concern of this paper is sub-national level water politics in India. This is an important area of research as most of the empirical work on the nation-state tends to focus on a particular body of policy or bureaucratic infrastructure while treating ‘the state’ conceptually as a nomothetic entity to which little analytical attention is accorded (Davidson and Frickel, 2004: 486;

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<http://oae.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/17/4/471>, accessed 05/01/07). Environmental and natural resources issues are particularly revealing at sub-national context of nation-state activity, since even in centralized nation-state apparatuses, responsibility for the implementation of environmental and natural resource policy is often delegated to local and regional administrative offices, and hence the 'local state' is and will continue to be an important forum in which environmental politics plays out (Peluso, 1992; Evans, 2002). In case of India, as the federal government loosened its centralized control over the economy, some State governments began taking initiatives to promote growth and attract investment, giving rise to regional economic policies (Jenkins, 1999). Urban water policies of State governments, while following the broad directions of National Water Policy, reflected the concerns of the State during its implementation. Through powerful laws and rules, the neo-liberal model of the water world was turned into reality at local levels. Locally elected representatives were largely excluded from the policy process, as also civil society groups, learning about major decisions only after the fact. Such policies appear to weaken prospects for governance institutions at the metropolitan scale.

It is within this context within which interaction of actors in the 24 × 7 projects needs to be studied. Taking the framework of political ecology, which posits that conflict over access to environmental resources is linked to systems of political and economic control, this study focuses on power relations that determine the way environmental issues are defined, prioritized and addressed through prevailing modes of environmental management (Swyngedouw, 1995, 1997, 1999; Bryant and Bailey, 1997). This approach not only focuses on the (unequal) power structures and politics that underlie processes of environmental change, but also the socio-political and environmental implications of changes in the ways that natural resources are allocated and managed, with particular emphasis on the interests of 'weaker' social actors. I have referred to *policy process* literature to analyze the project. The idea of 'policy processes' stands opposed to that of 'policy as prescription' – policy

is conceptualized as a process giving importance to the social and historical context in which policy is shaped and implemented. Policy is no more shaped on the basis of good information or research, nor does it emerge simply from bargaining among actors on clearly defined options and choices. Rather, it is a more complex process through which particular versions of policy content come to frame what counts as knowledge and whose voices count in policy deliberations in particular political and institutional contexts. Making sense of participation and hence implications for urban governance within policy processes would require an analysis of the ways in which power and knowledge define spaces for engagement, privileging certain voices and versions and excluding others. It would also require an understanding of how particular ways of thinking about water has gained primacy.

For different policy areas, the way that issues are talked about is highly significant. Key concepts in different policy sectors do not exist in some neutral and purely technical sense. They are not givens but are themselves discursively created (Apthorpe, 1986). Discourses can be defined as: 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer, 1995: 44). In Foucauldian terms 'ideas, concepts and categorizations' are expressions of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980), controlling human subjects by the definitions and categories imposed upon them. Shore and Wright (1997), following Foucault (1991), suggest that policy is itself a 'political technology'. Concepts have histories, and they reflect types of knowledge: they empower some institutions and individuals whose concerns and competencies they are associated with, and simultaneously they marginalize others (Drysek, 1997). Behind the widely unquestioned phenomenon of policy stands the notion of governance which is, therefore, not value-free; it is necessary to ask who is being governed by whom and to what ends and with what effects (Shore and Wright, 1997: 3–4). A range of linguistic and literary terms and ideas complement the notion of

discourse, emphasizing the importance of linguistic devices and styles of story-telling in policy analysis: examples include narratives, tropes, rhetoric, and styles of argumentation.

24 × 7 water supply: discourses on 'lifestyle' vs 'lifeline'

The central point in the concept of 24 × 7 supply was 'unaccounted for water' (UFW). A narrative was built up with factual details that not all the water supplied by water utilities reach the consumers and by adopting 'good engineering and management practices'; 'by keeping distribution network under constant pressure'; and 'by reducing losses', continuous water supply is possible (FAQs on KUWASIP). Some of the measures for the purpose would be obtaining credible data on bulk supply and distribution infrastructure, and accurate customer records; a hydraulic model of the supply system which would ensure that bulk water fed into the system can be distributed equitably to all parts of the urban area (Chary, 2005: 5). Hence it was justified to have a 'foreign' operator involved in a performance-based contract with Compagnie Generale Des Eaux (CGE)(1), for 'rehabilitation, operation and management' of the water services in the 'demonstration zones'. With economic liberalization, 'boundaries of the country are vanishing', so the distinction is not foreign or Indian; rather who provides the benefit and works under state control and regulation. Their sole responsibility would be to 'meet performance targets' and the 'innovation' of this project is that CGE is not only responsible for civil works but also maintains the assets for two years to ensure that there is 'service improvement to the public'. This is better than earlier times 'when large sums were spent to develop the infrastructure but failed to translate into better public service'.

Commenting on a similar scheme in Delhi, the Director of the Centre for Science and Environment, N. Delhi, Sunita Narain says 'There is no understanding of the distribution losses. There is absolutely no estimation as to how much additional water would be needed if the scheme does indeed supply it for 24 hours. The work

plan is that the private company will reduce the 50 percent distribution losses and this would make good the difference. Surely thieves are not siphoning off 50 percent of Delhi's water supply', she remarked. 'From what little is known, it seems water losses are about leakages from underground connections. Which company, however efficient, will be able to retrofit all the underground connections?', she asked (<http://www.thehindu.com/2005/11/13/stories/2005111307150400.htm>). Most water leakages occurred in 'rising mains' – the massive pipelines that carry water from water treatment plants to reservoirs. Leakages in the distribution sections are significantly lower. Thus, handing over distribution to a private company will not help reduce leakages. It will mean that most of Delhi's population shall live without water, according to an engineer, Delhi Jal Board (<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2217/stories/20050826003903100.htm>). These are some of the concerns that the project in H-D also faces as found by the researcher; but will not be highlighted as these are beyond the scope of this article.

Another important and appealing storyline and narratives pursued was on 'productive lifestyle'. With globalization more work opportunities are on the way. Uninterrupted water supply would make households stress-free in terms of doing away with 'time-consuming practice of storing water'. Or more importantly 'save them the trouble of collecting water at odd hours', if the supply to their area is scheduled at odd hours by the water utility. This would increase the free time for women in households to pursue hobbies or jobs. Measures would be introduced to ensure that customer grievances are handled timely and effectively through 'customer interface' and 'grievance redressal mechanism'. Extending the discourse to health issues, project officials elaborated on hygiene of households – 'absence of water in the pipelines create a negative pressure and there is possibility of filth sucked into the line and mixes with drinking water, that may cause epidemic like cholera, gastroenteritis'; 'fresh water stored in vessels leads to contamination, and breeding of mosquitoes, which cause dengue'. Water conservation issue was also included when fears were expressed about availability of water at source, in

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view of drought-like situation during the previous years when Neerasagar tank completely dried up. Using technical language, it was argued that (1) the current 50 percent loss in pipelines can be made up by increasing the efficiency of pipelines by 90 percent through plugging leaks and metering; and (2) consumption will decrease as there won't be storage of excess water than requirement. In other words, the argument put forward is metered continuous water supply brings in a sense of conservation rather than wastage in users. Moreover, the 'uninterrupted water supply' was cost-effective – 'if the municipal government has to pump the same quantity of water in four hours rather than 24 hours it would require larger pipes, higher pumping and storage capacities, resulting in higher costs'; 'in intermittent supply, the water pipes go through pressure changes and gets damaged easily leading to huge losses'.

To interpret it differently, '24 × 7' includes a two-pronged strategy – not only reduce cost of water supply but also reduce *non-revenue water* (NRW) – water that the water utility does not earn from. The latter refers to losses owing to leakages and theft, and more importantly, includes all water supplies to slums, unregularized colonies, standposts and public taps. To target NRW would mean a significant percentage of a city's working class population would go without water.

The concerns of the poor in relation to access to '24 × 7' water also figured prominently in the discourses. The *poor* who are currently in par with the rich in paying monthly Rs 60 (equivalent \$1.50) will continue to pay what they are paying now; but 'to *avoid wastage* their consumption will be linked to volumetric tariff'. Since it refers to 'you pay as much as you use', the argument was 'volumetric tariff will charge the rich higher as they consume more'. The 'facility of house service connections will be provided to *even* (emphasis by author) the poor and vulnerable' since their cost of collecting water, often through private sources, is high. They will be charged 'through subsidized tariff for *lower consumption block*'. Thus much depended on the way the 'lower consumption block' was defined.

100 In November 2006, the pilot project ran into trouble following opposition from Dharwad (slum

areas of Wards 7, 8, 9 and 10) where residents became apprehensive that their water bill would escalate manifold once the project became operational. They raised several issues – lack of proper information, apprehensions about hike in water tariff, non-availability of water to the economically weaker sections of the society under the project and privatization of water supply. At the peak of opposition, HDMC Commissioner maintained that 'the 24/7 drinking water scheme is being implemented by KUIDFC'. Under these circumstances the HDMC had no way except implement the scheme. However, HDMC 'as a local agency would ensure more openness in the project' 'it is important to take those who had been opposing the project in the committee and try to convince them by providing all necessary documents'. 'This project will be implemented in most transparent way and anybody is free to come and see documents pertaining to the scheme. At any cost this scheme could not be scuttled and KUIDFC will go ahead with the scheme purely in the interest of citizens' ([http://www.hdmc.gov.in/announcementpics&docs/19324 × 7project.php](http://www.hdmc.gov.in/announcementpics&docs/19324%20project.php)).

What was therefore significant in prioritizing the needs of the poor was the language of 'local'. This had been achieved due to the transformation in city governance during the years 2004–2006 under the HDMC Commissioner's initiatives creating trust and credibility among local agencies. While institutional changes were introduced such as 24 hours 'quick-response system': to respond to public grievances on basic amenities; transparent expenditure system; e-tendering process; and automatic building licensing system; what contributed to a sense of 'localism' was trust in the system, responsiveness of authorities to public grievances and increasing attention paid by HDMC to concerns of the poorer sections of the population. The residents maintained they can't trust outsiders (State-level officials) to understand their problems; 'we regularly voice our concerns to engineers in KWSDB and HDMC and will interact with them to sort out our problems of water supply'. By January '07 work on the 24 × 7 drinking water supply project resumed. Local authorities and residents had bargained for re-installing of a few public standposts; and negotiated for

public standposts that would be metered and catering to fixed number of households.

Implications

This paper discusses how policy discourses that treat water as economic good benefiting consumers with a better lifestyle and water as an entitlement that public authorities must ensure for a minimum standard of living are playing themselves out in the context of delivery of 24 × 7 water services within a State in India. This model has been proposed for many urban centres in India, where State governments are undertaking re-

forms based on policy recommendations of the World Bank. As States in India compete with each other for foreign investment, craft their own strategies, and prioritize their public investments, the terminology that will increasingly be used for articulating water problems and solutions is the terminology of neo-liberalism. While critiquing the paradigm is one of searching alternatives, it is also imperative to create space and scope within the policy process so that better democratic and pro-poor policies can be made possible. As this case study has indicated, generating and experiencing the power of 'localism' will help create the right means to demand water as a right.

Note

- 1 Veolia India is a subsidiary of multinational Veolia Environment is a global provider of environment management services. It operates water, energy, waste management, and public transport business. The company operates in 84 countries and is headquartered in Paris. For fiscal year 2005, the net income had increased by 334 percent to reach a total of US\$ 778.9 million.

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