

Muddy waters in Delhi's 'Dusty South'

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/06/08/muddy-waters-in-delhis-dusty-south/

2015-6-8

Matt Birkinshaw writes on the discretionary nature of essential services and blurring of public and private power on Delhi's unauthorised periphery. He also reflects on how things are beginning to change under AAP rule.



At the edge of south Delhi, beyond the wealthy enclaves synonymous with the city's elite, stands one of Delhi's largest unauthorised urban areas, tucked in a corner by the Haryana Border. Around the time the area was first occupied it was the site of intensive mining, feeding the city's continual need for construction materials. Many inhabitants were originally drawn by this work, but as output from the mines diminished, and court judgements called for mining to cease, the land was declared a wildlife sanctuary instead. However, the workers who had settled in the locality stayed on, rebuilding their homes after repeated rounds of demolition by the municipal government.

Today the area is a thriving, vibrant locality at Delhi's south-eastern fringe. The land was originally owned by a nearby urban village inside an ancient fort. The local MP and many key political players are from this village. The area is 'unauthorised' because village agricultural land was illegally sub-divided and sold but the location is not zoned for housing. Ownership of the eastern side is doubly contested as the Forest Department (rather than the Delhi Development Authority) claims ownership of the land. Unauthorised areas face continual struggles for civic amenities, and aspire to 'regularisation' which will allow them to merge with the 'legal' city. The marginal urban service provision is reflected in maps of the area which show a gradual thinning out of infrastructure the further south one looks.

Water of several kinds

The unauthorised colony under discussion has well-known water issues. Resident's frequently tell me that it is 'Asia's largest unauthorised colony' (in English). They also frequently tell me that 'water is a big problem here' (in Hindi). The first is contestable, the second – for most people – hardly.

Despite the presence of government pipes in some areas, the colony is not currently given piped water supply from the state water utility, Delhi Jal Board (DJB). Government supply is currently groundwater through tubewells or water tanker trucks, both of questionable quality and limited frequency and neither guaranteed. As with other scarce commodities, political and social connections allow preferential access to borewell and tanker water – and the privileged in particular are able to capture both exclusively. For example, the tubewell in the photo below has seven connections, six for the six lanes it serves and one as a private line to the house of a local party worker, who is also managing the tubewell. This party, now in opposition, is described as being 'in a fighting mode', sometimes literally as a number of people I have met have been physically attacked by opposition party members.



Figure 1: Tubewell with additional personal connection

General water supply is provided through local pipe networks from *sarkari* DJB tubewells serving from 200-600 households on rotation. This tends to mean 20-30 mins of water every two to six weeks. There are also 'private' tubewells, again operating through local pipe networks at a similar frequency. In fact the line between the two is very blurry as *sarkari* tubewells have a tendency to get 'captured' by locally powerful people who then collect payments for water. Payments for private piped supply can run around Rs600-700 per month, with further connection charges at the consumer's own cost. DJB tubewells which are not 'captured' still operate with elastic pricing through the *kholnewala* system, which sees a local resident responsible for turning the valves to deliver water to different *gallis* (lanes) under the tubewell's command area. Although officially these workers are employed directly by the DJB junior engineer for that area and entitled to collect a charge of Rs150 per connection per month (to provide their salary and cover repairs), the actual amount charged and spending on repairs varies. As this colony borders the Aravali Hills and lies above Delhi's quartzite aquifer, ground water supply is highly variable. It is undoubtedly, however, falling rapidly and this renders *kholnewalas* caught between the demands of their clientele and the decreasing yields of the submersible pumps which are already operating at capacity and have a tendency to break down when run at greater depths.

Water from these pipelines is used mostly for general uses such as cleaning, washing and cooking. If they can afford it, no one will drink it without treatment. The other source of general water, used when piped water has run out, are government and private tankers ordered through telephone (The drivers and consumers I've spoken to tell me that ordering water is just like ordering a pizza), or in some cases, with a regular weekly delivery point. Private tankers can be (and are) filled with borewell water for sale and in the event of DJB tanker loads being sold privately, a refill from a bore is also possible. The existence of small-scale filtering plants for production of 'local' bottled water in 20 litre cans allows another profitable use of bores.

Water supply businesses (wells, tankers, cans) also provide a potentially lucrative source of investment for those with surplus capital (often made through property investment) as well as a source of employment for the many underemployed young men in the area. However, there is no active division of territory by water tankers or organised conflict between tanker crews, and while there may be some collusion on pricing this is common in any private sector supply chain (juice shops, for example). Private tanker charges vary but are said to be around Rs600-

700 in winter and up to Rs1,200-1,500 in summer. DJB tankers are nominally free, although runs are frequently diverted to those willing to pay 'in black' for the water. A small consideration may also allow the delivery point to be adjusted in order to minimise the distance that heavy buckets and cans of water have to be carried in the Delhi heat.

The suitability of both piped and tanker water for drinking is doubtful. Indeed, for drinking, even very poor short-term migrant recycling workers living in *jhuggi-jhompri* shacks will buy 'canned' water in 20l bottles rather than trust the untreated groundwater that arrives in their boss's tankers. This adds up to a sizeable percentage of monthly household income (10-20%). People who cannot afford 'saf' (clean) water will boil water and often get sick. More wealthy households will install RO (reverse osmosis) filters on their DJB and private connections.

Public services (सरकारी सुविधा) and 'public service' (जनता का सेवा)

Provision of state services in this unauthorised colony is complicated. It would be inaccurate to present the situation as denial or absence of state agencies (or their subcontractors). However, what many of these forms of government intervention have in common is their discretionary nature.



Figure 2: Flooded street in Delhi. Most residents are concerned with immediate issues: sewers that don't overflow, water that comes more than once a fortnight, navigable roads, better education for their children and affordable healthcare.

Requests for water tankers in emergencies or as a supplement to inadequate supply should be fed through the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) office. Requests can be submitted directly to the DJB but residents tell me that without political support, tankers have a much lower chance of arriving. Applications for new tubewell boring or reboring must be submitted by a written petition to the MLAs office. Similarly, public works are done through funds under the MLA or Municipal Councillor's four crore (Rs40,000,000) discretionary funds. Thus there is a direct material relationship between voters and their political representatives. While unauthorised colonies in higher value areas of more central South Delhi may benefit from public works being undertaken by government departments for their own purposes, many other peripheral unauthorised colonies have to continually push for public work and are dependent on the goodwill of a political representative able to authorise, fund and personally oversee that 'work gets done'.

In the area under discussion, as in other unauthorised colonies, slums and urban villages *pradhans* (local leaders) are active as intermediaries between residents and the state. The work of *pradhans* varies. Many are not elected and may have interests in both property and water. Residents who do not understand the system may find *pradhans* a useful local point of call for dealing (not always effectively) with their problems. As for the 'higher' politicians, residents characteristically say that before elections the politicians promise them water ('vote de do aur panni de

denge') as well, as other civic services, but that after elections nothing is heard from them.

Progress under AAP

This southern corner of Delhi is a key marginal seat in the State Assembly Elections. With a large population of inter-state migrants, for whom obtaining the documents required to vote is not easy, the number of registered voters is very low (around 30%). When the area voted in the Delhi elections earlier this year the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) again beat the BJP by a small majority. The area was previously under Congress and BJP control and the BJP MP is credited with having pushed through plans to bring the colony onto the DJB network. Under the recent AAP government this work has continued, and in some areas public Sonia Vihar water pipelines (currently non-functioning) now run in parallel to public and private tubewell networks. At the moment Sonia Vihar water runs only up to the village at the northern end of the colony but there are plans to extend the service to the entire area.

While the unauthorised colony waits, one of the AAP party offices in the area has a dedicated staff member to track tanker arrivals and non-deliveries and act as intermediary between residents and the DJB functionaries and tanker drivers (who are employed by the tanker owners and hence unaccountable to the DJB or MLAs). Similarly in other water-stressed areas of South Delhi, MLAs have deputed staff to the tanker filling stations and a certain number of tankers for emergency supply come under the MLA staff's direct control. The more desirable regular 'point' deliveries however remain with the DJB.

Borewells are also seen as an imperfect solution and the staff at the MLA office are disinclined to provide more. As noted above, in this area (and other cities such as Patna and Mumbai) wells are prone to capture by locally powerful people, a fact well-known to AAP workers which leads them to see increasing the number of tubewells as simply increasing opportunities for rent-seeking and conflict over water. AAP functionaries and other researchers suggest that provision of tubewells is a convenient way for politicians to exercise (limited and discretionary) benevolence towards needy populations without solving the underlying problem. The AAP staff I spoke with placed a stress on giving water supply 'properly' (the English word was used) to whole of the colony and doing away with the faulty systems that give rise to patronage and local power politics. The current government has now been in power over 100 days. Although there is still much more to do, considerable changes are already evident while others are working their way through the channels of bureaucracy.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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