

Urban Water Supply: Contestations and Sustainability Issues in Greater Bangalore

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Abstract

The move towards privatization of public utilities such as water sector in India, particularly in the metropolitan areas, has gone hand in hand with the growing gap between demand and supply of water. With fiscal discipline being the key mantra of successive governments, cost recovery as a policy goal is prioritized over access to water and sanitation. This paper is a critical assessment of Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP), which aims to provide piped water to more than twenty lakh residents in Greater Bangalore. The implementation of the Karnataka Groundwater Act, 2011, and the debates around it are also examined in detail. The four main arguments are: huge gap between rhetoric and ground realities when it comes to the implementation of GBWASP and the Groundwater Act; the contestations between the elected representatives and bureaucrats have implications for urban governance; the axes of dispute between the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board and citizens have changed over time; the politics of negotiating access to water also bring questions of sustainability to the fore.

Keywords: Borewell, Privatization, Water

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Introduction

The Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP) was launched in 2003 in Bangalore and is implemented by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB). The project has two components: a water supply one and an underground drainage one. This paper shall focus on the first. This project represents a watershed in the history of Bangalore's water politics in that for the first time we see a novel structure in terms of its financing, with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) playing a pivotal role in its design. Two distinguishing features of this project are:

- a. Beneficiary Capital Contribution (BCC, collected as 'GBWASP charges'): for the first time, capital contributions were sought from all citizens and business enterprises seeking water connection to recover the costs of investment beforehand, which ostensibly made them 'stakeholders' in the project.
- b. Market borrowings: market borrowings are accessed by issuing municipal bonds on behalf of the urban local bodies (ULBs) involved.

This shift in the policymaking from the welfarist approach where the state incurred a 100% of the expenditure towards a neoliberal style of governance involving 'responsibilization' whereby the state raises the funds required for the implementation of the project through market borrowings and upfront financial contribution from the residents is illustrative of the emphasis of decision makers on market principles of efficiency and cost recovery over equity and greater accessibility. The underlying notion is the Thatcherian principle that people have to take care of themselves; otherwise, there would be 'welfare dependency', with people being 'passive recipients'. This model suggested by the USAID's Financial Institutions Reform and Expansion (FIRE-D) was preferred by the KUIDFC over Housing and Urban Development Corporation Limited's (HUDCO) offer of a loan for the financing of the project.

The second legislation that I would like to examine is the Karnataka Groundwater (Regulation and Control of Development and Management) Act, which was passed by the Karnataka Legislative Assembly in November 2011. Under this act, all commercial and domestic borewell users have to register themselves with the BWSSB, the failure of which shall entail borewell disconnection. Failure to compliance could also result in a penalty of up to ten thousand rupees and/or imprisonment up to three years. The act came into force in December 2012 in Bangalore Urban District after a severe water crisis in the summer of 2012. The BWSSB initiated a registration drive in 2013.

Once again, this legislation shows how the poor, the majority of whom depend on groundwater sources for their domestic and commercial needs, get adversely affected as they are required to pay an extra sum of fifty or five hundred rupees respectively in addition to their monthly water bill. According to data collected from the BWSSB, one out of every five households in Bangalore has a borewell connection along with BWSSB connection. This means that the monthly water bill itself will come up to around two-three hundred rupees, which is quite high relative to the income-level of the people who live at the periphery of Bangalore. The trade-off between sustainability and access to basic needs shall be discussed in a while.

Methodology

The paper is based on an ethnographic study on water politics in Greater Bangalore which was conducted during May-June 2014. Data on the GWASP and the Groundwater Act were gathered through more than sixty in-depth interviews with BWSSB officials, ward committee members, journalists, and researchers. These interviews were supplemented with media articles. Fieldwork was conducted in the 159th and 160th wards of BBMP i.e. in the areas of Kengeri and Rajarajeshwari Nagar respectively. Formerly a near bankrupt town municipal council (TMC), the two areas were among the eight ULBs officially incorporated into BBMP in 2007. The nature of the interviews was semi-structured, which facilitated me in getting information on perceptions of GBWASP and Groundwater Act, understanding different rationalities of payment, and the politics of engagement with the state in this regard.

Water politics as a case of discrepancies between rhetoric and realities

At first, the project stated that residents had to make a lump sum payment, with the amount varying with respect to the nature of the entity (residential or commercial), type of entity (individual house or apartment), and area occupied (for instance, owners of

residences of area less than 600 square feet were recognized as 'urban poor' and were exempted from it). After protests and several rounds of negotiation with the officials, an alternate mode of payment was agreed upon: residents could pay the 'GBWASP charges' over a period of twenty four months, which would be added to their monthly water bill. Even so, for residents of revenue layouts and informal settlements, who have to first regularize their land tenure, get their khata patra, and then pay the requisite amount specified by BWSSB, it came up to a considerable figure, sometimes of the range of one's monthly salary.

The above instance exemplifies the fact that the 'peripheralized middle class' of Greater Bangalore used payment as a bargaining tool for gaining legitimacy and respectability in the eyes of the State (Ranganathan 2014). It shows how rule is compromised over and accomplished (Li 1999) and how market-oriented rationalities, rather than merely being contested, eventually do gain legitimacy. Moore's understanding of 'hegemony' particularly suits this context: a process by which the subordinated are recruited into projects of their own rule through 'identifying their particular interests with a more universalizing one' (Moore 2005:11, quoted in Ranganathan 2014). Malini Ranganathan contends, "The political agency of the peripheralized middle class does not show signs of resistance so much as it demonstrates a range of tactics... often in ways that reproduce rather than challenge given power structures" (ibid). While there was resistance to the payment of BCC till 2009, such protests are no longer visible, at least not to the same extent. This was corroborated in my interviews with residents and BWSSB officials that residents, even those from low-income neighbourhoods, pay GBWASP charges. Whether or not they get water on time is a different matter altogether.

With respect to the Groundwater Act, while the stated purpose of tracking groundwater exploitation seems noble enough, the mechanisms the BWSSB has adopted in its attempt to materialize it have been shoddy. The water supply board launched a registration drive in early 2013 announcing March 31 as the deadline. With only a thousand people registering by then, coupled with other delays, the deadline had to be extended two more times, and the BWSSB finally closed registrations on July 31 (New Indian Express 2013). Even so, out of the 1.75 lakh odd connections which exist in the city according to a BWSSB executive engineer, around 50,000 people had registered their borewell connections. This shows that the BWSSB has not been successful in this process.

However, the problem does not end here. In fact, the complications begin here. With the threat of imprisonment and fine looming large, residents most of whose borewells had dried up were left in a dilemma as to whether or not to register. The following extract illustrates the point: "I have been trying to register my borewell although it has dried up and we don't get any water from it. The bank would not simply accept my application because it has a problem with the application number given by BWSSB for registration. Why should we should deposit Rs 50 for a borewell which doesn't yield water? We had to dig a sump to store water some months ago by spending around Rs 50,000. Also, the quality of water we get from BWSSB is not good," asked Ashok Venkataraman, a resident of Basavanagudi." (Times of India 2013). The BWSSB officials were clueless when asked about this. The engineer-in-chief told that they were yet to hold a meeting to decide on the matter.

While the water supply component of GBWASP was originally intended to be completed by 2008, it is still far from being so. Several localities such as Mahadevapura, HBR Layout, C V Raman Nagar, and Kengeri are not serviced properly. Many respondents who had paid the required GBWASP and related charges had not received water supply after almost a year. Even in those areas which are getting water supply, the residents are not receiving water every day. The whole point of launching GBWASP Cauvery Stage IV Phase II was to provide 24/7 access to all residents which are covered under this project. But, that has not materialized as yet. Low-income neighbourhoods such as Janata Colony and Jagajyothi Extension in the Kengeri ward receive water only twice a week, that too in inadequate amounts as a result of which they have had to resort to sourcing water from private tankers. Each load of water typically costs around six hundred rupees, and they had to get two-three loads per month, which is quite high considering the income level of the residents.

Contestations between citizens and bureaucrats

While there were initial disputes regarding BCC, they were 'resolved', by way of negotiating with the BWSSB through elected local representatives. With the bringing of eight ULBs under the aegis of Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the residents of these former City and Town Municipal Councils (CMCs and TMCs) no longer enjoyed the political space and leverage they once did. Elected representatives were no longer consulted about the feasibility of the project and the mode of negotiation for the residents changed. Parastatal agencies (in this case the KUIDFC) which report directly to the state government did that.

In case of the Groundwater Act, the BWSSB (at least the top brass) was thinking of forming squads to crack down on unregistered borewells and tubewells. What is important in this regard is that the state or even the bureaucracy cannot be taken a single entity. That would obscure the complexities that emerge in the politics of water reforms. In this context, the response to water crisis differed between the higher echelon engineers and secretaries and low-rung officials.

While the top bureaucrats, far removed from ground realities, thought crackdown was the way to go, the inspectors at service stations and junior engineers differed from this. In our interview, the BWSSB inspector, when asked to comment on the engineer-in-chief's claim of disconnecting 'illegal' connections, said that they caused the water supply board a loss of around four-six crores per month. Even so, he thought that the claim of disconnection was practically impossible, because elected representatives would surely bring pressure on them to prevent or stop such an endeavour, the obvious reason being that water is a basic need, something without which one cannot survive, and therefore people would go to great lengths to ensure that they can access water, one way or another. Solomon Benjamin's (2008:723) concept of 'occupancy urbanism' rightly captures this phenomenon. 'Occupancy urbanism' implies politics that is essentially centred on land relations by which low-rung officials are influenced to get access to services and regularise tenure.

In both cases, one can see a pattern of top-level bureaucrats and parastatal agencies drafting watershed legislations while being totally distanced from realities. This gap between rhetoric and reality adversely affects the urban poor who have to incur great costs

as the state withdraws itself from the water sector and constricts the sources of water available for the poor to meet their daily needs.

To rub salt on one's injury, then there is the issue of corruption. To gain insights into how deep-rooted corruption is in water sector in Bangalore, I interviewed journalists and independent researchers, apart from residents of Kengeri and Rajarajeshwari Nagar. One unanimous response was that corruption existed when it came to applying for new connections, although corruption was not reported with respect to service, in case of a repair or billing. Notwithstanding, one of the respondents said that the officials had to be given a bribe for pretty much everything, and the residents from the unplanned, low-income neighbourhoods ended up paying a lot more as they had to start from scratch. Some respondents, despite paying the requisite charges (bribe included) which amounted to 25000-30000 rupees had not received water, with the BWSSB officials giving them flimsy excuses such as non-submission of proper documents etc.

Sustainability issues: A change in the incentive structure?

The irony with respect to GBWASP is that, while the residents who had paid for the new water connections didn't receive a drop of water with their borewells also dried up, the BWSSB had been flushing out millions of litres of water every day. When enquired as to why this was happening, the sloppy excuse that was given was that the extra 150 mld (million litres of water a day) was drawn to clean the pipes.

A key issue that emerged in the context of GBWASP and the Groundwater Act is that of the incentives to opt for corporation or Cauvery water. As of now, residents pay more to get corporation water than they pay for borewell. In other words, citizens have no incentive to choose the former over the latter with the exception of long-term sustainability. Notwithstanding the fact that over 16000 borewells have gone dry in the city, people tend to do a short-term cost-benefit analysis, which leads them to opt for a borewell connection. For instance, several residents of Gandhinagar whom I interviewed had approached the BWSSB for a new borewell connection, and not a Cauvery connection. In fact, they had been fighting about it with the officials, with the reasons being rather straightforward. If one opts for a borewell connection, one has to pay fifty rupees for a one BHK house, and three hundred rupees for an apartment. On the other hand, if one chooses Cauvery connection, one will end up paying at least Rs. 500 per month, not including the amount they might have to pay in case they source water from private tankers (depending on the frequency of water supply from the board). Therefore, it makes sense economically for people to choose a borewell connection over corporation connection. Nonetheless, this poses serious challenges to the groundwater table of Bangalore, whose only other source of water lies a hundred kilometres away.

The BWSSB has to not only change its incentive structure to make the choice of corporation water more viable, but has to strive to minimize the gap between its rhetoric and reality. If daily water supply is ensured (which is the stated goal of GBWASP), then people would have a feasible alternative to groundwater sources, which are unreliable. This is because, in the short-run, while it might make sense to opt for a borewell connection, the fear of it drying up is always present among the residents. In other words, the BWSSB can tap this insecurity and make it less attractive. However, before that, it has to first make sure that pipelines are

laid in all the areas which are covered under BBMP and that water is being supplied in sufficient quantities. According to data collected by The Hindu (2013), about '34 percent of the 900 mld goes unaccounted for thanks to 'illegal' and free connections'. But, the illegality of these connections is itself not straightforward. Rather, the access to and payment for services are leveraged for recognizing 'legality' of land tenure and citizenship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper argues that the huge gap between rhetoric and ground realities when it comes to the implementation of GBWASP and the Karnataka Groundwater Act have adversely affected the urban poor in Greater Bangalore. The axes of dispute between the BWSSB and citizens have changed over time: in 2007-08, it was more around GBWASP; in 2014-15, it is more around the Groundwater Act. While the issue of corruption is prevalent, it is not ubiquitous: people bribe the officials when getting a new connection, but not for subsequent services. The politics of negotiating access to services has changed for several neighbourhoods over time, especially after the eight ULBs were incorporated into BBMP in 2007. Because parastatal agencies report directly to the state government and not local representatives, who do not have a voice in the decisions taken with respect to these policies and legislations, residents of revenue layouts and informal settlements find it even more difficult to get basic utilities. The lack of appropriate incentives has resulted in people preferring borewell connections over Cauvery water resulting in a loss of around four-six crores to the state. This needs to be changed, not only from an economic perspective, but more importantly, because of the sustainability issues that surface thereof.

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