

Migrants Fighting for Water Rights: Sangam Vihar and Deoli, Delhi

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Introduction

What does the flow of water tell us about a city, its people and its mechanism of politics? Does this relationship give us insights into urban ecology and politics? In what ways are city, nature and social power interlinked? The paper aims to understand the politics of accessibility of water and the aspiration for ‘piped water’ among the residents of a city. It is an ethnographic study based on fieldwork carried out during legislative assembly and municipal corporation elections to ascertain the nature of articulation on the issues of water, the plight of migrants and terms of negotiation between the state and citizens. The authors conducted the fieldwork over five years in three phases, between 2015 and 2019, at two adjacent legislative assembly constituencies of south Delhi: Sangam Vihar and Deoli. The method of research in the field comprised interviews of the residents and focused group discussions (FGDs).

Along with narratives collected from the field, the writing also builds upon the content analysis of newspaper reports and documents provided by the residents. The significance of the research lies in its attempt to examine and interrogate the nuances of social power and politics at the urban ‘periphery’¹ through the study of the everyday struggle of the residents, mostly comprising migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In short, the paper explores a new dimension of a migrant citizen – ‘hydraulic citizenship’² – a form of belonging to the city that is enabled by social and material claims made by the city’s water infrastructure. The last section of the paper will reflect upon the conception of gendered water based on fieldwork done in the two constituencies.

City, Nature and Social Power: Hydraulic Citizenship

Among various significant transformative developments that have shaped India’s economy, polity, and society, the migration of a large populace from rural areas of north Indian states to

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metro cities is crucial. Development-induced migration and its socio-economic and cultural patterns have been well captured in scholarship in recent years. However, not much attention has been paid to the plight of migrants facing water crises at the destination. Few studies have been done on the political, economic and cultural dimensions of water scarcity in those parts of a city where migrants live. It is an undeniable truth that the complex web of ‘metabolism of cities’ (Wolman 1965, 179) necessarily relies on the perpetual circulation of water into, through, and out of the city.

In addition, it is important to underline that water, like food, is now both a biological necessity and an economic commodity. Also, water is, historically, of intricate symbolic and cultural importance in diverse civilisational discourses. In modern cities, water is routinely organised and distributed by a highly centralised bureaucratic mechanism, and thus the role of the state is central (Wittfogel 1957; Worster 1985; Lorrain 1997; Donahue and Johnston 1998). Such a bureaucratised system, mostly publicly owned but privately managed, has led to monopolistic control over water by a powerful social and political class. Eventually, as we will see through the ethnographic account of the everyday struggle of citizens lower down in the ‘hierarchy’, urban water supply system and access to it mostly rely on the perpetual transformation, control and extraction of groundwater.

In light of the nexus of water, money and social power against the setting of slums in cities, the socio-political citizen-state relationship and its everyday aspect can be seen in terms of the concept of ‘hydraulic citizenship’ (Anand, 2011). The whole edifice of the water distribution mechanism, the access to and exclusion from it for certain sections of the population open a new site of politico-economic contestation. In metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, with a lack of inadequate water supply systems, the political system appears to be deeply embedded in local level social, economic and, obviously, political struggles for control over water in different pockets.

The study of two localities in the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi demonstrates, through an ethnographic account of the everyday struggle for ‘piped water’, the culture of politics that has evolved around it. We will see how the flow of water, flow of money and, consequently, the flow of power are deeply enmeshed in the ‘periphery’ of a city’s civic set-up. Through the interrogation of the nexus between local politicians and middlemen, both the public and private agents are found to be strongly implicated in this struggle for the command over water and, ultimately, power.

To seek water supply, varied interest groups in the city resort to various tactics – from manipulation to creating pressure at opportune moments. Sangam Vihar is not an exception to this. In his study of the accessibility of water in Mumbai (2011), Nikhil Anand differentiates between ‘technologies of politics’ and ‘politics of technology’. In the context of Mumbai, he asserts that the former is enabled by laws, politicians and patrons, and the latter by plumbing,

pipes and pumps. This framing seems to hold in the case of Sangam Vihar. Every time elections come around, different political parties approach the residents of Sangam Vihar with promises to make piped water available at the earliest. The residents also point out that those close to the ruling political parties have less difficulty getting water.

A newspaper report quotes a resident of Sangam Vihar:

‘This place today has become the largest and most congested colony of the capital. Illegal construction is rampant. Renting a house has become cheap, but basic facilities like water remains a dream. No wonder mafias have taken over water and housing, the two basic needs of locals,’ said Kumar, who runs a shop in the area (Srivastava 2018).

A similar narrative appears in another report, which highlights that rent is relatively affordable in this area, but the land is almost as costly as the most exclusive areas of Delhi:

Abnormally high rates, equal to those in many of the better parts of Delhi, and extremely low rents: that’s the contrast in Asia’s largest illegal colony. Real-estate agents and tenants attribute this mismatch to owners hanging on to their land and parking their ‘black money’ here, in the hope that the colony will turn official one day. They also allege that, in the meantime, they act as a sort of cabal to ensure that the rates remain high. Property dealers say a majority of the residents are tenants who are mostly migrants from other states. Ownership, however, lies with those who bought land before the influx of 2005, following the arrival of electricity, or with powerful players who control the market, mostly builders from outside (Bhardwaj 2015c).

It will be appropriate to recall here that the local politics in Delhi was dominated by the bi-party contest in the 1990s and 2000s between the Congress and BJP. The dramatic rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the backdrop of the Anna Hazare movement and its coming to power in 2015, initially for 49 days and then subsequently for full five years’ term, transformed the narrative of party politics in Delhi. Kejriwal led AAP government in Delhi has brought the ‘everyday’ issues of the residents to the core of political mobilisation, and thus, the meta-narrative of ‘nationalism’ and ‘development’ lost its sheen.

Sangam Vihar: The Location

Sangam Vihar, an illegal/unauthorised colony in south Delhi, is also one of the seventy legislative assembly constituencies of the Delhi state assembly (see Priyam 2014b). This area suffers from water shortage and witnesses frequent protests by residents for better water supply. It is a densely populated area with very poor basic amenities. The narrow streets with open sewer lines are testimonies to the suffering of the residents:

Typically, illegal, seen within the prisms of planning, Sangam Vihar is described as an ‘unauthorised colony’ – a category of space where the authority of the state steadfastly refuses to recognise land-citizen relationships in a manner so complete as to not just refrain from grant of tenure and titles, but forbid even the basic right to water and waste disposal, including of daily human excreta (Priyam, 2014b).

The constituent assembly of Sangam Vihar was carved out of the Tughlakabad constituency in 2008. If one tries to ascertain the tangible gains achieved by the newly constituted assembly seat, based on the narratives of woes we noted in our three rounds of fieldwork, it appears to be too little and too late. We will come back to the assessment of gains at an appropriate place in the paper.

A report dubs Sangam Vihar Asia’s largest unauthorised/biggest illegal colony (Bhardwaj 2015a). The report states that while the colony has an estimated population of 10 lakhs, merely 1.37 lakh are registered as voters. A part of the colony comes under the adjoining Deoli assembly constituency, and thus, many residents vote there. This report highlights the ambiguity over the population of the area and quotes a member of the Election Commission:

‘When delimitation was done on the basis of the 2001 census, Sangam Vihar had a population of 2 lakhs. It would have increased to a maximum of 3 lakhs now. A population of 8-10 lakh is not possible there. We gave electoral rolls to political parties, organised several camps for revising the rolls and included more voters. If there was so much population, it would have surfaced’ (ibid.).

Many residents in the area don’t have a voter card or PAN card since they lack any valid document to provide as address proof. Interestingly, some residents don’t feel the need for such documents since no property tax is imposed because it is an illegal colony. What all many of our respondents could muster to produce were bank account details and/or school certificates, none of which were admissible as address or identity proof. The local shopkeepers show little interest in Goods and Services Tax (GST) filing. It appears that the migrant residents of Sangam Vihar are nameless, faceless inhabitants of the Indian state. As Bhardwaj writes, ‘The ability to impose taxes, the provision of basic services, the assertion of national symbols and policing are means by which a state establishes its sovereignty over a territory and residents. None of the above exists in Sangam Vihar’ (ibid.). Living in an area lacking basic facilities such as water supply and sanitation, the residents face an everyday struggle for recognition as citizens with civic rights and survival. The national capital and a metropolitan city, Delhi faces a stark reality: ‘as water is transmitted to and distributed through the city, it produces regimes of management and marginalised’ (Swyngedouw 2004).

As underlined in the report, there are two types of residents in Sangam Vihar – those who have documents (such as Aadhar, passport and voter I-card) to prove that they are its legal

residents and those who lack such valid papers. To understand why this has happened, we need to delve a little deeper into the history of this colony. On the outskirts of the NCR, Sangam Vihar underwent a major transformation in the early 1980s when the original inhabitants – Gujjars and Jats, the two dominant landowning Other Backward Classes (OBCs) of Delhi – sold their land to private individuals. Some of these private individuals installed borewells and laid pipelines to their houses. Subsequently, in the 1990s and the following decades, as a major influx of migrants from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to Delhi occurred, the population swelled disproportionately to the available basic amenities such as electricity and water supply. Eventually, the mushrooming tiny houses, constructed haphazardly on the relatively cheap land in the area, became a thorn in the flesh of a ‘world-class’ city. In 2005, with a massive electrification drive in the area, a new wave of modernisation started and, with that, hundreds of thousands of new population increased the pressure on already decrepit basic amenities.

A Site of Water Woes

The residential areas of Sangam Vihar are almost out of bounds for four-wheelers. Even three-wheelers, such as the shared auto service, will drop you only to limited residential areas within. A large part of the road infrastructure is non-motorable. For those who have been to the remote areas of Bihar of the 1990s, Sangam Vihar would be reminiscent of that bygone era of crumbled infrastructure. Very little has changed during our three visits in the last five years: twice in November of 2015 and 2019 and once in April of 2017. The K and L blocks, near the landmark of Asthal Mandir, one of the area’s biggest temples, is a microcosm of Sangam Vihar in more ways than one; that is why we selected them for the study. Asthal Mandir is a shared space where residents offer their devotion according to their respective faith. We were told it has a small mosque and a church along with a temple. We had an FGD with several residents, specifically on water issues and the approaching elections. Most of the respondents were migrants from different districts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and had been living in the locality for more than two decades.

Wherever we went in these two blocks, residents were more than eager to talk about the condition of the area. Ram Prakash Lodhi, working as a security guard in Okhla – probably the most enthusiastic respondent throughout the discussion – was very systematic in his responses to our queries. He came to Delhi in 1984 in search of employment and eventually settled in Sangam Vihar in 1996. He had started a small business of dyeing clothes but had to close that due to water shortage. It became evident that he was an ardent supporter of the Bhartiya Janata Party’s Vijay Jolly, a former member of the legislative assembly (MLA) of the area. He felt that Jolly had done a lot for this area, but hardly any work had been done during Kejriwal’s brief regime. Lodhi named four major problems in that area in order of their severity: the shortage of water; dilapidated roads and sewage issues; the distance of hospitals; and lack of a community hall to organise any function. He called it ‘a *kachchi*

colony³ and also pointed to the lack of parks, adding that similar problems are found in many such colonies.

Residents of K and L blocks claimed that over the years, there have been no improvement inroads, which are bumpy and with huge potholes, and that the inadequate water supply costs them a lot more now. If the poor roads are a sure way of meeting with accidents, water scarcity – with supply only once in fifteen days and sometimes even once a month – is a surer means to fall ill. With six to seven members in one family calling for average consumption of water of around 1000 litres per day, one can only imagine the plight of the residents. During the summer months, people are unable to bathe for three to four days. People have constructed underground water storage near their houses with a capacity of 7000 to 8000 litres. When the supply water comes, they store it and then use a motor to transfer the water to tanks on their terrace.

However, the water is sometimes contaminated due to being stored for a long time. The residents have to add some medicine to disinfect it. If the water is not clean, the municipal corporation penalises them. One of our respondents complained, ‘We store the supply water, but it gets dirty eventually. Then the municipal corporation creates problems and asks us to pay a fine on the pretext that stored water may spread dengue and malaria.’ Consumption of dirty water leads to diarrhoea, but people are not able to afford clean drinking water. They don’t use RO as filtration often leads to wastage of water. When we asked about the water they use for worship, a woman answered, ‘We keep a separate bucket for that purpose, but we can only offer the same water to God that we consume.’

As the water level in the locality is critically low, it is not possible to dig borewells in large numbers. Thus, the local people are entirely dependent on the meagre supplied water. Eventually, as evident in the consensus of the responses despite the diverse ideological affiliations of the respondents, it appears that residence in this locality is not possible without submitting oneself to the ‘illegal’ acts of the state. No matter how ambiguous and oxymoronic it may sound, that appeared to be the ground reality. One respondent, a motor mechanic and a ‘permanent’ settler of this colony put this point across directly:

See, every time you are mentioning *rajya-rajya (state)*, just say government, and let me tell you what all your *rajya* does for us. There are two types of supply water: drinking and non-drinking water. If the government supply water does not come for a long time, people call the private tankers which cost them Rs 4000 for a tanker. People of this area have organised several protests demanding a better water supply. They use the slogan ‘Road, *Paani, Naali*’ during protests. The fact is, and we got to know about it eventually after months of struggle, the tanker mafias of the locality are relatives of either high-ranking officers of the Delhi Jal Board or the local representatives.

One group of respondents spoke of how, in every election, they are promised that water supply for the area would be arranged from the Sonia Vihar plant for the residents of Sangam Vihar. They were resentful that water supply from the plant had reached Deoli gaon, but not a drop was available to the residents of Sangam Vihar. Mukesh, a carpenter originally from Begusarai district of Bihar, observed:

Vijay Jolly made the water pipeline functional in this area, but Kejriwal did not do anything. Earlier, the tanker did not cost the residents, but now they have to pay Rs 20 for 30 to 35 litres of drinking water. In 1995–96, people used to fetch water from Deoli or a hand-pump in the nearby forest area.

He shared a disconcerting story: his landlord had told them how he had to use drain water to construct the house. Now, things are relatively better as the pipeline has reached them (though water supply is highly irregular, as we have noted).



Image 1: Borewell provided by the local politicians adjacent to the open drainage. Photograph by Ruchi Shree, on 18.09.2019.

Corruption was the readily available framework frequently cited by the respondents as the long-term cause of their plight. Corruption has led to the flaws in the delivery of services, they asserted: water is stolen and then sold to the people. The residents believed that the tanker mafia was behind the thefts and leakages that added to their water supply woes and that the city's water agency, the Delhi Jal Board, was not keen on fixing leakages because they were protecting the interests of this water mafia by letting this business flourish. One respondent observed despondently, '*Ghar aur bijli ke bina to koi reh bhi sakta hai. Paani ke bina jeene ki to koi kalpana bhi nahin kar sakta*' (One may live without owning a home or without electricity, but no one can imagine living without water). Another

remarked, *'Gaon mein to itna paani hai, shehron mein kya ho gaya?'* (There is enough water in the villages, what has gone wrong in the cities?), hinting at the pilferage of the resource by middlemen operating under the nose of the administration. Almost all our respondents echoed most of the issues discussed by the group in L Block.

Deoli: The Location

Another site of water crisis for the migrants to Delhi was Deoli, an assembly constituency adjacent to Sangam Vihar. Deoli is a legislative assembly constituency and a part of the South Delhi parliamentary constituency of the state of Delhi. As of the 2011 India Census, Deoli had a population of 169,122, with males accounting for 54 per cent. It has an average literacy rate of 84.2 per cent. Deoli is a part of Asia's largest unauthorised settlement along with Sangam Vihar. It adjoins the Asola Wildlife Sanctuary, located on the Delhi Ridge, on the northern part of the Aravalli Hills, one of the world's oldest mountain systems. The sanctuary was established in 1986 on the community lands of the villages Asola, Shapur and Maidangari (4707 acres); the land of Bhatti village (2167 acres) was added in 1991. Ironically, the tag 'sanctuary' may also be applied to the jungle as a safe haven for petty criminal activities, such as the manufacturing of illegal alcohol. The sanctuary limits the possibility of expansion of Deoli.

As one enters the locality, the sights of open drains, waterlogging, extremely narrow, perennially jammed lanes, crowded markets, and swarms of 'Gramin Sewa' shared autos convey the impression of an area that is rural, poorly developed, and neglected by the municipal authorities. The contrast with nearby areas – such as upmarket Saket, Malviya Nagar (that fall in the New Delhi parliamentary constituency), and Sainik Farm, along with a small portion of Deoli itself – is stark. In a way, one may say that this constituency represents the idea of 'Bharat' and 'India' coexisting alongside each other. On the one hand, one finds super expensive private vehicles such as BMWs and Porsches; on the other are shared auto drivers and rickshaw pullers plying in the poorly designed and ill-kept roads leading to the 'outer areas'.

Intensive data was collected from the following areas within L Block of Deoli: Shani Bazaar, Budh Bazaar, identified by residents as L 1st, Valmiki Colony and Christian Colony. Interactions were carried out with people from various communities: Jats, Gujjars, Muslims, Poorvanchalis (upper castes, OBCs and Dalit migrants). Respondents came from diverse professions: auto and taxi drivers, tea vendors, rickshaw pullers, property dealers, shopkeepers, servicemen, painters, school teachers, homemakers, daily vendors and sanitation workers.

L Block welcomes visitors with dust and broken roads full of garbage and stray cattle. The photo reproduced here captures the feel as one enters the block. Randomly parked vehicles, ill-designed houses hardly adhering to any safety standards, and narrow streets speak for this area's underdevelopment.



Image 2: In the middle of the road in the L block of Deoli. Photograph by Shashank, on 17 November 2019.

Civic Amenities in Times of Elections

We noticed that canvassing during the 2015 and 2019 assembly elections in Delhi had greater participation from ideologically motivated individuals, rather than organised groups, volunteering for the AAP and the BJP. Wearing white and saffron caps, respectively, the AAP and BJP volunteers were seen trying to convince the voters about their political ideology during door-to-door campaigns as well as informal conversations on the streets. Interestingly, volunteers were both men and women, young and old.

In L Block of Deoli, responses of the migrant residents to our questions were similar. To the query on election issues, the most common answer during all three visits to the field was the delivery of basic services such as water, power, sanitation and housing (including issues of rent and ownership). Respondents complained of poor water supply in the area and power cuts, and wanted to see efficient delivery of these services. One set of respondents saw the election as a contest between two types of parties – those that promise things and others that would actually act on those promises when elected. In that sense, the main issue in the election was that one had to choose between lofty promises and the possibility of concrete action aimed at the delivery of those promises.

The entry of the AAP into the electoral scene seemed to have provided the voters with a much-needed alternative. The political tussle in the capital had for a long time centred around the BJP and the Congress; voters were excited with the emergence of this new alternative, touted as a much-needed change. Through utterances such as *‘Ek alternative to mila na’*

(at least we got an alternative), the voter was keen to register a sense of dissatisfaction with the existing political scenario. Most respondents believed that not much had changed so far in their lives with a regime change, either at the Centre or the state. In this light, the respondents celebrated the noticeable difference in the political culture of the capital in the previous few months. Significantly, in a major change, people were now asking pointed questions of their legislators, and their mundane, daily problems were acquiring the centre stage in these elections.

A sizeable number of respondents admitted they were supporters of the BJP but would be voting for the AAP as they believed their water problems, electricity supply, and bills of essential services would be taken care of by Kejriwal. Hence, one could conclude that these elections were about very specific issues such as water supply, inflated electricity bills, and corruption in the delivery mechanism. Other issues mentioned by respondents included government schools, primary healthcare, sanitation, and inflation. Corruption was the overall framework in which the respondents could neatly place all these issues. As we have noted for Sangam Vihar, corruption was seen as the factor hobbling the delivery of services. Water supply, for instance, was suffering because of the tanker mafia, whose interests were protected by the Jal Board.

The Land

Rent of residential buildings was found to have gone up by three times during the last few years due to the growing influx of migrants into the locality. Being one of the denser parts of Delhi, Deoli is marked by rampant land grab by the land mafia, which has led to the spiralling of real estate rates. The respondents generally look to the AAP with hope, some expressing the belief that AAP would successfully check the land mafia. Most respondents believed these mafias are part of either the BJP or Congress.

There were some open secrets in the area. Migrant respondents were reluctant to point to tendencies of alcoholism and smoking in the area that appear to take hold from quite an early age among the residents. However, many did express concern about the illegal sale of alcohol in the locality. A respondent estimated that around 300 such liquor shops are being run from home in Deoli. Another asked, *'Bank ATMs khul sakte hain to sarkari theka kyun nahi khol rahi sarkar?'* (If bank ATMs can be opened here, why can't the government open authorised liquor shops?), so that the menace of illegal liquor may stop. A significant amount of country-made liquor comes to the area from the neighbouring state of Haryana via the Asola Wildlife Sanctuary.

The respondents of the area were mainly migrants. The universe of voters in this constituency is almost an exact reflection of caste and class identities as they exist in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Those who had migrated to Deoli from Bihar talked about the constituency

as ‘mini Bihar’, often with a hint of glee. Most of the respondents from Poorvanchal (eastern UP and western Bihar) were extremely eager to talk. This eagerness was altogether missing in the case of respondents who were ‘locals’: the Jats and the Gujjars. Very few of the respondents were willing to discuss the issue of caste in this reserved constituency. The question of regionalism, too, did not seem very significant in the minds of voters, though many spoke of the past or their ‘native place’ in nostalgic tones and phrases such as ‘*hamare wahan (at our place)*’ and ‘*pehle to aisa hota tha (earlier it used to be like this)*’.

One respondent from Deoli, Pappu Kumar, a rickshaw puller in his early thirties who moved to Delhi from the western Bihar district of Chhapra, was philosophical. Even as he spoke of his everyday tribulations in earning a living by pulling a rickshaw in Delhi, he said, ‘*Vote daalne se jeevan badal bhi sakta hai aur nahin bhi. Ye to chakra hai panch saal ka*’ (By casting a vote, one’s life may change and also not change. This is a cycle of five years). He was of the opinion that the voter could force AAP MLAs to work for the voters. On being asked if people like him vote for the same party, he said that these decisions are taken on the eve of the polling day (*katl ki raat*) when people gather and decide on voting for a particular candidate.

Another respondent, Madan Pandey, a Brahmin from the Siwan district of western Bihar, was a resident of Deoli for the last fifteen years. A fifty-six-year-old man, here counted his days spent in Bihar. He came from a family of Congress loyalists. He further added that the decline of the Congress in Delhi and national politics is because Harijans, Brahmins and Muslims have ceased to support the party. After all, the Jajmani⁴ had to continue. ‘I hope you understand what I am trying to say,’ he remarked on a suggestive note.

Like some others, Madan Pandey brought up the binary of wave versus choice (*lahar banam pasand*). He said he would not be wasting his vote by going with the wave. By ‘wave’, Madan appeared to be referring to the BJP’s high-powered campaign in the capital. Based on the experience of the forty-nine days of Kejriwal’s governance, he could ‘comfortably’ conclude that if voted to power with a full majority, Kejriwal would definitely do something. *Kam se kam paani to pahuncha hi dega*’ (At least he will bring water).

About the state of politics in the country, he had this to say: ‘*Rajneeti to nischit roop se achhi hai, Mahabharat kaal se abhi tak*’ (Politics is definitely good since the days of Mahabharat). He remarked, ‘*Sab usase hi chal raha hai. Saam, daam, dand, bhed hi to rajneeti hai. Aur kuchh aaye na aaye paani to jarur usase hi aayega. Aur nahin aaya to sattahatar ki kranti aayegi bhai*’ (Everything works only according to politics. By hook or by crook, that is politics. What else? Only he [Kejriwal] can only bring water to this area. And if it does not come, the revolution of 1977 will definitely come).

He defined politics as a process tied up with the process of social change: *'Parivartan hi rajneeti hai aur ye parivartan vote se hi aayega'* (Social change is politics, and that change would only come because of the ballot). When asked about what ails Indian politics, he said that people today are in haste. They now want quick results. People seem to be discontented. This is a problem. Politics, on the other hand, is a long struggle. People should not think that things and goals will be achieved in a matter of days and months. It goes on for years and many years. They need to be as cool as water but relentless at the same time.

A relative of Pandey's, who also happened to be his neighbour, intervened in the conversation. Satish Chaubey came to Delhi from the Gopalganj district in Bihar. He was of the opinion that at the individual voter level, the ballot is nothing but a veto power that must be exercised. It is the voter alone who decides whom to elect and whom to reject. It is the ballot alone that unites Hindus, Muslims and everyone else. When we asked him about the prospects of contesting candidates, he said, *'Jo unauthorised colony ko deal karega aur paani pahunchayega wohi jeetega'* (The party that deals with the issue of unauthorised colonies and makes water available will win). Sounding like a die-hard supporter of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said that in the Delhi assembly elections, he was supporting not the BJP candidate but Mr Modi: *'BJP ko nahin, desh ke sapoot Modi ko madad kar rahe hain'* (Not helping the BJP but the son of our country, Modi). He believed Modi knows the value of water and money and 'works like a computer'. He felt that with the entry of Narendra Modi on the political scene, politics in India had begun to witness a change, and the perception around politics and politicians, too, had changed.

Ikhlmaq Hussain, thirty-five years old and educated till the ninth standard, was volunteering for the AAP in these elections. We asked him about his reasons for joining politics. He said, *'Rajneeti se pareshaan ho kar hi Rajneeti mein shamil hue'* (I joined politics only because I was tired of politics). He believed that issues facing the country today existed only because of voter apathy. *'Sakriyata ki kami se ye sthiti paida hui'* (due to inaction, such a situation has arisen). He added, 'What should make us good humans is religion and what should give us our daily bread is education. These are some of the basic things needed in life.' He emphasised the need to bring moral values back into the socio-political discourse. Hussain remarked that despite being in power at the Centre for close to a year, the BJP had made no progress on one of their poll promises: bringing money back to India from bank accounts in 'Suziland' (Switzerland). 'How will they bring water?' he questioned.

Trucked Water

The main point of contact and contestation between the residents of the localities – both Sangam Vihar and Deoli – and the state is clearly the issue of the non-availability of water. A series of reports in *The Indian Express* during the 2015 assembly election campaign covered the plight of residents of these areas. One report, 'Where power flows through

water pipelines’, observed that a water tanker could be spotted at every nook and corner of the area, and both the BJP and Congress had earned a bad name as their party members were known to be involved directly and indirectly in the tanker trade, controlling the business of water in the localities (Bhardwaj 2015b). The tanker may be said to be more ubiquitous in the area than people. As reported, the most urgent problem, though, was getting water to the sprawling neighbourhoods of illegally constructed buildings, home to 40 per cent of the city’s slum residents and largely without water lines. Our findings more or less corroborated the newspaper reports.

The Delhi Jal Board sends 900 tankers into these crowded and congested roads every day. A tanker passes every few minutes in some neighbourhoods, its load sloshing down its sides and adding to the already overflowing open drainage on the road. Tankers usually stop for a few minutes, while dozens of people initially queue up and later crowd around with buckets and plastic tubes. In no time, tempers flare in the fierce heat of the Delhi summer; fights are frequent. In the same *Indian Express* report, Sangam Vihar station house officer (SHO) Randhir Singh is quoted: ‘The maximum criminal cases here are registered following fights over water’ (Bhardwaj 2015b). One of our respondents from Sangam Vihar claimed (which was later corroborated by the local police station) that many criminal gangs of the area started as water suppliers, became part of the water mafia, and moved on to other big crimes. A later report claimed, ‘The area has some big names such as gangsters Deepak Pandit, Ravi Gangwal and Rohit Chaudhary who dominate the locality and even control water distribution in their areas. Many water tanker suppliers and groups who control borewells are influenced by these men’ (Srivastava 2018).

The Indian Express report gave more details of how the ‘business’ worked:

Residents say it’s a business that has created many millionaires, some of whom operate a number of tankers. They add they have little choice but to pay Rs 100 for 15 minutes of water – available once a fortnight, a month or even two months – or Rs 700 for 2,000 litres from a private tanker. In fact, all new tenants are first informed about their fixed ‘quota’ – a few buckets a week, and every home looks like a water storage unit – utensils and buckets filled with water stand on terraces and indoors. Kamlesh, mother of five daughters and a son, is livid at the ‘BJP men who control the borewell in her lane’. ‘When I requested them for more water, they said, “Did you ask us before having so many children?” And their leaders ask us to have 10 children. What to do in such circumstances?’ (Bhardwaj 2015b)

In 2018, someone was murdered in Sangam Vihar over a fight for a water connection: ‘life is cheap. Sometimes cheaper than water’ (Srivastava 2018). The same *Hindustan Times* report points out, ‘The state government has failed to provide piped drinking water to this

south Delhi neighbourhood that houses a population of over 1.5 million residents. The resultant water crisis has made Sangam Vihar a haven for criminals and given birth to gangs whose members do not hesitate even to kill for water' (ibid.).

The Politics of Borewell

The water in Sangam Vihar and Deoli areas is supplied by the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) and sold mostly by supporters of politicians who control the main source of water: borewells. *The Indian Express* reported on some claims and counter-claims:

BJP candidate Dr S C L Gupta says when he was elected from herein 2008, the area had only 56 borewells. 'I installed many bore wells,' he says.

According to residents, the number of bore wells during Gupta's tenure was over 175, 'most controlled by BJP men'. 'They charged Rs 500–1000 for a monthly fifteen-minute supply,' says Kalicharan [a resident of Sangam Vihar].

The current MLA, AAP's Dinesh Mohaniya, says he 'nationalised' 35 private borewells in his 49 days in office. He added, 'I made them government property and handed them to a small committee of local residents. They provided water at just Rs 50 per month. I also ensured the sealing of many private borewells,' he says. 'After our resignation, local officials and DJB authorities did not cooperate with us in acquiring more borewells' (Bhardwaj 2015b).

During our research, we met many locals who claimed that now many AAP supporters and relatives of local representatives who managed borewells in the locality were frequently heckled by residents, mainly women, who accused them of charging high prices for water. Is it an early sign of the emergence of a new political class venturing into organised corruption? The residents constantly weighed the state's response to their local issues in the course of their conversation; the likely reason could be underlined in the following quote from Manisha Priyam's experiences of fieldwork in Sangam Vihar:

I gather that it is desperation for water and the lack of ability to make the state hear their grievances that constitutes 'poverty' here, not lack of (any) income or money. Indignity is not simply a historical caste hierarchy that Manu created~more importantly, it is a nonresponsive Weberian hierarchy which the poor legitimise regularly through elections. The state turns a blind eye to providing social welfare and civic amenities to its citizens, and it is this lack of responsibility which leaves the citizens here at the mercy of the police (Priyam 2014a).

Gendered Politics of Water

In the last two decades, a wide range of literature has explored the different dimensions of intersections between gender and water, especially in the context of third world countries in general and South Asia in particular (Zwarteveen, Ahmed and Gautam 2012; Kabeer 2005; Paul 2019). From the macro dimension of water governance and water resource development to the micro dimension of water availability in households, the gender aspect cannot be ignored. In 2015 and 2016, we conducted a few FGDs with women of the Sangam Vihar area to understand how they cope with water shortage.

When we tried to probe their perception of water, some very interesting responses emerged. Shamina, an illiterate woman aged around fifty, said, '*Paani hai to bahut kuchh hai, nahi hai to kuchh bhi nahin*' (If there is water, then one has many things, and in its absence, there is nothing). She said they usually had a bath every three to four days, and even washing clothes was very restricted. Earlier, there were many hand pumps in the streets, but they have been facing severe water crises in the last ten years. In summers, it is not easy to get a water tanker. They spend a large portion of their earnings on water. She added, '*Ramzaan ke dauran to har pandrah din me paani mangana padta hai. Un dinon humen roj nahana hota hai aur din me panch baar vajoo karte hain*' (During Ramzan, we have to call a tanker every fifteen days as it is a must for each family member to bathe every day. We also perform *vajoo* [wash hands and feet before offering prayers] five times a day).



Image 3: After an FGD with women of Sangam Vihar (L Block), photograph by Shashank Chaturvedi on 24/1/2017.

Another respondent named Shagufta said, *'Paani ke mare to sab pagal bhaye pade hain. Sari gali paani mol mangati hai'* (We have all gone crazy after water as the whole street has to buy water for all kinds of use). She said they don't let the children wash the utensils or clean the house as they were likely to waste water. They also collected rainwater for use. Most of the respondents complained of open sewers in the streets and the lack of any system to collect garbage.

One of the respondents, Hoor Bano, introduced us to her daughter-in-law, Shehnaz. When she was in her first year of college, Shehnaz married Hoor Bai's elder son. Her parents live in the Okhla area, where there was no crisis of water. Her husband worked as a tailor in a factory. She was not allowed to study after marriage as her husband was illiterate, and it was considered inappropriate for her to continue her studies. Shehnaz had a nine-year-old daughter, and she was happy about helping her with her homework. Ever since she got married and moved to Sangam Vihar, water shortage had been her biggest problem. She said, *'Meri mummy ke ghar paani hi paani hai. Button dabao, paani bhar jata hai. Main yahan paani ko tarasti hoon'* (In my mother's house, water is so easily available. With just the click of a button, water gets filled in the tanks. Here, I always think about water).

She took us to the terrace to show their four water tanks there. The fifth tank with the capacity of 1000 litres was on the ground floor right in front of their house. The four tanks on the terrace were of four different capacities, ranging from 350 to 1000 litres. We also noticed that the terraces of other houses were full of water tanks. Shehnaz said they end up spending a huge amount of their income on water only, as much as Rs 2500 to 3000 a month. The government's supply water comes once a month or sometimes once in two to three months. Even the government suppliers charge the families Rs 140 per family when they come to supply water. She said those who had political connections easily got water supply. Until the water problem got solved, their situation would not improve, Shehnaz asserted.

Omvati, who migrated from the Badayun district of Uttar Pradesh along with her husband to this area, said, *'Hum tees saal se dhakke kha rahe hain paani ke chakkar mein. Keval sarkari supply se hi theek hoga paani ka haal'* (We've been running after water for the last thirty years. Only government's supply water will improve the water situation). She added, *'Mehman bhi aa jayen to hamen paani ki hi chinta hone lagti hai'* (If guests come, we are so stressed about water).

Conclusion

The growing chasm between the state and its citizens is evident in everyday life of the nation. A careful analysis of the relationship between civil society and the political class suggests that a very sceptical worldview has acquired centre stage in the public imagination.

In terms of the associational relationship between the individuals as citizens and the state, the space of civil society, specifically the access to basic civil benefits, is primarily crowded with corrupt transactions. As evident in Sangam Vihar and Deoli, New Delhi, the space for democratic negotiations has reduced significantly, and the political class across the ideological spectrum is viewed as using mechanisms of the state to promote corruption and middlemen. We can only make these broad observations; we still know surprisingly little about how people negotiate this unique relationship with the state in which almost all their basic needs and rights are necessarily fulfilled through corrupt means and practices.

[Note: Names of all respondents are pseudonyms.]

Notes

1. Originally, James Holston (2009) used this concept to refer to land on the margins of the city of Sao Paulo in Brazil; Manisha Priyam borrowed it for her writing on Sangam Vihar (Priyam 2014a).
2. Nikhil Anand coins this concept in his study of the complex network of water supply in Mumbai (Anand 2011).
3. Locals use this term to denote unorganised colony. The political class promises a *pakki* colony, in successive elections, to the residents.
4. Jajmani system or Yajman system was an economic system most notably found in villages of India in which lower castes performed various functions for upper castes and received grain or other goods in return.

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