

India's Onus

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A woman in a white dress stands on a dry, grassy hillside, holding the Indian national flag (saffron, white, and green) high in the air. The flag is blowing in the wind, creating a sense of movement and freedom. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky.

India: Yearning For More

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**Akin to a Banana
Republic?**

A FORUM FOR FORWARD THINKING INDIANS GLOBALLY

Akin to a Banana Republic?

Asit K Biswas makes a passionate plea for a systemic urban management in India that seems to be passed over for long.

More than six decades after the Independence, India's urban water quality is worse than ever before. Admittedly, the population has grown tremendously. Equally, agricultural and industrial activities and the levels of urbanization have increased significantly. However, even though population of the country is around 1.2 billion and industrial activities and urbanization have increased significantly during the post-Independent period, the country's economic development has also accelerated substantially, as also has its knowledge, experience and technology. There is not a single good reason as to why India's urban population cannot have access to clean water, wastewater cannot be properly treated before being discharged to the rivers, and monsoon rains cannot be promptly drained so transportation and socio-economic systems are not paralyzed. The problems have been known for long, solutions have been known for at least five decades and financial and management needs can be successfully met. Yet, the problems continue to persist. Analysis of the current situations and trends indicate that there is no realistic possibility that the problems will be solved during the next 30 years for most of urban India. Still, why it has not been possible for India to solve its urban water problems?

Let us first consider some myths, which are often used as excuses for the status quo. The first myth finds an echo in Benjamin Disraeli's words: "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics". This is very appropriate for the urban water sector of India. The problem is effectively hidden in the guise of statistical fog. According to the latest report (2010) of WHO and UNICEF, as well as those of the government of India, 98 per cent of urban India has access to "improved sources of water". If one believes that "improved sources" means drinkable water without any adverse health impacts, which most of the world interprets it to mean, they could not be more mistaken. The real fact is that "improved sources" have no linkage to



quality. The water quality of an urban centre may have declined very significantly, as has been the case for many of India towns and cities, but officially they are considered "improved sources". When I proposed the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD) to the Secretary General of the UN Water Conference in early 1976, our thinking was unambiguous. Access to clean water meant that everyone will have clean drinking water which is safe to drink without any health hazard. This convoluted definition of improved sources now means that as long as people have access to water, no matter what is its quality, it is an "improved source". The main consideration should be availability of adequate quantum of water per person, of right quality, and with easy access.

The second myth is there is not enough water to ensure a 24-hour supply. Consider any large Indian city. Usually, the unaccounted for water is over 50%, which is mostly between 40–60 per cent of the supply. Even then, most inhabitants of these cities use more than two to three times the average

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daily consumption of any citizen of Hamburg, Munich or Rotterdam, and consumers are being continuously told that there is not enough water to assure a continuous 24x7 safe water supply. This is seemingly a good excuse, but is utter nonsense. Water is almost free in nearly all Indian cities. Ask any Indian what is h/his electricity bill, s/he would know the actual amount. Ask the same person, what is their water bill, and they invariably would not have a clue. Yet, while municipalities provide almost free water, the coping costs of making that water usable for the Indian householders are quite high and significant.

Nearly, all the households in urban India have now become mini-utilities. When water comes for a few hours a day, it is stored in underground tanks. It is then pumped to an overhead tank from where it is withdrawn for a 24-hour uninterrupted household supply. Each household has its own treatment system,

provided by private sector companies. Now, each household pays for electricity costs for pumping water regularly during the day, operation and maintenance costs to the private sector for the treatment system so that water can be drunk, and cleaning of both underground and overhead systems in every two to three months. The cost of making municipal water usable is quite high to each household, even though supply is basically free from the municipalities. Indian urban dwellers pay 2 to 2.5 times more for water which they could have received from civic sources if the municipalities had a good management system.

The third myth is that 75 per cent of the urban residents have “improved” or shared sanitation. When I proposed the idea of the IDWSSD, sanitation meant that wastewater would be collected from the cities, taken to a wastewater treatment plant, treated properly and then discharged safely to the environment. This objective has also been corrupted with the catch-all term “improved”. Cities like Delhi discharges its untreated, or very partially treated, wastewaters directly to Yamuna River and Ahmedabad to the Sabarmati River and both claim that they are doing well with sanitation. Last time, I visited Ahmedabad, its primary treatment plant was not even working and raw sewage was being discharged straight to the river. One wonders what the state and Central Pollution Control Boards are doing.

Sadly, the present situation for a country like India is difficult to justify. If we consider a city like Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1993, the situation was even worse as compared to its condition in present-day Delhi, Kolkata or Mumbai. The unaccountable water loss in Phnom Penh then was around 75 per cent, few people had access to water and that for only for 2–3 hours a day, and its quality was poor. The utility was bankrupt and corrupt. The Cambodian Government put a good, competent and dedicated manager, Ek Sonn Chan, in charge. Within five years, the situation changed dramatically. By 1997, Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority, an autonomous public sector corporation, started to make a profit, and since then its profit has increased each year. The consumers pay for a 24-hour supply of good quality water, which can be drunk straight from the tap without any health concern, corruption has been virtually eliminated, thanks to enlightened leadership, strict enforcement of rules, better salaries for all staff, and good training. By 1997, PPWSA had to pay a tax to the government on its profit as a public corporation. It was a tidy \$550,000. Since then every year its profit, and end taxes have increased. In 2009, it paid total taxes of over \$12.5 million. The con-



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sumers cover all its expenses for an excellent supply, and it has a tariff system which has actually reduced the water cost of the poor households by around 75 per cent.

Compared to the Indian urban centres, Phnom Penh appears to be a fairytale. How did Phnom Penh do it? It reduced its unac-

countable loss from the system to about 7 per cent, which is significantly better than London, Paris or Los Angeles. Every household pays for water, irrespective of their socio-economic status.

This “miracle” was achieved in only five years, and the system has continuously improved since then. Yet, Cambodia does not have the same technical, management and administrative expertise as in India, or no private sector to whom some work could be outsourced. Chan and his team completely transformed the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority. Impressed by their performance, I nominated them for the prestigious Stockholm Industry Water Prize, which they received in 2010.

If Phnom Penh can do it, why can't cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai or Chennai take a leaf out its book? The Indian water utilities give many excuses, none of which can withstand any serious scrutiny. Indian public is used to receiving a third-grade service. There is no reason, technical, economic or social, as to why the Indian urban population cannot have a 24-hour uninterrupted good quality water at around half the total cost which the households are spending. The fact that they don't is an indictment of the current water governance system in the country. India may be an emerging economic power, but its urban water management is somewhat similar to that of a banana republic.

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