

PUBLIC FACILITIES

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WATER AND THE PEOPLE OF CHENNAI

◆ **Some Examples :**

1. Senior government officials live in Anna Nagar, Chennai. area looks lush and green with lawns maintained by a generous spraying a water tanker is easily arranged for his house of water. Bungalows here have tap water for major part of the day. On days when the water supply is inadequate, a water tanker is easily arranged for there houses.
2. Like most areas of the city apartments in Mylapore suffers from water shortage. This area gets municipal water once in two days. A private borewell meets some of the residents' water needs. Borewell water is, however, brackish so the residents use it in their toilets and for washing. For other uses, water is purchased from tankers. One spends upto Rs 500-600 per month on buying water from the tankers. For drinking water, residents have installed water purification systems in their homes.
3. People who lives on rent on the first floor of a house in Madipakkam and gets water once in four days. For drinking, these people buys bottled water.
4. Many people work as a domestic help in Saidapet and lives in the nearby slum. They pay a rent of Rs 650 for the hutment, which has neither a bathroom nor a tap connection. For 30 such hutments there is a common tap at one corner, in which water comes from a borewell for 20 minutes twice daily. A family gets to fill a maximum of three buckets within this time. The same water is used for washing and drinking. In summer,

the flow becomes a trickle, so that one family gets water only at the cost of another. People have to wait long hours for water tankers.

➤ WATER AS PART OF THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO LIFE

1. Water is essential for life and for good health. Not only is it necessary for us to be able to meet our daily needs but safe drinking water can prevent many water-related diseases.
2. India has one of the largest number of cases of diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera. Over 1,600 Indians, most of them children below the age of five, reportedly die *everyday* because of water-related diseases. These deaths can be prevented if people have access to safe drinking water.
3. The Constitution of India recognises the right to water as being a part of the Right to Life under Article 21. This means that it is the right of every person, whether rich or poor, to have sufficient amounts of water to fulfil his/her daily needs at a price that he/she can afford. In other words, there should be universal access to water.
4. There have been several court cases in which both the High Courts and the Supreme Court have held that the right to safe drinking water is a Fundamental Right.
5. More recently, in 2007, the Andhra Pradesh High Court restated this while hearing a case based on a letter written by a villager of Mahbubnagar district on the contamination of drinking water. The villager's complaint was that a textile company was discharging poisonous chemicals into a stream near his village, contaminating ground water, which was the source for irrigation and drinking water. The judges directed the Mahbubnagar district collector to supply 25 litres of water to each person in the village.

➤ PUBLIC FACILITIES

1. Like water, there are other essential facilities that need to be provided for everyone. Last year you read about two other such facilities: healthcare and sanitation. Similarly, there are things like electricity, public transport, schools and colleges that are also necessary. These are known as **public facilities**.
2. The important characteristic of a public facility is that once it is provided, its benefits can be shared by many people.
3. For instance, a school in the village will enable many children to get educated. Similarly, the supply of electricity to an area can be useful for many people: farmers can run pumpsets to irrigate their fields, people can open small workshops that run on electricity, students will find it easier to study and most people in the village will benefit in some way or the other.

➤ THE GOVERNMENTS ROLE

1. Given that public facilities are so important, someone must carry the responsibility of providing these to the people. This 'someone' is the government.
2. One of the most important functions of the government is to ensure that these public facilities are made available to everyone.
3. We have seen that private companies operate for profit in the market. In most of the public facilities, there is no profit to be had. For example, what profit can accrue to a company for keeping the drains clean or running an anti-malaria campaign? A private company will probably not be interested in undertaking such work.

4. But, for other public facilities such as schools and hospitals, private companies may well be interested. We have many of these, particularly in large cities.
5. Similarly, if you are living in a city, you will have seen private companies supplying water through tankers or supplying drinking water in sealed bottles.
6. In such cases, private companies provide public facilities but at a price that only some people can afford. Hence, this facility is not available to all at an affordable rate.
7. If we go by the rule that people will get as much as they can pay for then many people who cannot afford to pay for such facilities will be deprived of the opportunity to live a decent life.
8. Clearly, this is not a desirable option. Public facilities relate to people's basic needs. Any modern society requires that these facilities are provided so that people's basic needs are met.
9. The Right to Life that the Constitution guarantees is for all persons living in this country. The responsibility to provide public facilities, therefore, must be that of the government.

➤ **WATER SUPPLY TO CHENNAI : IT IS AVAILABLE TO ALL**

1. While there is no doubt that public facilities should be made available to all, in reality we see that there is a great shortage of such facilities.
2. Water supply in Chennai, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, is marked by shortages. Municipal supply meets only about half the needs of the people of the city, on an average. There are areas which get water more regularly than others. Those areas that are close to the storage points get more water whereas colonies further away receive less water.
3. The burden of shortfalls in water supply falls mostly on the poor. The middle class, when faced with water shortages, are able to cope through a variety of private means such as digging borewells, buying water from tankers and using bottled water for drinking.
4. Apart from the availability of water, access to 'safe' drinking water is also available to some and this depends on what one can afford. Once again, the wealthy have more choices, thanks to the booming market in bottled water and water purifiers. People who can afford it have safe drinking water, whereas the poor are again left out. In reality, therefore, it seems that it is only people with money who have the right to water – a far cry from the goal of universal access to 'sufficient and safe' water.

➤ **IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES**

1. The situation in Chennai is not unique. A similar scenario of shortages and acute crisis during the summer months is common to other cities of India. The shortage in municipal water is increasingly being filled by an expansion of private companies who are selling water for profit. Also common are the great inequalities in water use.
2. The supply of water per person in an urban area in India should be about 135 litres per day (about seven buckets) – a standard set by the Urban Water Commission. Whereas people in slums have to make do with

less than 20 litres a day per person (one bucket), people living in luxury hotels may consume as much as 1,600 litres (80 buckets) of water per day.

3. A shortage of municipal water is often taken as a sign of failure of the government. Some people argue that since the government is unable to supply the amount of water that is needed and many of the municipal water departments are running at a loss, we should allow private companies to take over the task of water supply. According to them, private companies can perform better.
4. Consider the following facts :
 - (A) Throughout the world, water supply is a function of the government. There are very few instances of private water supply.
 - (B) There are areas in the world where public water supply has achieved universal access. (see Box below)
 - (C) In a few cases, where the responsibility for water supply was handed over to private companies, there was a steep rise in the price of water, making it unaffordable for many. Cities saw huge protests, with riots breaking out in places like Bolivia, forcing the government to take back the service from private hands.
 - (D) Within India, there are cases of success in government water departments, though these are few in number and limited to certain areas of their work.
 - (i) The water supply department in Mumbai raises enough money through water charges to cover its expenses on supplying water.
 - (ii) In Hyderabad, a recent report shows that the department has increased coverage and improved performance in revenue collection.
 - (iii) In Chennai, the department has taken several initiatives for harvesting rain water to increase the level of groundwater. It has also used the services of private companies for transporting and distributing water but the government water supply department decides the rate for water tankers and gives them permission to operate. Hence they are called 'on contract'.

➤ CONCLUSION

1. Public facilities relate to our basic needs and the Indian Constitution recognises the right to water, health, education etc as being a part of the Right to Life. Thus one of the major roles of the government is to ensure adequate public facilities for everyone.
2. But, progress on this front has been far from satisfactory. There is a shortage in supply and there are inequalities in distribution. Compared to the metros and large cities, towns and villages are under-provided. Compared to wealthy localities, the poorer localities are under-served.
3. Handing over these facilities to private companies may not be the answer. Any solution needs to take account of the important fact that every citizen of the country has a right to these facilities which should be provided to her/him in an equitable manner.