Hydraulic City

Anand, Nikhil

Published by Duke University Press

Anand, Nikhil.
Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64058

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2278298
Rain, floods, rivers, pipes, tides, and springs. Water is moving and is moved. Humans have experienced water as the giver of life and death. They have imagined it as three atoms or one of four elements, springing from the head of the divine, or floating under his son’s feet. Human histories can be characterized by the search for and control of water. Wells, canals, aqueducts, lakes. Cities and civilizations have withered in its absence; others have risen through their control of the oceans. The social life of water has a deep, complex, and remarkable history that quickly traverses social, natural, and political boundaries.¹

This book addresses the way water is made and managed by cities in a period of dramatic environmental change. In particular, it explores the everyday uncertainty with which water is accessed by those living on the margins of the state and the market in Mumbai, India. As states increasingly seek to distribute things through market mechanisms, this research asks why water continues to be demanded as a public good, particularly by settlers (also called slum dwellers) who are marginalized by public institutions.² The city and its citizens are made and unmade by the everyday practices around water provisioning—practices that are as much about slaking thirst as they are about making durable forms of belonging in the city. Yet this is only one of many stories about this city of water. The city, surrounded by the sea, irrigated by a river-sewer, and annually flooded by the monsoons, is soaked in water stories. They constantly disrupt the stories and arguments I tell in this book.

In a wonderful essay about the power and promise of stories, K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal (2003) point out that stories have multiple vocalities and multiple sites of production. Unlike discourses, stories are particularly attuned to the diverse locations at which human agency is thwarted or dreams are partially realized. Stories are unstable. Stories are the stuff with which cities are made (Calvino 1972). They present other ways for the world to be known. Unfortunately, while Mumbai is filled with stories of
water, many of these stories are now submerged in a new wave of crisis narratives about water, its politics, and its urban state. As policy experts proclaim a future of water wars, scientists warn of imminent changes to our climate, and government officials, politicians, and researchers proclaim new emergencies around the state of cities; these emergency narratives often work to subdue and suppress the multivalence of water and its storytellers in the city. They obscure how, for many residents of large cities, the uncertainties around critical resource provision are already an ongoing, almost mundane feature of everyday life.

The telling of stories is always a political act. Ethnographers have been famously uneasy with the ways in which our stories silence others. In recent years, however, infrastructures of the Internet, of mobile phones and mobile audio and video technologies, have changed the landscape of possibility for those long silenced by the political economy of writing. If writing has never been too far from projects to administer structural violence on the poor, as Akhil Gupta (2012) has poignantly argued, part of the excitement around new communications technologies has to do with the way in which they have reinvigorated popular oral and visual circuits of storytelling. They also promise to democratize the ways in which stories are told, circulate, and, as such, affect political structures (Appadurai 2006). They permit the ethnographer an opportunity to have the stories we tell through ethnography destabilized by other storytelling projects, entangled as they often are with our own.

In a modest and somewhat accidental effort, I worked with youth in two community organizations, Akansha Sewa Sangh and Agaz, and an artist organization, camp, to produce *Ek Dozen Paani* (One Dozen Waters), a series of twelve short films about water in the city while conducting fieldwork in 2007–8. I had been hosting weekend seminars on the city and citizenship for members of the two youth groups in the settlement where I worked, using water as a heuristic to do so. Through our conversations in these meetings, I was struck by the profound memories and experiences my volunteers-friends-students had around water. To them, water was neither dull nor merely politics. Instead, it animated their social memories of settlement, environment, and the city. Together, we agreed to archive these memories through a collaborative video documentary project. Members of our small collective shot video and contributed their footage into a shared archive. A series of ten storytellers then composed and assembled a montage of audio and video footage to tell their own stories, narrated through the relationships between water and its infrastructures. The films are freely available online and lie alongside the stories I tell in this book. In addition, some of these stories are
featured in the book as interludes. Like the other interludes in the book, they sit with and sometimes interrupt life that I describe in these pages. Water, like many other things we pretend to know and control, leaks from and undermines the stories we tell. It saturates, soaks, and erodes the stability of the world we know.

Supriya Polmuri’s film in the collection, *The Question (Prashna)*, is one example that demonstrates not only the power of stories but also the phenomenal power of water to order and render human life precarious and possible. The film begins with Polmuri looking out a window into the relentless monsoon rain. As she does so, she remembers how this cyclical, temporary, and yet prolific storm is so essential for the possibility of human life. She narrates an Akbar Birbal story.

As parables circulating through oral traditions, Akbar Birbal stories have long been told to children on the Indian subcontinent. These stories would always teach children to be thoughtful and a little irreverent in the world. Here, Polmuri draws on one Akbar Birbal story to remind us that while the world has long been ruled by great powers, they too are ultimately dependent on water to survive.

Akbar asked his brother-in-law, “Tell me, what will remain in this world if we take away the ten nakshatra of the monsoon?” The brother-in-law said, “I am not a little child to be asking me such questions. Naturally, seventeen constellations will remain.” Akbar said, “That is incorrect.” Akbar then asked Birbal the same question. Birbal answered: “Zero.” Everybody in the darbar started whispering, “How can it be zero? . . .” Birbal said, “If the rain’s constellations go away, what will remain in the world? If it does not rain, how will the crops ripen? Human life itself depends on water. If the rain’s constellations are taken away, all life forms will disappear.” (Supriya Polmuri 2008)

In telling this story, Supriya describes how Akbar, one of India’s most powerful rulers, was nonetheless aware of water’s necessity to the earth and to life. By telling the story with nakshatra—lunar constellations that are used to compose the calendar year—the story illuminates how water does not “just” make life possible. It also marks time and gives life meaning.

Yet even as we recollect water’s powers, engineering projects to control water frequently presume we can rule over it and make its flows predictable, continuous, and ordered. Of course, as stories in this book demonstrate, pretenses of human control are routinely swept away in times of drought and deluge, or when the technologies of concrete and steel yield to water’s steady,
Nevertheless, hydraulic projects continue to reanimate the city in an always incomplete effort to make environments predictable and reliable. As we enter times beyond the grasp of human history, we now need to confront the very real possibility that modernist modes of hydraulic government may no longer be sufficient for stabilizing our worlds. ⁸

Indeed, in his life, Akbar would realize that despite ruling over much of the Indian subcontinent, he could not control its waters as effectively. In the late sixteenth century, Akbar decided to move his capital from Agra to Fatehpur Sikri so that he could live closer to the Sufi saint Salim Chisti. The capital city, specially constructed for the purpose, took fifteen years to build. Constructed out of red sandstone, its royal durbars, large columns, and impressive gates together are believed to compose one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture. Yet just fourteen years after it was completed, this fine city had to be abandoned when its nearby lakes suddenly dried up. Salman Rushdie recounts the event in his novel *The Enchantress of Florence*:

The destruction of Fatehpur Sikri had begun. . . . Slowly, moment by moment, retreating at a man’s walking pace, the water was receding. [The emperor] sent for the city’s leading engineers but they were at a loss to explain the phenomenon. . . . Without the lake the citizens who could not afford Kashmiri ice would have nothing to drink, nothing to wash or cook with, and their children would soon die. . . . Without the lake the city was a parched and shriveled husk. The water continued to drain away. The death of the lake was the death of Sikri as well.

"Without water we are nothing. Even an emperor, denied water, would swiftly turn to dust. Water is the real monarch and we are all its slaves."

“Evacuate the city,” the emperor Akbar commanded. (Rushdie 2008, 344–45)