Hydraulic City
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Urban living is ceaselessly rhythm by its excesses and scarcities; its dispersals and immobilisations; its homogeneity and heterogeneity; its total boundlessness and the totalitarian nature of its endless restrictions; its frequent moments of violent effervescence and the boredom of endless waiting. —Filip de Boeck 2015

Residents of Mumbai have long been governed by the time of water. As a child growing up in the city, my mornings would often begin at 7:00 a.m. with a wake-up call to bathe. “The water has come!” my mother would shout, by way of telling us to begin our day. Because the water arrived only half an hour before the school bus, she was understandably concerned that one of her three children might miss the bus if we did not shower immediately. Her announcement was the second one to rouse us. Minutes before her words, our bathroom walls and pipes would make the announcement themselves. The mixtures of air and water would gush into the empty toilet cistern, noisily clanking and creaking pipes along the way. Taps we sometimes left open and dry the night before poured water with a force that headily announced that it was a new day, that it was past 6:45 in the morning, that it was “time to get up!” For us, and for many others, water supply marked time. We, like others who lived in the city, collected our daily rations from the state at water time. Our ability to do so made it possible to live in the city, to drink, cook, bathe, and wash—all acts necessary to rejuvenate and reproduce our lives for another day.

For much of its history, Mumbai’s water has been delivered to residents on a water supply schedule. Divided into different water supply zones, each neighborhood receives water for a fixed period of time. Conditioned by
scarcity, the city water department actively manages supply, regulating how much and when water is delivered to each neighborhood. To the extent that neighborhoods in Mumbai are varied (high-rise buildings and settlements frequently adjoin each other), diverse classes of residents are together subject to the peculiar temporality of the intermittent water supply produced by the BMC.

Since my childhood, water’s daily arrival in my parents’ home has lost some of its magic. Over time, my parents, like those inhabiting many other households in the city, have installed hardware that enables us to ignore the city’s water schedule. Today, overhead storage tanks, non-return valves, and auto-switch pumps in each bathroom draw water automatically from the apartment building’s underground sumps, suction pumps, and tanks.¹ Now, when the water “comes,” this assemblage of pumps, tanks, and pipes serially and (mostly) silently collects and stores as much water as possible, and directs it to the various bathrooms, faucets, and the kitchen throughout the day.

Like those who live in buildings, settlers share water connections with their neighbors and collectively pay the city their water dues. However, because settlers are connected to the city by a different and differentiating regime of pipes and policies, they often cannot draw on the same techno-political arrangements as those living in buildings. They are not permitted (neither legally nor logistically) the construction of large underground sumps or overhead storage tanks. Their shared connections are often much smaller, making the volume of water that arrives every day significantly more contested. Settlers are formally not allowed to extend water connections from the shared line into their homes. Even those who go ahead and do so often find that their individual lines do not have the pressure necessary to fill the vessels in more than one home at once. At water time, therefore, they are sometimes compelled to order themselves in a series, collecting water for twenty or so minutes each. Therefore, it continues to be especially critical for settlers to be present to collect water at the right time. When the water “comes,” members of each household collect and store their daily supplies separately in a dense agglomeration of water containers—drums, tubs, buckets, and vessels.

In this chapter, I attend to the ways in which Mumbai’s water infrastructure produces and scales time in the city.² The intermittent water supply—its schedules and varying pressures—produces a particular arrangement of time and tempo in the city, and particularly in the settlements. For settlers, water time is an active social event, requiring negotiation with the city’s engineers and councilors (to extend, expand, or shift water time), neighbors (to distribute water fairly between them), and family members (to decide
whose responsibility it is to collect water). The peculiar and very temporary daily appearance of water is often a cause of stress for those (most often women) who are responsible for obtaining the household’s water. The viability of the household depends on not only the way in which they can arrange and clear their daily schedule of competing demands but also their ability to manage amiable relations with the neighbors with whom they share connections. These social negotiations for and over time—with family members, neighbors, and city workers—are a central feature of living in the city that are produced through water’s emergent temporality.

In her detailed and careful analysis of socialist Romania, anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1996) has drawn attention to the way in which time was made, controlled, and governed by the state. In Romania, officials sought to efficiently regulate the distribution of basic needs and consumption of vital resources. Verdery describes how the Romanian state did so by controlling the time of its populations. It compelled citizens to line up for essential provisions. These forms of regulation produced the effects they sought to control. As bodies were immobilized, waiting to gather allocations of essential provisions, the state’s seizures of time, Verdery points out, “produced incapacity, and therefore enhanced the state’s power” (1996, 46). By drawing attention to the “etatization of time” and the ways in which state time was inhabited, formed, and contested by its subjects, Verdery provides a compelling account of the temporal connections between the techniques of government and those of the self.

Verdery’s account of time and waiting in Romania is especially instructive in the case of Mumbai, as state officials control and govern the city’s water supply and its population by governing time. An attention to water time helps describe how experts, urban water, and urban residents are made and managed. Further, as the city water utility has begun projects to provide not intermittent but continuous (or 24/7) water supply, changing the time of water is also a critical project of reform. The project to make water available not on time but all the time is a project to produce not only a new kind of state but also a new kind of urban subject—a citizen–consumer “liberated” from the exigencies of water time. I delve into the technopolitics of the new proposal, and particularly the contentions among engineers, later in the book. Here, I extend Verdery’s work by describing how infrastructure’s times effect gendered subjectivities in the settlement. I explore the consequences of how and why settlers in Mumbai do not demand water all the time. Configured by daily experiences and political imaginaries of waste, excess, and cost, they do not object to the state’s management of water time. Instead, they demand
modest quantities of water “on time.” Accordingly, water time is a time of normalization, a temporal regime through which gendered and classed forms of personhood are produced and reinscribed.

Making Water Time

To manage water scarcity, engineers at Mumbai’s water department distribute fixed allocations of water (quotas) to the city’s residents on a supply schedule. By managing water schedules, engineers are able to control the volumes and quantities of water distributed to different urban populations. As such, the water schedule creates a distribution regime through which differentiated citizens and cities are produced in Mumbai.

While the schedule is sought to be drawn up and implemented from the planning cell of the water department (Bjorkman 2015), in practice this schedule is put together by assistant engineers in each of the city’s twenty-four wards, together with senior engineers in the zonal offices of the city’s water department. Based on the existing network and on the location of pipes and valves, engineers subdivide each ward into several zones. They try to calculate each zone’s water demand as a complex function of population, housing type, and commercial/industrial demand. In performing these calculations and producing the water schedule, engineers exercise and establish their authority as public officials—experts who allocate water by recognizing different kinds of residents and providing them with different quantities of water at different times of the day. By materializing the schedule, by moving water to various parts of the system, city engineers and key workers are a powerful location in which class and cultural difference are recognized and produced.

For example, engineers do not provide for all citizens equally. For the purposes of their calculations, those living in buildings are allocated 120 liters per person per day (LPCD). Those living in settlements, meanwhile, are allocated 90 LPCD. Furthermore, engineers do not (and refuse to) count all residents in the settlements. Domestic help, construction workers, illegitimate renters, or other “floating populations” are often not included in the state’s various calculations. By not counting “floating populations” (see chapter 1), engineers produce a lower water demand figure—a more convenient figure that allows them slightly more flexibility and possibility in creating and managing a water schedule.

Having (under)estimated demand, engineers then focus on the existing infrastructure of the water network—its pipe diameters, pressure, and
elevation—to determine how much time is necessary to deliver each zone’s share of water. The higher the pressure (or the larger the pipe diameter), the less time is necessary to fulfill the calculated demand of a particular zone. The duration required to meet each zone’s demand then has to be balanced with not only the demands of other zones but also the material demands of the water network. That is to say that in directing water to different neighborhoods at different times of the day, the city water utility needs to ensure that water is not drawn out of the reservoirs or from proximate service mains too quickly. Either situation would cause a debilitating loss of pressure in the system.5

Therefore, to ensure that residents in settlements are able to open their taps and receive water with sufficient pressure, engineers stagger distribution between zones, delivering water to each zone at a different time of the day. For example, they deploy the same service main to deliver water to adjacent settlements in Sunder Nagar (see figure 5). By operating valves, the higher levels get water in the early morning, and lower levels in the late morning. The differentiated water times allow engineers to maintain the pressure necessary to deliver water to different parts of the network. Engineers, therefore, must decide not only how much water people will receive but also when they will receive it and for how long. Places deemed to be of commercial or industrial importance are frequently privileged in the schedule. For instance, in the schedule shown in figure 3.1, the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) and Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport are each mandated to receive water for twenty-four hours a day. Most other zones receive water between three and four hours a day, while some settlements get water for just under three hours (see Jogeshwari East). The difference in water time and supply duration is a powerful illustration of how structural inequality is produced through daily activity in the city.

The timetable shown in figure 5 divides K-East ward into seventeen water supply zones. The four columns of the schedule list the water supply zone, the normal and actual times of supply, and the reservoir from which the water is sourced (e.g., V-I denotes Veravali One reservoir). Each water supply zone is made into a discrete hydraulic entity through the installation of valves at the boundaries of each zone.

The water schedule is realized through the work of municipal employees, called chaviwallas (key people), whose primary job is to turn the valves on the water pipes as per the schedule drawn up by engineers. Forty-five valves need to be turned at least twice every day in K-East ward alone to distribute water to each zone at its assigned time. Beginning at 7:00 in the morning, the
chaviwallas work in three eight-hour shifts, traveling across the ward throughout the day to turn valves off and on at scheduled times. The combination of these ninety turns, accomplished over a twenty-four-hour day, divert and materialize water times and hydraulic zones in the ward. The everyday implementation of these water plans establishes not only the city’s urban water system but also its residents’ peculiar experiences of time in the city.

I acquired a better sense of the critical (and rather unsung) work of chaviwallas when I accompanied them on their rounds in September 2007. Following my repeated requests, the ward engineer, Mr. Patankar, had agreed to arrange a ride-along with the chaviwallas as they worked. On the day of our field trip, I arrived at Patankar’s office a few minutes after eight, in time to join the workers for their first shift. While no other workers were there yet, I was pleasantly surprised to find Patankar already present, alert, and actively working. Dressed in the trademark blues I had come to associate with the Municipal Corporation’s midlevel engineers (light blue shirt, dark...
blue trousers), Patankar was comparing the readings entered on the green-colored cards used by meter readers to record consumption with the readings of water consumption that appeared on bills generated by the city’s new computer billing system. While I was busy wondering about the kinds of discrepancies and disjunctions that made it necessary for Patankar, an engineer, to audit computer-generated bills, the chaviwallas called to tell us that they were waiting for us at the Marol Pipeline. Patankar replied that we would be there in a few minutes. He very quickly wrapped up his work, sat me on his bike, and rode us to where the large, gray municipal truck was parked. Seven men were waiting for us, having tea. Patankar parked his bike near the truck and we quickly got into the front seat. The workers looked confused. “Where shall we go, sir?” the driver asked Patankar. “Go on your rounds like you always do,” he told the driver. “He is a student; he wants to see what you do.” The confusion revealed the unusualness of both the request and also of Patankar’s presence in the truck. The driver started the truck and drove to the first valve, at Sahar village.

Sahar village sits between the cargo and passenger terminals of the airport (or more accurately, the cargo and passenger terminals of the international airport were built on Sahar village). We made our first stop right by a little bridge. The city’s water mains run under the bridge. Some of these pipes have been cemented over by settlers, who live directly on top of them. Though they lived on top of high-pressure water mains, their access to water was regulated by a valve that released water to them between 5:30 and 8:30 in the morning.

It was 8:30 a.m., and the workers had arrived to turn off the valve. We got out of the truck and walked to the side of the bridge. Hidden in plain sight, the valves of the municipal water network were located just beneath the surface of the city’s streets. The workers inserted a large “key” and crank through the metal plate on the road. Working together, two of them begin to turn the crank. Two others later joined them. I marveled at this mundane operation. Using their own physical labor, workers turned the valve shut. As they did so, water, the enabler of urban life, was moved, swirled, shifted, and diverted right under our feet. These hidden flows structure the everyday life of the city. As water changed course, new zones of hydraulic pressure were enabled, and almost unseen (but for the chaviwallas that stood over the pipes), different parts of the city were thereby made to live.

The daily manual labor of chaviwallas gives pause to contemporary accounts that frequently situate government “at a distance”—embedded in laws, policies, procedures, and plans—especially under the sign of neoliberalism.
Through technologies like the survey, the plan, and the development program, scholars have drawn on work by Foucault to show how the art of liberal government is performed through these technologies, which merge the “techniques of domination” with “techniques of the self” (Burchell 1996, 20), where governmental dispositions are enacted and regulated by the subjects of this government.

Nevertheless, as they proceed to turn subterranean valves on and off daily in the city’s various neighborhoods, the appearance of chaviwallas makes a critical site of state regulation both proximate and visible to populations. Their daily labor reveals how biopolitical government in Mumbai takes place not just at a distance or through self-governing individuals but also through intimate material and physical forms of labor conducted by hundreds of employees of the city’s water department.

The chaviwallas returned to the truck, and we moved on toward our next stop. By now more comfortable with their supervisor present, the workers took the opportunity to show the engineer some problem spots in the system. We came to the second stop. Here the pipes were above ground, running parallel to a road and flanked by buildings. One of the chaviwallas made his

![Figure 6. Two pairs of chaviwallas turn the valves of underground city water pipes while the mukadam (foreman) looks on.](image-url)
way to the pipes with a wrench in his hand. As he turned the valve, I asked Patankar whether the valves were ever turned without his authority. What stopped anyone from turning valves off and on themselves? Patankar agreed. He told me that it happens sometimes. When I looked puzzled, he continued, cynically: “This is in India, no, people won’t be punished!” He went on to explain that if they found valves are open or closed not per the schedule, they would catch the person doing it and send them to the police. Patankar confessed that the perpetrator would likely pay a bribe to release them from the police station, but yet, “even paying the bribe is a punishment.”

Patankar was not afraid to point out the helplessness of the water department in monitoring and prosecuting unauthorized manipulations of the water system. The government was not the only one who controlled its valves, and it was possible for residents to turn valves and control the network without the department’s knowledge. Provoked by social workers and city politicians, intransigent populations were difficult to discipline. The police were corrupt, he told me. Nevertheless, this is not to say they were not effective. Patankar pointed out that even though it was not official, the bribe that the policemen would demand dissuaded residents from tampering with the valves. Even as police officers put this money in their pockets, their private collections asserted the punitive power of the state.

As we proceeded on our tour of the chaviwallas’ work, we spoke of the special negotiations that being a chaviwalla entails. Their work required not only a certain *metis*, a field knowledge and sense of how to turn a valve (too much force damages it), as well as an understanding of how to most effectively get to places on time, but also sufficient social engagement (Scott 1998). It was difficult to deliver water on time every day. The everyday life of the city and the materiality of the street presented many challenges (see Barak 2009). Often, traffic made it difficult to reach the valves on time. One day, the chaviwallas could not turn a valve because a car had parked over it, and many people did not receive water that day. When the chaviwallas returned the next day to turn the valve, an angry group gathered around them, threatening to beat them up for their transgression. The residents had been waiting all day for the water to come.

This was an exceptional incident, a story told largely to convince me of the extraordinary work that goes into making the system function. I was receptive to the message. In the eighteen continuous months that I conducted fieldwork, I seldom heard of the system totally shutting down. This was remarkable. Eight hundred valves are operated at least twice daily in the city (once in each direction). Taken together, a valve is turned somewhere
in the city between one and two times every minute, all day, every day. Yet most of the time the infrastructure works. Residents expect and receive water daily.

Like all infrastructures, this is a vibrant, vital, heaving system—one that seems to have a life of its own, a life that is nevertheless brought into being and (not quite completely) managed by humans (see Bennett 2010). It is enabled by human labor, gravity, and machines. Yet, it is not a stable system of fixed and continuous flows. As valves turn, water is channeled in different directions, constantly diverted and rearranged. Its rapidly changing movements send the bulk meters, installed on the distribution mains, into a tizzy. Pipes open and close. Leaks appear when valves are turned one way, and then disappear when they are turned off. Engineers, consultants, and experts are unable to map and measure water amid these constantly changing flows (see chapter 5).

Because water is vital to urban life, the infrastructure and all of its human and mechanical parts need to keep working all year. It needs to work through the heat of the city’s summer and the floods of its monsoon. When there is a fire in the city, chaviwallas are deployed to turn valves, so that the fire department’s nearby hydrants will have sufficiently pressured water. When gunmen attacked the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels in 2008, setting off fires and explosions, it was not just the police and fire department that were pressed into action. Water engineers rushed through the city, trying to work a combination of valves that would produce enough pressure for the water from the city’s fire hydrants to reach the upper floors of the burning hotels. Likewise, during the unprecedented floods of 2005, when most of the city was underwater, chaviwallas still had to do their rounds, driving through an inundated city and inserting their keys through a few feet of water on the flooded road so that water could flow out of city taps. Despite all of these uncertainties, people in the city most often receive their water in a timely fashion. That water generally arrives on time speaks not only to the power of the system but also to the reliability of state employees.

Changing Times

Chaviwallas are a critical locus of state labor and produce the city’s intermittent water supply system with commendable regularity. Through the work of materializing the water schedule, the chaviwallas governmentalize time in the city. As they make water available to households by turning valves, they not only bring the state to bear on intimate regimes of domestic provisioning—
when clothes are washed or whether people bathe or drink. They also render public the everyday ways in which water is used by marginalized settlers in the city.

To governmentalize time, state officials draw up and deliver water on a schedule. While scheduled water times are regular, they are also always shifting. Note on the water schedule (see figure 5) that the shorter “present times” of supply are typed into the schedule and are distinct and different from “normal times.” This suggests that the “present time” is not a temporary stopgap measure. It has a past and also a future. That the “present time” is different from the “normal time” also demonstrates that the water schedule ironically needs to be in a constant state of flux to keep working.

There are many reasons for the constant recalibration of the water schedule. First, the quantities of bulk water delivered to the city are reviewed and revised every day by the water department’s Planning and Control cell. Maintenance works or leakages on the water mains, for instance, constantly constrain how much water can flow. Furthermore, with the city dependent entirely on the monsoons for replenishing and recharging the dams (see chapter 1), engineers in charge of planning the city’s water supply are always calibrating how much water can safely be released in the summer months before the monsoon, without compromising future supply. Counting the city’s water reserves in “days of supply,” the department rations the quantity of water released from the dams so that the city may have enough water until the estimated arrival of the monsoon rains.

Of course, the monsoon is notoriously hard to predict. As the lake levels diminish, engineers become increasingly concerned over whether the reserves will be sufficient. What if the rains are late? Will the city need to be evacuated? Therefore, every year, as the monsoon approaches (and lakes reach critical levels), engineers in Planning and Control institute water cuts. As less water enters the city’s service reservoirs, engineers in city wards are compelled to react to upstream water cuts by enacting cuts of their own. They do this by reducing the duration of water supply to each zone. In these zones, the water “goes away” earlier, causing considerable concern, most particularly among settlers.

Through the rationing produced by the water schedule, the state produces “a redistributive system that delivers power into the hands of those persons or bureaucratic segments that dispose of large pools of resources to allocate” (Verdery 1996, 45). The water schedule first requires people to wait for water and then to hurriedly mobilize around its collection and storage. When settlers do not receive sufficient water, they often make their claims on the
water department by making claims on time—by asking that the department extend, change, or alter the allotted water time.

Patankar said as much when I asked about the difficulties of managing the water schedule. He tries to optimize the schedule in such a way that people stop shouting (or shout less). Pressured by both residents on the one hand and engineers in the planning department on the other, the schedule is always changing. As a result, even though the schedule is intended to produce regularity (an expectation of when water will “come”), it also produces uncertainty. Will water come for long enough? Who will not get water if it doesn’t? Uncertain about the time and duration of its appearance, settlers, like their neighbors living in buildings, collect all the water they can (and sometimes more water than they need) during supply hours. Who knows when it will come again?

Thus, water time not only governs social life in the city but also produces water use practices that contribute to the very same water scarcity that schedules were enacted to resolve. Taken together, the practices of city residents and engineers make time an intensely contested political terrain.

Social Time

There are two times of the day. There are the four hours of water supply, when all of us, very good friends even, are each other’s enemies. And then there are the other twenty hours, when we are the best of friends, when we would do anything to help each other.

—RAFIQ BHAI, September 2009

When water comes out of the tap, these relations of ours . . . change. —SHARIF, 2008

By turning valves with their keys, chaviwallas create water time—a time when residents of settlements and high-rises alike collect their daily supplies of water.9 Water time is an especially stressful time for many settlers in the areas where I conducted fieldwork. Called on by city policies and infrastructural arrangements to collect water themselves from shared water lines, water time simultaneously enables settlers to live in the city while requiring them to mobilize social relations (with neighbors and friends) to negotiate access to water. Anxiety over whether water will be sufficient to meet their household’s needs—whether it will come for a sufficient amount of time and with sufficient pressure—often makes these relations strained and contentious. As settlers from each household try to collect enough water to meet their daily needs, they risk fracturing the durable and extensive network of social relations that they depend on to survive.
The state water schedule calibrates and composes a “social time”—a shared sense of experience and time in the settlement. As a time shared by a group, water time “orients individuals’ sense of time” (Greenhouse 1996, 27) and compels collective social activity—a tense collaborative endeavor of collecting, and storing water in different households. When water flows out of taps in settlements at water time, it reproduces and reconfigures existing social relations in the settlement. Here, I illustrate how the negotiations that water time requires “call out” particular and differentiated experiences of personhood (Althusser 1971; Bergson 1921). To demonstrate the extraordinarily diverse set of experiences it produces, I describe the water work of three women as they live through and with water time.

**EASY TIME**

Kamla tai had lived in Jogeshwari for much of her life. She had grown up in the area, married, and had two children. When I visited her house for the first time in 2008, I noted that it was rather small and filled with all the things that typically characterize one- and two-room houses in the settlements: roll-up beds, posters on the walls, cooking vessels, a stove, a washing place, a bureau that doubled as a bed, a small loft to accommodate a sleeping body, some clothes, and schoolbooks. Yet Kamla tai’s chief problem was not space. It was water. Her water line did not deliver water with sufficient pressure, causing her “tension” every day. The problem had gotten so severe that Kamla tai had resigned from her position as a women’s rights activist at a city NGO so that she could take care of her household—oversee the education of her two young children and also collect water. In our conversations we found it quite ironic that her work outside the home—on matters of gender inequality, no less—were proscribed by domestic duties in the home.

Kamla tai’s family subsequently responded to their water difficulties by moving into a new home, also on rent, just a few doors down from her old place. Here, she seemed happy. The house was larger. It had a little alley on both sides and a small, open space right in front of it. There was more natural light. More importantly, however, the water line was much better. She told me with great relief that the water arrived at around 3:30 p.m. every day, and remained until 11:00 at night. Moreover, the municipal tap was located just outside her home and was shared with a group that included only six others. Because of the extraordinarily fortunate duration of water supply and also the size of the group, Kamla tai spoke of how little trouble they had encountered over water. They did not even need electric pumps.
When it was her turn to collect water (generally at around 5:00 in the evening), Kamla tai would unroll her PVC pipe and attach one end to the common tap. As water flowed through the other end, she would sequentially fill her various storage vessels. First, she would fill the smaller handis, buckets and bottles, used most often in the kitchen for drinking, cooking, and washing. Then she filled the large, three-hundred-liter blue drum that (unlike other households) she stored inside her house. In about twenty minutes, her work was done. Together, the different containers stored five hundred liters of water, most of which she used before water time the next day.

Kamla tai used most of her water in the morning. Mornings were when families in the settlement used water not only for bodily activities—for the toilet and to bathe—but also for cooking and dish washing. “Jévan, nashta, angol, bhandi;” she told me of her morning chores, all involving water. “Lunch, breakfast, bathing, dishes.” She would make lunch in the morning (so that her husband could take it to work), together with breakfast, all while rushing

**Figure 7.** Storing water. Residents repurpose commercial three-hundred-liter chemical drums to store their daily water supplies outside their homes. Ubiquitous in most settlements, the drums are purchased from the second-hand market, where they have been collected and cleaned following their first life as containers for oils and other petrochemicals.
to get the children ready for school. Soon after they left, she would begin to wash their clothes and to sweep and wash the floors.

Kamla tai was not alone in her preferences to do most of her water chores in the morning. By 10:00 a.m., the alleys of the settlement would shimmer with water and were soaked in the talk and rhythm of women doing laundry on their stoops and stairs. After meals, pots and pans would also be washed outside the home. Washing was a social time—a time that women used to exchange stories of local events and festivals, the temples they visited, and concerns about their children in school.

Surprised by the time and location of water work, particularly when they had washing places inside their homes, I asked Kamla tai why women washed outside in the morning. It was cool and fresh in the morning, she told me. Washing outside was more pleasant. There was more space and ventilation, and it prevented the fragile drains in their homes from getting clogged. Given the size of their homes, washing outside was also a way for women to extend their homes beyond their four walls, Kamla tai told me. In doing so, they blurred the boundaries between home and public space, effectively claiming the area outside their doors as their own.10

As she continued to speak, it became clear that washing outside was also a public performance of good comportment. Washing clothes (and dishes) outside allowed people to keep separate the spaces of washing (outside) and

**Figure 8.** Washing clothes outside on a rainy day. Photo by Govindi Gudilu.
bathing (inside). For bathing, bathrooms afforded privacy. Washing outside, meanwhile, was a demonstration, not of dirty laundry but of good moral character. It stretched the boundaries of the home and created acceptable (and even expected) ways for women to be seen outside. She explained: “Women who do not wash their clothes in the morning get noticed. . . . Other women gossip about how she is not doing her job as caretaker of the house very well. This is especially hard for working women because they only wash clothes after they get home at the end of the day.” When Kamla tai describes the ways in which washing is necessary to produce social membership, she is describing what Bourdieu would identify as habitus—a structuring structure that is produced by “respecting the collective rhythm” of the group (Bourdieu 1977, 162). Women were required to wash their clothes in the morning to perform their social belonging. This not only made them proper neighbors but also demonstrated that they were good wives.

This, in and of itself, is not peculiar to Mumbai. Kamla tai’s story was not dissimilar to one I had heard from a friend’s grandmother in Germany a few years before. Living in a small village near Frankfurt, she spoke of how important it was to be seen hanging washed clothes outside in the mornings. People would gossip if a woman did not hang clothes at the right time of day. Only lazy women did not do so, she had said.

Back in Mumbai, Kamla tai seemed slightly uncomfortable telling me about this. I wondered if it was because other women had been gossiping about her in this way. Having been employed by an NGO previously, she would not often have been at home to wash clothes during the day. Moreover, while she had recently stopped going to work, she had also acquired a washing machine, making her work of washing clothes much easier. Now, all she had to do was manually fill the washing machine with water prior to the start of the cycle. Her new machine not only made it easier for her to wash clothes at any time but also brought this performance inside the home. In so doing, it had made her a less social person among her neighbors.

Nevertheless, Kamla tai was happy with her new water situation. Its more adaptable schedule allowed her a degree of flexibility in her day. She also spoke of how water availability had effected a change in her practices. Sometimes, she put her clothes through two cycles, just to make sure that they were clean. “When we have more time, and have more water, we use more water,” she said thoughtfully. She spoke to me of how her neighbor scrubbed her pots many times a day. Others washed their floors daily. Indeed, while conducting fieldwork, I often noticed how sparkling clean and well arranged the floors in settlers’ homes were. They were far cleaner than many of the
homes with which I was familiar in other middle- or upper-class locations. Kamla tai wondered aloud if this had to do with her neighbors wanting to compensate for the image that comes with living in a slum. To elicit respect when guests visited, settlers might want to keep the insides of their homes very clean.

Therefore, the easy availability of water enabled settlers not only to produce clean, sparkling houses and bodies but also to establish their social reputations. Sufficient water allowed them to transcend the stigma of living in a settlement. By using water in the right place at the right time, the women sought to exceed the expectations of their social locations. In so doing, they reproduced gendered forms of personhood. Their production as good women depended not only on their work in the home but also on the time at which this work was carried out (see Bryson 2007). Good women were those who used water at the right times of the day and in the right place.

DIFFICULT TIMES

Kamla tai told me that she was happy with her new water situation. She was lucky. Several other homes near her had puzzling water pressure problems. For instance, in the adjacent settlement of Inquilab Nagar, Smita and her neighbors had encountered an altogether different set of issues. Her daughter, Amisha, who was a member of the youth group at Asha, the community center, invited me to Smita's home in June 2009. In our interactions at Asha, Amisha had always been a little quiet and shy. Now, at home with her mother, she appeared more calm and confident.

A TV was playing a Marathi film over the bed. The kitchen was on the other side of a partition wall, chock full of pots, pans, and dishes. There was also an adjacent bathroom, lined with pink and green buckets. They offered me a seat on the bed and, at first, stood around me. Smita was distracted by the necessary chore of collecting water and frequently left the conversation. While she was busy ensuring that the pipe was, in fact, filling her drum, Amisha explained that she worked at a data processing center, entering pharmaceutical research into a database for an American company. She worked the evening shift—from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. That way, she could go to college in the mornings and to work in the afternoons. Her friends also worked the evening shift, and they would all return home together—an arrangement that pleased her parents, who worried about her safety.

When Smita finally returned, she sat on a chair and began speaking immediately, confusing me at first with another researcher who had come to talk with her about slum redevelopment. Later, she recollected that I was more
interested in water, but the fragility of our association reminded me of how the neighborhood had hosted many researchers in times past. In the current moment, the “slum” and particularly the emergent possibilities of real estate development occupied the concerns not just of researchers but also residents (see Anand and Rademacher 2011; Weinstein 2014).

I asked Smita to tell me about what the settlement was like when she first came to this area. I learned that she did not live at her current location right away. At first, she and her husband’s family had stayed in an adjacent house, but they moved into her current home in 1992 when her husband’s family left it for a state housing project. At first, things were very precarious. “There were no facilities,” she said, using the English word. “Our houses were made from bamboo [chatai] and plastic.” She described, in great detail, the waves of demolition her family and others had to suffer because they had illegally built homes on land that (though marked for public housing) had been lying vacant for decades. “Then we used our heads, and decided to file a case together. The lawyer cost thirty-two thousand [rupees] in 1991 [approximately US$1,000]. . . . After many years, we won the case. The judgment said that until MHADA [the public housing authority] makes permanent houses for us, that we shouldn’t be moved.” Following their victory in the courts, Smita and her neighbors gained some degree of surety that their homes would not be demolished. Rather than waiting for the public housing authority to do its job, they began to make material improvements. They received water connections in 1996 and electricity connections in 1997 by paying “agents” large sums of money to get their connections approved. Recalling this history, Smita reminisced about the changing times. In so doing, she too talked about the changing patterns of consumption in the settlement:

Then [in 1996] the electricity bill was 150 rupees or so. Now it’s 300 or so. . . . We now have four points [sockets]—TV, fan, light, and [a couple of others for] different kitchen appliances. First we had a light, a fan, and a mixer. We had no iron then. Now we sometimes iron, too. . . . Water came in June 1996. First, when we got the connection, we had lines outside—four taps in all. It would come between 3:00 p.m. [and] 7:00 p.m. The water we would get in Jogeshwari, then, came with a pressure that you wouldn’t find in all of Bombay! In ten to fifteen minutes—at most in twenty-five—the water would be filled. Now, things have changed. We use more water. Its fashion has increased.

For Smita, her water and electricity connections were directly linked to processes of state recognition. Her account illustrates the powerful ways in
which water and electricity infrastructures have been critical grounds for the contestation and formation of settlements. Indexing her transformed relationship to these infrastructures, Smita used the English words *fashion* and *facility* to speak about the changing consumption practices in her home. Over time, her household has come to use water and electricity, even as it remains highly sensitive to the accompanying costs. Smita and her neighbors have since been facing water shortages. Water’s “fashion” has increased, not just in the settlements but also among the middle and upper classes (like my family’s neighborhood). At the same time, the lines have corroded and the schedule has been shortened, making the city’s water time more precarious.

As we continued to speak, I learned that the problem for Smita has been exacerbated in Jogeshwari since new settlers moved into the area, creating an additional demand. Smita told me that a few years back, some of her neighbors responded to a state resettlement proposal and were rehoused in a public housing building constructed right next to the settlement. The homes of those resettled were to be demolished by the city authorities following their resettlement. Instead, those who were resettled promptly found new renters to move into their previous homes, turning them into sources of income. As a result, the same water network was facing additional demand—not only because of the increased consumption of those living in the area (both in the settlement *and* the nearby building) but also the additional consumption of those who had recently moved there.

Smita had a very clear sense that those resettled were doing something wrong by renting out their former homes. They were unfairly exploiting (*galat phayda*) the system. Briefly forgetting her own history of settlement, her daughter Amisha told me that the rented homes were illegal. “The BMC is supposed to [demolish] their houses after they move into the building,” she said. Rather than articulating the subaltern consciousness that scholars and activists frequently attribute to “slum dwellers,” Smita and Amisha expressed their difficulties with the legality of new residents—a poignant reminder of how settlements are also places of inequality and difference.

Having made some critical improvements to their lives through a combination of legal cases, surreptitious infrastructural arrangements, and various modes and means of consumption, Smita’s household is no longer as unstable. She now views her other, more precarious neighbors with a measure of disdain. The social anxieties she experienced with her neighbors were produced and articulated through the social life of water. Thus, the water system not only harmonized and brought different settlers together as a community
and committee that shared a water connection. It also divided them as they struggled with each other to provision enough water for their individual homes.

Seeing the newer renters as the cause of their water problems, Smita, together with some of her neighbors (who were not resettled), recently applied for a new water line. Deliberately excluding both those who had moved into the neighboring building and their renters, Smita reported that her group has collectively spent close to ninety thousand rupees (US$2,000), for the new plumbing works—taps in every home, new pipes, and so on. However, their work was suspended because city engineers refused to approve their connection to the city’s water network. Smita suspects her former neighbors might have something to do with their problems at the department. “They are upset because we haven’t included their tenants in the proposal,” she said, “so they have gone and told the engineer that our complaints are false, that we are getting enough water and just [creating] drama to get more.”

As a result, the proposal for a new connection has not been approved. Clearly upset at what she perceived to be the intransigence of city water department officials, Smita said, “The engineers should understand that our problems are real . . . that we wouldn’t apply for a new connection and spend all this money if we were getting water!” The city department’s unwillingness to sanction the connection, effected at least partly by a social conflict in the settlement, was a source of great difficulty for her and other residents in the area.

By the end of 2008, the forty households in Inquilab Nagar all shared a single, 1.5-inch water line. During water time, residents collect their water in sequence, by “number.” If someone was second in line today, they would be third tomorrow. The last person in line would be first the next day, and the cycle would continue. But regardless of their position no one gets their full requirement of water, Smita complained. “And there’s no pressure in the taps, either. We need to pull it from the pipes [using a pump]. And everyone is so stressed about it that everyone takes care of only themselves. Everyone is busy doing their own work [Apna apna kaam mein busy hai]. No one saves two to three handis for each other.” Instead, owing to their water stresses, fights often break out between neighbors if they perceive each other to be taking more than their share. Smita was rather upset at how the water situation produced neighbors who did not look out or care for each other in these difficult times. They only cared to fulfill their own needs.

Right on cue, a woman whom Smita recognized came to her front door. She went to greet her. They spoke in hushed whispers, and then Smita ac-
companied her outside. She returned after ten minutes or so to tell me of a strange coincidence. The woman, a friend of hers, lived on the other side of the new building and did not get water that day. She had come to Smita’s home to request a couple of handis of water. Smita hesitatingly obliged, saying that she could have some water today, but not every time. She explained: “The water meter is shared by everybody. [The neighbors] will complain if I always give others water. One or two times is OK, but not every time. This is how things are. I can’t say no and I can’t say yes. She’s a friend, but my neighbors will shout—that I give everybody water. If it was my own meter [as with electricity] it wouldn’t be a problem. But now when forty of us share one meter then we can’t just give water to anyone.” Smita explained that her connection is first on the line so her water pressure is better than most. She believed it was good to share water with others. Yet her ability to do so was compromised by the fact that it was not her water to share. The water meter brought a social group into being. This group was responsible for collectively paying the water bill. Accordingly, Smita felt ambivalent about sharing water with friends that were not part of the group.

Smita’s difficulties point to important ways in which the water network produces and mediates social life in the settlement (see Furlong 2011). As it moves from the municipal network and into the pipes of authorized

Figure 9. Shared water lines, Mumbai. Water lines run just above the surface of Jogeshwari’s alleys.
users, water passes through a variety of states that confound easy distinctions between the public and the private, bringing many other mediating social and infrastructural collectives into being. The connection from which Smita draws water belongs to a group of which she is a part. This group—enumerated on the water department application forms as authorized and eligible—is constituted by the procedures required by the Municipal Corporation. Bound by their investments, application documents, and bills, those inside the group share the water connection with one another, settle bills, and maintain pipes. Those “outside,” even friends, are not easily able to obtain water from this connection.

Thus, both Kamla tai and Smita tai experienced water problems that affected their social aspirations, and the structure of their days: Kamla tai could not operate her washing machine in her old home, nor could she go to work. Smita tai had difficulty giving water to her friend and also using it in the new upwardly mobile “fashions” as befitting her household. Their difficulties show how water regimes are not entirely synchronous with social mobility. In very quotidian and yet effective ways, their water problems figure them as “slum dwellers.” Both Kamla tai and Smita tai have sought to transcend these difficulties by using some combination of geographic knowledge (which pipes/homes have water), social knowledge (what to do if they stop working), and money (to pay for materials, plumbers, and engineers). Kamla tai moved to a house with better water. Smita tai was in the process of wresting a new connection from the Municipal Corporation despite the objections of her neighbors.

NO TIME

Many settlers, however, do not have the means to afford new and repeated repairs to water connections. Living a few hundred yards from Smita’s house in a different settlement, Anku mausi was no longer able to afford a regular water connection. As I walked to her home with my research assistant one day, I noticed that many households in the settlement had a more precarious water system. A few dozen women were in the process of rushing to or walking from a gushing water pipe situated at the settlement’s edges. Others were waiting at the pipe for their turn. As empty handis were brought to the tap, filled, and carted back to the house several times, I wondered how many trips each woman had to make back and forth every day.

When I first arrived at Anku mausi’s home, I learned that she, too, was down at the pipe collecting water with her children. We were told to wait and that she would be back shortly. A small mat was set down for us, and we sat
in a corner of the house. I took in the surroundings. There was no window, which was not unusual, but the house was quite dark. The walls were made of a mix of tin sheets and plaster. In the dark loft over our heads, kids were doing their homework. Several other children, between the ages of three and five years old, came to the house and peered at me. I put my glasses on one of them and we played a little.

Anku mausi was a vendor who traversed various neighborhoods every day, selling combs, bindis, and other beauty products. As she was in her fifties, she had developed health problems and had taken the day off work. This of course did not preclude her from having to collect and carry water to her house. Shortly after 4:00 p.m. she arrived home carrying a large handi. Beads of sweat trickled down the sides of her face. Seeing us, she sat down and, wiping the sweat from her brow with her sari, began to speak with us. She seemed to be in a hurry to return to her water collection tasks, and I felt quite certain that we had arrived at an inconvenient time. But then, after noticing that her children were doing a good job of transporting large vessels of water on their heads, she began to relax.

Anku mausi had been in the area for a long time. She could not recall the exact year she had moved there but said that she had done so before having children—now, she has a big family. She had arrived with four other families. “It was all jungle,” she said, adding that they would come home from work before sunset because they didn’t want to walk in the dark. I asked her whether she was more scared of animals or people. She said she was not scared at the time. Back then she was more naïve. Before the arrival of city water pipes, Anku mausi told me, the settlers would collect water from a nearby spring. Sometimes, when it went dry, they would dig into the mud and lay a cloth down in the hole. Clean water would percolate through the cloth, and they scooped this water into buckets for use. There were also two wells that they used, but these were situated far away from the house.

Things became easier when they were finally allowed to install a tap outside. But then the tap went dry, and the bills kept coming. So they stopped paying and they stopped receiving tap water. Anku mausi had neither the money nor the patience to install a new line. “Who has three to four thousand rupees to spend for a new connection?” she asked. Neither was she convinced that spending money would solve the problem. People nearby had connections, she pointed out. “Even [for] those that do [have connections] the pressure is low.” As a result, Anku mausi obtains water from a ruptured line quite a distance from her home. This line was meant to take water further up into the settlement to a different group. When the pressure dropped
and that group no longer received water in their homes, they cut their pipes at a lower elevation at some distance from their homes, and began collecting water at the base of their settlement. Now, many people line up near the unmetered, broken line to get water. Anku mausi filled in the details: “Some people had paid money for this connection, but even so, many others line up for water. You should see how long the line is. But we need this water for drinking. [At] first, the time was good. It would be between 3:30 and 10:30 p.m. Even when people came at 10:00 p.m. they would get water. Now, there is no time. It comes anytime between 3:00 and 4:30 p.m. Everyone rushes to [get] water at this time.” While Anku mausi was aging and unwell, she did not complain about having to carry water back and forth. Neither did she complain about the line of women that she had to wait with and jostle through. This was part of her routine.

What she did complain about, however, was when the supply times were arbitrarily changed and shortened. Now, with as many people rushing to collect water during this condensed time, many are not able to sufficiently pro-
vide for their homes. For Anku mausi, this is even more difficult because the revised time is not one that fits easily with her work schedule. As a result, if she returns from work late or is too tired, she does not get water. On those days, she goes to her friends’ houses and asks for a little water: one or two handis for the day. “They give [me] two handis. They don’t say no. But how many days can this go on for?” she asked, echoing Smita’s concern.

Gender and the Time of Times

The main thing in Bombay is this—water. If we don’t get to eat for two days, chalega [It’s OK/we’ll keep going]. If we don’t get work for eight days, that’s also OK. But if we don’t get water for one day, then the house won’t run. . . . Everything depends on water. . . . [A twenty-four-hour water supply] will be good for people who go to work. Now if they go to work at 7:00 a.m., and the water comes at 4:00 p.m., . . . they have to return from work running, before the water [goes] away. . . . There’s traffic. You don’t get rickshaws. Everybody’s so stressed about it. If it [water supply] becomes twenty-four hours, it will be good, very good. —SMITA TAI, June 2009

When conducting fieldwork, I had asked Smita tai about a proposal by the water department to deliver water “continuously” for twenty-four hours a day. In telling me why she supported the idea, she spoke of the way in which the current scheduled water supply demanded and produced a particular experience of time for women in the settlements, particularly for those who had paying jobs to sustain. Smita tai spoke of the ways in which settlers are constantly struggling to manage the different and demanding schedules of their workdays, their housework, and water time.

In his article on time, E. P. Thompson points to the way in which the expansion and extension of industrial clock time and the working week were predicated on the existence and subsistence of a different temporality in the home.

Such hours were endurable only because one part of the work, with the children and in the home, disclosed itself as necessary and inevitable, rather than as an external imposition. This remains true to this day, and, despite school times and television times, the rhythms of women’s work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. . . . The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of “pre-industrial” society. (Thompson 1967, 79)
In an argument that precedes Claude Meillassoux’s (1981) attention to the reproductive base of wage labor, Thompson argues that capitalism, and with it, clock time, is rendered possible due to the differentially constituted rhythm of “women’s work in the home,” a rhythm that is outside of clock time (see also Barak 2013). In so doing, Thompson points to the resilience of different (gendered) temporalities that continue to persist in industrial life, and upon which the performance of modern time depends.

Nevertheless, in and around settlements in Mumbai, women have to negotiate several imperfect yet significant times, all of which are clock times—caring for children, preparing for festivals and their attendant social obligations, work, going to the market, washing, cleaning homes, cooking, and earning wages. These times lie not necessarily outside, but alongside, those of modern capitalism in the city. Thus while Thompson is astute in pointing to the dependencies of capitalism on other temporalities of personhood, Mumbai’s water infrastructure reveals how time is both clocked and “tidal” in the city. Precisely because it is scheduled by the city’s water department, as water advances and retreats in city pipes, the cyclical rhythm of supply cannot be understood as a “pre-industrial time.” It is a time produced by a modern, engineered water supply—a clock time that is an “external imposition” inserted deep into the diverse times that householders need to consider, negotiate, and resolve. It represents one more “dimension” of sociocultural time that settlers have to negotiate and incorporate as they compose their lives (Munn 1992).

In recent years, Mumbai’s water department has been compelled to explore projects to deliver water not at scheduled times but for twenty-four hours per day (see chapter 5). Proponents of “anytime” water seek to release water from the regulations of time, nature, and the state. Proposed by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and heralded as a world-class water supply standard, continuous water supply is a modern fantasy of capitalist development—a hydraulic regime that seeks to make water available anytime to anyone who can pay for it. And in fact, when I asked her to speak about 24/7 water, Smita tai became excited. “No one will say no,” she said. Like other women, she too welcomed the fantasy of not worrying about water’s temporary daily appearance. She said that she would be relieved at not having to be subject to the unstable and dyssynchronous times of water in the city.

Yet it was striking that during my fieldwork, while the proposal for 24/7 water was under consideration, no one aside from the management consultants were demanding 24/7 water. Instead, women in the settlements (including Smita tai) were very concerned about the spiraling cost of water and electricity, particularly given contemporary “fashions” of consumption. In
order to reduce their water bills, they would sometimes collectively restrict water supply, even when it was available for a long time.

For example, in a nearby settlement, one group received water for a long time—approximately eight hours a day. The group kept the common tap locked for about half that period! Due to the wastage and high bills that resulted from a longer water supply, residents told me that they had mutually agreed to restrain their consumption by restricting water time. Perhaps it was because of monetary concerns—of realizing that anytime water was a domain of privilege they could not afford—that several residents in Jogeshwari, recognizing their class positions, advocated for water to appear not all the time but at the right time, and with the right pressure.

The arrival of water on a daily schedule does make it easier for settlers to plan and allocate time for water supply in accordance with the other things they need to do to reproduce their lives. Yet the right time for some might be the wrong time for others (see Simone and Fauzan 2013). For Anku mausi, it was all right when the schedule allowed her to come home and collect water after her work. That schedule and tempo of water time was consistent with the other rhythms of her daily life. However, when the water time changed, it compelled her to make a difficult decision. It required her to choose between two times and two kinds of subjectivity that had been made inconsistent: between the times she could be earning wages and the time she needed to collect water. This is not a viable choice. Both water and work are vital for sustaining life in the city.

In urging us to think beyond heterogeneous time, Louis Althusser points to the importance of tempo and articulation in the resolution of different times: “It is not enough, therefore, to say, as modern historians do, that there are different periodizations for different times, that each time has its own rhythms, some short, some long; we must also think these differences in rhythm and punctuation in their foundation, in the type of articulation, displacement and torsion which harmonizes these different times with one another” (Althusser 1970, 99–101). Beginning with the experience of multiple, heterogeneous times, Althusser draws our attention to think of the ways in which they may (or may not) work together (see also Barak 2013). Pointing to their different rhythms, tempos, and articulations, Althusser suggests that we attend to not only times that are consciously counted, measured, and apprehended but also others that matter. For instance, lying behind the time of the scheduled water supply are several other times, including those of the monsoons and those of scheduled pipeline maintenance works. These times also matter to the visible, materialized time of water supply. Similarly, elections (when
more water is released), school exams, and festivals also punctuate and influence both the water schedule as well as social life in the settlements. Water time depends on the different rhythms and appearances of these other times (Fabian 1983).

For settlers then, the viability and possibility of their urban lives is contingent on the manner in which they temporarily anticipate and negotiate the diverse times, tempos, and demands of urban life (Simone and Fauzan 2013). As settlers are not permitted (either by law or by the state of their water connections) access to machines (sumps, tanks, and pumps) that apartment residents use to collect water for themselves at any time of the day, they work to amalgamate different times and tempos of water time into their daily life (De Boeck 2015). In so doing, they are called on to limit, constrain, and commit to certain possibilities of life and living in the city.

Thus, if water is scheduled in the morning hours, its rhythms might be consistent for women who are based at home—Kamla could run her washing machine and others (like Smita) might be able to collect water while washing clothes or the floors with their neighbors outside the house. Yet as Smita and Kamla both point out, water in the morning presents difficulties for those women who have no members of the household present to collect water (parents, children, extended family) at water time and who also have to work outside the home. A morning supply is difficult because it forces women (or their children) to choose between paid work and water collection. Kamla tai had made that choice. She told me that water collection, at least initially, was a big reason why she had to stop working at the NGO. Instead, she began tutoring preschool children at home so that she could be there when the water came. The water schedule therefore effects and articulates the difficulties and contradictions between different kinds of agency (Greenhouse 1996). The way that these are resolved produces not only different compositions of personhood (Bergson 1921) but also different kinds (and experiences) of time and of the city.

Conclusion

Water time draws on and reproduces the gendered division of labor. It is based on the assumption that someone will be at home and available to collect water when the water comes. It draws on the assumption that this person will be a woman whose routines and rituals include provisioning food and water for the household. As women leave other kinds of work to rush and collect all the water they can during the finicky water time, their concerns
about not getting enough water and their desire for more water are seen to be formative to their identity.

“Women are those who are always fighting over water,” a man told me outside Smita tai’s house one day. “No matter how much we get they are always wanting more.” Gendering women by not only their concern around water but also their desire for “more,” the neighbor’s comment obscures the way in which the temporary and limited time of water produces this anxiety. That water shortage is understood as a matter for “women’s concern” points to the way in which intermittent water supply constitutes and structures their agency in the settlement. As they work to join a city water supply regime to the provisioning of sufficient water in the household, women are hailed and engendered by the politics of water time.

The fact that the stress of water shortage falls unfairly on women was explicated in a conversation I had with the women in the savings group Disha. They were only too clear about the differentiated agency and subjectivity that water problems produce:

The men would say that water is women’s work; it would be better if we handled it. We have had to pick up, carry water, two to three handis at a time and bring it home. We know what we had to do to get this water. And the men, they would just come behind us [benefit from our labor]. And now this water they drink, they drink the water the women worked to get! Even now, if any good work has been done on water, [you will see] women have done it.

It is women’s groups that are called upon most frequently to address the difficulties produced by a finicky water supply (see chapter 4). Working with social workers, politicians, and engineers, women’s groups work to extend water supply timings as well as address pressure problems and insufficient supply. In doing so, they also structure their agency around the provisioning of water.

Yet, conditioned by the experiences of class and city expertise, women’s groups in Jogeshwari’s settlements did not demand a twenty-four-hour water supply. They instead demand that water arrive in the settlements “time pé [on time].” This is a more modest demand, one that recognizes that for people of their class position, a scheduled water supply might be cheaper than one regulated by market tariffs. When realized, this political demand—for water on time—ensures that the work of water collection can be completed quickly and seamlessly along with the other demands that structure their days. Joining together the different times—of work and social work, of seasons and
festivals, of school and house cleaning, of collecting water and washing the dishes—the ways that women in the settlements resolve the competing demands of different times figures the vitality of their household and the settlements in which they live.

Yet as I have shown, demanding (or receiving) water “on time” does not necessarily resolve the problem that scheduled water supply presents in the settlements. Without machinery that can do the work in their absence, scheduled water supply requires women to be home during supply hours. While some times are more convenient than others, there is no single “right time” for all women living in the settlements. The “right time” is a socially and materially mediated desire and depends on the way in which women’s lives are arranged in several other spheres of living as well (at work and at home, among their families, friends, and neighbors) (see Strathern 1988).

As a social demand, the demand that water come “on time,” therefore, is a demand that normalizes a particular form of social life in the settlement, one that makes water, and the concern over water, women’s work. As residents living in the settlements demand water “on time,” they not only seek to ameliorate the difficulties produced by a water supply regime but also reinforce the very same regime that genders water work, personhood, and agency in the city.