

On the thirst for citizenship

NIKHIL ANAND, 2017, *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai*, Duke University Press, pp. 312 ISBN: 978-0-8223-6269-2

Reading through a work that has already become a signpost in the anthropology of infrastructure, I was reminded of Pa Ranjith's recent Tamil blockbuster *Kaala*, a film that, like Nikhil Anand's monograph *Hydraulic City*, is set in the settlements of Mumbai. In a brief scene, two brothers are faced with a water shortage in their community and decide to address the issue in divergent ways. Lenin, the quintessential civic activist, painstakingly collects signatures to petition local municipal authorities. Selva, the grittier local leader, assembles a coterie and digs into the ground, puncturing an underground pipe and drawing water. It is a depiction of two purportedly divergent political avenues in the postcolony—in Partha Chatterjee's famous theorization, the derivative performance of liberal rights in 'civil society' and a more partial and contingent politics of direct action, patronage, and moral claims that constitutes 'political society.'

Hydraulic City interrogates this neat separation, examining how both petitioning for water and rerouting its flow may be equally contingent, partial, and reversible political acts when mediated by Mumbai's water infrastructure, a socio-natural network that distributes 3.4 billion liters over three thousand miles of pipe. It focuses on how Mumbai's marginalized inhabitants forge a 'hydraulic citizenship' through a plurality of liberal and illiberal relations: "the iterative, discreet, and incremental ways in which [they] establish their lives in the city by attending to the fickle flow of water through municipal pipes" (p. 6). The multiple articulations of hydraulic citizenship, Anand argues, is both made possible and circumscribed by the leakiness of the city's water infrastructures. While remaining resolutely public, these systems bring forth forms of belonging and contestation that exceed both the linear time of liberal polities and purely human intentionalities.

Chapter 1, titled “Scare Cities,” traces the construction of water ‘scarcity’ as a discourse and a social fact, focusing on how it structures rural-urban relations as well as forms of nativist politics. Anand elaborates on how the specter of an overpopulated, thirsty city is conjured to govern populations in ways that privilege concerns of the urban over the rural and of Mumbai’s established residents over its migrant settlers. Examining colonial legacies of fiscal austerity, dam engineers whose jurisdiction prioritizes a distant city over adjacent agricultural communities, reports that overstate urban per-capita demand while understating consumption disparities within urban populations, and silences over underground sources of urban potable water, the chapter argues that the construction of Mumbai’s water as a scarce resource reinforces the centralization of state control and excludes particular urban and peri-urban communities from liberal state care.

Chapter 2, titled “Settlement,” narrates a brief history of the settlement of Jogeshwari, which began as an informal community and was regularized over the course of many decades through a range of legal, extralegal, and protest actions. It underscores how Mumbai’s inhabitants draw upon both state recognition and ties of patronage and kin to constitute plural political subjectivities. Here, Anand argues that such a plurality of relations both allows them to access municipal water as well as mobilize their locations within water infrastructures to perform forms of urban belonging that bring their habitations both official and tacit recognition. Showing how inhabitants deploy illiberal relations of patronage, clientship, and friendship in concert with rights discourses, the chapter theorizes how the expansion of liberal rule need not foreclose the multiple sovereignties that inflect postcolonial urban politics.

Chapter 3, titled “Time Pé (On Time)” is a granular account of the rhythms that mark water distribution and collection in the city, focusing on the multiple temporal scales produced by the sputtering flow of water directed through pipes, pumps, valves, tanks, and taps. Whereas most of Mumbai’s inhabitants have shared water connections, settlers do not have the extensive socio-technical apparatus, such as storage tanks and pumps, of wealthier, propertied inhabitants. Instead, the former settlers depend on a more capricious network of community, kin, and municipal workers to draw sufficient water ‘on time.’ Anand focuses on the conjuncture of two

kinds of infrastructural labor—that of municipal chaviwallas who calibrate water schedules by turning municipal valves on and off and that of inhabitants who perform ‘water time’ by being present to collect water. Not only does such a double movement normalize certain gendered roles and spaces, but also allows forms of mediated personhood and agency that are irreducible to human design.

Chapter 4, titled “Social Work,” concerns itself with Asha, one of the community organizations in Jogeshwari, and the forms of social arbitration that Asha workers engage in. It focuses on Asha’s role in a public consultation on water reform policies, highlighting how certain political subjectivities come into tension as settlers, officials, and various mediators find their relationships de-stabilized within certain moments and enactments of hydraulic citizenship. Spurred by a World Bank financed reform plan, Asha workers, along with other settler organizations and NGOs, interrogate municipal councilors, officials, and their own leadership, with mixed, sometimes caustic, consequences for how they access urban services. Their experiences reveal how public entitlements are not realized simply through rights discourses or as brokerage, but through the reiteration of claims and relations within an inherently violent, unstable, yet open system.

Chapter 5, titled “Leaks,” works through the ways in which leaks within Mumbai’s water infrastructure are symptoms of a network that escapes present human regimes yet draws in material and historical accretions to bear on human lifeworlds. For instance, the painstaking indexing made by hydrological engineers around supply and demand remains no more than approximate calculations, leading them on a perpetual chase to anticipate, locate, and mend leakage along the city’s vast network. Such persistent leakage makes certain infrastructural visions, such as 24/7 water supply, improbable, pushing water engineers to promote numerical fictions to appear legitimate to local, national, and international auditors, even as they watch city streets flood and sink unexpectedly. Ironically, this makes the technical work of engineers irreconcilably political. Without reliable metrics to anchor their work, they quickly come to depend on the councilors’ abilities to issue contracts and promotions as well as to placate restless publics.

Chapter 6, titled “Disconnection,” focuses on the ways in which the Muslim community of Premnagar experience water as an index of socio-political abjection as they get disconnected from municipal water lines. By letting water lines leak, rust, and eventually run dry, city engineers actively create infrastructural contexts through which they can apprehend minority communities as troublesome outsiders who are incapable of hydraulic citizenship. This forces the residents of Premnagar to look for alternative sources of water as they draw from wells adjacent to sewage lines, make unauthorized connections that circumvent the need for government documents, and improvise pumps to navigate less than ideal topographies. Here, local plumbers become just as significant as municipal engineers, helping create moral communities that carve out limited autonomy for those suffering from the exclusions of majoritarian politics and a prejudiced municipal bureaucracy.

Hydraulic City is a thoughtful ethnography of how hopes, desires, and distributions of life are mediated by and accrete in the everyday infrastructures that surround us--systems that are perpetually falling apart and, much like our own lives, relations, and imaginaries, require constant upkeep and maintenance. Such a focus is beautifully reflected in the book’s form. Each chapter is bookended by impressionistic ‘interludes’ that both focus on and perform the fickle, unruly affects of water. Just as floods, sedimentations, rivers, and rains interrupt and shape water’s infrastructural channeling, these interludes cut and mingle with their adjacent chapters, imbuing Anand’s ethnography with a rich multivocality appropriate for an account of infrastructural re-enchantment. As we confront our uncertain planetary conditions, this important work charts how we may cultivate social and political possibilities within more-than-human systems that are shared, tenuous, and differentiated.

Cited Works:

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