

The killing of 24x7 water

By Gurcharan Das
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It came as a shock to me that India's cities have more water than most cities in the world. Delhi has 300 litres per person per day of treated water compared to Paris with 150 or London with 171. Then why do people in Paris and London get water 24 hours a day while Delhi's residents get it only for four? Guwahati sits on the Brahmaputra River but people get water for only two hours. The poor in our cities have to depend on tankers. When the tanker is late there is a scramble and even a riot. Recently, a tanker driver fearing for his life took off at a high speed, and a child died in the chaos.

Because water comes intermittently, Indians have to store it. Storage tanks cost money and are not cleaned regularly. This brings disease. Since water pipes are not under continuous pressure, they get broken when pressure is released — it's called the 'hammer effect'. Vacuum also develops in the pipe, and ground and sewage water enters through the cracks, thereby contaminating drinking water. It takes 90 minutes to re-pressure, dump the contaminated water, and lots of clean water is thus wasted.

Everyone has a diagnosis. Delhi's Jal Board says that 40% of its water is stolen. Its zonal engineers want more pipes and infrastructure. (Lucrative contracts bring prosperity to engineers.) Economists say that Paris charges properly for its water; hence Parisians don't waste it. Delhi's water charges are so low that there is little incentive to conserve. Besides, low tariffs help mainly the rich because the poor don't have taps. All these facts are true but the main problem is the Delhi Jal Board. It is a fiefdom of politicians with 20,000 employees when it should have 5,000. It doesn't meter properly, encourages theft, and is not accountable to customers.

Delhi's government, to its credit, recognised the problem and decided to fix it. It tried to insulate the Jal Board from politicians and test a plan to give water 24 hours a day in two out of its 22 zones. It offered management contracts to experts, who would motivate Jal Board employees to reduce theft, extend taps to poor areas, and be responsive to customers. It also decided to take a loan from the World Bank for this project. This is

when its problems started. A well meaning but ideological NGO, Parivartan, claimed that the process of hiring consultants was manipulated. It raised the fears of privatisation, mobilised public opinion, and water the reform. With it died the prospect of 24-hour water for Delhi.

The Greeks were suspicious of democracy. They felt that people often made bad decisions that went against their interest. People could be manipulated by demagogues and vested interests. In this story, vested interests were the local politicians, bureaucrats and Jal Board employees. They manipulated Parivartan to become their demagogue. They scared Delhi's people and a workable reform failed. Sad, indeed, for it kills 24x7 water in other Indian cities as well.

The lesson from this sad story is that it is not easy to reform in a democracy. Reformers have to win over the people when they change institutions. If Sheila Dikshit had worked as hard to 'sell' this reform as she had to conceive it, she might have saved it. We are facing another summer of water and power shortages and politicians have begun to make ridiculous promises. The answer is "not to fix the pipes, but to fix the institutions that fix the pipes".