

Looking through the water glass

Drinking water in the urban realm of movement and rest

Nirali Joshi, Independent Urban Researcher (mailjoshinirali@gmail.com)

Please note: This paper is a snapshot of ongoing work, and should not be cited without prior consultation with the author.

Throughout the study, 'pyau' is used as the local term for public drinking water facilities. The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, MCGM, is the civic authority. For administrative purposes, the jurisdictional area of Greater Mumbai is presently divided into 24 administrative wards.

In traditional and 'common' usage as well as dictionary reference, beverages are understood as potable fluids *other than water*. This maintains in sacrosanct the fundamental, physiological significance of water to the vitality and sustenance of life. Across large parts of India (where this study is primarily based), this is embodied in socio-cultural practices such as the ready offering of a drink of water to visitors and strangers. Material manifestations of this are to be found in the numerous public drinking water facilities that range in forms as modest as earthen pots in makeshift shelters to highly elaborate architectural edifices.

The latest references to the landscape of water availability and access as the arena for the next level of human wars is set out against the backdrop and onslaught of increasing commodification, privatization and enclosure of water resources; of global, regional and local injustice in access and distribution; over contestations of use and abuse of the resource; over debates over its fundamentality as a human right. In an urban context where these dynamics revolve around issues of exclusion and inclusion, municipalisation versus privatisation, fuzzy categorisations of formal/informal, authorised/unauthorised, legal/illegal, and contestations over volumetric allocation at household and locality level, this paper sets itself a focused objective of unravelling the socio-ecological landscape of drinking water availability for people on (and within) the go in the city.

Methodology:

This study uses micro level observation to zoom in on contemporary planned precincts as well as traditional neighbourhoods in Mumbai city to observe if and how drinking water is conceived as an essential public amenity and provisioned for by urban governing authorities. A second focus is retained on the existing social, institutional and spatial arrangements outside of governance that continue to cater to this vital need in the public realm (such as tea and food vendors on the street providing water in their establishments or drinking water facilities set up in good will). It identifies the socio-material forms of such arrangements and the various activity and actor alliances that partake in their making and sustaining, while also observing the conditions/nature/affordances of access and use they concede in the

instance. The study utilizes the case study method combining visual documentation along with field observations and interactions with a range of involved individuals/authorities/groups, and a review of secondary literature, both mainstream and academic, to reveal both -the challenges that lie in store for the survival, restoration and fresh creation of public drinking water facilities in the face of urban pressures of land and services, neglect and increasing hygiene-related distrust, as also the characteristics, effectiveness and value of individual and collaborative investment in producing these significant urban components in its landscape of practice. It further argues that human vitality and wellbeing as qualitative aims of the urban experience are facilitated and provisioned as much by socio-spatial environs that nurture human presence, contact, inter-dependence and trust.

This is an ongoing study that has, as an initial step, identified autorickshaw and taxi drivers as a constituency that is able to share its distinct experiences as one that is constantly on the move, and in the process of navigating the city, has also been able to help identify the points of access and availability of drinking water in the everyday urban, kinetic realm.

The amen(abil)ity of public drinking water:

When brought into discussion through the formalized version of public drinking water fountains, the provisioning of drinking water as a public amenity can find itself a high level of historical discussion and demarcation into abstracted eras during which they were materialized and patronized and consequent decades where they suffered decline and distrust with the onslaught of the 'germ theory'. Over the past decade or so, there is a resurgence of advocacy seeking to highlight the resilience of drinking water fountains in the face of privatization and commodification of drinking water (especially with a change in the very vocabulary of drinking water consumption, with bottled water now conceived as a competing beverage), and underscore them as more economic and sustainable options.

Thus, a search¹ for any dedicated discussion around drinking water fountains surfaces a larger number of such in the years post-2000. These posit drinking water fountains as investments capable of countering health-risks arising from increased consumption of bottled beverages such as colas (the obesity red-alert of the USA), of curbing environmental pollution exacerbated through proliferation of plastic packaging of beverages, and some which suggest that public drinking water fountains may be among the most credible means of ensuring sanitised water for consumption of the extremely poor and homeless.²

In several of these discussions that incorporate historical accounts of these structures, it is easy to identify at least one salient aspect of public drinking water fountains across time– they have historically been promoted predominantly by private enterprise. In England, for example, public drinking water fountains were facilitated by the coming together of a group of wealthy Londoners under the

¹ A disclaimer here is that the search is largely an internet-based search, thus the range is limited to those regions and time periods from which net based information is forthcoming.

² For eg, the year 2013 saw the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) in the USA announce a partnership with mayors to bring back the water fountain, with an objective to 'reinvigorate the nation's supply of public drinking fountains'
Source:<http://water.epa.gov/action/>

Metropolitan Drinking Fountain Association³ as a means of providing safe drinking water in the face of disease and epidemic at a time when the poor of the city depended on water from private companies directly hauling it from the Thames. Similarly, while the first public drinking water fountain was created using public money in New York city in around 1859, their actual proliferation occurred only post 1880, when their construction received patronage and funding from wealthy residents.

Similarly, in the city of Mumbai, public drinking water fountains marked their advent with the arrival of water-works and water schemes in the industrializing 19th century, went on to proliferate largely by elite patronage and charitable intentions, and are understood to have gradually lost public use, interest and investment with the arrival of individual piped connections by the late 1960's. This is largely the narrative that packages these grand ornamental architectural edifices as 'built heritage' where what was lost to neglect and disregard was their immense heritage value, and falling through the cracks was the awareness of the contribution of several worthy citizens to the well being of the city in the past. In this context, Shirgaonkar's (2011) extensive documentation of Mumbai's water heritage is a valuable source that includes a detailed listing and visual documentation of the public drinking water fountains created in the late 19th and early 20th century Mumbai, along with insights into the various actor alliances and agendas that partook in their making. The author's work substantiates other scholarly attempts (Chopra, 2011) to unravel how the building of colonial Bombay in the early 20th century was a joint enterprise between the colonial regime and the Indian and European mercantile and industrial elite who shaped the city to serve their combined interests.

Yet, to explore the actual landscape of availability of drinking water through a singular focus on public drinking fountains is but an inadequate and erroneous exploration. A pleasant challenge for the study was encountered in the often bemused reaction of several respondents to the question of where they accessed water while they were on the move. 'What is there with water? We fill it from here and there, we ask'

What was this 'here and 'there'? Were they real physical places, or was this actually reference to a socio-cultural agreement of water sharing between stranger and familiar faces? Who was being asked? And was it really that easy or simple?

These are some of the questions that the study has chosen to move ahead with. Incidentally, the trigger for this exploration came from a conservation architect and friend, who was sharing his experiences of difficulty in convincing the civic authority of investing in the architectural restoration of various *pyaus* across the city despite the successful demonstration in restoring one such in one of Mumbai's oldest wholesale market in a busy commercial area – Dana Bazaar (grain market). True to the pattern, this *pyau* had been constructed in the year 1876 with donations provided by a rich businessman Mr. Kessowjee Naik, and has since several years, been run by the Shri. Anantnathji Maharaj Jain Temple & Lts Sadharan Funds Trust of the Kutchi Dsaha Oswal Jain Mahajan community to which he belonged. It is owned by Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and is a Grade II-A structure in the proposed list of Graded

³ Source: [http://www.drinkingfountains.org/Attachments\(PDF\)/DFA%20History.pdf](http://www.drinkingfountains.org/Attachments(PDF)/DFA%20History.pdf)

structures of Island City of Mumbai⁴. The conservation architect added that at the time, they could use the heritage status of the structure to curtail the Trust's desires to bring the structure down, or replace it with another contemporary one. The restoration was eventually achieved through a public private partnership at the cost of INR three million, and was inaugurated with much fanfare in 2015, in the presence of the Chief Minister of Maharashtra state and other dignitaries.⁵ While the conservation architect had managed headway in confirming projects to architecturally restore two more of such *pyaus* in the surrounding areas in the following time, his key lament was that nobody was willing to explore options of reviving their core utility, which was to be a public drinking water facility. While the heritage cell of the civic authority received a fair amount of interest for private partnership in maintaining the city's listed heritage structures by way of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the practical and regulatory complexities in actually introducing functional water facilities within them were those that the cell was reluctant to involve itself with.

Facilitation by the civic authority and existence of public and private investment in the creation of public drinking water fountains was thus taken up as one track of exploration for the study. One of the first steps in this direction was a filing of an application (by the author) under the Right to Information Act (2006) with the MCGM to collate information on the number of public drinking water fountains across the city that were active/defunct/pending approval. This helped expose both – the need for better accuracy on the part of the applicant⁶ while requesting such information, as well as the clear challenges in the prospects of acquiring the information even with such accuracy. The application travelled across various departments of the civic authority to finally rest at the table of the assistant engineer of the water department of every ward, from where the responses received proved inconsistent⁷ in some cases and also difficult not just to collate but also correlate with ground observations⁸. However, the difficulty in procuring data related to this particular amenity doesn't seem a challenge unique to this city or governing structure. A media feature⁹ suggested a similar challenge faced by the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) when it attempted to plan for more efficient, better designed water fountain systems based on its own assessment of its existing water fountain infrastructure and related maintenance costs. A major roadblock was encountered in this initiative when the PWD discovered that it was challenged with availability of comprehensive data in this regard.

⁴ Value classification includes A(arc), A(cul), B(des), B(uu), C(seh), D(bio) E, I(sce).

⁵ Considering that it has always been a significant market area, it is not surprising to find establishments and religious institutions of several hindu and jain trading communities in what is predominantly a muslim populated area (the area and its railway station is called Masjid bundar), it was interesting to notice a closing line in a media feature that covered its grand inauguration ceremony that quoted a Trust member saying that it was the first time in 50 years that a Chief Minister had visited the masjid area.

⁶ Asking about the number of public drinking water fountains in the civic authority's jurisdiction found a reply by some of the respective ward offices specifying only the number, and not the name or location.

⁷ A particular ward responded with a list of 42 water connections given out as water fountains in their jurisdiction, all privately owned and all operational. It was soon to be realised that the information provided was probably for ornamental fountains and not public drinking water facilities.

⁸ Some public drinking water facilities that were operational in some wards were not listed by the corresponding authorities. Furthermore, while some ward offices offered information on 'metered' public drinking water fountain connections operational in their ward, it is unclear if that is a comprehensive category as some of the drinking water fountains receive free supply from the civic authority.

⁹ <http://www.phillymag.com/citifed/2015/08/12/public-drinking-fountains/#6k8C7SkrrJ0H7Ilj.99>

In the case of Mumbai, not only is the maintenance of data inconsistent, the stand of the civic authorities toward these structures is as much. In December 2012, the civic authority brought out a notification that no more drinking water fountains would be sanctioned in their jurisdiction thereafter, as they caused a wastage of water and were also difficult to clean and maintain. This was in response to a plea raised by an ex-corporator for the creation of more water fountains in the A ward¹⁰ since it received thousands of tourists across the year and from all economic classes. And yet, it is not surprising to see the inclusion of drinking water fountains in the tourism development plan for Mumbai and its suburbs, presented by Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC)¹¹ to the MCGM in 2013 and available for download from the civic authority's own website. It is in the same ward that another *pyau* has turned into a matter of contention between the civic authority and the private Trust that maintains it. The water fountain (*pyau*) was built in the year 2005, with permissions granted by the local authority and a popular political leader inaugurating it, and is one of 11 such set up by the Trust in south Mumbai. The local authority's decision to tear down the structure came nearly a decade later, in the wake of the civic body's Heritage Committee's indication that the *pyau* was unhygienic since it doubled up as a place where people washed their lunch boxes and other utensils. The demolition was stalled by a stay order that the founder president of the Trust and an eminent socialite/philanthropist procured from the Civil Court on the ground that the local authority was bringing down a vital utility that served several of the thirsty.

In a personal discussion, the founder president of the Trust reiterated the stand that she had shared with the media – that her public fountains were essential utilities, they were in use by hundreds across the day, and also that if the poor and homeless utilised the space for accessing water for purposes other than drinking, it was something that could not be controlled, and moreover that it reflected on the failure of the government to provide appropriate facilities for the poor and homeless to undertake the said activities.

In the same ward, there exist two other public drinking water facilities that are operated by another private Trust that has mitigated the maintenance crisis brought on by the multiple utility that a water tap can offer by the deployment of caretakers at the location who constantly monitor people's usage of the water, refraining them from activities such as washing their body parts, spitting and gargling at the spouts as also discouraging them from filling bottles of water to carry away. 'This is a difficult, thankless job', revealed one of the employees. The Trust, on the other hand shared that finding people to agree to such a job was getting increasingly difficult, since the young were not interested in jobs of the kind. According to them, salaries for the caretakers, electricity bills, cleaning and maintenance costs amounted to substantial monetary commitment and while there were always sponsors approaching them for taking on this responsibility, none were available to take on their daily maintenance and monitoring. When asked why the Trust had stopped any further facilitation of drinking water *pyaus* in other parts of the city, they cited difficulties in getting access to any appropriate piece of land, or gaining lease to public land from the civic authorities as the major source of discouragement. When further asked if they would be

¹⁰ The area is both a commercial and touristic hub, and large parts of the ward also fall under heritage regulations.

¹¹ A nodal agency for government of Maharashtra for developing and promoting tourism in the state

willing to take on the maintenance of new *pyaus* (for example those that got restored by the heritage cell), another condition was forthcoming – they shared that they would find value in such facilitation only if the spot was one with heavy pedestrian traffic. Attention was sought to the fact that their current *pyaus* existed in highly commercial areas, and operated only up till a particular hour in the evening/night.

Once again, a parallel can be drawn with the Philadelphia Water Department case mentioned above. The PWD had been ignited into considering a ‘public drinking water renaissance’ of its own after receiving proposals by a company that offered turnkey facilitation of public drinking water fountains – handling everything from installation to maintenance, with its own costs recovered through advertising on the fountain. A potential downside of committing to an agreement with a for-profit vendor (where the profit was derived from the advertising on the fountain, and not charging for the water) was the commonly perceived possibility that fewer fountains would end up in needier neighborhoods. In the course of this study, this assumption was challenged where the provisioning of a public drinking water facility was concerned. In the M ward in eastern Mumbai that is characterised by resettlement and peripheralisation of slums, a slum community has managed to set up a *pyau* (comprising of the simpler format of water stored in earthen pots in a permanent structure with a water storage tank) through the support of the MLA¹² Local Area Development Fund. A community welfare committee comprising of some young boys/men of the neighbourhood were responsible for cleaning, refilling and maintaining the structure. It is to be noted that several such structures exist across the city alongside roads and within neighbourhoods, which have been set up without any input of public funds, often by single or groups of individuals. However, the concerned MLA in the mentioned case cited the formal materialisation of such *pyaus* as a difficult process compounded by numerous NOCs that were mandated to be procured ahead of it. These included those from the water department, the maintenance department and traffic department, as well as regulations imposed through CRZ, Heritage Zoning, etc. According to him, the civic authority needed to come up with a policy that could facilitate more participation in the community creation of such structures. In a neighbouring slum, at the time of the visit, a water cooler provided by the adjoining Hindustan Petroleum Private Limited lay in the premise of a temple along one of the busy streets of the settlement. The community members shared that it had been lying there since a couple of months, all new and ready to install, but the process had been delayed by the contractor assigned the job. Incidentally, in a scenario where small drinking water pouches are banned in the city, the community members revealed that they presently spent money on buying 2-3 such in day costing INR 2 each. Expectedly, these pouches were locally packed and refrigerated, and had a healthy market in this small area.

Discussions with assistant hydraulic engineers at various ward offices revealed maintenance as the single most difficult challenge where public drinking water facilities in their wards were concerned. With water reaching respective areas differentially, both in terms of timings and quantity of water supply (the city is challenged by its geography as well as anthropogenic pressure on its water resources in this regard), *pyaus* needed to be endowed with water tanks in order to facilitate continuous water output. This

¹² Members of Legislative Assembly, who have a fund quota at their discretion that they may choose to utilize for different public infrastructure/amenities in his/her constituency

enlarged the budget as well as footprint of the *pyaus*. Contrary to common perception, one such engineer shared that the existence of a public drinking water facility didn't pose any great volumetric burden on the water department. But in a situation where selling a few items in scrap could earn one a day's subsistence, theft of water taps and other infrastructure was a deterrent. 'If I had ten public drinking water facilities in my ward, with two taps each which got stolen every night, how would I set about with procurement processes for twenty taps every morning?'.

Interestingly, he shared, the civic authority had summoned officials from its various water departments a few years back to deliberate on the feasibility of introducing subsidised water through public drinking water fountains at the rate of 1-2 INR /litre of refill. It was the officials of the water department who maintained that setting up such facilities was possible, but the population that these counters ought to serve couldn't afford even that much. If water was to be provisioned, it ought to be free. That was where the discussions and decisions on this matter had last ended.

Moving on to the next method of exploration for the study of starting out with conversations with autorickshaw and taxi drivers¹³ about the sources through which they accessed their refill of water through their day on the move, several mentioned tea stalls on the streets as a widely frequented and omnipresent source. Some mentioned hotels and eateries in the same vein, and these included those which the drivers approached only for refills (and not to first eat in as a legitimate reason to subsequently access water). For this particular constituency, the petrol station was another stable source. *Pyaus* of different formats featured as the fourth source. A large part of these included those operated by and premised within religious institutions such as temples, mosques and gurudwaras.

Each of these options listed out is worthy of sharpening some focus on. For tea and other food vendors on the street, it is the street which is first appropriated as a commons for livelihood opportunity and drinking water is a commons that is produced in the process and as an outcome of this act of commoning. Further, it is interesting to observe the spatial configuration of these vending stalls. Several placed their water at a distance not necessarily close to themselves, but in clear accessibility of passers-by. The water in this instance is carted from their place of residence or other places of familiarity and access, or actually bought from commercial water tankers. Moreover, the placement of a drinking water container outside one's shop or oriented to the street is not a phenomenon unique to tea and food vendors. The compressed, high-value real estate space within which several commercial enterprises are housed in the city make various kinds of outward spill overs and expansions an almost naturalised claim on the street. Of these, the possibly leaky, wet points of water storage find their most practical placement outside. While the underlying intention may not necessarily be of philanthropy or overt sharing, it is not very common that a person requesting a drink of water from these was denied one.

¹³ At the time of presenting these observations, a total of 54 autorickshaw drivers and 15 taxi drivers had been approached. While this may be a very small sample size to generalize from,

In the case of eateries, the ones approached were clearly the types for which the economic classes such as the rickshaw and taxi drivers considered themselves a client base. A nearly negligible number of drivers mentioned being denied water at such joints. An odd one or two recalled experiences of late, where they were requested to drink at the venue, and not fill their bottles.

The availability of drinking water at restaurants and eateries, however, presents an interesting scenario if the canvas for observation is enlarged. Whether restaurants are mandated to serve tap water or are allowed to refuse to serve it, is a rampant issue discussed in consumer forums across the world. It also appears in discussion forums that serve to inform and alert the unaware tourist of countries where requesting for tap water in restaurants could turn out either expensive or unpleasant. It is also ironical that while in earlier days, temperance was one of the driving forces behind the promotion of drinking water fountains, it is licensed bar owners in UK and Ireland who are the only ones mandated by law to serve free tap water, as a measure to combat binge drinking¹⁴.

Author and columnist on consumer issues Vasudevan, calls the usual poser “normal or mineral?” in Indian eating joints as a cunning one, designed to create insecurity in the customers¹⁵. The result, she seems to suggest, is usually desirable for the restaurant, as the customer most often opts for bottled water. However, in the context of this study, it might be valuable to probe the possibilities that the existence of the all encompassing ‘saada’ (normal) paani (water) as a category holds out. For after all, saada pani is rarely asked to be further defined, it is largely accepted and consumed simply as the ‘other’. Does this acceptance have an inherent democratizing/liberating and inclusive value, or is it explicitly the unaffordability of choice for the poor?¹⁶

The canvas of drinking water in the urban realm of movement and rest: readjusting pixel size

The utility of water as a drinkable fluid is closely linked with its evidence and association with life or living process – may it be in the form of a natural body advantaged with the purifying process of nature, or actual human presence around the water source that signifies an added human investment in keeping the source invigorated. This is an aspect that is both the challenge in creating a landscape of democratized, civic infrastructure through the mode of public investment and deployment of free standing, self serviced and remotely monitored arrangements, but as much the reality that fosters scaled down, informal versions of the same that often fall out of regulatory glance.

While across several other parts of the world, the ‘return’ to public drinking water fountains can afford to be a loudspeaker call made from federal level and percolating to the local, with focused investments in the technology deployed to reduce health risks and threats of sabotage by natural and human elements, toward information sharing and awareness generation, and as a national/regional/local/individual call of

14 Source: <http://www.ccwater.org.uk/waterissues/currentkeywaterissues/tapwaterinrestaurants/>

15 Source: <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/7Mk6TanhLPXcs9i6RwhPzN/Are-you-being-served-water.html>

16 The water provisioned by the MCGM in Mumbai is considered potable, and the city benefits from a supply that is derived largely from recharge by rain water. It is this water, often with little or no filtration, that makes its way into several of the water storage containers in *pyaus* as well as eateries and restaurants.

action to ward off environmental degradation and health deterioration, the story varies significantly, globally . In the context of this study, for most of the maintainers of these facilities, there was no additional constituency of water consumers that they were seeking, no real larger, ecological or environmental ethos that housed their agenda, but more explicitly a humanitarian one. Nobody mentioned a desire to attract or encourage more people to their pyaus. It was largely about filling in an immediate need. Furthermore, where present, none of the operational drinking water facilities fall short of a user base. It is just not a universal one in these cities of high economic differentiation and affordabilities.

The fact that several such modes of accessing and making available drinking water in 'broken down', 'rationed', 'proportional to provider's capacity' models exist, leads one to wonder whether this could truly be conceptualized as a model of sharing, and not just one of advantaged/conditional redistribution that the philanthropic investments in this infrastructure could be critiqued as. Applying a policy lens with its normative mandate to 'enable' the proliferation of more such infrastructure and encourage (or the least, facilitate) public participation in their creation and sustenance might be a straightforward and desirable framework that this study could aim for. As meaningful an objective, or perhaps more, would be to safeguard the existing and potential creation of such structures from the rash, inconsistent de-patronising by governing authorities (such as demolitions owing to road expansions, subsuming by contentious and fragmented urban regulations such as CRZ regulations, heritage regulations etc.). But perhaps most worthy is to remain alive and alert to the real nutrition that sustains the processes of commoning that enable the creation of this landscape of water availability. Is it the presence of other commons such as streets? Or the ubiquitous category of 'municipal water' that enters into various kinds of containers and places itself on myriad physical platforms? Is it to be attributed to the persistence of socio-cultural ethos that dissuades the refusal of a drink of water to a fellowperson? And furthermore, is this landscape or its suggested culture of sharing currently only sustained by a hitherto critically unthreatened (although widely contended) water supply that the maximum city has afforded itself?

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