

8th – Public Facilities



Water is essential for life and for good health. Not only is it necessary for us to be able to meet our daily needs but safe drinking water can prevent many water-related diseases. The constitution of India recognizes the right to water as being a part of the right to Life under Article 21. This means that it is the right of every person, whether rich or poor, to have sufficient amounts of water to fulfill his/her daily needs at a price that he/she can afford in other words, there should be universal access to water.

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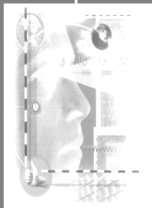
Like water, there are other essential facilities that need to be provided for everyone. Other such facilities include healthcare and sanitation. Similarly, there are things like electricity, public transport, schools and colleges that are also necessary. These are known as public facilities. The important characteristics of a public facility are that once it is provided, its benefits can be shared by many people. For instance, a school in the village will enable many children to get educated. Similarly, the supply of electricity to an area can be useful for many people.

The Government's Role

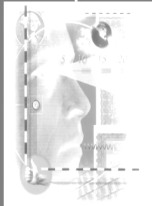
Given that public facilities are so important, someone must carry the responsibility of providing these to the people. This 'someone' is the government. One of the most important functions of the government is to ensure that these public facilities are made available to everyone. Private companies operate for profit in the market. In most of the public facilities, there is no profit to be had. But, for other public facilities such as schools and hospitals, private companies may well be interested. In such cases, private companies provide public facilities but at a price that only some people can afford. Hence, this facility is not available to all at an affordable rate. If we go by the rule that people will get as much as they can pray for then many people who cannot afford to pay for such facilities will be deprived of the opportunity to live a decent life. Public facilities relate to people's basic needs. Any modern society requires that these facilities are provided so that people's basic needs are met. The right to life that the constitution guarantees is for all persons living in this country. The responsibility to provide public facilities, therefore, must be that of the government.

Water Supply to Chennai: Is it Available to All?

While there is no doubt that public facilities should be made available to all, in reality we see that there is a great shortage of such facilities. There are areas which get water more regularly than others. Those areas that are close to the storage points get more water whereas colonies further away receive less water. The burden of shortfalls in water supply falls mostly on the poor. The middle class, when faced with water shortages, are able to cope through a variety of private means such as digging bore wells, buying water from tankers and using bottled water for drinking. Apart from the availability of water, access to 'safe' drinking water is also available to some and this depends on what one can afford. The wealthy have more choices, thanks to the booming market in bottled water



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and water purifiers. People who can afford it have safe drinking water, whereas the poor are again left out. In reality, therefore, it seems that it is only people with money who have the right to water- a far cry from the goal of universal access to 'sufficient and safe' water.

In Search of Alternatives

A scenario of shortages and acute crisis during the summer months is common to other cities of India. The shortage in municipal water is increasingly being filled by an expansion of private companies who are selling water for profit. Also common are the great inequalities in water use. The supply of water per person in an urban area in India should be about 135 liters per day (about seven buckets) a standard set by the urban water commission. Whereas people in slums have to make do with less than 20 liter is a day per person (one bucket), people living in luxury hotels may consume as much as 1,600 liter's (80 buckets) of water per day. A shortage of municipal water is often taken as a sign of failure of the government. Some people argue that since the government is unable to supply the amount of water that is needed and many of the municipal water departments are running at a loss, we should allow private companies to take over the task of water supply. According to them, private companies can perform better.

Consider the following facts:

1. Throughout the world, water supply is a function of the government. There are few instances of private water supply.
2. There are areas in the world where public water supply has achieved universal access. (See box below)
3. In a few cases, where the responsibility for water supply was handed over to private companies, there was a steep rise in the price of water, making it unaffordable for many. Cities saw huge protest, with riots breaking out in places like, Bolivia, forcing the government to take back the service from private hands. Within India, there are cases of success in government water departments, though these are few in number and limited to certain areas of their work. The water supply department in Mumbai raises enough money through water charges to cover its expenses on supplying water.

Conclusion

Public facilities relate to our basic needs and the Indian constitution recognizes the right to life. Thus one of the major roles of the government is to ensure adequate public facilities to everyone.