Basic Urban Services in India: a Paradoxical Bricolage

By Hugo Ribadeau Dumas

why is India still unable to efficiently supply basic services to all urban dwellers? When the public authorities concentrate large projects in megalopolises, small towns improvise heterogeneous solutions, thereby reinforcing segregation.

About: Marie-Hélène Zérah, *Quand L'Inde s'urbanise : Services essentiels et paradoxes d'un urbanisme bricolé*, Editions de l'Aube

"Bricolage". This is how the French scholar, a senior researcher at the Institute of Research for Development (IRD), characterises the process of urbanisation in India. Informal, illegal, chaotic, out-of-control: the caricatural terminology often used in the literature and the media to define urban growth fails to capture the sophisticated form of modernity which Indian cities carry. The concept of {*bricolage*}, instead, opens new ways to understand urban India. Borrowed from the French language (M.-H. Zérah's book is yet to be translated into English), *bricolage* has a positive connotation—it can mean repairing, sorting things out, creatively giving a new life to objects. But the term also carries a more negative overtone—hacking, tamping, fiddling, mixing things up. It is therefore an interesting concept, that allows to reflect over the paradoxes of Indian cities where planned, improvised, intended and accidental mechanisms simultaneously shape the urban fabric.

Patna, Bihar,, 2.4 million inhabitants (photo : Hugo Ribadeau Dumas)

M.-H. Zérah's adresses more specifically the question of basic urban services. Ensuring that cities remain clean, well-lit and healthy is more than a matter of engineering: it is intrinsically linked to the political, social and cultural mutations currently taking place in India. There is no doubt that, in the last thirty years, the access to basic services has tremendously improved in the country. Yet, even today, not a single city in India has the capacity to secure 24/7 water supply, at sufficient pressure, in all neighbourhoods. Private pumps and water tanks might hide this fact to many, but the reality is experienced bitterly by the majority. Likewise, power cuts remain endemic, waste collection erratic, and sanitation is sometimes completely overlooked altogether. As the urbanisation of the country is progressing at ferocious velocity— M.-H. Zérah points out that two third of the buildings which will dot the landscape of Indian cities in 2030 did not exist in 2010 (p. 286)—this book asks a fundamental question for the future: why is India still unable to efficiently supply basic services to all urban dwellers?

Near Shyambazar, Kolkata (photo: Hugo Ribadeau Dumas).

Chasing the Pipe Dreams of a Fantasised Modernity

In India, metropolises are largely perceived as the gateway to national prosperity. In addition to concentrate capital and employment, they also symbolically embody the modernity envisioned by the elites. Henceforth, metropolises ought to be performant, but also global, shining and spectacular. This idealized urban imaginary comes with a strong "technological fetichism" (p. 125), which is to say the firm belief that engineering and IT innovations are the key solutions to all problems. Yet, for M.-H. Zérah, this "incantation to modernity" clashes heads-on with reality.

First of all, the "obsession with metropolises" (p. 70) has translated into a growing marginalization of smaller cities. Contrary to popular belief, the bulk of urbanisation in India is not occurring in megacities, but in more modest, unassuming locations. In India, 70% of urban dwellers live in cities with a population inferior to one million inhabitants. M.-H. Zérah calls this phenomenon « subaltern urbanisation » (p. 68). Yet, policy makers have largely ignored this trend and concentrated most investments in larger cities, as it was the case with the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), and now with the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and the Smart Cities

Mission. As a consequence, smaller urban units—particularly census towns and cities with a population under 100,000 residents—suffer from harsh infrastructural deficiencies.

Additionally, the prevailing fantasied imaginary of urban modernity implies a strong tilt towards large, costly yet flamboyant projects to the detriment of more worldly basic services, viewed "neither as an emergency, nor as a priority" (p. 113). In New Delhi, for instance, motorised flyovers have received tremendously more financial attention than sanitation infrastructures, despite urgent needs in the matter (p. 112). This "developmentalist" approach also favours constructions at the expense of operations, leading to situations like in Dhanbad, where a new sewerage network was set up but no budget was allocated for its maintenance (p. 105).

Handpump in the neighbourhood of Mastipur, in Bodhgaya (Bihar), a small town of 50,000 residents (photo: Hugo Ribadeau Dumas)

The Ideological Twist Leading to the Withdrawal of the State

This book is not a case against privatisation. In multiple cases across India, the introduction of private operators did enhance the quality of basic services (p. 182). Still, M.-H. Zérah raises the alarm about several challenges linked to the rise of private stakeholders. In the 1990s, a major ideological twist occurred when India embraced the neoliberal mantra. Today,

although liberal precepts are not applied homogeneously across regions, there is nevertheless a national consensus about the fact that the private sector is more competent than public entities to supply services. Since 2014, the state has turned even more zealous in embracing this ideology, with Narendra Modi sporting a resolutely pro-business posture. The influence of consulting firms, now ubiquitous in government offices, has largely accentuated this trend (p. 107).

Unfortunately, privatisation ventures do not always have a happy ending. Big Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), for instance, have been disappointing. The idea seemed simple: the government would contract private companies to supply water or electricity at the scale of a city, bringing in the process better technologies and better expertise. True enough, this model did obtain encouraging results in a few cities (p. 184). But, more commonly, these partnerships could not fulfil their promises. Private firms, overwhelmed by the proliferation of illegal connections and inhibited by the reluctance of citizens to pay more, often remained unable to find a financial equilibrium (p. 186).

In reality, as a whole, Indian-style urban capitalism is much less flashy than these large-scale Public-Private Partnerships. Instead, municipalities mostly mobilise small local entrepreneurs to privatise tasks like solid waste collection or faecal sludge management. Imposing ruthless working conditions to their employees, these private companies manage to reduce drastically their operating costs and therefore offer unbeatable rates to local governments. The other side of the coin is that their weak investment capacity and their limited expertise rarely result in an improvement of services.

Overall, it has been observed than Indian elites—whether mere citizens, private entrepreneurs or senior bureaucrats themselves—have been increasingly questioning the credibility and legitimacy of the state in supplying basic services, encouraging in the process a worrying voluntary withdrawal of the administration (p. 172). The situation is particularly grim in smaller cities where the state sometimes does not even appoint anymore engineers or urban planners, generating a kind of "unbureaucratisation" (p. 170). For M.-H. Zérah, the insufficient financial and human resources allocated to smaller urban settlements is equivalent to some sort of "irresponsibility, if not a complete abandon" (p. 94).

Waste disposal in the very small town of Delwara, Rajasthan (photo : Hugo Ribadeau Dumas).

Caste and Class Prejudices Fuelling the Fragmentation of Basic Services Delivery

M.-H. Zérah restrains from putting all the blame on neoliberal practices to explain the persistence of inequalities in the access of basic urban services. She argues that strongly-entrenched prejudices along class and caste lines also deeply influence the political and technical choices made by public authorities.

During the British Raj, colonial engineers used different technologies for different populations: for example, proper pipelines were installed in civil servants' quarters, while simple wells were dug out for indigenous masses. This discrimination was largely based on the belief that Britishers and Indians had different natures, and therefore different needs.

M.-H. Zérah argues that this approach has not completely disappeared in independent India. The delivery of basic services is often adjusted depending on the social status of concerned populations (p. 82). In Haryana, for example, the urban planning agency is setting up water networks and power gridlines in the new middle-class neighbourhoods of the periphery, while it does not even intervene in historical city centres inhabited by working classes (p. 92). The "perception of a radical alterity of poorer residents" could explain why decisions-makers tend to

be less sensitive and therefore less reactive in certain localities, leading to situations of endemic scarcity in access to water or power (p. 163).

The essentialisation of social groups also appears as a major reason behind the prevalence of strenuous manual labour in the sector. Jobs related to cleanliness, considered to be impure, have traditionally been occupied by lower-castes. This is still largely the case today for waste collection and sludge disposal, among both public and private operators. The availability of this cheap and malleable manpower constitutes somehow a deterrent for investing in more sophisticated, mechanised technologies, such as pumps for sewerage systems. This is why it is still possible to spot men jumping inside clogged manholes, with underwear as only protection, despite the official ban on such a humiliating and hazardous practice.

A water tanker in Ashoka Bindusar Camp, a low-income neighbourhood located in East of Kailash, New Delhi (photo: Hugo Ribadeau Dumas, 2011)

Urban Bricolage and the Fragmentation of Basic Services Delivery

When basic services are lacking, citizens can access a wide range of alternatives, depending on their resources and their level of influence. More affluent residents may set up

motorized pumps to extract water straight from groundwater tables. In other instances, local entrepreneurs-cum-pirates may hijack the municipal supply network and redistribute it—sometimes for community service, but more commonly for heavy profit. In other cases, private trucks may bring water straight at the front door of residents. All these eclectic ad-hoc solutions—relying on a mix of clientelism and technological ingenuity—can take place in all localities, from the poshest to the most marginalised.

This is what M.-H. Zérah means by bricolage, echoing the North-Indian expression of *jugaad,* the art of getting things done. With this terminology, the author carefully avoids terms such as *informal* or *illegal,* which would inaccurately suggest that these arrangements occur completely out of the purview of public authorities. Quite the contrary, the state often tolerates, and sometimes even encourages, this patchwork of unofficial urban services providers which, after all, allow cities to remain functional.

The book argues that this bricolage "evidences the innovative potential of Indian cities" (p. 221). For instance, leveraging the pragmatic know-how of grassroot intermediaries—such as local technicians, community leaders or low-level civil servants—can be critical to supply water or power to neighbourhood with no legal existence. This collaborative approach might be sinuous, time-consuming and unpredictable—but evidences from the ground suggest that this negotiated bricolage is often more efficient than a simplistic and depoliticised form of modern governance according to which urban services are a mere technical issue (p.167)

Nevertheless, M.-H. Zérah does not romanticise India's urban bricolage. Her key argument is that the fragmentation of urban services provision represents a major danger for the social contract of Indian society. On the one hand, well-off residents are "seceding" from the rest of the population, with an access to significantly better basic urban services (p. 208). On the other, the poorest citizens often have to pay disproportionately higher prices to get water or electricity, with private operators enjoying situations of monopole and discriminating on the basis of tenure statuses and community affiliations. For M.-H. Zérah, we are witnessing the consolidation of a "graduated citizenship" (p. 235).

Water supply pipelines in Shillong, Meghalaya (photo : Hugo Ribadeau Dumas).

Conclusion: A Risk of Social Explosion?

Towards the end of her book, M.-H. Zérah asks: "are Indian cities at risk of social explosion?" (p. 285). While abstaining from providing a firm answer, she reminds us that the issue of basic urban services has the potential to make and unmake governments. In 2013, at the local elections in Delhi, the newcomer Aam Aadmi Party [the *Common Man's Party*] made a stupendous win after leading a campaign against corruption, particularly in the privatised power sector, going as far as encouraging citizens to stop paying their bills. The book ends with a warning: "India's urban growth, based on bricolage and negotiation, is resilient indeed, but this is not sufficient to build sustainable and inclusive cities" (p. 280).

Lower Parel, Mumbai (photo : Hugo Ribadeau Dumas)

Further reading

- **Documentary:** *Katiyabaaz*, by Deepti Kakkar and Fahad Mustafa (English & Hindi, 2013). This film narrates the adventures of a power pirate, both hero and villain, who steals electricity from the municipal network and redistribute it to unconnected homes. Shot in Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh), the documentary illustrates brilliantly the paradoxical bricolage described in M.-H. Zérah's book.

- **Book :** Éric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah (dir.), *Subaltern Urbanisation in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns, Exploring Urban Change in South Asia*, New Delhi, Springer India, 2018