The urban water reform project: a critical discourse analysis of the water policy making process in Delhi, India

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Abstract

Making sense of policy processes in India requires an understanding of how particular ways of thinking about water have gained ascendancy in national and state discourses, and how they have determined the frame through which water is perceived, defined and handled. The way in which the concept of water is framed has important implications for the ways in which water reform policies come to be shaped. Shifting narratives of the causes and solutions to water issues in a neoliberal India both drive and produce policy processes, making available or constraining policy choices in which different forms of water knowledge can be available and mobilized. Using methods of critical discourse analysis, this paper uses the Delhi Water Reform Project as a basis for understanding how power and knowledge define spaces of engagement among a range of positioned actors like the World Bank, the Government of Delhi, and civil society. It argues that their strategies are constructed in a way that permits intervention in a manner so as to promote a particular kind of technical and managerial approach that lends persuasiveness to policy instruments.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; Public–private partnerships; Water policy process

Introduction

Water policy production in the national capital territory of Delhi, which is the subject of this case study, provides an excellent example of the policy pressures associated with the sorts of complex, multi-scalar policy production processes that have resulted from globalization and the rescaling of the state. While the predominant area of theorizing in public policy and water governance has focused on the linear model of planned intervention, there has been little theorizing about the overlap of local, sub-national, national, and global scales, expressed by the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that surrounds these diverse system actors in the processes of producing water policy. These actors are bound by discourses, and an analysis of their discourses used in policy deliberations highlights the ways in which particular versions of water come to gain legitimacy. By looking at how differing discourses and actors interact in such spaces, we can better understand the ways in which power mediates policy processes.

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such, water policy does not make policy about water but frames ‘water’ in such a way as to condition the possibilities of any attempts for change. Thus, the making and shaping of water policy is seen as a ‘political technology’ that relies on the versions of ‘expertise’ and institutional techniques that create and define the category ‘water’.

This makes policy processes inherently political and shaped by different contexts of interaction or social domains (Shore & Wright, 1997: 8), as opposed to a linear model of policy making that focuses on the state. This paper reviews the concepts and stylistic devices that are deployed in framing the object of policy, in this case water, to understand how particular interpretations of reality are adopted, upheld and come to gain hegemony.

The paper begins with a reference to the two major approaches of discourse analysis and their relevance to policy making. The next section provides the background and context of the Delhi Government’s reform project. The following section uses selected texts and documents, as well as interviews with key actors in the project, as examples to discuss the overlapping scales, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the making of policy, approached in a language of neutrality and technology. The conclusion draws upon the texts and practices of these actors to show how the linguistic turn1 in public policy provides policy researchers with a useful tool to analyze how relations of dominance are structured and reproduced in implementing urban water reform in the national capital territory of Delhi.

Methodology

In this paper, attention is drawn to two discourse analysis approaches that have particular salience in making sense of water reform policy. The first of these is derived from the analysis of texts and utterances, and involves the deconstruction of terms used in the language of policy. Gasper & Athorpe (1996: 24) argue that ‘rival ways of naming and framing set policy agendas differently’. The way issues are talked about is highly important. A closer look at the terms and concepts, and at the stylistic devices, that are deployed in framing the objects and scope of policy provides a productive entry point for understanding how particular versions of water come to gain hegemony. Highlighting the style, form and language used in the construction of policy statements and in the interactions that shape policy processes, strategies (such as deconstruction) and narrative analysis proves valuable in policy analysis, and discourse analysis can provide insights into how particular stories come to gain ascendency and others fall by the wayside.

The second approach to the analysis of policy discourses considered here has a wider purview. Many analysts turn to what has been termed the ‘argumentative turn’ in policy analysis to draw attention to the ways in which particular concepts or storylines ‘frame’ what and who is taken into consideration in, and excluded from, policy deliberations (Fischer & Forestor, 1993; Rein & Schon, 1993; Hajer, 1995). An analysis of framing extends from semiotic or narrative analysis of policies themselves to the ways in which the role of different actors in the policy process is framed by policy as discourse. It is here that approaches to discourse informed by the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1977; Gordon, 1980) become particularly valuable in making sense of urban water policy.

1 The linguistic turn in public policy represents an interpretative analysis of the use of language, style, forms and its meanings in determining policy choices and the interests that they represent.
The Foucauldian concept of discourse refers to a historically situated set of practices that produce and reproduce relations of knowledge and power. Power for Foucault is imminent in all social relationships. For Shore & Wright (1997), analyzing policy as discourse is perhaps most significant in drawing attentions to the ways in which the political nature of policymaking is camouflaged by recourse to idioms of objectivity, neutrality and rationality. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of political technology, they argue against the instrumental view of policy where policy is treated as an instrument of governance, a rational, non-theoretical and goal-oriented tool to provide the most efficient means to obtain certain desired ends (Shore & Wright, 1997). According to them ‘policy’ is always informed by ideological considerations and often codifies morality, functioning like a Foucaldian ‘political technology’ which masks its political origins and the relations of power that it helps to reproduce. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of political technology, they cite Dreyfus & Rainbow (1982: 196): ‘political technologies advance by taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science’. This has important implications for the ways in which information and knowledge come to be represented in the policy process.

In the most comprehensive articulation of different approaches to policy, Martin Hajer, drawing on Foucault’s conception of discourse and bringing it to bear on an analysis of how policies are constructed and extended, proposes two key concepts: ‘storylines’ and ‘discourse coalitions’. Story lines, according to Hajer, gain their discursive power by combining elements from different domains to provide actors with a series of symbolic references that suggest not only a common understanding, but also one that sounds ‘right’. This, in turn, is influenced as much by the trust people have in the ‘story teller’ as the persuasiveness of the story itself, and the acceptability of the story for their own identities. ‘Story lines’, then, not only cluster knowledge but position actors, proving ‘the essential discursive cement that creates communicative networks among actors with different or at best overlapping perceptions and understandings’ (Hajer, 1995: 61–63).

Hajer examines how particular storylines are taken up in policy through an analysis of ‘discourse coalitions’, through which previously independent practices are actively brought together and given meaning within a common political project. Through these coalitions, actors ‘not only try to make others see the problems according to their views, but also seek to position actors in a specific way’ (Hajer, 1995: 53). The approaches of Hajer and Foucault, when applied to the water reform project in Delhi, provide the right lens to conceptualize policy as a process in the post-reform era, to understand the ways in which water knowledge affects water policies.

Methods

To understand the positions that were being justified, the key strategies adopted were the analysis of policy texts and documents, interviewing, and observations on site visits. In reviewing policy documents, each passage was carefully viewed as a form of action, rather than a communication. The works of Hastings (1998) and Marston (2000) were referenced when analyzing key policy documents. These works help understand how texts are deployed as part of a persuasive strategy to convince readers of the appropriateness of a policy objective (Hastings, 2000: 133). Production of written texts is, according to Hastings (1998), a crucial means by which policy makers establish parameters of debate and policy endeavors. Other techniques used to supplement the evidence base were face-to-face open-ended, semi-structured interviews on site visits with the actors, in order to
elicit their own narratives about the shifts in water use practices. Such interpretative modes of research present the context of meaning in which policy events, through their language, objects, acts are interpreted. To understand these processes, the following section provides the context and background for determining the way in which the phenomena of water is represented by the Delhi Government’s water vision.

The Delhi government’s water vision

So far, this paper has been confined to the relevant theoretical literature and methods used; this section focuses on the Delhi Water Reform Project itself. The project arose as a result of the government’s vision for the water supply and sewerage sector: ‘provision of universal 24/7 safe water supply and sewerage services in an equitable, efficient and sustainable manner by a customer oriented and accountable service provider’ (DJB, 2004: 9).

To achieve this vision the government’s plan comprised of three steps: (1) augmentation; (2) treatment; and (3) distribution. The government proposed that in this process for improving water supply and services, the supply of raw water, treatment, bulk distribution and retail distribution would be handled by different parties, in contrast to the post-independence models of a monopoly like the Delhi Jal Board (DJB, the Delhi Water Board), the institutional agency responsible for handling all these functions.

Augmentation. The government’s first step towards a comprehensive reform policy was the augmentation of 300 cubic feet per second (c.8.5 m³ per second) of raw water from the River Ganga, at the Tehri Dam, to a water treatment plant at Sonia Vihar Plant in Delhi.

Treatment of water at the Sonia Vihar Plant. As part of the second step towards comprehensive water policy reform, the Sonia Vihar water treatment plant was constructed to treat raw water, and to supply it at the main input zone for distribution to the citizens of South and East Delhi. The plant is designed to treat 140 million gallons (635 million liters) of raw Ganga water a day for distribution to residential areas. The water from this plant was intended to be distributed under a pilot project, in two zones of South Delhi I and II as the first step in achieving the government’s water vision, outlined in the Delhi Urban and Environmental Infrastructure Improvement Project (DUEIIP) Report, 2021 (DUEIIP 2001).

2 This process, in World Bank language, is known as ‘unbundling’, the goal of which is to reduce monopolies as much as possible and subject everything to market forces. This neoclassical idea is endorsed wholeheartedly by the Bank in infrastructure in general, and for water in particular (Finger & Allouche, 2002: 73–74).

3 The purpose of augmentation is to increase the availability of water supply.

4 This plant is run by the multinational Suez, under a 10-year Build Operate and Transfer (BOT) contract. Under the terms of the contract, all performance targets assigned to contractors were based on a presumption of adequate raw water supply by the DJB, failing which the contractor was absolved of all performance obligations and targets (Sethi, 2005). Since 2006, the plant has started to treat water and supply it to certain parts of South Delhi but there are serious concerns over whether the plant is being used to its full capacity to treat 140 MGD of water, due to a lack of raw water availability from the Tehri Dam and interruptions from the Upper Ganga Canal by the Uttar Pradesh Government.

5 A water treatment plant like the Sonia Vihar treats raw water drawn from the river through a pulsator technology to provide clean drinking water for distribution to the residential areas.
Distribution of water supply in South Delhi Zones I and II. Assuming that the Sonia Vihar plant would function by August 2003, processing 140 million gallons a day (c. 530,000 m³ per day) of water, a pilot project for the management of two zones, South I and II, was to be handed over to multinational companies under the Delhi water supply and sewerage project, to be funded by the World Bank⁶. In accordance with the project requirements, the water distribution services for these two zones were to be handed over to private corporations on the condition that they supply water round the clock, at a specified pressure, for five years.

To accomplish this goal, under the directives of the Bank, DJB commissioned the ‘Delhi Water Supply and Sewerage Project Preparation Study’. This study, to assess Delhi’s water conditions in 2002, was conducted by Pricewaterhouse Cooper (PwC), a consultant agency, and focused attention on both technical and institutional aspects.

The study gave a complete snapshot of the existing infrastructure and institutional arrangements, and identified certain areas requiring critical intervention: these were organizational restructuring, corporate governance, regulatory mechanism, financial sustainability and reliability of supply services to the entire city (PwC Report, 2005). PwC reported that more than 40% of the city’s supply was nonrevenue water. The supplies were intermittent and their low pressure increased health risks and reduced both the quantity of water available and the users’ willingness to pay (PwC Report, 2005: 1–1). The key to a successful program, according to the PwC report, was to provide scientific and technical expertise from private players that would, in turn, provide Delhi with equitable and sustainable management tools and lead to an efficient management of the water supply.

The consultants’ reports were released in April 2004, closely followed by the release of the ‘Delhi Water and Sewerage Supply Reform Project (DWSSRP)’ (2004) by the DJB that laid the road map for restructuring water supply in the city.

What was being proposed?

The DWSSRP proposed:

- the management of each of 21 zones of the DJB to be handed over to a private company after the pilot project went through⁷;
- each company would not invest any money; it would manage a zone;
- all DJB employees in that zone would report to that company;
- the water companies would receive a fixed ‘management fee’;
- the companies would be given annual targets to achieve;
- penalties were be imposed if a company failed its targets, and a bonus given if it succeeded;

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⁶ The DJB approached the World Bank (WB) for a loan in 1998. The Bank offered a US$2.5 million loan to DJB to hire a consultant who would ‘suggest’ basic reforms for the DJB to carry out. The process was finalized in complete secrecy under conditions imposed by the Bank. The Bank’s role and interference in awarding Pricewaterhouse Cooper (PwC) a consultancy contract in November 2001 was exposed by Parivartan, an NGO (The Hindu, 2005).

⁷ Each zone will have a core team of four managers and the consultants GKW earmarked a monthly fee of $24,400 for each manager in the team spread over six years (GKW in RFSTE/Navdanya, 2006: 24).
each water company was to supervise the implementation of all capital works for maintenance purposes (DJB, 2004; RFSTE/Navdanya, 2006).

Each distribution company was therefore contract bound to ensure uninterrupted water supply at a specified pressure to the operating zone under its control. A fixed fee, called a management fee, was to be paid to each company for running that zone.

The role of the World Bank

The consultant’s reports and the DWSSRP followed the World Bank’s ideology closely. The Bank claimed that the goal of the reform was to ensure continuous and regular supply to the citizens of Delhi, including the urban poor in the JJ clusters (slums), and thereby set right the problems of scarcity, poor quality, and irregularity in water supply to Delhi. The Bank categorically stated that the public–private partnerships it espoused were proposed not for privatization but for efficiency and improved management of water resources through infrastructural development and improvement of water quality.

The Bank also asserted that its main goal was elimination of poverty:

The proposed reform specifically covers the poor…. Continuous water supply will not only ease the burden on households and provide them with safer water, but will also reduce their costs in buying water from tankers, making extensive arrangements for water pumping and storage, and buying their drinking water or purifying it themselves. (World Bank, 2005: FAQ)

In the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section of its website, the Bank (World Bank, 2005) explained the need for involving foreign companies in Delhi’s water reform saying that they provided the necessary expertise:

Upgrading a system to provide continuous water supply requires specific expertise. As developing countries across the world face similar problems, many companies have successfully tackled these challenges and have acquired the necessary experience. Bringing in operating expertise and know-how can therefore upgrade DJB’s operations and train the utility’s staff in management methods that are on par with world standards.

The discursive package through which the Bank constructed private sector participation is called ‘water resources management’. The rationale behind this approach was that the private sector could be used effectively to manage waters to enable sustainable development and alleviate poverty. According to the Bank, breakdowns in the system have resulted from bad management practices by the state in maintaining infrastructure networks, and, given the Bank’s belief in the efficacy of market forces,

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8 Three types of payments were to be disbursed to the private companies: (1) a management fee to meet the salaries of the employees appointed by companies to work on the project. In other words, the company would not pay for its employees but asked the DJB to pay for them in the form of a management fee; (2) operational and day-to-day expenses to run the zones where the companies were functioning under the DJB contract; and (3) capital investments to make improvements and for infrastructure maintenance. Land, water and power all had to be supplied by DJB to the operator. Credit goes to the NGO, Parivartan, for exposing the details and underlying implications of this project.
management reform from the Bank’s point of view should involve a wider application of commercial principles to service providers.

Based on the World Bank’s and the consultant’s (PwC) recommendations, the government announced its plans to implement the project to manage water rationally and technically, and four multinational companies were short-listed for water distribution in the South Delhi I and II zones in early 2005 (Parivartan, 2005).

**Government position**

The government and proponents of the free market, however, described Delhi’s water problems as an issue of wrong pricing, inadequate incentives, free riders, subsidies, and inefficiency. The government justified this reform based on the claims it made for the need for such a shift and to solve these problems. The following section sheds light on how knowledge in the policy processes for water reform came to be regarded as useful and legitimate. It also reveals those constructions of water that captured the attention of the government of Delhi, and cites policy documents and interviews as evidence of the way in which the government framed the challenges of water supply and distribution.

**Consultations in the reform project**

The reform project was intended to solve the problems of uncertainty in bulk supply of water, intermittent and inadequate water supply, nonrevenue water, absence and ineffective metering, and inefficient operations (DJB, 2004:8–12). The general overall position of the government on reform was one of support. The Government of Delhi, the central Government of India, the Planning Commission, the World Bank and the consultants all seemed to share a similar position on water reform in Delhi. This situation strongly reflected Hajer’s ‘discourse coalitions’ where previously independent practices on infrastructure development in water were brought together to give meaning within this common political project of urban water reform. However, realizing that success of the reforms depended not only on the discourse coalition but also, to a great degree, on stakeholder participation the report therefore mentioned that:

*a workshop was held in March 2004 to formulate a Sector Vision in water and to set an agenda for the reform process. The workshop brought together representatives from DJB’s management and staff, central and state government, resident welfare associations, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, NGOs, and experts from progressive water utilities on a common platform to deliberate on the issues facing the sector, share best practices, and reach a consensus on the proposed vision.* (DJB, 2004: 8)

The report’s claims on ‘consultations’ is an example of how messages are regulated and controlled. In this example, the government and the DJB set out to position themselves as communicators who make decisions based on consultative processes and discussions, and with the participation of stakeholders. The adoption of this position has strategic significance, as it promotes a view of the decision-making process as being based on consensus, and hence uncontroversial.
Official categorization of water supply and services

The government justified its proposal based on the official categorization of water supplies and services in Delhi in the DWSSRP report. The report asserted that the actual water supply available to residents was ‘intermittent and inequitable’, that the demand–supply gap was on the rise, losses were around 40–50% and intermittent supply was leading to increased health risks from possible contamination of leaking pipes. Furthermore, there were shortcomings at treatment works and inefficient equipment. The obvious manifestation of the above situation, the report claimed was, ‘poor reliability, increased health risks due to inadequate water supply and management of wastewater, huge coping costs and low customer satisfaction’ (DJB, 2004: 2, 7, 8). These quotes are an example of how the categorization was used to demonstrate the priority that public–private management practices needed to be accorded in the decision-making process.

Government position in line with national and international policy frameworks

The government report argued that the proposed reform project was in line with the Government of India’s National Water Policy (NWP) (2002), which advocated an ‘integrated and multidisciplinary approach toward water resource planning, development, conservation, and management’ (DJB, 2004: 10). The NWP (2002) laid emphasis on formulation of state water policies, backed with an operational action plan to be implemented in a time bound manner, spread over two years. With respect to the policy aspects:

*The NWP lays emphasis on the need for the paradigm shift from development to effective management of water resources through recognition of water as an economic good with well targeted and transparent subsidies for the poor, adoption of scientific water management techniques, participatory approach to water sector management and encouraging private sector participation. (DJB, 2004: 10)*

The report claimed that these principles were incorporated in the proposed reform project. It also claimed that the Delhi government rationalized these reforms on the basis of various policy pronouncements by the Government of India, such as the NWP itself, the 74th constitutional amendment on decentralized local planning, and the 10th Five-year plan (Chapter IV), arguing that the policy change was in line with national goals. The government also justified the policy shift in accordance with goals adopted by international institutions such as the United Nation and with the millennium development goals for safe clean drinking-water access adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 (DJB, 2004: 10–11). The government thus demonstrated that it was fulfilling a national and international vision for continuous water supply, better quality and customer orientation, improved services to the poor, environmental and financial sustainability, operational efficiency and accountability.

Government claims for DWSSRP

*DWSSRP provides technology, quality, efficiency and maintenance.* The government’s position was in keeping with the vision of Delhi’s water policy, private companies be recruited solely to ensure bulk supply of treated water as well as a regularized supply of distribution management. This rationale was demonstrated in the DWSSRP Report of 2004: ‘The technical and managerial expertise of the
private sector would be used to achieve significant efficiency gains and to train the DJB employees in modern utility management best practices (DJB, 2004: 3).

Considering the fact that the DJB has made a conscious decision to upgrade services, increase responsiveness, incentivize demand management, and increase awareness among people about the value of water in order to promote conservation, the Government argued that a professional service and adopting best international practices in operations and management of the water sector were needed to achieve these goals. Government claims therefore were based on technicality and expertise, highlighting the shaping of water policy reform as a ‘political technology’, as Foucault referred to it, relying on versions of ‘expertise’ and ‘institutional techniques’ that define the category ‘water’.

**DWSSRP recognized that cost recovery is essential for better services and financial sustainability.** The reform project addressed the problems of low tariff, low cost recovery9 and, consequently, the reliance on excessive loan assistance from government, the high cost of water supply and energy usage:

> The government claims that given DJB’s envisaged pipeline of projects, funds required for system rehabilitation, as well as limited capacity of the Government as the sole funding source, there is a need to progressively revise water charges accompanied with improved services whilst gradually phasing out the Government subsidy, with the objective of achieving full recovery of costs of efficient operation and maintenance. (DJB, 2004: 9)

**DWSSRP brings targeted services to the poor.** The report claimed that in ‘the present situation, the poor are particularly hard hit with inadequate access and huge coping costs. All institutional and technical interventions are therefore to be designed with a clear obligation to improve the service to the poor (DJB, 2004: 6.4). The objective was to ensure access to the economically weaker sections of society through specific pro-poor measures, thus challenging the myth promoted by the opponents of water privatization that ‘eventually the poor will be deprived of their rights of water’. Most poor reside in settlement colonies, *Jhuggi Jhopri* (JJ) (urban slums), and urban and rural villages that are partially covered by water distribution system. Targeted interventions where companies ‘will be contractually required to improve water supply in poor settlements’10 (DJB, 2004: Introduction) would cater to the water supply and sanitation needs of the urban and rural poor.

**Water reform project benefits the people of Delhi.** Ultimately, the Government claimed that the continuous water supply would not only ease the burden on households and provide them with safer water, but also reduce their costs of buying water from tankers, making extensive arrangements for water pumping and storage, and buying their drinking water or purifying it themselves. According to the

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9 There is no doubt that ‘price’ is an issue that needs to be addressed in the Indian context, and there is truth in the fact that subsidies actually do not reach the poor, but the solution offered in terms of private being effective and public being ineffective does not reflect the Indian understanding of sociopolitical realities.

10 Currently, people in the JJ clusters get water from stand posts, water tankers, leaking pipes and tube wells. They are not a part of the formal water distribution network because they do not have tenured land rights, so they either depend on free water or illegal water from leaking pipes. The idea of group meters increases the monetary burden on people who live on less than a dollar a day. Group metered connections require monthly payments and, with no subsidies and without a process to recover the dues for used water in a household from a shared meter, would lead to conflicts among the neighbors sharing the meter.
Government’s report (DJB, 2004: 23–24) addressing the water supply and sanitation sector would have a visible impact on multiple fronts, such as poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, public health, life expectancy, participatory development, and good governance.

These claims represent the Government’s position in presenting its case for public–private partnership in Delhi’s water sector. The present conditions of uncertain and intermittent water supply, excessive nonrevenue water, and poor reliability due to inefficient equipment and other shortcomings at treatment plants are utilized to explain the need for private sector’s technical expertise to improve these inadequate services.

Dissenting voices

While agencies such as the Ministry of Water Resources, Ministry of Urban Development, the Planning Commission, Delhi, the Delhi State Government and the DJB presented a unified front on the issue of water reform, there were a few politicians and a section of the bureaucracy (at the middle and lower level) who formed the ‘Water Workers Alliance’, with dissenting perspectives on the issue at the local and state level. The developmental vision of the Government was highly contested as being technocratic and based on foreign investment. Opponents of this vision included not only the bureaucrats and political parties that favored a nationalist–protectionist discourse but also intellectuals and activists who came from a broad range of civil society groups. These included trade unions like the Water Workers Alliance, community organizations of resident welfare associations, environmentalists and consumer organizations that formed discourse coalitions in the name of ‘Water Liberations Campaigns’ and ‘Citizens for Water Democracy’.

Widespread public protests were made over the much publicized public-private partnerships, ranging from protests over multinational corporations taking over Delhi’s water for profit, to the role of the World Bank in facilitating private sector participation in water, and over tariff hikes as a step toward accomplishing the process of what many called ‘back door privatization’. Campaigns revolved around a broad set of interests based on social, economic, and environmental grounds. Being in the government themselves, they said that the DJB’s claim on financial sustainability and cost recovery could be achieved through public–public partnerships and cooperative initiatives. These groups sympathized with the activists and argued that the programs and policies of the DJB were positive indicators of the privatization of urban water supplies of Delhi. They spoke out against transnational corporate players and even provided alternative plans for the Government for running the system, augmenting the water supply, and making the DJB financially sustainable (Sharma et al., 2004). These tensions within levels of Government institutions provide evidence that the Government was not a monolithic entity as understood in traditional policy studies but an area of conflicting aims and tensions, within which interactions for policy outcomes take place.

The activists against the project argued that the debate needed to deal directly with Multinational corporations (MNCs) and that, under MNC domination, water would be treated as a commodity, denying people the rights to a basic life need, curbing water democracy, making water out of bounds for the poor, and negating the value of local knowledge, skill, and technology. They also contested the role of trade liberalization as a route to the economic and social development of society, thus incorporating elements of the anti-globalization movement into their protests. These coalitions shifted the focus of the debate away from the narrow dimensions of efficacy, efficiency, technology, and quality and extended the debate to moral and ethical issues in water policy – more specifically to those related to rights over nature, water as a commons, and the right to control resources that would otherwise be dominated by MNCs. From the local issue of Delhi water privatization, the discourse entered the broader network of anti-globalism alliances. The claims of these politicians and activists represent the policy space that arose through independent forms of social
action but remained excluded from the government discourse. The following section analyzes the interactions of these competing discourses for a better understanding of the water policy process.

Analysis

This paper has reviewed the claims made by Government in the DWSSRP Report and by the dissenting voices against the DWSSRP in detail, by drawing upon the methods of a critical discourse analysis to understand policy processes. The utility of a discourse-based approach is that it can make clear the ways in which key actors tactically use policy documents to reinforce dominant ideologies and power relations. Rather than treat language as a neutral medium in which ideas and an objective reality can be represented, texts and actor interactions are seen as the outcome of power relations and ideological contestations. Analysis of the discourses that emerged during the research investigation show how an atmosphere of crisis was built through narratives of the irregularity, poor reliability and scarcity that dominated the water sector in Delhi, and thus necessitated water reforms in the first place. A network of experts – not only technicians but also administrators, strategists, and political advocates – was mobilized to drive this vision forward. The global expertise came through the ‘invited participation’ of the consultants, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, who were engaged to assess the status of the water sector and to provide inputs for remedial measures. These consultants were hired with the approval of the World Bank which was funding the project. A 24/7 water supply facilitated by technical experts and a national and state government engaged in a donor–recipient relationship was seen to result in good governance and good infrastructure, leading to poverty alleviation and economic growth.

The Government essentially adopted the outlook of the PWC consultants. It stated, ‘despite having abundant water as well as sufficient treatment capacity, the actual service is poor’ and requires ‘managing development through demand management’ (PwC, 2005). In following the lead of the consultants and the Bank that such reforms can best be achieved through public–private partnerships, a strong science-technology and industrial network was evident in the policy process. The Government’s narratives of efficiency, quality, health, and environmental sustainability that it promoted in its report are major contemporary public policy issues, both globally and nationally, and were thus reproduced in the neutral language of good governance.

The Government echoed the rhetoric of the World Bank and the consultants, citing efficiency, quality of water, and 24/7 water supplies to the poor under the aegis of science, technology, and skills available through the private players. This thinking echoes the rhetoric of transnational institutions that have entered into the fray to provide the knowledge, technology, and skills necessary to manage the water sector. These discourses of power were built around the scientific knowledge and expertise brought by the so-called ‘public–private partnership’ in water reform policy intending to improve the potability and access of water. The water reform discourses incorporated these claims, and solutions were presented in the politically neutral terms of a technical approach.

Conclusion

Government claims for the project represented water in a broad, macroeconomic and technical approach of ‘managing’ development. The consensus on policy reform can be associated with a broader
agreement between the donor communities, central government, and the state of Delhi. These relationships between donors, lenders, and governments are the factors that comprise the DWSSRP, which represents a policy instrument that is constructed as ‘state-owned’ and reliant on a foundation of consultation between the Government and civil society. It is perceived as offering an opportunity for a range of actors to engage legitimately in policy formulation. Simultaneously, however, it remains an instrument of political and economic conditionality, which forms an essential part of the narrative established by international financial institutions. As the process unfolds, an unprecedented range of policy spaces emerge, but the potential of these spaces to influence policy outcome depends on the terms of invitation to stakeholders. Some were in fact invited, and others who were not invited functioned outside the invited spaces through protest movements as a collective action by the community against government policy. These groups, also characterized as social movements, frequently fall outside the bounds of the current hegemonic discourse of water reform. Yet they become an important entry point to the understanding of the dynamics and development of alternative discourses in the agenda of water policy reform. The policy outcome of the DWSSRP was determined by the dynamics of the discourse coalitions and power struggles in these interactions. The project is currently on hold at the request of the Indian Central Government, after many protests and resistance from civil society groups and from a section of the bureaucracy. However, the project report still occupies a prominent place on the World Bank and DJB website, at the time of writing (in 2011).

A discourse-based approach in this case study helped situate key terms within a discursive environment to highlight their political and ideological significance in the making of policy. It also provided an understanding of the dynamics of power, agency, and knowledge in shaping urban water policy in the national capital territory of Delhi.

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