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Decentralised Water Management in small towns of India

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Abstract

In India, the limited impact of the decentralisation reform on urban drinking water accessibility poses new questions both technical and institutional, especially in small Indian municipalities. Based on empirical data from a recent doctoral research, we will analyse the water service management of four small towns in eastern Uttar Pradesh, a poor state in northern India, where expectations of improvement are strong. Beyond their singularity, each of these towns is facing the same kinds of water services problems and governance needs. Their comparison is relevant to highlight the general process of decentralisation, and at the same time, to underline the permanent role of the state in water accessibility. For that, interviews have been done with users, political leaders and government officials appointed at different levels (local, regional and state). Our aim is to give an idea of the municipal building of these small towns and its impact on water service.

Keywords

Urban India; small towns; municipalities; decentralisation reforms; water management

INTRODUCTION

Formerly characterised by a hegemonic presence of the state, the organisation of urban management¹ and among it water management, in India knows a deep redefinition since the implementation of decentralisation² reforms (with the constitutional recognition of local governments in 1992, provided by the 74 Constitutional Amendment Act). In a country where only a third of population did have access to tap water in the early 1990s (Census of India, 1992), the decentralisation of public water service to the municipalities carried great hopes of improvement. But this reform didn't seem to have had the desired results because in 2011, 56.5% of the population is still excluded from access to piped water (Census of India, 2012).

The decentralisation theory, which has become the keyword in urban governance in most of the countries all over the world, is based on the assumption of closer spatial and administrative proximity between local governments and local population with the expectation of increasing "responsiveness and accountability". The aim of decentralization was to strengthen local level democracy, transfer some decision-making powers to local bodies, to thus promote more effective management of local affairs, especially of local public services like water system.

¹ In our terminology, « urban Management » is understood as the set of functions of coordination and regulation of technical services that contribute to urban functioning.

² The term decentralisation refers to a wide range of transformations from administrative devolution to the establishment of a policy of local democracy (Litvack, Seddon, 1999, pp. 2-4). We designate by this term the process by which a central government formally devolves functions and powers to local government.

So far, the majority of the research on decentralisation and water issues in India has mainly focused on the cases of rural areas and large metropolises; little attention has been paid to the same issues in smaller urban settlements. Yet, small towns are vital to sustain the regional agricultural economy and to support the local industrial, manufacturing and service sectors (Hardoy, Satterthwaite, 1986). Furthermore, around half of the urban population in India lives in agglomerations with less than 100 000 population and the first results of the 2011 Census show an increase in their number, with 2774 new census towns which were considered to be villages in 2011³ (Bhagat, 2011). This demographic significance poses legitimate questions about the limited effects of the reform that has been undertaken especially in backward States which are generally characterized by a lack of urban infrastructure (Kundu 2009) : what are the transformations of public water management in small towns of these region? Has the decentralization reform improved general access to water supply? What are the barriers to universalisation of water service in smaller Indian towns?

METHODS

Using empirical data Survey collected between 2008 and 2012 from a recent doctoral research (Bercegol, 2012), this communication analyses the decentralised water service of four small towns in eastern Uttar Pradesh- a poor state in northern India, where expectation of improvement are strong. These towns, of a similar demographic size (around 20,000 inhabitants in 2001), located in the same geographic areas (in eastern Uttar Pradesh - UP) and crossed by the same government reorganisation (UP municipality Act 1916, amended by the 74 CAA), have been extensively studied and compared.

³ In India, a census town is one which has a minimum population of 5000, has at least 75% of male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits and a density of population of at least 400 persons per km² (Census of India, 2012)

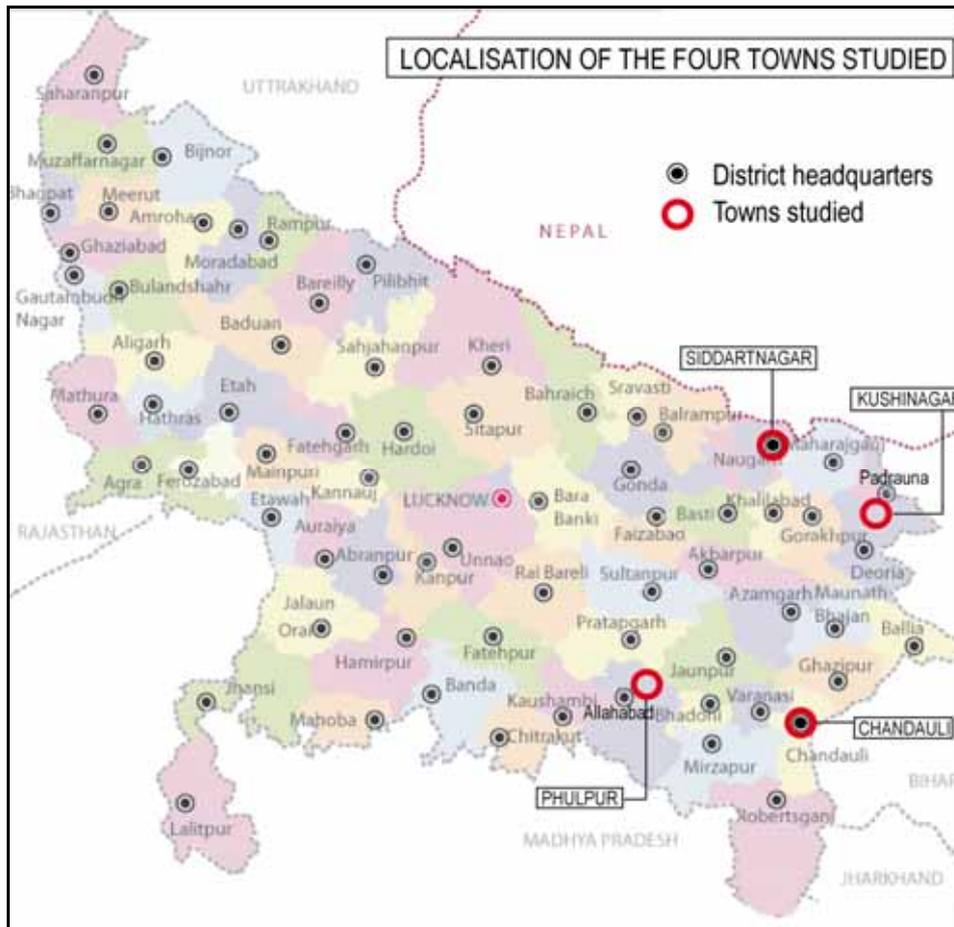


Figure 1: Localisation of the four towns studied. Source: DE BERCEGOL (2012) based on “map of India” (<http://www.mapsofindia.com>)

These agglomerations are: Kushinagar Nagar Panchayat- A small tourist town which is becoming increasingly popular and is frequented by international visitors; Chandauli Nagar Panchayat- town headquarters of the eponymous district where the population has doubled between 1991 and 2001; Phulpur Nagar Panchayat- A small town in Allahabad District, with 55% of the population is Muslim; and Siddarthnagar Nagar Palika Parisha- A district headquarters with a different administrative status⁴, usually reserved for larger municipalities. Beyond their singularity, each of these town is facing the same kinds of water problems and governance needs. That’s why their comparison seemed relevant to highlight the general process of decentralisation and at the same time, to underline the permanent major role of the state in water accessibility.

By looking beyond the municipal government and by analysing government reorganisation in a multilevel perspective, this paper aims at giving an idea of the impact of decentralization reform on water services accessibility in small Indian towns. For that, accessibility to the network and satisfaction has been empirically evaluated and mapped, financial investment in water infrastructure has been analysed and interviews have been done with inhabitants, political leaders and government officials appointed at different levels (local, regional and state). The aim of the

⁴ The decentralisation amendment in India (74CAA) provides three forms of local government: -the “Municipal Corporation” or “Nagar Nigam” corresponds to the metropolitan municipalities; -the “Municipality” or “Nagar Palika” refers to the city government; -the “Nagar Panchayat” administers areas called “transitional” which correspond to small towns. It is the regional state’s responsibility to determine the status of an urban area as “Nagar Panchayat”, “Nagar Palika” or “Municipal Corporation”. This decision is based on a combination of criteria (demographic, spatial, economic and tax) and the decision remains at the state government’s discretion.

research was to give an idea of the impact of decentralisation on water services and, more broadly, to give an understanding of institutional building of small municipalities.

RESULTS

Field surveys show that despite the decentralisation reform opening fresh opportunities for their strengthening, small municipalities don't have yet the technical, financial and decisional capacity to improve public water service and its accessibility remains very low (with less than 50% of households connected to the network, cf. table n°1).

Table n°1: household connexion to the public service (in %). Source: municipal accounting

	Kushinagar	Chandauli	Siddarthnagar	Phulpur
Tap connexion%	36%	31%	18%	45%

One of the main problem appears to be the lack of coordination between local government and the *Jal Nigam*- which is the parastatal water agency which is still taking care of the construction of the main infrastructure even if the maintenance has been given to municipalities since the decentralisation reform. Lack of coordination explains the insufficient training of the local staff now in charge of the service management. Furthermore, the absence of proper financial means aggravates the strong dependence of the municipality on other levels of government. Finally, the mediocre level of water service in small towns shows that the decentralised set-up is still far from defined and is not yet stabilised. It's caught between a political and technical vision which appears rather difficult to conciliate without the strong involvement of the state government to achieve it.

The transfer of decentralised water management to the urban local governments appears extremely laborious. Support of water services by small municipal institutions faces many constraints in practice and the logic presiding over local choices is obliterated by the weakness of municipal resources, both from a financial (1°), institutional (2°) and technical (3°) point of views. It prevents any noteworthy improvement and accentuates the dependence on the state government (4°)

1°) A weakness of financial resources

In India, towns appear generally highly dependent on the financial decisions of the regional government for important infrastructure investments - especially for drinking water systems (Kundu, 2006). In the present case, our field fork in Uttar Pradesh shows that small municipalities struggle to even contribute up to only 10%. To deal with this deficiency, access to the private capital market and borrowing or Private-Public-Partnership model, which is pronated by reformers since the 1990s, appear largely disconnected from the ground reality of these small towns where a real financial accounting system is difficult to implement due to a lack of trained personnel (Ravikant, 2003, p. 112), and where the culture of opacity in budget management is still an integral part of its functioning (Bercegol 2012). For these same reasons, the establishment of a government bond without interest (called the "revolving fund") recommended by the Uttar Pradesh State Finance Commission – SFC, was doomed to certain failure in these small towns which have rarely been able to pay back the loan after they had contracted it. In summary,

despite decentralisation reform, small towns still rely on financial subsidies from the state for investing in water infrastructure improvement and management.

2°) A laborious institutional transfer

Institutional integration of municipal government in a system of urban governance that previously existed appears to still be limited. Nowadays, Jal Nigam- the parastatal water agency created in the 1970s- , is reluctant to transfer its old prerogatives to these new municipal institution, that they perceive more as a concurrent than as a partner. Within the new decentralised framework, the morphology of the water supply network is still constructed by the Jal Nigam without any real consultation with the concerned municipal body and then the infrastructure is transferred to it. But the lack of definition in coordination between Jal Nigam and Municipality tends to create a mutual distrust (which can be exacerbated by caste conflicts specific to the nature of small towns, mainly represented by elected councillor from lower caste groups, and the Corps of Engineers, which are generally higher caste based), or competition, instead of working together and complementing skills between local government (which is supposed to know what is the best thing to do at the local level) and water technical agency (who know how to implement it better). The official texts of decentralisation reform in India appear to be largely unknown at the ground level as well as the higher level (the primary stakeholders, municipal workers and by the engineers of the water agencies). This leads to confusion in functional interpretation, as they are not very clear about their roles. The Uttar Pradesh municipal legislation assumed that the diffusion of a model almost identical to all urban local governments is enough to build and consolidate all urban municipal institutions. But while big cities often inherit stabilised institutions, everything is still under construction in the case of small towns. Therefore, the reorganisation of technical water services appears confused in practice for the smallest towns. Municipalities are mostly limited to minimal responsibilities, like choosing the place for hand pump and they are largely left out of technical decision making.

3°) A lack of local expertise

Contrary to what decentralisation advocates about the powers, Jal Nigam still is the main decision making body because small towns simply don't have the human resource to take it over. Although, municipality has increased the number of local employees in the last twenty years, small municipal bodies are still financially unable to hire qualified engineers to oversee the technical aspect of the distribution of water. As we have said, the decentralisation reforms, set-up by the State, did not specify the ways of learning and transfer of skills. It has very little space reserved for the training of municipal officials. Without the transfer of technical skills, municipalities still plays an almost non-existent role in the planning, development and maintenance of water services. This lack of expertise hampers effective decentralisation of functions and can even lead, in some cases, to a dislocation or a worsening of performance and management. The water distribution system suffers from inadequate maintenance, which causes deterioration of the network (with problem of intermittence, low water quality⁵ and low pressure) and huge dissatisfaction among the people (only 18% to 45% of the population is connected to the water supply and most of them are complaining about pressure, intermittent supply insufficient quantity and overall, mainly about poor water quality). Locally recruited employees do not have the technical and financial recommendations of Jal Nigam because they simply are not aware about it. Therefore, this deficit of local human resource, caused not only by financial shortage but overall by a non-cooperation from the Jal Nigam, appears to be one of the main constraints to an efficient decentralised water management.

⁵ The establishment of an unplanned system of gutters necessary for sanitation, remains insufficient to clean the streets, lead to infiltrations of the water pipes and affect the quality of the drinking water.

4°) The permanent role of the State

Despite the same demographic size of the surveyed towns, the infrastructure for the drinking water shows large variations in its design in terms of quantities, that may range from basic (70 litres per day per person to Phulpur) to twice (135 litres per capita per day for other towns of the district) or even three times higher (200 litres per inhabitant per day for the tourist district, Kushinagar). In fact, because the functional scope of the municipality remains quite low in small towns, the inefficiency in service delivery is not due to the local performance of municipal employees but is directly determined by the genuine and voluntary commitment of the state government. So, the differences in water services between the towns studied is directly due to the state government and its willingness to provide financial grants based on its biased view. Such as, its accelerated upgrading of the poor neighbourhoods (Dalit neighbourhoods) through regional special programmes (Kanshi Ram Avaaz Yojana)⁶, or the promotion of a tourist town (Kushinagar Maitreya Project)⁷.

Among of the few major discriminating factors, these two major factors influencing the decision making are the *administrative status* of a town as a district capital, and the *economic importance* as tourist capital. This clearly allows towns to be a priority for major infrastructural improvement projects (such as the central programme, UIDSSMT, or the mega tourist project of Kushinagar) and these towns are generally offered an improved electricity service (which leads to a better water service). In all the cases, the improvement of water service finally still relies only on a greater involvement of the state government in municipal affairs.

CONCLUSION: WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS FOR DECENTRALISED WATER GOVERNANCE IN SMALL INDIAN TOWNS?

Looking at the decentralised water services of small Indian towns, two major lessons emerge: one, on the specific process of the institutional construction of small towns in Uttar Pradesh and the other on the need for more research on small towns to better understand their dynamics to be able to improve their governance with appropriate reforms.

The first lesson is that, for the moment, decentralised water reform in Uttar Pradesh has not clearly given a place for urban local governments especially in small towns with weaker capacity which *de facto* deprives them of any autonomy. This is partly due to the unclear municipal legislation which ignores the specific situations of small towns and appears unable to take into account their handicaps in water management. A strong involvement of the state is needed for the strengthening of the local bodies, especially for developing their technical skills.

The government of Uttar Pradesh seems to have prudently engaged in a process of gradually reorganising water management services. While municipalities have entered a process of “learning by doing” (Crook, Manor, 1998), it would be unrealistic to expect them to be enough stabilised to be able to fully assert their responsibilities, especially the technical ones like water management. This process cannot occur smoothly, without any errors and adjustments and more so in the case of small towns, where everything remains to be done. It is therefore necessary to adopt a long-term vision of the decentralised water management. The challenge is to promote the municipal water management with appropriate policies adapted to small town needs.

⁶ During her tenure, one of the first projects launched by Mayawati (a famous politician, woman and dalit, who served four terms as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh) was a programme specifically directed towards the development of Dalit neighbourhoods. The programme “Kanshi Ram” was named in honour of the founder of her party the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP – a political party with a strong Dalit identity) who died in 2006.

⁷ Since the 1990s, the Uttar Pradesh government wishes to develop and promote the tourist potential of Kushinagar town as one of the leading cultural and religious Buddhist areas.

Linked to the first lesson, the second major result of this research is that any institutional change like decentralised water management, is particularly difficult to achieve in the case of small towns- not only because of their deficits in human resources, technical skills or financial needs, but primarily because of the ignorance of their socio-cultural characteristics and the specific problems which they confront daily.

By deliberately choosing to illuminate the specific case of small Indian towns, one aim of this article was modestly to recall the existence of the other urban reality beyond the metropolises⁸, which is often overlooked by planners and researchers. Also, to enrich the understanding of the dynamics, beyond this particular case of India. Like some other research papers on this theme have written⁹, one has to emphasise the existence of a vast field of analysis specifically focused on the dynamics of small Indian towns. In this regard, the SUBURBIN project (Subaltern Urbanization In India, a research programme funded by the French National Research Agency), which aims at bringing these marginal small agglomerations to the forefront of the analysis of urbanisation dynamics announces a promising renewal of Indian Urban studies (cf. <http://suburbin.hypotheses.org/>). There is a need for renewal of observation on non-metropolitan cities in India which could bring the hope that, in the longer term, the diversity of urban India will be taken into account by planners and this would prevent a scenario where “the small towns of less developed countries continue to live in inhumane conditions, without clean water, no toilet and no electricity” (Kundu, 2009, p. 169).

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⁸ Not specific to India; we will not recall here the role of development and poverty reduction assigned to small urban areas (Hardoy, Satterthwaite, 1986) in which the bulk of urban growth will be concentrated in the future (United Nations 2004).

⁹ Far from being the first to argue for greater consideration of small towns, some other research (such as David Satterthwaite of the International Institute for Environment and Development in London, Dennis A. Rondinelli, Center for Global Business Research at Carolina North or Amitabh Kundu, Jawaharlal Nehru University of Delhi) have tried before us to revive interest in this subject, in a timely manner, and with very relative success for the moment (from Richards, 1965 to Bell and Jayne, 2006).

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