

## UC Santa Cruz

### UC Santa Cruz Previously Published Works

#### Title

Hydraulic City, by Anand. Book Review

#### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6td644nv>

#### Author

Delgado-P., G

#### Publication Date

2023-12-12

#### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

**Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai.** Nikhil Anand. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 312 pp.

DOI: 10.1111/amet.12650

**GUILLERMO DELGADO-P.**

University of California, Santa Cruz

In Bolivia, social movements ousted two neoliberal governments by the year 2006. At the center of such events were water privatization proposals by the transnational company Bechtel that provoked the famous Water Wars. Indeed, water is becoming the blue gold of the 21st century. Its materiality and the infrastructure necessary to make it available to urbanites have shaped the great modern cities of the world—London, New York, São Paulo. And as Nikhil Anand shows in this important ethnography of infrastructures and waterscapes, water—and how to get it and who gets it—is central to the development of the emerging megalopolis of Mumbai. His innovative and extended study presses us to think not just about water's materiality but also about its causal connections to the infrastructures of citizenship in this sprawling city by the sea.

Anand traces how water works as it seeps and leaks into Mumbai's social triangle of exclusion as well as the chorographic ekistics intersected by the entangled techno-

natures, cyber waterscapes, and techno-science of the state agencies that implement and regulate its distribution. Of course, consumption in itself depends on where each of us is situated in a daily saga of being either satisfied or thirsty, so much so that we could read this contribution as a manual of Everyday Forms of Drinking Water.

*Hydraulic City* is composed of six chapters, each of which brings to the forefront a multisited ethnography in which people and water are intertwined in the social life of infrastructures. Anand visited the area for more than eight years before conducting his doctoral fieldwork, a rarity for any young ethnographer; the time from 2007 to 2009, when he lived at Jogeshwari, was the most intensive. Each chapter is accompanied by an interlude—stories, films, dialogues—where he shares methodological observations and narratives engaging theory, neoliberalism, climate change, and biopolitics that help the reader understand the travails of fieldwork.

I venture to say that Anand's familiarity with this megalopolis (he speaks English, Hindi, and Marathi) assisted him in turning over all stones or, rather, pipes as he ambitiously traversed underneath and through Mumbai's social hierarchy, where markers such as ethnicity, language, and gender are critical. Bureaucracies and technicians decide the fate of water kinetics, and the daily struggle to consume water implies disrupting legal formalities or, for that matter, being protected by them. Anand argues that "water infrastructures are generative of a multiple, entangled, nonconstitutive outside to the form and performance of the liberal city" (7). He then gives us "three subsidiary arguments that pertain to how the hydraulic city and its citizens are made": through "an incremental, intermittent, and reversible process that is composed of multiple temporalities," through "the historic, political, and material relations [citizens] make with water pipes," and through the "excesses of Mumbai's water infrastructure—the leaks of water and authority" (7–8).

"Scare Cities," the first chapter, constitutes a historicizing tour de force that helps the reader understand the layered coloniality (Portuguese, British) of urban development, which also implies tracing the engineering of its infrastructure (dams, canals, pipes, purification systems) as a contradictory example of "urban ingestion on the one hand, and disconnection on the other" (33), since more than 3.3 billion liters of water flow through Mumbai every day. And yet issues of scarcity and shortages seem to constitute the regulatory strategy of water delivery, including the management of silence about these issues, since some information—such as information about the impacts of the massive displacement or relocation of peoples who till the land—is not publicly available.

In chapter 2, "Settlement," Anand addresses a rejection of the outdated "trope of two cities and two polities" (76), suggesting a challenge to this Dickensian binarism.

All classes are affected by water insecurity, and all to varying degrees must find ways to negotiate “the fluidity of urban life” (68), where residents “simultaneously combine diverse kinds of social, material, and political subjectivities” (69). Here political society emerges as a disciplinarian entity that works hard to regulate habitation while trapped in the tensions brought about by the il/legality and il/liberalism (settlements, squatting) that reveal its own conceptual vulnerability.

“Time Pé (on Time),” chapter 3, can easily be read as an ethnography of water distribution, since it entails a detailed nominal scheduling of water delivery. This is a problem of synchronicity and cultural concepts of local time and also a problem of citizenship that depends on the *chaviwallas* (key people) responsible for turning on 800 valves so that Mumbai citizens can have (although not be guaranteed) “water time” (116). One would estimate that without correct demographic data (e.g., floating populations, new settlers), a percentage of inhabitants would go thirsty. Likewise, there is a gendered aspect to the story: because of the domestic division of labor, access to water and cooking are inseparable, and women must constantly calibrate their family’s schedules against the often unpredictable availability of water.

The fourth chapter, “Social Work,” is about the works of civil society, in particular about Asha, a community organization whose members “mobilize a variety of social relations beyond those of liberal subjectivity” (133) to achieve their goals. NGOs and community-based organizations encourage full citizenship participation because it is through citizens that these issues are negotiated, underscoring the meaning of participatory democracy. Clearly, this is democracy at work, with all its obstacles, corruptions, and successes.

“Leaks,” chapter 5, questions the measurable, the illusory exactness of the amount of water that is available to use. Water enters the space of leakage, the immeasurable intangible. Despite their trust in Cartesian certainty, technocracy, numbers, and policies, hydraulic engineers are trapped by the “leaky materialities” (188) of inexorable infrastructure decay. While water shortages and scarcity often dominate daily life, Anand travels with water infrastructure technicians and finds out that water leaks are so abundant that they must cover themselves with umbrellas to keep dry as they inspect the underground system of pipes.

Finally, chapter 6 is about marginalization. Appropriately titled “Disconnection,” it foregrounds life in Muslim Premnagar, whose residents “recognize the diffuse, plastic multiplicity and plurality of ‘the state’” (212). Being affected by a system of inclusion by exclusion, they must over and over validate notions of citizenship, since the state deems Premnagar a “zone of abjection” (194). Residents then, performing their “hydraulic and customer citizenship” (149),

must relentlessly struggle to demand and reclaim water services without ever being secure in even partial successes.

*Hydraulic City* is an engrossing contribution to recent ethnographies on waterscapes and infrastructures. Students and scholars of glocality will relish Anand’s ethnography of the intricacies brought about by potable water, techno-natures, techno-science, state structures, precarity, and friction, all entwined in and by hydraulic materiality.