

CBSE Notes Class 8 Social Science Civics Chapter 9 Public Facilities

Water and the People of Chennai

Anna Nagar, Chennai is an area lush and green with lawns maintained by generous spraying of water. Tap water is regular for the major part of the day in this area. On the days that water supply is inadequate, the residents can speak to the senior official of the municipal water board, and a water tanker is arranged for their houses. Meanwhile, Mylapore suffers from water shortage and gets municipal water once in two days. A private bore well meets some of the residents' water needs. However, bore well water is brackish so the residents use it in their toilets and for washing. For other uses, water is purchased from tankers at a cost of Rs 500-600 monthly. The Madipakkam area gets water once every four days. For drinking purposes residents have to buy bottled water. Saidapet Slum is another area, where some hutments have neither a bathroom nor a tap connection. For 30 such hutments, there is a common tap at one corner, in which water comes from a bore well for 20 minutes twice a day, during which time a family gets to fill a maximum of 3 buckets. The same water is used for washing and drinking. In summer, the flow becomes a trickle, so that one family gets water only at the cost of another. People have to wait long hours for water tankers.

Water as Part of the Fundamental Right to Life

Water-essential for life and good health-necessary to meet our daily needs-safe drinking water also prevents many water-related diseases. Above 1,600 Indians, most of whom are children below the age of 5, die every day because of water-related diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera and so on. Access to safe drinking water can help prevent these deaths. Right to water is a part of the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution. Hence, it is the right of every person, whether rich or poor, to have sufficient amounts of water to fulfil his/her daily needs at a price that he/she can afford. In other words, there should be universal access to water. Even both the High Courts and the Supreme Court have held in certain cases that the right to safe drinking water is a Fundamental Right.

Public Facilities

Other essential Public facilities apart from water provided to everyone include healthcare and sanitation. Things like electricity, public transport, schools and colleges are also necessary. The main important characteristic of a public facility is that once it is provided, its benefits can be shared by many people.

The Government's Role

The Government has the responsibility of providing public facilities to the people. They have to ensure that these 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. Hence, a private company will probably not be interested in undertaking such work. However, for some public facilities such as schools and hospitals, private companies may be interested. In a city, some private companies also provide water through tankers or supply drinking water in sealed bottles- not available at affordable rates- living by rule that people will get as much as they can pay for will ensure that many people who cannot afford to pay will be deprived of the opportunity to live a decent life. Public facilities relate to people's basic needs. 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.

Where does the government get money for public facilities?

Every year the government budget is presented in the Parliament. This is an account of the expenses the government has made on its programmes in the past year and how much it plans to spend in the coming year.

Water Supply to Chennai: Is it Available to All?

Public facilities should be made available to all. However, there is a shortage of such facilities. Water Supply in Chennai is marked by shortages. Municipal supply meets only about half the needs of the people of the city, on an average. In some areas, the water supply is more regular than others. Areas 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 borewells, buying water from tankers and using bottled water for drinking. Access to 'safe' drinking water is also available to some and this depends on what one can afford. 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

The situation in Chennai is not unique. A similar 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 is the great inequalities in water use. The supply of water per person in an urban area in India should be about 135 litres 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 litres a day per person (one bucket), people living in luxury hotels may consume as much as 1,600 litres (80 buckets) of water per day. Shortage of municipal water translates to a sign of government failure. Some people believe that the government is unable to

supply the amount of water because the municipal water departments are at loss and so private companies should be allowed to take over. They will be able to do better.

Consider the following facts:

1. Throughout the world, water supply is a function of the government. There are very few instances of private water supply
2. There are areas in the world where the public water supply has achieved universal access.
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 protests, with riots breaking out in places like Bolivia, forcing the government to take back the service from private hands.
4. Within India, there are a few cases of success in government water departments, limited to certain areas of their work. The water supply department in Mumbai raises enough money via water charges to cover its expenses on supplying water. In Hyderabad, a report shows that the department has increased coverage and improved performance in revenue collection. In Chennai, the department has taken several initiatives for harvesting rainwater to increase the level of groundwater. It has also used the services of private companies for transporting and distributing water but the government water supply department decides the rate for water tankers and gives them permission to operate. Hence they are called 'on contract.'

Public facilities relate to our basic needs and the Indian Constitution recognises the right to water, health, education etc as being a part of the Right to Life. One of the major roles of the government is to ensure adequate public facilities for everyone. But, there is a shortage in supply and there are inadequacies in distribution. Compared to the metros and large cities, towns and villages are under-provided, while compared to wealthy localities, the poorer localities are under-serviced. Handing over these facilities to private companies is not the answer. The solution needs to take account of the important fact that every citizen of the country has a right to these facilities, which should be provided to her/him in an equitable manner.