

Gray Zones: The Everyday Practices and Governance of Water Beyond the Network

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Abstract

In Delhi, India, the centralized water supply is highly fractured and sporadic, reaching less than half of residents on an everyday basis. As a result, urbanites across social groups co-produce water infrastructure through reliance on a host of alternate sources, technologies, and political actors. However, such diverse delivery configurations do not fit the conventional dualistic framing of urban water governance as either state or private, legal or illegal, and divided along the geographies of formal or informal settlements. This paper instead shows that everyday water is procured and governed through a “gray zone” of hybrid institutional and infrastructural arrangements. By tracing water regimes across Delhi’s settlements, I show that gray zones are: 1.) characterized by political assemblages that defy dualisms such as legal/illegal, formal/informal, and public/private, 2.) typified by a spectrum of differing legitimacies associated with the practices and (il)legality of water and its infrastructures, and 3.) produced through, and productive of, social power relations and embodied forms of gendered/classed/ethno-religious difference in the city. This paper demonstrates that gray zones provide a heuristic device to analyze in/formality, infrastructure, and governance in cities of the global South such as Delhi, contributing to a situated and embodied urban political ecology of water. My findings reveal that gray zones of water have distinct embodied and political ramifications that produce unequal hydro-social geographies not only within the city, but also at the neighborhood, household, and bodily scale.