

Waterwise: The rise of the informal sector

Water and sanitation services are big business, especially in urban areas of India. With the government institutions failing to deliver both quantity and quality of water, several services have sprung up to assist the citizen.

The first of them is the private water tanker. EPI coated tanks roam around the city delivering water at the call of a mobile. More than 1,000 tankers are registered in Bangalore, and they may be delivering up to three million litres of water or more every day. Unfortunately, since they are not regulated, there is no assurance of quality of the water delivered. Since this group also has not formed any association it also does not attempt to self-regulate itself and draw up guidelines for correct operations.

New service

A new service which has emerged is that of cleaning sumps and overhead tanks. Since the supply from the water utility is intermittent, almost every building in Bangalore has large sumps from where water is pumped to overhead tanks. Over time these sumps accumulate dust and dirt and therefore this cleaning service has sprung up. The dirt and slime is removed using a jet pump and the tank is disinfected using chlorine or iodine. Again, there is no formal structure to ensure what quality of service has to be delivered and trust alone is the compact between the client and the service provider.

Borewell drillers

Borewell drillers are the next set of service providers, again operating in the informal sector. They will come and identify a point for drilling and will then proceed to drill and operationalise the borewell. As usual there is no assurance of whether water will be struck, how much water will be available and what will be the quality of water available. *Caveat emptor* is the mantra and since there is no alternative, the system operates without any regulation.

Recently a groundwater bill has been passed and rules and regulations have been drafted. It remains to be seen how effective it will be in protecting the interest of the consumers. An added service is the cleaning of borewells and hydro-fracturing. When old borewells reduce in yield or become dry people resort to cleaning them up or try hydro-fracturing. This service too is not regulated and there is no system of complaint or grievance redress.

Water filter

The water filter has become ubiquitous in almost all households. From the simple candle filter to the sophisticated Reverse Osmosis-based ones, many are available in the market. Here the system is more formalised and if there is a complaint with the filter the manufacturer usually takes the responsibility of replacing or repairing it. The selection of the filter itself is in a grey zone with many people unaware as to which filter is the most appropriate for them. More information on the right filter choice should be available but the question is whose job is it to do that?

Honeysucker

For septic tanks and pit toilets, a new service has sprung up in recent years called the 'Honeysucker'. These vacuum trucks will de-sludge the pits and the septic tanks for a fee. Again, since they operate in the informal sector, there is no price regulation or standards of service required. A formal structure for their operations and a good regulator will need to be activated.

There are many informal service providers and they are doing a reasonably good job with service provision and helping address a need. It is in the interest of the State and the citizens to enhance the skills of these operators, regularise them and integrate them into mainstream operations of water supply and sanitation. The Water Supply and Sewerage Board should take this responsibility (The Hindu 10-2-12).