

Explainer: Why the riverfront project is extremely unfair to citizens

Dr Gurudas Nulkar

Social justice is the fair and equal treatment of everyone who lives in a community. In the context of cities, it refers to the distribution and access to infrastructure, public goods and services without regard to economic status, religion, gender or other demographic aspects of citizens.

Unfortunately, our cities are far from being the guardians of social justice. On the contrary, public infrastructure is skewed towards some sections of society. One such instance is the budgetary outlay for Pune's river rejuvenation project.

The initial budget to develop the riverfront of Pune's Mula-Mutha rivers was Rs 2,619 crore. But it now stands at Rs 4,700 crore.

This project ignores the impacts of climate change on the precipitation regime, its vision lacks reference to riverine ecosystems, biodiversity and ecological services of the river, and it will turn natural

embankments into constructed ones. These are some of the discrepancies that are flagged by citizens' groups. The environmental clearance issued for this project also has blatant misrepresentations by the project proponent. That is acknowledged by the National Green Tribunal order.

The recent case of over 6,000 trees being cut for the project is a case in point. There is no mention of tree cutting in the Environmental Clearance certificate.

So, what does this project have to do with social justice? The Rs 4,700 crore being spent on this project violates the principle of social justice on at least two counts. First, the PMC's failure to provide clean drinking water to all citizens. Second, the callousness with which the civic body releases untreated sewage that affects people living downstream. The PMC has disregarded its duty to the citizens of Pune as well as residents of Solapur, the city that feeds on the sewage of Pune city. The Rs 4,700 crore will not be spent on any of this.

Rise of the tanker lobby

The primary responsibility of an urban administrative



THE WRONG PRIORITIES: When Rs 4,700 crore is allocated for riverfront beautification in Pune, it is extremely unfair to people who buy water of questionable quality, at a price set by private operators, the author writes

body is to provide its citizens with public infrastructure. Providing safe drinking water equitably is a cardinal duty of the corporation. How does the PMC score here?

A rapid survey of housing societies revealed that the number of suburbs that are not supplied water by PMC is

not small. The survey reveals the areas that buy water are: Vimannagar, Kharadi, Wagholi, Undri, Kondhwa, Wanowrie, Pisoli, Salunke Vihar, NIBM Road, Mohamadwadi, Hadapsar, Bavdhan, Pashan-Sus Road, Baner-Pashan Link Road, Aundh-Baner Link Road, Balewadi,

and some parts of Kothrud. The list is long.

Even some new buildings in the 'peths' are forced to buy water. All these years, their need was supplemented by groundwater sources. But new construction in place of old 'wadās' have diverted springs and destroyed aquifers, com-

PELLING newer buildings to buy tankers.

Some of the large housing complexes in the newer suburbs pay crores of rupees to buy water of dubious quality.

The PMC budget for 2023-24 has an allocation of Rs 1,300 crore for water projects. This is to pay for water to the 34 newly merged villages and the 24x7 water supply programme. The outlay seems woefully inadequate.

When Rs 4,700 crore is allocated for riverfront beautification, it is extremely unfair to people who buy water of questionable quality, at a price set by private operators.

Solapur - silent sufferer

The second count on which the PMC contravenes social justice is in its duty to treat the city's sewage. The current capacity of PMC's sewage treatment plants (STP) is not enough to treat the city's sewage. The PMC has a responsibility towards downstream inhabitants, and to the denizens of the riverine ecosystem. The Solapur Municipal Corporation (SMC) is forced to treat the partially treated sewage of Pune.

While Solapur has been protesting against the PMC



The ₹4,700 crore being spent on the riverfront project violates the principle of social justice on at least two counts. First, PMC's failure to provide clean drinking water to all citizens. Second, the callousness with which the civic body releases untreated sewage that affects people living downstream. The PMC has disregarded its duty to the citizens of Pune as well as residents of Solapur, the city that feeds on the sewage of Pune city. The ₹4,700 crore will not be spent on any of this

and PCMC sewage, successive governments have let off the erring corporations with just a slap on the wrist.

The PMC responds to the issue of sewage treatment with loan from the Japan International Cooperation Agency for setting up 11 STPs. This is to create an additional sewage treatment capacity of 396 million litres per day (MLD) above the existing 477 MLD.

The project was to be completed by January 2022, but did not take off until last year. Once complete, Pune's STP capacity will be 873 MLD. This

is not enough to cover the quantum of sewage generated in 2023.

It is time then that downstream residents demand that the Rs 4,700 crore be spent not on beautification of Pune's rivers, but on treating sewage.

Beauty over liveability

The budget for the river rejuvenation project neither provides for improving the water quality, nor for enhancing water distribution to deprived areas. These discrepancies raise the question: Is the project a socially just investment?

Social justice transcends the current generation to include future citizens. The brunt of the climate inadequacy of this project and the massacre of 6,000 trees might not affect this generation. However, future citizens might not be so fortunate. In any public expenditure, maximisation of social benefit is advocated. However, in the case of Pune's river rejuvenation project, it appears that only a section of society will benefit from it.

The writer is a professor and director of the Centre for Sustainable Development, at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune