

Master Thesis

Analyzing Water Spheres in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

Negotiation Processes between Society and Space in a Changing Environment

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Abstract

The ~2.5 million people agglomeration of Kathmandu Valley – one of the fastest growing urban areas in South Asia – faces water issues on various dimensions while adaptation poses a critical challenge (UN-HABITAT 2015: 4). Urbanization transforms open spaces and agricultural land into concrete building blocks, traditional water supply systems established around sacred water collection points vanish, and alternate water sources are only accessible to economically well-situated inhabitants. While globalization influences socio-economic processes, tradition lifestyle and consumer behavior consequently alter.

Within these dynamics the urban dwellers find themselves in an ongoing negotiation process in terms of water. Looking at these determinants shaping day-to-day water usage of Nepalese people, understanding the actual impact on the supply of water, social relevance of ancient water supply infrastructures, and religious meaning of water is of utmost importance.

Therefore, a dynamic analytical framework ‘Water Spheres in a Changing Environment’ has been developed, which concentrates on three different spheres of water: the supply sphere, the social sphere, and the religious sphere. The supply sphere understands water as a basic need of the urban dwellers, including the challenges they face to obtain enough safe and secure water in their daily life. Within the social sphere the focus is on how traditional stone water spouts (local water wells) act as spaces of communication and social interaction. The religious sphere considers water as a transcendent element embedded in religious activities, ranging from in-house rituals to city-wide performances. The significance of water as social and religious spheres currently experiences a transformation seen differently by the dwellers. These three spheres of water are in a dynamic relation and constant shift, which completes the picture of water space in the context of the Kathmandu Valley.

The study employs qualitative methods such as field observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversation.

The introduced framework gives an analytical contribution to the debates within the academic community of Urban Political Ecology (UPE). Additionally, the findings could be integrated in urban planning strategies to provide a sustainable environment for urban societies.

The study reveals the interconnection of the three water spheres, their dynamics embedded in a changing environment and shed light on the social constructiveness of the water space. It aims to explore the impact of these dynamics on the residents' daily life, focusing in particular on women and community level; special attention is paid to the social dimension. In this sense, it evaluates the traditional and current significance of stone water spouts as water sources and as places for social interaction and religious performances.