

## Waterboarding No More

An experience at the Delhi Jal Board regarding a complaint of overbilling reveals that the attitudes of public servants have changed, thanks to technology and grass-roots democracy.

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The water bill was a bit smudged. Or so I thought since the amount payable seemed to be in five figures. I was supposed to pay ₹30,156 by such-and-such a date. I thought that there had been a mistake. However, getting the whole thing sorted out gave me an opportunity to see how something seems to have changed with the way the bureaucratic machine now works.

It turns out that the tenants living in the flat for the last seven years had stopped paying the water bill since 2010. Add to that late charges, surcharge, etc, and pretty soon we were talking real money. I didn't even know where to start trying to get this issue resolved. So I checked out the website of the Delhi Jal Board and got the address of the local water office. Except that I had no idea of its location. So I, without any hope, called the landline number of the officer mentioned on the website. And lo and behold, not only was the phone answered but I was also very politely told what I needed to do and where exactly the office is located.

I got all the documents required and finally decided to go to the office. Reaching the office at 3 pm, I found the compound deserted—never a good sign at a government office. Sure enough, the board said in bold letters: “Public Dealing 9.30–2.30, Lunch 1.30–2.00.” “Pretty much giving up hope, I very diffidently ventured to knock on a slightly ajar door since all the windows were closed. The person sitting inside called me in and, more importantly, asked what the problem was. I explained and he did something which was unbelievable—he actually took out the register in which the papers and application details had to be entered, did the entry and gave me a receipt. I thought I was in cuckoo land!

I was told that I don't need to do anything till the details are entered in the system (something which will take a week or so) after which I can check on the website and find the amount due after appropriate rebates, etc. I was mighty impressed with not just the fact that the work got done but also the helpful attitude of the person concerned. Little did I know that there were more surprises in store.

After about 10 days, I visited the office again. Same time—3 pm (since I have classes before that). This time, another young computer operator asked me what I wanted. I explained that the details had not yet appeared on the website. He looked at the papers I was carrying, checked and told me to wait for

a few minutes while he entered the details. After doing this, he told me to go and get the reading of the new water meter which I had installed so that the latest bill can be generated. I told him I will come tomorrow and give him the reading. “No, no, sir, there is no need to come here again. Here is my mobile number. Just WhatsApp the photograph of the meter to me!” I could not believe my ears. That my work was being done after the regular hours, that I was being offered a chair, spoken to politely and now this! My innate suspicion of all things bureaucratic told me that something must be missing.

And so I went again the next day with the photograph of the meter on my phone. This time, the operator tried to put in the details but was not successful and so he called his boss who also spent some 30 minutes, but the server would just not accept the details. At this point, the boss—a soft-spoken lady—decided it was not going to work that day. So she gave me her mobile number, took down my mobile number and asked me to call her again in a week when she would update me on the status of my application. No need to visit the office again. And sure enough, after a week or so, I got a call from the boss to tell me to check the website. I did and realised the whole matter had been sorted out!

This episode reminded me of the situation 20 years ago when I was allotted the flat. At that point, I had to make 15 trips to the office to get a water connection. And it was only when the person concerned got sick of seeing me every day that he condescended to do the work.

So what has changed in the intervening two decades? Technology, of course, but that couldn't be the sole reason since even with the latest online tools, the operator and his boss had to struggle for half-an-hour to enter my details. Another reason could be, I suspect, that the staff is on contract from a service provider. But again, the boss was clearly an employee of the water department and she did take a lot of initiative to get the problem solved. And it was also not because I was clearly someone who knew his rights and so could make things hard for them if harassed—I saw the staff there displaying exactly the same attitude towards an old woman who had come from a nearby slum cluster.

Herein, I think lies a clue to the remarkable change in attitudes of public servants. The government in Delhi, for all

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its faults, certainly has given a fillip to grass-roots democracy. The *mohalla sabhas*, the referendums on mobile apps and the massive advertisement campaigns regarding public services, coupled with a dedicated cadre at the grass roots have led to people being far less docile when it comes to demanding what they think is rightfully theirs. As a consequence, the bureaucracy is possibly far more diffident and wary of throwing its weight around. Whether this will be a lasting thing or not is hard to say. After all, the trains did run on time during the Emergency but pretty soon afterwards, it was business as usual. Nevertheless, it was an extremely heartening sight to see the old lady from the slum walk out happily from the Water Department office.

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