Embodying the spirit of affordability and low income community living, Kapashera is a unique residential settlement. Housing hundreds of migrant worker families, this settlement colony has employed a rare system of delivering basic utilities like electricity and water. Catering to the low but not insignificant consumption needs of the migrant workers staying there, water and its access in Kapashera is used as a scarce, rent-seeking resource. This photo essay explores this in more detail.

As the elixir of life, water is the basic, imperative essential required for comfortable living. Beyond its use for sustenance, it is integral for cooking, cleaning, bathing and other household chores. The water delivery system at Kapashera caters to all these applications.
Untreated water is supplied to households throughout the day which is used for cleaning, washing of clothes and other purposes. During certain hours of the day, usually in the mornings, treated drinking water is available which the families store and use for cooking and drinking.

Given that drinking water is available in limited quantities and only during specific times, many families also source large water jars locally to supplement their water needs. These water jars (valued at around Rs 10-20 per jar) contain filtered, treated water that is safer for consumption than the regular water being supplied. Using a permutation of these three sources, all the water-related needs of the families are covered.

Water is an integral part of a family’s expenses at Kapashera. The untreated water, often referred to as ‘ganda paani’ by the residents, is supplied to them using the ‘metre system’ — landlords fix water meters in each apartment/room to accurately measure the quantity of untreated water consumed while the drinking water supplied is free of charge.

The water quantity supplied for a family over a month amounts to nearly one thousand litres. It is charged individually for each member of the family, every month. Kids are often exempted from such usage charges. These expenses mostly vary from Rs. 100-200 per person every month. Hence, based on the local rate, the family pays the landlord for water as per the number of members in the family and consumption. The average monthly household expenditure on drinking water ranges from Rs 300-600 per household.
A strange aspect of this water distribution system would be the fact that it is mandatory for every resident to pay for the untreated water if they are living inside the premises of this settlement. Once people choose to reside in Kapashera and have rented a room, paying for the water is almost a requisite. The fact that the water is not utilised by certain people does not make a difference.

Apart from the inescapable costs incurred by residents for buying water, another obligation which is imposed on them is that they are expected to buy water from the same distributor who supplies to all the residents in their building. In Kapashera, the landlords themselves act as distributors by outsourcing the water from the nearby plant. In this way, a monopoly of sorts is created, by the distributors who supply water.

Though such a 'moral' obligation might seem uncanny to some, the reality is that these are the characteristics that distinguish Kapashera from other residential settlements. The landlords play the role of a unifying force and in return, often provide noteworthy support to the tenants during adversity. Kapashera in essence embodies not only shelter, but a community, a home.
Another peculiar feature of the water system in Kapashera is the way used water is discharged from homes. This wastewater goes through ‘naalas’ and keeps flowing within the lanes. Most of the time the drainage lines which carry this water get choked up. The presence of only one municipal vehicle responsible for sanitation is not enough to rectify the problem. On this premise, the landlords demand payments from the residents to get the choked drains cleaned.

A payment of Rs.20 per family is taken every time cleaning is needed, after which workers are brought in to clean the waste. While this is a recurring problem in Kapashera, the landlords rely on the continuous payment by the residents for cleaning up the wastewater. They say (many a times) "aap hi ganda karte hai na", as a guise for ensuring the cash inflow.

It is now an accepted practice by both, the landlords and the tenants to take care of the problem in this manner. However, a proper solution to end this is yet to be found.
Understanding the water distribution system at Kapashera is essential for comprehending the settlement itself. Given the scarcity of clean drinking water and the gaping inequality in access to it, drinkable water has become a commodity that reflects income status and class. All families in Kapashera do have access to clean drinking water, thereby, implying a certain minimum living standard.

However, in a world where the upper strata of society can take drinking water for granted, the respect and value for this natural resource displayed by the residents of Kapashera hint at the systemic inequality of access that plagues society. From placing locks on taps to going beyond their way to procure water jars, every action of a Kapashera resident exudes reverence for the elixir.
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Ideal youth for Revolutionary Changes is a grassroots non-governmental organization founded in 19th March 2017 by dedicated youth of Kapashera estate in the state of Delhi. IYRC envisions holistic development of the society by rendering equal opportunities to the vulnerable and under-privileged sections. It strives for the upliftment of the youth by engaging them into meaningful activities and ensures the wellbeing by developing a sense of ownership, dignity, equality and social justice. Education, Women-empowerment, Art and Culture as a medium of expression are its core objectives. IYRC enables all its stakeholders to be good learners, achievers, thinkers, and motivators.

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