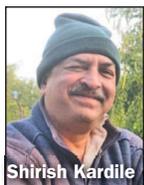


From the Board

No Operator, No Water



Shirish Kardile

On an overcast, drizzly day last July, I decided to take a drive. One of my favorite pastimes is to visit nearby water treatment plants, so I selected a village about 100 km from my home, which lies near Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra, and rode toward it in my battered truck. I knew a 1.5-mld water treatment plant was commissioned there recently, so I wanted to see how it was performing, considering it was a high-turbidity (raw water) period.

My truck plodded through the street muck, and I saw an elevated reservoir at a remote corner of the village. I gathered that must be the plant site. The building's porch was full of mud, and I was greeted by a dozen or so piglets that ran away at my approach. "Anybody home?" I shouted. Then I realized the ground floor door was locked, and I was alone with the plant.

A STATE OF DISREPAIR

I climbed to the first floor, and fortunately there was a walkway around the plant. The plant was simple, consisting of a cascade aerator, a mixing weir and channel, a mechanical flocculation tank with a slow agitator, a tube settling tank, and two beds of rapid sand gravity filters. Turbid water was passing through all the units. I pushed open the chemical room's door and wondered

at the relatively new plant's defunct machinery. I saw neither sacks of alum nor any bleaching powder. I took another round on the walkway and realized the slow agitator wasn't even working, as a belt was missing between the motor and gear box.

The plant used some of the simplest, most foolproof technologies available for a manually operated, compact system. Unfortunately, the operator was nowhere to be seen. While I was contemplating what to do next, the overhead backwash water tank started overflowing from the top on all sides. (Later, I realized the overflow pipe was too small to distribute the incoming flow.)

I opened my umbrella and climbed down a staircase beneath the overflow water. With mud caking the bottom of my shoes, I glanced through the window of the treated water pumphouse. Of course, it was locked, too! The treated water (service water) pump was churning and sending part of the flow to the overhead backwash water tank! A village mother from a nearby hut came by with a bucketful of clothes and two kids in tow and proceeded to do her wash in the overflow. Meanwhile, the kids played merrily in the leakage from a valve outside the pump house.

On the way home, I stopped for a smoke and a cup of tea in the village. Most of the shops were closed, but I casually inquired about the valve man (operator). Everyone knows everyone in such a small place.

"Oh, it is a bazaar day," I was told. "*Gaonwale* (villagers) have gone to sell their farm produce, and so may have *bbau* (brother)!"

How true, I thought, and I reflected on AWWA's members thousands of miles from this nondescript village who are trying to make the world a better place through better water.

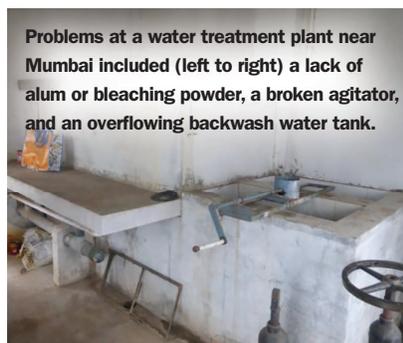
ONGOING CHALLENGES

In this particular village, folks are reasonably well off and produce high-quality vegetable and cash crops as produce. They don't live in a "poor" environment, just a "rural" environment.

Maharashtra is by far the most advanced state in India as far its drinking water schemes and implementation are concerned. About 10 years ago, the state decided to decentralize water supply schemes by giving power to the local bodies for implementation, maintenance, and revenue collection. Though the objective was laudable, the village I visited is typical of many others. Because of political interference and, to a certain extent, nonviability, the local bodies didn't take ownership of the schemes, and many of them are in a dire state for want of maintenance.

In my opinion, India is sorely missing state primacy like they have in the United States. Without it, huge capital expenditures on infrastructure will not yield lasting benefits in terms of public health.

—Shirish Kardile,
AWWAIndia Strategic Board Chair



Problems at a water treatment plant near Mumbai included (left to right) a lack of alum or bleaching powder, a broken agitator, and an overflowing backwash water tank.

