

Elite Capture in Participatory Urban Governance

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The responsibility of municipalities to provide crucial services is being increasingly passed on to the resident welfare associations located in middle and upper middle class areas in cities. Similar tools of intervention are absent in the slums and low-income neighbourhoods and even the local ward committees fail to represent their needs and aspirations. The RWAs are trying to sanitise their neighbourhood by attempting to remove encroachments and petty commercial establishments from their “gated” colonies. The very mechanism of the functioning of RWAs is likely to accentuate and institutionalise disparity within urban areas.

In recent years, there has been a sea change in urban governance in the country. The economic liberalisation initiated in the country followed by decentralisation measures adopted by all tiers of the government as an aftermath of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) has resulted in gradual withdrawal of the State and increasing private sector participation in capital investment and operation and maintenance of urban services. The institutional vacuum thus created has sought to be filled up by the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Also, the inability of the wards committees, institutionalised through 74th CAA, to usher in decentralised governance has led to the growth of middle class activism through the resident welfare associations (RWAs). The municipal responsibility of provision of services is being increasingly passed on to the RWAs (Smitha 2010). Their involvement has been broadly in areas of operation and management of civic services, capital investment in infrastructural projects, planning and participatory budgeting, and maintenance of neighbourhood security. In fact, efforts have been made to institutionalise them as partners in the development process, through government-led programmes like the Bhagidari in Delhi. The RWAs have been supported not only by the government but also by private agencies and other civil societies. Importantly, their functioning has been restricted largely in the middle income and posh colonies. Correspondingly, the informal settlements, which house the urban poor, are unable to exercise their voice through the same form of activism.

Limited Success

In India, urban development is a state subject, which has resulted in variation in the powers, tasks and membership of the ward committees (WDCs) across states. Also, the provision in the CAA that the

state governments are to decide the criteria and procedure of selection of the members of the WDCs has made their very existence and composition a prerogative of the state machinery. There is limited citizen's participation in planning and implementation at the ward level as these committees have not been constituted properly nor has the CAA clearly spelt out the scope of the functions or their composition. There is also large variation in financial powers of the WDCs across states. Many state governments have remained silent on this issue while some have delegated marginal powers to them (Kundu 2009).

It is noted that WDCs in most of the cities are ineffective in representing the aspirations of the common people. The concept of participation between the people and the local government did not succeed in most cities due to the large size of the constituencies. In many cities they are non-existent and even where they are functioning there is hardly any participation from the citizens at large. WDCs are, thus, non-functional and structurally flawed in most of the metro cities. Further, there is limited participation of both middle and upper class, which led to an alternative system of participatory governance in the form of civil society organisations.

Involving Civil Society Organisations

RWAs are emerging in almost all big cities and are effective as people in a locality or belonging to a group can see their interest being served by these organisations. The participatory model helps the people to get involved to voice their concern by building local pressure groups. RWAs found in middle class areas serve their interests as consumer-citizens. Participation in associational activities is skewed quite heavily towards those with higher levels of education and income (Harriss 2005). Harriss found that in Delhi, the poorer and sometimes also less well educated people are more active in political life, and that poorer people, especially those with some education are more active in solving public problems. He noted that the same is not true of associational activity as there is a strong tendency for

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wealthier and particularly for more educated people to be involved in associational activity, which questions the notion in the current development discourse that poor people are able to secure effective representation or “empowerment” through participation in associations in civil society.

The NGOs, the government and the private sector are supporting the participatory governance through RWAs in a big way. Asian Centre for Organisation, Research and Development, an NGO, has been assisting the Delhi government with the Bhagidari scheme. A similar involvement is witnessed in Mumbai. Further, the state has in a way sponsored the RWAs. Many state and local governments have signed memoranda of understanding with the RWAs with the latter being accountable to them. In the National Capital Territory of Delhi a majority of the RWAs are registered with Delhi

government as their “Bhagidars” (partners) in the Bhagidari or Citizen-Government Partnership Scheme.

The RWAs are required to coordinate with a number of government departments and parastatal and civic agencies to address their day-to-day problems. As an illustration, the RWAs in Delhi need to coordinate with the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) to resolve their problems related to drinking water and sanitation. The RWAs also help the DJB to collect water bills, to distribute water through tankers, replace old/leaking pipelines, in water harvesting, etc.

Neighbourhood security is already being maintained by many of the RWAs. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has allowed them to construct gates for security purpose after obtaining necessary clearance from the police, fire department and the MCD itself. Several RWAs have come forward to take up

the responsibility of cleaning the roads, maintaining street lights, community parks and roads, and managing community halls as well. The RWAs are trying to sanitise their neighbourhood by trying to remove encroachments and petty commercial establishments from their “gated” colonies. Importantly, in Delhi, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) has been brought under the participatory framework as the RWAs have joined hands with the authority for prevention of encroachment, maintenance of community parks, other common areas and parking facilities inside the colony. The RWAs are also coordinating with the Delhi Police for crime prevention and regulation of traffic in their respective colonies. In Mumbai too, residents are trying to ward off the unauthorised encroachments from their immediate neighbourhood as a part of the Advance Locality Management Programme.

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Importantly, as per the new land use notification of DDA (2006), the provision for consulting RWAs has been reintroduced. In residential areas where mix land use is permitted, the Local Area Plan (LAP) would be formulated and implemented only after seeking the approval of the RWAs. The appointment of court commissioners by the Delhi High Court to monitor illegal constructions is not new in Delhi. However, appointment of RWA members in the committee in place of lawyers is definitely a departure from the previous organisational structure.

In many cities, e.g., in Gurgaon, Delhi and Chennai, the RWAs have formed political parties and federations to make their voices felt. In Delhi, the 10% increase in power tariffs was withdrawn with the efforts of the RWAs. The RWAs voiced their concerns about the ambitious 24×7 project. Presently, the RWAs are being encouraged to get involved in selection of projects that are to be implemented by the government departments. The government calls this participatory budgeting for including citizens group in budget formulation and resource allocation. The MCD, for example, would release payment to the contractor only if the concerned RWA has given clearance. Payment to the contractor would also be based on the quality of the works, as determined by the RWAs.

The Delhi government is also making efforts to involve the RWAs in preparation and implementation of development plans at the local level. It is envisaged that the RWAs would be able to take decisions with regard to construction of roads, drains, parks, water pipelines and other civic works within their colony. Many of these have asked the government to strengthen the Bhagidari system through legislation, giving RWAs a legal status or giving them control over a part of the budget so that their participation in developmental activities becomes real.

Importantly, a new fund "My Delhi I Care" has been created for meeting the infrastructural needs of the community, which is likely to increase the role of RWAs in development planning. The role and responsibility of RWAs have, therefore, been extended from maintenance of services to making capital expenditures

for infrastructural development. Encouraged by the success of the initiatives mentioned above, the residents in several other colonies are also proposing capital projects like building of roads, footpaths, drainage system, water connections and other amenities. They have expressed their willingness to pay for it provided the MCD helps in fixing a reasonable rate for a part of the project cost.

In Tamil Nadu, RWAs are effective in large cities and in small towns as well. In some cities RWAs have also been able to collect funds from the residents to launch major capital investment projects in their localities. In some projects, the RWAs are not only active partners in capital investment but also act as intermediary monitoring agencies.¹

Conclusions

The participatory framework of governance functioning through RWAs has for the first time led to the active involvement of citizens in the provision and maintenance of services. Further, the very mechanism of the functioning of RWAs is likely to accentuate and institutionalise disparity within the cities. A few of the RWAs in high-income areas have constructed roads with their own funds without any financial support from outside. Those RWAs, which are in a position to generate funds from among themselves, are eligible to access municipal revenues for development work in their locality. It is thus the better educated and wealthy who can avail themselves of the opportunities by adopting the notion of "collaborative change" between state and civil society.

The participatory efforts of RWAs have resulted in "sanitisation of the cities" and policing of public space within their jurisdiction. The kind of "empowerment" that is taking place through civil societies is exclusionary in nature and is directed towards the "consumer-citizen" and much of the activity that it sustains is directed at disciplining the urban poor rather than supporting their struggles over rights to housing, livelihood and protection, or their self-realisation. The "new politics" of empowerment – the mode of governmentality of the post-liberalisation state in India – does not incorporate the urban

poor, nor articulate their political practice (Harriss 2007).

The functioning of RWAs has serious consequences in terms of access of the poor to basic amenities and infrastructural facilities and accentuation of intra-city inequalities. Middle class activism through RWAs has opened up new opportunities for local representation, as they are able to exercise significant influence on the city and state government. Similar tools of intervention are, however, absent in the slums and low-income neighbourhoods. Understandably, the unauthorised colonies and the slums and squatter settlements located on public land, with the residents having no legal ownership or tenancy rights, have shown little initiative in forming the associations or registering them with the registrar of societies. It is true that tenurial rights are not formal requirements for registration as Bhagidars. However, the absence of that creates informal barriers.

NOTE

- 1 The active involvement of the citizens' groups in funding and monitoring of capital works have become a necessary precondition in obtaining funds from the TNUDF.

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