

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Infrastructures of Consent

Interrogating Citizen Participation Mandates in Indian Urban Governance

This paper examines contemporary practices of participation and consultation in the context of urban governance in India. It builds on earlier critiques of participatory development to explore the ways in which the imperatives of neoliberal restructuring of cities have led to tensions between urban reforms and participatory democracy.

The imperatives of fast-tracking India's cities into a post-Third World regime of 'global cities' have resulted in the emergence of new sites of consultation and collaboration in municipal governance. This paper uses contemporary case studies of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Chennai and Bangalore to explore how civil society, corporate interests and state or quasi-state bodies have been brought together in new formats of 'citizen participation' to institute urban reform. The authors consider the success of these PPPs and describe how this 'new politics', often revolving around middle-class neighbourhood-based collective action, often works at the expense of elected bodies and the urban poor.

In this paper the authors consider how the means/ends debates which characterised older discourses on development participation have been subsumed to efficiency considerations in urban India as participation and consultation are deployed instrumentally. It explores how a drive to

depoliticise the running of Indian cities is part of an emerging consensus between the reforming Indian state and partners such as financial and lending institutes, corporations and sections of urban civil society. This has been pursued primarily through corporatising and commercialising aspects of urban governance. In this scenario, participatory mechanisms serve to embed market-oriented reforms by creating and nurturing their demand side.

The authors consider how this is exemplified in three pioneering models of PPP: the underground sanitation project of Alandur, near Chennai; the Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP); and the multi-faceted Bangalore Agenda Taskforce (BATF). It details how these innovations were ushered in or accompanied by new forms of urban middle-class activism, primarily Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). These case studies are significant because they have inspired new mandates for participatory governance mechanisms at the national level, primarily through the

Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) which aims to transform Indian cities by making large amounts of central government funding contingent on the implementation of reforms at state and local body levels.

The authors observe that while actors such as RWAs have played important roles in demanding and enhancing access to some municipal services, the character of neighbourhood-based collective action is strongly determined by class and/or other exclusive qualities such as caste or property ownership. The case studies show that RWAs tend to bypass existing institutions of representation, such as elected councils of urban local bodies (ULBs). In addition, RWAs have not generally been successful in influencing issues requiring policy or legislative changes, and have been ineffective in spheres with strong interest groups. They have therefore found themselves increasingly obliged to seek entry into local politics.

“ The character of neighbourhood-based collective action is strongly determined by class and/or other exclusive qualities such as caste. ”

“ Participation and public consultation are now deployed with the aim of “getting things done”. ”

Key findings

- New forms and understanding of participation and consultation have arisen in urban governance in India as a result of the process of fast-tracking India's cities into 'global cities'.
- A 'stakeholder' paradigm, working on the premise of limited, identifiable constituencies with demonstrable stakes in particular projects, rather than a concept of broad public accountability, has been established.
- New participatory mechanisms serve the purposes of embedding market-oriented and financialising reforms in municipal governance by creating and nurturing their demand side.
- A range of urban collective actors and citizens' initiatives have come to the fore, prominent among them being RWAs and other forms of neighborhood associations.
- The character of neighbourhood-based collective action is strongly determined by class, and has a tendency to be exclusive.
- The limited success of these elite efforts to reshape the city has, arguably, moved RWAs to turn to the domain of local politics.

The elevation of rapid economic growth as the new unquestioned 'common good' has resulted in the suppression of democratic norms and procedures that might produce different or dissenting versions of public aspiration.

Examination of urban reforms reveals a history of failure, partly due to the narrow concept of urbanism that lies at the heart of the reformist project. This concept fails to take into account the realities of urban growth and settlement in Indian cities, and the struggles through which the poor and marginalised have obtained a foothold in these cities. Participation and democratisation, the authors conclude, cannot be implemented through top-down measures but only through taking into account these realities and struggles of the excluded.

Key policy lessons/implications of research

- The question of who can and cannot 'speak for' stakeholders is critical for the implementation of urban reform.
- RWAs and similar bodies based on exclusive foundations are limited in their capacity to represent the urban public.
- Policies based on top-down participatory and consultative measures often fail.
- A broad and inclusive concept of the urban agenda is required for policy success.
- The concepts of public participation and public consultation should not be conflated.
- Further studies of people's movements and RWAs may shed light on a broader definition of 'the public' and how this can improve urban reform.

Credits

Karen Coelho, Lalitha Kamath and M. Vijaybaskar (2011)
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