

**Participatory Urban Governance
and Contestations in Local Politics**

Participatory Urban Governance and Contestations in Local Politics

The urban poor in a small city in India

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Preface

Participation is widely considered a panacea for the many drawbacks of development. Its core emphasis has always been on the inclusion of people, especially the poor, their voices and pro-poor issues in decision-making. From the late 1990s, participatory discourse is closely linked to governance, being adopted by governments and international aid agencies in the pursuit of 'good governance' and 'inclusive development'. These ideas caught my attention during my days as a student of economics and urban planning. Later on, I have had the opportunity to directly engage in some participatory exercises both as a teacher and a practitioner.

What has intrigued me is that, while theoretical discussions and project documents espouse an inclusive vision of participation, in practice, it is found to be exclusionary; often maintaining status quo in power relations. Often in spite of the best intentions of planners and development practitioners, participatory initiatives do not sustain over time. This has prodded me into looking for answers in real-life situations through my research. This book is an outcome of my Ph.D. work, which I completed from CEPT University, Ahmedabad. It is a study of participatory urban governance in Chandannagar, West Bengal. The state was governed by an elected Left government for 34 years that undertook reforms in democratic decentralization and pro-poor governance. The research seeks to understand how far urban governance is representative of the urban poor and their concerns.

It is impossible to remember and thank all the people who have contributed to this process of learning and experience, that has informed the research – my teachers who through their lectures stimulated interest in the subject, government and donor staff who shared their experiences and most importantly, ordinary people – 'participants' in development processes, through their conduct, remarks and perspectives which nudged me to think beyond the obvious notions of participation. I am grateful to Prof. Darshini Mahadevia, my Ph.D. supervisor, for her support and guidance. Over time, I have gained immensely from my discussions with Prof. C.N. Ray, Prof. Shrawan Kumar Acharya, Prof. Ghanshyam Shah and Prof. R. Parthasarathy. I am especially indebted to Prof. Biswaroop Das for his insightful comments and constant encouragement. I express my gratitude to Prof. Shrawan Kumar Acharya, for agreeing to write the foreword.

At the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), Eastern Regional Centre Kolkata, discussions with Archana Ghosh and Madhulika Mitra on their research on urban governance in Kolkata helped me to refine my research. I am thankful to them for indulging me during my visits to Kolkata on field work. Prof. Gopa Samanta shared her research on West Bengal and valuable insights, which was very useful. My deepest gratitude to the Late Prof. Mohit Bhattacharjee for the lively discussions we used to have while working on

professional projects. Some of my research ideas emerged out of these interactions. I am immensely indebted to my friend, Saikat Sengupta, ex-Economist, KUSP, Kolkata, for helping with establishing contacts with officials of KUSP and Chandannagar Municipal Corporation (CMC). Our informal chats over tea and sharing of his professional insights has enriched my research. Other key officials of the KUSP project team, especially Moumita Das (Urban Planner, KUSP), have been very kind and supportive by providing information, insights and help whenever required. At Chandannagar, discussions with the Mayor, councillors and CMC staff have been very useful. I personally want to thank former Mayor, Sri Ram Chakraborty, for his time and help, which eased much of the field work. Sanchita Sengupta, the Social and Community Development Officer (SCDO) of CMC was very accommodating by providing information, data and establishing contact with key informants. I express my sincere gratitude to Probhas Padui, Town Project Officer (TPO) and Sucheta Vaidya, Ex-Urban Planner, CMC, for sharing their experiences and helping me to get in touch with local residents. Special mention needs to be made of Sri Ramen Ghosh, an octogenarian, who inspite of his ill-health, provided a vivid account of the history of Chandannagar, the Sanjukta Nagarik Committee (SNC) and its evolution. The councillors of the wards selected for the study, their ward committee members and other local level staff has made the field work possible. I am deeply indebted to the residents of the slums chosen for field work – for their time, patience and sharing their views and experiences with me.

The generous support and suggestions from Rishi Seth, Managing Editor of Copal Publishing, made the process of publishing a pleasant experience.

My family has always supported me in all my endeavours. My deepest gratitude to my parents; through their prayers and blessings, I could never lose hope. Sudeep and Samik kept me motivated, without their understanding this would not have been possible.

Foreword

The vulnerabilities of our cities world over have been exposed by COVID-19 and its lingering after-effects. It has highlighted the true significance of participation in governance and the need to internalize and actualize them in our everyday urban policy and practice to build city resilience in overcoming calamitous uncertainties. In fact, people's participation has been considered to be sine qua non in liberal democracy for ensuring justice and equity in human progress, especially for the marginal including the urban poor. All progressive states epitomize governance mechanism where the citizens are active participants in decision-making process. However, in practice, effective participation is constrained and limited due to political, economic, social and bureaucratic reasons. There is glaring difference between preaching and real practice. Until COVID-19 struck, the phrase "Participatory Governance" was everyday sugar coatings to camouflage our half-hearted approach to empower the vulnerable. Such words insulated negative externalities of neoliberal projects from public scrutiny designed to enhance global competitiveness of the cities. No wonder, nearly after 30 years, the achievement of 74th Constitutional Amendment with intended goals towards decentralization and people's participation in urban governance is not very encouraging. This gap in theory and practice is what the present study intends to explore. Anurima with her skills in Urban Planning and Economics has tried to understand the reasons behind such a state of affairs in India by embedding herself in the urban conditions of a small city Chandannagar, within the Kolkata Metropolitan Area of West Bengal. What makes the study interesting is to know that the State of West Bengal as compared to other states was much more politically embedded in the philosophy and practice of participatory governance, especially during the Left Front government, but still failed to ensure and provide space to the agency of the people in effective urban governance. Anurima has very lucidly, with strong analytical rigor and conceptual framework, tried to answer this contradiction based on systematic ethnographic field explorations. The deep insights from the book provide answer to questions regarding everyday vulnerabilities of the urban poor and their challenges to effectively participate in the governance of the city despite the constitutional mandate and political ideology, at least during the Left Front rule in West Bengal! The failure, as Anurima highlights, is not only due to state capacity and political hypocrisy but also inability of the people to unitedly mobilize, negotiate, bargain and make the state and the political parties accountable. The embedded research predates COVID but provides deep insights about the political realities of urban Bengal and the challenges faced in embedding participatory governance which may also provide insights to address our collective failures in managing the pandemic disruptions.

As India urbanizes and is expected to add nearly 300 million people in the cities by 2030, the question of governing and managing cities in India is going to be critical. It is apparent that the overburdened and centralized urban local bodies will not be able to deliver, therefore decentralized and participatory governance innovations will have to be made for our cities to become habitable, egalitarian, healthy and competitive. In the post-Fordist networked society, the roles of multiple agencies in city building will have to be acknowledged and institutionalized. Of all the actors, the role of the common citizens and their agency will be important. Their power will have to be leveraged to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of the existing governance deficit. In order to do so the current practice of tokenism and “patronage politics”, as Anurima highlights, will have to be abandoned and replaced by empowered communities by using existing policy instruments under the provision of the 74th Amendment Act. If need be, even the provision of this Act may have to be relooked in the changed post-COVID urban realities of India. The states will have to create conducive space and genuinely “Invite” people’s institution and agency, both formal and informal, to proactively participate in decision-making process regarding everyday grounded civic activities. At the same time, the citizens will have to engage with the state and “Claim” their legitimate space for constructive civic engagement. Empowering governance structure will have to facilitate convergence of the “Invited” and the “Claimed” space involving both political and non-political participation. Anurima asserts that mere political participation of the community is not sufficient by just electing their representatives to the local, state or Federal level government, but also include engagement of non-political and informal institutions of the people in day-to-day decision-making at all levels. The study rich in theoretical concepts, embedded analysis and appropriate policy recommendations is a relevant addition in the field of Urban Planning and Governance. No better time for the book to come out in the public domain, when all of us are earnestly reimagining a stable and egalitarian post-Pandemic world! The book will immensely benefit politicians, practitioners, researchers and concerned citizens seeking answers to leverage opportunities from our everyday-lived realities of cities for a post-COVID urban future.

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