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WARD COMMITTEES AS "INVITED SPACE": IS IT SUCCESSFUL?
A LITERATURE REVIEW OF URBAN INDIA

Riya Bhattacharya[1]

Abstract

Governance of urban India has been following the decentralised governance policies. One of the major objectives of the decentralised system is to enable the common man to take part in the decision-making process, and to induce equity, transparency, and accountability. A forum for participation is facilitated under the policy, which represents the "invited space". Under the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, a ward committee is considered an interactive institutionalised space to invite the common people to participate in urban governance in India. The success of its provision and implementation has worth being a concern and little known from different aspects. This paper tries to summarise the previous studies and tries to bring out the major issues related to the functioning of ward committees and problematise the findings.

Introduction

The history of urban governance in India is very promising in its trajectory shifts and can be traced back from the pre-Independent centralised governance period to the contemporary era of decentralised measures (Shah and Bakore, 2006). The governance is directly related to the nature of urban growth. The continuous growth of the urban population has put pressure on the existing centralised system (Shaw, 2010), which became inadequate to incorporate the needs voiced by the citizens (Shah and Bakore, 2006). As a consequence of the situation, in the post-Independence era, decentralisation has been introduced with the constitution of a three-tier federal system to govern the urban areas.

Governance is defined by Singh as "a process through which public goals are achieved through mutual interaction between government and citizen" (Singh, 2013, pp 191). The process, thus, keeps two things in order, one is the "checks and balances" of government, and another is to bring democracy into the political system, that is, public participation. World Development Report (1997:3) states that "involvement of citizens in the process of delivery of goods and services make the state more effective". It thus, unlocks the way for accountability and transparency (Singh, 2013), which is better facilitated by the decentralised government.

Decentralisation aims to bridge the gap between government and people, which is assumed to enhance their well-being and the presentation of their needs and preference, facilitating their decision-making and enabling them to plan and monitor development works (Rajasekhar, 2022). For this purpose, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act has provided the institutional space to invite people to participate in the governance process. Article 243S of the Act makes a provision for the constitution of Ward Committees (WCs) consisting of one or more wards from the territorial area of a Municipality having a population of three lakhs or more. It has been assumed that if citizens are participating in the

decision-making process at the ward committee, then "participatory democracy" at the lower level can be assured (Shah and Bakore, 2006). In the emerging paradigm of urban governance, the participatory process has also been emphasised to maintain sustainability at the local level (Holden, 2010).

WCs are the platform of inclusive urban governance, and the outcome of its successful implementation is thus, worth giving attention to. Hence, this paper tries to evaluate the performance of WCs to fulfil its objectives through a systematic review of the literature. The paper has reviewed the existing studies on the performance of WCs in Urban India. The review included Journal articles, Newspaper articles, Books, and Reports and systematically specified the issues encountered by the WCs, and tried to highlight the limitation of the previous studies on ward committees.

The paper begins by describing the importance of participation in urban decentralised government and their organic linkage, to find the research problem associated with the performance of WCs as a participatory platform and "invited space". The successive part of the paper will discuss the background of the study, followed by the major findings of the literature, and reports. The paper concludes with critical remarks on the missing aspects in these studies that are crucial for taking any progressive steps in policy-making.

Background of the Study

In the recent literature, participatory governance and democracy became key words in understanding the performance of local bodies. According to Zientara *et al*, the idea of "participatory urban governance" has rooted in the idea of "pluralism", and Hebarmasiam narrative, related to "deliberate discursive processes" which have its emphasis upon inclusiveness, collaboration, and consensus-seeking (Zientara *et al*, 2020). Whereby, the idea of empowerment is under the interplay in promoting citizen participation (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). The logic of public participation also has its correlation with the preference for the hierarchy of leisure, the proximity to the space, and its intensity of influence to stimulate the instinct to participate (Zientara *et al*, 2020). Participation requires the existence of the "space" for facilitating the process, though, the idea has plural dimensions.

Ward Committees as Invited Space

The paradigm of decentralised governance has emphasised the idea of "space" provided for the integration of citizens and government. Gaventa defined the space as "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially influence policies, discourses, decisions and relationships which affect their lives and interests (cited in Patel *et al*, 2016).According to Cornwall and Coelho, the new "democratic space" is "intermediate, situated between the state and society, they are also, in many respects, intermediary spaces, conduits for negotiation, information and exchange. They may be provided and provided for by the state, backed in some settings by legal or constitutional guarantees and regarded by state actors as their space into which citizens and their representatives are invited" (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007, pp 1). The space has three main forms, namely, closed[2], invited[3], and

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[2] In closed space citizens are not allowed to make any kind of decisions and do not have any say in the government's decisions.

claimed[4]. The "invited space" is related with the legislative idea of "participatory governance" (Patel *et al*, 2016).

A worldwide approach in the arena of governance has widened the scope for opening the space to invite citizens to participate in the way of directing the service delivery and development. These "invited spaces" have different forms and legislative backing (in the form of decentralisation) with the assumption of enhancing the government's performance by ensuring accountability (Aiyar, 2010). It promotes the role of citizens as "makers and shapers" of the services rather than being "users and choosers" (Patel *et al*, 2016). The participatory governance through "invited space" is presumed to bring more efficiency in service delivery, as decisions are made in proximity to the people (Crook and Manor, 1998, cited in Pate *et al*, 2016). The institutional spaces are now crowded with "invited spaces" to signify the state's performance by enhancing responsiveness and accountability (Aiyar, 2010). The WCs are, therefore, institutionalised by the government to act as an "invited space" to facilitate the participation of citizens in the deliberate decision-making of the government.

The trend of Participation

The promotion of citizen engagement is also entangled with the nature of emerging economic policies and ideologies. In the post-globalisation period where the cities became the growth engine of the economy of the nation (Chattopadhyay, 2015; Sivramakrishnan, 2006) the idea of "democratic deepening" in the urban governance to bridge the gap between infrastructural development and public demand became significant. According to Brinkerhoff *et al* (2006), democracy can be deepened when people from different socio-economic strata participate in the process of decision-making (cited in Chattopadhyay, 2015). The popularisation of "deliberate democracy" as the inclusive method of governance became the trend; however, according to Varshney (1989), the existence of poverty and rigid societal hierarchy existing in India is inhospitable to the implication of democracy (cited in Menon, 2019).The present-day economy can be portrayed in the notion of post-Fordism and domination of market forces. The recent idea of "participation" and "civil society" which directs the urban governance reforms is focusing upon "user participation" and "marketisation of service delivery" (Kamath and Vijyabaskar, 2013).

Following neo-liberalism, the concept of good governance came forth underlying the idea of public participation and accountability. Active participation of people in the polity is represented by the term "citizenship". Although, there is the risk of backfiring of this model which is coming forth in the discussion, as the danger of elite capture is persistence and as per Heller, the very idea of "citizenship" can be subverted due to the existence of caste hierarchy (Menon, 2019). In the diverse society and complex urban India, public participation can ensure the quality of life (Singh, 2013).Participation is presumed to empower the people in the local governance and the inclusion of poor people in the decision-making process was stressed. But, in reality, the community domination by middle-class people (Kamath and Vijyabaskar, 2013; Chattopadhyay, 2015), the interplay of political associations, and the

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[3] Invited spaces are a formal institutionalised system to promote citizen participation in the decision-making process.

[4] In claimed space, citizens come together to make collective decisions to influence the government.

risk of economic, and environmental degradation by faulty decisions by "economic man" (Irvin *et al*, 2004) construct the complex nature of participatory governance and it's interplay to secure the well-being of the citizen.

Empowerment: Whether Good or Bad

Empowerment of the people is essential for augmenting the effectiveness of governance to meet the basic requirements and demands equally (Nainan and Baud, 2008). Although in ground reality, the socio-economically divided society leads to discriminatory mechanisms, hence, inequality, has led to the debate whether participation is empowering or not. Swyngedouw (2005), argued against democratic decentralisation from this perspective, and regarded the involvement of "civil society" as "governance beyond the state", which he called to be "Janus-faced". (Swyngedouw, 2005). There are different forms of "civil society", thus, having differential influence over governance. Nijman and Clery (2015), highlighted in a case of the suburban USA, that civil organisations are dominated by the middle class which led to inequality. This debate has been raging in India since B.R. Ambedkar targeted the decentralised policy itself on the ground that a hierarchical society can never provide equal opportunities. Keeping this argument in mind, the Constitution has provided a scope of reservation of seats in administration, but in the case of direct participation, such scopes are limited. If the argument of "caste" division is kept aside, then the economic and political power and network of the people can be regarded as influencers in the negotiation grounds. Supporting this argument, there are many terms which are used to denote this discrimination. "Middle-class activism" (Bose, 2022; Lama Rewal, 2013; Batra, 2013), and "Bourgeois environmentalism" (Baviskar, 2020) are some of the main terms, which denote the domination of a particular class of people in the planning and decision-making process in urban areas.

On the flip side, there has been an increment in the scope of participation through the implementation of a decentralised platform. Samanta (2013) in her studies mentioned that there are a greater number of poor participants in the meetings rather than rich or middle-class people (Samanta, 2013, pp 349). The social and political network of the people also influences the system in formal and informal ways. Thus, there are arguments in favour of enhancing democracy in the lower tier of government, which make it complicated to state whether the policy of ward sabha meetings is effective or not.

The Constitutional Provision for Enhancing Participation: The 74th CAA and Ward Committee

The 74th CAA of 1992 is a watershed in the history of urban governance in India. It has broadened the horizon for urban local bodies to incorporate the authority of various financial, functional, and democratic power over their jurisdiction (Sivaramkrishnan, 2015). The idea of decentralisation and participation remained an integral part of the mandate (Sivaramkrishnan, 2006). The mandate opened up the opportunity for people to participate in the decision-making process (Roy Bardhan, 2006), and constituted a platform for representation through municipality and ward committees (Seth, 2006) along

with increasing the connectivity between people and government (Vidyarthee, 2006) to address the issues posed by the local people (Mathur *et al*, 2006). To manage public services in favour of the people who are the direct stakeholders of the project, the amendment has provided the legislature to constitute ward committees at the lowest level of urban governance (Shah and Bakore, 2006). These committees are formed by the councillors or elected representatives and a few adult voters from the ward (Aijaz, 2008; Shah and Bakore, 2006). They have various responsibilities and functioning duties to develop their jurisdiction. However, in India, the urban governance laws vary from state to state, similarly, the constitution of WCs also varies with regional disparities. These contrasting characteristics make the assessment of decentralised policy at the national level difficult. This article will try to highlight the current issues of WC functioning, its effectiveness and the lacuna of our understanding of the factors influencing the same and will try to suggest ways of evaluating them.

Composition, Structure and Function of Ward Committee

According to the constitutional amendment, ward committees need to be constituted for urban local bodies within the jurisdiction consisting of one or more wards to ensure the participation of people (Aijaz, 2008). Article No 243-S of the Constitution made the formation of WC compulsory for each ward having a population of three lakh or more. Regardless of the sanity of the purpose, the current situation is not pleasing at all. In many states, only a few people represent lakhs of people and thus, it fails to recognise the real purpose of bringing people near to the government (Shah and Bakore, 2006; MOHUA Chapter X).

According to Part IX A, of the Constitution of India, the followings are the composition and functioning of WCs in India as per the 74th CAA:

Composition:

- There will be constituted ward committees consisting of one or more wards, within the jurisdiction of a municipality with a population of three lakh or more.

    This may vary from state to state, for example, in West Bengal Municipal Act 1993 sections 22 and 23, there is a provision for the constitution of "Borough Committees" constituting more than one ward and "ward committee" for each ward under that (MOHUA, Chapter X).

- State laws are allowed to assist its functioning and composition. The states are allowed to set up committees as per the provision of clause five of article 243S in two ways:
    1. The composition and territorial area of WC will be decided by the state.
    2. The State will decide how seats are filled.

- The ward committees are constituted with one elected representative and a few members from the adult voters from the respected wards. Further, one member of the ward committee representing the ward has to be a member of the municipality.

    This also varies from state to state. For Tamil Nadu under section 49, the Ward Committees are constituted with elected councillors only. In the case of Gujarat and Mumbai, the WCs are constituted with an elected representative and other members with no more than five people. In

Madhya Pradesh under section 48A, the WCs are constituted by elected councillors and two knowledgeable people residing within the ward (MOHUA, Chapter X)

- The chairperson of the committee shall be the one who represents the ward in the municipality. But, for more than one ward one of the representatives shall be elected by a committee to chair them.
- The number of wards and number of seats allotted to them is done according to the proportion of the population in the area. There are various functions performed by WC.
- The municipal corporations housing more than six lakh populations are allowed to constitute a sub-category of "zonal committee" under the ward committees.
- As per the TERI report 2010, the Act enables the reservation of 1/3rdof seats for women and marginalised groups (SC and ST).
- The quorum for holding WC meetings varies from state to state. For instance, in Karnataka 1/3rd of the members should be present for holding the meeting while in the case of Kerala it is 1/5th of the members.

Functions:

- The state gets to decide about the financial resources and functions that are to be delegated to WCs.
- Ward Committee can plan and execute projects costing up to Rs One crore in its jurisdiction.
- The Constitution has authorised WCs to raise finance through taxes and charges, namely, use of public spaces as markets, parking vehicles, access to parks and common lands, pet charges and advertisement.
- The WCs are supposed to maintain transparency at the local level and provide quarterly financial reports, and physical and financial targets.
- The committee must conduct at least four meetings a year.
- The major function of WCs is to disseminate information to the citizens and collect information regarding their needs and wants.

Status of Participation: Functioning of Ward Committees

The functioning of ward committees (WC) varies across states, as they are formulated under the provision of respective state municipal laws. Thus, the functioning, composition and arrangement differ across states. It has become an issue of wide debate that in which scale the functioning should be measured. The nature of the participation in the virtue of the 74th CAA is "inducive" in nature and thus, controlled via state (Menon, 2019). The report of a working group on Urban Governance states that as legal provisions for constituting the WCs are provided in most of the states, the actual spirit of the amendment for diffusing the authority is absent (NITI Aayog, 2017). The following studies depict the condition of WCs, in some of the cities in India, as available through literature.

Highlights of PRAJA Report of 2020

The report prepared by PRAJA shows that there is a lack of capacity and empowerment of newly-elected councillors and funds allocated to a councillor at the WC level is limited to executing the development plans. They found the existence of low interest among participants regarding the municipal election and a huge level of unawareness of WCs regarding their responsibilities and division of functions among state and central governments as the main threatening issues. The report states that WCs are constituted in only some cities namely Dharamshala, Delhi, Udaipur, Ahmedabad, Mangalore, Mumbai, Kochi and Bhubaneswar and among these cities, except for Mangalore and Udaipur, others have active WCs. With the recommendation of JNNURM and Nagar Raj Bill, there is a provision for the constitution of Area Sabha (AS) in some of the states and cities namely Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. But the functioning status of these AS is only found to be active in Dharamshala. The report further stated that public participation through WC meetings is found to be active only in Mangalore, Dharamshala, Ahmedabad, Bhopal and Bhubaneswar among the 21 cities under study.

Table 1: Status of Ward Committee across selected cities in India

Cities	Provision of Ward Committee in the Act	Constitution of Ward Committee	Functional Ward Committee
Amritsar	√	×	×
Ahmedabad	√	√	√
Bhopal	√	√	×
Bhubaneswar	√	√	√
Coimbatore	√	×	×
Dehradun	√	×	×
Dharmashala	√	√	√
Delhi	√	√	√
Gurugram	√	×	×
Kochi	√	√	√
Kolkata	√	×	×
Lucknow	√	×	×
Mumbai	√	√	√
Mangaluru	√	×	×
Panaji	√	×	×
Patna	√	×	×
Ranchi	√	√	×
Rajpur	√	×	×
Udaipur	√	√	×
Vijayawada	√	×	×
Warangal	√	×	×

Source: National Consultation on Urban Governance, 2020

City-wise performance of Ward Committees: A summary of studies:

After the implementation of the 74th CAA, not all the states enabled the recommendation and only about 12 states constituted WCs (Sundar, 2006; TERI report 2010) and 19 states including Chandigarh have enabled the legislation to constitute the WC as per the 74th CAA (Sivaramkrishnan, 2006, cited in TERI report 2010). But the report of TERI says some of the states have not constituted the WC or have deliberately interpreted the provisions differently, while some other states tried to make the WCs successful. West Bengal and Kerala have the highest citation for their success story of decentralisation implementation; although the actual situation on the ground reality is not very promising beyond the pen and paper. Only these two states have constituted WCs for every wardat the municipal level (Sivaramkrishnan, 2006; Mathur *et al*, 2006; Sundar, 2006). Although, scholars have found some major anomalies in these states as well; for instance, in West Bengal, only 50 per centof wards have constituted the WCs and the majority of them are non-functioning (Sundar, 2006), and for Kerala as well, the plans prepared in the WC level are not taken into account in many divisions (Vidyarthee, 2006).

In the case of Bangalore, people had to seek judicial help from the court to kick-start the proper functioning and election in the WCs (Sundar, 2006). During the pandemic, the situation of WCs in different cities of Karnataka was revealed. Chamaraj (2021) in an article revealed that the ward committees were nowhere to be found to mitigate the pandemic disaster. Citizens from Mysuru had to reach the high court to claim for the constitution of WC. Similarly, in Tumakuru, and Mangaluru, WCs were not constituted even after the elections (Chamaraj, 2021).

In Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh where WCs are functional, the WCs are limited to councillors and NGOs and thus, there is little interaction with the people in the decision-making processes, local needs and monitoring (Vidyarthee, 2006).

On the other hand, the WCs of Gujarat are kept limited to perform only advising, seeking and extending cooperation from the municipal corporation to citizens. They are not financially powerful with limited financial autonomy. As per the state rules, WCs are divided into three Area Sabhas regardless of the population size. They are meant to deepen democracy. The guideline for people's involvement in these forums was exclusionary, despite being the motor of the pro-poor development agenda, the leaders of slum dwellers are kept out of the list. Further, WC meetings are not inclusive and open to the citizens and even NGOs (Patel *et al*, 2016).

Pinto (2008) in his study highlighted the six-year-old (contemporary) ward committees of Mumbai city. These WCs are perceived as weak and ineffective, and many people are unaware of their existence. According to him, these committees had failed to promote deepening democracy, thus, requiring further amendments (Pinto, 2008, pp 59).

In a case study on Kozhikode municipal corporation of Kerala, there is a major variation in the functioning of WCs within different wards in terms of inclusion of BPL households as well as migrants in the basic service provision and infrastructural facilities. There are still loopholes in the beneficiary selection in the case of the implementation of various schemes and projects (Sasikala, 2006).

In the case of Ambikapur, Chhattisgarh, there is an anomaly in the development of basic services and the gap between expenditure and revenue earned by the municipal body is hindering the uniform development of all the services (Seth, 2006).

In the study of the Salt Lake City of West Bengal, Bardhan Roy found an interesting story of existing competition between traditional Community Welfare Organisation (CWO) constituting the elite middle-class residences of the region and newly-formed ward committees. The competition depicts the lack of belief in the WCs in the area, while the preference for CWOs also increases the complexities of negotiation for the basic functioning on the ground reality (Bardhan Roy, 2006).

In Jaipur, Rajasthan, Saxena found that the total absence of power delegation to the WCs made them incapable of reproducing the ideologies of decentralisation on the real ground (Saxena, 2006). In Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, Rai found the restriction on the public in their way of participating in the WC meetings has blocked the way for democratic decentralisation (Rai, 2006). In West Bengal, Chattopadhyay pointed out the issue of irregularities in Annual General Meetings and a sense of political party preference drives the entire process of participatory governance, and the opposite party people keep themselves out of such processes. People avoid opposing the councillors to avoid conflict with the local party system. (Chattopadhyay, 2015).

Singh narrated the story of Mumbai where the unreliability of the councillor and WCs has led the middle-class citizens to raise their associations. He regarded the "invited space" as being the space of the middle-class only. The definition of "participation" is "how ordinary people gain political agency". The space of decentralisation is very fragmented and the WCs do not render the purpose of public participation (Singh, 2012).

In a recent article in The Times of India, Omjasvin discussed the condition of Ward Committees in Chennai, where he cited the words of the secretary of Peoples Awareness Association, that only one ward committee was constituted for 15 zones in Chennai, instead of 200, which is failing the very purpose of the ward sabhas. He added that without consulting the community, the motto of the WCs became limited to claiming central funds without any intention to decentralise the power (Gokhulraj, 2020; Omjasvin, 2022). The absence of a democratic space like WCs created an opportunity for people with better social capital to exploit the public services (Gokhulraj, 2020).

The very nature of the constitution of WCs varies significantly across the states. That creates issues at comparative levels. The "invited space" aims to bring people from different socio-economic strata together to participate in planning and decision-making. However, the agendas of states created variation in the outcomes. For example, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu have provisions for constituting WCs for each of the wards, while other states tend to group the wards. This results in differentiation at the representative level, as well as complicates the process of comparison among states. Therefore, some of the issues become specific to the states, and some are general to all.

Issues faced by Ward Committees in India

Micro-level planning helps to focus on the actual need of the people, cost-effectively produce services, to tackle the issues from their roots. They include addressing the best use of community land, resource for residential, commercial, and recreational purposes; traffic congestion, air pollution; zoning code,

building code and environmental regulation (Sundar, 2006). The assumptions, however, in many instances failed to become reality in urban India. The state-specific issues are somewhat pertaining because of the state-wise constitutional rules which complicate the comparison process. Therefore, various kinds of issues are faced by ward committees across states and some are generally persistent in the whole country and some are specific tothe socio-economic and political context of the region. The general issues are discussed in the following section.

Budgetary Constraints and financial restrictions

The first and foremost issue states that in no cities the proposals by neighbourhoods and WCs are considered in the budget formulation (Sivaramkrishnan, 2004). So far, they are dependent on the fund transferred from the central government (Bagchi, 1999). The very nature of decentralisation in India has defected with the lack of access to financial pools (Nandi and Gamkhar, 2013; Vidyarthee, 2006). In many states, the WCs are performing as mere advisory bodies with no significant financial powers. Except for in West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Maharashtra the WCs are not financially empowered (TERI report, 2010). Even in the report of the Economic Survey, 2017-18 by the Government of India, the data says that urban local bodies are restricted in their tax collection and able to recover only 44% of revenue through their sources, which on the other hand makes the ULBs more vulnerable and dependable on central grants (Economic Survey Report, 2017-18, pp. 61). The report further elaborates that many of the states, despite constituting state finance commissions (SFC), did not accept the recommendations promoted by them. The acceptance rate ranges from 11% in Karnataka to 50% in West Bengal (Economic Survey Report, 2017-18, pp. 62). Talking about the budget at the WC level, the percentage of the budget in Ahmedabad kept limited to 4.43% of the total municipal budget in 2014-2015. Further, the decisions are influenced by zonal political party relations and power compositions (Patel *et al*, 2016).

Functional Restriction

At present, the functional domain is very narrowly developed. Community participation through the functioning of NGOs and CBOs along with WCs is still in the infancy stage, and in many instances is biased toward the middle-class. It is not well adopted at this level to ensure accountability and transparency regarding information dissemination to people. The urban poor is kept outside the domain of citizen participation and decision-making despite various poverty alleviation measures being adopted. Even after the lack of functioning it can be said that there is an existence of a forum or structure for democratic participation in cities of India (Vidyarthee, 2006). In the 74th CAA, the functioning of the WCs is left to the state legislations and thus, limited functions are delegated to the WCs (TERI report, 2010). Functions are kept limited to monitoring and repairing due to budget constraints in some cities (Ahmedabad) (Patel *et al*, 2016).

Existence of lobbying and clientelism

Participation is prone to manipulation through higher socio-economic communities. The issues rotting the "participatory governance" principle are prominent. A process of lobbying involves the community's

utilisation of councillors to interact with the other spheres of government thus, using the councillor as a lobby (Sundar, 2006).   The heterogeneity or plurality of the society makes it difficult for the participation of the people in developing nations and therefore needs impartial involvement of CBOs and NGOs. In the process of intra and inter-community competition for getting access to basic services, the urban poor remains deprived and relies on intermediary sources for getting access to basic amenities (Political party influence on such patronage creates the informality and patrons get vote support). The role of CBOs and NGOs is also affected by such differentials. "Clientelism" is an active phenomenon which denotes preferences of own political party supporters at the expense of the opposition party supporter which advocates the "vote bank policy" adopted to disrupt democracy (Mathew and Mathew, 2016, P 22).The election of WC members by councillors and chairman is also influenced by the party preference. The picture of WC to be apolitical is destroyed. In the case of Mumbai, the ALM functions pretty well but is dominated by the local elites (educated, middle and upper-middle-class people). Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) in Delhi, Bangalore, and Chennai are dominated by the elite class who considered the slums as nuisances and thus, a large proportion of urban people are kept out of the system (Bose, 2022; Lama Rewal, 2013). Councillors often use allocated budgets in favour of particular socio-economic groups, especially before an election (Patel *et al*, 2016). The activities of CBO, NGOs etc. are accessible to richer people in most cases and poor people are left out (Chattopadhyay, 2015). In contrast, in Ahmedabad, the poor people are more prone to get access to councillors for a minimum of their needs, but to them, it is a very limited opportunity as compared to the e-governance facilities opted for by the middle-class people (Patel *et al*, 2016).

Widening distance between people and governing body

According to Sivaramkrishnan (2000), it has been found that even after the constitution of WCs the proximity between government and people is neglected. For many other states, multiple wards together constitute a ward committee. This increases the distance between citizens and authority against the principle and motif of decentralisation (Sundar, 2006). In Mumbai, only a dozen people constitute the WC and become representatives of lakhs (Sivramkrishnan, 2006). In Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, WCs are constituted where a huge number of people is represented through a single WC (Singh, 2006). Sundar found in Tamil Nadu and Delhi that some of the WCs are constructed with only the councillors without any participation from the public. There is clear variation in the coverage of population among the wards. For instance, in the case of Mumbai, the coverage of each ward is around 7.5 lakhs on average, and for Delhi, the number is around eight lakhs (Baud and Wit, 2009; TERI report, 2010), in Chennai, the figure is 4.2 lakhs (Sivaramkrishnan, 2000) and similar stories are found in Pune and Navi-Mumbai etc. In Hyderabad, at least ten wards comprise one ward committee, in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka a ward committee comprises contiguous wards. In Bangalore, the ward committee represents around two lakh population; a ward in Kolkata and Trivandrum represents 40,000 to 70,000 of the population (Sivaramkrishnan, 2000). In metropolitan Gujarat (Ahmedabad) the representation ratio of Area Sabha is 29,000 people on average which weakens the democracy, while for WCs the average ratio is 97,858 (Patel *et al*, 2016).

Domination of Political Party ideology

The prominence of the party system within the functioning and composition of WCs is hindering the full-time functioning of WCs as a proper democratic entity. For instance, in Mumbai, the WCs are working following the political party agendas. In a study in Cochin, it has been found that the political leaders are not interested to get engaged with civil societies in WCs and hence, the prioritisation of true decentralisation is neglected by the political party system (Kuruvilla and Waingankar, 2013). Bajaj (2012) mentioned in her article that, WCs are used as a tool for extending state politics to the local level. In her study on West Bengal, she found a positive correlation between the party operating at the state level and the same at the local level (Bajaj, 2012). Thus, the domination of the party in the local governance influences the transparency and accountability of the system.

Lack of integration

The urban local bodies, being a part of multiple governing bodies, face issues of administrative delay, involvement of unsound public officials, poor review or inspection, and minimising citizens' role in auditing of schemes and programmes. The SARC report of 2007 states that the WCs are not well equipped (Singh, 2013). In Kerala, WC meetings are held quarterly which makes the issues irrelevant at the time of its planning; moreover, the planning done at the corporation level or by councillors does not give a way to the suggestions made by WCs. There is a lack of political and institutional integration in the planning process (Kuruvilla and Waingankar, 2013). The need for activity mapping at the local level is hampering the effective functioning of WC in Maharashtra (Kuruvilla and Waingankar, 2013).

Unawareness and Unwillingness among Citizens

In many urban areas, citizens are not aware of the very existence of the ward committees, and authority has never shown any real interest to overcome it. In Chennai, one resident said that many citizens are not aware of the existence of ward committees (Omjasvin, 2022). A survey by Jaanagraha found that in Bengaluru 87% of the voters do not have any knowledge about the ward committees (DHNS, 2022). Unawareness is sometimes related to the irregular constitution of the WCs. However, it has been found in ULBs of West Bengal, that about 87% of the respondents were unsure about the constitutional status of WCs and as much as 90% of them are not aware of the rules and regulations. Many citizens do not bring any issues to the meetings, and 64% of them do not participate in the decision-making process (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2019).

Gender Bias and Proxy

The WC meetings are chaired by the councillors. Councillors, therefore, play an important role in mediating the plans and directing the decision-making process and influencing the impact of the meeting. Women Councillors are often discouraged in this domain. Banerjee and Samanta found in their study in Darjeeling, West Bengal, a women councillor was stopped while speaking in the meeting (Banerjee and Samanta, 2020, pp 108) causing disruption. Weak women are controlled by the political party to execute their agendas (Banerjee and Samanta, 2020, pp 109). In many instances proxy leaders (Bauri and Basu, 2022; Jayal, 2005; Prasad, 2014) mainly the male members of women councillors

participate in the external duties and WC meetings leading to the failure of the whole democratic system.

An Alternative to Ward Committee: Formal and Informal Institutions

The poor performance of WCs led to the emergence of informal and formal alternatives which have their benefits and disadvantages. The study on the involvement of the community in the governance in the context of Andhra Pradesh by Maringanti can be mentioned. The innovative action by the Andhra Pradesh Government in terms of urban governance was the involvement of self-help groups for the community sanitation in slums and RWAs for mobilising resources through tax collection monitoring. The initiative enhanced the governmentality among the poor as well as the middle class while increasing transparency and accountability (Maringanti, 2013, pp 126). In the peripheral urban regions, the RWAs play a crucial role in getting access to basic services and infrastructures as found in the case of Salt-Lake City as well as in South Bangalore (Bardhan Roy, 2006; Kamath and Vijayabaskar, 2013). While in contrast, as studied in Salt Lake City of West Bengal, Bardhan Roy has found the creation of conflict between the RWAs and Ward Committees, and surprisingly here the democracy is compromised by the domination of WCs (Bardhan Roy, 2006). Similarly, in Bangalore also the domination of the middle-class population in creating unequal access to resources through the operationalisation of RWAs is persistently leading to the bourgeois capturing master plans of land use regulations as per their requirements (Kamath and Vijayabaskar, 2013, pp 156). As found by Cornea, in small towns of West Bengal (Bardhhaman and Medinipur) the system of clubs is found to be bilaterally influencing different areas differently (Cornea, 2019). Following this ideology, Kundu and Chatterjee (2020) investigated the fragmented infrastructural provision of urban water supply in Baruipur municipality (Kundu and Chatterjee, 2020). The findings adhere to the existence of the exclusionary nature of formal public water supply, which indulged the increase of involvement of informal agencies, local "para" clubs, party workers, and informal brokers in the accessing process (Kundu and Chatterjee, 2020). These institutions are trying to bridge the gap created by the poor performance of WCs, but they are also encouraging the splintering of urban governance.

Conclusion

The very idea of the ward committee constitution underlined the idea of "democratic participation". The current status of the functioning of the WC shows a completely different picture and it cannot be said that the ward committees are effectively functioning. Unlike the Gram Sabha, there is no provision for Ward Sabha for a smaller population or area and thus, the implication of the presumed ideologies in the ground reality is far from being complete. Even after 30 years of implementation of the 74th CAA, the condition of WCs is not promising and needs to be studied by considering the socio-economic hegemony existing in its performance. Other informal bodies or "claimed spaces" that are performing as an alternative to the WCs need to be viewed from a comparative perspective.

The studies on the evaluation of the performance of WCs are limited in India. A majority of them talk about metropolitan cities and bring out the issues about those spaces. Furthermore, in studies about urban service delivery, the role of WCs is barely studied. Which is the way to empower the citizen

to bring inclusive development cannot be properly understood due to the existence of informal and formal organisations parallelly working along the WC.

Through the review of the available cases and reports, it can be concluded that

- Even after three decades of decentralisation, the power and authority delegation to the local authority is far from being expected and the implementation is limited in much pen and paper.
- The majority of the studies and reports evaluated the condition of WCs in large cities, which shows an under-representation of people's perspective on governance.
- Furthermore, the awareness of its existence is limited and people are negligent towards its functioning in many instances.
- There are informal and formal organisations, that operated on behalf of WC in many cities. These are not necessarily just and equitable in their way of performance.

The above discussion has sought to bring out the performance of WCs in various urban areas in India. The empirical evidence suggests that their performance and functioning are not as per expectation. The presumption of "invited space" is failing in the virtue of low awareness, the unwillingness of political leaders and authorities to facilitate the same, differential participation, engendering of these meetings etc. The primary issue is the absence of the WCs themselves in many instances. But none of the studies has succeeded in answering why so. Is it the fault or unwillingness of authority? Or is it the disinterested citizens?

Further, the citizen is not a homogenous group. There are socio-economic differences, there are race, gender, a caste which divide the population into different segments. The issues among them cannot be evaluated from a fixed perspective. The studies need to be very critical about the factors leading to such conditions. The primary concern can be limited to understanding the statistics of meetings, the constitution of WCs, and the number of participants. But the critical concern is required to understand how far the participation is effective and inclusive. Who are these participants? And what are the reasons behind their participation and non-participation?

The performance of WCs, therefore, needs to be judged by the outcome and implementation of the decisions taken in WC and is very limited in talking about the primary statistics. In other words, what is the result of the discussion on the issues and planning which took place in such meetings has never been systematically discussed which might indicate the actual effectiveness of WCs. Civil organisations are emerging as a support system for this, but they are not necessarily inclusive for all as found in some of the studies. To bridge the gap, and reach every heterogenous group in the society WCs might need to associate with civil bodies but first, they have to be empowered themselves to avoid inequality. Therefore, studies need to re-examine the way they evaluate the performance of WCs, focus more on the factors leading to it and suggest ways to overcome the same.

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