



# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: THE PULSE OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

*T*racing the trajectory of the concept of ‘participation and development’ the governments have walked half ways to ensure actual citizen participation. A representing agency, be it government or private has constrained the citizens from exercising their will. The concept of ‘community participation’ began in 1970s, following the approach of ‘project with people’, the involvement of the people with the institutions of local governance has largely turned ‘democracy into bureaucracy’ rather than ‘representation into participation’.

### The Unserved Evolution

The evolution of concept of participation at grassroots grew in three states. Firstly, Project efficiency and effectiveness, fulfilling the goals of utilization of benefits by the poor, without actually empowering the poor. Secondly, the increased number of institutions undermine the actual participation of the individuals and democracy becomes bureaucracy. Thirdly, community participation helps in further strengthening the influence of the elite and elite can reinforce it for their personal benefits<sup>i</sup>.

### Participatory Governance

In the Indian settings the foremost democratic objective of the process of decentralization in India is the bi-annual meetings of Gram Sabha in every Gram Panchayat to enhance the levels of citizen engagement. What is yet to be realised is the true potential of the rural cabinet being an instrument of participatory governance<sup>ii</sup>. In a quest to bring citizens closer to the government, renewed approaches in ‘development planning’ and ‘service delivery’ mechanisms have been adopted by governments of countries across the globe, where decentralization is one such experiment. The process of devolution of power, however, upholds the spirit of democratic ideals from different dimensions, creating an inter-related web of reform processes. As Crook and Manor have said, the process of devolution of power and resources to local elected representatives promises more transparent, accountable and responsive government. Further, decentralization catalyses people’s participation and raises the tendencies to create an environment of associational life<sup>iii</sup>.

### The Segregation

As a matter of concern, decentralization in many countries has been adopted to inculcate the above-mentioned benefits. But in practice the situation is precarious, undermining the rights of the marginalised. In developing countries like India, where, ‘social-inequality’ that unfolds into caste, communal and gender inequality, forms the basis of ‘economic inequality’ is still a relevant unresolved issue at the grassroots. These persisting inequalities have been a major challenge before adequate representation of the marginalised groups<sup>iv</sup>. Mainstreaming all social groups, bringing together to a scale of equal participation is therefore a serious issue that emanates from the low levels of literacy and income stability.



Sphere of participation of diverse groups before and after the participatory mechanisms applied. Figure 1 (a) Before and Figure 1 (b) After.

### RTI: A Tool of People's Participation

Moreover, institutionalization of participation can be done through the recent legislations like RTI, but merely legislation of RTI Act is not sufficient to raise citizen participation. Transforming the orientation of people as well as public authorities towards the administrative culture is the key impediment in operationalization of the RTI.



It has been seen through various studies on freedom of information (hereinafter FOI) that participation lies at the heart of the RTI<sup>v</sup>. It is the citizen participation in decision-making, in designing public policy, in social audits, upon which the success of RTI is largely dependent. Therefore, considering the above statement, it can be argued that, effective and meaningful participation is the cornerstone of democratic governance and RTI plays a significant role in mobilising effective participation.

As it has been said, informed citizenry is complementary to participatory processes, in fact, it expands the domain of effective participation, and thus can use the platform to keep government answerable to people. Consistent pattern, if followed, adding more innovation, can socialize such government-citizen equations<sup>vi</sup>. The argument can further be justified considering the innovative practices that different countries have been adopting time and again to draw public opinion through their participation.

### Illustration 1: United Kingdom

In UK, a co-operating central government has been appreciating and enhancing public participation that has led to influx of more innovative ideas as a result of discussions, suggestions and consideration of people's voices in the substantially high budget, large encompassing government schemes<sup>vii</sup>. Here informed public participation by the people adds more to the working of the government. Bringing together the ideas that help the government to weave more people-centric policies that feed on a high budget. Such innovative methods of working in tandem also embolden state's accountability towards people. As Neera Chandhowke has emphasized, 'The degree of state accountability to the citizens for most of its part depends on the awareness and knowledge of the people about the state activities involving public money and the problems that





people confront collectively as a society<sup>viii</sup>! The practice of informed citizen participation has a grooming impact world over on the working of governments.

At home, one of the much discussed initiative by the government that has already proved its potential, is the concept of social audit as a part of MGNREGA<sup>x</sup>. A government funded scheme that ensures 100 days of employment to millions of adults from each family conducts audits on a regular basis that helps the government to be transparent in its working.

#### Illustration 2: Bolivia

Another illustration of the legalization of the citizen engagement is the Bolivia's Popular Participation Law (LPP), an initiative by the then Bolivian president, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada<sup>x</sup>. The initiative has been applauded by the international community is an initiative aiming incorporation of marginalised section of Bolivia into processes leading to political and economic development.

LPP along with Capitalization law was an experiment to retain the concept of democracy along with adoption of free Market. But it has been through various studies that the programme failed in the early stages. LPP led to the transfer of 20 per cent of finances to the municipalities<sup>xi</sup>. Here it can be argued that the growing practice of institutionalization of people's participation as an attachment of administrative state has manifested change and development at the smallest administrative unit like villages, wards and blocks.

#### Illustration 3: Mexico

Participatory Budgeting programme of Mexico is another expression of global democratic reform process. Similarly, in Brazil, the concept of the Participatory Budgeting (PB) has gained global attention. In one of the city, Porto Alegre Tax delinquency has reduced from 20 to 15 percent. And in Mundo Novo in Brazil drop in tax delinquency re-counts to transparency in public administration necessitated by PB<sup>xii</sup>.

In South East Asia in Indonesia, it has been found through a study that, people's participation at grassroots assemblies had a very limited role to play in regulating corruption in a village road project. Olken has found that the conventional bureaucratic auditing has proved more efficient in curbing corruption in such projects<sup>xiii</sup>. Above mentioned illustrations justify the growing preference among Latin American countries for citizen-centric governance processes through greater citizen engagement. Greater the participation, more are the chances of a transparent, accountable and responsive governance, further, if attained following a democratic strategy or plan of action thus upholding the institutions of democratic governance.

#### Lack of Participation at Grassroots

Lack of awareness regarding any aspect of government functioning has often remained a major issue at grass-roots level. Being called as a platform for discussing the village issues, the periodical meetings of Gram Sabha are looked upon as a tool of public awareness to bring information regarding the policies and entitlements of the people<sup>xiv</sup>. But the frequency of these meetings is very low and if somehow meetings are organised successfully then there is no means to inform people to be present in meeting, sometimes organisers paste notice on the office wall and sometimes not. Therefore, communication is a big issue at grass-roots. Here we realise the drawbacks of the rural-urban divide.

## Conclusion

It has been seen and widely accepted that for the processes enhancing people's participation, initiatives like India's RTI, UK's people's participation in budgeting, Bolivia's Popular Participation Law and Mexico's Participatory Budgeting shall be adopted and for their awareness generation mechanisms to be effective, certain initiatives should be espoused to ensure and underline broad-based participation from diverse groups. Democratic political systems in India define the constitutional rights of citizens but the need is to reinvent the required mechanisms to be applicable for a better participative institution. Such democratic initiatives at the grassroots level enhance people's participation by encouraging assertiveness among people and further equips require apparatuses and enterprises related to complications of government system. To a large extent through such mechanisms, the additional scale, breadth and depth of participation in a democracy can be ensured.

<sup>i</sup>Andrea Cornwell, "Participation in Development", Currents 28: Participation- Where is it heading? August, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup>Mathew C Kannumkal, "Grassroots level democracy in India: An Assessment Yojana, Vol. 55, February, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup>Richard Crook and James Manor, "Democratic Decentralization", OED Working Paper Series No. 11 (World Bank, 2000). 20. Available as: [www.worldbank.org/html/oed](http://www.worldbank.org/html/oed). As on: 8/10/2012.

<sup>iv</sup>NirajaGopalJoyal, "Locating Gender in the Governance Discourse", Essays on Gender and Governance (UNDP, 2003) 112. As on: 1/8/2015.

<sup>v</sup>Report, "The World Bank Participation Sourcebook" (World Bank, 1996). Available as:<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/289471468741587739/pdf/multi-page.pdf>. As on: 21/10/2017.

<sup>vi</sup>Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee, "Accountability through Public Opinion from Inertia to Public Action", (World Bank, 2012) Available as: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVACC/Resources/Accountabilitybookweb.pdf>. As on 22/10/2017.

<sup>vii</sup>J, Bell and A. Stockdale, "Examining Participatory Governance in a Devolving UK: insights from national parks policy development in Northern Ireland", Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy. DOI: 10.1177/0263774X15625643.

<sup>viii</sup>Neera Chandhoke, "Human Development: Health and Education", In Contemporary India. 20.

<sup>ix</sup>PRIA, "Democratic accountability in local governance institutions: Experiences from South Asia", PRIA Global Partnership (2011) 6.

<sup>x</sup>Miriam Seemann, "The Bolivian Decentralization Process and the Role of Municipal Associations", HWWA Discussion Paper 271, Hamburg Institute of International Economics (HWWA), Available as: <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/26356/1/dp040271.pdf> Accessed on: 11/11/2015.

<sup>xi</sup>Benjamin Kohl, "Stabilizing neoliberalism in Bolivia: popular participation and privatization" Political Geography Vol. 21 (2002) 449-472. Available as:

<sup>xii</sup>Yves Cabannes, "Participatory budgeting: a significant contribution to participatory democracy", Environment and Urbanization, Vol. 16 no. 1, (April 2004) 27-46. Doi: 10.1177/095624780401600104, Accessed on: 15/11/2015.

<sup>xiii</sup>Diaz-Cayeros, A. et al. Traditional Governance, Citizen Engagement, and Local Public Goods: Evidence from Mexico, World Development (2013) 4. Available as: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.008>. Accessed on; 16/11/2015.

<sup>xiv</sup>"A handbook on Gram Panchayat Governance", (Ministry of Panchyati Raj and UNDP, 2014). Available as: <http://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/10198/456811/Panchayat%20Manual.pdf> As on: 21/10/2016. ■

## Author



**Dr Renu Singh**

(The author is a faculty of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and also a faculty of Dronocharya IAS, Chandigarh.)