State of the Art on Citizen Participation in Local Democracy in India

1. Introduction

The vitality of discourse on participation is of critical importance to practitioners and advocates of citizen participation for a variety of reasons. First, citizens are increasingly getting disillusioned with institutions of representative democracy, particularly those which are represented by political parties. Second, in recent times, there has been an upsurge of ‘eruptions’ of citizen movements, often supported by civil society to address the issues of prevailing injustices, discriminatıons and abuse of power by political elites. Third, a considerable number of citizens and civil society, equipped with new information and awareness, are increasingly becoming vigilant of the state and private corporations. Democracy, according to them, is not limited to casting the ballot once in five years, but a 24x7 initiative by active citizens.

2. National consultation

PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia), in partnership with Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK) and Logo Link, organised a national consultation on ‘Citizen Participation in Local Democracy’ on 11-12 March 2013 at SSK, India. The consultation was organised in order to provide a platform to civil society, activists and citizen leaders to share their experiences and insights on the critical issues and challenges of citizen participation in local democracy. The consultation sought to explore answers to various complex issues and questions including:

a) What is the meaning of real participation and why is it important to local democracy?
b) What motivates citizens and civil society to participate?
c) What are the pre-conditions of authentic participation?
d) Where are the spaces for participation?
e) How are the voices of marginalised (like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, women, youth and other excluded) incorporated in local democratic processes?

It is important to understand whose participation is neglected and how participation of these excluded groups is ensured through civil society interventions while viewing citizen participation as ‘Right’. Hence the basic question is whose participation is critically important? If we have clarity in our work about this we should also know the spaces where we want to ensure their participation. It also leads to identification of values and principles that needs to be promoted to ensure participation of these groups. The sections of society whose participation is important could be classified as:

a) Vulnerable sections of the society like, women, widows, young girls and boys, dalits, tribals, Other Backward Classes, victims of natural calamities and other victims, old people, disabled, urban and rural poor, people from unorganised sector, landless, labourers etc.
b) Those who are operating under some institutional framework and mandated with certain roles and responsibilities like Self-help groups (SHGs), standing committees of local governments, elected representatives of local governments (panchayats and municipalities).
c) Those who are informed and educated sections of society like students, teachers, academicians, media etc.

The participation of these groups could be ensured through institutional spaces which are ‘invited’ in nature like, gram sabhas (village council), area sabhas (urban neighbourhood committees), district and state level. As well as through spaces which are not open but can be claimed through engagement in one form or another, like developmental programmes and schemes, access to government services, political and social participation etc.

3. Existing spaces for participation

Indian Constitution ensured citizen participation in local democracy through the insertion of Part IX and IX A of the Constitution with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in 1993. The amendments provided legitimacy to the local government institutions widely known as, Panchayats and Municipalities for rural and urban areas respectively. Through these institutions citizen’s participation is ensured in the local planning and development processes.

The 73rd CAA, in order to empower panchayats, introduced institutional arrangements for citizen participation through ‘Gram Sabha’ or village assemblies on a national scale for the first time. The Gram Sabha meetings provide space where villagers (69 per cent of the total population\(^1\)) can participate in decision making process w.r.t. their development and planning. On the other hand, in urban areas proper institutionalised means for participating in development decisions is not yet so visible and vibrant. States are yet to implement ‘Community Participation Law’\(^2\) in letter and spirit resulting in uneven constitution and presence of Area Sabhas (urban neighbourhood committees).

4. Other initiatives for promoting citizen participation

a) Political representation of women, marginalised and disadvantaged through reservation in institutions of local government.

b) National Forest Policy of 1988, recognised local populations’ rights over forest resources. The policy envisaged citizen participation in the use and protection of forests, and suggested that forest-dwelling communities should develop and conserve forests together with the state forest departments in a Joint Forest Management (JFM) program.

c) Access to public information is a critical prerequisite in achieving the ideals of participatory democracy. This becomes possible through Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005.

d) Various other schemes and programmes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) etc. envisaged citizens participation in the overall process through the involvement of local governments.

e) ‘Social audit’ process is also seen as a mechanism of citizen participation and vigilance designed to ensure transparency and accountability in the program’s implementation. This becomes a big success in the implementation of MGNREGA.

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1 Population Census, 2011, Govt. of India
2 The Model Nagara Raj Bill, 2008 is India’s first community participation legislation and creates a new tier of decision making in each municipality called the Area Sabha. The Bill is a mandatory reform under the JNNURM. The basic objective of the Bill is to establish appropriate political and accountability spaces to link urban governance with the people by institutionalizing citizen participation.
Citizen’s report card, community monitoring, public hearing, citizen’s charter etc. have been tried in the last two decades in India and these tools have been successful in checking corruption and ensuring the timely delivery of services to the poor. Some of these are also integrated into the process of social welfare programmes. For example, social audit and community monitoring have been integrated into MGNREGA and NRHM. The efforts of civil society also enable some municipalities to use citizen’s report card as a benchmark to improve their services.

Service Guarantee Act by almost 15 states in India also promoted citizens participation in ensuring services on time and in more effective manner.

There are many examples of social movements and campaigns like Jan Satyagraha campaign by Ekta Parishad on land rights, India Against Corruption (IAC) campaign etc. have made a big impact by mobilising citizens for a cause.

5. Difficulties for inclusive participation within available spaces

It is often argued and evidences are available that there are issues and challenges attached to citizen’s participation through the available legislative and institutional spaces. The Gram Sabhas have yet to become fully operational and to realize their potential for empowering rural masses. The community participation law is not enacted by many states in the country. Hence, there is a limited space for citizen participation in municipalities. The benefits of reservation to the marginalised and women are not exercised to its full potential due to prevailing social order and inaction be the state. The decisions taken during the Gram Sabha meetings are often overruled or not implemented, which adds to the dissatisfaction and apathy among the members. The para-statals constituted (e.g. village education committee under SSA) under various schemes and programmes also challenge the legitimacy of the standing committees of local governments.

In case of RTI, delay in disclosure, denial and inaccurate information are the main hindering factors. Attacks on many RTI activists were attempts to defeat the very purpose of the Act by creating fear among the active citizens to use this powerful tool.

6. Strategies that worked for civil society

In order to ensure participation of these sections, multi-pronged strategies are adopted by civil society through its programmes and interventions. These include:

- Information dissemination, awareness and sensitisation around various issues and programmes. It is strongly believed that awareness about the entitlements, rights and responsibilities is a first step to ensure citizen participation. But beyond that it is not only about the knowledge and access to entitlements, but “enjoying rights or entitlements” is far more important.
- Communitisation and mobilisation is also suggested as a major strategy for ensuring participation.
- It is often believed that if participation of the marginalised sections of the society needs to be ensured the demand should come from within the groups. And for doing so nurturing leadership among these groups is essential. Hence, leadership development at the community level is suggested as an important strategy.
- Interface among various sets of stakeholders is also very important. This is mainly achieved through multi-stakeholders dialogues. But such dialogues should be open and everyone should get due representation.
7. **Enablers of participation**

The discussion question on what values and principles we promote through our own interventions and programmes to ensure participation threw up answers and relevant strategies for ensuring citizen participation through:

- Continuous facilitation and support.
- Transparency and accountability in the institutions. This would also help in generating confidence of the citizens in these institutions.
- Politicisation of the affected would help them to get their due spaces and representation.
- Participation in decision making.
- By promoting unity among the groups.
- Own representation (own voice and recognition of voice) and Voice in decision making.
- By creating target groups and associations of the marginalised groups. And by ensuring credibility of these groups and associations.
- Intermediate reaction with positive and long term vision.
- Exposure.
- Collective leadership.

8. **Propose changes in the format, processes and spaces in participation**

It is often argued whether the systems of local democratic institutions are democratic themselves? Over the period new centres of political power have evolved in terms of local governments instead of authentic decentralisation of power. It is emphasised that current democratic framework needs to be challenged because government institutions can be equally undemocratic as the society and there is a challenge among the civil society to make society as well as government more democratic.

The argument is further unpacked when inhibiting and enabling factors for citizen participation among various sections of society were analysed. It is collectively understood that among other factors, constitutional and programmatic provisions under various schemes and programmes, spaces to form associations and freedom to protest, better and equal opportunities for education, equality before law, collectivisation of excluded sections, reservation to these sections in political and administrative fields, pro-marginalised policies and programmes are some important enabling factors to enhance participation. However, these factors should also be supported by conducive and sensitive structural mechanisms and responsible media.

On the other hand findings of the discussions revealed that, socio-political setup and mind-set, inefficient planning, low awareness regarding rights and entitlements, illiteracy, poverty, social norms, gender
insensitivity, poor access to resources and poor governance etc. inhibit citizen participation. Following questions needs to be discussed and deliberated over time:

- How can we give centrality to the ‘citizen’ in the whole democratic process?
- How can we keep this discussion going on and how can we involve other stakeholders in the process?
- How can we bring issues of citizenship into public discourse?
- What could be the elements of a National Policy on Citizen Participation?

There is a need for a campaign on ‘Right to Participation’ to pressurise the state for having national policy on the same. In doing so it is important to identify objective, strategy and stakeholders of the campaign. The objectives of the campaign should be:

- To promote peoples action, activism and advocacy for peoples participation.
- To build pressure for national policy on Right to participation.
- To get a clean and responsive leadership.

9. Strategy for the campaign

- Currently ‘Citizen Participation’ is not in public discourse. Hence, first and foremost strategy is to make “Citizen Participation” an issue of masses. And citizens should be at the centre of the whole process.
- Consensual definition of citizen participation is required and important ingredients of citizen’s participation need to be identified.
- There is also a need to keep govt. informed about failures of participation in schemes and programmes.
- To collect evidences from the best practices on participation.
- Information dissemination on the issue.
- Collectivisation and formation of common interest groups and associations. CSOs working on sectoral/ issues to be brought to common platform.
- Organizing meetings, workshops and multi-stakeholders consultations on the issue.
- Use of traditional (IEC material) as well as modern means of communication (social media) for campaign.
- Media engagement and advocacy.

10. Conclusion

The citizen participation in democratic governance in India has increased in the past two decades and various legislations and policies have facilitated this change. However the complexity of institutional framework for participation needs to be demystified and there is a need for common understanding on citizen participation in a common framework.