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Fostering Participation and Accountability in Local Governance: Current Experience, Future Challenges

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“.....it is arguably the largest deliberative institution of its kind world-wide....Its [the 73rd amendment’s] impact on 700 million Indians who live in rural India has been profound. It has instituted 2 million little democracies across the country, making the practice of democratic politics, its attendant elections cycles, deliberative rituals, and political machinations and negotiations part of the quotidian landscape of rural lives.” (Rao and Sanyal, 2009)

By virtue of its ability to bring governments closer to people, decentralization or local governance is widely recognized as a crucial ingredient in a participatory and accountable governance system. The argument is a compelling one. For one, decentralization results in smaller, local governments that are better able to align decision making to the needs and priorities of people. Second, proximity improves monitoring. Local government thus results in more direct participation, greater representation, better monitoring and enforcement and hence greater accountability.

In India, decentralization reforms through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments are arguably the most comprehensive effort to strengthen participation and accountability in governance processes. By making it mandatory to conduct regular elections at the town, district, block and village level, and significantly devolving administrative functions and financial resources to them, by reserving quotas for women and SCs/STs and by making it mandatory that all villages hold Gram Sabhas (GSs) at regular intervals to monitor the operations of the Gram Panchayats (GPs) and to debate local decisions, the 73rd and 74th amendments have resulted in the creation of hundreds and thousands of ‘little democracies’, and in so doing have ushered in the possibility of creating new spaces for citizens to come together and participate in the government, and hold it accountable for its promises.

In practice however, the amendments have been implemented in slow and halting steps. Owing largely to internal resistance within the state, the devolution of powers and resources to local governments has been uneven at best. Moreover, and arguably as a consequence of this poor devolution, platforms for direct participation have proven somewhat ineffective. GSs, for instance, are rarely held. A 2005 study by Besley and others from more than 4000 households across South India found that a quarter of GPs had not held even a single GS while a mere 20% households had ever attended a GS. Reservations too have yielded a similar, lukewarm response with many arguing that women merely act as proxies for their men-folk whose political ambitions have been temporarily suspended. In a similar vein, it is argued that SC/ST representatives remain largely ineffectual.

At the same time there is a small but growing body of empirical work that is indicative of the promise of local governance as a means to ensure participation and accountability. Duflo and Chattopadhyay's (2004) research on the impact of women's reservation is particularly significant. Through a cross-state comparison in one district each in West Bengal and Rajasthan, they found that in West Bengal, reservations led to increased participation of women—from 6.9 percent to 9.9 percent—in the GS in GPs with a woman President. They also found that in the villages studied women and men ask substantially different questions: 31 percent of women asked about drinking water versus only 17 percent of the men. These differences lead to differences in outputs—and not always in predictable ways: in West Bengal there is more investment in water and roads and less in schools in GPs with women Presidents.

Recent research on the effectiveness of the GS tells a similar, promising story. Besley and others found that despite low attendance, where Gram Sabhas are held, they do yield positive results. Participation in a GS is associated with a better chance for the landless, illiterate and SC/STs obtaining Below Poverty Line and Ration cards – probability of an 8-10 percent increase. And GSs are a vibrant space for deliberation and accessing public goods. A recent, insightful study undertaken by Rao and Sanyal (2009) on the nature of deliberation in the GS tells a fascinating story of how citizens use the GS as a space to discuss routine problems, access public goods and on occasion challenge local hierarchies

and decisions. Rao and Sanyal characterize the GS as a space that “briefly releases people from primordial inequality traps and allows them the freedom to speak.”

This research, however, also warns us to be careful not to over-romanticize participation. The nature of participation is deeply embedded in the traditional hierarchies and inequities that characterize social life in India. As Rao and Sanyal point out, the absences and silences in GS meetings are as revealing of the nature of participation as those who speak. Women attend but rarely participate and when upper caste citizens and land owners attend meetings, they tend to dominate the discussions by demanding that precedence be given to their needs. Jayal (2006) in her analysis of the impact of women’s reservations comes to a similar conclusion - that social and institutional factors seriously constraint women’s participation.

So how do we begin to make sense of this rather complex reality and what can we say about the effectiveness of local governments as spaces for participatory and accountable government? Moreover, what can be done to strengthen participation and local accountability?

What this research does tell us is that the 73rd and 74th amendments mark an important first step towards the establishment of real, participatory governance in India. The ‘legal’ right to participate, accorded by the Amendments through mechanisms such as the GS has, despite all its flaws, resulted in strengthening citizen capacity to engage, which many theorists argue is the first step to real participation.

However, as we have seen, the mere institutionalization of spaces for participation runs into natural limitations if these spaces are not harnessed properly. What are these limitations and how can we create conditions that can enable participation? For one, there are institutional factors that can act as serious disincentives to ‘real’ participation. In the current structure of local governance, participation is unlikely to result in a true reflection of citizens’ needs in decision-making. Local governments (LG) have very little flexibility to allocate resources as grants come tied and are required to be spent for particular purposes

in particular contexts. This severely limits their ability to allocate resources according to citizens' needs. Even where decisions are made locally, delays in fund flows from the centre and states mean that funds rarely reach local governments (LGs) in time for needs to be met. Moreover, limited devolution has meant that LGs have access over such few resources that they can rarely meet the needs of people. Where then are the incentives for participation? After all, if resources are not available and locally-made decisions rarely implemented why would anyone participate? Institutional reforms such as greater devolution of resources, with greater flexibility and predictability in fund flows can go a long way in creating the incentives for people to participate.

Institutional constraints apart, information asymmetries are often at the heart of participation and accountability failure. There is a growing body of literature that argues for information as an essential pre-requisite for participation and accountability. There is also ample evidence to suggest that awareness about rights and entitlements, roles and responsibilities of local governments, and resources available is extremely low, particularly in rural India. Strengthening citizen access to information is thus crucial. The Right to Information Act offers the opportunity to do just this. Section 4 of the Act mandates that governments proactively disclose information relevant to the public including details on budgets, roles and responsibilities, policy decisions and so on. Stricter adherence to the requirements under the RTI Act could improve access to information significantly.

Information, however, is a necessary condition for participation, not a sufficient one. There are opportunity costs to participation. Participation comes with many risks, particularly for the poorest, for the very act of standing up and getting your voice heard challenges existent power relations. There are also risks of collusion and co-option by vested interests. Participation is also hampered by deeply entrenched notions of inaction and distrust in the ability of the system to yield any results.

To overcome these constraints, it is important for people to believe in the efficacy of their own actions and to see tangible outcomes. People need to see change to believe that participation can yield results. The experience of conducting regular social audits and

following up on issues raised in these audits on the National Rural Employment in Andhra Pradesh is insightful in this regard. A 2008 study on the effectiveness of these audits found that regular follow up resulted in a huge jump in people's perceptions about the efficacy of social audits- one month after the social audits as many as 87% laborers surveyed said that they would not conduct a social audit on their own. Six months and much follow up later, 95% of the very same laborers surveyed said they would conduct a social audit on their own. Thus regular feedback and real time grievance redressal are crucial for it can go a long way in reassuring people that their participation and the attendant risks were worthwhile. Activating mechanisms through which the system is both answerable and responsive – the two most crucial elements of accountability – are critical to the establishment of a participatory and accountable government.

In sum, by creating institutionalized spaces for participation and accountability, the 73rd amendment has ushered in an unprecedented opportunity for participative, accountable governance. However, the mere presence of these spaces does not implicitly result in participation by citizens and the establishment of an accountable system. The dynamics of participation and accountability are clearly more complex and require a number of institutional reforms that facilitate participation and make it more meaningful. Crucially participation will foster in an environment where decentralization is real and meaningful. What the last fifteen and more years of experience with local governance in India highlights is that strong local governments do have the potential to significantly transform our politics. Empowered local governments can create empowered citizens and accountable government. The challenge lies in making this happen.

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