

SUMMARY NOTE

The Future of Governance Forum 7 Oct - 8 Oct

PANEL ON A DELICATE THREAD: GOVERNMENT PERCEPTION OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION



Panelists

Anjali Yadav, Government of Jharkhand
Gaurav Gogoi, Member of Parliament
Rai Mahimapat Ray, Government of Jharkhand
Uma Mahadevan, Government of Karnataka

Moderator

T.R. Raghunandan, Former IAS officer,
and Advisor to the Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research

About the Panel



The panel offered insights on:

- *How the government perceives citizen engagement;*
- *The need to listen to diverse perspectives;*
- *The use of social media to disseminate information;*
- *The potential for partnerships between district administration and local academia.*

The session also explored deliberative democracy processes like gram sabhas.

The Future of Governance forum was curated by the Accountability Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, and co-hosted with Arthan from 7 October-8 October 2020.

Perspectives on citizen-state interaction

Mr. Raghunandan, the moderator for the panel, kick-started the discussion by posing broad questions to the panelists: “Is the government’s perception of citizen participation open or closed? Is it real or fake? What are the real challenges of citizen participation as you see it, especially because it is often seen as an inconvenience.”

The moderator requested Ms. Yadav to respond first as her current posting meant she worked closest to local communities. Ms. Yadav shared that her recent postings have enabled her to work with the third-tier of government, and that her perception of citizen-state engagement is also shaped by having worked with an NGO before joining the IAS. She spoke of two types of information-sharing with citizens: first, in cases where the state is legally bound by the Right to Information (RTI, 2005) Act, and the second where district officials voluntarily listen to citizens’ grievances and answer their queries through events like *Janta Samvad* and *Vikas Melas*.

In response, Mr. Raghunandan asked: “How do you view citizens in terms of their legitimacy? How do you consider citizens’ responses when they are opposed to you?” Ms. Yadav answered that good intentions can be recognised when they take the needs of marginalised communities into account. While there are vested interests and lobbying as well, she felt that officers must adopt a long-term perspective to deal with this, and must build skills to address such situations.

Next, when being asked how she negotiates with her seniors in case they disagree, she said that one will always have seniors in the bureaucracy and government with different points of view. Yet, one has to engage with them in a constructive way. Using the government file as a medium is an excellent method as it is hard to ignore something that is put down in writing.

Engaging multiple stakeholders

Mr. Raghunandan also asked MP Gogoi about his work on air pollution: “Since it is one of those issues where everyone thinks it is not their problem, how do you facilitate civil society engagement? How do you harmonise different views on it?”

Mr. Gogoi said he uses tools available as a Member of Parliament, such as questions in Parliament, debates, and parliamentary committees. Second, he shared that he found the inputs of both Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and academia very helpful. He emphasised the importance of taking into account different thoughts and debates, as otherwise one can get stuck in an echo chamber.

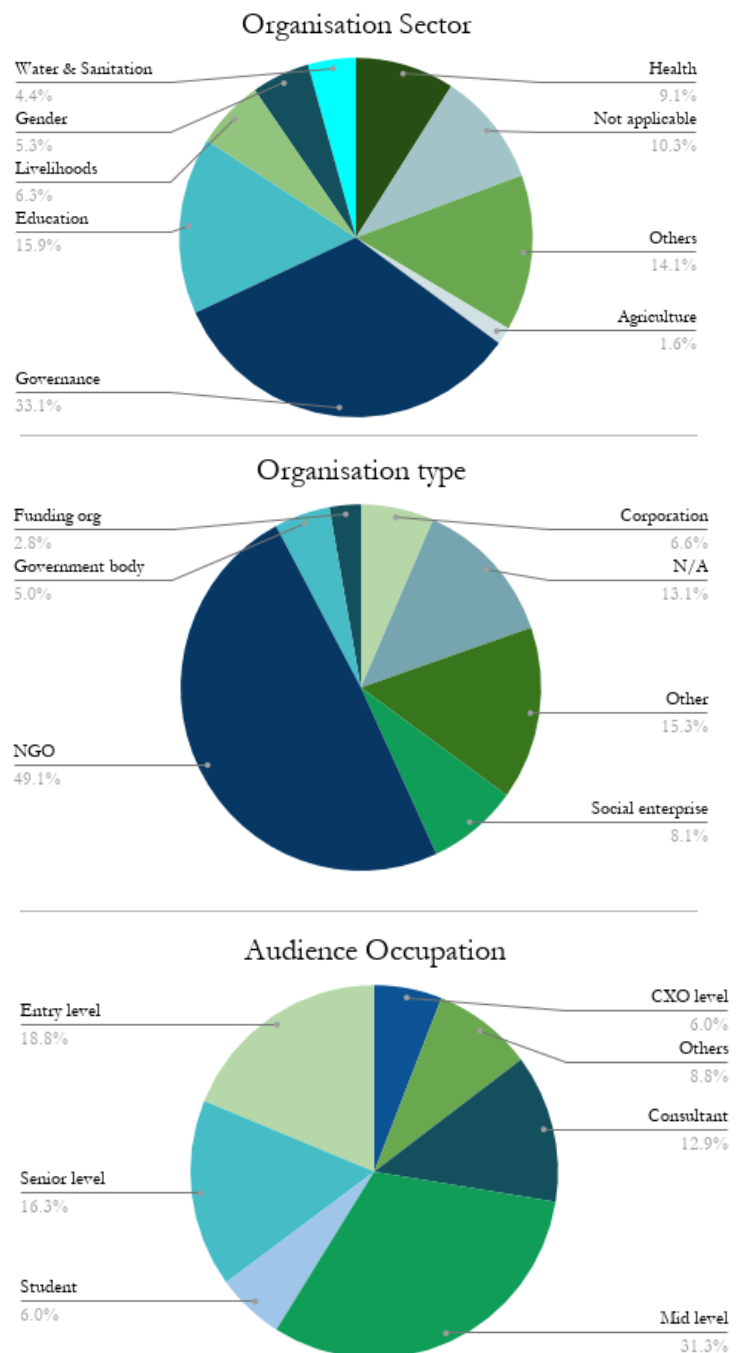
The moderator then moved to the next panelist - Ms. Uma Mahadevan - and asked: “As an administrator how do you see people’s participation in the backdrop of a wicked problem [problems for which it is hard to satisfy everybody] and knowing that you are not going to be able to find solutions that will satisfy everyone?”

Ms. Mahadevan responded by saying that it is important for people in the government to listen to different perspectives, as much as possible. However, it is also not possible to continue stakeholder consultations endlessly. Citizens are also divided, so it is equally important to take difficult decisions sometimes. The challenging task of the policy maker is to make a judgement call on ‘wicked problems’. We can hope that the majority are the right decisions and are taken in good faith. One also needs to be open to course correction when needed.

Technology and citizen participation

Mr. Raghunandan then posed an important question to all the panelists to reflect on their experiences of working with the government: “Did you feel like you are just ticking a box for citizen participation?”

Who the audience were:



Ms. Yadav was the first to respond. Reflecting on her experience working with the third-tier of government, she said: “Certain things are already part of the system such as making Gram Panchayat Development Plans, using 15th Finance Commission grants, etc. Some of these activities are already formalities. But we need to try and make sure we are engaging all voices. [...] A more proactive approach is needed.”

Taking the conversation towards the lower levels of government functioning, Mr. Raghunandan added that one problem is the capacity gap. He shared an experience from the field where a bureaucrat working on the ground-level told him, “Aap Collector se neeche nahi dekhte, aur hum BDO se upar nahi dekhte” (While you do not look below the level of the Collector, we do not look beyond the level of the Block Development Officer).

In response, MP Gogoi said that he would like to see more capacity building as there is much more room for training. He added that the lower levels of bureaucracy can be upgraded through on-the-job capacity building. Building on the points he had raised earlier in the panel discussion, MP Gogoi said that partnerships need to be worked on a lot more.

Speaking specifically on his role as an MP, he added: “As an elected representative we are called in by the district administration because of the influence that we have. The role of parliamentarians in drafting laws is limited in India, but we are more like an extended arm of the executive. So our role is also to help citizens.”

Throwing back to the point on whether the government only includes citizen participation for formality sake, Ms. Mahadevan said that this is not always the case, and sometimes things done as per procedures yield results. For example, one can just tick a box by conducting the *Makkala* (children’s) Gram Sabha, but the conversations that happen can be extremely moving and emotional.

Issues related to lack of funding

Commenting on the lack of funding, Ms. Mahadevan added that even the act of making the Gram Panchayat-level plan (GPDP) is a good thing, as it forces people to listen to other perspectives, and makes people more sensitised. To add to the discussion on maintaining enthusiasm for citizen participation even without funding, Mr. Ray said that some questions need to be taken into account, like: How effective is the Mukhiya? How much social cohesion is there in the panchayat? By way of a proverb, he said that “no matter how many fishes you get, unless you learn how to fish you will remain hungry”. Similarly, gram panchayats need to learn how to raise their own revenue.

Ms. Yadav raised the issue of district administrations having very limited untied funds. She said that although she had not seen many delays in scheme-based funding, she has faced a challenge when citizens raise their demands and grievances with the district administration. This is because of the lack of untied funding. The district responds by first tackling the grievances that can be slotted into and funded by schemes.

Mr. Raghunandan shared an anecdote from his experience working on Panchayati Raj at the Government of India level. He said: “Back then, the government did not have the capability to give real-time information on fund releases. It has the capacity now. There is a website that provides information on releases but not to Gram Panchayat level. MGNREGS is an exception (as it provides granular information down to the Gram Panchayat level). Is there a reluctance in government to make this real-time information available to Gram Panchayats?”

MP Gogoi responded by saying that engaging with Panchayati Raj Institutions, one finds that they have a sharp understanding of how and where funds are coming from, so we cannot underestimate their knowledge. On funding gaps, he said that there is a gap in short-term funding especially for emergencies. For example,

there are floods in Assam almost every year, and the funding takes too long. He also shared the example of a fire in a local market and said, “by the time you go through the process of getting the funds, it may be too late and the family may already been pushed into poverty”. He concluded by suggesting that since untied funding is very useful at the district level, a district-level relief fund could be experimented with.

Trust as a factor on citizen participation

To a question on how engagement at the local or district levels can be ensured, MP Gogoi responded saying that such engagement depends on role-modelling and political leadership. Institutional behaviour does not work in isolation of political leadership. Bringing in a suggestion for the future, he added that, “what I want to see more of is greater participation between local administrations and local colleges and universities. There is a wealth of knowledge that is not being tapped into. They can bring in their academic rigour into conducting evaluations, etc., and students can also get to participate in this.”

Mr. Raghunandan concluded the panel discussion by saying: “Running a democracy requires a lot of processes and planning. The biggest challenge in the future will be of wicked problems. Everybody wants clean cities, but nobody wants a landfill in their vicinity. When we face issues of climate change we will have to gear up our processes of participation to ensure that we get the best possible solutions. I find that participation is dependent on the quality of trust between the elected representatives, bureaucrats and the local people. This trust is very important.”

This is a summary of the panel discussion, and has been paraphrased.





@Accountabilityindia



@Acclnitiative



@AccountabilityIndia



www.accountabilityindia.com

Accountability Initiative



@ArthanCareers



@ArthanCareers



@Arthan



www.arthan.in

Arthan