

# The Role of Citizens in Democratic Governance

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## *Abstract*

*This paper seeks to answer the question as to why some governments are more stable, efficient, innovative and well-managed than others. It locates the answer in the shift of paradigm from a governance model in which citizens were mostly passive to one in which they are provided with power and avenues to influence public affairs that affect their individual and community life. Citizen centric administration (CCA), as the new approach is popularly known, is based on the idea of active citizenship and the way it affects the organisation and control of public services in our communities. CCA builds on the existing social capital in communities to make citizens sophisticated consumers of politics, ones who interact with the government based on who they are and what their needs are and not based on the way government is organised. The interplay between social capital, exemplified in many grassroots as well as corporate organisations, and CCA holds tremendous potential for enhancing citizens' participatory role in governance.*

## **I. Introduction**

The strategy of active citizenship and its implications for the way we organize and control public services for and within our communities, is both a subject of increasing relevance to the citizens as well as a phenomena of ever-greater importance in political and social life in India. The role of the public in shaping communities of the future has long been emphasised in discussions on the 'good governance' paradigm. The image of citizens joining together in governance has been the dream of advocates of democratic self-government. The concept of citizen-centric governance represents the quintessential idea of democracy. India is the world's largest democracy and, by comparative standards, a well-functioning one at that. India's democratic experience till now has ascertained that good governance must necessarily aim at an expansion of social opportunities and removal of poverty. Governance must aim at securing justice, transparency and accountability, empowerment, employment and efficient delivery of services.<sup>1</sup> The Indian State does not have monopoly over the public sphere and the civil society

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<sup>1</sup> Balmiki Prasad Singh. 'The Challenge of Good Governance in India: Need for Innovative Approaches'. *Second International Conference of the Global Network of Global Innovators*. Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation and John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. 31 March-02 April. 2008.

is increasingly more concerned with the public sphere while considering intervention of government critical for provision of welfare schemes to cover social safety needs.

The agenda for Citizen Centric Administration was set by the Conference of the Chief Ministers of Indian States in May 1997 in order to ensure effective and responsive administration, one that gears itself toward progressive effectiveness in the delivery of basic and essential services. However, citizen-responsive governance relies not only on supply of efficient public service delivery from the government to citizens but equally on the demand for responsive public authorities on part of the citizens. The Indian government has realised this interface between public authorities and citizens. The Ninth and Twelfth Reports of the Administrative Reforms Committee, titled 'Social Capital- A Shared Destiny' and 'Citizen Centric Administration- The Heart of Governance' respectively, focus on these parallel concerns. This paper looks at the interplay between social capital and citizen-centric governance in India.

## II. **Unbundling Citizen Centric Governance**

Citizen centric governance has long been a part of deliberations in the public domain in India. The traditional paradigm of the political system provides for linkages to citizens primarily through electoral politics, public opinion polls, customer satisfaction surveys, public hearings, organised group activities, and individual contacts. Public consultation and deliberation among citizens and between citizens and government in the traditional paradigm has been largely passive. Early nineteenth century onwards, franchise was extended to previously excluded sections of population, particularly in the western world. However, the role of the citizen as an engaged partner in the governing process has been minimal and they have only limited information about the government's public affairs. Citizens play a secondary role in setting agendas, developing budgets, implementing programmes, or evaluating outcomes. As a consequence of these factors working together, a wide gulf exists between the public expectations of democratic theory and the practice of democracy in community governance.

Despite the convolutions of democracy, the average Indian citizens still believe in it but are concerned more with its substantive than procedural aspects- a concern with obtaining rapid and equitable access to government services whether regulatory, developmental or welfare oriented. It is for this reason that stability, transparency, efficiency and continuity in the governance systems that citizens come into contact with most often, is necessary. <sup>2</sup> Governance and the agenda of 'good governance', therefore, need to be premised on the needs of the citizens that they seek to benefit.

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<sup>2</sup> Government of India. Second Administrative Reforms Commission. *Citizen Centric Administration- The Heart of Governance*. February 2009.

The Constitution of India has in-built provisions to protect the rights of the country's citizens and ensure that the socio-economic empowerment of all sections of population is guaranteed. The Fundamental Rights are critical for democracy while the Directive Principles of State Policy embody the concept of a Welfare State. A strong legal framework comprising of the National Human Rights Commission, National Commission for Women, National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission, *Lokayuktas*, affirmative action policies etc. has been established. The Tenth Five Year Plan places upon the State the responsibility for creating conducive political, legal and economic environment for building individual capabilities and encouraging private initiative. The Eleventh Plan outlined that the core elements of good governance are transparency and accountability in government affairs, an effective and efficient delivery of social and economic public services, empowerment of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, firm and clear establishment of rule of law, and fairness and inclusiveness of the entire government system.<sup>3</sup>

The rights of citizens in the country are ensured through strong and effective institutional mechanisms that uphold the rule of law. A dynamic society requires that laws are upgraded and new ones introduced to meet emerging needs of the society in order to meet challenges to citizens' welfare, protection and development as and when they arise. Rule of law requires institutions that are well-empowered, properly structured and have the right quality of personnel and resources at their disposal. Further, institutions need to be made closer and easily accessible to the citizens they are meant to serve. Devolution of government authority and decentralisation of institutions produce efficiency in governance and bring citizens directly within the fold of practicing such authority. Decentralisation produces efficiency gains stemming from inter-institutional competition, enhanced checks and balances over the government through voting at the sub-national level, and informational advantages due to proximity to citizens.<sup>4</sup>

With decentralisation of power and resources, in the form of local self-governments, comes the opening up of the process of governance. Transparency in decision making, disclosure of standards of delivery and openness in everyday functioning of the administration, the primary hallmarks of citizen centric administration, can be created through decentralisation. However, in order to ensure these, it is important for the government to provide its citizens with mechanisms to demand information from the government at all levels of administration. The Right to Information Act 2005 was a landmark move towards the same. Processes need to be put in place to ensure that the laws enacted, policies laid out and institutions determined work to serve the citizens effectively and efficiently. These include mechanisms through which

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Aehyung Kim. 'Decentralisation and the Provision of Public Services: Framework and Implementation'. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series*. No. 4503. 1 February. 2008

commitments are made to the citizens by public authorities (Citizens' Charters), effective anti-corruption machinery is put in place and avenues are made available for the redressal of their grievances.

In order to maintain continuity in effective, timely and efficient delivery of services to citizens, it is important to periodically monitor and review the performance of government agencies at all levels. All programmes and projects check their achievements and performances in order to build on competencies achieved and improvise in time to avoid any wastage of resources. This principle holds good for governance as well. Internal as well as external monitoring mechanisms are required to be in place for the same.

### **III. Benchmarks of Effective Public Service Delivery**

Public service delivery exhibits the supply side of citizen centric administration. This includes the parameters, laws, policies and institutions that the government puts in place in keeping with its commitment for enhancing citizens' participatory role in the governing process.

Effective public service delivery implies involvement of citizens at all stages of a programme, that is, planning, implementation and monitoring. Granting of such agency to the citizens needs to be operationalised through institutionalisation of a variety of mechanisms to encourage people's participation in governance across public agencies at all levels. To start with, institutions need to follow the principle of subsidiarity, wherein a larger body does not exercise functions that can be carried out efficiently by one smaller and lesser body; the former must support the latter and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the whole community. Once institutions are decentralised and powers devolved in this manner, it would be easier for the citizens to associate with them at a more local and familiar level. This, in turn, would lead to a more clear exposition of the functions of different institutions and particular public officials within them. Internal procedures of government organisations require simplification for the benefit of citizens and public officials alike. Government agencies across the country are doing so by engagement of external experts, getting feedback from citizens, constitution of an in-house team of people well-versed with internal procedures and such like. Along with systems like that of citizens' charters- voluntary, written documents, reinforcing citizens' existing rights, by various government agencies to let people know the mandate of the concerned ministry/department/organisation, the procedure for getting in touch with the officials, what to expect in terms of services and grievance redressal- this has assisted citizens in making legitimate demands for service delivery. Transparency and accountability in its affairs provides legitimacy to the government.

It is as significant as service delivery to realise that citizens would have queries that would need clarifications and complaints that would need addressing. Inculcating the ability to follow-up on the services delivered is equally crucial as delivering them in the first place. This is the idea of responsiveness of the government. An effective public grievance redressal system includes identification and analysis of grievance prone areas, setting up of a consumer protection system in the form of *lok adalats* and consumer forums for rapidly dealing with consumer complaints, and setting up of a well-functioning consumer feedback system. These mechanisms must necessarily be inclusive of marginalised sections of the society- women, physically challenged, lower castes, remotely located and such like.

#### **IV. People's Participation in Governance**

The form and extent of people's participation in governance processes reflects the level to which government agencies and citizens have been able to engage constructively for improved outcomes with regard to better service delivery, public policy reforms, redressal of grievances and such like. People's participation in governance can also broadly be seen as the demand side of citizen centric administration.

Citizens' participation in governance does not embody a deepening of democracy alone; it reflects a complete shift in the hitherto existing paradigm of development- a shift from viewing people as recipients of development to active participants in the development process. The concept of people's participation in governance is quintessentially based on the idea that people have the power and avenues to exercise legitimate control over governance matters that affect their lives, business and communities. It builds on the existing social capital in communities, consisting of trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviour that bind together the members of a community and make cooperative action possible. The basic premise is that such interaction helps people commit themselves to each other and knit the social fabric. Collective action of citizens puts pressure on the government to make its affairs transparent and accountable.

Mechanisms for citizens' participation in governance have been conceptualised in the form of citizens seeking information, citizens giving suggestions, citizens demanding better services, citizens holding service providers and other government agencies accountable and citizens actively participating in administration and decision making processes.<sup>5</sup> Access to information is a fundamental requirement for ensuring citizens' participation in governance. In this context, the Right to Information Act 2005 has laid down adequate ground-work for the same. Its

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<sup>5</sup> Government of India. Second Administrative Reforms Commission. *Citizen Centric Administration- The Heart of Governance*. February 2009

functionality and utility depends on greater awareness on part of the citizens. The process of including people in decision making processes necessarily needs to start small and with direct interaction with the citizens, asking for their suggestion through surveys, referenda, public hearings, suggestion boxes etc. Thereafter, the efficiency of government organisations is determined by their ability to allow citizens to rate/provide feedback on their services and effectively address their complaints. Keeping citizens engaged in the decision making process on a continuous basis, beyond sporadic consultations with them, is a more intensive form of citizens' participation in governance. The Twelfth ARC reports cites examples of such participation to include participatory municipal budgeting, allowing citizens to vote directly through a referendum on specific proposals for changes in public policies, projects and laws; mandatory public hearings before approval of projects or decisions such as changes in land use plans affecting the environment and/or the local community, giving citizens' representation on management committees for local hospitals and schools, social audit, empowering the *gram sabha* to decide on issues of implementation in government welfare schemes and such like.

### *Democratising impetus of citizen participation in governance*

We have argued along familiar lines to establish that participatory governance makes for better citizens, better governments and better decisions. The inclusion of a broader spectrum of citizens makes for improved circulation of information, greater oversight over the political process, and more robust public debate. These all presumably lead to more effective and equitable policies. However, experiences around the world have taught us that this is far from practical.

So how can democratic and effective participatory mechanisms be promoted? A Sao Paulo-based think tank Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento conducted research on the various mechanisms of social participation related to public policies in Brazil.<sup>6</sup> The two main conclusions of this research were, first, the success of participatory mechanisms depends on the combination of several elements: committed public officials, mobilised citizens, and innovative design features. Each of these elements alone will be insufficient to overcome the enormous difficulties of bringing marginalised groups into the policy process. Indeed, success almost invariably requires the simultaneous presence of state actors interested in building alliances with civil society, of citizens and civil organizations that display interest in participating in public policies, and of design features that reduce the asymmetric distribution of resources among participants. Second, participatory governance brings to the fore issues related to the distribution of power. Consequently, it is vitally important to ensure that a broad range of

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<sup>6</sup> Odugbemi, Sina and Taeku Lee. Ed. *Accountability through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. 2011

actors is represented in these new spaces, including marginalized or disorganized social groups. It is also crucial to recognize that through these forums new forms of representation are emerging as 'civil society' comes to be represented in a variety of ways: by individuals, by nominated representatives from nongovernmental organizations, by elected representatives from neighbourhood associations, and by members of collective actors such as unions or movements. From this perspective, those who are interested in participatory governance should be prepared to tackle questions related to both inclusion and representation.

## V. Exploring Potency of Civil Society

### *The interplay between social capital and citizen centric administration*

Social capital in communities has led to the formation of the Social Capital Institutions or the Third Sector, which perform service, value guardian, advocacy and community building roles.<sup>7</sup> These institutions include grassroots level community based initiatives like Residents Welfare Associations and Self Help Groups, and cooperatives of various types to voluntary organisations, charitable societies and trusts as well as self-regulating professional bodies such as the Medical Council of India, Bar Council etc. in terms of participation of the corporate sector, the alignment of business operations with social values- the essence of Corporate Social Responsibility- is the crux of its ability to contribute to social development alongside economic development.

As we have observed, the civil society has tremendous potential to achieve good government. This stands in direct contrast to traditional understanding that it is electoral competitiveness, institutional design, political polarisation, bureaucratic capacity and socio-economic modernity that determine the stability and responsiveness of governments. Social capital theory has provided us with an additional explanatory variable for the same. But what is the logic of the micro-linkages that tie a community's cooperative capacity to achievement of good governance?

Civil society engagement makes citizens sophisticated consumers of politics. Owing to active participation in community associations, citizens are provided opportunities to discuss civic affairs. It increases their awareness of political issues, giving them a platform to discuss whether the government is doing everything in its capacity to improve the welfare of its people.

Civil society engagement is beneficial for the government as well. It reduces cost of enforcing and implementing governmental policies and regulations. To secure compliance, governments must create complex and costly mechanisms of enforcement. Social capital reduces the need for

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<sup>7</sup> Government of India. Second Administrative Reforms Commission. *Social Capital- A Shared Destiny*. August 2008

such mechanisms by shaping the expectations citizens have about the behaviour of others. If people expect their fellow taxpayers or waste-producers to pay their taxes or comply with environmental regulations, then these costs are more likely to be borne willingly and the cost of enforcing compliance will be low.

Social capital, embodied in civil society organisations, enhances citizens' demands for collective benefits. It encourages the articulation of demands on government that are to everyone's benefit rather than helping some members of society at the expense of others. Further, it fosters accommodative practices among the social and economic elites. It is particularly helpful for regions fraught with antagonistic ethnic, religious or class blocks.

In a nutshell, trust and civic minded and civic minded attitudes can improve governmental performance by affecting the level and character of political participation, reducing "rent seeking" and enhancing public-interested behaviour. Public service delivery can be efficiently administered, if social network groups are in operation and they mobilise people around common issues. Women's Self-Help Groups / Micro-Credit Institutions in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and Kudumbashri in Kerala are fine examples of collective participation which have led to better implementation of development programmes in these states.

## **VI. Conclusion and the Way Forward**

Placing citizens at the centre of administrative and decision making processes of the government is the hallmark of a living and thriving democracy. It is inextricably linked to a development paradigm that works to create an inclusive environment where people can develop to the fullest of their capacities, with people having efficient and equitable access to public services. Indian democracy has extensive legal and institutional provisions at various levels of administration to include citizens in the processes of governance.

The Ninth and the Twelfth Reports of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission have dealt elaborately with the idea of social capital and citizen centric governance. These two processes can be seen to together answer the question: why are some governments more stable, efficient, innovative and well-managed than others? This paper has argued that there are two sides to citizen centric governance- the demand and supply sides. The demand side draws on the existing social capital to organise communities in such a manner as to become sophisticated consumers of politics. On the supply side, the aim is to reorient government organisations to make them more efficient, effective and participatory.

However, there is tremendous scope for improvement in ensuring better efficiency and sustainability in mechanisms instituted by government for including more people in its



governance processes. With the surge in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools, service delivery has become more precise, quick and transparent, with better redressal system for citizens' grievances. The burgeoning growth of these tools offers numerous and promising alternatives for renewing direct means of communication, and at the same time provide greater control to users at a reduced cost. This approach brings informed citizenship back by circumventing the market-driven environment that has led to the reduction of news media to shallow and superficial forms of reporting and journalism. Multiple innovations across the country have demonstrated enhancement in the ability of government organizations to devise a fool-proof system for registration of all complaints, a prescribed time schedule for response and resolution, and a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure that prescribed norms are complied with. The recent Right to Public Service in Bihar, introduced on August 15, 2011, utilizes an in-house service provision and monitoring software called *Adhikar*, an online portal for registration of applications and delivery of service, and an Integrated Voice Response System (IVRS) to enable citizens from remote areas and illiterate backgrounds to demand services from public officials. Similarly, the *Jaankari* call centre in Bihar again utilises an IVRS to provide citizens with adequate information on the Right to Information Act, files RTI applications and appeals on their behalf and registers their complaints for forwarding to the appropriate department. *Jaankari* has successfully overcome the language, literacy and location barriers among residents of Bihar in terms of usage of RTI.

It needs to be remembered that e-government is established in phases and based on the socio-economic context of the state in which it is being initiated.<sup>8</sup> In its emerging presence, basic information about government services is provided online. With enhancement in its presence, greater sources of information, e-services and e-tools are provided. When the presence graduates to being transactional, two-way interactive applications can provide citizens with opportunities for online, financial and non-financial transactions. Finally, with connected presence of ICT tools, the way the government operates changes fundamentally, and there is better coherence, integration and coordination of processes and systems within and across government agencies. The government transforms into a connected entity. India stands at a very nascent stage in this trajectory but impressive strides are being made to leverage e-governance. ICT is not the solution to everything that is wrong with participation, governance and accountability. However, they do give us a channel for democracy that we would otherwise not have. ICT is an important addition to the public sphere that has the potential, in convergence with traditional media, to provide significantly increase citizens' opportunities to hold their government accountable.

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<sup>8</sup> Tanya Gupta. 'The UN E-Government Survey: Towards a More Citizen-Centric Approach'. *World Bank Blog*. 01 October. 2011. Web. 02 October. 2011. < <http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/node/5624/>>.

A single window agency system would help to minimise delays and maximise the impact of government programmes. The efficiency with which information can be submitted to official agencies would be the key factor in the competitiveness of agencies to provide services to the public as well as remedy their complaints. Under this system, citizens would only need to submit documents only at a single entry point. This can enhance the availability and handling of information, expedite and simplify information flows between government and citizens and can result in greater harmonization and sharing of the relevant data across governmental systems. The use of such a facility can result in improved efficiency and effectiveness of official controls and has the potential to reduce costs for both governments and citizens due to better use of resources. The Single Window Multi Channel Government (SWMCG) originated in mid-1980s at the municipal level in Germany with a view to creating 'one-stop shopping' agencies. Multi-channel approach<sup>9</sup> is followed to provide single window service delivery through channels like Municipal Internet Portal, Call Centres, and Citizen Service Centres. In India, Karnataka, one of the top five industrialized states in India, has taken several initiatives to streamline procedures for investors in the state. These include a single window nodal agency called 'Karnataka Udyog Mitra'<sup>10</sup> for necessary clearances.

Further, there is a need to strengthen the management tools of monitoring and evaluation in order to demonstrate progress in achieving outcomes and impact as well as maximise the utilization of resources. In order to do this, it is important to review existing systems and efforts to strengthen monitoring and evaluation and identify challenges and opportunities within them. For making governance more consumer oriented, feedback from citizens must necessarily be used to monitor the performance of government offices. Each government office that has public dealings should have an external evaluation conducted every year in addition to the internal ones conducted by the organisation every year. The idea is to maintain a system of external checks and balances and to minimise corruption within the organisation.

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Leveraging citizens' role sustainably in decision-making and administrative processes of the government requires designing of legislation with transparency in mind. In a country like India where the bureaucracy is overburdened, a national legislation like RTI may prove insufficient to improve government accountability. Therefore, transparency provisions can be designed into sectoral legislation such that they stimulate collective action. The Mahatma Gandhi National

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<sup>9</sup> This will mean, for example, that where mobile penetration and device based internet usage is high, service delivery should be also be organized around device based as opposed to PC-based access to information and services (e.g. mobile web), and also take the role of social media into account.

<sup>10</sup> Karnataka Udyog Mitra. < <http://www.kumbangalore.com/>>.

Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), for instance, is built on a model of participatory planning, execution and auditing. Very often the reality does not live up to the model, but the efforts that have been unleashed in trying to achieve accountability to local people can significantly improve the governance environment if allowed time to mature.

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