

The City Frontier: Lockdown and Local Governance

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The extent to which our urban local bodies have been effective and proactive in handling the current coronavirus crisis is something that would be needed to be studied in detail once we get some relief from these stressed times. States have a view that the Centre need not lay down so minutely as to what is to be done in terms of restrictions on movement, closing border and related issues. All these have local context specific connotations and so, those living within the city or town limits are naturally left thinking about both the ways in which pandemic is influenced by statutory limits and the appropriate process of handling the pandemic.

Then the question is, have we been able to take all those measures which were necessary to arrest the spread of the virus? In many ways, the answer would be yes, because of the well-recognized governance system, from state to district and then further down to the blocks, towns and villages. But as we do not have an established elected governance system at the district level, the next available level where there is elected representation is that of the local bodies. And to be fair to our local bodies, it appears that these bodies along with the parastatals have been more or less successful in maintenance of essential services like water supply, supply of electricity and removal of garbage.

When we come to our local governance system, Mumbai experiences have raised serious policy concerns. It is well known that little more than half the city's population lives in slums,

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which happen to be the most vulnerable to this pandemic. And this is a pointer to the lack of seriousness over a period of time in addressing the problems of the slum dwellers. One was hoping that earlier with the Rajiv Aawas Yojana and with the present ambitious Housing for All mission, Mumbai could have been in the lead in finding a more or less permanent solution to the miseries of the homeless and the huge number of slum dwellers. And this exactly is the issue of local governance, which has come into focus now.

The powerful city governance system has failed to capitalize on their surplus resources combined with the central schemes to work out practical solutions like *in situ* up gradation, slum rehabilitation, finding available vacant land for new construction, having potential for improving the living conditions of this large segment of people who remain at the base of the city's economic activity. So, the question remains as to why the state government and the powerful local body could not together proactively to address the housing issue in the city particularly catering to the problems being faced by the increasing slum population? Moreover, in the post COVID-19 phase will the city undertake focused, time bound effort to bring about the required fundamental change in living conditions of one of the largest slums in the world?

Moving to a smaller city we also have the example of Gurugram, where an integrated governance structure consisting of the district administration, the city corporation, the city bus service and the Development Authority seems to have been able to deliver better. They have also been able to keep the effects of the virus spread under control and have acted in the best interests of the city residents. The municipal workers were kept motivated, good supports were elicited from the resident welfare associations, food was distributed to almost one lakh needy people every day, the idle city buses were deployed along routes to reach provisions and other essentials to various parts of the city. Further,

the integrated command and control centre set up under the Smart City Mission was put to full use to monitor the epidemic control activities. Thus, it is clear that with effective collaboration among the development authorities and all concerned departments as well as active support from the state government, the systems at the city level are able to perform and deliver.

Regarding the potential of local governance systems to respond properly to the pandemic, let us also look at the example of the National Capital Region (NCR). Unabated expansion of the territories has made it imperative to bring the adjoining regions in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan under one coordinated arrangement of functioning through a legislation. Unfortunately, a formal, single governance system could not be put in position for this region as the territorial limits of the different jurisdictions had to be respected. But supporting infrastructure was promoted in the region through expansion of Delhi Metro along with free movement of taxis, auto-rickshaws and establishment of residential living plus corporate offices.

But what is it that those residing in this extended area, having to move into the capital city and vice-versa suddenly find? In the wake of COVID-19, the residents of these extended regions encountered a different world as the borders were closed, metro trains topped plying, and there was no way regular free movement could take place between the laid down geographical limits except under specified and stringent conditions. It was for the concerned state/Union Territory (UT) governments to keep the requirement of continuous movement of these people for whom the state/UT limit was of no relevance in the normal scheme of things and work out a methodology whereby the nitty-gritties of their being part of an integrated geography could have been sustained. Somehow, we seem to be lacking working mechanisms of facilitation in scenarios like this, an essential ingredient of the NCR concept. Yes, larger interests of the larger population prompted measures of this kind, but what the ordinary people would want to know is

why there could not be standing arrangements whereby administrations on both sides could talk to one another and have workable mechanisms in position since going by the concept of the 'region', people had decided to be on one side or the other.

Generally, it appears that everything relating to fighting the pandemic is happening at the level of the Chief Executive of the city. How different it would have been if s/he had the required data base and information system from levels closer to the people. Big cities have zonal or regional offices, mostly department wise but these are offices used to either administering something or waiting for complaints and grievances. It may be recalled that years ago when the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) was under implementation, states were asked to go in for a reform to enact a community participation law to institutionalize citizen participation and provide for 'area *Sabhas*' below the level of wards in urban areas. The logic behind this move was that citizen participation is essential for making democratic process effective and for strengthening the same, thereby also providing a platform to citizens to influence policy/program development and implementation.

Going below the level of wards where there would be 'ward committees', area *Sabhas* were to be constituted at each polling booth level, meaning a governance level closer to the people which would be compact and manageable because each polling booth would have about 1000 voters only. As per the Election Commission of India figures, we have on an average 800 to 900 voters at the polling booth level. To facilitate drafting of the required legislation, a draft 'Nagar Raj Bill' was circulated by the Centre to all states. It was left to the states to decide the territorial limits of these 'areas', which could include the entire geographical territory in which all persons mentioned in the electoral roll of a single polling booth, or if the state government so decides, two or more contiguous polling booths also could constitute an 'area'. A list of eight functions covering subjects like

generating proposals for development programs, identifying eligible persons to be beneficiaries of schemes, suggesting location of street lights, community water taps, assisting the activities of public health centers in the area etc. was also suggested. These ‘*Sabhas*’ were also expected to impart awareness on matters of public interest such as cleanliness, promoting harmony and unity among various groups of people.

One can imagine the various positives of having a close involvement and engagement of people residing in a compact area like that of the polling booth level in times of a huge crisis like present one, thereby contributing to the efforts of the city administration. As handling this dangerous pandemic is teaching us, communication is important and individual action in adhering to all the laid down norms is crucial in situations like this. With the ‘area *Sabhas*’ functional, it would have been easier for the municipal authorities to communicate better with residents about the various requirements at each stage and the latter, in turn, could have given regular feedback about the ground level situation. This would have worked well particularly in areas with dense population. As we all know, people to people communication tends to be more trustworthy in a small area and in a crisis, this also helps in reassuring the people and in giving them a better sense of confidence in an almost panic situation.

In practice, at least three states namely, the then composite Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra took steps to act on this requirement proactively by providing for ward committees and area *Sabhas*. An amendment was made in the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation Act to provide for these and accordingly ward committees and area *Sabhas* were constituted. Similarly, constitution of these two levels were notified after an amendment to the Karnataka Municipal Corporation Act.

However, there was not much interest in detailing how the area *Sabhas* are to be constituted for a city like Bengaluru. Maharashtra went to the extent of amending the relevant Act to

provide for area *Sabhas* clearly stating how these are to be constituted and what their functions are. But even after some eight years of doing so, the state government was yet to notify the required rules regarding constitution of these units. Some more states are reported to have provided for these additional levels, but one has not heard of any proactive action at the area *Sabha* level in any of the states of India. In the cities of Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam, these area *Sabhas* are structured on selection basis and not on election basis.

Importantly, the provision of ward committee did not receive much resistance as the councillors are mandated to chair the meetings of these committees. For example, state like Kerala did not go down to the level of area *Sabhas* since it was considered sufficient to have the ward committees' level only. It is reported that the meetings of these committees are attended normally by sixty to seventy people. Of course, there is a point in saying that while a big city like Mumbai has wards ranging in population from five to ten lakh, whereas cities like Dehradun or Chandigarh have population at the ward level ranging from three thousand to eight thousand. Appraisal of the JNNURM found that though the Community Participation Law is in place in many states, its implementation in ensuring community participation in urban planning, development of infrastructure and service delivery is limited to just a few consultations with the community leaders. It has been found that states are encountering difficulties in operationalizing the area *Sabhas*. This reform calls for a political consensus and there is reluctance on the part of councillors to share powers with the area *Sabhas* members.

In the process of all this what we have been denied is active functioning of and contributions by two desirable levels closer to the constituents which could have made city governance smoother and better. Area *Sabhas* with details about the residents, their day to day issues and requirements could have played a constructive role in the present times when one does not even

know one's neighbour, not to speak of the locality as a whole. Today's situation management requires data about senior citizens in the area, their specific requirements if any, single persons living alone, slum dwellers, labourers working or residents in the area, domestic helps and other workers coming into the area to provide services, linkages with nearest possible provision stores, medical shops and units, easy access to water and electricity solution points and so on. Collecting and updating such information by the area level units whether elected or in the alternative, administratively created, need not be seen from a point of view of any sort of intrusion into privacy. But on the contrary, existence of such a robust arrangement could benefit city administration in accessing those key inputs. It will facilitate better decision making, especially in a crisis situation like that of today. In normal times, also it will definitely help to plan better, lead to garnering support of more hands-on problem solving especially in matters of service delivery and also help the municipal authorities to reach out to each of the area residents with more transparency, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness.