

Review Essay

Exploring Governance in South Asian Mega Cities: A Review Essay

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Review of *Mega City Governance in South Asia*. by Kamal Siddiqui., Archana Ghosh, Sharit K. Bhowmik, Shahid A Siddiqi, Madhulika Mitra Shchi Kapuria, Nilay Ranjan, Jamshed Ahmed Dhaka: UPL. 2004.

The term megalopolis was first used in 1940 by Lewis Mumford to refer to the great 'metropolis growing uncontrollably.' Manuel Castells(1996), a leading urban sociologist has called the rise of these mega cities of 8 million or more people as the specific feature of the third millennium urbanization. In another ten years there will be 26 of these giant cities in the world. These mega cities "leapfrogs in all directions" (Stren, 2001:2) bridging towns and villages and creating what McGee calls *desakota* zones (Stren, 2001).

South Asia is undergoing a rapid process of urbanization. In India alone there has been an 11 fold increase of urban population in the last century. What is more important is the rise of mega cities in South Asia. In 1950 there was only one large city-Kolkata, which was among the top ten cities in the world. In 2000 four of the largest 15 cities of the world were situated in South Asia. By 2015 five of the largest cities will be from this region. Mumbai will be the second largest city of the world with about 23 million people. Delhi will move to the third position with 21 million. Dhaka will rank 7th with 18 million people. Kolkata will emerge as the 10th largest city surging with 17 million souls. Karachi will be in the 11th position with a population of about 16 million. These five cities together will contain nearly 100 million people. These cities have swollen up through migration from the countryside and many of these migrants are poor. In the backdrop of massive wealth of these cities the poor lead a subhuman life in slums or squatters, in its informal economy and in its underworld without shelter, safe water or medicare and often jobs.

This is Siddiqui's 30th book and the third on South Asia. This book follows from two of his earlier books – *Local Government in South Asia* and *Social Formation in Dhaka City*. The *Local Government in South Asia* has been an authoritative work in this field. In the *Mega City Governance in South Asia* Siddiqui and his co-authors from three SARC countries unveils the more complex problems of governance of mega cities in an increasingly globalized world.

The book sets out to understand the problems of local governance in five mega cities of South Asia in terms of the actual structure of governance – their organizations and functions and how they fared in terms of good governance – efficiency, transparency, lack of corruption, devolution, social capital and so on. It also looks into the relationship between existing urban governance and overall power relationships. The larger context that has guided the enquiry is the issue of poverty alleviation.

This is a long book over 500 pages. It contains 7 chapters and a valuable 17 pages long bibliography. It provides an overview of the local government system of each city and perceptions of governance by key stakeholders within a larger institutional and political setting.

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The data of the book come from two sources. First, the book has used a variety of documents regarding these five mega cities. Secondly, it has undertaken survey of three categories of respondents – local government functionaries – elected and/or officials, intelligentsia and the poor. The sample size appears to have been more than 100 from each category.

Although there is increasingly a rise of giant cities all over the globe, they are becoming more and more difficult to govern. In the US the fiscal crisis of the cities and the advocacy of the public choice theorists for a segmented approach to efficiency and the resulting fragmentation of urban government have led to serious negative consequences for the poor. The poor face increasing exclusion from urban life and urban services and remain trapped in the zones of poverty and decay (Davis, 1990).

In South Asia as well as in developing countries the urban local governments suffer both from fiscal crisis and poor governance. The fiscal crisis stems from the inability of elected representatives to increase local taxation. The poor governance partly results from the fact that most third world states are soft, neo-patrimonial or predatory states, which are unable to blueprint efficient policies and implement them, and from the weakness of the local governments themselves. As a result the citizens suffer from poor urban services and the poor from multiple deprivations. It is in this context that Siddiqui and his team has focused upon the structure of urban governments in five mega cities of South Asia with specific attention to the urban poor.

But the book is also important for another reason. It has been increasingly felt by sociologists like Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990) that modernity produces a risk society. Modernity produces unpredictable catastrophic events like nuclear accidents or environmental crisis that have massive consequences for thousands or even millions of people. The mega cities are likely sites for such catastrophes. The absence of good governance in these cities may seriously threaten governance at national level as well as the emerging global order around the network of mega cities. For South Asian cities AIDS is a major threat and many apprehend that these cities may be AIDS capitals of the future unless governance is improved.

The tales of five cities are fascinating. Two of these cities date from pre-colonial times-Delhi and Dhaka. Three others- Kolkata, Mumbai and Karachi began their life as colonial trading outposts. The institutional form of municipal governance in five-mega cities show some variations. The form of Kolkata can be described as Mayor-in-Council system. Only the councillors are directly elected. The councillors and even councillors from the opposition parties or groups have considerable power in running the municipality. There is a great deal of decentralization through borough and ward committees. The KMC has enjoyed considerable autonomy and freedom from interference by the state. Dhaka represents the opposite pole. Here both the mayor and the ward commissioners are directly elected. The mayor runs the show along with his powerless cast of commissioners. There is little decentralization in the form of zonal or ward committees. The state wields significant control over DMC. Delhi and Mumbai are examples of strong commissioner system in which councillors elect mayors and the bureaucracy plays a strong role in running the routine administration.

Siddiqui and his co-authors found that the cities suffered from a high level of corruption and it was on the increase. In Mumbai and Kolkata large scale corruption was more visible. In Delhi and Karachi petty corruption was more pronounced. Dhaka had a high level of both these types of corruption.

Accountability was poor in all the cities except Kolkata. Corruption, trade union activism and increasing role of money and muscle in the elections are significant factors behind low level of accountability. There was also little transparency within local governments. This was partly due to public apathy. Efficiency was low. Interdepartmental coordination was satisfactory in Kolkata, but average to low in other cities. The coordination with other service providers was quite satisfactory in Kolkata and average in Mumbai. It was unsatisfactory in Dhaka.

The authors took into account four factors that hindered or fostered good governance. These four factors were social capital-based informal governance, power structure, advocacy and internal resistance to change within the city government. Social capital was highest in Kolkata and was on the increase due to greater awareness and community initiatives. It was declining in Karachi as a consequence of ethnic conflicts. The low level of social capital was visible in Delhi, Mumbai and Dhaka. The poor had the lowest amount of social capital.

The power structure of Karachi was complex due to the presence of ethnic dimension in the class structure and ethnic conflicts. The poor and women were negatively affected. In Delhi the bureaucracy has a pre-eminent position. Politicians and businessmen influence the decision making process through them. The poor are without voice. In Mumbai the economic power has shifted from *Gujratis* to *Marathis*. Politically the city has turned into the stronghold of *Shiv Sena* and its fascist ideology. The city has also a powerful under world that has connections with the local government. It is a major constraint on improving governance of the city. Dhaka suffers from an intense factional conflict within the ruling class. Kolkata has better prospects for governance reforms.

The advocacy for pro-poor reform is led by elites in Delhi, as there is little civil society initiative. Civil society organizations are both numerous and active in Mumbai. Advocacy has increased in Karachi, but it is yet to make any significant impact. In Dhaka advocacy is more confined to NGOs, press and intra-elite communication. Internal resistance against reforms is strongest in Dhaka, Karachi, and Mumbai.

Siddiqui's narratives can be read also in a different way. Karachi and Mumbai provides examples of two different paradigms of governance crisis that has engulfed the urban space in the South. Karachi provides an extreme example of institutional instability. The Karachi Municipal Corporation was dissolved one year after the birth of Pakistan in 1947. It was revived in 1953 and again dissolved in 1958. It was given a new shape in 1960 under the Basic Democracy System. It died with the fall of Ayub regime in 1969. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gave it a populist look in 1972. It underwent another round of change in 1979 under President Ziaul Haq. It was dismissed in 1987. A new system came into existence a year later, which was dismissed, in 1992. In 1996 an older arrangement of two-tier KMC was restored. But until 2001 civil or military administrators ran it. In that year the structure of KMC was radically altered. It was renamed as the City District Government of Karachi. It has now three tiers – union councils, town councils and the city district council. There is direct election only at the lowest level. It is now headed by Nazim and among its vast range of functions are law and order and revenue collection! It is no wonder that Karachi suffers from the worst form of governance.

Siddiqui and his team encapsulates the historical pattern of political anarchy of Karachi along side this institutional instability. Karachi became an ethnic flashpoint when the *Pathan* labour force was ascendant and it became a part of the underworld mafia. During 1980s the Urdu-speaking refugees became armed and violence became more pronounced among different communities, among linguistic and religious and other ethnic groups. The role of the central government was to control it through intelligence agencies. Its impact was quite obvious. There was little efficiency, hardly any accountability and transparency was particularly missing in sharing of strategic information and award of contracts and licenses. Corruption was widespread. Perception of governance however varied among three groups of respondents. The officials had a more positive view of governance and the intelligentsia a very negative attitude. But whatever the attitude of the respondents the urban services were not simply there. Karachi remains a city of dirt, clogged drains and congested roads and a landscape of violence. The poor had no place in the mental horizon of the city officials. The two top problems of the poor were lack of jobs and the lack of security. The poor obviously suffered from the endemic violence of an overgrown city.

Mumbai offers a different history and nearly a parallel outcome. Siddiqui shows urban governance of Mumbai can be divided into four phases from 1793. The basic framework of municipal administration was fleshed out through the act of 1888 and in spite of some

amendments this framework has remained in place for over a century. Thus Mumbai enjoys great institutional stability. But when one looks into the functioning of the corporation, it appears there is an increasing erosion of civic virtues. The political parties and corrupt politicians have taken it over. As Thakkar(1995) has shown, meetings of the corporation often end in pandemonium. Events such as smashing a microphone during meeting or pointing shoes at a member have made the corporation 'a joke house' or a 'circus'. In 1980s about a dozen corporators were facing serious criminal charges for murder and extortion. Thus Mumbai is a dream city of high finance – 'the engine of the economy' (Sivaramakrishnan, .2001:14) and tough mafia governed poorly. The tales of these two cities show two divergent patterns of governance crisis.

A key objective of the research was to get feedback from concerned stakeholders about how to find a pathway out of this crisis and improve the governance of these mega cities. The authors have prepared a thought-provoking and wide-ranging set of recommendations for reforms in governance spanning 22 pages on the basis of this feedback. The authors remind us that only alternative to reforms is the fate of Surat.

The only weakness of this admirable book is the lack of an analytical framework showing why poor governance is the common feature of these five mega cities and how it is related to the livelihoods of the poor. As Pendse (1995:4) shows for Mumbai, the fate of the poor and the women have hardly been explored. "The most populous classes in the city, the toilers, remain unrepresented, largely unknown and mostly ignored." Siddiqui has made special efforts to hear the voices of the poor but without any reference to the cultural fabric of their life. It is not clear from the narrative how the poor construct their individual and collective identities, articulate their anger and crystallize their protest against their deprivation in an alien universe and against the powerful other.

Every good book opens a new horizon of research or policy agenda. This book clearly and strongly demonstrates once again that there is no alternative to powerful and vibrant local government. Secondly, this pioneering work shows clearly that the structure of urban government in these mega cities exemplifies what sociologists and political scientists call machine politics – the structure of patron-client relationships, which underpin the formal governance. This calls for more qualitative research on the actual functioning of local government in these mega cities.

Thirdly, we need further information for useful entry point for effective policy intervention. One difficulty of a comprehensive policy package is that it is often difficult or impossible to implement. Although there is need for synergy among different policies, a comprehensive wish list may not be very helpful. The choice of entry point and agency may be decisive in the success or failure of any policy. One interesting possibility is the international municipal cooperation. The example of city-to-city cooperation between Guagzhou of China and Fukuoda of Japan provides a good example of such cooperation. There are possibilities that require more innovative research strategies for exploring the institutional terrains and dynamics of collective action in the arena of urban governance. Fourthly, some of the policy measures have to be tuned to the local situation. The global solution of high modernism may not be appropriate for the cities of the south (Friedman, 2001). Again the policy agenda in the context of institutional instability demands a different strategy than the one within a stable institutional space. The challenge here is how to overcome the pervasive patron-client relationships that underlie these cities (Pacione, 2000).

Meanwhile this work will remain a milestone in the study of mega city governance of South Asia and the authors are to be congratulated for accomplishing this difficult journey across five cities. The book will be of interest to scholars engaged in the study of city and governance, policy makers, students and enlightened readers. The UPL has maintained a high standard in the production of this book

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