

BOOKS

Urban Governance in South India

Reviewed by D. Jeevan Kumar*

The book under review examines critical issues related to decentralized urban governance and democracy in South India. Being perhaps the first comprehensive volume that offers comparative frameworks on urban governance in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the book focuses on small district-level cities and raises several critical questions relating to the nature of decentralized urban planning, the big issues in urban local governance, the role of social capital, etc. While emphasizing the need for both efficient urban governance and effective local democracy to meet the challenges of urbanization in these states, the author draws important policy lessons from their respective processes of urbanization.

In terms of theoretical framework, the book follows the Social Capital theory, popularized and developed by Robert Putnam, Michael Woolcock, Helen Sullivan and others. Their basic argument is that district-level cities, their governance and local democracy will be effective, if there is better social capital amongst their citizens, in terms of social cohesion, cooperation and harmony.

In terms of methodology, the book follows the approach developed by

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Rob Jenkins of comparing multiple states. While the 2011 census has been utilized for secondary data, primary data has been collected from fieldwork.

The volume is divided into five chapters. The Introduction and the second chapter deal with the *raison d'être* of the book and an elaboration

Urban Governance and Local Democracy in South India

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of concepts like local governance, local democracy and social capital. The third chapter focuses on Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The fourth chapter looks at urbanization in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The last chapter summarizes the major findings of the study, discusses their major policy implications, and identifies areas for further research.

The book's major findings and conclusions may be summarized as follows:

1. The major consequence of the development of Primate Cities (like Bengaluru and Hyderabad) is that district-tier cities get neglected in governance.

2. The problem with excessive urban primacy is that Primate Cities become highly exclusionary for ordinary people, by radiating cultural and social hegemony.

3. Governance is a problem in Primate Cities; local democracy is far-fetched.

4. Better Social Capital – in terms of more cooperation among citizens amidst norms of trust and reciprocity – can ensure not only better local governance and local democracy, but also better religious and social harmony.

5. Sustainable urban living depends not only on economic, ecological and social sustainability, but also on Rule of Law and accountable and transparent governance.

The major policy implications that emerge from the study are as follows:

1. Correction of the spatial concentration of urban growth through dispersed urbanization will make the urbanization process inclusive, as well as spatially and socially just and equitable.

2. The infrastructure in district and taluk-level cities, especially in terms of basic needs like drinking water and sanitation is abysmal and needs improvement.

3. Smart City Missions and digital solutions through e-Governance cannot substitute for basic minimum infrastructure,

The author deserves to be commended for several reasons. In a slender volume, he surveys the scenario of urban governance across five South Indian states, focusing specifically on small district-level cities. He raises critical micro and

macro issues, reaches well-argued findings and conclusions, and winds up with a set of policy recommendations. There is academic rigour in the work, in terms of theoretical framework of the Social Capital theory, and the utilization of comparative methodology to study urban local governance in the five South Indian states.

The volume, however, makes no claims to being the last word on the subject. Several areas have been identified for further research. They include an exploration of unequal urbanization in the other states in the country; a study of the differential growth trajectories of district-level and capital-level cities, and a look at the status and growth of taluk-level towns; and a serious introspection on the prevalence (or absence) of an urban civil society.

A couple of perceptions of the author perhaps merit discussion. Regarding the role of Civil Society and Civil Society Organizations in both mobilizing the local population to cooperate with urban local bodies, as well as in ensuring their accountability, the author points to the non-existence or ineffectiveness of Civil Society, especially in smaller cities and towns. In his view, this is due to the *lack of Social Capital* in urban areas. He is convinced that "*Social Capital can ensure not only better local governance and local democracy, but also better religious and social harmony*" (p.72). While the argument is indeed thought-provoking, one wonders whether it provides the correct prescription to set things right, in the Indian context.

The talisman, in our view, lies not so much in the concept of Social Capital, but in *Civic Consciousness*.

If the average Indian urban citizen today refuses to segregate household garbage at source, undertake rainwater harvesting, opt for public over private transport, understand the importance of '*Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Restore*', and generally abide by civic rules and regulations, will the prevalence of *Social Capital* make him/her into a better urban citizen, or will *Civic Consciousness*? The latter concept is concrete and doable, and lends itself to a variety of methods to promote it, unlike the very abstract concept of *Social Capital*.

Shifting our gaze from Civil Society to Urban Local Administration, one is immediately confronted by limitations, some of which seem to have been overlooked by the author. It needs to be understood that Urban Governance is a

specialized subject which requires to be handled by experts. But in a system which places generalists at the helm of affairs and where policies and decisions are based, not on Rational Choice but on Bounded Rationality, is it surprising that cities and towns are in a mess, thanks to *ad hocism*, populism and corruption? It is not that experts and their reports are in short supply. It is the absence of both political and administrative will that is responsible for the urban mess that we are in.

In a nutshell, the need of the hour is for urban governance to be left to experts in the field, and for the average urban citizen to exhibit a modicum of civic consciousness. This may go a long way in addressing the critical concerns and challenges of urbanization in our part of the world. □

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