New Forms of Urban Localism: Service Delivery in Bangalore

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Residential welfare associations are a window of opportunity to consolidate loose networks of local associations engaged in activities around urban services. They have changed the dynamics of urban politics. This article attempts to trace how, while working in an increasingly globalised and polarised city like Bangalore, these groups demand a better quality of life and more equality for their members. It also assesses the collective urban practices through which individual grievances are redressed.

Residential Welfare Associations (RWAs) otherwise also referred to as Neighbourhood Associations (NAS) are involved in a big way in setting the priorities of local infrastructure and urban services in India. The RWAs are the forum at the community level that offer tools to engage and lobby for better services and ensure quality of life. In fact, in recent times the activities of many RWAs and NAS have gone beyond merely confronting and cooperating with the local administration to protecting the quality of life in their areas. They are more concerned about improved urban governance (Zerah 2007: 61; Coelho and Venkat 2009: 358; Kamath and Vijayabaskar 2009: 368). The RWAs are actively involved in raising issues like leaking pipes, clogged drains, billing problems, security cover for citizens, water conservation, sanitation, construction of roads, payment of house tax, etc; and at times bigger issues like use of electronic metres, privatisation of water, and demolition of illegal structures. Before this trend started, local funds were spent at the discretion of the local municipal corporator and many citizens felt that year after year important works were either neglected or poorly implemented.

Essentially, the goal of the RWAs is to create a platform to voice the demands of urban citizens regarding the improvement of local infrastructure like roads, pavements and sanitation.

This exercise involves renewed forms of mobilisation by the urban middle class to rearticulate their claims and capture most of the government resources of the developmental state (Zerah 2007: 61). Therefore, these groups, together with other more formal, private sector organisational, constitute an urban civil society which has increased its political and economic space and created a power block in urban centres (McCarney 1996: 12). Clearly, interests of various segments particularly the upper middle class and the middle class are being protected. The role of the RWAs across the spectrum of governance is not yet formally institutionalised. But in areas where people are better educated and economically well off the RWAs are more powerful, what Kamath and Vijayabaskar (2009) refer to as elite RWAs, whereas in other areas especially in slums and resettlement colonies these are relatively weaker. One of the key reasons for this is that they have no structured role at the municipal (ward) level planning and implementation. Some of the associations have become powerful because of their long history and the socio-economic profile of their members not due to any institutional backing. In fact, most area residents are not even aware of the municipal action plan pertaining to their locality. In any case, this information is not easily available. They are not even aware of the planning process and their role. Bangalore city presents vibrant participation avenues through RWAs and NAS for the middle class and for its engagement with issues related to local governance. This reflects the existence of a thriving civil society in urban India as a number of programmes, incentives and forums enhance people’s participation. Kamath and Vijayabaskar (2009) present the typology of such middle class RWAs in the city adopting various forms of engagement.

The RWAs constitute sites to address municipal concern and energise the hitherto apolitical section of the city (like retirees in the middle class and women) and taxpayers into becoming “responsible citizens”. The activities and demands of these bodies are non-confrontational and non-controversial in strategy and approach. Many citizens feel that the existing local governance is highly ineffective and that the local official institutions are inaccessible and elitist. A larger part of the population has to, therefore, face this form of life dominated by the battle for urban services that is characterised as “urban dynamics”. Some studies record the RWAs’ role in the
co-production of services as well as in civic mobilisation (Zerah 2007: 62). These RWAs represent a window of opportunity to consolidate loose networks of local associations, often engaged in local activities, around the urban services. The dynamics of urban politics is thus changing with these new players coming to the fore with enormous vigour. These groups are vocal in their demands and are increasingly networked groups of elite that seek to organise themselves in order to pressure the government to address the demands of “Consumer Citizens” (Harriss 2005: 2716). Case studies presented here would focus on the intersection formed by the elite middle class constituting the Jayanagar area, the historical and traditional areas such as Malleshwararam with retirees from the private sector, the bureaucracy and public sector employees located in the core city and the RWAs from revenue layouts that have been recently regularised within the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) limits. The aim is to trace how these groups demand a better quality of life and more equality for their members, while working in an increasingly globalised and polarised city like Bangalore. The city’s residents resort to several methods of resolving their day to day problems which vary according to the location and economic segment that they belong to. The aim of this study is to assess the collective urban practices through which individual grievances are redressed.

Structure and Responsibilities

The structure of the RWAs and NAS seems to provide a common platform and to institutionalise the two methods at their disposal to improve the service delivery between citizens and institutions: representation and common interest that equip negotiating partners and create economies of scale (HUCHON and TRI-COT 2008). The unique quality of Bangalore’s RWAs and NAS includes the associations of group of families residing in the neighbourhood locality or a particular class of people or a block of apartments or housing societies or an entire ward. These self-motivated residents’ associations engage and strive for a cleaner, greener, safer and healthier environment by empowering the residents to assert their rights and participate in the governance of their localities. The study covered nine RWAs and NAS: Indiranagar, Nagarabhavi, Jayanagar 3rd, 4th and 7th block, Banashankari, Jayamahal, Malleswaram and Vasantha nagar areas. These associations also co-opt and coordinate services with several other parallel agencies like non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public utilities and caste-based or region-based organisations to support major civic issues.

Further, these RWAs are registered bodies which also ensure provision of services such as maintenance of parks, educate citizens on their rights, and conduct review meetings. They also interact regularly with service providers such as the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC), the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BMP), the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewage Board (BWSSB), the Bangalore Electricity Supply Company (BESCOM), the BDA, the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and other government departments, to monitor and maintain civic amenities. They also organise cultural festivals, and provide security and day-care services for children. Though registered they do not have a clearly defined legal status that entails a recognition of their role by the local body and public utilities. They are mostly self-funded through membership fees and donations received on significant occasions and festivals. As such they form informal relations with the administration (with no funds, no legal status or obligations) but still benefit from a “proactive role” and “constructive engagement". Thus, in the case of Bangalore, RWAs are a relevant focus to study the “processes” of civic engagement and mobilisation in middle class residential areas.

Public Space and Representation

Most of the RWAs compile lists of the telephone numbers of all the service providers which are then circulated among the resident families. In addition, they bring out quarterly newsletters and souvenirs containing information and details of their work. The RWAs also conduct monthly executive committee review meetings with the representatives of their localities. These issues might be regarding water supply (low-pressure, supply disruptions, breakdown of pipes, faulty bills, and meter faults), drainage (blockage of open drains, blocks of closed drains, flooding of underground pipes on streets, etc), street cleaning or garbage disposal affecting the locality as a whole.

Very often such problems affect not just single households but the entire street/ neighbourhood and though the complaint is lodged by a single family, the improvement benefits the whole locality. Joining hands to get individual complaints redressed can sometimes lead to group action. Some of the residents might shy away from contacting the officials directly and prefer to seek the help of an intermediary like the RWAs/NAS.

Figure 1: Channels of Grievance Redressal for Improved Urban Services in Bangalore City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public utilities</th>
<th>Online complaints/ telephone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Corporation</td>
<td>MLA and municipal corporator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local leaders</td>
<td>Alliance between RWAs and civic groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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linkages between public utilities, the municipal corporation, the MLA and councillors, local leaders and managerial alliance between civic groups like NGOs and RWAs.

Approaching the nearest RWAs with a grievance has become the normal practice as against the conventional manner of contacting public officials. Joint complaints are taken up during executive committee meetings lodged on behalf of the entire locality or the building. The RWAs tend to play out in opposition to the local leaders such as an ex-corporator, ward members, etc, essentially competing for legitimacy and performing the role of an intermediary communicating the demands and needs of the local populace. While explicitly questioning the democratic nature of the “conventional democratic channels” they aim to reduce the gap between demand and supply of services particularly the basic amenities such as water supply and sanitation.

Office-bearers of the RWAs in the city do not dismiss the role of local politicians like the MLA, the ex-corporator or ward members. They, in fact, conduct reviews or quarterly review meetings and invite these representatives to update them about local problems and demands. One such practice is visible with respect to the RWA of Jayanagar 5th block. As a part of its citizen charter, the association on 13 August 2008 organised an interactive meeting with the local MLA, B N Vijay Kumar-(BJP) and officials of all the public utility departments connected to Jayanagar 5th block at his newly opened office. Some other representatives also attended the interaction.

The MLA offered the use of his office to the association, announced the date of the laying of the foundation stone for a water harvesting project and a follow-up meeting that would be held in the coming months. He would also be meeting other RWAs, cultural groups, sports clubs, groups of senior citizens of Jayanagar constituency to understand their problems. The Jayanagar 4th block RWA is a federation of 14 RWAs that spread from the 1st to the 9th block of Jayanagar and was established in 1982. The association fought a long battle laying of the foundation stone for a water garden and Malleswaram among elite RWAs such as those of Jayanagar and Malleswaram RWAs. In addition, RWAs provide a platform for talks and presentations on subjects of general interest like exercise, health, nutrition, hygiene and solid waste management and discuss declining public services that is their primary concern. A comprehensive work on solid waste management was initiated by the MSI. The pilot project meeting was conducted on 3 August 2008 and attended by health officials from the city municipal corporation, technicians and composting experts. These experts made presentations and gave demonstrations on vermin-composting, organic waste converters at the community level, introduced the concepts of “garbage to garden” and “wealth out of waste”, and also distributed jute bags for segregation of domestic waste at source. The residents took a pledge that said, “Let us talk about doing ourselves – let us pursue and persuade the community”.

While these local actors are actively involved in the day to day activities of their respective localities, they do not garner the same support and response from all the households. In fact, some of the latter contact them only during a crisis neglecting to attend the general body meetings at other times. A common problem affecting the entire locality leads to collective action after formal discussion among all the residents or a group, a more institutionalised local representation and civic culture that is delegated to RWAs or intermediary to confront or lobby for action. The fact that their civic power and resources can determine governance outcomes (as our cases show) is the best example of the idea of a “political society” in action. A local neighbourhood network can be an important factor in determining the quality of services that lead to the generation of common complaints (HUCHON and TRICOT 2008).

These new forms of urban localism are based on three grounds. First, they are a realistic response to the complex modern forms of urban governance. Second, they represent new forms of democratic engagement. Third, “new localism” reflects trust, empathy and social capital to be fostered to encourage civic renewal (Stoker no date: 2). A similar study by John Harriss on Delhi (2005) points out that “life space” social networks based in the neighbourhood are now producing the most politically efficacious collective actors, more prominent than work space related organisations. And that poorer people are more active within them. There are indications that neighbourhood associations are significant vehicles of representation for poorer people as well as for the wealthier citizens of Delhi.

Table 1: Nature and Characteristics of Residential Welfare Associations in Bangalore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RWAs</th>
<th>Date of Registration</th>
<th>Area of intervention</th>
<th>Federation</th>
<th>Finance</th>
<th>Frequency of Meetings</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jayanagar 4th block</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Water, sanitation, street lights, parks, etc</td>
<td>1st to 9th block</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>MLA, ex-corporator donation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayanagar 5th block</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Water, sanitation, street lights, parks, etc</td>
<td>1st to 9th block</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>MLA, ex-corporator donation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malleswaram</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Water, sanitation, solid waste management, parks, environment</td>
<td>5th cross to 4th main</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>MLA, ex-corporator donation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagarabhavi</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Water, sanitation, street lights, local basic amenities</td>
<td>Teachers colony</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>MLA, ex-corporator donation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interviews with respective RWAs in 2008.
Civic Mobilisation and Urban Poor

In Bangalore City, basic services and infrastructure are woefully lacking and not accessible to the poor staying in the slums. In fact, slum-dwellers have unconventional approaches to accessing urban services. Reliance upon formal organisations, it is argued, limits what services the poor can access. The slums display a perfect picture of clientele influence on service delivery. Most of the slum-dwellers are illiterate and face the problem of information asymmetry. Consequently, they rely on various “intermediaries” such as government officials, employers, politicians—MLAs, councillors and ward members, even the police, and official service providers. Besides, local leaders by the very virtue of being (a) residents of the same slum for many years, (b) community leaders, (c) caste leaders, and (d) religious leaders play a significant role in providing organisational linkages to access the services (De WIT 2002: 3939). Even informal local organisations such as community-based organisations and WATSAN committees have been active in representing the voice of slum-dwellers. Similarly, many local organisations such as youth associations, caste-based organisations (B R Ambedkar dalith sanghas) and even microcredit associations (basically micro women’s saving groups) establish patron relations with service providers to access the services. These local organisations undertake maintenance of the area and cater to the day to day needs of the slum community. Collective action among slum-dwellers is not effectively coherent and systematic.

To address the deteriorating services in the city the CIVIC, an NGO has been in the forefront of the efforts to organise “grievance redressal melas” at the ward level once every three months. These are attended by representatives of the BMP, BMTC, BESCOM, BWSSB, BSNL and BDA and the police force. This provides a common platform from which service providers can directly respond to their complaints. During the past three years, CIVIC has organised between four and six melas in different wards. In this process, traditional political channels were bypassed. To start with, the forum brought together many associations to discuss “urban governance”.

Limitations and Future

At the ward level, RWAS and NAS constitute pressure groups, and are de facto recognised as representatives of their area or locality. Certainly, maintaining and upgradation of property values and expectations on the quality of life bring together RWAS of similar interests and class (Kamath and Vijayabaskar 2009: 371). Striking variations among elite RWAS is reinforced by usage of “exclusive citizenship” that hinges on “consumption, property and legality” reflection of ongoing urban reform process in metropolitan cities like Bangalore (ibid: 372). Hence RWAS essentially lack “embedded solidarity” in terms of lack of convergence of interests and approach and weak political networks (Coelho and Venkat 2009: 360; ibid: 374).

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Second, as representatives of their neighbourhood with unofficial legitimacy, they follow the “utilitarian” approach, expand their activities only to solve immediate urban service problems and fail to influence larger issues of policy decisions. As soon as the problem is resolved they often stop their activities (Zerah 2007: 64). They are not involved in political mobilisation around the municipal elections. Nevertheless, these are “invited spaces” which are mostly managerial in their conception of participation (Zerah 2007: 63). As rightly pointed out in the study by Marie-Helene Zerah (2007):

Neighbourhood associations are concerned with improved governance. However, through their repeated interactions with the municipal governance system, they have realised at first hand on that “good governance”, in contradiction to the often highlighted depoliticisation project behind it (Harriss 2005), is intrinsically linked to defining priorities, making choices and allocating resources. As such, the conventional political science question of “who governs” is of critical importance.

The third outcome is the emergence of a collective identity, discursive articulation of their rights as taxpayers (mostly house tax) and law-abiding citizens. But these local associations are threatened by the ever-expanding city both in terms of demographic and economic terms. It is rightly presented in the study of Kamath and Vijayabaskar (2009: 375) that “the city is now undergoing processes of change in political structure and power relationships”. Such pressure might not be internal to the political domain, but uses the “Right to Information” on several grounds such as to shape the investment in the already “developed” part of the city; to resist “vote bank” politics and to undermine and dilute the power of municipal bodies where poor groups have easiest access (Benjamin 2008: 174). Evidence from Bangalore, in fact, suggests that such dichotomised views obscure the complex and multifaceted ways in which the informal social networks infuse and intermesh with formal local systems (Beal 2001: 1018).

Lastly, strategies of civic mobilisation among urban poor have undergone tremendous changes in tandem with emerging urban dynamics and city governance. The study by Coelho and Venkat (2009: 366) clearly shows that the urban poor are increasingly presenting themselves through a non-institutional form which is essentially politically neutralised and not accurate in depiction.

Observations and Conclusion

Undeniably, RWAs in Bangalore city mobilise local human resources and lobby with public service providers and the municipality for better service of daily amenities. Obviously, the areas with RWAs and NAS have an advantage over the areas which do not have them. One of the most important efforts of the RWAs has been in institutionalising interactive meetings with officials from public service providers and municipalities and ward level melas by NGOs. This would certainly increase their “lobbying” power. Demand for better urban amenities constitutes the foundation for collective activities at neighbourhood level through RWAs and NAS that encourage “social capital”. To summarise, these parts of the city with RWAs have built countervailing power to have direct and privileged access to the bureaucracy (sometimes bypassing the local representatives-corporator and MLAs). With expertise and an out-based legitimacy (Zerah 2007: 63), they have succeeded in co-producing services and improving city governance. Years of civic activism in the city of Bangalore that include exerting pressure and lobbying for better services with local governance has, in fact, strengthened the visibility, legitimacy and support within their areas for these RWAs and NAS.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1 Neighbourhood is defined as a strictly residential space by associations “which inaugurated a new phase of civic activism by mobilising together a different Social Class”.

2 Partha Chatterjee identifies Indian “urban civil society” with urban middle class that seeks to be congruent with normative models of bourgeois civil society which essentially represent domain of “capitalist hegemony”. Whereas “political society” includes a large section of rural population and urban poor (Chatterjee 2008: 57).

3 Some of the elite RWAs like Mullavanaram and Jayanagar date back to the early 1980s and 1990s. Essentially their presence was felt during the pre-urban reform period.

4 Out of 100 wards in Bangalore city, residents of 66 wards show some interest in campaign and 32 wards actively participate in multiple groups of residents (Clay 2007: 10).

5 WATSAN refers to Water and Sanitation Committees that symbolise “tripartite” partnership between NGOs and the World Bank and community for service delivery.

6 Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (Greater Bangalore City Corporation) was constituted by the gazette notification of Urban Development Department, Government of Karnataka. The existing areas of Bangalore City Corporation, eight urban local bodies (ULBs) and 111 villages of Bangalore urban district have been emerged with Bangalore Core Corporation area.

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