E-Participation in Urban India: Case of State of West Bengal

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Abstract

E-Participation refers to ICT-supported participation in processes involved in government and governance. Processes may concern administrative, servicedelivery, decision-making and policy. The current study is focused on the analysis of the rate, current challenges, prospects and future scope of electronic participation (e-participation) in the urban local bodies of the State of West Bengal, India. The website of the five municipal corporations of West Bengal, India have been analyzed and the rate of e-participation with its sub-factors i.e. e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making has been determined. The various shortcomings are highlighted and the prospects of its future growth and development are also emphasized. It is found that there are good prospects of development of e-participation in India but for that there are need of growth of offline participation and ICT infrastructure.

Keywords:
E-Participation, West Bengal, Urban Local Bodies, Community Participation Law, JNNURM

1. INTRODUCTION

As per 2011 Census, 377.1 million people live in urban areas (out of total population of 1210.19 million) accounting for 31.15 per cent of the total population of India. The proportion of people living in the urban areas of the country had increased from 27.80 per cent in 2001 (Census 2001) to 31.5 per cent in 2011. Cities and mega cities has become the symbol of dynamic economic growth of India. Urban economy constitutes 60 per cent of the national GDP and more than 80 per cent of the incremental job creation (GOI, 2011). The governance of these cities and mega cities has become the greatest challenge. Representative and participatory governance is of the growing issue. The essence of the Constitution of India is based on the representative governments at all levels. The Government of India, pledging to maintain the essence of the Constitution of India, enacted the 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act, 1994. The Act gave constitutional status to the urban local bodies. India also embraced e-government and launched the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) (2003-07). e-Government in municipalities became one of the Mission Mode Project (MMPs) under the national urban development program, i.e. Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Program (JNNURM). JNNURM was launched in 2005. The basic objective of granting the constitutional status to urban local bodies and e-governance program is to enhance the participation of the people in the governance process.

The 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act, 1993 in Article 243Q laid down Nagar Panchayat for the transitional areas, Municipal Council for the smaller urban area and Municipal Corporation for the large urban area. Article 243S specifies constitution of the ‘Ward Committees’ consisting one or more wards, within the territorial area of municipality having a population of 0.3 million or above. Representation of the Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribe (ST) and Women are laid down in Article 243T. The Constitution of India also specifies regular election of the municipal bodies and council as the highest decision-making body. The e-government in the municipalities also emphasizes upon peoples participation in the urban local governance. The basic step in this direction is taken with the
establishment of the online presence and disclosure of information to the citizens, application of Web 2.0 technologies and engagement of social media.

The positive environment for the enhanced citizen engagement and participation is well reflected in India in the urban government level. Around the world also, the participation of the citizens in the urban local governance is gaining momentum. Active participation is the relationship based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy-making. It acknowledges equal standing for citizens in setting the agenda, proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government (OECD, 2001). The benefits of participatory governance are numerous and range from ensuring better employment of public resources and through joint identification of municipal priorities to decreasing the likelihood of mismanagement through increased scrutiny by the public. Participatory governance also facilitates governing and leads to marked improvements in the quality of services provided (OSCE, 2007). The revolutionary developments in ICT and World Wide Web (WWW) opened a new horizon of participatory opportunities at all levels of government. The growing issue of participatory urban governance and its other complexities could be easily addressed with innovative application of ICTs. This citizen-centered transformation is achieved through e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making which ultimately establish the e-participation or electronic form of participatory governance.

The current study is focused on the analysis of the rate, challenges, prospects and future scope of e-participation in the urban local bodies of the State of West Bengal, India. The website of five municipal corporations have been analyzed and the rate of e-participation with its sub-factors i.e. e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making has been determined. The various short-comings are highlighted and prospects emphasized.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature shows that considerable research has been done in the sphere of e-participation. The most of the research and studies are confined to research in the area of political participation and e-democracy. But there also studies conducted to examine, develop and enhance e-participation at the level of municipal governance. Conroy and Evans-Cowley (2004) examined the use of information and communication technology e-government tools to promote citizen participation in the planning process on the basis of analysis of the planning department websites of the 582 US cities and found that the reviewed websites provide only basic planning information. Roeder et al. (2005) studied e-participation processes in Esslingen, Germany, the first project to use web-based discussion forums as an instrument to inform and consult the public about the municipal budget. The authors emphasized the need of internal and external relevance affecting the consultation mechanism. Scott (2006) made an empirical analysis of government websites of 100 largest US metropolitan areas in order to find out that to what extent local government websites support practical, meaningful public involvement. The study found mixed results depending on how the concept of public involvement is defined and measured. Aichholzer (2006) explored the practical role and applications of various forms of e-participation in Austria and found a somewhat mixed picture. Medaglia (2007) tried to address that to what extent e-participation is actually occurring in Italian local government, how can it be measured and what variables affect the e-participation adoption at local level. With a survey of official websites of 113 Italian local authorities, the authors found that factors such as scale, socio-economic status and center-left political orientation are positively associated with greater information and consultation features. Mercatali et al. (2007) described the TeleP@B (Electronic Technologies for the Participation to the Budget) for creation of participatory budgeting at municipal levels in the mountainous areas of Tuscany, Italy. The authors found that digital divide of mountain territories is a main obstacle in reaching important goal. Borge et al. (2009) carried out an explanatory analysis of local initiatives in e-participation and offline participation taking into account political variables as
well as socio-economic variables that characterize municipalities at Catalonia region in Spain. The authors found that the number of participatory activities developed by municipalities in Catalonia region is very low. Spacek (2009) studied e-participation with the help of analysis of the websites of the Czech statutory cities. The analysis of the websites of Czech statutory cities clearly showed a prevailing of the surveyed e-information aspects over aspects of transparent e-participation. Tait (2009) presented some of the findings of the research project examining e-participation initiatives in Scottish Local Authorities. The focus was to identify the extent to which e-participation is being used and the benefits and drawbacks of these methods. It was found that the Scottish local authorities were using e-participation tools, their use was rather limited and the methods used were fairly basic. Sagile and Vabo (2009) analyzed the municipal e-participation in Norway, comprising local politicians as well as citizens, explores the impact of municipal size on online participation. The findings indicate that the relatively high level of traditional participation in small municipalities also promote e-participation. Alonso (2009) analyzed the use of internet by local people on their participation and local democracy in a town in Spain. Akdogan (2009) analyzed the e-participation by the Metropolitan Municipality of Istambul, Turkey. The increasing demand of citizens for participatory planning in three Dutch municipalities is analyzed by Koekoek et al. (2009). With e-participation, the planning support systems (PSS) in the municipalities could be enhanced. The authors showed the initiatives taken by three Dutch municipalities. Panopoulou et al. (2009) evaluated e-participation sophistication of the websites of all regional public authorities in Greece and Spain based on three factors (information, consultation and active participation). The results indicated that although a political priority, e-participation is not yet a common practice in both the countries. Matheus et al. (2010) describes the case studies of Digital Participatory Budget (DPB) in four municipalities of Brazil, one in Peru and one from Argentina. The authors try to establish that the use of ICTs, especially the internet, can be a promoter of citizenship and citizen participation. But the authors found that this promotion is limited by the condition of access to these technologies and the depth and quality of information available to citizens. Bebic and Vuckovic (2011) examined the relationship between specific content categories on city web sites and civic engagement in Croatia. The role of the city web sites in e-participation was studied by the surveying citizen’s views. A web based volunteer survey was conducted in 33 Croatian cities, with more than 600 citizens participating. Results showed that there is democratic divide in Croatian local government. The study overall finds that the citizens are willing to engage online if the government provides them with an adequate platform. Rojas et al. (2011) studied the actual use that local governments give to social media tools to promote e-participation and e-governance. Hochtl et al. (2011) studied the present situation of e-participation initiatives of Austrian municipalities and derives recommendations to further enhance the e-participation sophistication level. The authors found that the technical basis for e-participation in Austria is well-developed, yet accessibility of municipal websites and the phrasing of information leave space for improvement. E-Participation in Austria is still in a nascent state and requires the convergence of technical, political, legal and socio-economic factors, which has not yet fully arrived at the municipal level. Johannessen et al. (2012) examined the expectations and communication needs of relevant stakeholder groups for municipal e-participation in a small Norwegian municipality. The findings show that information about local issues, information about issues relevant for the individual stakeholders, and dialogue on business’ needs and employment are three most important communication needs. E-mail and municipal websites are two most preferred mode of communication. Effective municipal communication requires a number of different media, depending on what is being communicated. Sandoval- Almazan and Gil- Garcia (2012) said that the most important interactions between citizens and government happen at local level. These relationships could become closer and more frequent with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The authors analyzed the local government portals in Mexico. The authors found that progress toward citizen engagement is slow in local governments and there are very few efforts to increase interaction, participation and collaboration. For the authors, it seems that e-government in municipalities is still more rhetoric and less reality, at least in some countries. Damurski (2012) did the comparative analysis of online participation offered in Poland and Germany. In India, there are only two studies on e-participation but
both the studies are confined to political participation, and citizen empowerment in e-democracy. Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2012) examine the relative importance and significance of three types of information communication technologies (ICTs) towards the use of e-government and development of civic engagement. Empirical investigation was made of 179 Spanish official town websites (websites in the municipalities). The research findings suggest that the implementing ICT not only involves a step towards an increase in the use of e-government services by people, but also provides numerous opportunities for their civic engagement. Fedotova et al. (2012) studied the level of electronic participation (e-participation) initiatives that are promoted by government authorities in Portugal at local and national levels. The study reveals that local e-participation initiatives are predominantly informing in character and there is lack of high level of e-participation initiatives. There are no studies on e-participation in the urban local bodies in India. In the first study, Gowda and Gupta (2010) studied the various initiatives that harness information and communication technologies (ICTs) to promote electoral reform and political mobilizations. Alathur et al. (2011) signified whether citizen’s empowered status influences their online democratic participation.

3. E-PARTICIPATION IN WEST BENGAL

The present status (as on 31st March 2013) of e-participation in the five municipal corporations of West Bengal (Asansol, Chandannagore, Durgapur, Kolkata and Siliguri) have been analyzed by incorporating the studies of Demirhan and Oktem (2011) and the criteria and indicators of e-participation is shown in Table 1. The score arrived was using the formula \([X/21 \times 100]\), where \(X\) is the number of municipal corporations with own determined indicators and 21 shows the number of indicators. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Criteria and Indicators of e-participation (adapted from Demirhan and Oktem, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables of e-participation</th>
<th>Number of indicators</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e-information (e-I)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. e-participation policy, program and progress</td>
<td>e-I_1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Structure of municipalities, authorities, services and institutions</td>
<td>e-I_2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Laws and regulations</td>
<td>e-I_3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Financial information</td>
<td>e-I_4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Agenda, annual reports and outcomes</td>
<td>e-I_5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Announcements</td>
<td>e-I_6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. RSS</td>
<td>e-I_7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Statistics</td>
<td>e-I_8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-consultation (e-C)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Polls</td>
<td>e-C_1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Surveys</td>
<td>e-C_2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Claims, complaints and feedbacks</td>
<td>e-C_3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Chat rooms or instant messaging</td>
<td>e-C_4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Available e-mails of authorities</td>
<td>e-C_5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Web logs or blogs or links to blogs</td>
<td>e-C_6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. e-Services</td>
<td>e-C_7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-decision-making (e-D)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Discussion on forums</td>
<td>e-D_1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Archive of past discussions on forums</td>
<td>e-D_2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Notice and/or publish citizen inputs</td>
<td>e-D_3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Petitions</td>
<td>e-D_4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Voting</td>
<td>e-D_5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Notice results of inputs or citizen’s opinion</td>
<td>e-D_6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: E-Participation Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipal Corporation</th>
<th>Score (%)</th>
<th>E-Participation Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e-I</td>
<td>e-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asansol</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandannagore</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durgapur</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolkata</td>
<td>75.00</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siliguri</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 clearly reflects the state of e-participation in the State of West Bengal, India. There is only certain growth in the e-information indicators. Municipal Corporation of Kolkata is scored the highest and the Chandannagore Municipal Corporation is the lowest. The growth in e-consultation is poor and well below 50 per cent. There is no initiation of e-decision-making process in the municipal corporations.

4. CHALLENGES AND GAPS

The extent of e-participation in India (UN E-Government Survey, 2012) is very low (15 per cent). ICT infrastructure, which is the backbone of modern society, is low and only significant growth in mobile cellular telephone subscriptions have been witnessed (ITU, 2011). Internet penetration is also very low in India (4.2 per cent) as compared to 24.5 per cent in Asia-Pacific (ITU, 2011). There are also significant deficit in the demand and supply of electricity. Electricity is the most basic condition for using ICTs. The Strategic Plan Document of the Department of Information Technology, Government of India for the next 5 years (2012-17) found lack of focus on e-inclusion in IT policies of the State Governments including West Bengal. Lack of standards for information systems, data management, scrutiny, software localizations and interoperability, poor availability of e-content and e-services are also mentioned. Apart from ICT and infrastructural challenges, there are administrative and institutional challenges also. The offline participation mechanism established by the 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act, 1993 has not been fully established. The ‘Ward Committees’ are not properly instituted and given adequate functional and powers (PRIA, 2010). Ramanathan (2005) analyzed that beyond voting, there is no opportunity to participate in decisions on local development and engage in the affairs of the governance. The TERI Report (2010) found that barring few States, the setting of Ward Committees could not take off in the urban areas. Sharma (2011) studied the impact of 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act, 1993 on the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation, India and found poor empowerment, lack of unity among the Ward Committees and Councilors, poor authority for levying taxes, poor devolution of funds and overall ineffective decentralization.

5. PROSPECTS AND SUGGESTIONS

There are great potential of growth of e-participation in urban local bodies of India including West Bengal. Use of ICT tools and establishment of online presence has started from 2006 onwards as part of the national e-governance program. According to the Internet World Stats (2012), India has achieved 10.2 per cent internet penetration at 0.12 billion users as on December, 2011 and out of this, 37 per cent of the users access Facebook. India has the largest number of Facebook users in Asia. In 2012, the internet subscriber base is expected to rise to approximately 45 billion. The wireless internet base is estimated to rise to approximately 196 million from the current 76 million. There is also a strong favorable public policy environment and assertiveness from the Government of India. The various legislations and acts such as Right to Information Act, 2005; Framework for Citizen Engagement in e-Governance (2012); Framework and Guidelines for Use of Social Media for
Government Organizations (2012); The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Services Bill (2011) etc.

Under JNNURAM mandate, states will have to enact or modify legislations and municipalities will have to undergo structural and institutional reforms. One of the major structural and institutional reforms is the Community Participation Law (CPL), which was originally called Nagara Raj Bill, 2004. JNURM contemplates the creation of third-tier of decision-making in the municipality which is below the word level, called the ‘Area Sabha’. For growth and development of e-participation in West Bengal, the foremost requirement is the development of the offline participation in the urban local bodies. West Bengal is the second state in India (after Kerala) which has constituted ‘Area Sabha’. According to the recommendations of the TERI (2010), for the development of the offline participation, 18 functions delegated to the municipal bodies under the 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act, 1993 should be given to ward committees and area sabhas. The Report of the Working Group on Urban Governance of 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17) of Planning Commission, Government of India advocated for two-pronged strategy including adoption of e-governance tools & IT and monthly towon hall meetings for strengthening online and offline participation. There is also need to launch ‘JNURM e-Governance 2.0’. JNURM e-Governance 2.0 would lay down detailed guidelines for the establishment of the components of e-participation and social media development. There is need of harnessing the Web 2.0 technologies and social media. The engagement of social media by the urban local bodies may be implemented through public private partnerships (PPP). PPP is encouraged under JNURM especially in the sectors of service delivery and management. Apart from the above initiatives, there is also need of development and spread of ICT infrastructure, internet and broadband penetration and social capital development. The Government of West Bengal need to sincerely implement all the above recommendations and develop proper ICT infrastructure. This will enhance the offline participation in the urban local bodies and growth of offline participation will stimulate online participation or e-participation.

REFERENCES


