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## URBAN GOVERNANCE AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS: A TAKE ON CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN REGULATORY PROCESSES

~ *Noholie Bonnerjee*

### Introduction

Over the last few decades, India has emerged as the fourth-largest economy, with the potential to become the third-largest economy by 2028, accounting for 20% of the world's growth (India 2025). Besides industrial development and commercialization of markets, urbanization makes its own significant contribution to this phenomenon. What started as rural settlements is gradually transitioning into cities and towns. This demands proper governance to manage factors such as roads, water supply, education, housing, healthcare, and sanitation, while tackling climate change and pollution. Here, urban governance becomes important to ensure resource allocation and structured policy implementation.

However, it is not always as easy as we imagine. Governance also requires cooperation from stakeholders such as municipalities and urban development agencies, the private sector, educational institutions, research hubs, along with civil society and residents, to ensure a smooth transition. As the cities suffer from poor governance, inadequate infrastructure, and services, the bureaucracy remains stagnant with no accountability and transparency. This makes citizen participation in the regulatory process crucial for inclusive decision-making and community engagement. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the relationship between urban governance and citizen engagement in administration.

### Urban Governance and Citizen Participation: The Concept

Urban governance, as a mechanism, is primarily responsible for managing cities through efficient operations and resources. The World Bank describes citizen engagement as “*responsiveness of the government to citizens' voice*” (McNeil 2017). As a core element of

democracy, it allows residents to actively contribute to decision-making and communicate their grievances for improvement with the administrative authorities (Urban 2025).

An effective urban management system becomes a boon when decision-making is open, and officers are responsive to their subjects. This reduces wastage of resources, ensuring both equality and equity within the communities. Municipal bodies can socially include marginalized communities, bringing different perspectives to the table. Following the footsteps of ancient wisdoms, such as the Arthashastra, environmental sustainability, disaster management, and economic resilience should be the benchmarks for achieving a successful urbanization in India.

### **Is it a Necessity or a Luxury?**

Citizen participation not only creates an understanding among ULBs about basic requirements, but also assesses the on-ground policy impact. This creates a sense of belonging, empathy, and increasing community-based ownership among the residents. As an outcome, the local administrative units get empowered, along with citizens, reducing political intervention and enabling the exercise of basic human rights (Institutionalizing 2013).

In the digital age, citizen participation has become much smoother. Platforms such as UMANG (Unified Mobile App for New-Age), UPYOG (Urban Platform for Delivery of Online Governance), IUDX (India Urban Data Exchange), and NUDM (National Urban Digital Mission) accelerate digital transformation through innovation, technology, and open-source data platforms. This creates standardizing initiatives such as smart cities and grievance redressal apps for transparency. Besides digitization, citizens can elect representatives based on their interests through voting rights. Community-based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs) also advocate for community-based engagement through awareness programs. Therefore, citizen engagement becomes a necessity rather than a luxury for ULBs.

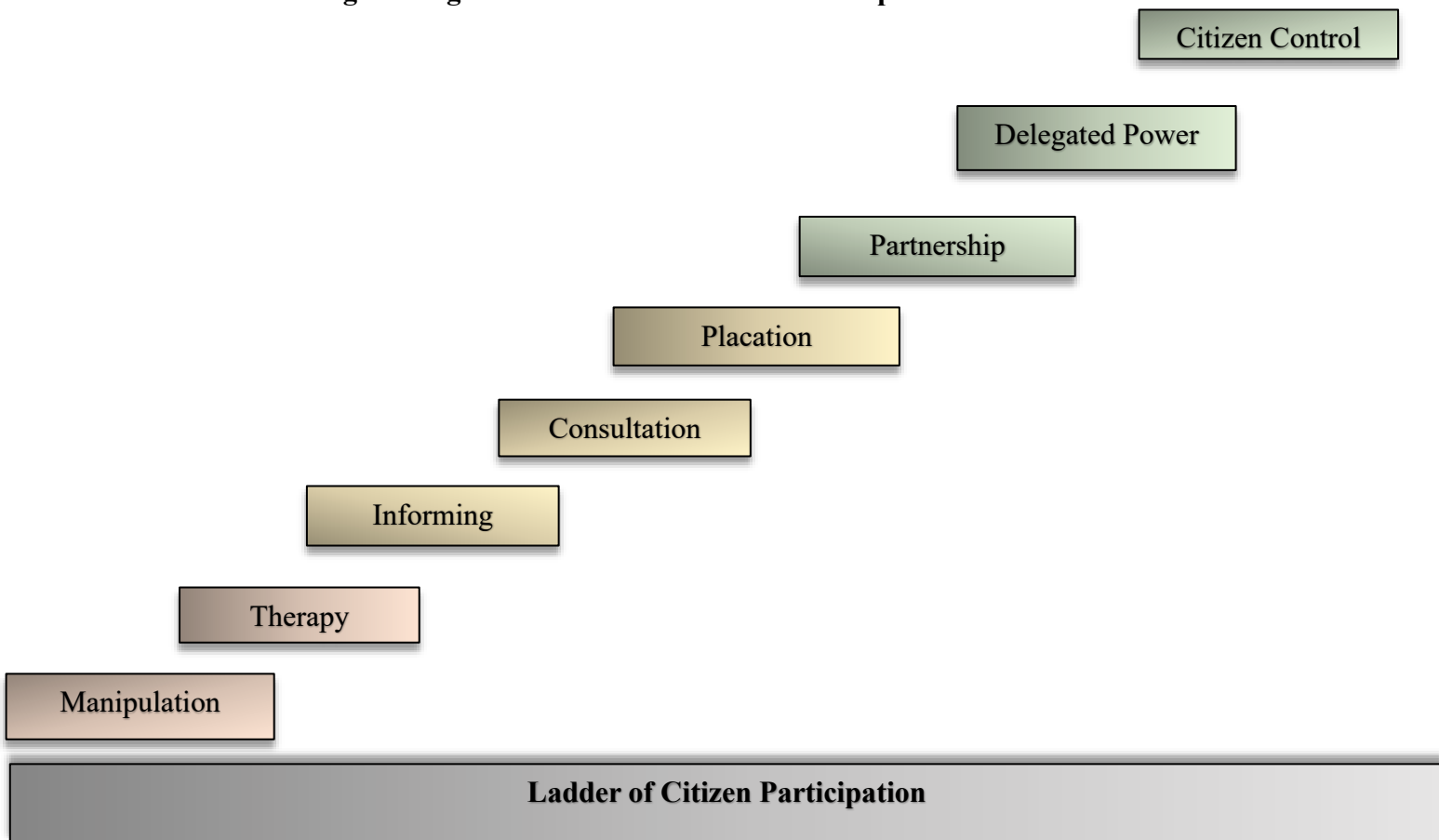
### ***“Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969): A Role-Model for Urban Institutions***

Sherry Arnstein, through the *“ladder of citizen participation”*, highlights the importance of the common masses in local administrative units. Considered as an essential component in democracy, citizen engagement should be more of *“participation”* rather than an intervention. Without decentralization, the citizens become puppets of their political leaders rather than

decision-makers themselves. To overcome such disgrace of democracy, the model advocates for the redistribution of resources, where “*citizens’ participation is citizens’ power*” (Posodobitev 2025). This empowers them to question the bureaucracy, denying accountability.

Structured as a metaphorical ladder, Arnstein’s model represents different stages of participation, each step rising towards agency, control, and power (Posodobitev 2025). It starts from “*non-participation*” and reaches the actual “*citizen control*” in the system.

- **The Eight Rungs of the Ladder of Citizen Participation:**



Inspired by Arnstein’s 1969 model, the above diagram shows the steps to reach citizen control in a democracy. Classified in three forms, each step is characterized by distinct features, making it a crucial part of decision-making and community engagement. These are as follows:

- i. Non-Participation/ No Power
- ii. Degree of Tokenism
- iii. Degree of Citizen/ Actual Power

- **Three Forms of Citizen Participation**

- i. **Non-Participation/ No Power:** Non-participation is built upon two basic human psychologies- "*manipulation*" and "*therapy*". Manipulation exists when public institutions mislead citizens into believing that they are actually given the power to decide, but in reality, they are not. Meanwhile, therapy signifies that public administrators tailor 'pseudo-participatory programs' in which they convince citizens that they are the problem, rather than solving the roots of the problem.
  
- ii. **Degrees of Tokenism:** Tokenism is formed on the foundations of three significant steps- informing, consultation, and placation. Informing citizens of their basic rights, responsibilities, and options is a crucial step towards active citizen engagement in policy-making. However, the process remains incomplete as there is no "*two-way communication*" between the citizen and administrators, creating a gap in implementation. For instance, Indian cities suffer from delays in the delivery system as municipal officials show incompetence in communicating with the residents.

Similarly, consultation invites citizens to provide their opinion. Consultation mainly takes place through surveys, meetings, workshops, and conferences. Though considered to be a progress, this step gives no assurance that the ideas will be taken into account. Stuck in research journals and statistical data, the ideas remain untouched while the decision has already been taken by the officials.

Placation occurs when citizens are granted a certain degree of influence. This includes a representation from the marginalized community to be employed in a minimal position of power, to display "*inclusivity*" in the process. This can be observed in the Indian reservation system as well. But what remains unchallenged is the misuse of power by elite officials, silencing the representatives based on hierarchy.

- iii. **Degree of Citizen/ Actual Power:** As a final form of citizen participation, the degree of citizen power highlights actual engagement of citizens in a regulatory process. This form includes partnership, delegation, and control. In partnership, citizens are allowed to negotiate, veto decisions, share funds, and recommend solutions in collaboration with public institutions. They agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities through joint policy boards and planning commissions. However, partnership is only provided voluntarily, as many institutions claim it as an intervention rather than participation.

Delegation of power highlights power distribution to a certain extent in an administrative domain. This includes control, management, decision-making, or organizing a community program. This ensures accountability from the administrators, but still lacks the full control of execution.

Finally, citizen control advocates for active engagement of residents in the governance of a program or institution. In this step, citizens gain the full right to execute policies and management based on their requirements, rather than waiting for the authorities to make decisions. For instance, in urban governance, public funds are directly invested in community organizations, think tanks, and NGOs, ensuring full control over finance and improvement of conditions.

### **Are Indian Citizens Capable of Making Changes in Regulatory Processes?**

As observed in Arnstein's 1969 model, the active citizen engagement in the governance system automatically guarantees accountability rather than begging. If the civil society mobilizes, it can also identify gaps and address them through monitoring and social accountability tools (Institutionalizing 2013). As an outcome, major issues such as inaccessibility of water, improper sanitation, and negligence towards healthcare, education, roadways, communication, and transportation are resolved rather than being delayed.

With the Right to Information Act (2005), the municipalities are obliged to disclose information and communicate their operations with the citizens to maintain accountability and transparency. If the *informing* part decreases, municipalities can become centrally authorized, *manipulating* people about their data, and misuse of power. This, in fact, becomes the very source of corruption. To prevent such damages, citizens should educate themselves about their

basic rights and apply them to question the authorities concerned by using the citizens' charter and grievance redressal mechanisms.

The emergence of Social Accountability Monitoring (SAM) led to an improvement in performance. Municipalities are now responsible for sharing their data with multiple stakeholders, such as policymakers, ministries, and officials at the national level, other municipalities, practitioners, and civil society at the sub-national level. These initiatives involve debate and discussions, not only at the central level but also at the grassroots level, influencing the modification of policies in a positive direction.

### **74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act (1992): A Breakthrough or a Failure of Citizen Engagement in Indian Democracy?**

India's structure as a representative democracy includes active engagement from citizens in governance. With the implementation of the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act (1992), a breakthrough was observed as it aimed to constitutionally reform local governance. Not only does it empower ULBs, but it also legitimizes decentralization of power. Powerful SAM Tools enabled this process through grievance redressals and digital platforms. Mechanisms such as elections, distribution of funds and resources to different municipalities, reservation of seats for marginalized communities, and the establishment of planning committees legally enhanced the system. However, several gaps have also been noted as these policies were more about 'participation' than 'engagement'.

- **Policy Assessment: Examining the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act through the Ladder of Citizen Participation Model**

The 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act (1992), as examined through Arnstein's Ladder, has achieved a degree of tokenism but not actual citizen power. True participation only exists if there is a certain degree of active engagement of citizens in decision-making, control, management, and organization of events. Though tokenism is achieved through partnership, consultation, and placation, the path to actual citizen control remains invisible. The reasons for such conditions are as follows:

- i. **Gaps in Policy Implementation:** A huge gap is observed between the constitutional promises and the actual redistribution of power to citizens. To

achieve actual control, these issues need to be addressed by the authorities to bridge the legal gaps.

- ii. **Non-Participation:** The age-old bureaucratic form of governance leads to both manipulation and therapy, convincing the citizens that they are the “*disease*”, rather than curing the real disease. This limits the shift from the non-participation stage of participation.
- iii. **Partial Tokenism:** While formal institutions exist for ‘*consultations*’, the real execution remains with the state government. Ward committees, public hearings, and e-governance platforms, though considered progressive, suffer as they are excluded from decision-making power. This creates a concentration of power, as it limits citizen participation. If the situation gets declining, placation is used as a medium, and to some extent partnership. However, citizens are forced to protest to gain these basic rights.
- iv. **Rare instances of Citizen Control:** This stage has rarely been achieved in India, though the act was implemented in 1992. One of the success stories can be Surat’s model of urban governance. However, this success cannot be celebrated as states like Bihar suffer from administrative issues and corruption, right from the grassroots to the state government level. This makes citizens deprived of their actual control, returning to stage 1 of non-participation.

Therefore, for India to climb higher on Arnstein’s ladder, decentralization must progress towards real functional empowerment, rather than continuing as a symbolic structural governance structure.

- **Outcomes of the Assessment**

Though the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act created room for citizen-centric urban governance, it can still be considered a failure despite its progressive legal approaches. A huge gap is observed between approach and actions, which constrains the power of citizens in decision-making. It created a foundational framework for decentralization in urban India, but was only effective when the provisions of the *Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)*

were operationalized in 2005. This raises a question on the autonomy of the act, as the success rate is still limited in this regard. Recent initiatives such as *Smart City Missions* and the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* were also executed, extensively focused on city development and sanitation. Thus, while the act laid importance on democratic groundwork, its success as a tool for active citizen participation remains a subject of debate.

## **Policy Recommendations: Lessons from Indore's S.M.A.R.T City**

### **Administration Model**

Indore, ranked as India's cleanest city, is a role model for efficient decentralisation in India. The Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) deployed data-driven governance, adapted a PPP (Private-Public Partnership)-based model for waste management, and ensured citizen engagement through city-based apps, campaigns, and social media feedback. If compared, the Indore model actually attempts to fill the gaps observed in the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act. With an on-ground impact, it prioritizes 'engagement' over participation. The following are some policy recommendations that can help in achieving national urban reforms:

- **Institutional Autonomy:** While the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act legally recognizes ULBs, many remain dependent on the state government for execution. The IMC empowers leadership with innovation, monitoring, and penalties. This creates a functional autonomy in the system. In alignment, state municipal laws should also provide institutional autonomy on waste management, water supply, health, sanitation, and education. By maintaining communication between commissioners and mayors, the state intervention can be reduced.
- **PPP-Based Model for Financial Empowerment:** Indore's financing of solid waste processing and green infrastructure ensures a private-public partnership, ensuring sustainability. Other cities should also design a revenue-based system for incentivizing innovation and operating service deliveries (Indore 2025).
- **Mandatory Citizen Engagement:** Indore's S.M.A.R.T. City Plan has achieved 25% population engagement through tokenistic participation. To achieve the bare minimum, cities should map a participation-based planning, both at the ward and municipal levels. This increases co-creation and feedback, leading to citizen-centric budgeting.

- **Ethical Governance:** IMC continuously monitors the operations through GPS-linked vehicles for waste management, mobile reporting in case of grievances, and transparency dashboards for evidence-based governance. Backward states should use these initiatives for ethical governance. Urban Performance Tracking systems should be tied to State Finance Commissions to assess governance outcomes.
- **Implanting Civic Sense within Citizens:** Civic education and behavioural changes should be integrated within the constitutional frameworks of the Municipalities. For instance, Indore's "*Cleanliness is Pride*" campaign refined civic behaviour, setting a landmark in waste management (Solid 2025).

Thus, the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act should replicate Indore's S.M.A.R.T. city approach to transform from a structural framework to a living reality in terms of urban governance.

### **A Way Forward: Citizen Governance and Viksit Bharat 2047 Mission**

The motto "*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas*" (Roy 2025), as envisioned under the Viksit Bharat target, highlights the importance of participatory governance. With an objective of "*maximum governance, minimum government*", the following are the expected agendas set for 2047:

- **Migration Governance:** Migration is considered to be one of the rising challenges for urban governance. To overcome the related issues, a portable welfare will be set up to introduce "*one nation, one migrant ID*" to ensure that citizens enjoy cross-border benefits. City Migration cells under municipalities map migration flows to facilitate affordable housing and employment in industries. The Viksit Bharat Urban Data Mission includes service planning for an accessible citizen charter.
- **Healthcare Policy:** Healthcare schemes such as Ayushman Bharat enable a universal, AI-generated telehealth ecosystem to make healthcare accessible in remote urban areas such as slums. Health insurance is secured for internal migrants through wellness centres.
- **Circular Economy:** Viksit Bharat mission attempts to achieve circular economy hubs by encouraging waste-to-energy centres, reuse enterprises, including informal waste-

pickers as stakeholders of the Urban Livelihood Missions. National IEC (Information, Education, Communication) campaigns, and PPP-based decentralized waste systems under Swachh Bharat 2.0, can enable digital monitoring and incentive-based performances.

- **Sustainable Urban Construction:** The Green Construction Code assures zero carbon while maintaining energy standards. Through geo-tags, digital land governance, and citizen budgeting, transparency is maintained in terms of land property, construction, and infrastructure development.
- **Other Aspects:** Leveraging Digital Public Infrastructure platforms such as MyGov and CPGRAMS, it aims for timely delivery, accountability, and citizen feedback through Janasamarth and Citizen Governance Index (CGI). Initiatives like Youth Parliament, Yuva Connect, and civics education foster youth leadership and governance literacy. Meanwhile, gender-responsive policies assure inclusive decision-making by employing women council members.

Therefore, the mission attempts to gain a governance that will be “*by the people and for the people*”.

## Conclusion

Citizen Participation forms the bedrock of effective governance, serving as a demand for inclusive decision-making and resource allocation. Though there are legislative provisions, such as the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act, and S.M.A.R.T. City Missions, the shift from tokenism to actual citizen control has been limited in India. As governments progress with the Viksit Bharat vision, they also need to overcome these limitations by bridging policy gaps, empowering ULBs with fiscal and administrative power, institutionalizing robust platforms for citizens, and ensuring an active yet transparent engagement. If India truly wants to achieve the “*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas*” motto, it needs to step up from tokenism to real citizen control, following the Ladder of Citizen Participation model. To conclude, the journey from symbolism to real governance is necessary, making it responsive, accountable, and engaging in all regards, respectively.

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