

Citizenship, Participation and Accountability: A Perspective

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Abstract

Exclusion of the poor and the marginalised from the development process has given rise to the concerns for active citizenship, responsible participation of people and accountability in the development process. Such concerns seek alternate forms of development, which foster more inclusive and deliberate forms of citizen engagement. Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability aims to re-cast such concerns on inclusion, participation and accountability in a rights-based and citizenship-centered mould both in theory and practice. This article, briefly highlighting the background of DRC on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, presents PRIA's perspective on these themes.

Background

The concern for achieving development, without forsaking the goals of poverty reduction, requires re-thinking on the relationships between poor people and the institutions, which affect their lives. It also necessitates a search for the alternate forms that can foster more inclusive and deliberate forms of engagement between the citizens and state. Active citizenship, responsible participation of people, and accountability in the development process are now the key issues. Considerable debates and discussions around the process, content, organizational structure and strategies of implementation of active, participatory and accountable development efforts have been taking place. Consequently, a number of concepts, theories, approach and strategies have emerged. The establishment of **Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability** is one such step.

DRC is the consortium of the collaborative institutional partners from seven different countries viz., Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa and UK. The centre is concerned with the alleviation of poverty. Its objectives are as follows:

- ◆ To construct new forms of citizenship that will help make rights real and inclusive for the poor.
- ◆ To recast debates of inclusion, participation and accountability in a rights-based and citizenship-centered mould both in theory and practice.

Demands for inclusion entails citizen voice. This requires developing a greater understanding of how poor people perceive their rights and responsibilities; the ways through which they develop awareness, individually and collectively; and the means through which they mobilize in order to make their claims. New

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mechanisms for direct citizen participation go beyond the traditional and established processes of representative democracy and shift the discussion of participation from that of beneficiaries in development projects to that of a right of citizens in the governance of their own affairs. Important questions follow: Whose voices count? What prevents long established patterns of power from being reproduced? Which perspectives prevail and which are obscured? Changing understanding of rights and new arenas of participation in turn lead to a reconsideration of traditional relationships of accountability and responsibility amongst actors across differing spheres and levels. With more inclusive citizen participation, what forms of accountability help to ensure that increased voice actually contributes to institutional and policy responsiveness? Accordingly **DRC** has identified the three research themes, viz., **(I) Images and Meanings of Rights and Citizenship, (II) Spaces, Places and Dynamics of Citizenship, and (III) Accountabilities and Responsibilities**. By taking a multidimensional and multi disciplinary approach, it aims to explore these themes across differing contexts, types of rights and levels and arenas of citizen engagement through empirical studies and research. This way the Centre plans to contribute to the understanding of the potential of new spaces for citizen voice and to influence development policies from the rights and citizenship perspective.

Given the diversity of the contexts –both across the countries and within themselves, the Centre does not have common set of research designs and methodologies. Each research partner defines the most critical entry points approaches to the core concepts from their contexts, which the Centre as a whole wants to pursue. For instance, **PRIA-DRC's** (India) has three distinct yet interrelated projects: **Meanings and Identities of Citizenship in a New State** (Images and Meanings of Rights and Citizenship), **Linkages, Conflicts and Dynamics between Traditional, Development and Statutorily Decentralized Local Bodies** (Spaces, Places and Dynamics of Citizenship Participation), and **Multiparty Accountability** (Accountabilities and Responsibilities). It aims to work with local research institutes and civil society groups in three different states of Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Maharashtra.

PRIA's Perspective on Citizenship, Participation, and Accountability

DRC on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability Inception Workshop took place on 22 -24 November 2000 at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK. The aim was to develop a conceptual understanding and to establish a joint research agenda. A number of background papers were presented on the themes of citizenship, participation and accountability, which formed the basis for developing a common conceptual approach to each core theme and provided a starting point for future research. Dr Rajesh Tandon presented a background review paper on the theme of 'Participation'. He highlighted PRIA's perspective, with focus primarily on the key issues relating to **the approaches to participation and the conceptual framework on the themes of citizenship, participation and accountability**. The key points of his presentation are elucidated as below.

A. Approaches to Participation: Some Key Issues

Historical Approach to Participation

A historical approach to participation implies looking at the forms of participation both in the traditional and modern context. In India, both of these forms of participation co-exist. There were traditional forms of participatory mechanisms in the caste, village or tribal indigenous communities. These were voluntary, self-help informal initiative of people arising out of their needs, characterized by a recognition of their dependency on each other. The people's traditional groups were independent any kind of external inducement. It provided space to citizens to articulate their demands, to negotiate and to influence decisions, which affected their lives. It played an important role in their struggles for justice and a good life and facilitated the organization of community and collective action.

Participation in development projects of large-scale nature under the aegis of Government and bi-lateral and multi-lateral agency programmes has, of late, led to the creation of a number of village level development committees, which are primarily sectoral, and projected. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993, by constitutionalizing the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as third tier of governance and Panchayats, as the local elected grassroots level governing body, has strengthened people's participation in development. The modern forms of organizations like village education committees, or watershed committees and modern forms of local elected bodies are characterized by formalized relationships. These organizations are externally induced and guided to meet the predetermined objectives. In India, both forms of participation simultaneously exist. The traditional village forms work alongside the elected local bodies. With an *ahistorical* approach we risk seeing the two forms in conflict.

The historical approach to participation looks at the traditional forms and approaches to participation and at the same time look at the way these compare to the modern forms. There is a need for forging greater institutional linkages and collaborations between the development committees, the statutory decentralized local bodies and traditional groups. This relationship needs to be studied in greater detail in order to work out approaches for better collaboration among the institutions.

The Subaltern-‘ Bottom-Up’ Approach

It is a fallacy to think that subaltern is a simple and homogeneous group of poor, and have-nots. On the contrary, they are highly stratified group. Taking the issues of control and ownership as point of departure, we find that differences exist within each stratum of the subaltern. The differences are profound and extremely complex within categories of caste, class, gender and ethnicity. By overlooking the in-built dominant relations of power and production within the social system, we undervalue the situation of shrinking spaces and options of various categories of subaltern. A more nuanced subaltern view will take into consideration the columns and rows of participation between different strata-different vertical and horizontal formations and relationships.

Political and Cultural Meanings of Participation

The focus has, generally been on political meaning of participation. The political meaning is inevitably linked to people's relationship with the state. People are defined either as beneficiaries or as voters. They are either beneficiaries of the government largess or patronage or development programme, which means 'you sleep, state delivers', or mere voters, which means periodically 'you exercise your vote and then forget about it'.

Citizens in India, as perhaps elsewhere, are becoming mistrustful of public institutions and government agencies. They are becoming apathetic towards governance and dependent on the state for their welfare. This is one of the things that we discovered in the study conducted by us, called '*Citizens and Governance*'. This study covered many commonwealth countries. While doing the study we examined the question- what citizens expect from themselves, and from others? There was a clear demand in citizen's voices that they be treated neither as beneficiaries of government program and schemes, nor as voters occasionally electing their representatives - but as citizens.

Our study further revealed that people did not perceive themselves as citizens in political sense- in a state-citizen relationship. The growing alienation from the state has resulted in increasing marginalisation of a large section of people who have been denied access to institutions of state and their own traditional structures of community and habitation. For instance, a group of immigrants from Kerala, who went to Gulf for employment, felt they did not belong when they returned to India. The classic situation was the Gulf war in 1991, when the state abandoned these people. They neither belonged to Kuwait nor did they belong to India. But they saw themselves as citizens in the cultural context. The cultural meaning of citizenship was different from the political meaning. The cultural ethical interpretation of participation is linked to the sense of belonging and responsibilities. People's sense of belonging and responsibilities are directed more toward their community, fraternity, and kinship groups.

Citizens gaining voice and choice are the key challenges facing us today. The central issue is, therefore, the restructuring of the system and polity, which protects the liberties and rights of the poor and the marginalised. There is a need for re-thinking on the 'politicization of the participation of citizens' - not in an electoral sense but in basic sense of developing active citizenship. The concept of informed, empowered, and active citizenship is yet not fully understood and debated in our context. The conception of active citizenship is based on cultural diversities and multiple identities as well as an array of alternative systems of survival and sustenance. Direct participatory democracy, to change the existing discriminatory institutions and practices throughout the society, entails tolerance for plurality of culture and perspectives for citizen's actions.

The Individual and the Collective Notion of Citizenship

The perspective of individual notion of citizenship is directly linked to the discourses about merit, entitlement and contractual relationships. It transcends the collective identities of kinship, caste and communities, and thereby, negates some fundamental principles of communities and ascribed identities. Kinship, caste, community, social obligations, cultural relationships and religious forms of participation are traditionally collective in nature, demanding active participation and some form allegiance. In these indigenous civil societies public service is desirable for its contribution to the advancement of the collective good. The framework of common good as defined by indigenous communities in a collective sense within a larger framework of common good is opposed to the individual rights and gains. In our context, we are not exactly in the post-modern world, which is based on the assumption of motivating individuals to pursue self-interest vigorously. We are, in fact, somewhere in the interface between the post traditional and pre-modern state of world. As a result our collective nexus is unavoidable.

The different sets of discourse on citizenship provide conflicting forms of legitimization. At times, these contrasting discourses are interrelated, where different groups of people cooperate in their struggle for recognition and resources. Sometimes, there are tensions in the rights and obligations, as inherent in the individual notions of citizenship, with those claims and obligations that same individuals enjoy as members of kinship, caste, community, socio- cultural and religious groups where forms of participation are collective in nature. Alternatively, the collective rights may exist in tension to each other. Different members within existing groups compete with each other for access to resources and recognition.

There is a need to examine the relationship between the individual and the collective and the meaning that these have for the forms of participation and rights to participation. This would assist in better management of development interventions, facilitate good governance and strengthen citizen's participation "in determining their own future on an ongoing and sustained manner".

B. Conceptual Framework: Two Overarching Pegs

Meaning of the Public

Current conceptualizations have resulted in a definition that equates private with what goes on within the family and public with what concerns the government. There is a need to re-formulate our understanding of what is public and what is private. It is important to recognize that private opinions become the basis for evolving a public position and the question of privacy is a relative issue within a broader framework of a community. Similarly everything that is of public interest, everything that concerns the public arena does not automatically become a concern for the state or its agencies.

There are three issues in the meaning of public. The first one is 'public good'. We are very concerned, in our context, to explore how public good is established, and how it is contested and how any kind of professional consensus, even if not a permanent consensus is reached. Frankly in our society, there is no 'public good' consensus at the moment. There are contestations on everything from basic education to globalization. The whole range is contested.

The second issue is about 'public institutions'. We increasingly believe that public institutions do not only mean government institutions. We believe that it includes all institutions, which operate in society in a public manner. Private sector institutions, which increasingly use public resources, civil society organizations and NGOs, are all public institutions because they operate in public space, and act on public issues.

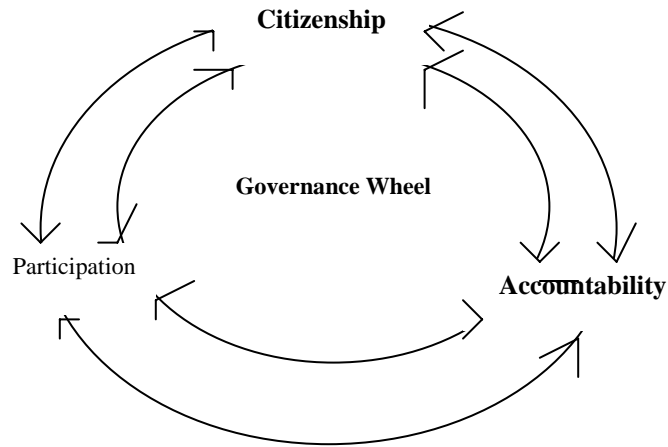
This leads to the third issue viz., 'public accountability'. We are particularly interested in what we are beginning to call multi-party accountability. We are beginning to experiment with different parties holding each other accountable, as opposed to the exclusive notion that there is only one way accountability.

Governance Wheel

The second peg relates to the three concepts of citizenship, participation and accountability. It is one thing to debate them individually and approach them singly, but it may be worth while to think about how they fit together. I look at three of them together as a 'governance wheel'. We need to look at how participation assures accountability and how a sense of citizenship enables participation.

Participation is about the involvement of all stakeholders, the state and the non-state, through a process of communication and negotiation to influence the decisions that affect their lives. Participation leads to the creation and sustenance of accountability. In fact, accountability is the only basis by which citizens can act. It leads to openness and transparency in policy making. Such accountability builds up social reciprocities characterized by equity, inter-group tolerance and inclusive citizenship. Responsible and active citizenship, in turn, results in meaningful participation.

There is yet another reverse perspective on the inter se synergy amongst citizenship, accountability and participation. Citizenship gives the right to hold others accountable and accountability is the process of engaging in participation. An active citizenship would assert itself by seeking greater accountability from the service providers through increased dialogue and consultation, and by monitoring and assessing performance externally and mutually. The concept of citizenship encompasses the concepts of social rights, social responsibility, and social accountability. Thus, the accountability induced by an active citizenship would necessarily have a participatory dimension. Then it does not have the dilemma of having somebody else's policy and somebody else's participation.



Either way, citizenship, participation, and accountability would form the basis of 'governance wheel', which move in an integrated, inter-linked, and synergised manner and affect each other in a dynamic relationship. Citizenship, participation and accountability are in fact pillars of any kind of meaningful governance, not just in government institutions but in all institutions which occupy public space.

The article is based on the presentation given by Dr.Rajesh Tandon at the Inception Workshop of "Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability", on 22-24 November 2000 at IDS, Sussex, UK.

