



Scope for bottom-up planning in Kolkata: rhetoric vs reality

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1. See Gualini, E (2001), *Planning and the Intelligence of Institutions: Interactive Approaches to Territorial Policy-making between Institutional Design and Institution-building*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK.

2. See Forester, J (1989), *Planning in the Face of Power*,

ABSTRACT This paper describes the process of metropolitan planning and decision making in Kolkata, India. Despite widespread belief that West Bengal has been a pioneer in democratic decentralization in India, this paper argues that the dominance of one political party and its hierarchical structure has thwarted the scope for effective bottom-up metropolitan planning in Kolkata. It questions the unchallenged dominance of partisan political actors in public decision making at the local level, and suggests a greater role for non-partisan and locally based civil society organizations. The case also demonstrates that these processes call for expertise in communicative people-centred practices and for shrewd strategic actors who understand the power dynamics of the wider political context. It highlights the need for policy makers to focus on the design of institutional mechanisms that allow for a more bottom-up approach to metropolitan planning through which to address common problems and define shared objectives.

KEYWORDS democratic decentralization / Kolkata / partisan politics / urban governance

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses an in-depth study of the process of metropolitan planning in Kolkata, India (previously called Calcutta). The key issue addressed here is the gap between the official *rhetoric* about democratic decentralization and bottom-up planning, and the political *reality*. The focus is on the dynamic interactions between planners and the operation of the political process, which shape this reality. More specifically, I ask: "How do elected officials at different governmental levels, professional planners and ordinary citizens interact? Which players are dominant in the process of metropolitan planning?"

This paper illustrates that the hierarchical structure of the state government and the dominance of one political party in Kolkata have prevented bottom-up pressures in metropolitan decision making. It suggests that metropolitan planning has to focus on the design of institutional mechanisms⁽¹⁾ through which to address common problems and determine shared values and objectives. The case also demonstrates that these processes call for expertise in communicative people-centred practices⁽²⁾ and shrewd strategic actors who understand the power dynamics of the wider political context.⁽³⁾ In addition, it questions the unchallenged dominance of partisan political actors in public decision

making at the local level, and suggests instead a greater role for non-partisan and locally based civil society organizations.⁽⁴⁾

The empirical material for this case study comes from direct, sometimes participant, observation, from interviews with the actors⁽⁵⁾ involved in the metropolitan planning process in Kolkata, and from documents produced by the planning agency, by other organizations and individuals involved with the metropolitan planning in Kolkata and by the state government. The scale of the study (metropolitan versus municipal level in most cases), the subject matter (the planning process, not a project) and the political tradition (post-colonial, single-party hegemony in an electoral democracy as compared, for instance, to European and North American liberal democratic traditions) all add to the specificity and uniqueness of this case.⁽⁶⁾

II. BACKGROUND

There is a growing awareness among development institutions and scholars of the need to empower individuals and households by addressing what Arjun Appadurai calls "capacity to aspire".⁽⁷⁾ in order to go beyond relationships of patronage between local elites and ordinary citizens. This "capacity to aspire" is conceived by Appadurai as a cultural capacity. In a detailed ethnographic account of a pro-poor alliance of housing activists based in Mumbai who are building a global coalition to serve their vision, Appadurai sees a kind of grassroots globalization⁽⁸⁾ that has replicated itself in more than a dozen countries in Africa and Asia (notably in India, South Africa and Thailand). He points out:

"In this ongoing exercise, which is a textbook case of what 'empowerment' could really mean, important segments of Mumbai's slum dwellers are exercising collectively the sinews of the capacity to aspire, while testing their capacities to convince skeptics from the funding world, the banking world, the construction industry and the municipality of Mumbai that they can deliver what they promise, while building their capacities to plan, coordinate, manage and mobilize their energies in a difficult and large-scale technical endeavour."⁽⁹⁾

It is reasonable to ask the question: if grassroots mobilization was so successful in "empowering" marginalized communities in Mumbai to negotiate in metropolitan decision making, why has it failed to have a similar impact in Kolkata, a metropolis of similar size in the same country? Civic activism in the area of urban planning in Kolkata has been documented as having failed.⁽¹⁰⁾ This is despite the fact that the state of West Bengal, of which Kolkata is the capital, has had an elected communist government advocating democratic decentralization and bottom-up planning in the state for the last 28 years. West Bengal is widely believed to have provided the longest and most elaborate experiment in local democracy in India.⁽¹¹⁾ Kolkata's failure takes on added significance when we note the international recognition of the Mumbai Alliance model. There is a need for comparative research⁽¹²⁾ in order to better understand the differences in contexts that might explain the differences in grassroots empowerment in cities in India.

University of California Press, Berkeley; also Innes, J E (1996), "Planning through consensus building – a new view of the comprehensive planning ideal", *Journal of the American Planning Association* Vol 62, No 4, pages 460–472.

3. See reference 2, Forester (1989); also Huxley, M (2000), "The limits to communicative planning", *Journal of Planning Education and Research* Vol 19, No 4, pages 369–377; Flyvbjerg, B (1998), *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL; and Yiftachel, O (2000), "Social control, urban planning and ethno-class relations: Mizrahi Jews in Israel's 'development towns'", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol 24, No 2, pages 418–438.

4. See Mitlin, D (2004), "Reshaping local democracy", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 3–8.

5. Interviewees were mostly key political actors in the planning process at the state, metropolitan, municipal and ward committee levels. They also included a number of senior and mid-level planners from Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), independent urban policy consultants, civic activists, academicians and ordinary citizens. I used a snowball technique to identify interviewees, i.e. each of my interviewees referred me to other potential interviewees who they thought would be able to answer my questions.

6. For similar case studies, see Meyerson, N M and E C Banfield (1955), *Politics, Planning and Public Interest: The Case of Public Housing in Chicago*, Free Press, New York; also see reference 3, Flyvbjerg (1998); Friend, J K and W N Jessop (1969), *Local Government and Strategic Choice: An Operational*

Research Approach to the Processes of Public Planning, Tavistock Publications, London; Kitchen, T (1997), *People, Politics, Policies and Plans: The City Planning Process in Contemporary Britain*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London; Doig, J W (1995), "Politics and the engineering mind: O H Ammann and the hidden story of the George Washington bridge", in D C Perry (editor), *Building the Public City: The Politics, Governance and Finance of Public Infrastructure*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, pages 21-70; Savitch, H V and R K Vogel (editors) (1996), *Regional Politics: America in a Post-City Age*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi; and Pinto, M R (2000), *Metropolitan City Governance in India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London.

7. Appadurai, A (2004), "The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition", in V Rao and M Walton (editors), *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

8. Appadurai, A (2001), "Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics", *Public Culture* Vol 14, pages 22-46.

9. See reference 7, page 73.

10. Mageli, E (2004), "Housing mobilization in Calcutta – empowerment for the masses or awareness for the few?", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 129-137.

11. Thomas Isaac, T M and R W Franke (2002), *Local Democracy and Development: The Kerala People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, page 15.

12. My research involved only a single case study, with

I argue here that, until not so long ago, Kolkata had no less an active urban social movement in the form of NGO activism and voluntarism than Mumbai. Eldrid Mageli has described the long and rich tradition of associational life from the colonial times in Kolkata, which contributed to the use of the term "Bengali Renaissance" to characterize this epoch.⁽¹³⁾ She also describes the disillusionment with the government performance in substantially improving the lives of the poor in the late 1960s and 1970s in West Bengal. Economic crises and political instability, droughts, floods, price rises and the influx of refugees after the liberation of Bangladesh contributed to the emergence of a new generation of social and political activists. In Kolkata, numerous civil rights groups were formed to protest the imposition of a national state of emergency in 1975. Soon after, people's participation and the empowerment of the poor became part of the new rhetoric among NGO activists. In particular, an alliance similar to the one in Mumbai evolved under the initiative of a Kolkata-based NGO called Unnayan (a Bengali word meaning "development"). It consisted of a community-based organization (CBO) called Chhinnamul Sramajibi Adhikari Samity and the National Campaign for Housing Rights, which engaged in advocacy and lobbying within the government's policy-making process. The launch of the National Campaign for Housing Rights at the national level led Unnayan to be regarded as significant in the urban social movement, not just in Kolkata but also throughout India. Eventually, in the late 1990s, the NGO and the campaign lost steam and disintegrated.

If we delve deeper into Unnayan's failure to sustain a significant role in metropolitan planning, we find hints of political fragmentation. Many of the Unnayan workers were members of the radical Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the general perception among these field-workers was that the organization was being driven by foreign-educated, upper-middle-class elites, a trend which seemed to result in class fragmentation and the ultimate demise of the organization.⁽¹⁴⁾

Non-partisan, non-governmental organizations in Kolkata existed not just in the past. In areas other than urban development planning, Kolkata still has examples of successful civic activism. A case in point is HIV/AIDS prevention among the prostitutes of Kolkata's red light district of Sonagachhi. Instead of using health extension workers to spread AIDS awareness and increase condom use, in 1992 a team of doctors trained a small group of 12 sex workers as peer educators, to pass on information to their co-workers. This mobilization of sex workers for HIV/AIDS intervention led, over a period of two or three years, to a metamorphosis in the sex workers' aspirations. They founded a union called Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC – literally meaning Powerful Women Coordination Committee) to fight for legalization, a reduction in police harassment, and other rights.⁽¹⁵⁾ The mobilization of this marginalized and stigmatized population has been widely acclaimed, not just nationally but internationally. Now, sex workers from all over Asia visit Kolkata to learn from DMSC how to organize themselves to demand legal rights and protection, how to practice safe sex and how to resist those who try to take away their hard-earned incomes.⁽¹⁶⁾ My hypothesis is that DMSC's success is attributable to the political space around these marginalized women. The social stigma attached to prostitution in Kolkata's conservative society discouraged political parties from co-opting HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness activities among prostitutes. This allowed

NGOs and civic activists to become involved and to work with the sex workers in a way that was hugely successful.

a. Hypothesis

Based on the experiences of Unnayan and DMSC, I developed the following hypothesis: extreme politicization of public decision making along party lines prevents access to the political space needed in order for non-partisan, non-state civic associations to participate effectively in the planning process in Kolkata. That is, excessive politicization of local decision making is in fact detrimental to the cause of decentralized metropolitan planning.

There has been insufficient literature evaluating the established notion that the presence of an *elected* local government is a sufficient condition for decentralized planning and decision making. I argue here that local elections are only one of the many necessary conditions that encourage metropolitan planning by consolidation of plans from the bottom-up. Other conditions include active non-partisan grassroots organizations, effective political opposition to the ruling party, and an independent planning bureaucracy.

I selected Kolkata for this study because I considered the city to be the "most likely" critical case that would yield information permitting logical deductions of the type: ". . . if this is [not] valid for this case, then it applies to all [no] cases."⁽¹⁷⁾ I intended to generalize on the basis of a single case study. One of the misunderstandings about a case study is that it is most useful for generating hypotheses in the first steps of a total research process, while hypothesis testing and theory building are best carried out by other methods later on in the process. My argument is this: the West Bengali government is widely recognized as being in the forefront of "democratic decentralization" in India, using elections at the local level as a means to achieve it. If there is a deficit in democratic decentralization and bottom-up planning even in Kolkata, the lead city in West Bengal, then there is a need to examine more closely the institutions of governance that only rely on local elections to promote democratic decentralization in other cities in India.

III. DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One of the issues that planners deal with is the identification of the right geographical/administrative scale at which to intervene in the face of a planning problem. If a household or neighbourhood needs additional drinking water, the solution might be to dig a tubewell. If a town needs additional water, an expansion of the local water treatment plant might meet the requirements. If a whole region has a water shortfall, a system of dams to hold water and a network of artificial canals to carry the water might be a solution. There is no single best level, then, on which an administrative structure should be situated.⁽¹⁸⁾ Planning intervention in the public domain needs to address each problem at the appropriate scale. Also, each level of planning intervention affects planning at the next higher level. For example, each additional tubewell that the neighbourhood installs will cause additional pressure on the groundwater reserves

limited comparison to metropolitan planning in other cities. Nevertheless, the case study selection (Kolkata) was based on the idea of comparing Kolkata with the political and planning culture in cities such as Mumbai – whose civic activism and political and planning culture have already been extensively researched.

13. Magelli, E (2001), *NGO Activism in Calcutta 1973–1997: Exploring Unnayan*, Faculty of Arts, University of Oslo, pages 26–48.

14. See reference 13, page 221.

15. Rao, V and M Walton (2004), "Culture and public action: relationality, equality of agency, and development", in Rao and Walton (editors), see reference 7, pages 3–36.

16. Bhaumik, S (2005), "India sex workers demand rights", BBC News On-line, accessible at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4256412.stm.

17. See Flyvbjerg, B (2004), "Five misunderstandings about case study research", in C Seale, G Gobo, J F Gubrium and D Silverman (editors), *Qualitative Research Practice*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, pages 420–434.

18. See Berg, L, H A Klink et al. (1993), *Governing Metropolitan Regions*, Avebury, Aldershot, UK.

in areas beyond the neighbourhood. So the municipality might have to take steps to augment the groundwater reserves and limit its depletion through regulations, projects or programmes.

This example is a simplified version of a “bottom-up planning” process in which plans at one level are consolidated in the plan-making process for the next, higher level. Consolidation of plans takes place from individual household level, to neighbourhood, municipal, metropolitan, state, national and even to international level. Each successively higher level is thought to intervene so as to support the actions taken by the lower levels of administration. In India, the Constitution and the legal framework have been designed to support such “planning from below”.⁽¹⁹⁾

As we all know, public planning never follows a truly bottom-up process. There are two underlying assumptions, however, for idealizing such a bottom-up process. One is that the power is evenly distributed in space (so that there is no scope for such things as NIMBY or environmental racism) and across different levels of government. The second assumption is that the “values” that shape our normative view of society and that set the goals for planning are shared universally. In reality, neither of these assumptions holds ground. A truly bottom-up system of planning may therefore not be feasible in the real world. This realization a couple of decades ago caused the planning literature to move away from using the phrase “bottom-up” to describe the strategies by which various local-level voices are inserted in the public planning process. The phrase that has gained much currency lately is “participatory planning”. This phrase has come to mean, among other things, a process by which a community undertakes to reach a given socioeconomic goal by consciously diagnosing its problems and charting a course of action to resolve those problems. The process includes limited mediation by the next higher level of community aggregation. Experts are needed in this process, but only as facilitators.

From where, then, do questions regarding democratic decentralization or its impact on participation in planning in the public domain arise? There is an inherent complexity in the relationship between decision making by existing state agencies, including elected representatives and government bodies, and decision making emerging from participatory planning and governance. Many elected politicians oppose most forms of participatory governance because they see themselves as the legitimate decision takers, elected by citizens through a democratic process, and they believe such participatory processes take decisions and control away from them.⁽²⁰⁾ There are some scholars who have argued that participatory planning (just like participatory governance) is a “. . . *necessary complement to representative democracy*.”⁽²¹⁾ Representative democracy often fails to represent the interests of less powerful groups, especially in situations of resource scarcity, where elections become a way of allocating limited state benefits rather than making political choices. In North America, Europe and Australia, there is already recognition of the need to infuse representative/electoral democracy with participatory democracy (e.g. by funding non-statutory groups, delegation to neighbourhood/community groups, referenda, citizen ballots, etc.). This research suggests a similar need for the so-called “developing” countries.

19. Bandyopadhyay, D (2000), “Planning from below: is planning commission performing its role?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 34, 18 March, pages 982–983.

20. See Etemadi, F (2004), “The politics of engagement: gains and challenges of the NGO coalition in Cebu City”, *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 79–93; also Cabannes, Y (2004), “Participatory budgeting: a significant contribution to participatory democracy”, *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 27–46.

21. Mittin, D (2004), “Civil society organizations: do they make a difference to urban poverty?”, in N Devas (editor), *Urban Governance, Voice and Poverty in the Developing World*, Earthscan, London, Sterling, VA, pages 123–144.

IV. THE CONTEXT FOR METROPOLITAN PLANNING IN KOLKATA

The urban hierarchies that existed immediately after Independence have been replaced by the emergence of new cores and peripheries. The old hierarchy of four megacities (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai) located in different regions of the country is giving way to urban corridors and clusters of new investment located mostly in the southern and western parts of the country.⁽²²⁾ Only eight of the 23 metropolitan cities fall into what Shaw⁽²³⁾ calls the “periphery” (a broad term that encompasses all those regions not experiencing growth of the type described above). The periphery contains regions and cities that once saw better times, and Kolkata best epitomizes this decline. Kolkata today ranks fourth – after Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai – in many important economic functions. Although its decline began with the loss of capital city status in 1911, it was hastened further by the overall decline in manufacturing that has beset the state of West Bengal since the early 1960s, and which persists.

In the 1960s, West Bengal, along with Maharashtra, was India’s leading industrial state, accounting for 14 per cent of India’s industrial output. This had fallen to 9.8 per cent by 1980–81 and 5.6 per cent by 1992–93. Industrial decline has affected all spheres of business and commerce, and is reflected in the slowly declining level of Kolkata’s share of port and airport in all-India foreign trade. According to 1964 figures, Kolkata port handled 92 per cent (by tonnage) of India’s exports and 25 per cent of its imports.⁽²⁴⁾ In 1985–86, 10.57 per cent of India’s exports and 9.57 per cent of India’s imports together passed through Kolkata’s port and airport. By 1995, these figures had fallen to 2.69 per cent and 5.5 per cent, respectively.⁽²⁵⁾

Politically, Kolkata and the rest of West Bengal went through various periods of turmoil in the first three decades after Independence. First, the partition of Bengal led to two massive influxes of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), once in 1947 and again in 1971. This put additional pressure on the already crippled infrastructure of Kolkata. Second, the violence of the radical Naxalite movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and its brutal suppression, and the rise of “electoral communism” (Box 1) posed challenges to the existing Congress Party’s grip on the state. Finally, the electoral victory of the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI–M)-led coalition of left parties⁽²⁶⁾ in the state legislature in 1977, and its subsequent consolidation of power at all governmental levels within West Bengal, has led to its continuing in office for six consecutive terms spanning 28 years. Subsequent sections of this paper present more elaborate discussions of the consequences of one party’s dominance in the political landscape in West Bengal over such a long period of time.

V. THE CASE: METROPOLITAN PLANNING IN KOLKATA

a. Multiplicity of planning institutions

The planning institutions in India are complex and often have overlapping jurisdictions. At the national level, the function of the National Planning Commission is mostly recommendatory and includes preparing the model for a plan to allocate national resources among various central

22. Shaw, A (1999), “Emerging patterns of urban growth in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 34, Nos 16/17, pages 969–978.

23. See reference 22.

24. See Banerjee, T and S Chakravorty (1994), “Transfer of planning technology and local political economy – a retrospective analysis of Calcutta’s planning”, *Journal of the American Planning Association* Vol 60, No 1, pages 71–82.

25. See reference 22.

26. The coalition is popularly known as the Left Front.

27. See Shourie, A (2004), *Governance and the Sclerosis that has Set In*, ASA Rupa & Co, New Delhi, page 95.

28. See reference 19.

29. Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (2001), *Vision 2025: Perspective Plan of CMA* (Interim Draft), Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority, page 2.

30. See reference 19.

31. Burra, S (2005), "Towards a pro-poor framework for slum upgrading in Mumbai, India", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 17, No 1, April, pages 67–88.

32. This fact is discussed in greater detail in Benjamin, S (2000), "Governance, economic settings and poverty in Bangalore", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 12, No 1, April, pages 35–56.

33. See reference 31.

34. On 22 September 2001, the government of West Bengal and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation evicted some 20,000 people from Tolly Nullah; on 10 December 2002, another 40,000 people were evicted in Kolkata; on 2 February 2003, some 7,000 dalits were evicted; and on 15 December 2003, 75,000 people from the canal-side settlements at Bagbazar and Cossipore area were evicted. See Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (<http://www.achr.net/impacts.htm>) for details.

35. See reference 31, page 88.

government ministries and among different states. Even some within the commission increasingly regard these tasks as irrelevant.⁽²⁷⁾ The commission has also come under attack for failing to incorporate into its national plans the constitutionally mandated district and metropolitan plans prepared by the district and metropolitan planning commissions, respectively, which are constitutional entities.⁽²⁸⁾

Planning functions at the sub-national scale have been assigned to different agencies at different levels. At the state level, planning boards have been set up. These boards are neither constitutional bodies nor are they statutory entities (the same is true for the National Planning Commission). The state five-year plans generally follow the formula of the national plans, not only in content but also in methods and techniques of preparation of plans.⁽²⁹⁾ The main task, then, of the state planning boards is to allocate state resources to various districts and local urban bodies within the state. However, these boards are afflicted with problems similar to those of the National Planning Commission discussed above. These boards do not concern themselves with spatial planning in the context of sectoral planning for housing, infrastructure, land use, and urban and rural development:

"There is nothing in the Constitution to indicate how these district plans [and likewise the metropolitan plans] would be integrated into the state plan. Theoretically, state plans could be prepared independently, totally ignoring the district draft plans. In that case, it would be an ungainly caricature of planning from below."⁽³⁰⁾

India's Constitution is federal insofar as certain areas of concern fall within the legislative domain of the government of India (for example, foreign affairs, defence and finance). Other areas fall within the states' jurisdiction (for example, housing and urban development), and in other areas (such as education, criminal law, economic and social planning) both the central and state governments have jurisdiction. With regard to urban development, central government can influence states in only limited ways, through national policies that the states are not obligated to follow and through centrally sponsored schemes implemented through budgetary transfers to the states.⁽³¹⁾

Despite progressive policies in the past, many state governments in India have continued to implement flawed urban development policies with little or no concern for the urban poor and other politically marginalized sections of urban society.⁽³²⁾ Between December 2004 and February 2005, 50,000–70,000 hutments were demolished in Maharashtra (whose capital is Mumbai), in violation of poll promises and of international covenants to which India is a signatory.⁽³³⁾ Similar demolitions have occurred in other cities in India, including Kolkata.⁽³⁴⁾ As described by Burra:

"[T]hese actions by the government raise fundamental doubts about the health of self-professed democracies in the absence of counter-acting powers, and underline the vulnerability of the poor where there is a consensus across political parties, significant sections of the media, and captains of industry and trade."⁽³⁵⁾

b. Kolkata's post-Independence planning experience

Kolkata's post-colonial planning experience is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it included an unprecedented effort to transfer western planning technology (mainly through the Ford Foundation) to a Third World city. Second, this particular transfer represented a major "paradigm shift" – from the highly codified physical master planning of the British Colonial administration to a performance and mission-oriented strategic planning approach heavily influenced by contemporary social sciences. Third, it serves as a graphic example of how the larger picture of a city's future is drawn by the forces of politics and economics.⁽³⁶⁾ (See Box 1 for more details.)

The Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) today is an organization in decline,⁽³⁷⁾ having earlier been the supreme planning body in Kolkata. According to the West Bengal Town and Country Planning Act, 1979, the KMDA was made the statutory planning body for metropolitan Kolkata. (This Act was modelled on the British Town and Country Planning Act.) The Municipal Development Programme initiated in the 1980s by the Left Front government in West Bengal was an effort to decentralize planning and curtail the powers of the KMDA. In the 1983–84 financial year, during the third phase of the Calcutta Urban Development Programme, some major changes were introduced in the area of metropolitan planning in Kolkata.⁽³⁸⁾ Some of the local governments were allocated a budget by the state government to be spent on locally identified development projects. They prepared a plan of action for five years based on a set of guidelines given to them by the state government (such as encouragement for using locally available technology, an emphasis on sanitation and water supply, financial discipline, revenue performance targets with incentives and penalties attached to funding). This was a major departure from earlier practices where all development projects were planned and executed by the KMDA. Because of its earlier centralized planning process, the KMDA had failed, in most cases, to appreciate the local-level needs and priorities of the residents. In addition, when the KMDA finished a particular infrastructure project, the urban local body was expected to operate and maintain it. A number of problems in maintaining the newly created infrastructure cropped up because of mismanagement, due to the reluctance of the urban local bodies to take ownership of the project.

c. Democratic decentralization

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 mark a watershed in the evolution of local-level planning and decision making in India. For the first time, the *gram panchayats* (village councils) in rural India and the municipalities and municipal corporations in urban India were accorded constitutional status in these two amendments. They were therefore raised to the status of "government" at the local level, like the union government at the national level and the state governments at the state level. These constitutional amendments were followed by state legislation compatible with these amendments, and the legal framework for "planning from below" was established throughout the country by April 1994.

These developments bestowed constitutional status on "planning" at

36. See reference 24.

37. Sanyal, B and M Tewari (1990), *Politics and Institutions in Urban Development: The Story of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority*, Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, Washington DC.

38. Information from interview with Kalyan Roy, Director (Macroeconomics), KMDA.

BOX 1

Institutionalized planning in post-Independence Kolkata

The urgency of planning for Kolkata was first recognized after a public health crisis in 1958, when an outbreak of cholera in the city claimed about 250 lives. In 1959, a team from the World Health Organization recommended immediate planning for a potable water supply, drainage and sewerage, and a general planning effort to address the abominable conditions of the city's transportation system, housing, slums and land use. In 1960, the Ford Foundation was enlisted to advise on a Kolkata planning project.

However, when Ford Foundation consultants arrived in Kolkata in the early 1960s, there was no state or local agency with responsibility for urban or regional planning. An authority was needed to receive the advice of the Ford Foundation experts, thus the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) was created in 1961 to plan for the entire metropolitan area and to offer the experts a base.

The influence of the American planning style on the workings of the CMPO was apparent from the very beginning. Despite the presence of prominent land use planners, the conventional British master plan approach, still popular in much of the world, was dropped, and the Basic Development Plan (BDP) concept was advanced instead. Such a plan was seen as much more encompassing and strategic in scope than a physical master plan. The BDP was to emphasize economic development within the regional context.

The planning document proposed that separate detailed plans for water and sanitation and for traffic and transportation be made within the overall framework of the BDP, whose recommendations nevertheless remained indicative only. That is, instead of earmarking specific projects, the BDP should simply outline the desired direction of growth. The plan was meant to be comprehensive, covering all facets of urban life including health, education, recreation and beautification. An urban policy planning exercise of such scope had never before been attempted in India. The data requirements were immense, while the resources were scant.

The document finally published in December 1966 was the first perspective plan for Kolkata. It was expected to cover the 20-year period from 1966 to 1986. Although the BDP was never intended to be project-specific, by then it included a list of projects already underway or under consideration. This list of specifics, although perhaps inevitable, greatly compromised the plan's original intent. Yet the list turned out to be the very essence of the BDP. Other criticisms of the BDP did not surface publicly at that point. Over time, however, the BDP's emphasis on economic development was criticized as grandiose but lacking in tangible prescriptions for generating hard revenue. The plan was also criticized as remiss with regard to encouraging participation by local urban public works agencies (e.g. the Calcutta Improvement Trust) or local governments (municipalities or municipal corporations within metropolitan Kolkata). Moreover, the role of the informal sector in economic development, despite its preponderance in Kolkata employment, was not incorporated into the BDP perspective.

But what really upstaged the BDP were the political changes that began in the late sixties. By the mid-1960s, the leftist political parties led by the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI–M) had made strong inroads into state politics. In the 1967 state elections, the BDP's principal patron, the Congress Party, which had held uninterrupted power in the state since Independence in 1947, lost to a coalition of leftist parties. Although technically the BDP survived, it was pushed aside by the political instability of subsequent years. The next four years saw three elections and several coalition governments of left- and right-wing parties, each lasting for about a year on average. The political instability and partisan infighting soon escalated to widespread violence, triggered mainly by a new radical force, the Naxalite movement. With a Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Naxalites rejected the democratic process and sought to capture the state through revolution. They challenged the authority of the established political parties, especially that of the CPI–M. The resulting confrontations led to political conflict and violence throughout the state of West Bengal. As the political chaos continued unabated, the national government (with the Congress Party in power) finally intervened. What was needed at once in Kolkata (and West Bengal), the reasoning went, was a massive infusion of funds for physical improvement projects that would improve the physical city, create jobs and, ultimately, counteract the rising twin forces of "revolutionary Marxism" and "electoral Marxism".

Continued

Accordingly, a special presidential decree created the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (now the KMDA) to serve as a conduit for funds. Ostensibly, the purpose of the KMDA was to coordinate the implementation of projects and not to duplicate the functions of the Calcutta Improvement Trust and other line agencies. The KMDA was flush with funds from the central government and the World Bank and, in order to move expediently, it adopted the BDP's appended list of projects as its own mandate. The underlying assumption was that "better" infrastructure would lead to a "better" and less Marxist city. Thus in 1974, the KMDA, with the help of a US\$ 35 million World Bank loan, began major projects in Kolkata. It is noteworthy that the World Bank chose only 44 out of 160 BDP-recommended projects that met the Bank's criteria and development philosophy. Thus the bustee (slum) improvement programme, which has been widely acknowledged as a major KMDA achievement, was not among the projects funded by the World Bank.

Curiously, the CMPO, the original planning organization that gave birth to the BDP, was neither abandoned nor folded into the newly created KMDA, but was allowed to continue its planning mission. Meanwhile however, the KMDA had the authority to plan and the funds to implement. In 1977, the CMPO was formally merged into the Town and Country Planning Organization (TCPO), a state agency; overnight, the CMPO, an urban planning body, became responsible for planning for villages and for those cities that did not yet have any planning or development authority.

It is now clear that since the departure from Kolkata of foreign experts, the institutional apparatus for planning has undergone several mutations, as it has adapted to local expertise, politics and bureaucracy. Meanwhile, institutions involved in planning have proliferated. The TCPO is engaged in planning outside Kolkata; the State Planning Board, although more policy-oriented and ostensibly concerned with statewide issues, also maintains a strong interest in urban matters and in Kolkata's affairs. Such institutions (and commissions, task forces, research organizations) are predictable bureaucratic responses to complex social problems in developing countries, serving as effective foils for political heat, diffusing accountability and excusing failure to act.

SOURCE: Banerjee, T and S Chakravorty (1994), "Transfer of planning technology and local political economy – a retrospective analysis of Calcutta's planning", *Journal of the American Planning Association* Vol 60, No 1, pages 71–82.

three levels: the village and municipal level; the district level; and the metropolitan level. The National Planning Commission at the national level was established by executive fiat and has no constitutional status. But local- and regional (district)-level planning were accorded constitutional status, which underscores the importance the national political class attached to "decentralized" planning.⁽³⁹⁾ The intent of the constitutional amendments was to induce the state legislatures to make such laws as would lead to a devolution of power and responsibility to the municipalities with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice.

The Left Front government that replaced the Congress government in 1977 had already adopted a decentralized planning and development policy, as discussed earlier. But for a city-region like Kolkata, with 41 contiguous urban local bodies and 100 or so rural local bodies, some of the planning interventions and physical infrastructure cut across the boundaries of local bodies. The need was felt for a metropolitan-wide planning body to administer such a planning exercise.

In this regard, the state of West Bengal enacted the West Bengal Metropolitan Planning Committee Act, 1994, for the purpose of decentralized spatial and socioeconomic planning in Kolkata. The Act provided for the constitution of the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee (KMPC) and for the preparation of a draft development plan for the metropolitan area as a whole by consolidating the development plans for

39. Bhattacharya, M (1998), "Municipal planning in the perspective of 74th Amendment", *Nagarlok* Vol 30, No 4, pages 1–7.

its constituent municipalities and *gram panchayats* (village councils). Two-thirds of the committee is elected by, and from among, the elected councillors of the 41 municipalities and around 100 chairpersons of the village councils in the Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA). Another one-third of the committee is made up of nominated representatives of the government of India and the state government, and of organizations and institutions relating to urban development and infrastructure. It took seven years after the enactment of the Act before the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee was formed and started deliberating.

The KMDA was made the technical secretariat of the KMPC, following which the KMDA was asked to prepare a perspective plan for the KMA. This they did by 2001, as *Vision 2025: Perspective Plan of CMA*.⁽⁴⁰⁾ It is worth noting that a perspective plan with a time horizon of 20 years had already been prepared by the State Planning Board.⁽⁴¹⁾

The intent of the KMPC is to consolidate local needs and priorities as expressed in the municipal development plans for the local bodies into a metropolitan development plan. This invariably involves resource allocation within the KMA that has variable impacts upon different local bodies within the metropolitan area. Thus the KMPC is also envisioned as assisting in managing conflicts among various local bodies within the KMA and letting the local bodies negotiate development-related allocation with the state government. The KMPC is currently⁽⁴²⁾ in the process of finalizing five sectoral plans for the KMA.

It is a hard reality that the preparation of municipal development plans as laid out by the Constitution cannot be undertaken by the municipalities on their own because of a lack of organizational capacity.⁽⁴³⁾ And given their fiscal constraints, the municipalities will remain unable to bear the financial costs of having the necessary planning expertise “in-house”. A cost-effective and workable alternative is for a multidisciplinary expert group to prepare model development plans for municipalities of each size (small, medium and large), and the KMDA has offered to prepare model plans for two municipalities within the KMA (Titagarh and Barrackpore). It remains to be seen how successful these model plans will be as a tool to enable other municipalities to prepare plans themselves (Figure 1).

VI. PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF PARTISAN POLITICS

There is a story of a would-be school teacher who was asked during an interview by the principal of a conservative religious school: “*Is the earth flat or round?*” The hapless teacher looked around at the faces of the interviewers for hints and, not finding any, settled for: “*I can teach it flat or round.*” This story might help us to understand the relationship between the planners of Kolkata and their political bosses at the state and local levels. In this section of the paper, I discuss the influence of the political culture at the state level on the planning process at the local and metropolitan levels.

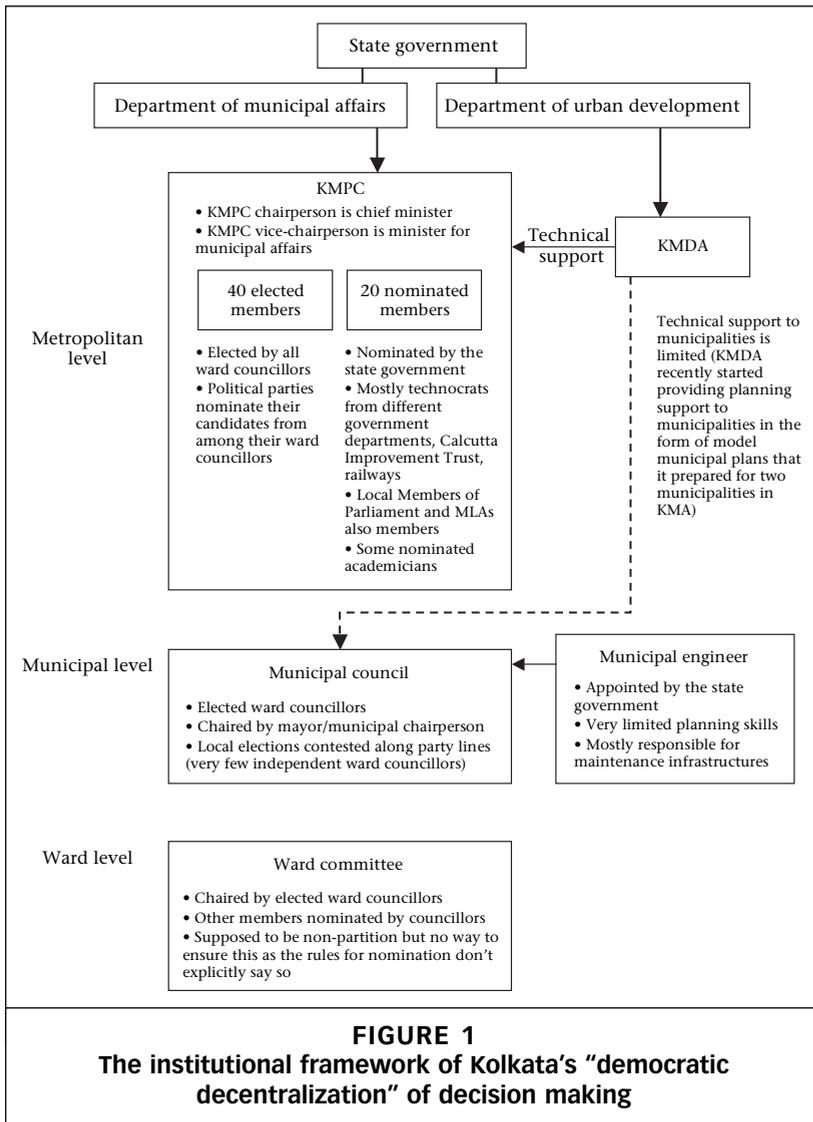
The Left Front (a coalition of nine leftist political parties led and dominated by the CPI-M) defeated the ruling Congress Party and came to power in West Bengal in 1977. The coalition has won all state-level elections ever since. Immediately after coming to power, the CPI-M in 1978 held local level elections in the state, winning a landslide victory.

40. See reference 29.

41. State Planning Board (1990), *A Perspective Plan for Calcutta: 2011*, Development and Planning Department, State Planning Board, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta.

42. The fieldwork was conducted between August 2004 and January 2005.

43. See reference 39.



As already noted, the initial electoral successes of the CPI–M were largely due to the popularity of its land redistribution policy, mostly among the rural poor. Over the last 28 years, it has consolidated its power base throughout the state, including in the urban areas,⁽⁴⁴⁾ not always by fair means. The sheer length of time that the party has maintained its hold on the state administration has made the line separating the party and the state's administrative machinery (including the planning agencies, state-run educational institutions and the police) less distinct.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Both local and national media have time and again reported widespread electoral irregularities – rampant rigging, jamming of booths, casting of false votes, voter intimidation, assault of opposition candidates by CPI–M cadres and the police – in both municipal and state legislative assembly elections.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Although these allegations cannot be independently verified

44. In the most recent elections, held in 2005, the Left Front won 75 of the 141 seats in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The main opposition party, All-India Trinamul Congress, won 42 seats. In most of the other municipalities in the KMA, the Left Front won more than two-thirds majority. For example, in Bidhan Nagar Municipality, the Left Front won 18 out of 23 seats.

45. See Sanyal, S (2005), "Bogus Bengal: hasn't Alimuddin Street created some?", *The Statesman*, 15 February, Kolkata; also Sanyal, S (2004), "Unfair poll: West Bengal bracketed with Bihar", *The Statesman*, 6 May, Kolkata.

46. See Nambudiri, U (2005), *Bengal's Night Without End*, India First Foundation, New Delhi; also Statesman News Service (2005), "Ballot blows land thick & fast", *The Statesman*, 19 June, Kolkata; and "Card games", *The Telegraph*, 16 January 2006, Kolkata, page 1.

47. See Mathew, G (2003), "West Bengal – still a role model for *panchayat raj*", *PUCL Bulletin*, July.

48. "Gimmicks galore: fragmented opposition only helps Left Front", *The Statesman*, 24 February 2002, Kolkata.

49. See reference 32, page 54.

50. See Sarkar, Abhirup (2006), "Political economy of West Bengal: a puzzle and a hypothesis", *Economic and Political Weekly* 28 January, pages 341–348.

51. See reference 24.

– and for that matter the CPI-M also alleges that opposition parties indulge in poll-related violence – a matter of greater concern is the number of uncontested seats. In the local elections held in West Bengal in May 2003, about 6,300 seats (nearly 11 per cent of the seats) went uncontested, and most of them went to the CPI-M and its allies.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Although one can only speculate about the reasons for opposition parties not fielding candidates for these seats, the fact remains that one party has held sway over the state administration for a long period of time, and that this one-party status has led the state to a condition that can best be described as a pseudo-democracy.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that fraud and the threat of violence are the only reasons for the Left Front's continuous electoral victories. The opposition parties in the state are disorganized and highly fragmented. Internal divisions between factions in the main opposition party (the Trinamul Congress – TNC) and divisions among different opposition parties have helped the Left Front in the elections.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In addition, in sharp contrast to Bangalore where a significant number of elected officials are elected as independents without political affiliations,⁽⁴⁹⁾ Kolkata's electoral politics are extremely partisan in nature with very few independents winning elections.

In addition, a recent article⁽⁵⁰⁾ argues that economic stagnation and increasing informalization of West Bengal's economy, far from weakening the Left Front's hold in the state, have actually helped enhance its powers. Using social, economic and election data for West Bengal, Sarkar infers that the vulnerability of those who depend on the informal economy have made them increasingly dependent on the Left Front for protecting their livelihoods. He argues that if formal sector jobs were readily available in the state, and if the formal legal system were less costly in terms of time and money so that the common citizen could seek its protection, the people would have enjoyed a more secure life and hence dependence on politics would have been minimal. Even many among those who are employed in the formal economy in West Bengal – particularly those in state government institutions – believe that they owe their employment to the Left Front. A Class-IV staff member from a local state-run university in the municipality of Kalyani confided during an informal interview that he voted for the party that he believed was his *annadaata* (a Sanskrit word for "food provider", referring here to the CPI-M).

Within this political context, I attempt to understand the government's efforts to decentralize decision making in Kolkata. Although many officials in the West Bengal's Left Front government often claim that it was the pioneer in democratic decentralization and bottom-up planning in India, many scholars have noted a gap between the official rhetoric and the reality. Bannerjee and Chakravorty,⁽⁵¹⁾ for instance, describe it this way:

"In Calcutta, as in West Bengal and the rest of India, planning is done from the top-down. It has been argued that planning is fundamentally a 'state apparatus' . . . and that seems particularly true in India. After 40 years of post-colonial organizational developments, few municipalities can plan, and activism by citizen groups is minimal. Calcutta, despite its heightened political culture, is no exception. . . .

The apathy of [the] urban public means that the political parties have little incentive to decentralize planning. In examining the

recent experience with district-level planning in West Bengal, Ghosh⁽⁵²⁾ points out that the idea of bottom-up planning is contradictory to any political framework, regardless of who holds power. . . . And while the rural reforms pursued by the Left Front have significantly increased political awareness and participation at the *gram panchayat* and *panchayat samiti* levels, *partisan politics* [emphasis added] still shape its policies.”

This section of the paper provides evidence that reconfirms the mismatch between the strict top-down hierarchy in which political parties are organized and the approaches of bottom-up planning as envisioned by the constitutional amendments. As Susanne Rudolph notes,⁽⁵³⁾ not all kinds of civil societies (in her words “associationalism”) are friendly to democracy. Differentiating between types of associations might produce a better assessment of their effect on democracy. To this end, Rudolph addresses three questions:

- Are associations political or non-political and, if political, are they deliberative or interest-oriented?
- Are they hierarchical or egalitarian?
- Are they voluntary or natural (ascribed)?

According to her, such differences may be consequential for the relationships between associations and democracy. In the case of Kolkata, the dominant forms of civic associations that are part of the metropolitan decision-making process, i.e. the political parties, are political associations by definition and strictly hierarchical – that is, structured on Leninist-style principles of leadership. Members of this kind of association stand in dependent, clientelist relation to patrons. They are habituated to comply with and act on the directives of those in authority. As was pointed out by Rudolph, “. . . *hierarchical associations are not likely to create the sort of psychological and moral preconditions that generate the social capital considered a pre-condition for democracy.*”⁽⁵⁴⁾

An example of the hierarchical patron–client relationship between the elected members of the KMPC and the state government is illustrated by what a senior planner in the KMDA (who was also serving as a nominated member of the KMPC) had to say about KMPC meetings: “*We wouldn’t expect a councillor or a municipal chairperson [as one of the elected members of the KMPC] to oppose any suggestions made by their minister⁽⁵⁵⁾ [also belonging to the same party], would we?*”

Most ward councillors have political ambitions beyond ward- or municipal-level politics. To bring these ambitions to fruition, they need at least to avoid antagonizing their party leaders at the state level (if not actively seeking favours from them). And even those councillors and municipal chairpersons who would like to remain active only in local politics need the patronage of their party bosses at the state level in order to secure the party ticket to contest the next municipal election. This makes the power relation between the *state* and the *local* similar to that of a patron–client relationship. Such a relationship undermines the state government’s efforts towards democratic decentralization in urban development.

It is telling that in the quote above, the interviewee omitted any mention of elected members of the KMPC who came from political parties other than those that form part of the ruling coalition in the state

52. See Ghosh, Arun (1988), “Popular participation and decentralized planning”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 January, pages 66–68.

53. Rudolph, S H (2000), “Civil society and the realm of freedom”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 35, No 20, pages 1762–1769.

54. See reference 53.

55. The state government’s Minister for Urban Development and Municipal Affairs presides over KMPC meetings as the ex-officio vice-chairperson of KMPC. The Chief Minister of the state is the ex-officio chairperson of KMPC.

56. Each political party nominates candidates from among its ward councillors for the 40 elected seats in KMPC. So, again, the elections for KMPC membership are partisan in nature.

57. DIG stands for Deputy Inspector General of Police.

58. IAS stands for Indian Administrative Service, the post-Independence equivalent of the Indian Civil Service.

59. See reference 44.

60. See Friedmann, J (2004), "Globalization and the emerging culture of planning", revised version of a Paper that the author wrote for Chapter 7 of the UN-Habitat's flagship report *State of the World's Cities – 2004*, UN-Habitat.

government. Of course, this omitted group of ward- and municipal-level politicians would be freer to voice their local concerns during metropolitan-level deliberations. But they are only a handful in number compared to the majority who belong to the ruling Left Front coalition.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In addition, according to another nominated member of the KMPC, most elected KMPC members from political parties outside the Left Front fail to take an active interest in the workings of the KMPC – they feel they have very little political influence in decision making through the KMPC due to their very limited representation. They seldom attend KMPC meetings.

Such hierarchical patronage relationships are not limited to the circle of elected local officials. They also apply to the technocrats employed by the KMDA, including their planners. In discussions with the planning officials from the KMDA, and a few academicians who have turned to advising the state government on issues relating to decentralized governance, urban planning and public decision making, there seems to be a general sense of approval of (and in some instances, enthusiastic support for) the Left Front government in the state and in many municipalities in the KMA. Some, however, have noted and voiced their concerns over the lack of independence of the bureaucratic machinery in the state of West Bengal from the influence of dominant political parties:

"[T]here is none in West Bengal today who has not witnessed vote fraud in some form. Consider the methods of intimidating the voters of the opposition parties that the CPI–M uses to achieve uncontested victory – 'motorbike brigades', ostracism, threats of rape, actual murder and all that. And who has not seen the televised reports of vote rigging at the Salt Lake [one of the municipalities within the KMA] civic poll in 2000, with Alapan Bandyopadhyay, district magistrate [who coincidentally was to be made the CEO of the KMDA during the course of my fieldwork in 2004], and Gautam Chakraborty, DIG,⁽⁵⁷⁾ Presidency Range, looking on as non-plussed bystanders?

A much-respected former IAS⁽⁵⁸⁾ officer says a government officer must deal with governments run by rival parties in order to realize what it means to achieve stability in a democracy despite political flux. In this view, those who joined the services in 1977, and are going to retire before long, without working with any government other than the Left Front, have clearly developed a vested interest in inefficiency by being party to the vote fraud."⁽⁵⁹⁾

This holds true not only for IAS officers working in state departments but also for planners working in the KMDA. The CEO of the KMDA is usually an IAS officer on deputation by the state government. Most often, CEOs have little or no planning experience; their professional training is mainly in the area of public administration. Friedmann⁽⁶⁰⁾ has already noted that India's planning function is directed by the elite civil service bureaucrats. And Indian civil service entrance exams favour general knowledge over specific skills, leading to criticism that the civil service lacks professional and technical proficiency in areas such as planning. In addition, the ruling political party is highly influential in decisions on matters such as the promotion and transfer of these bureaucrats. An event worth noting was the occasion, reported in a newspaper editorial, when a district magistrate deliberately ignored vote rigging by the ruling party, and was later deputed to head the organization entrusted with Kolkata's planning. His

ability to perform his duties as CEO of Kolkata's planning agency – to speak truth in the face of power – comes under question with his supposed close relations with the powers that be. This is an extreme example of the blurring of the theoretical separation between *power* and *rationality*, similar to what Flyvbjerg⁽⁶¹⁾ finds in his Aalborg project in Denmark.

It is fair to conclude that, since the setting up of the KMPC, with the KMDA as its technical secretariat, the latent function of the KMDA's planners has been "... *mere rationalization of political decisions*"⁽⁶²⁾ already made by the politically stronger interests within the KMPC. It is worth mentioning here that, based on my analysis of the minutes of the KMPC's various sector committee meetings, only rarely did the nominated (non-elected) members (representing planners and engineers from various public agencies such as the KMDA, Port Trust of India, Indian Railways etc.) of the KMPC propose any new plan or alternatives to existing plans, or oppose any of the proposals that came from the elected members (politicians) of the KMPC. The planners in the KMDA did have a role to play, however. When they were to make decisions on how to allocate limited state resources among the various plan proposals that came from many elected members of the KMPC, they had to justify the inclusion of some of the proposals and the dropping of others based on some kind of "technical" analysis. The minutes of the KMPC meetings did not provide enough data to make it possible to decipher any pattern in the way proposals made their way into the annual plan of action of the KMPC, or whether power relations between the members of the KMPC had any role to play in the KMDA's so-called "technical" analysis. Nonetheless, the dominance of the state's ruling party, and its regimental hierarchical organization, seemed to significantly reduce alternative proposals that came to be discussed in the KMPC.

In order to understand how planning at the metropolitan level is informed by more local municipal-level and ward-level plans, I asked one councillor from Kolkata Municipal Corporation and one councillor from South Dum Dum Municipality, who were not members of the KMPC, about the processes of information flow between them and the KMPC. To my surprise, neither of them was aware of the metropolitan level sectoral plans prepared by the KMPC. One of them did not even know who among the councillors in his municipality had been elected to represent the municipality in the KMPC. The interest taken by ward councillors in the functioning of the KMPC, in other words, varied greatly. Through interviews with two planners at the KMDA, who were also nominated members of the KMPC, I learned that there were a few councillors who were not members of the KMPC but who regularly sought information about KMPC decisions; two of them even proposed projects in their locality to be included in the KMPC sector plan for traffic and transportation. Despite the KMPC being seen by the state government as providing a forum to help information flow between metropolitan planners and local leaders who are more aware of local needs and priorities, the elected members of the KMPC were not obliged to report the proceedings of the KMPC meetings to their colleagues at the municipal level. Nor were the local councillors who were not members of the KMPC sensitized about the role and functions of the KMPC, or how they could have a voice in the decisions taken by the KMPC.

At the ward level, the ward committees – just like the KMPC – were

61. See reference 3, Flyvbjerg (1998).

62. See reference 3, Flyvbjerg (1998), page 19.

found to be working in extremely partisan ways. The system of selection of ward committee members by the ward councillor is highly discretionary, and the ward committee rules specifying the types of nominees to be selected are often violated. Since ward councillors nominate the ward committee members, their general tendency has been to select people from their own political party. Ward committees under a councillor from the opposition party within the municipality also complain of discrimination by the municipality in financial allocation, provision of services and general neglect. Although ward committees were designed to be “non-political entities”,⁽⁶³⁾ field observations show that they are becoming another political organization at sub-municipal level.

It is mandatory that the names of the councillor’s nominees for membership of the ward committee be presented to the public, and that people’s approval to be sought; however, this requirement was found to have only limited effect on making the process more democratic. Most of the participants in the Annual General Meetings (AGMs) organized by ward committees were found either to be close to the ward councillor or to have been drawn by the various incentives⁽⁶⁴⁾ that some of the more innovative ward councillors provided in order to enhance attendance at AGMs. Those who are critical of the ward councillor’s leadership, including people belonging to other political parties, have not used the AGMs to voice their concerns so far.

In addition, the ward councillors, in general, were found to be ignorant of many of the ward committee rules. One of the councillors I interviewed mentioned that among the many ward committee rules, there is one that says that the person who lost the municipal election cannot be a member of the ward committee. In fact, there is no such stipulation in the West Bengal Municipal (Ward Committee) Rules 2001, nor in the amendments made in 2003. This councillor’s words are evidence not only of his ignorance of the ward committee rules but also of the tendency to exclude any elements from the opposition parties in local decision making.

There is also the issue of inequity in the distribution of power and influence within the ward, which creates problems described by some as “elite capture”. Box 2 is an extract from my field notes, and illustrates the political dynamics among the different actors and ordinary citizens in a ward in the KMA. Although this ward may not be representative of all wards within the KMA, this description will help us appreciate the complexity of power relations at the ward level, some of which are inherited from the past and are therefore structural in nature.

A few points may be drawn from the description in Box 2. First, ward committees operate the same kind of patron–client relationships that they are intended to replace. Second, there is a general unwillingness among residents to voice their opinions publicly on matters of the public good due to their fear of antagonizing the established authority. Third, new people in the neighbourhood did reduce the influence of the existing power structures. But at the same time, with the waning of the existing power structure that had provided some sort of support for many of the poor households, although in the form of patronage, a need has developed for other forms of organized mobilization in favour of the poor and the politically marginalized households.

63. As per Mr Prabhat Dutta (Advisor, ILGUS) interviewed on 8 January 2005.

64. An incentive provided by the councillor for Ward 11 of Kalyani Municipality to increase attendance at AGMs is to enter people into a lottery for small gifts.

BOX 2
**The influence of neighbourhood elites in ward-level
 decision making**

Three years ago, in a neighbourhood in a municipality adjacent to Kolkata Municipal Corporation, a locally influential and prosperous timber trader (Mr X) sold part of his land to a promoter, to build a middle-class apartment complex where his timber workshop once stood. Mr X is known well enough locally that the local rickshaw pullers and auto-rickshaw drivers would take visitors to this apartment complex without needing directions. According to long-time residents of the neighbourhood, Mr X has close links with the local and state-level CPI-M "party bosses" in the sense that they benefit from each other's influence. He is also known to have close ties with antisocial hoodlums in the locality.

Even after the apartments in the complex were sold and individual homeowners had moved in, Mr X's influence in the area remained. Some of the people who had worked for him earlier and who have a patron-client relationship with him kept receiving favours in kind, often of a kind that causes nuisance to others. For example, some of Mr X's ex-employees park their pushcarts and taxis inside the apartment complex at night for security reasons. Some of them even use part of the building complex as a cowshed for their cattle. The apartment owners secretly expressed to me their displeasure about the arrangement, as it makes the entrance to the building complex look dirty and smelly (because of the cow dung) and overcrowded. No one has raised the issue of the cattle, pushcarts, rickshaws and taxis in any of the resident committee meetings. This is less out of respect for Mr X than out of fear; no one wants to confront him or question the authority that he exercises locally. However, since the new residents of the apartments moved in, he no longer holds the same "godfather" status in this neighbourhood that he previously enjoyed. The composition of the neighbourhood has started to change from generally poor residents to an upwardly mobile middle-class community that sees his political influence both as an asset and as a nuisance. Many of the new residents in the building complex have developed cordial relations with Mr X in the hope that they can tap into his "political connections" if ever they are needed. One of the apartment owners (Mr Y) is a long-time resident of the neighbourhood and a member of the local ward committee, and he too receives patronage from Mr X. Although nominated as a member of the ward committee by the local ward councillor (also a CPI-M activist), residents believe that Mr Y's nomination was a favour from Mr X.

SOURCE: From author's field notes prepared after informal interviews with residents of a neighbourhood. Identities of individuals have been removed to maintain their privacy.

VII. CONCLUSION

My research findings support the argument that, among the various forms of organized civic groups that potentially can take an active part in metropolitan planning and local decision making, political parties are not the best vehicles to promote participation of the local marginalized population. In the words of a local housing activist in Kolkata, what the

CPI-M was doing in West Bengal was just “. . . *orchestration of the disgruntled by the political elites.*” It did not allow the voices of the marginalized groups to be heard in the decision-making process. In particular, the plurality of opinions that is so necessary in any democratic decision-making process was thwarted due to the dominance of a single, hierarchically organized political party.

Although this paper is based on a single case study, a number of generalized lessons can be drawn from it. As a UN-Habitat report observes:

“Since the late 1970s, countries in different regions of the world have pursued their own path towards decentralization. These paths have been shaped as much by historical legacy and cultural tradition as by their contemporary administrative structure, political system and economic opportunities.”⁽⁶⁵⁾

Despite these differences, there is a degree of convergence among the stated objectives underlying the decentralization process wherever it occurs – enhancing flexibility in response to different local and regional problems and opportunities, improving local governance through greater autonomy, mobilizing private resources for local development etc. There are a number of cities – notably those in China, but also many in the so-called “democratic” countries such as Zimbabwe, and less so in South Africa⁽⁶⁶⁾ – where one political party dominates the entire urban political space, as in Kolkata. These cities have also adopted the policy of decentralization so enthusiastically endorsed by powerful international development institutions such as the World Bank. But there has been very little attention to supporting its realization at the local level – especially for urban areas – or to supporting local democratic processes and greater scope for participation by low-income groups and other groups facing exclusion or discrimination.

Many have argued⁽⁶⁷⁾ that one of the greatest contributions to democratic decentralization made by the Left Front government in West Bengal was to politicize local-level elections by contesting these elections along party lines during 1978. It is well to remember this political awakening, which preceded the introduction of decentralized planning in West Bengal in 1985–86. But the very limited inclusion of the grassroots in the planning process in Kolkata, even after 28 years, points to a severe gap between the state government’s claims regarding the devolution of planning powers and the reality.

If we compare Kolkata’s degree of decentralization and citizen voice in urban decision making with that in Mumbai, it becomes clear that real devolution of planning powers to neighbourhood groups can only happen when initiatives from the bottom are given the political space necessary to set precedents, and when the state and the formal political/administrative structures (such as political parties, administrative/ technical agencies etc.) allow them to do so. Due to a strong and viable political opposition, there is always room for civic grassroots activists to manoeuvre in Mumbai’s political landscape. These groups of activists at neighbourhood level then build alliances with similar groups to scale up their activities at the metropolitan level, remaining politically neutral and negotiating with whichever party is in power. It is interesting to note that even though one political party has dominated Kolkata’s decision making in high investment planning for economic growth,

65. UN-Habitat (2001), *Cities in a Globalizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements 2001*, Earthscan, London and Sterling, VA.

66. See d’Cruz, C and D Satterthwaite (2005), “Building homes, changing official approaches: the work of urban poor organizations and their federations, and their contributions to meeting the Millennium Development Goals in urban areas”, Working Paper No 16 in Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, IIED, London, page 38.

67. Ghosh, Arun (1988), “Decentralized planning – West Bengal experience”, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 23, No 13, page 655.

infrastructure, education etc., there are other areas of urban health – such as HIV/AIDS prevention among the prostitutes of Kolkata's red light district of Sonagachhi – which no political parties saw as having the potential to mobilize popular support. The social stigma attached to prostitution in Kolkata's conservative society allowed NGOs and civic activists the space to work with the sex workers in a way that was hugely successful, not just nationally but internationally. This indicates that successful non-partisan civic activism is also possible in Kolkata, but only when the existing power structures permit it.

This paper highlights the mismatch between the objective of promoting bottom-up planning through democratic decentralization and the top-down hierarchical structures within which political parties operate. It argues that empowering local bodies through constitutional and legislative reforms is only the first step towards a policy of democratic decentralization of local-level planning. It needs to be accompanied by a host of other measures, including effective political opposition to the ruling party, fiscal decentralization, a reformed curriculum for planning education, an independent planning bureaucracy, but most important, the involvement of non-partisan actors in metropolitan decision making.

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