

A Tale of Many Cities

Governance and Planning in Karnataka

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Urban governance under the 74th Amendment Act has been ignored in Karnataka. A study of Dharwad district shows that the Act is not implemented in letter and spirit and governance and planning is done through a small section in the deputy commissioner's/collector's office and has no links with the chief planning office in the zilla panchayat.

Towns, cities, are turning points, watersheds of human history. When they first appeared, bringing with them the written word, they opened their door to what we now call *history*.

– Fernand Braudel (1992: 479)

This article is the product of research in progress on district-level urban governance with special reference to Dharwad in northern Karnataka. The research idea came up from a prior study done on district planning with reference to the Tumkur district in Karnataka. In that study while we basically focused on rural planning we also noticed and touched on the problem of urban planning (Vaddiraju and Sangita 2011).

The state of urban governance and planning vis-à-vis district and taluka towns in India is deplorable. District and taluka towns play a crucial role in development and form the nodal points of the sinews of the development process. They are the nerve centres of all development insofar as the majority of the ordinary citizens are concerned.

Research Questions

The central question for this study is how the district and small cities are governed. Does the governance process at this level conform to what is postulated in the Constitution?

How does the planning function take place? According to the Constitution the district is the place where all planning – rural and urban – has to be centred and decentralised planning is the responsibility of the urban bodies. Is this happening at all?

Karnataka is one of the six most urbanised states in the country with 33.98% of urban population (Sivaramakrishnan, Kundu and Singh 2010). Most district towns in Karnataka are neglected and the bulk of the concentration on urban development and planning is on Bangalore

and Mysore, which are sought to be made into global cities. The many small towns, as our earlier fieldwork in Kolar, Bellary, Davangere, Chamarajanagar, Bidar and other places shows, are mostly urban slums. This is not in consonance with the constitutional amendments on urban governance. Media and civil society attention too is limited largely to Bangalore and Mysore and the smaller cities are written about only in local newspapers or in the local editions of the major dailies. What is happening in Karnataka is clearly a reflection of what Amitabh Kundu (2003) called exclusionary urban development. We will discuss more about this later. Suffice to say, this urbanisation process is not friendly to the poor in larger as well as the majority of poor in small and medium cities.

What is more glaring is the neglect of north Karnataka in comparison to other parts of the state and therewith the neglect of towns and their populations in northern Karnataka. This comes out in our fieldwork and interviews with many scholars in Dharwad. Indeed, scholars in the Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Research in Dharwad hold that at least part of the explanation for the backwardness of Dharwad and other towns in northern Karnataka stems from the neglect of overall development and conditions in that region. Despite a number of committees being appointed to address the question of regional inequalities, their recommendations have not made significant impact on north Karnataka and its towns and cities.

Exclusionary Urbanisation

We have mentioned that the nature of urban development in India in general and Karnataka in particular is exclusionary urbanisation as Kundu (2003, 2011) has noted. This concept points to specific features of urbanisation. These are:

Poor Migrants from Rural Areas Are Unwelcome: The cost of living and lack of employment opportunities are very high for the poor migrants from smaller towns and rural areas. This is a marked phenomenon of urbanisation in Karnataka. The

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most important one is the lack of employment opportunities for the poor in a highly capital-intensive development which is not conducive to the healthy accommodation of newcomers into the city.

Captured by the Local Elite: According to Kundu (Kundu 2003, 2011; Sivaramakrishnan; Kundu and Singh 2010) another major feature of exclusionary urbanisation is the capture of the cities by the elites of major cities who form a highly influential interest group that favours its own from the state. These elite happen to be the articulate middle class, the business class and industrial houses that consistently demand better services and conditions at the expense of the poor and newcomers to the city. The frequent demolitions of slums in the name of beautification, and the attempts to privatise basic services in the name of efficiency gains are some of the features of exclusionary urbanisation that favour the elite at the expense of the local poor or new entrants. Often, privatisation and outsourcing of basic services and the consequent user charges imposed on them can work against the poor. Again, the voice of the articulate elite is often more prominently heard than that of the poor who are generally not only property-less and asset-less but also voiceless.

Spatially Skewed towards Big Cities: Another major feature of the exclusionary urbanisation process is its spatially skewed nature (Bhagat 2011). Bangalore is highly favoured over Bidar. Mysore is highly favoured over Chamarjanagar. This is not limited to Karnataka alone. Small cities and towns are losers unless they are saved through deliberate interventions. Globalisation favours big cities. The state provides and develops those cities where capital and its managers are at ease. All amenities, services and facilities are provided in such places to attract more capital. In the process, an attempt is made to create “global cities” with global standards of living for a few while the rest are neglected. The argument of economies of scale comes handy to legitimise this process of a concentrated and distorted development process. The urbanisation

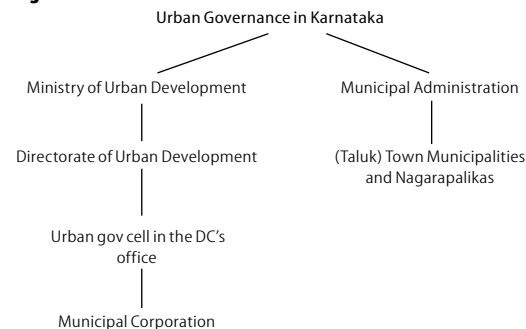
process thus is not spatially distributed and decentralised to incorporate all the cities, including small cities, but is limited to a few megacities.

Methodology

Dharwad is on the Bangalore-Pune highway and is a link, in more ways than one, between Karnataka and Maharashtra. Dharwad in many respects is a remarkable city. It is supposed to be the gateway to the hilly region of the state (*malnad*) connecting it to the plains (*bayalu seeme*) in Karnataka.

We also intend to study the Navalgund taluka of Dharwad district with special reference to its rural linkages in view of the importance of linkages between urban and rural areas in the development process. While this idea is found in development literature, Marxist historians have also pointed out the specific importance of towns as radiators of capitalism in the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe.

Figure 1: The Structure of Urban Governance in Karnataka



The two poles of these debates were the standpoints of Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy. Many other historians too joined the debate (Hilton 1978).

The major methods used in this study are review of secondary data, interviews with officials at the district level, interviews with key informants in the city and field observation. As part of the secondary documents we have considered writings by scholars and documents on urban governance. As part of the interviews we have spoken to officials in the urban government cell in the deputy commissioner's office, the chief planning officer and those in the zilla panchayat office. We have also interviewed scholars at the Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Research and the

Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC).

Governance and Small Cities

Some of the major problems addressed in this article are: the implementation of the 74th amendment to the Constitution; the planning function within it and the relationship between rural and urban areas or the rural-urban continuum, which also raises questions of addressing the needs of the existing population as well as planning for the future; and the priority to be given for civic amenities and the question of preserving the distinct identity of the place. We deal with these questions vis-à-vis Dharwad city in particular and Karnataka in general. We attempt to understand the above from the point of view of small cities and towns.

In Karnataka, the urban governance process comes under two important laws: the Karnataka State Municipalities Act of 1964 and the Karnataka State Municipal Corporation Act of 1976. The 74th Amendment Act of the Constitution is an add-on law and most of the urban and municipal governance is carried out under the former two laws. The structure of urban governance in Karnataka is as shown in Figure 1.

There are two streams according to which urban governance is carried out in Karnataka. One, the Ministry of Urban Development and the other is the department of municipal administration. The ministry governs through the directorate of urban development to which all urban government cells in the deputy commissioners' offices report. The municipal corporations of the state come under this while the town municipalities, which are not corporations come under the department of municipal administration. However, both streams only pay token attention to the 74th constitutional amendment. The process largely involves the bureaucracy and there is hardly any representation of citizens.

Urban Planning at District Level

District planning in Karnataka, and for that matter in any Indian state, is supposed to happen via the urban bodies.

The planning function for the district is situated in the 74th constitutional amendment and not in the 73rd amendment to the Constitution. The latter specifically pertains only to rural areas. In the light of this constitutional division of responsibilities it would be interesting to see how it works in reality.

It is a mystery as to why the district planning committee (DPC) and the planning function for the district is envisaged in the 74th constitutional amendment. The DPC is supposed to plan for the entire district, perform the major functions of integration of urban and rural plans and conduct all planning related to the governmental schemes in rural and urban areas. It is also supposed to plan for the entire district – rural and urban – according to the resources, opportunities and vision that the conditions can allow to be developed.

The DPC is supposed to be an elected body from both urban and rural areas and though it has no decision-making authority, it has the major function of advising and approving the entire planning process at the district level. It is important to iterate this point because most small and medium cities and towns in the country are situated at the district or sub-district level. Therefore, urban planning at the district level is synonymous with planning for small and medium towns and cities. Not only planning, but the entire governance process of small and medium towns is meant to be carried out from district offices. In this context, it would be interesting to examine as to how these processes are operating at the district level. The megapolises in the country are replete with their own organisations to govern and plan for them. It is the small and medium towns in the country whose condition is inextricably linked to district planning.

Issues of Concern

Given the above scheme of things it is interesting to see as to what is happening in Karnataka. Often the process of district planning in general and urban planning in particular is not unfolding in an ideal manner. The following are some of the features of the existing urban planning process at the district level:

The urban cell in the DC's office conducts all urban planning for the district. There is often a small section in the deputy commissioner's office that looks after all the district's urban affairs. This section is led by an officer of the rank of tehsildar and is responsible for urban governance as well as urban planning despite the fact that there is often great need for urban planning in each district. This office reports directly to the DC without any accountability to either the DPC or to the elected urban representatives. Often, the small cell is ill-equipped in terms of expertise, staff and scope to meet the demands of urban governance and urban planning. Urban governance and planning at district level not only involves the district town but also numerous small taluka towns or other municipal areas. These towns are growing fast and most of the time in dire need of governance, civic amenities and planning. We can hardly expect the urban cell in any district of Karnataka to meet these needs.

To make matters worse, the urban governance cell in the collectorate is accountable only to the DC and not to the elected representatives. This urban

cell also does not see itself as part of the district planning process. The chief planning officers we met often felt that the urban cells in the office of the DC do not share information and data or urban plans in time. The plans are integrated and consolidated in the actual process in the zilla parishad whose function is to plan for rural areas. Consequently, often rural plans, at least in Karnataka, are prepared ahead of urban plans and when the CPO asks for the urban plans from the urban planning office, they are not supplied. The urban planning cells at the district level are reluctant to participate in the planning process, which is done by the DPC with elected members in it whereas the urban cell is only accountable to the higher bureaucracy.

The net result of the above processes is that district plans are prepared without the urban component or the integration of rural with urban plans. This is further aggravated because the zilla panchayat/parishad basically remains a rural panchayat/parishad rather than a body reflecting both rural and urban areas of a district.

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In Karnataka, rural decentralisation has received considerable attention and therefore the rural planning process as well as the offices concerning the rural governance are strengthened but the same has not happened with urban local governance or planning. There is a need to recognise and emphasise this dimension while continuing with the efforts on rural planning.

An important aspect to consider is why in any district the zilla panchayat should only be the zilla rural panchayat. There is a renewed need to consider the importance of urban local government and urban planning at the district level on par with the rural government and planning. The need for this is only going to increase rather than decrease in the future.

Dharwad City

Besides being a cultural centre, Dharwad is also a major educational centre of northern Karnataka. It is home to Karnatak University, a university of agricultural sciences and a number of reputed colleges and institutions for higher education. Dharwad is governed by a municipal corporation and population of the twin cities of Hubli-Dharwad is approximately 13 lakhs while that of Dharwad alone is around seven lakhs.

Basic civic amenities like drinking water and sanitation are the major problems in Dharwad. The supply of drinking water is not on a 24-hour basis and even the few wards which do receive it throughout the day are doing so due to an experiment as part of an ongoing World Bank (wb) project. Otherwise the city faces a severe shortage of drinking water. A majority of the wards receive water only once in three to four days and in the summer season once in seven days. There is a proposal to provide 24 hours supply as part of the wb project but it does not seem likely very soon.

Dharwad has an open drainage system. The colonial part of the city has an underground drainage system while the rest, which developed later, has no underground drainage. Often there is no regular cleaning of the overground drainage, leading to problems arising

from poor hygiene, especially those related to diseases and health. In this scenario, the most vulnerable areas are the poorer residents.

These conditions raise the question of governance in small cities and towns in the country. Most of these small cities are in transition, growing at a varying pace and lack any planning. There are serious questions to be asked about the governance and planning of these towns and the neglect and apathy that they face (Shaw 1999).

A random sample of letters to the *Times of India* (Bangalore, Monday, 25 July 2011, Hubli/Dharwad/Belgaum) shows many are about overflowing drains, cleaning of open garbage sites, unbearable stench and the need for interior roads.

The first aspect of the problem under consideration is the unplanned and haphazard nature of the growth. This growth process has little connection with the district planning process. The second is that the question of civic amenities to the growing urbanisation process is completely ignored in the small towns and cities. Third, the specificities of these cities are being neglected. Dharwad requires better transport, concert halls, reading places, libraries and so on, in addition to drinking water and sanitation. We could not find such amenities in any of the small towns that we studied in Karnataka. The fourth issue is that the linkages between small towns and cities with the hinterland are missed in the process. Finally, and because of the factors mentioned above and their combinations, there is little or no perceivable governance and planning.

Conclusions

Can we generalise the Dharwad experience? Though Dharwad is exceptional in terms of its cultural and literary achievements, the state of most district towns in Karnataka is similar. We witnessed the same conditions in Bellary, Chamarajanagar, Bidar, Davangere, Kolar and recently in Haveri. All these are district towns. According to the State Institute of Urban Development (SIUD, Mysore) the cities of Dharwad and Udupi in Karnataka are better governed and better planned than most other small cities and towns

in the state. One can gauge from this what the conditions in other small cities are. The reasons for most of this state of affairs can be traced to what Kundu called the "exclusionary urbanisation" process in the country. The big cities and large urban agglomerations such as Bangalore and Mysore are favoured over small cities and towns. Governance and planning in the latter languishes without being noticed. Indeed, Karnataka has a rich history of decentralisation and local government reforms. But most of these are related to panchayati raj institutions and rural areas. The state must now concentrate on small towns as Bangalore is increasingly becoming unmanageable.

What is stated in this paper is not limited to Karnataka. The condition of Dharwad reflects the condition of small towns in other states as well. Since we began this paper with a quotation from Braudel we also end with what he says about small cities and towns in the historical process:

...urban history has to be extended to cover these small communities, for little towns as Spengler observed, eventually 'conquer' the surrounding countryside, penetrating it with 'urban consciousness', meanwhile being themselves devoured and subordinated by agglomerations more populous and more active. Such towns are thus caught up into urban systems orbiting regularly round some sun-city (Braudel 1992: 482).

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