Vocal for Local: Reviewing Global Experience with an Indian Insight

Udayan Chakraborty
PhD. Research Scholar in Public Administration at Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

Abstract

This Review Paper tries to find out the emerging problems in Local Governance by exploring Global dynamics from an Indian perspective. Historical inheritance of colonial mindset disallows Indian administrators to judge the Local issues from a grassroots level perspective; a decade of indecisiveness and rising corruption along with the role of social media exposure to perceived group threats from cross-border terrorism has given birth to a centralized political force and the current era is witnessing an increase of State Capacity. On the advent of COVID-19 and growing income disparities, a paradigm shift from the conventional idea of the nation towards the praxis of the tangible identity with the nation from the Local viewpoint thus opens the doors for further research.

KEYWORDS: Local Government, Participatory Action Research, COVID-19, Vocal for Local, Democracy, Nationalism

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 outbreak has placed a serious challenge to the public machinery to provide the citizen with the basic supplies, and also to maintain its integrity and stability, the question for new pathways has arisen in the minds of the intelligentsia and the authorities on how to find out the best possible solution for this situation of emergency. It is a visible fact that the COVID-19 crisis is more than just a medical emergency, and is continuously moving forward as a socio-economic and above all an administrative crisis questioning the very existence of State and its authority.

In this article, we would look forward to the Local solution in light of Global experience, particularly with an Indian perspective, as the Prime Minister of India in his address to the nation on May 13, 2020, has urged the nation to be Vocal for Local himself. By reviewing Global resonance towards Local challenges, we would be connecting it to our cultural roots.

The Inheritance of British Legacy

India being the most diverse democracy in the world with the widest spectrum of political ideas and organizations holds her administration united and functioning with its SMART bureaucratic mechanism that she inherited from the British Crown. The political administrators are widely depended upon the shoulders of Public Services giants, who work at both Central and State premises of Indian Union. Therefore, policy formulation by the Central and the State Governments depend verily on the outlook of the Civil Servants as a whole and their management skills.

A key assumption in Public Policy is that the behaviour of the independent policymaker, i.e. the political part of the government in India, as an individual,

influences the policy formulation and the level of policy diffusion according to his/her interest.

Butler, D. M. et. al., (2019), in their study on policy diffusion at the individual level, find that local officials do not exhibit nationalistic biases in information seeking from Global platform, i.e. EU.

Though this research was conducted to study policy diffusion within Europe, Indian bureaucracy having its root into European, particularly the British legacy, tends to depend on the endorsements of their Global counterparts, without having the voice of the Local properly heard.

The IAC Movements

A study carried out by Potter, A. (2017) enquires the reason behind why almost 30% of countries house their capitals outside the largest city and since 1960, 11 countries relocated their capitals. He finds out that locating the capitals outside of a major city is associated with a significant reduction in civil conflict, both violent and non-violent.

It can be inferred from his study that the population in major cities are more aware of politics in contrast to the population living in smaller towns or rural areas. Another proposition we can infer from his research is that the State Capital is more than just a seat of the Government but is a symbol of the nature of administration the government executes on its people.

We can relate his idea with India Against Corruption movement of 2011 when Jantar Mantar in NCT Delhi became a centre of people's non-violent protest against the UPA government.

Another paradigm shift we can discuss here is that the idea of the nation had always been represented by the Government, being the sovereign authority to exercise control over the identification of what is national and what is not.But the identification of oneself with the nation is becoming more and more subjective rather being a legal problem. The idea of India as the experiences we observe in our tangible environment, that is the Local around us is as practical and as important as the idea of India as we see in the media while some political leader or Foreign Affairs official represents this nation at the stages of Global fraternity. Thus in a changed narrative, the idea of the Indian nation becomes synonymous with Mother Nature.

Social Media and Collective Fear

Reilly, J. L. (2017), in his study on social connectedness and political behaviour at an American context concluded that socially connected people are much more susceptible to contextual influence from their surrounding political elements. They are more likely to influence anther's vote, campaign for a political cause, attend political meetings and raise or contribute funds to political parties of their favour for contesting elections.

In the Indian scenario, with the rise of digital communication and social media platforms with the government encouraging data revolution the social connectedness among the citizens has risen geometrically. Though this gift of science is often misappropriated by the anti-social elements to create panic and unrest among the

public and to tear the social fabric by applying psychological triggers, it had a larger impact in 2014 General Elections, exposing the corruption and the threat of cross-border terrorism to the Indian public.

Berning, C. C. (2016), in his evidential study on contextual perceived group threat and radical right-wing populist party preferences argues that above and beyond the personal perception of group threat, the prevalence of local perception of group threat leaves a deeper impression on the individual preferences.

His argument was examined by employing multilevel structural equation modelling and substantiated by evidence in favour of the contextual effect of perceived group threat on Individual-level preferences for the Swiss People's Party, which is a radical right-wing populist political party in nature.

In India too, the group threat imposed by Terror Groups operating from the other side of the border, belonging to a particular faith, which is a minority community in India, created a sense of fear and unity among the majority community, i.e. the Hindus, causing a landslide victory of Bharatiya Janata Party, which is considered to be Conservative, with its close relationships with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Pro-Hindu Voluntary Movement.

Democracy and increased State Power

There has been a historical debate on whether State machinery or Democracy should precede since the time of Bose and Nehru. Same as Bose, who was an ally of the Axis Powers in WW-II, Carothers (2007) also states that "democratization must wait until there exists not merely an adequate but a well-functioning state – one with capable, impartial institutions and a solid capacity to develop, legislate, and implement effective policies."

But Wang, E. H., & Xu, Y. (2018), denying the "sequencing approach" to prioritize state-building over democratization, are of the view of democracy having a substantial and positive causal effect on state capacity, after analyzing a global panel of countries over 50 years.

As a response to collective fear against cross-border terrorism and to end a decade of indecisive coalition governance, the Indian populace voted for a strong and decisive centre to the power. With the demand of democracy, the present BJP government lead by Shri Narendra Modi has enthusiastically responded to long-neglected public demands.

The induction of demonetization to check the corrupt economy, the repealing of Article 370 and 35A to uphold India's territorial integrity, the enactment of CAA to ensure citizenship of the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi & Christian migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan before December 2014, all of them can be characterized as increased State Capacity, which in turn may be seen as a response to increased Voice of the People.

Mass Awareness of Inequality

Newman, B. J., Shah, S., & Lauterbach, E. (2018) researched to find out whether the citizens are aware of the level of inequality in their local residential context. They analyzed two national surveys, namely - 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election

Study (CCES) and Qualtrics Omnibus Survey, May 2017. Their findings were positive in the US context, so, predictably, India being much less developed than the US and having a higher index of income disparities, the Indian citizens are also aware of their local economic context.

Another study (Solt, F., et. al., 2016) tried to seek the reason behind despite being aware of the social inequality and disparities of income, why the citizens do not contribute to public unrest? On contrary to the argument of Newman, B. J., et. al., (2015), that exposure to higher levels of local income inequality leads lower-income people to become more likely to reject— and higher-income people to become more likely to accept—the dominant US ideology of meritocracy, Solt. F., et. al. (2016) analyzed a larger and more representative survey and concluded that "Consistent with the relative power theory, among those with lower incomes, local contexts of greater inequality are associated with more widespread belief that people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard."

We can relate Solt's statement with the Indian mindset and belief of Indian people in the Law of Karma, which inspires the people to accept the misery instead of joining a revolt against the State, as it is considered to be unethical from the majoritarian religious point of view, where the nation is represented as a Mother Deity.

European Exploration

Let us discuss two studies conducted by Atkinson, R., Dörfler, T., &Rothfuß, E. (2018) and Prost, S. (2019) on the Challenge of Local responses to Climate change and Food Democracy respectively conducted in European soil.In the first article, the authors analyze how the Self-organizations contribute to the enhancement of innovative societal capacity and the potential for societal transition in the face of climate change based on SELFCITY Research Project on selected urban and regional place-based forms of self-organization, three self-organising groups in Germany, two in the Netherlands and two in the United Kingdom, including a 'transition town', two energy coops, a 'transition house', a free café, a climate change group and an ecological garden, developing new forms of 'Collective Governance'.

They used a statistical analysis of attitudes towards ecological issues based on quantitative Q-Sort methodology. According to Jeffares &Skelcher (2011, p. 6) "Q methodology involves each participant in the sample (the P sample) sorting a series of statements (a Q sample) representative of the breadth of debate on an issue (the concourse) into a distribution of preference (a Q-Sort) from which statistically significant factors are derived."

By analyzing the responses they identified four distinct types of self-organizations based on their shared attitude towards climate change and named these four types as –

    a. Radical Green,
    b. Consensus Builders,
    c. Eco-egalitarian, and
    d. Community Builders.

They further observed from comparative analysis among these four types that –

i.   The first three groupings are more inclined towards theory-building to justify their cause, but the Community Builders are more interested in the practical course of action.

ii.   Among the four groupings, three except the Consensus Builders tend to oppose the government, whereas the Consensus Builders are easily approachable by the government for sharing ideas and collective discussions.
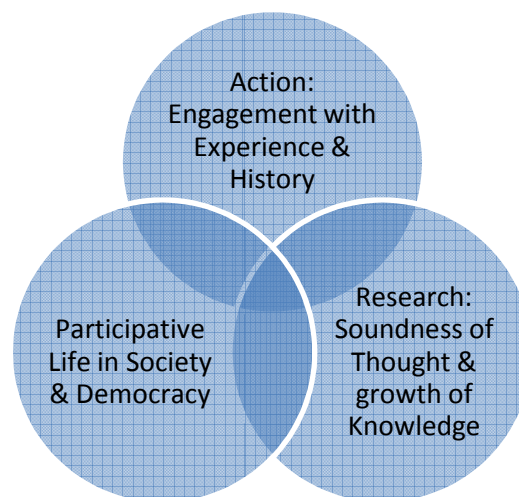
Prost, S. (2019) based his study on philosophical grounds to answer the 3 challenges to Civic Food Networks (CFN) posed by Levkoe, C. Z. (2011), they were –

i.   a strong ethical commitment to environmental sustainability, social justice, as well as individual and community health;

ii.   democratic governance through active participation of food citizens;

iii.   a whole system perspective aiming to transform the entire food system.

The research was conducted on a charity-cum-community centre named Meadow Well Connected based on the Meadow Well estate located in the suburban fringe of the Newcastle upon Tyne metropolitan area in North East England inhabited predominantly by British white working-class and low-income families. Decades of neglect by local authorities resulted in a brief period of violent unrest in the mid-1990s.

According to OpenDataCommunities (2015) report, it remained among the most deprived 10% neighbourhoods in England in terms of education, employment, income, health, and environmental quality due to decades of neglect by local authorities resulting in a brief period of violent unrest in the mid-1990s.

Prost applied Participatory Action Research (PAR) method to conduct his study. According to Chevalier, J. M., and Buckles, D. J., (2013), PAR practitioners make a concerted effort to integrate three basic aspects of their work: participation (life in society and democracy), action (engagement with experience and history), and research (soundness in thought and the growth of knowledge).

As PAR approach not only seeks to understand the world but also tries to change it through collaborative action, Prost develops 3 techniques to answer the challenges identified by Levkoe, C. Z. (2011), these techniques are –

i.   flexible ethical standards responding to community needs,

ii.   accessible participation focusing on relationships rather than skills, and

iii.   a focus on local impact while striving to collaborate and network with other organisations.

In the Indian context, we can locate the ideas of Tagore, R. in this spectrum between Eco-egalitarian and Community Builders based on his concepts of Socio-Economic

Reformation. Rabindranath Tagore in a series of essays and lectures (1918-1929) emphasized the importance of cooperatives in rural reconstruction and poverty alleviation. On February 6, 1922, he founded Sriniketan – Institute of Rural Reconstruction with Leonard Elmhirst as its first Director.

CONCLUSION

In this Review Paper, I have acknowledged current works of various researchers from the diverse range of Public Administration and attempted to find out the similarities between Global experiences and current developments in Indian Administration and Politics. I have tried to concentrate on how the intrinsic nature of public policy formulation is affected by the socio-economic and political realities of the modern world, and how in turn public policy affects the further political and social changes and keep the wheel of the society dynamic.

I have attempted to explain how the concern for ecological issues, decentralized policy formulation and local governance has evolved as a self-styled political discourse in Europe, independent of partisan politics based on ideology or the idea of a nation as a centralized intangible concept. I have also incorporated a case study based on Participatory Action Research as an ideal methodology to offer solutions to emerging socio-economic challenges.

Finally, I conclude that Indian problems of Local democracy can only be addressed through a purely Indian perspective, and therefore further research is suggested in the field of Public Administration for vocalizing the local challenges in these changed circumstances.

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