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**Agency and Access  
under Decentralized Governance:  
Water Supply and Sanitation in Kolkata City**

**Keshab Das**



# **Working Paper No. 191**

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**February 2009**

**Gujarat Institute of Development Research**  
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## Abstract

Ensuring sustainable access to basic services in urban India has continued to remain a major challenge for civic bodies. A fast growing urban population has exerted great pressure on the provisioning of these indispensable services. This paper discusses the issues in agency and access to basic services as drinking water and sanitation in the bustling eastern Indian city of Kolkata. While availability of water *per se* has not been a constraint in the city, access to basic services has been uneven underscoring possible dysfunctionalities in urban governance. An out-dated and over-stressed system of drainage and sewerage has restricted chances of a better hygienic living environment in the city. With the growing emphasis on decentralized governance – that could facilitate local level democratic decision-making – the pattern of provisioning of basic services reflects the dynamics of urban governance, ultimately. The empirical core of the study dwells upon qualitative and quantitative information as collected from the offices of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), local newspapers and discussions with inhabitants and representatives of the civic body in select regions. That the marginalized section of the cities had poorer access to the services was obvious, irrespective of the distinct local political culture as also the manner of urban governance.

**Keywords** : Urban governance; Drinking water supply; Sanitation, drainage and sewerage, Kolkata.

**JEL Classification** : I38, R58, H41

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# Agency and Access under Decentralized Governance: Water Supply and Sanitation in Kolkata City

Keshab Das

## 1. Introduction

Ensuring sustainable access to basic services in urban India has continued to remain a major challenge for civic bodies as well as both state and central governments. A fast growing urban population, manifesting in both rising rural out-migration and the urban out-growth *per se*, has snarled up any meaningful strategies to address the crisis of making these services available to the concerned population. While resource inadequacy – both physical and financial – has been an obvious area of concern, a number of studies, especially during the last two decades or so have been keen to examine any lapses or dysfunctions in urban governance. As it would appear, governance factors are so important as to determine the nature and course of management and provisioning of resources with the aim to attain equity. Furthermore, with the growing emphasis on decentralized governance – that facilitates local level democratic decision-making – the pattern of provisioning of basic services reflects the dynamics of urban governance, ultimately.

While the use and over-use of the term ‘governance’ in the literature is more of a recent phenomenon, the early 1990s onwards, the concept has been at the heart of democratic functioning of any system. It needs to be underscored that with the influential International Monetary Fund and World Bank pushing forward the neoliberal agenda of development intervention, especially in the developing nations, which became their aid recipients, governance, or, rather ‘good governance’ has assumed the prominence of a buzzword.

This paper discusses the issues in agency and access of basic services in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), drawing upon both secondary sources and a primary survey in four Wards in the city.

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## 2. Decentralised Urban Governance: Recent Developments

With the popularisation of the expression through the well known World Bank document in the early nineties (World Bank, 1992), and the myriad writings brought out on the subject subsequently, much of the last decade witnessed nation states trying to pursue what appeared to be the magic formula for prosperity (World Bank, 1997). Very briefly, the World Bank emphasised upon 'sound development management' in four areas, namely, prudence in public sector, accountability, legal framework for development, and information and transparency. It is no surprise that governance *per se* continues to be an impressive theme and often seems to have acquired sort of an accretive status.

Conventionally, governance has been understood to be the deft management of the public affairs by the state, i.e., through the exercise of political power of course. However, much of the last decade's overemphasis on the otherwise familiar theme by the Fund-Bank has tended, in effect, to vitiate its essential meaning and purport. The Bank-promoted 'discourse on governance does not take us far since its definition is not only neutral between forms of government of fundamental importance to the nature of governance (viz., democratic or authoritarian) but even between 'good' and 'bad' governance since both would, in their own ways, qualify as the exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs' (Guhan, 1998: 185).

Local level governance, which thrives on democratic decentralisation, has been described as an ideal mechanism to maintain a healthy relationship between the government and the citizens. Nevertheless, as one examines the *modus operandi* of decentralization – that is, if it actually involves creation and functioning of an autonomous stratum of elected representatives, who participate with the local bureaucracy in ensuring a fair provisioning of the resources among the local population – issues of devolution of authority and activities to the elected local representatives come to the fore. Further, what matters is the efficiency and the distinctive role of the functionaries of the local (or, lower) level government as they operate independently, but with certain accountability to the higher form of government (Smith, 1985; and Jalal, 2001: 51).

As is well known, in the urban governance context, in response to a liberalising economy, the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Act (CAA) accords constitutional recognition to the Wards, the lowest administrative unit in a

municipality. Although the norms and practices vary across states and Union Territories as to the devolution of power, authority structure, roles of various municipal institutions, the CAA unequivocally ensures regularisation of elections to the urban civic bodies. That is, no municipality can remain without holding elections within a maximum period of six months once it is dissolved or suspended. This has been a 'revolutionary' component of the CAA, as it has rendered the as a dynamic and democratic institution of decentralised governance. The autonomous status conferred to the State Election Commissions has prompted conduct of municipal elections on a regular manner and as an important event in local governance.

Unlike in the past, when municipal elections were highly irregular and had not been held for years, the CAA formalised a closer interaction between the agency and the citizens, through energising elected representatives. This change also has implied that the municipal Wards have been vital bodies with a significant influence in the urban governance structure. In other words, poorer access by the citizens to certain urban services would, eventually, reflect the inability of articulation of the local representative at the municipal level in securing sustainable provisioning of the services. In an aggregative sense, inferior or irregular service provisioning in a large number of Wards, whose representatives belong to a given political party, would underscore the relative inefficiency of that party, endangering its chances in the next municipal polls, if not at a higher level or in similar other municipalities in the state or Union Territory. Another vital change introduced through the CAA concerns freeing the municipality of constraints of funding uncertainties. It provides for apportioning revenues between the state government and the municipalities, as per the decisions taken by the State Finance Commission. Notwithstanding the significant provisions in the 74<sup>th</sup> CAA, over a decade now (since 1993), a number of assessments of performance of urban local bodies in terms of improvement in the provisioning of basic services have provided at best a mixed scenario (Mathur, 2001).

### **3. Urban Local Governance in Kolkata**

With one of the oldest records of municipal government in India (the Corporation of Calcutta was established under a Royal Charter in 1726), urban governance in the city has undergone important stages of evolution and, in more than one way, remains a unique ensemble of experiments in

ensuring provision of basic services to the ever-bourgeoning population. For the purpose of the present study, while it would be necessary to leave out most of the fascinating history of urban governance in Calcutta, it would be most useful to mention the landmark Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act of 1980, which was brought in by the democratically elected Left Front government (LFG) that came to power in 1977.

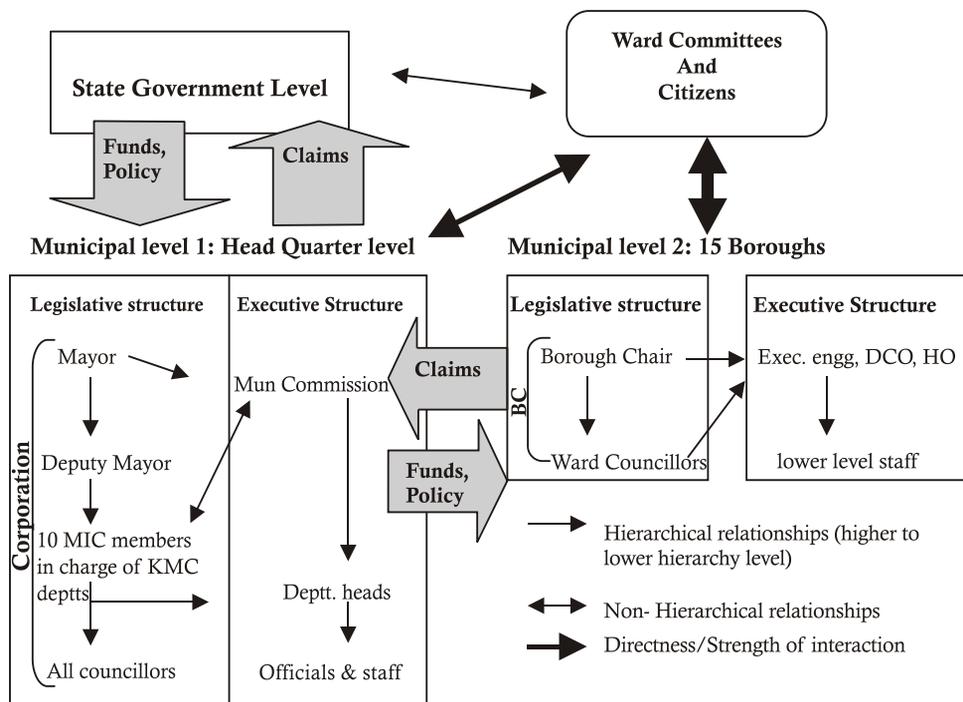
At this juncture, a note on the nature and composition of the LFG is in order. As is well known, the LFG, with ten leftist parties, functions as a coalition government on the basis of a common minimum programme. “*It is not a communist government. It is a coalition of democratic and progressive forces – not all of them are Marxists. It is committed, inter alia, to democratic decentralisation of powers, public participation in administration, radical social transformation, changing the balance of class forces in the society in favour of the poor*” (Datta, 2000: 11; emphasis ours). Despite being an explicitly (that is, ideologically) pro-poor government, most of its alternative development programmes and activities are constrained by the imperatives of the Indian quasi-federal polity which maintains a “strong unitary bias”. It is important to acknowledge the constraints of the broader political regime, which impinges upon the functioning and performance of the state as well as local urban bodies.

Much ahead of the much-discussed 74th CAA, the Act of 1980 aimed at broad-based democratization of the municipal governance and provided for a Mayor-in-Council form of government, which comprises a Mayor, Deputy Mayor and a maximum of ten elected members. The Mayor has five-year tenure and has the power to guide and supervise the activities with support from the Mayor-in-Council who is chosen by him from among the elected councilors. Essentially, the Mayor-in-Council system infuses the political approach to urban governance, in that, by rendering decision-making on such aspects as mobilization and utilization of resources a process involving popular participation, exercise of power and distribution of patronage. Figure 1 provides an idea about the municipal functioning in Kolkata city.

At a further level of disaggregation, the Borough Committees, those are formed with the councillors of the Wards belonging to that Borough, are directly responsible for ensuring maintenance of local services. In fact, the amended West Bengal Municipal Act, 1993 highlights the role of the Ward Committee, which needs to meet once a month. The 14 members – both

nominated by the councilor and the municipality - are expected to identify Ward level problems, assign priorities, take responsibilities to supervise and oversee various activities with active popular participation. Additionally, the Ward Committee has to prepare, discuss and submit the annual administration and financial reports to the municipality. Eventually, the efficiency of the Ward Committees adds up to an active, responsive and transparent municipal government.

**Figure 1 : Organisational Structure and Functioning of the KMC**



Source: Chandra (2004), p.8.

Notes: Mun. Commission- Municipal Commissioner; BC- Borough Committee; DCO- District Conservancy Officer; HO- Health Officer; Exec. engg- Executive Engineer

In practice, since 1984 in the state, as has been pointed out by perceptive observers, the system of Mayor-in-Council revolves round that of the political party, that is, much of the success of the urban governance could be attributed to the LF parties in power both at the state and local levels. However, despite the uninterrupted run of the LFG at the state level for the last about three decades, the KMC elections have not uniformly chosen

the LF. This has rendered the municipal poll a thickly contested and politically charged event. Hence, at the Ward level, the role, responsiveness and dynamism of the councilors often influence the outcome of the party in the future polls.

#### **4. Political Culture in the Context of Decentralised Governance**

It is no uncommon knowledge that the West Bengal political scene has been one of the most unique in the history of democratic politics in India. No Indian state has been ruled by the same government uninterruptedly for close to three decades. In West Bengal not only that the LF has continued non-stop for 29 years now, but also has systematically kept any right wing and/or the established Congress Party at bay. The successive state elections invariably (and often overwhelmingly) voting for the LF to victory are in themselves an unparalleled phenomenon in post-Independence Indian politics. Eventually, the emergent political culture in the state has had impacted decentralized municipal governance both directly and indirectly. As argued, “the political culture, the bureaucratic discourse, the dominant discourse at the social level, have all been influenced by the class based rationale aggressively articulated and promoted by the Leftists, especially the CPI (M)” (Chandra, 2004: 10).

Despite being a coalition of “like-minded” parties, the LF has not been free from infighting often attributable to differences in ideological and hierarchical positions. However, the single most prominent challenge to the LF has been posed by the relatively recent party, Trinamool Congress (TC), which has especially waged a war against the ‘communist’ government. As unequivocally articulated by its firebrand leader, Mamata Banerjee, the TC would oppose the LF government, especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) on every conceivable occasion. It would welcome association with any party that is disavouring the CPI (M) or the LF. Since the TC came into being in 1997, as the largest opposition party it has further deepened the political culture of the state; this has its reflection in the politics of urban governance.

So far as the KMC is concerned, given its significance as a powerful body leveraging in some way or other the state politics, the TC has put up fierce contest and has won even. In such an event, as in 2000, wherein the KMC was led by TC and the State Government by the LF anyway, the process of decentralized governance is deeply influenced by the tense and bitter

relationship between the two parties. In fact, in their zealously to prove relative efficiency in governance, the CPI (M) and TC have often ended up in sharpening confrontationist strategies rather than in bringing about improvements in providing urban services. For instance, while the CPI (M) is keen to enhance its urban middle class and above base, the TC has been attempting to emulate the CPI (M) style of functioning that ensures a large and committed following at the marginalized section of the society. The responses of the bureaucracy also have been reflective of the tussle between these two hostile parties. As argued by Chandra (2004), high politics and everyday politics have tended to converge in the process.

It needs to be noted that unlike in other states/regions where the civil society is evidently represented by an active group of non-government organizations (NGOs) or community based organizations (CBOs) which function without any direct political links, in Kolkata, such a scenario is nearly absent. Instead, the main political parties, namely the CPI (M) and TC operate through a number of 'mass' organizations created by and loyal to the respective parties. The mass organizations function as conduits for propagating and reinforcing the messages and 'ideology' of the concerned party in the wider public. These organizations are so strong, widespread and deep-seated that it is not easy to find individual NGOs/CBOs in action in the sphere of urban governance.

Further, whereas the CPI (M), through decades of experience in grassroots organization, has been able to project an image of a disciplined and well-entrenched party, the TC has been seen more through the charisma, boldness and fiery qualities of its single-most important leader. The problem with TC, however, is that its leader could act and react in a volatile manner; the unpredictability of the leader's action and dictatorial style has deterred a well-planned move by the party in spreading its message and stronghold. In short, the party is bereft of any sound ideological and/or theoretical bedrock. This has implied that while the CPI (M), systematically and almost as a regular practice, has been protecting the interests of its party functionaries at all levels, (often through using its power as a ruling party), the lower level leaders of TC do not enjoy such a privilege through their party or party chief. So far as urban governance is concerned, the CPI (M) takes care to prompt its members to utilize the municipal system to a large extent so that that enhances the visibility of the party's active interest in the urban administration in the public eye. The TC, in a different manner,

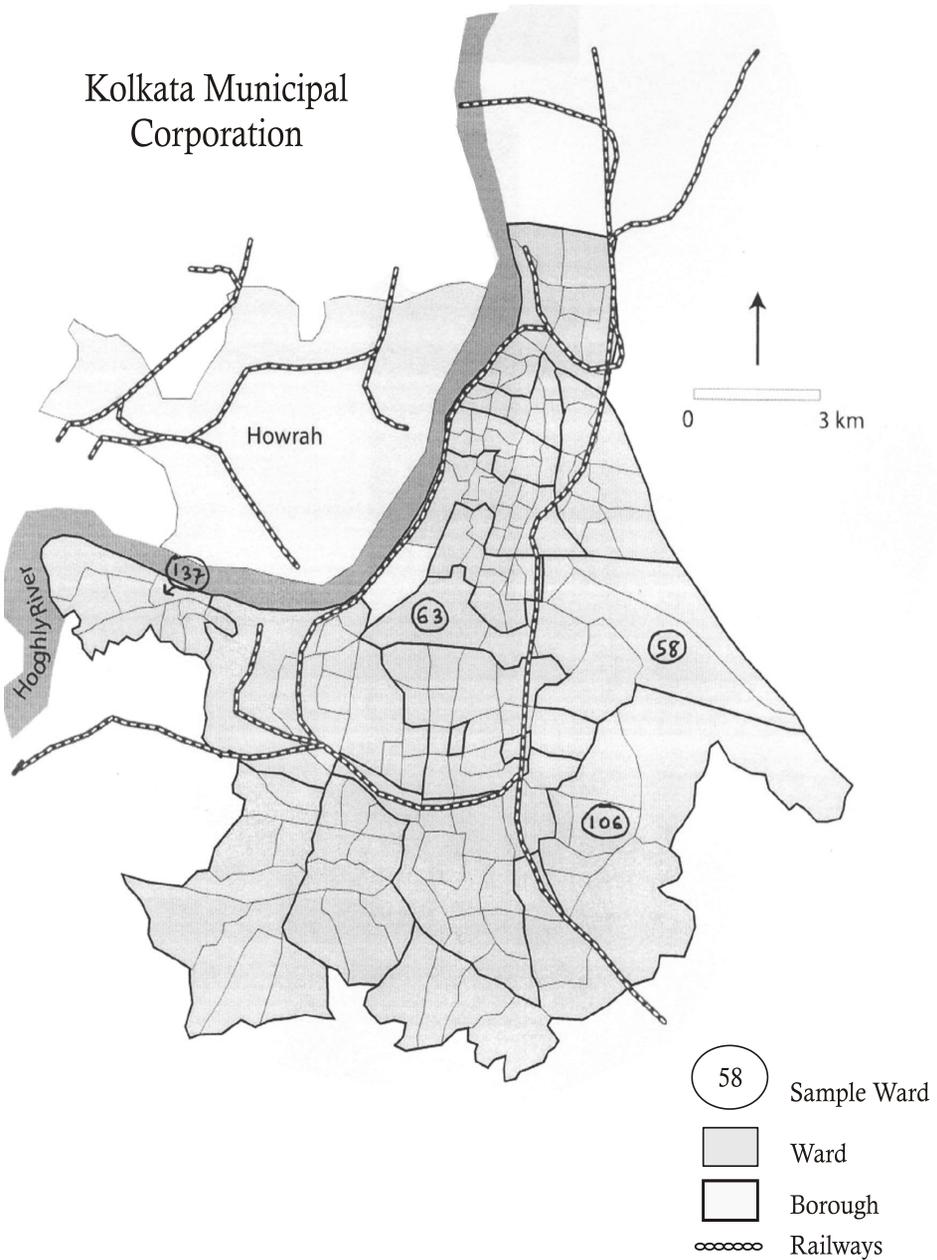
promotes the party cause by patronizing its Councilors over CPI (M) Councilors, say, in a Borough Committee dominated by a TC leader.

However, as detailed in an interesting recent study (Chandra, 2004), in actual practice both the parties have not been free from frailties in governance, whether it be making grand promises of better service provisioning, promoting party interests through influencing bureaucracy/legislative structure, abetting corruption, and so on. It has been observed that, “despite surface differences in elements of High Politics in the political culture of both parties, such as their public presentation and organizational structures, the inherent party discipline and organization of both the Left and non-Left parties are antithetical to decentralization. Their impact on the bureaucratic culture of the state has also been demonstrated to be not conducive to increasing the accessibility of governance structures for the public” (Chandra, 2004: 24).

## **5. Status of Water Supply and Sewerage in Kolkata City**

The KMC comprises 141 Wards with a population of 4.6 million, as per the Census of 2001; 41 additional wards were brought under the KMC limits in 1991 (Map 1). The decadal growth has been relatively tardy at about 4 per cent, which is far lower than the urban population growth figure of 20 per cent for the state as a whole (Table 1). The population living in slums accounted for over 30 per cent (1490811) of the total population in 2001. Although the KMC population indicates a somewhat ‘saturation’ of the city’s population, the individual Wards have been showing extremely diverse picture so far as population growth is concerned. For instance, the decadal growth rate ranged from -28.11 per cent in Ward 87 to 109.20 per cent in Ward 108. Similarly, for the sample Wards (discussed later), the variation has been large, between -11.32 per cent for Ward 63 and 34.19 for Ward 106.

**Map 1: Sample Wards in KMC**



Sources : ISS, Kolkata ; Kolkata Municipal Corporation

**Table 1: Population of KMC and Sample Wards**

Region	Population		Decadal Growth
	1991	2001	Rate
West Bengal Urban	18707601	22427251	19.88
KMC	4399819 (23783)	4572876 (24718)	3.93
Ward 58	78565	86487	10.08
Ward 63	32554	32123	-1.32
Ward 106	22729	30500	34.19
Ward 137	18592	20036	7.77

Source: *Census of India 2001, Final Population Tables, West Bengal.*

Note: Figures in brackets show Population Density (Number of persons per Km. sq.)

The city has a unique natural advantage of bountiful surface water availability through the river Hooghly, on whose banks has developed the city; this meets for over 90 per cent of water demand of the KMC. Additionally, the groundwater source remains rich, with water bearing granular material which are tapped and developed. The availability of water on an average is 205 litres per capita per day (lpcd), probably the highest compared to all Indian cities.

Table 2 provides information on certain key aspects of water supply to households by the KMC, since the 1990s. There has been a near doubling of the storage capacity during the last 15 years. This, largely, has helped meeting the demand targets for about three-fourths in 1990 to 95 per cent in 2004. In terms of coverage of households, the recent period, 2000 onwards, has witnessed a much greater improvement in the coverage; by 2004, it has reached 90 per cent. Installation of meters in housing apartments has made a late and slow beginning, but would grow fast in coming years. Going by these data, it is an impressive achievement by the KMC.

**Table 2: Water Supply to Households through KMC**

Items	1990	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Storage Capacity (million gallons)	46	46	68	68	68	68	84
Targets for demand for water (Production %) (million gallons)	300.00 (75.0)	305.00 (75.4)	320.50 (74.9)	330.05 (75.7)	331.82 (81.4)	333.60 (82.4)	335.37 (95.4)
Coverage of households (%)	60	60	83	83	83	83	90
Meters for housing apartments	--	--	8	8	2	14	24

Source: Official documents, KMC.

With rising demand for water provisioning, the costs have also kept growing. Table 3 compiles data on expenditure on and revenue from water supply, sewerage and drainage for a few years. It is striking to note that the revenue has invariably fallen far short of expenditure (including capital) all through. With a large number of users not paying for the basic civic services KMC has been concerned and has initiated efforts at cost recovery, at least from the high-end users. Further, the KMC is engaged in a number of new water supply schemes (Table 4) which would ensure better coverage and adequacy in the future for the city dwellers.

**Table 3: Expenditure and Revenues of KMC under Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage**

Year	Water Supply and Water Works*			Sewerage and Drainage		
	Payments	Receipts	Ratio**	Payments	Receipts	Ratio**
1997-98	395797694.63	91186736.42	23.04	311234664.94	8425923.88	2.71
1998-99	431394159.35	89561209.52	20.76	412289186.86	8734350.57	2.12
1999-00	625949009.71	120270517.60	19.21	521028142.64	47240712.71	9.07
2000-01	618662301.38	116688632.61	18.86	517059364.30	91040677.14	17.61
2001-02	704926261.42	145439303.20	20.63	480869696.71	115719478.18	24.06
2002-03	772608273.89	197769347.57	25.60	413158842.84	204616012.83	49.52
2003-04	730544538.00	330274277.00	45.21	47466767.00***	214284058.00	451.44

Source: KMC Budget documents.

Notes: \* Refer to both production and distribution of water

\*\* Ratio of Receipts to Payments

\*\*\* This figure appears grossly understated, but reported as in the source cited.

**Table 4: Water Supply Schemes of KMC under Construction**

Details of the scheme
Additional 40 MGD water treatment plant at Palta
3.5 MG UGR-cum-pumping station at Ranikuthi
4 MG UGR-cum-pumping station at Kalighat
6 MG UGR-cum-pumping station at Bagmari
3.5 MG UGR-cum-pumping station on R.B. Connector (Kasba)

Source: Same as in Table 2

An idea about the sewerage system as managed by the KMC has been presented in Table 5, which points to a high operating efficiency of 60 per cent. An interesting feature of the treatment of sewage has been by what is called the 'natural' process as much as 70 per cent of waste water could be used in agricultural land (Table 6). There has been improvement in sewerage coverage in the city. As Table 7 shows, by 2004, 80 per cent of houses, both *pucca* and *kutchra*, had been covered.

**Table 5: Sewage Load and Operating Efficiency**

Items	Magnitude	
Waste water load (MLD)	Domestic waste water load	10,72,480
	Industrial waste water load	36,820
	Commercial waste water load	6,700
	<i>Total waste water load</i>	<i>11,60,000</i>
Length of underground drainage (Km)	Brick sewer	180
	Trunk pipe sewer	1430
	Branch sewer	500
	<i>Total</i>	<i>2110</i>
Length of nikashi and surface drain (Km)	953	
Drainage pumping stations (Nos.)	18	
Sewage lifting pumps installed (Nos.)	89	
Installed capacity (Cft/Sec.)	6600	
Operating efficiency (%)	60	

Source: Same as in Table 2

Note: MLD - Million litres per day

**Table 6: Treatment of Sewage, 2001-05**

Method of treatment	Coverage (%)
Activated sludge process*	10
Natural process, by disposing water in an open channel by which polluted water comes in contact with oxygen and can be used in farms	70
Untreated, as no drainage is available soakwells are used	20
Recycling of waste water	No facility

Source: Same as in Table 2.

Note: A noted authority on sanitation, however, has pointed out that the city has no such process functioning.

**Table 7: Sewerage Coverage**

Year	<i>Pucca</i> and <i>Kutch</i> a Households (%)
2000-01	70
2001-02	72
2002-03	75
2003-04	78
2004 onwards	80 (approx.)

Source: Same as in Table 2

Note: Slum area coverage 80 per cent

It is important to note that a major part of KMC is yet to be adequately served by an efficient sewerage and drainage system. The British-era brick sewer network with old and overworked pumping machineries has been a major concern as heavy siltation and waterlogging have been a regular occurrence causing an unhygienic living environment in many areas. In recent years, the Kolkata Environment Improvement Programme (KIEP), with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank has begun a massive project of Rs. 1900 crore addressing this issue. “This includes improvement of sewer system/network, repair, renovation, augmentation of the existing pumping station, construction of new pumping station, re-excitation of existing drainage canals and rehabilitation thereof” (<https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/jsp/SewerageAndDrainageServices.html>).

In short, the KMC has been making strong efforts to enhance its capacity to store water and treat sewage, so that household coverage would be near

total. Along with the development of infrastructure for basic services, its role and achievement in mobilizing revenue for maintaining these has been crucial. Despite inadequacies, the efficient practices of the KMC have reflected good municipal governance.

## **6. Approaches to Primary Data Collection**

In order to obtain an idea regarding the functional dynamics of provisioning of basic services an attempt has been made to obtain popular opinion on the same. Even if a detailed household level sample survey would have been the most appropriate approach to gauge the access to basic services, this study limits the analysis to the observations made at various focus group discussions (FGDs), a method of enquiry commonly proposed to be pursued by most members of the larger collective research programme. The FGD, however, pursued a structured questionnaire to ensure uniformity of approach and quality of enquiry across locations.

For the study, four Wards have been chosen for conducting the FGDs. As may be observed from Table 8, in the selection of Wards, attempt has been made to include such Wards which would have localities dominated by slums as well as with fairly developed ones. Moreover, these Wards also equally represent the two dominant political parties, namely, the CPI (M) and TC. In all the four Wards at least two FGDs per Ward have been conducted to have a more representative view of the resident population. On an average, about 20-25 persons participated in every FGD, wherein discussions were held following a detailed structured questionnaire. In addition to the direct participants, informal interactions were held with other residents of the sample Wards to obtain their impression about provisioning of basic services in the localities. Hence, while direct participants in the FGDs number close to 200, the total number of persons interacted with shall be above 200.

**Table 8: Sample Wards in Kolkata**

Wards (Party affiliation of the Councillor)	Areas surveyed	Remarks
Ward No. 58: CPI (M)	Tiljala and Picnic Garden	Slum dominated
Ward No. 137: CPI (M)	Mazid Tala, Lichu Bagan and Blocks R,P and Q	Slum dominated
Ward No. 63: TC	Gariahat and Fern Road	Economically better-off
Ward No. 106: TC	Nandi Bagan	Economically better-off

## 7. Observations from the Field

The observations from the field have been presented under the following thematic sections, namely, the availability, access and quality of service; agency and its response; and issues in governance. These themes have been discussed with reference to water supply, sanitation, drainage and public hygiene.

### 7.1 *Availability, Access and Quality of Service*

*Water Supply:* The unique position of KMC in having access to copious supply of water from the river Hooghly, however, has not ensured complete coverage of households in the concerned region. In both the sample wards (Nos. 58 and 137), having a large population of slum dwellers and lower middle class inhabitants, between 15 to 25 per cent of households did not have a tap connection in their homes. This was the case with all the four localities in these wards. Those who had taps at home, the FGDs further brought out that water was available twice a day for about three hours in the morning and as many hours in the evening. Although water pressure was said to be good in all these four localities, the residents considered the supply to be inadequate. The situation gets especially difficult during summer months, when both irregular supply and low pressure become frequent. Nevertheless, no one reported buying of potable water, a phenomenon increasingly being common in most urban areas.

However, as one considers the remaining two sample wards (Nos. 63 and 106), comprising mostly upper middle class households in Gariahat, Fern Road and Nandi Bagan, both the availability and access of water were far better at the household level. It was found that almost all houses had tap

connection and had water available for about 8-10 hours a day. While these households found the supply quite sufficient, about 20 per cent of households in Gariahat, there exists a certain slum population, had no taps at home. During summer, residents of Ward 63 pointed out, water availability reduces and supply becomes erratic. An altogether different problem existed in Nandi Bagan (Ward No. 106) till last year; the water that was being sourced from the local pumping station was salty. However, with major intervention by the KMC, this Ward gets fresh potable water directly from the Garden Reach pumping station. Similarly, in Fern Road a few residents did mention about “water quality not worthy of drinking”, for which they purchased packaged / bottled drinking water on a monthly basis.

Public taps/standposts, which are enough in number and have been placed at regular intervals in all the locations of the sample Wards. Although these are being used, one notices distinct patterns in terms of regularity of supply as also condition of the hardware as between slum dominated Wards (58 and 137) and richer Wards (63 and 106). Expectedly, in Wards 58 and 137 the irregular supply has been a cause of concern.

Further, as has been widely mentioned, many of these public taps/standposts are broken and/or leaking. A number of residents were of the opinion that the existing taps or tap systems were outdated contraptions and of poor quality. There was widespread dissatisfaction over the poor maintenance of the taps. Importantly, almost every resident contacted, through the FGD or informally, expressed anxiety over the dirty surrounding at all the public taps/standposts, whether functioning or not. But the situation was entirely different in the remaining two well-off Wards (63 and 106). Most residents observed that the public taps/standposts were being used and were in good condition and had neither been broken nor leaking. The water supply was regular in these taps. The remarks of dissatisfaction over the condition of taps came from only a few residents from the Gariahat locality, who lived in the poorer pockets of the Ward. The complaints included, as in Wards 58 and 137, non-maintenance of tap surroundings which were unclean. However, this was just the reverse in case of Fern Road and Nandi Bagan where the surroundings were clean and well-maintained.

As regards the pipes laid in the locality, opinion did vary. For instance, while in the Picnic Garden area residents rued over the poor state of the pipes leaking, in Tiljala (in the same Ward) no such complain was made. In both Mazid Tala and Lichu Bagan (both in Ward 137) also residents felt that the pipelines were in good shape.

*Sanitation, Drainage and Public Hygiene:* Access to proper sanitation facilities and the up keep of public hygiene are the two vital basic services that have direct impact upon the health of the local community. Unfortunately though, these two key basic services have suffered gross neglect, particularly in the relatively poorer and slum regions of any city. Kolkata could not be an exception. As revealed through the detailed FGDs, in Ward 58, although all houses had some form of toilets in both Tiljala and Picnic Garden areas, the situation of sewerage has been deplorable. It was observed by most residents that during monsoon drainage pipes invariably overflowed. The breach remained unattended for days causing much squalor. The residents agreed that the mismanagement of drainage consequently resulted in waterlogging and could potentially lead to variety of diseases, including malaria, typhoid and jaundice. The overwhelming concern regarding the outbreak of severe malaria consecutively at least for the last three years (2003, 2004 and 2005) in these localities only indicated the lack of attention to preventing the mosquito menace by the authorities concerned. Cases of hospitalization due to malaria were also reported during the FGDs. The state of drainage, sewerage and public hygiene was no different in the slum-dominated S-block (Lichu Bagan) of the Ward 137. Problems of waterlogging and unclean surroundings posed health hazards to the local residents.

Even within the same Ward No. 63, it was found that there were distinct areas served differently so far as sanitation and related facilities were concerned. In the high-end Fern Road area, FGD respondents were generally satisfied with the drainage and public hygiene provision in the locality. They mentioned the 'modernized' and 'scientific' system of drainage and sewerage in the area that did not allow drains overflowing during the monsoons. However, it was quite hard for the people living in slums in the Gariahat area, where about 10 per cent of households did not have individual toilets. That left these households with the choice of open defecation or use of public toilets.

The FGDs included residents complaining about overflow of drainage especially during the monsoons, causing the danger of outbreak of malaria and other ailments in the area. That such diseases have been a regular occurrence here indicated the inadequate attention paid to these poorer pockets. Utter neglect of drainage and poor preventive action against malaria and other diseases laid bare the deplorable state of public hygiene in the locality. But this was not the case in the Fern Road area, where, it was reported that the mosquito menace was fully under control as regular spraying, door-to-door campaign regarding community hygiene and supervision were undertaken in the locality. Enquiries regarding sanitation, drainage and public hygiene in Nandi Bagan, in the well-off Ward 106, met with satisfied residents, who observed that most of the drains were covered and cleaned once every two months. They, however, pointed to the *khal* (the large underground sump) where drain water was disposed off not properly cleaned; during heavy shower the *khal* overflowed and caused water logging in a few adjacent areas. Some even felt that the drainage had design inadequacies.

## **7.2 Response by the Agency**

The preceding section has provided a glimpse into the nature and extent of provisioning of basic services in the sample Wards. Given the skewed access and quality of services as between localities, it is important to know the usual agency approached and its response in addressing the problems. Faced with problems of irregular water supply, breaches in drainage/sewerage and public hygiene lapses the residents approach either the Ward Councillor or officials at the KMC. It may be underscored that unlike in other major Indian cities, NGOs/CBOs hardly play any role in the provisioning and/or maintaining basic services in Kolkata city.

*Water Supply:* When asked about whom did the residents approach whenever issues such as irregular/inadequate water supply came up, whether for household taps or public taps/standposts, whereas the FGD participants in Tiljala cited only the ward Councillor, those from Picnic Garden went to both the Councillor and KMC officials. As regards the reaction of the Councillor/officials, the most commonly observed response was that of indifference or disinterest. In certain cases, only oral assurance was given and that was it. A couple of residents in Picnic garden indicated positive response from the Councillor. Regarding the final outcome of their

complaints/requests, most residents held that nothing was done to sort out the water supply problems, although a few in either locality mentioned that their problem was solved partly.

Expectedly, in Gariahat of Ward 63, the residents reported practically in the same manner as those in Ward 58. As mentioned before, all these are slum-dominated localities. Respondents in Fern Road (Ward 63) and Nandi Bagan (Ward 106) sounded quite positive regarding their experiences with dealing with the Borough Chairman and Ward Councillors. Prompt services were performed whenever any problems were faced in terms of inadequate or irregular water supply. Almost all felt that the Councillors were responsive and took quick action. That these localities had well maintained public taps and many thought these were of good quality indicated the effective role played by their elected representatives.

*Sanitation, Drainage and Public Hygiene:* Management of urban sanitation, drainage and public hygiene remains a key function of all urban local bodies as it involves the issue of public health. In fact, it has often been held that the proof of a city's good governance is reflected in the condition of its sanitation, drainage and garbage removal. In other words, the responsiveness of the elected representatives and/or concerned municipal functionaries can be best appreciated through their role and promptness in sorting out problems relating to these basic services.

In both the areas of Ward 58 where FGDs were conducted, breach of drainage line was a regular feature and the Councillor is typically approached for its redressal. In both Tiljala and Picnic Garden areas respondents were clear that their representative was never prompt and took long time to act. Similarly, residents were concerned that due to mismanagement of drainage and waterlogging there was the potential danger of incidence of such diseases as malaria, typhoid, jaundice, etc. In recent years, severe malaria had spread in 2003 in Tiljala and in 2004 and 2005 in Picnic Garden areas. Despite repeated occurrence, that both the Councillor and the KMC authorities could not manage to control the mosquito menace was a sad commentary on the nature of urban governance in these low-income localities. Some described the attitude of the Councillor and KMC officials as 'indifferent' and they offered only 'oral assurance' not followed by any effective steps. During the year 2005, however, there had been some efforts at awareness campaign in this Ward.

In Ward 137, in Lichu Bagan area the responses were very similar. Complaints of waterlogging and consequent public health hazards were not meeting with prompt action by the concerned Councillor and/or KMC officials. Further, in Gariahat, the FGD done at the low-income residential area indicated that the drainage overflow was a regular feature every monsoon. Although KMC officials had been approached, their intervention took long time and was not of much use. For instance, the incidence of malaria during the recent two years (2003 and 2005) was quite severe, the KMC's help was minimal and many reported that 'nothing' was done by them.

The middle and upper income class areas of Ward 137 (Blocks R, P and Q), Fern Road of Ward 63 and Nandi Bagan in ward 106 faced no problems of breach of pipelines, overflowing drains and waterlogging. The incidence of malaria and other diseases that occur due to poor management of the local basic services was practically absent in these areas. During FGDs and informal meetings as well, residents spoke of effective mosquito control measures taken by KMC officials. At Fern Road, although in 2002 the mosquito menace had just begun, it could be checked instantly due to steps taken by KMC officials and prompt action by the Councillor. In all these localities, drains were cleaned, garbage removed and anti-mosquito insecticide fumigated on a regular basis. The efforts at awareness campaigns stressing community hygiene and 'door-to-door' inspection were much appreciated; these reflected efficient municipal governance.

### ***7.3 Governance Issues: Perception about Services and Choice of Parties***

Having dealt at some length about the status and issues in availability, access and provisioning of basic services in the sample Wards, the study also looked into the manner of responses of the concerned agency. In this section, general issues in municipal governance have been discussed, even as keeping central the concern of provisioning of basic services in Kolkata city. Questions in the FGDs were designed in a manner to obtain popular views on the nature of services and perception about the role of elected representatives and KMC.

As already has been evident in the preceding discussion, in relatively low-income slum-dominated areas, public taps going dry in summer, irregular supply and neglect of taps were commonly observed. There were problems

of breach of drainage, waterlogging and mosquito menace in all these areas suggesting poor attention given to the needs of these localities. Contrarily, in middle and upper income localities these inadequacies hardly existed and much care was taken to contain such problems through regular cleaning of drains, repairing pipelines, promoting awareness through systematic household level campaign and removal of garbage. It was obvious that residents of the poorer localities vehemently expressed their dissatisfaction over the services of their representatives and/or KMC authorities. In the better-off localities, however, most respondents were satisfied with the performance of the concerned KMC functionaries and Councillors, although some still thought their expectations were not met.

While it is difficult to assess, objectively, the nature and extent of deepening of influence of individual political parties, or for that matter efficiency or general acceptance by the populace these serve, the FGDs sought to elicit some idea as to compare the two chief rival parties, namely CPI (M) and TC. Quite interestingly, the responses were highly indeterminate (expressed as 'all are same' or 'cannot distinguish or compare'), across residents, irrespective of their level of income or degree of access to basic civic services. As an indirect approach to gauge any correspondence between service quality and popularity of a given political party, a compilation of information from local (Bengali) newspapers concerning citizens' views about the state of some basic services has been presented in Table 9. The three related basic services included here are irregular water supply, waterlogging and drainage problems and mosquito menace. It is important to note that different political parties irrespective of their numerical strength in various Wards across KMC have not differed much in terms of their role in the provision and/or maintenance of these services. Contrarily, neglect in attending to these problems appears widespread, even for the two major parties. Moreover, it is not clear on what basis the following election results in June 2005 (as compared to that of the previous election in 2000) came up with a higher number of wards having voted for CPI (M) and not TC. May be the voting pattern has been a reflection of how a given party has articulated its usefulness, rather than eventually helping to sort out various constraints facing basic service provisioning. The findings from the table are, of course, subject to interpretation; but these are indicative of the performance of political parties on ground.

**Table 9: KMC Poll Results and Problems in Basic Services Provisioning in Wards, by Political Party**

Political Party	KMC election results*		Wards in which problems yet to be solved		
	2000	2005	Water shortage/irregular supply	Waterlogging due to poor or no drainage	Mosquito menace
Left Front (CPI, CPI (M), FB, RSP)	60	75	30	37	49
Trinamool Congress	65	42	17	51	43
Congress	10	21	5	9	7
BJP	4	3	1	3	3
RJD	1	-		1	
Independent	1	-	1	1	1
Total	141		52 (36.9)	102 (72.3)	103 (73.0)

Source: Compiled from local (Bengali) newspaper reports, in early 2005, a few months preceding the Municipal elections held in June 2005.

Notes: Figures in parentheses are percentages to the total number of Wards (141).

\* Total number Wards won by the parties.

CPI – Communist Part of India; CPI (M) - Communist Part of India (Marxist); FB – Forward Bloc; RSP – Revolutionary Socialist Party; BJP - Bharatiya Janata Party; RJD – Rashtriya Janata Dal.

In spite of the varying nature of provisioning and maintenance of urban basic services, none reported instances wherein residents had to pay extra or bribe either their representatives or KMC officials to obtain an improved service. Moreover, the absence of functioning of any external agencies (NGOs, CBOs or private companies) in these areas, in a real sense, establishes that private sector operations in these services have not yet found ground here so far; that renders the Kolkata experience uniquely important.

## **8. Concluding Observations**

The residents, notwithstanding lapses in services and inadequate/unsatisfactory responses from the elected representatives and KMC functionaries, did value the system of democratic decentralization. This, in any case, provided ample space for popular participation in the process of governance through expressing their anger, frustration as also satisfaction so far as basic service provisioning/maintenance was concerned.

On being asked if they would have suggestions that would improve municipal governance in general and services in particular, a plethora of ideas and opinions came forth. Two specific observations need be made regarding the popular views. First, while residents from poorer (or, relatively disadvantaged in terms of services) localities insisted on a more accountable/attentive/(even 'punishable'!) agency, those from well-off areas looked forward to a 'modernised' and 'friendly' governance structure. Second, there was only a fragile case for privatizing services. In a substantive sense, these observations from the field defy the much-hyped neoliberal prescription of ensuring good governance of cities through privatizing basic services.

In a substantive sense, these observations from the field amply indicate that there are deeper structural issues of legal status to dwelling and improving opportunities for a better livelihood for the urban poor. Those are the persisting problems and need a different kind of intervention and, most preferably, mediated through a democratically accepted process of governance system.

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