Chapter 5

Reengineering Citizenship

Municipal Reforms and the Politics of ‘e-Grievance Redressal’ in Karnataka’s Cities

Malini Ranganathan

The emerging new paradigm worldwide for government organizations is that of an ‘enterprising government,’ a government which responds to what citizens want in a more market-oriented way, provides good quality services and products, and listens more closely to citizens. The reform steps include: public–private partnership, empowering citizens and clients, minimizing rules, measuring outcomes, redefining clients and customers, decentralizing authority, and employing competition/market-oriented government.

—Sheila Dixit, Chief Minister of Delhi

In line with prevailing global and national rhetoric advocating a lean, business-like, and customer-responsive government, in 2005, the Government of Karnataka (GoK) launched Nirmala Nagara (clean city), a municipal reform programme for 57 cities in the State. The centrepiece of the programme—now being scaled up throughout the State via a World Bank loan— involves the application of information and communication technology in government services, or ‘e-governance’. The e-Governments Foundation—a corporate philanthropic trust with influential donors from the high-technology sector and strong allies in the government, including Dixit herself, who had earlier outsourced Delhi’s e-governance systems to the foundation—was recruited to design and implement all software modules under the programme. In this chapter, I focus on computerized complaint management, or what I refer to as ‘e-grievance redressal’, a highly publicized

aspect of Nirmala Nagara that sought to systematize and digitize how citizen grievances about core municipal services are recorded and responded to. I explore what the development of e-grievance redressal, as an illustration of Dixit’s ‘enterprising government’, reveals about the changing meanings of and implications for citizenship in contemporary urban India.

Programmes such as Nirmala Nagara and, at a larger scale, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) launched across India’s largest cities in 2005 reflect the deepening neoliberalization of urban governance, or the embrace of market principles, private sector participation, and private sector-like behaviour by public agencies as prescribed by the ‘New Public Management’. While neoliberalization represents a transformation of state-making and rule (Sparke 2006), critical analysis also reveals that it is an unstable political–economic project that is contingent upon geographical and historical particularities. Programmes of neoliberal reform are often associated with micro-governing and subjectifying practices such as benchmarking, audits, credit ratings, and other market-based techniques that intend to instill conscientious economic behaviour in subjects. Following scholars situated in a Foucaultian tradition, these are rationalities and governmental techniques or ‘governmentalities’ that aim to direct the conduct not only of citizens, but also ‘on the part of those who would govern’ (Rose 1999: 52). Scholars of governmentality suggest that neoliberal rationalities are reconfiguring citizenship as consumer sovereignty and entrepreneurial ability (see, for instance, Dean 1999; Mitchell 2006; Ong 2006; Rose 1999), while advancing ‘an impoverished practice of political citizenship’ (Swyngedouw 2005: 1993). Accordingly, the establishment of rights and responsibilities dictated by market forces has taken precedence in policy arenas over rights exerted through deliberative democracy and political participation.

Much of this scholarship draws implicitly or explicitly on T. H. Marshall’s (1998[1950]) classic formulation of modern citizenship based on a three-step evolution from civil citizenship providing the basic conditions for capitalist development such as the right to sell one’s labour; to political citizenship associated with the development of the public sphere, voting, and other political rights; to social citizenship ensuring entitlements to social justice, such as unemployment and health insurance. As Sparke (2006) notes, while the Marshallian definition continues to be limited to certain Western contexts, it nonetheless provides a starting point for interpreting how citizenship is being reformulated through neoliberal practices. Thus, for Sparke (2006: 155), not only have social and political forms of citizenship been ‘increasingly restricted and economically recoded’, but
civil citizenship—especially in terms of labour and mobility—is also being rescaled from the national to the transnational scale.

Rose (1999), Hindess (1997), and Jayasurya (2002) further elaborate that following the erosion of the welfare state in advanced liberal democracies, social citizenship is now assuming contractualized forms. That is, neoliberal governments no longer consider citizens passive recipients of welfare and entitlements, but call on them to play a more proactive role in the services they obtain through established contracts between the individual ‘customer’ and ‘service provider’. Importantly for Rose, ‘whereas social rule was characterized by discretionary authority, advanced liberal rule is characterized by the politics of the contract’, which ‘[shifts] the power relations inscribed in relations of expertise…especially…when they are accompanied by new methods of regulation and control such as audit and evaluation’ (Rose 1999: 165, emphasis mine). For instance, in some cases, customers may become more empowered by the information provided in a contract to insist on service quality standards and new sanctions if they are not met. Similarly, higher levels of government can use the data generated by specific service contracts to surveil and discipline lower levels of government.

This chapter engages directly with debates on the implications of neoliberalism for citizenship—which is assumed here to mean a bundle of rights, obligations, and negotiated claims that frame the relationship between citizens and the state. I am motivated by the fact that despite the rich theoretical work on neoliberal governmentality, few studies delve into the nitty-gritty of how that power constitutes subjects, is reproduced, and is resisted (cf. Mitchell 2006), and even fewer engage non-Western contexts. E-grievance redressal provides a compelling case to fill this gap because, as a technology of neoliberal government that fits squarely within the New Public Management, it represents a particular coding of citizenship rights along contractual lines. As I show below, e-grievance redressal pre-selects the types of complaints citizens can file and the means through which they must be filed, and establishes norms for responding to complaints that municipal governments must adhere to, or face disciplinary sanctions by senior administrators. Yet, its development in a distinctly Indian urban context—one in which welfare is typically negotiated through what Kaviraj (2000: 150) calls ‘unified pressure groups’ or what Chatterjee (2004: 74) suggests is through collective appeals to ‘ties of moral solidarity’ made in political society—presents some interesting challenges to Euro-centric readings of citizenship. Through an analysis of Karnataka’s e-grievance redressal experience in Bommanahalli and Bytarayanapura located on the outskirts of
Bangalore, I aim to shed light on \((a)\) the assemblage of neoliberal power supporting the emergence of municipal reforms and related technologies of governance; and \((b)\) implications of e-grievance redressal for substantive aspects of citizenship (Holston and Appadurai 1999; McFarlane 2004)—that is, the social rights (in this case, basic municipal infrastructure) that people possess in practice.

I make four main arguments. First, despite policy pronouncements for urban decentralization, there has been a tendency towards greater centralization in decision-making in Karnataka, particularly around international loans and urban reforms. This, in turn, has facilitated the entry of corporate actors into policy-making, and the adoption of private sector-like techniques in governance. Second, the urban policy-making environment in Karnataka, involving partnerships between international donors, corporate actors, financial intermediaries, and bureaucrats, is generating a considerable amount of expert knowledge around urban services. Higher levels of government increasingly wield this expertise to subordinate local government and local political actors. This power equation is further facilitated through e-grievance contractual arrangements in which the data generated (number of complaints received, time taken to redress them, and so on) is used to hold staff accountable and make budgetary decisions—what Rose (1999) refers to as ‘the politics of the contract’. Third, while e-grievance redressal does not necessarily serve as an improvement over previous ad-hoc systems of filing and responding to complaints, which, as I will show, continue to prevail, the data generated provides the semblance of efficiency and rigour. This serves as the basis for expanding reforms and continuing to leverage international loans. Finally, the system of e-grievance redressal presents a clear attempt to reengineer the act of complaining by privileging individual complaints over the ‘messiness’ of group complaints often made on the basis of moral solidarity. However, because poor women and groups that live in informal settlements make many such complaints—complaints that are not recorded in the e-grievance system—there are critical gender and socio-economic biases that have not been accounted for. The stakes of these findings are high given that e-grievance redressal is being rapidly scaled up throughout India’s cities.

The rest of the chapter is divided as follows. In the next section, I explain the governance context in Karnataka that is amenable to the entry of corporate philanthropy into policy-making. In the section following this, I analyze the e-grievance system in depth and discuss its implications for citizenship. I conclude by revisiting certain key theoretical debates on citizenship within the context of urban reforms.
NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE IN KARNATAKA’S CITIES

Problem Framing: Municipalities Need Discipline

Over 30 per cent of Karnataka’s 50 million people live in urban areas that fall under four major classifications depending on population size: ‘corporations’ with over a million people, followed by smaller ‘city municipal councils’, ‘town municipal councils’, and ‘town panchayats’, or village entities. Most of the State’s population lives in municipalities and towns with fewer than one million people (KUIDFC 2004).

Following the implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment in 1992 for urban decentralization, local governments are responsible for the delivery of all services to its inhabitants in municipalities: streetlights, sanitation, solid waste management, stormwater drains, drinking water, and roads. Maintenance contracts are typically outsourced to a variety of private contractors overseen by elected councillors and engineers. Responsibility for day-to-day city management and budgetary allocation lies with the administrative and elected arms of the local government.4

In practice, however, the level of service delivery in most municipalities in Karnataka continues to be inadequate in comparison to demand. Private providers are sometimes required to fill gaps in service provision (for example, private water tankers) and citizens themselves pool their resources to fund new infrastructure (for instance, a neighbourhood borewell or streetlights for inner neighbourhood roads). Thus, access to urban services varies according to income level, the tenure status of the neighbourhood (authorized vs. unauthorized; more on this later), and prevailing environmental conditions (for instance, the depth of the groundwater table).

The reasons for poor urban service provision are complex and are connected both to broader political economic shifts, such as diminished fiscal devolutions from the centre since the 1990s owing to new political mandates for ‘fiscal rectitude’, as well as rapid growth in population and local mismanagement of municipal funds. However, the narrow manner in which senior administrators frame municipal problems—focusing almost exclusively on technical and managerial deficiencies—has, in turn, dictated the types of ‘solutions’ proposed.

Administrators hold municipalities to be weak, their management and accounting practices ‘backward’, and, quite bluntly, mere ‘garbage’ as one administrator put it to me—alluding to both the physical presence of trash lining the streets, as well as the perceived ineptness of municipal administration. As a response to the perceived problems of municipal government, the Department of Municipal Administration (DMA), whose director is an
officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), was created to oversee municipal management in every municipality in the State and to ‘exercise disciplinary control over the staff of municipalities’ (GoK nd). By several accounts, DMA’s role is one of a disciplinarian. One researcher intimately familiar with municipal budgeting in Karnataka described the DMA’s director as a ‘headmaster’ that dictates to councillors in meetings, who, in turn, say and participate very little. This is because, frequently, the resolutions pertaining to reforms are written in a technical language incomprehensible to elected representatives. There is thus a widening gulf between the administrative and political classes in local government reinforced through the implementation of reforms that are designed in institutional environments far removed from political participation. To add to its disciplinary role, the DMA periodically reviews the performance of municipalities and ranks them in order of worst to best performing via a scorecard system of output-based indicators. Such an assessment is then used to design ‘corrective measures’ (KUIDFC 2004: 58), or a variety of financial and managerial reforms. The ‘politics of the contract’, then, in which new relations of expertise are established between customer and provider, has also been established between different levels of government. In this case, senior bureaucrats are mandating the generation of new types of performance indicators for local government employees that are lower down on the hierarchy.

The Nirmala Nagara reforms programme is one among several that the DMA supervises. Although the programme involves a range of scattered, small-scale investments in infrastructure (for example, public latrines, rainwater harvesting, solid waste management, and so on), the main thrust was to develop and implement municipal e-governance systems in partnership with the e-Governments Foundation. The rationale behind e-governance maintains that because ‘record keeping functions are poorly carried out and are a manual drudgery,’ local governments are in need of ‘process reengineering’ (CMAK 2006: 3), and, further, that ‘greater accountability and citizen participation’, until now severely wanting, must be made ‘the pivot’ of urban governance (see note 7).

Several functions of city governments were computerized to this end: property tax collection, financial accounting based on a shift to double-entry corporate standards, the municipal employees’ payroll, inventories for tracking contractors, public works, and assets, birth and death registration, and public grievances (covering a wide variety of complaints from municipal services to day-to-day administration). In addition to these technology applications, the e-Governments Foundation launched websites for all participating cities with content in both Kannada and English. According
to the foundation, Nirmala Nagara is the largest project for municipal e-
governance in the world both in terms of the number of participating cities
and range of software applications. The programme is financed through a
combination of the Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) second urban infra-
structure loan to Karnataka and the foundation’s own resources.8

Centralized Governance, Privatized Governance

The particular reforms and e-governance strategies selected under Nirmala
Nagara are not unique to this programme: since the late 1990s, there has
been a move, both at the central level and at the level of individual States in
India, towards property tax reform and computerization of municipal func-
tions in order to increase transparency, accountability, and efficiency—the
language that universally frames notions of good governance. In Karnataka’s
case, several reforms were experimented with the Bangalore Agenda Task
Force (BATF), a public–private partnership that the then pro-technology-
industry chief minister S. M. Krishna himself created in 1999, and which
lasted until he lost elections in 2004. The partnership, bringing together
bureaucrats, civic organizations, and leaders of the business community
who were determined to take the city’s ailing infrastructure into their own
hands, initiated participatory budgeting, public opinion polling of service
providers, and corporate-style accounting of municipal finances—in total
over 50 reform and infrastructure initiatives in Bangalore over a five-year
period (see A.Ghosh [2005], Kamath [2006], and Nair [2005] for a de-
tailed account of these measures). Kamath (2006) contends that they were
designed in the pursuit of furthering the city’s economic competitiveness
in the global economy, but with much less regard to Bangalore’s growing
poverty. This is in line with Harvey’s (1989) thesis that city governments
are assuming an ‘entrepreneurial’ role in their bid to outcompete other cities
for global capital. Although the partnership itself was considered contro-
versial, there is little doubt that the BATF set a precedent for the type of
techno-managerial reforms mimicking private sector principles witnessed in
Nirmala Nagara (A. Ghosh 2005), as well as the involvement of corporate
actors in urban policy-making spheres and the generation of governance
expertise in Karnataka.

Along with the entry of private actors in governance, there has also
been a trend in the State government towards vesting decision-making au-
thority in corporatized and centrally operated public entities. Along with
the DMA, the Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development Finance
Corporation (KUIDFC) also serves a key disciplinary role in municipal
reforms. First set up as a conduit for ADB's loans to the State in the mid-1990s, KUIDFC is a state intermediary that negotiates and brokers loans, provides oversight for reforms, and assists municipalities in borrowing from the market. Its staff consists of approximately 20 full-time corporate executives, all of whom hail from management, finance, engineering, or accounting backgrounds. Its managerial culture and accounting practices are that of a corporate entity, but its close working relationship with the higher echelons of the urban bureaucracy also means that it is able to enforce loan covenants and reforms without much opposition.

The establishment of institutions such as DMA and KUIDFC is consistent with the notion that neoliberalism involves both the promulgation of market-based principles and some degree of authoritarian control (Harvey 2005). Over nearly two decades since the start of liberalization in 1991, cities in India have become strategic sites for both the downsizing of the state in areas such as social services, and its expansion into arenas such as land acquisition for special economic zones and the facilitation of market-based finance for cities. These trends indicate the simultaneous ‘roll-back’ of the neoliberal state in some arenas and its ‘roll-out’ in others (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harvey 2005; Larner 2003; Peck and Tickell 2002), and as J. Ghosh (1998: 180) says of the Indian context: ‘The centralized, centralizing and increasingly authoritarian state is in fact a necessary requirement for… liberalizing structural adjustment.’ The important point to keep in mind here is that as a project of state rule, neoliberalism can often represent a hybrid between older political legacies and institutional formations (in this case, Karnataka’s predilection for centralized, state-centric rule) and newer market-based models (Peck et al. 2009).

The KUIDFC is a parastatal organization that sits within the interstices of the state system, and, while not accountable to local government (it has no representation on local councils), it mediates between local government and consultants, donors, financiers, and other proponents of reforms. One of its specific roles has been to scale up Nirmala Nagara reforms in the rest of Karnataka through the World Bank-funded Karnataka Municipal Reforms Project, while continuing to work in close connection with the e-Governments Foundation.

The e-Governments Foundation is a not-for-profit trust co-founded by prominent technology and business entrepreneurs. Its clients include all the cities of Karnataka, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, and the erstwhile Bangalore City Corporation. It coordinates over 500 volunteers around the world and has developed nine different software applications, including ‘e-Gov Property’ and ‘e-Gov Financials’—both to increase local
government revenue. The foundation describes itself as a ‘new breed IT Social Startup whose mission is to provide an eGovernance Software System for use in city municipalities all across India—for free’.9

‘New economy’ corporate philanthropists—that is, those emerging from the high-technology sectors—have established a strong presence in Indian States that concentrate the country’s software and biotechnology sectors, such as Karnataka (Sidel 2001). The main icons associated with philanthropic public interest organizing in Karnataka are Azim Premji (of Wipro Technologies), who founded the Akshara Foundation dedicated to issues of education, Nandan Nilekani (of Infosys), who co-founded the eGovernments Foundation, and Rohini Nilekani, his wife, who founded the Arghyam Foundation, involved in the water sector.

Although the e-Governments Foundation describes its activities as restricted to software, it has also played a powerful role in shaping policy discourse. The role of corporate actors in urban policy-making is a phenomenon well studied in Euro-American contexts, particularly among regulation theorists who stress the institutional and social relations responsible for capitalist restructuring (Jessop 2002). In the United States, in particular, ideas of ‘growth coalitions’—strategic partnerships between business actors and urban governments to propel economic development and real estate growth—have held considerable sway (Logan and Molotch 1987). In Karnataka, despite policy announcements in support of decentralization, the reverse has been true; that is, there has been an increasing tendency towards centralization of decision-making and the creation of politically insulated government bodies (such as KUIDFC) that have supported private sector entry into policy-making. Moreover, high-ranking government officers and corporate actors influencing policy through philanthropic trusts share particular cultural understandings of ‘good’ governance, and the technomanagerial approaches associated with them. For instance, while not one councillor I interviewed in Bommanahalli recalled hearing about the eGovernments Foundation or the e-grievance redressal system, the DMA shares a close working relationship with the foundation. Its senior bureaucrats, moreover, are highly conversant with the now universal technical, financial, and managerial approaches of municipal reforms.

In Vithal’s (1997) analysis of evolving trends in Indian bureaucracy, he suggests that academic specialization in neo-classical economics within the IAS starting from the 1980s is valued since it provides a gateway to jobs in the economic ministries, and greater opportunity for interface with international financial bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. For Vithal (1997: 215), there is thus ‘a certain intellectual
seepage’ occurring between international development agencies, corporate actors, and senior bureaucrats, such that ‘the players on either side of the international divide find themselves having more in common than the national officials and those who they are supposed to represent’ (Vithal 1997: 215).

In sum, despite the constitutional amendment for decentralization, decision-making has been increasingly centralized in Karnataka, particularly around international loans for urban reforms. This institutional environment has enabled the entry of corporate actors into policy-making, and the embrace of private sector-like techniques in governance because of shared cultural understandings of governance among a select group of elite actors.

REENGINEERING THE COMPLAINT INTERFACE: THE CASE OF THE NIRMALA NAGARA E-GOVERNANCE REFORMS

In every town in which the computerized grievance redressal system was implemented, a helpline was set up to collect and respond to complaints in a centralized manner staffed by a local NGO (GoK 2006). When residents face a problem, such as disruption in water supply, they have four options for reporting this grievance: (a) personally visiting the helpline front desk; (b) reporting the complaint over telephone; (c) submitting a written or faxed complaint to the helpline desk; or (d) lodging the complaint through the city’s website. That is, even though the system is referred to as ‘computerized’ grievance redressal, it is accessible to users through avenues other than the internet. Non-internet routes for complaining were incorporated because of the low penetration rate of computers and the internet in India, which is a well-known fact.

The mechanics of the system are as follows: residents can choose from a set of 90 pre-coded complaints organized under 10 main categories, such as Engineering, Health, Community affairs and General administration (or if the complaint is made via telephone, the helpline personnel categorizes the complaint on behalf of the complainant). Under ‘Engineering’, by far the category with the most registered complaints in every participating city, citizens can register complaints about broken streetlights, blocked underground drainage, interruptions in water supply, and poor roads, among other types of infrastructural complaints. Under ‘Health’, citizens can complain about the lack of garbage removal and overflowing stormwater drains. Perhaps the most intriguing category is ‘Community affairs’: here, citizens can register a complaint with regard to, or against, ‘slums’; further details on how exactly this complaint is to be interpreted are not provided.
After a complaint is registered (and, as I found, often in-person visits and phone calls are recorded in a log book first and are then inputted into the database), the complainant is provided with a tracking number that she/he can use to follow up, and the complaint is routed (either through phone call, cell phone text messaging, or email) to the concerned engineer or city official. In turn, the concerned official must resolve the problem within a stipulated timeframe and input the status of the problem (that is, pending or resolved) directly into the database or through the helpline.

There is much that is rationally appealing about the system, especially within the framework of customer satisfaction: it is intended to build accountability of local governments because it provides real-time information about problems experienced and whether they are addressed. As a contract between the ‘customer’ and ‘service provider’, it also sets a time limit within which grievances must be resolved, thus creating the threat (or at least the impression of a threat) of disciplinary sanctions on engineers with unresolved complaints. Finally, customized reports aided by GIS software can be generated showing the spatial distribution of complaints and the breakdown of complaints according to a category over a given time period.

These are potentially powerful types of data: the aggregation of citizen dissatisfaction with a local government’s performance, for instance, can serve as a compelling basis on which to allocate budgets or request loans, deploy labour, and make hiring and firing decisions. Indeed, as Wallack and Nadhamuni (2008: 9–10) found through their survey of 74 commissioners, deputy commissioners, and chief officers across 38 cities in Karnataka three years following the implementation of the e-grievance redressal system, the data generated ‘is used for work planning and short-term allocation of resources as well as for monitoring departments’ performance’. Further, a report published by the Urban Development Department of Karnataka states that the data generated through e-grievance redressal ‘enables performance measurement of municipal staff’ (GoK 2006: 3) and introduced ‘transparency and accountability of municipal staff’. This invokes Rose’s (1999) ‘politics of the contract’: the information generated through the establishment of a contract (in this case, e-grievance redressal) enables increased monitoring by senior administrators and officials of frontline engineers and municipal employees. The more unresolved complaints frontline engineers have, or the longer their average record in resolving complaints, the greater the potential disciplinary sanctions on them.

This may be a desirable outcome if the data is representative of the types and distribution of problems experienced in a particular municipality, and, more importantly, if the system does not bias against particular groups
of people. In order to verify whether this was the case, I generated reports for the cities of Bommanahalli, Byatarayanapura, and Mahadevapura over the period of August 2005 (when the system was first launched) to June 2007 (that is, 22 months). I corroborated these results with 40 focus group discussions conducted with resident welfare associations (RWAs), civic welfare federations, and slum-based organizations across Bommanahalli and Byatarayanapura; 25 household surveys; 54 semi-structured interviews with lower- and mid-level bureaucrats, frontline engineers, ex-councillors, and members of the legislative assembly (MLAs); and 24 phone surveys with individuals who had visited the help-desk in June 2007. In addition, I drew upon the recent fieldwork results of a project titled ‘Urban Local Government, Infrastructure Planning and the Urban Poor’ reported in Kamath et al. (2008). The project, funded by Citizens Voluntary Initiative for the City (CIVIC) Bangalore, was conducted by an independent research organization (Collaborative for the Advancement of Studies in Urbanism through Mixed Media or CASUMM) with which I collaborated closely in 2007. This secondary data was based on 138 interviews conducted with residents, associations, politicians, and officials in Mahadevapura (a city municipal council), Kengeri (a town panchayat), and Bellandur (an urban village). I was interested in what data is being recorded in the system and what is being left out.

The results of the e-governance reports for Bommanahalli in the ‘Engineering’ category are provided in Figure 5.1. According to the e-grievances data, problems with streetlights comprise the most significant in Bommanahalli (45 per cent of all reported complaints over two years, n = 2,862), followed by underground drainage (UGD) and water supply problems. I generated a similar report for the category ‘Health’ [n = 569] and found that problems related to garbage collection comprised 96 per cent of complaints made in this category. Other categories had a negligible number of complaints listed over the time period. Thus, streetlights, underground drainage, water supply, and garbage would appear to be the most common grievances from the data generated in descending order of priority. Within the category of water supply, leaking pipes were reported as the most common grievance in Bommanahalli. Similar results were obtained for other municipalities: over the same time period in Mahadevapura [n = 1,969], 66 per cent of all complaints in the ‘Engineering’ category were related to malfunctioning streetlights.

The picture provided by this data is not altogether incorrect when compared to anecdotal reports and the qualitative data I collected; undeniably, the lack of proper lighting, garbage removal, adequate sanitation and
drainage, and reliable water supply are problems experienced throughout Bangalore's outskirts. My qualitative results, however, do not support the conclusion that malfunctioning streetlights is the most important grievance.\textsuperscript{1112} More importantly, I discovered that the categorization and prioritization of grievances in this manner masks key differences related to formal and informal planning. It also neglects those arenas in which collective struggle, particularly by poorer women, is the norm. In fact, reporting of the latter is completely absent in the e-grievance data, suggesting a gender and implicit socio-economic bias that has serious implications for equitable infrastructure provisioning. In the following section I discuss these findings as garnered through ethnographic research.

Collective Complaining as a Form of Negotiating Substantive Citizenship

In many small municipalities—particularly those located on the outskirts of Bangalore—the majority of residential settlements are considered 'unauthorized', the planning term used in India for areas that have not been approved by, or do not conform to the norms specified by, the planning agency of the city. In Karnataka, these areas, known as 'revenue layouts', are formed through the subdivision of agricultural land by a private developer who then sells individual plots to buyers, often to the lower middle classes—what I have elsewhere called the 'peripheralized middle class' (Ranganathan...
Because these plots are not legally converted from agricultural use to residential use, and have not secured the appropriate planning permits, infrastructure is not provided upfront but is negotiated incrementally over time through the help of neighbourhood associations, and deals made with politicians, contractors, ‘watermen’ (those who physically turn the municipal water supply on and off), and city officials. As Chatterjee (2004) suggests, most Indians negotiate access to public services and make claims on the state not through the terrain of established law or administrative procedure, but through a variety of political negotiations in the realm of ‘political society’. This is in contrast to a small fraction of the population that can be considered ‘civil society’ and who claim rights on legal grounds.

Negotiations are particularly critical in the case of drinking water in which residents use a multiplicity of arrangements for obtaining access. While wealthier households and those settlements deemed ‘authorized’ can obtain formalized individual piped water connections from the utility and sink their own borewells as a supplementary source, lower-middle class and poor households depend on municipal borewells, often sunk at a much shallower depth than private borewells. The schedule of operation of public borewells is contingent on such factors as electricity supply, the dependability of maintenance contractors, relations with the water engineers, and the presence and depth of competing borewells in the vicinity. What follows then is a series of complaints, informal negotiations, and bribes to engineers and ‘watermen’ for water to be released. A single visit to the helpdesk of the municipality will rarely suffice.

Complexities owing to differences between authorized and unauthorized settlements and formal and informal planning modes are not captured in aggregate e-grievance data. I summarize the differences between what the e-grievance redressal system captures and the nature of existing modes of complaining amongst the lower socio-economic classes in Table 5.1.

Another potentially more serious omission is that the e-grievance system captures a much greater proportion of complaints filed by individuals than those voiced collectively. The following example is illustrative. While interviewing the Assistant Executive Engineer for Bommanahalli in 2007, I was interrupted by 20 or more distressed residents, mostly from lower-middle-class backgrounds, and mostly women, who stormed his office. They represented residents in one low-lying ward in Bommanahalli, Garvebhavipalya, which often gets flooded after a bad downpour. In this ward, several borewells sunk by the local government have gone dry, and in several others, the electric motor is worn so badly that the pump no longer draws water. The women complained to the engineer about the flooding in their homes
and about the fact that there had been no drinking water for days. Public borewells had broken down and the local government had not sent supplemental tankers (in times of emergency, the municipal government ensures tanker delivery). The engineer ordered them to speak softly (‘nidhanavaagi heeli’) and proceeded to listen to them patiently, almost with the demeanour of a stern parent. A few minutes prior to this incident, when questioned about the e-grievance system, the engineer had told me: ‘Mostly we get oral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who complains</th>
<th>Existing Systems</th>
<th>e-Grievance Redressal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups of people</td>
<td>The individual (sometimes on behalf of a neighbourhood or group of houses/apartment complex)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How they complain</th>
<th>Petitions, storming office, to councillor, direct telephone calls</th>
<th>Visiting help-desk, calling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What they complain about</th>
<th>Top three complaints: drinking water, poor roads, clogged open drains/sanitary outlets. Other frequent complaints: flooding of homes, inter-family abuse, ration cards (especially in slums).</th>
<th>Categorized according to ‘engineering’/’health’. Under community affairs, ‘slums’ are an unspecified category; streetlights comprise 50% of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whom they complain to</th>
<th>Community activist, councillor, engineer on spot visit, assistant executive engineer, MLA</th>
<th>Help-desk personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How complaints are redressed</th>
<th>Councillor puts pressure on contractors, extra money paid off</th>
<th>By directing complaints to specific engineering personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How data is tracked/monitored</th>
<th>Highly decentralized; very little systematic monitoring or collation of data</th>
<th>Highly centralized; through GIS maps, graphs, tables; can be broken down by ward, type of complaint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What data is used for</th>
<th>Future visits by engineers to troubled areas</th>
<th>Budgetary priorities and for scaling up reforms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Source: Interviews and focus groups in neighbourhoods carried out in Bommanahalli and Byataranyapura between 2007 and 2009.
complaints from poor people because the poor would not be having access to email. We get around 20–25 oral complaints per day.’ The mob appeared in his office as if to demonstrate the veracity of his statement.

In front of the women, the engineer picked up his cell phone and dialed the contractor in charge of borewell maintenance. A few minutes later, he hung up in frustration telling me that ‘the contractor is absconding, as usual!’ What the engineer meant is that the contractor had failed to honour his responsibilities of regular maintenance check-ups and that he was now refusing to answer calls. He then turned to the women, reassured them that their woes would be attended to in four days, accepted their written complaint and laid it on top of a pile of complaints that had already come in that day and had not been fed into the system, and dismissed them. Before returning to his cell phone, he said to me: ‘These people exaggerate when they say it has taken “one month” to repair. It has been less than that!’

I later spoke to the women and discovered that some number of them came to the municipal office at least once a week. Several felt that it was better to speak directly with an official—even if it meant being more confrontational—than speaking with help-desk personnel because they felt that there was a greater chance of their complaint being attended to and that they could appeal to the engineer’s ‘sense of duty’ directly to attend to their problems. Importantly, they noted that complaining in groups—either in spontaneously formed neighbourhood groups or through associations—is more effective than complaining alone. As one resident in Bommanahalli said:

I am behind the officials all the time. Sometimes, I make fifty calls per day. I’ll call and ask ‘Why isn’t the water coming?’ If people are not responding, I’ll take a crowd of people with me there…. It is not possible to solve all problems in all areas. But we should join together and the ‘we’ feeling should be there, not just the ‘I’ feeling. Nothing will get done with the ‘I’ feeling.

(Interview with Bommanahalli resident, 27 August 2007)

What I witnessed that day was by no means rare: on nearly every subsequent visit I made to the municipal office, groups of women had collected to protest malfunctioning public borewells, floods, and problems with overflowing sanitary outlets. As Karen Coelho (2005) finds in her ethnography of water reform in Chennai, the poor exploit group-oriented strategies because of their recognized leverage in demanding a reaction out of frontline functionaries. For Coelho, the “complaint” as the key operational measure of the service represents a form of *individuation*—a technology of administrative control as well as, in its demands for order and specification, a
way of perceiving’ (Coelho 2005: 186, emphasis mine). Reforms that aim to structure and codify complaints as problems of individual consumers fundamentally mask or, worse still, undermine certain types of collective struggles. In my research, I found that several women also communicated problems directly to engineers in the field when they came for spot inspection visits. These informal reports usually do not get recorded in the e-grievance system.

In addition to spontaneous gatherings of people, several associations are formed to lobby for neighbourhood improvements. Some associations are trade union affiliated, such as the Bommanahalli Nagarika Hitarkshana Vedike (Civic Welfare Association), organized by the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), a cadre-based group of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Others are caste-based, such as the Dalit Sangharsha Samithi and the Karnataka Janandolana Samithi—two grassroots political organizations fighting for greater Dalit rights, largely based in slums (whose concerns are not at all reflected in the e-grievance database). And others, such as middle-class resident welfare associations, are ubiquitous in most urban areas and focus on problems specific to their localities.

The example of DYFI is instructive of the type of ‘claims to moral solidarity’ that Chatterjee suggests is common in political society. The organization is mostly active in Hongasandra and Garvebhavipalya, two lower-middle-class wards in Bommanahalli. As a politically affiliated organization, and one with an agenda of expanding membership in Bommanahalli, for the past several years, DYFI has mobilized both working-class and middle-class residents in revenue layouts around compensation for rain and flood damage, ration cards, and urban services—sometimes in confrontational ways. For example, in April 2007, DYFI stopped traffic on the Hosur Road to protest the lack of water supply in Bommanahalli and the over-supply of water to elite areas and technology parks (Hindu 2007). In my interviews, DYFI members cited at least one other incident in the past few years in which they had blocked traffic as a form of protest against the municipal government’s failure to provide services.

The group has also been successful at negotiating service improvements through less confrontational means. In one meeting I attended between DYFI and the joint commissioner for Bommanahalli, the leader invited the administrator to visit areas of Bommanahalli that were suffering acute water shortage. The site visits that I attended the following day involved detailed inspections of Bommanahalli’s ailing infrastructure during which engineers patiently recorded the grievances of all citizens who approached them. When I followed up with DYFI after the visit, I learned
that municipal workers had unclogged drains and cleared garbage, and that
tankers were now plying the streets more regularly to provide drinking wa-
ter. Such successes are not often observed, but this example demonstrates
that historically in India, ‘demands or complaints were taken more seriously
if they were made on behalf of communities rather than individuals’ (Kavi-
raj 2000: 150). One Bommanahalli resident and DYFI member described
the achievements of the organization as follows:

When we first came here [in 1996], there was no proper electricity or water,
no telephone connection, and nobody used to even pass by here. Not even
the postman and courier would come to this area. It was only after the big
flood in 2005 that the municipal office opened their eyes and saw that we
were living here. DYFI came and helped us at that time. We worked together
as a group. Before that, I didn’t even know who my next-door neighbour
was. Because of DYFI, we’ve got things done in this neighbourhood like
roads and water supply. (Member of DYFI and resident of Garvebhavipalya,
May 2007)

Note that many of DYFI’s constituents live in unauthorized revenue
layouts. They do not make their claims, therefore, on the terrain of legal or
established procedures, but rather on the basis of collective appeals to the
right to basic services by virtue of their living there.

The e-grievance redressal system, however, does not capture these
types of initiatives and interactions between citizens and local government
officials, much less does its data reflect the types of complaints frequently
made by groups. As Wallack and Nadhamuni (2008: 12) acknowledge
about the e-grievance redressal system:

Several cities mentioned parallel processes for managing public grievances....
Some department officials, for example, received complaints directly from
citizens or specifically went out to worksites to check for potential com-
plaints. Others mentioned using phone calls or direct communication to
route complaints to the appropriate departments in emergencies. Modifying
the system to motivate more complete usage is a high priority: the perform-
ance reports generated for citizens and city managers will be inaccurate and
potentially biased if these parallel flows of information are not being captured
in the public grievance redressal module.

What Wallack and Nadhamuni (2008) fail to recognize, however, is
the systematic exclusion of particular types of complaints made by particu-
lar people—that is, the gender and socio-economic biases of the system. As
Coelho notes of the institutionalized complaint management in Chennai’s
Metrowater Board, ‘the instrument of the complaint, structured as a problem of the individual customer that is amenable to being solved, denies or renders invisible the field of struggle implicit in the collective character of access to water and sanitation in the city’ (Coelho 2005: 185). By codifying certain ways of complaining and not others, and by shaping the conduct of complaining through a process of individuation, these systems screen out a significant proportion of grievances.

Since municipal staff are being held ‘accountable’ to the data reported in the e-grievance redressal system and are being rewarded or penalized based on the data obtained by authorities higher up in the chain of command (for example, administrators in the DMA), the finding that group complaints are rendered invisible by the e-grievance system has a number of very serious implications.

First, if municipal engineers prioritize the complaints received through e-grievance redressal (since this is the basis upon which their performance is judged), then the complaints received through alternative routes (for instance, women complaining in groups) are not as likely to be taken seriously. Second, if budgetary allocations and work plans are decided on the basis of e-grievance data, then it is likely that particular types of infrastructure that are reported through individual complaints will get more financial support than those reported through collective complaints. Thus, I argue that the contractualization of social citizenship through e-grievance redressal undermines the ability of certain groups to gain access to substantive social rights (in the sense of basic urban infrastructure). Jayasurya (2002) comes to a similar conclusion when he finds that the very liberal notion of individual choice and freedom embedded in the ‘new contractualism’ in the UK produces a decidedly illiberal set of outcomes, including the further marginalization and neglect of deprived groups. In the case of India, however, the reason is because certain ways of accessing the state—that is, collective complaints and appeals made on the basis of moral solidarity in political society—are simply not amenable to contractualization. The ‘politics of the contract’ in which new power relations are being established through the data and expertise generated in e-grievance redressal is ensuring that lower levels of government are subordinated to higher levels, thus causing the latter to be less likely to respond to collective complaints not made through the system. It is foreseeable that collective, spontaneous, and ad-hoc complaining may be increasingly marginalized in favour of complaints recorded in the database. This is not to say that all types of associational activities will be undermined by institutionalized complaint systems: indeed, all evidence points to thriving associational life in Indian cities, particularly among the
middle class. At the same time, questions of which groups are gaining better access to the state and how e-grievance and other institutionalized forms of complaint management further reinforce these inequities should not be dismissed.

CONCLUSION: REVISITING CITIZENSHIP DEBATES IN THE CONTEXT OF MUNICIPAL REFORMS

This chapter attempts to contribute to the existing literature on citizenship in urban spaces by combining the study of the analytics of neoliberal government with the study of collective struggle and practices of claiming substantive rights in Karnataka’s municipalities. It takes the case of the Nirmala Nagara reforms involving the implementation of e-grievance redressal in 57 of Karnataka’s municipalities, now being scaled up in the State through the World Bank-assisted Karnataka Municipal Reform Project. The system individuates the act of complaining, codifies the possible range of complaints about the municipal government, and establishes norms for resolving them—in essence, it establishes new contractual norms between the ‘customer’ and the ‘service provider’.

An analysis of the institutional environment in Karnataka reveals the ongoing entry of corporate actors, now through charitable trusts such as the e-Governments Foundation, in urban policy-making further facilitated through the centralization of decision-making authority. The language and assumptions of the New Public Management enables the establishment of shared norms between corporate actors and senior members of the bureaucracy and a widening gulf between the administrative and political classes. Institutions created to mediate between local government, financiers, consultants, and international development agencies—but which are not accountable to the electorate—further encourage the involvement of the private sector without public knowledge or scrutiny. The ‘politics of the contract’ indeed signals a shift in the relations of expertise (cf. Rose 1999). In this case, expertise about local government performance is increasingly being held by higher levels of government to discipline municipal staff. This power equation, in turn, ensures that frontline engineers increasingly heed the data and performance statistics that are being generated through the e-grievance redressal system, rather than responding to collective complaints not being captured by the system.

An ethnographic approach reveals fields of struggle beyond institutionalized complaint management that are especially prevalent in unauthorized layouts and slums in smaller municipalities. In these areas,
basic infrastructure is typically negotiated over time through the help of associations, side-payments made to contractors, and negotiations with local bureaucrats and frontline engineers. Groups of women, in particular, commonly make complaints to municipal workers about flood damage and water supply in person—complaints that are rarely recorded in the e-grievance database. Further, the example of the DYFI demonstrates that associations and 'unified pressure groups' (cf. Kaviraj 2000) continue to be the most common way of routing complaints to and about city authorities. Thus, by omitting complaints filed by groups of poorer women, and certain types of associations, the data generated by the e-grievance system is inherently gender and socio-economically biased.

As frontline engineers are increasingly held accountable to their seniors based on the performance data generated through the e-grievance system, and elected representatives are increasingly shut out of decision-making processes related to reforms, the implications for substantive citizenship are profound. As Swyngedouw (2005) and Chandhoke (2003) have observed in different contexts, the practice of political citizenship, in the sense of collective consciousness and representative democracy, is seriously hindered when citizens are reduced to consumers of services. Although the challenges and failures of representative democracy are well known, the risk of exclusion inherent in the market-driven alternatives may be even more severe.

NOTES

1. To avoid confusion, 'State' has been capitalized whenever referring to a geographic entity within the country, such as the 'State of Karnataka' and used in lower case when referring to government, as in 'the state apparatus'.

2. The formal term used in project documentation is 'public grievance and redressal module' or PGRM which has been shortened here to 'e-grievance redressal' in order to avoid the excessive use of acronyms.

3. The 'New Public Management' is a philosophy that took root in New Zealand in the late 1980s and spread globally. It insists on the professionalization of bureaucracy and the empowerment of citizen as customer. Reforms following this philosophy include private sector-style initiatives purporting to improve accountability through the payment of user fees, citizen charters delineating service quality standards, and institutionalized technologies and spaces for customer grievances, audits, and managed civic participation.

4. The head of the administrative arm is the commissioner, who is assisted in the everyday running of the city by various mid- to lower-level managers (chief officers, revenue officers, and so on) and engineers, a health inspector, and accountants. Councillors elected from each ward in the city for five-year terms comprise the elected arm of city government, or the council. The council and its committees create legislations, pass resolutions, and oversee budgetary allocations.
5. The IAS is a system inherited from the British for training career bureaucrats.
6. Interview with Sharadini Rath, 19 April 2007. Rath was comparing Maharashtra with Karnataka saying that in the former, politicians were much more vocal, informed, and engaged in municipal decisions than in the latter.
7. This is taken from the description of Nirmala Nagara on the website of the Department of Municipal Administration, Government of Karnataka: http://municipaladmn.kar.nic.in/NNe.htm (accessed on 8 June 2009).
8. It is a little known fact that the ADB funded Nirmala Nagara through its Karnataka Urban Development and Coastal Environment Project (KUDCEMP) loan. Although the state government requested the ADB to allocate loan finance from an unrelated loan to Nirmala Nagara, the ADB has no direct oversight over the reform implementation (personal communication with ADB’s Indian Resident Mission, 21 November 2007).
10. Interestingly, Gajanana Vidyamahalike, the NGO appointed in Bommanahalli to staff the helpline (according to CMAK [2006]), was not mentioned once in over 100 interviews and focus groups I conducted in the municipality.
11. In not one of 30 focus group discussions with neighbourhood associations were streetlights mentioned as a primary concern. This is not to say that lighting, especially at night, is not valued. However, when pressed to list priority areas, associations were more likely to mention other areas of collective struggle.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

GoK. nd. ‘Initiatives from Urban Sector of Karnataka State’, Urban Development Department, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore.


