

System Governance and Public Spaces in Chennai: Stakeholders in Urban Planning towards Equity and Inclusiveness

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Abstract

In Chennai, India's fourth-largest metropolis, the rights of stakeholders in public spaces are increasingly impinged upon. Traditional Tamil conservatism in social practices provides a contrasting background to the all-pervading, increasingly corporatized economic sphere. While the social and spatial segregation of private spaces is apparent in the fading role of neighbour relations with the onset of isolating lifestyles, nowhere is the global homogenization of public spaces as rapidly apparent as out on the city roads. The natural authenticity of tribal settlers and migrants is deemed incompatible with the self-perpetuating propriety of established new economic order. Fishing hamlets become obstacles for a developmental pathway that eases unsustainable, elitist private transport practices, at the cost of quiet residential areas and a pleasant sea view. An irresponsible corporate entity attempts to recruit students for its new farmer-displacing centre, generating debate about accountability in an elite educational institution. Within the context of public space versus private planning, the paper presents a multiple stakeholder analysis. It outlines the trends in redefining public spaces. Throughout, the focus on the question of what characterizes public space, its inclusive nature, is emphasized in the light of the threat posed by various facets of inequity in policies and through lack of implementation of regulations. Within this maze in a city of the global South, the questions of agency, allocation and access find expression and are addressed.

1 Introduction

This paper deals with different aspects of system governance in the sphere of public space, across its various forms of expression, each representative of certain kinds of challenges faced by stakeholders in urban planning. Hence it is necessary to take up each instance, prior to concluding with the commonalities it is possible to draw from them as a collective set, reflecting the rounded concerns of system governance towards equitable and inclusive agency, allocation and access, and the implications this has on system architecture and process. However, the intention of this introduction, prior to embarking on a demonstration and analysis of the sort detailed, is to examine the very nature of the discourse of governance, its context and language, and determine its basis, along with the consequences and limitations to our understanding through the method of engagement, that the basis arrived at indicates.

Human intervention in the natural environment is problematic because, unlike any other animal, the human species uses sophisticated technology capable of causing irreversible effects that have mass impact. This problematic takes on interest due to another ability our species exhibits, the capacity for sustained sequential thought coupled with the faculty of reasoning. We are equipped to model, predict, negotiate, outmanoeuvre and anticipate, with a certain degree of success, over prolonged time periods. We are capable of deliberating on what value to assign success, strikingly. In this sense we are normative beings, who quantify and measure. This enables economic, social and political engagement. Specifically, this makes geopolitics possible.

In contrast to this, the human species is also part of nature, and shares most of the defining characteristics of any animal. We are capable of experiencing a sense of communion with nature, and having a mind empty of thought, in moments of insight. This is humankind at its deepest and most receptive, completely sensitized to nature and aware of everything around us. However, we do require thought in order to act, and every action can be considered a decision at some level of consciousness. These decisions are conventionally shaped on the basis of our experience as well as instinct. However, the decisions that drive economic, social and political structures are also influenced by the phenomenon of path dependence, whereby their status at one point

in time affects how they unfold till a later point in time. When we engage with each other through structures of any nature, called institutions, it is normative values that direct us, but quantification and measurement that our arguments in support of a view primarily rely on. By their very nature, such arguments are more capable of defending certain types of views over others. The question of what value to assign success is an illustrative instance.

One might instinctively feel that success can be defined as being “a good human being”. But experience informs one that people with power, wealth or fame are most often referred to as successful. Hence success becomes being a good, rich, powerful, famous person. Moreover, success has a positive connotation, so it must satisfy one’s desires, given the conventional connotation of positive. Power, wealth and fame are all means to achieving what one desires, which includes material wants as well as the way one lives one’s life. Hence success becomes the characteristic of doing and having what one wants.

In the above train of thought, we may note how easily certain assumptions find expression in the linkages without overt consideration. This is the nature of thought, and if one were to analyze the above, this would be thought attempting to explicate its own structure, leading to further complexity. Note that success has already been imbued with the ontological “state of being” trait as well as the possessive “state of having” trait. It may be argued that when simply being is mixed up with possessing (whether physically, mentally or psychologically), it induces dependence on the thing possessed, if not on the very act of possessing. Thus we have gone from defining success as being a good human being to being a human being having and doing what one likes. Two vehicles have enabled us to do so – the processes of thought, and the intrinsic structure of language. Our instinct and experience pass through this filter, and certain attributes are emphasized while others are obviated.

Finally, consider if success were to be something indefinable, attained not as an end (teleological) but in the very observation of it. In this case it would not have a normative connotation attributed to it. The state of being successful does not necessarily have an opposite, unless considered within a dualistic framework, which that of thought or language is. Then success becomes to simply ‘be’, or as Parmenides

put it, “Being is.” That is to say, success, to humans, is to simply be human. Within the constraints of language, this is not very helpful, but two essential points have been made. One, that thought, and anything made possible by thought (like language), filters selectively, assigning varying importance to attributes following its own internal logic; two, that there are indefinable properties, not all aspects of which can be captured through a framework enabled by thought. Hence, to engage in economic, political and social spheres is not sufficient to holistically address any problem of humanity that is all-encompassing in nature; nor, consequentially, can geopolitics accomplish a complete response to questions of governance for human beings.

2 Professional Ethics and the Industry-Academy-Government Complex

In late 2007, it first came to the notice of some students and faculty at IIT Madras that Dow Chemical Company was scheduled to come to campus to deliver a Pre-Placement Talk (or PPT) on 23rd October. A lot of questioning regarding the procedure for selecting and inviting companies to recruit on campus started doing the rounds. As it turned out, this is how it’s done: students from each department inform their respective counsellors of the companies they wish to target. The counsellors act as representatives of each department during Placement Committee meetings, conveying this information.

The Placement Cell’s job is to smoothen the flow of information between the companies and students; its primary working aim is to attract these companies to campus in order to recruit IITians. In the words of the then Placement Cell In-Charge Colonel Jayakumar, “it is a service provided by the Institute to its students in order to facilitate their placement with companies.”

The question for several students and faculty members was: why Dow? It would be hard to find a company with a worse track record in India and internationally: guilty of practising double standards (paying up USD 2 billion in the asbestos case in America but neglecting responsibilities from the disaster in Bhopal), caught lying to Indian Oil (as recently as 2005), fined for bribing Indian Ministry of Agriculture officials to the tune of USD 200,000 to bring Dursban (a pesticide,

banned elsewhere) into circulation in India, and currently under investigation by the CBI, for instance.

The answer was seemingly simple: Dow wanted to come with a job offer of INR 10.5 lakh per annum and an intent to recruit about a dozen IITians. On the other hand, a closer look showed that Dow was also being remarkably active in trying to sponsor events at IITs. RTIs showed it had approached several of the IITs with the aim of establishing future associations (an RTI filing revealed too, incidentally, attempts reaching all the way up to the PMO vying for an out-of-court settlement on the Bhopal case, currently sub judice at Jabalpur High Court).

To some, it became clear that Dow's coming for campus placement was an image-building exercise. Not wanting IITs to be tainted with guilt by association, students and faculty across IIT campuses got active. On the 22nd of October, a petition was handed in at the Director's office on the Madras campus. This was followed up at IIT Bombay. Alumni released a now-famous petition in Delhi, addressed to Directors of all IITs. The basic demand, in the words of Praful Bidwai: "The company has to clean up the toxic wastes in Bhopal, compensate the victims of contamination, and force its subsidiary (Union Carbide) to face criminal trial ... Otherwise, it will be met with hostility wherever it goes in India." The idea was to send out a crisp message to Dow saying that, unless it started acting responsibly, it could hardly expect IITs to help its appearance.

One would think this line of argument would, after initial consideration, appear obvious to anyone with an average amount of intelligence. After all, how much reason does one need to stand in solidarity with hundreds of thousands of one's suffering countrymen? But what the prospect of lucrative employment can do to people's perceptions is incredible. Apparently, Dow's coming to campus meant a job in the core sector with an attractive pay-scale. In the words of a final year student, "placement is not that peaceful in Chem, nobody should fool around with Dow."

It came to light that the idea of an engineer going into a core sector job is more palatable than one taking up a career in management. If the former job happens to be as lucrative, it would seem to hardly matter that one is doing research for the company

whose backroom boys were busy making Agent Orange and figuring out ways to make napalm more 'effective' during the Vietnam war.

Dow had asked to be invited for placement. The screening of a documentary on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy on campus was sufficient for it to 'postpone' its PPT with implausible excuses on two occasions. At IIT Madras, an invitation to represent itself in a neutrally-moderated panel discussion, with a placement official, the Head of Department of Chemical Engineering and Bhopal survivors sharing the table, was cold-shouldered. Eventually, probably scared of bad press and wanting to avoid an embarrassing situation, Dow had to stay off IIT campuses. Even their sponsorship of major conferences was called off at IITs Kharagpur and Delhi, after the authorities took all views into account.

In mid-January 2008, Dow officials visited the Department of Chemistry at IIT Madras, reaffirming the doubts of those who see this whole chapter as an attempt to build association. Students who earlier claimed that, unless Dow came to campus, their chances of being recruited by them would reduce drastically, were less convinced about their position on the issue now. After all, how hard can it be for an MNC of Dow's order to hire 500 of the best researchers in the country for its Chennai and Pune centres? Why should IITs subsidise its advertising costs for recruitment, let alone allow it the image boost of being seen as invited by IIT?

But the whole argument above does not even begin to cover the points that beg to be addressed. One of the real issues is the age-old one of the takeover of education by industry. The trouble is not merely that Dow wants to collaborate with certain departments of elite educational institutions - that is understandable - the fact we must guard against is the clear historical precedent of what this usually leads to. This is not stated unadvisedly, because while the incorporation of courses that equip students to meet industrial demands is desirable, even necessary, within the academic curriculum, the influence of these demands on the educational vision and its implementation by academic institutions is unacceptable. One shudders to think of what the outcome would be, should the orientation of research at institutes of higher learning also be directed as if governed by concerns that belong to industry.

The whole Dow-IIT-Bhopal issue is an instantiation that makes apparent certain failings that have begun to develop in the most elite of our educational institutions today. One is not so much stunned by the actions of any corporate as by indifference and apathy among students. The concluding lines of the petition at IIT Madras read: “for members of the student body it is infinitely important that this sort of critical thinking accompany academic instruction during the years at college. It would perhaps be our best insurance against sudden disillusionment and its degeneration into chronic cynicism.”

For a student, involvement with such an issue, apart from being wonderfully educative, can be a process of disillusionment too. The student body has what can at best be referred to as an ill-informed opinion – often due to a lack of awareness, but as this example illustrates, clearly there is something that lies deeper – a lack of understanding. Why, among an intelligent lot, should there be such a remarkable display of the lack of application of this intelligence?

The answer to this has far-reaching implications as a comment on the Indian educational system. The reason a majority of the student body either failed to grasp the issue in its entirety or failed to express this understanding, or both, is not because it is confident of being able to afford not to care. True, most will get employment that provides a decent standard of living, but more than that, they can afford to be mistaken about something and get away with it, or so it seems.

That – callousness – is at the root of the seeming indifference to issues of humanity. Many IITians hail from middle-class backgrounds, have worked hard to get in, have families that work hard to pay our expenses. But somewhere these years of being driven harder than is normal, of being considered superior and an achiever, and then of staying on insular campuses where every amenity is easily available, alienate most from those on “the other side”.

This is the divorce of education from learning. The fact that students, for the most part, lead completely contrasting lives during class and on their own time, the fact that many are more interested in what career their degree will secure for them than what learning their educators might have to impart, feeds into the same system

that produces it, thereby perpetuating it. Today's IITian is tomorrow's white-collar leader. If these are the sensibilities of people at the helm of our workforce, the future looks positively bleak. Perhaps educational institutions would do better to take up the responsibility of addressing concerns of this sort: the inculcation of sensitivity to human values, the promotion of critical thinking about how to integrate one's work with one's interests, the cultivation of an understanding that stems from an awareness about the structural framework one intends to work within – rather than providing placement services that function based on the myth of neutrality.

If as an institution IIT does not claim to have more than a facilitator's role to play in getting its students recruited by their firms of choice, then the fault does not lie in the placement procedure. That criticism is limited merely to expressing that the procedure followed should be transparent, that there be some screening criteria based on guidelines evolved collectively by the students, faculty and administration that are followed while deciding which companies to invite and which to explicitly refuse entry to campus. This does not in any way restrict students from approaching the company; sending in a resume these days does not even take a postage stamp, usually.

Why some of our educational institutions are churning out students who have not progressed beyond a mindless obsession with the highest possible salary and an elementary, mistaken notion of what is meant by a high quality of life, is because the system does not actually present a good enough case to get students to take it seriously. Ten lakh rupees, on the other hand, are an estimable option, and rate higher than any opinion a system that has failed to defend its own incapacities may proffer.

3 Nature Conservation, Public Participation and Lifestyle Issues

This section relates to beaches in Chennai and the preservation of their integrity. This coastline is important for multifarious reasons and an approach to conservation seeks to address each of these aspects, including economic and sustainability issues. The core concept is to safeguard livelihoods of fishing communities, protect the dwindling population of Olive Ridley sea turtles (on the UN Endangered species list), secure the interests of beach-goers, maintain a peaceful

environment in the residential areas nearby, ensure sustainable fishing practices and development around the beach in a way that does not interfere with its natural beauty.

The method to be adopted in order to make this happen is a community-based, process-oriented solution, involving the stakeholders both by empowering them to express their views as also by engaging them in the planning and execution of any actions that are arrived upon via democratic and equitable decision-making means. There are several key initiatives and organizations that already exist in Chennai which can help bring this framework to fruition, and coordinating their activities raises awareness about the issues at stake, helping garner much needed attention and support, while at the same time enabling gains from shared expertise, collective action and a stronger front to give minority interests a powerful voice. Presented here in brief is a plan that first lists the concerns in brief, then presents an overview of existing group initiatives, finally arriving at a way of preserving the integrity of beaches in Chennai, given the outlined context.

There are several concerns: due to human interference with the coastline (Tata's Dhamra Port in Orissa with Greenpeace's fight against it is an example, and the Students Sea Turtles Conservation Network's battle with the World Bank which successfully resulted in hundreds of miles of casuarinas plantations being moved the requisite distance away from the sea is another right here in Tamil Nadu) the Olive Ridley turtles' nesting grounds are threatened. Beach lighting makes hatchlings head away from the sea and die of dehydration. Trawling nets also lead to asphyxiation for these turtles and other sea creatures indiscriminately. This sort of fishing is not sustainable and also results in increased poverty among smaller fishermen with their traditional catamarans. Post-tsunami, their hand-made wooden boats have been replaced by heavy fibreglass ones and this does not help either. At the same time, there is a project proposal that has been given government approval, to construct an elevated expressway across the beach from the East Coast Road to the Marina. This would mean the displacement of hundreds of fishing families, threatening their livelihood and destroying the hamlets and unique culture of these communities (multiple religious shrines also face destruction). Moreover, with 800 new vehicles hitting the roads in Chennai every day, private-vehicle oriented transport infrastructure has no future, and the bottlenecks that this elevated expressway is being

constructed with the intention of removing, will only multiply in number. It will also transform the residential areas of Kalakshetra, Thiruvanmiyur and Besant Nagar from peaceful neighbourhoods to a noisy traffic nightmare, and Elliot's beach will go from being the city's most favoured hangout to an ugly built-up skyline. A sea wall is also in the pipeline, similar to the one in Puducheri, and that will mean the end of the kind of beaches Chennai has prided itself on through the centuries. Lastly, the beaches have become incredibly dirty, with a lot of the city's trash landing up on these sands. This is a threat to the littoral zones, sea life, the tourism industry and sanitation. The mouth of the Adyar river has gone from being a beautiful estuary to a stinking drainage outlet.

Group initiatives exist at multiple levels across different sections of this array of problems. The Students Sea Turtles Conservation Network is one of a handful of voluntary organizations that help conserve the threatened Olive Ridley population along stretches of the Chennai coastline. Proactive residents of Besant Nagar and concerned citizens are carrying out a campaign in order to stop the elevated expressway from coming up in their area. This needs to be taken up across the entire stretch, with engagement at the level of protest, public outcry, consultation, reworking of policy and a more public-transport oriented approach to urban transport, which is both equitable and sustainable, rather than catering to an elite minority of car-owners. However, despite current efforts, the final feasibility report has been passed with a severe lack of public consultation. Beach roads at Elliot's and the Marina are well-maintained at the moment, but plans are on to put gigantic medians down their middle, which will be an encumbrance to elderly pedestrians and morning and evening walkers. Moreover, the Marina is being subjected to contestable 'beautification' programs. Norms and Indian Roads Congress guidelines need to be enforced in order to ensure sufficient access, frequent crossings and visibility, as also right of way to pedestrians and cyclists, if not car-free hours along the sea-front where possible during peak walking hours. Individuals and groups sporadically conduct beach clean-ups. Yet the overall volume of garbage flowing on to the beaches is a problem that needs to be addressed at the source, and this will best happen with community involvement, people in each locality assuming responsibility and influencing others. The garbage clearance company, Neel Metal Fenalca, that is entrusted with the task, has prior experience only in Columbia, and does not

understand the context of the city of Chennai as well as its locals, nor (it would appear) the basic principles of sustainability and segregation at source. This can only be set right with mounting pressure due to a rise in public awareness and concern, leading to effective political lobbying.

This is not to deny scope for development along the beaches of Chennai. There is much scope for well-designed benches and green patches, such as at the Promenade and Bandstand in Bandra, Mumbai. Adequate pavements already exist and instead of the current 'beach beautification' measures being put in place, local vendors who patrol the beach with their wares could be provisioned better facilities. Development of a sort in sync with the cultural vibe of the city in a people-centric manner, rather than commercialization (renting beach space for film shoots), is what is needed.

4 Public Spaces and the Policy-making and Implementation Framework

The two wide-ranging examples considered in the earlier two sections serve to capture and convey a broad sense of public spaces in Chennai, their status quo and current concerns with regard to their governance and functioning. What operations are seen as legitimate and which are marginalized of themselves, given the prevailing framework, is a reasonable indicator of how equitable and inclusive policies and their implementation are, in terms of allowing agency to operate, access to be distributed and allocation to be fair and just.

Consider the latest developments on related fronts in late 2009. Kite flying has been banned within city limits, as this is seen as being dangerous and leading to accidents. However, kite flying is both a traditional practice (pastime and skill alike), as well as one of the very rare cheap (or free) sources of entertainment available to poor children and young adults in Chennai, often in locations where kite flying has been going on for generations without causing any mishap comparable to the misery and risk these people face in their daily poverty stricken lives already.

Moreover, an even more drastic ruling has been passed recently, banning cricket on the beach. Anyone familiar with Chennai, or even just India for that matter,

knows that cricket is next to religion, and that many of the country sporting idols have groomed their talent on the sidewalks, alleyways and beaches of towns and cities of this country. Not only does this ruling prohibit another investment-free form of entertainment and social capital, but it is directly discriminatory against lower income groups, as there is no law effectively imposed against cars being parked in public space, or even a fee in most cases, especially not at the beach. The rather ridiculous reason cited for banning beach cricket was that it endangers passersby; however, if twenty people are provided entertainment by using a public space that is the equivalent of the area taken up by ten cars, then they are as entitled to its use, if not more, than a piece of plastic and metal sitting there idly. People can skirt by, as they have done for decades, or better still, enjoy watching the action for a while.

These are two instances of grossly discriminatory public policy being framed and imposed while nothing is done about much more urgent issues that are the concern of the municipal corporation, such as the waste disposal situation being disastrous, or water resources being abused and overexploited. The most worrying thing about the issue is that these legislations were quickly passed and brought into effect, whereas more legitimate concerns, even when backed by policy prescriptions, are not addressed in an actionable way, as implementation tends to be lacking. The reasons behind this, in cases ranging from corporate accountability to transportation infrastructure investment or the provision of facilities for hawkers as opposed to concessions for malls, are to be found in the intimate linkages between the private lobby and public administration, as also the apathetic orientation of educational institutions and the educated towards all concerns save employability and good ratings on comparative performance charts.

5 Conclusion

The above discussion is representative of the concerns relating to public spaces and their governance, with regard to ensuring equity and inclusiveness in terms of access, agency and allocation, as discussed in the introduction. While this is an empowering point to begin with, the concerns expressed are only indicative of the whole host of complex, interrelated challenges that an adequate system governance architecture and process must inevitably take into consideration and account for in both its

conceptualization and its execution. The conceptual understanding of the term ‘public space’ has been kept unconfined in the discussion to accommodate for the inability to outline each and every aspect of public spaces and the stakeholders involved, not only those involved in urban planning but also those whom it is for, and most severely affects. The intent has been to construct an intellectual framework within which to analyze equity and inclusiveness in their manifestation in the urban tissue. For this purpose, the above examination of the nature of some concerns, the institutions involved in addressing them, and their interface with social, political, economic and ecological dynamics, constitutes a simplified problematic. While a brief look at transport equity in pedestrian access without compromising on street vendors, who are actors in the public space of the pavement, draws attention to the complex nature of any decisions to be executed in terms of the multiple interactive phenomena they must necessarily be informed by, the elevated expressway case serves to draw out the enmeshed political and economic agendas that drive development in a paradigm characterized by elite capture and resource-intensive infrastructure. Both examples instantiate the threat that public spaces are under within a dominant framework that seeks to further inequity and perpetuate exclusion, emphasizing the benefits of certain stakeholders at the cost of others who are marginalized. This is merely one instantiation among many, all of which are subject to this penetrative regime. The concept of public space can be regarded from many perspectives – personal ecological space, the space of self-expression, space for social interaction, the space for critique – and this last introduces an element of reflexivity. Self-critical systems have accountability instilled in them by virtue of this mechanism, and good institutions and organizations follow such practices. A society working on principles of greed and self-interest, by failing to respect principles of justice, which include equity and inclusiveness, unwittingly condemn themselves to a stumbling point somewhere in the future. Nor is that point far, with social resistance, and in this era of climate change also natural resistance, on the rise.

Yet, grim though the situation is, at present it is still the case that human agency is to be observed more often than the spaces legitimated by the appropriative discourse. This is sound reason for arguing that local symbolic culture may yet integrate with contemporary urban tissues. The danger that is pointed out, however, is that the appropriative discourse has a tendency to move towards domination, and select

instances of this have been explicated. This is added to, moreover, by the worrying fact that the weaker social adhesion is, the more susceptible it becomes to the strongly cohesive movement based on individual interest that corporate entities (and also public administrator in their individual capacities) frame, as symptomatic of the usurping regime.

This indicates the way ahead, which needs must be based in community driven solidarity, and practices that encourage and incentivize responsible behaviour of big organizations through an accountability framework that has to be brought about. Capturing the transitional dynamics of this required change is a matter that requires consideration of phenomena such as path dependence and reflexive interactions, which is a more involved affair than the scope of this paper; however, it is clear that a necessary condition to accomplish the same is to ensure direct downward accountability, even if it means having to introduce stringent punitive measures. This is as true in educational institutions as of industry or administrative units, and even civil society. However, the latter must play the role of the catalyzing agent to begin with, and rationalizing its own structure can be dealt with once a shift in the tendencies of the current framework has been initiated.

In this manner, we can eventually hope to arrive at a dynamic that allows for the agency of individuals and organizations, the access of all to systemic possibilities (as a consequence of the system responding to possibilities it accesses in the first place), and the allocation of public space in a manner that is representative of the equity and inclusiveness inherent in a governance structure that incorporates all these factors. Then, even if we do not quite arrive at a utopian scheme of things, our tendency as a governed system will be to move towards more democratic, empowering processes than to be subjected to appropriative power structures that are self-perpetuating. In this manner, the age-old principal-agent problem (to draw an analogy) is to be overcome by diversifying risk across society while releasing incentives to the common good, and offering the opportunity for individual agency to contribute by capitalizing on this tendency of the system rather than one that rewards by increasing concentrations of information, power and resources.