Joel Ruet and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (eds.)

Governing India’s Metropolises is a co-edited volume comprising a set of 11 essays that are based on case studies from four Indian metropolises (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Hyderabad). The contributors seek to generate an understanding of urban governance using a comparative framework to investigate six public services, namely primary education, healthcare, food, water and sanitation, slum rehabilitation, and solid waste management programmes and practice. Outlining the rationale for the book, the editors of the volume observe that Mumbai and Delhi are among the ten largest megacities in the world, and one tenth of the world’s urban population lives in Indian cities. This collection attempts “to understand who plans and manages urban affairs, how they do it, and whose interests are kept in mind” (p. 10).

The volume focuses on the period following the adoption of India’s 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in 1992, which aims to decentralise power, mobilise democratic participation and strengthen local governance in and of Indian cities. In the first ‘comparative overview’ chapter, the authors Ghosh et al. suggest that there is “strong institutional fragmentation” across all local urban bodies in India. Further we observe the emergence of the ‘corporate sector’ and the ‘middle-class’ as significant actors in urban affairs, thus “bringing in new types of governance relationships” (p. 34).

While it reiterates the consensus that the 74th CAA has not achieved its political or administrative objectives, the authors highlight the emerging trend of the significant role of ‘non-state actors’ in the governance of cities. Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) continue to lack autonomy and are shackled by the absence of streamlined processes and procedures. However, especially since the mid-1990s, mega-cities in India have witnessed the growing involvement of the corporate sector and middle-class-led civil society organisations in the delivery of public goods and services. Identifying this development as a key feature of neo-liberal urban management, many contributors in this volume provide a critique of the catchphrases that characterise much of the contemporary discourse of urban governance, including, for instance, the World Bank mandated ‘best practice’ and ‘PPP’ (Public-Private-Partnership) processes.

Many of the papers in the volume record the shift towards ‘outsourcing’ and ‘co-production’ of public services and civic functions. Increasingly, the urban citizen is imagined to be a paying consumer of services that need to be delivered efficiently. A vocal middle class is gradually emerging as a key constituent in a new urban governance paradigm that imagines ‘residents’ associations’ and ‘neighbourhood-watch programmes’ to be signal manifestations of participatory democracy at work in cities.
The book is useful for its focus on the administrative structures of governance and the service delivery mechanisms in four of the largest municipal corporations in India. By paying close attention to the administrative structures of governance in these four cities, the contributors to this volume have been able to generate a detailed picture of urban governance in contemporary India. This, in turn, enables the volume to emphasise the significant differences in administrative structures and institutional arrangements among India's mega-cities, even as it foregrounds the inefficient overlapping of functions and responsibilities in the administrative bodies across cities.

While the case studies allude to the works of theorists in the field, it does not engage substantively with these formulations. This might have been an opportunity to address key notions, such as Sassen's 'global city', Chatterjee's 'political society' and Appadurai's 'deep democracy' from the standpoint of specific urban experience in the contemporary Indian city. While it does gather considerable evidence, the studies lack theoretical depth. In part, this seems to be a function of falling between the stools of policy-focused analysis, on the one hand, and a reluctance to anchor the enquiry within an unambiguous disciplinary orientation, on the other.

In the concluding essay, Ruet outlines the multiple modes of governance that can be discerned in studying the changing nature, role and responsibility of the state in urban affairs. The contributors are concerned, collectively, with the challenge of making urban governance more democratic. Consequently, the volume highlights the threats to democracy and community participation implicit in the emerging political and economic trends in urban governance in India.

The authors of the introductory essay observe that "the geographical and demographic expansion of urban peripheries are giving rise to a new balance at the metropolitan level, one that will reduce the political dominance of the city centres" (p. 34). This is an intriguing assertion. However, this observation too is not substantiated or built on in the collection. This is a pity because an inordinately high proportion of works in the field of urban affairs focus on the mega-city, and consequently our understanding of urban transformations of small towns, peri-urban regions and edge and fringe cities is patchy, at best.

According to the 2011 Census, there are 3,894 census towns in India (the corresponding figure for the 2001 Census is 1,362). This implies that, in the past decade, we have seen the growth of 2,532 census towns—this is a staggering increase of 186 per cent. In India, these spaces of urbanisation fall outside the catchment area for ULBs, as defined under the 74th CAA. Thus, even as we struggle to implement democratic practices and processes in officially recognised 'statutory' towns, the real story seems to be unfolding elsewhere, in