

Decentralizing Democracy: A Study of Good Governance Practices in Surat's Local Administration

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Abstract:

Governance has been an integral part of human civilization, evolving alongside social structures ranging from tribal to feudal societies. It refers to the decision-making process and the implementation of decisions through various institutional and social mechanisms. True governance includes three essential components: Process, Content, and Deliverables. Process involves transparency and accountability, Content emphasizes justice and equality, and Deliverables ensure that citizens can live with dignity. Good governance goes beyond mere laws or administrative procedures, it requires accountability, fairness, and effectiveness in meeting citizens' needs. It also demands that rulers and institutions operate within established norms and strict institutional scrutiny. According to the World Bank, good governance involves open, efficient, and equitable management of a country's resources. In this context, this study examines good governance practices in the local administration of Surat and explores how decentralized democracy, through the devolution of powers, enhances accountability, transparency, and citizen participation. Using qualitative analysis and a review of Surat Municipal Corporation policies, this research explores how ethical and participatory local governance contributes to effective service delivery, disaster management, urban planning, and community development. Both primary and secondary sources were used to provide a comprehensive understanding of Surat's governance model and its impact on sustainable urban governance.

1. Introduction:

Governance, an inseparable aspect of human civilization, has evolved to embrace the benchmark of Good Governance, which demands transparency, accountability, fairness, and responsiveness for citizen welfare, focusing on the equitable and efficient management of a nation's resources as defined by the World Bank. To realize this vision, particularly in developing democracies like India, Decentralizing Democracy has gained prominence as a vital strategy. Decentralization systematically devolves political, administrative, and fiscal powers to local institutions, a move constitutionally enshrined by the 73rd and 74th amendments, which institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. This multi-tiered system aims to deepen democracy by bringing decision-making closer to the people, thereby enhancing transparency and citizen engagement. However, challenges such as inadequate fiscal autonomy, bureaucratic dominance, and social inequalities persist despite these progressive reforms. The conceptual foundation of this study lies in the interdependence of these two concepts: good governance provides the necessary efficiency and ethics, while decentralization offers the structural framework for its realization. This relationship is significant in urban

governance. The Surat region serves as an exemplary case study of successfully implementation of good governance. Its transformed into a model of effective local governance, recognized for its innovative administrative reforms, efficient public service, and commitment to participatory governance in areas like e-governance, waste management, and disaster resilience.

2. Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine good governance practices in the local administration of Surat and explores how decentralized democracy, through the devolution of powers, enhances accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.

3. Research Methodology

This is qualitative analysis and reviewed the practices of Surat Municipal Corporation. Both primary and secondary sources were used to provide a comprehensive understanding of Surat city governance model and its impact on sustainable urban governance through the lenses of good governance.

4. Literature Review

Literature review highlights the existing studies and research related to good governance and decentralized democracy. The literature review focuses on both theoretical discussions and practical examples from different regions.

Srivastava Meetika, in article “Good Governance - Concept, Meaning and Features: A Detailed Study,” explains that the idea of governance gained importance in the 1990s as it shifted focus from government control to citizen involvement. Researcher describes good governance as accountable, just, and development-oriented administration within a democracy. Srivastava refers to the World Bank , emphasizing participation, rule of law, and cooperation with civil society. She also notes that information technology and administrative reforms play a major role in improving citizens’ quality of life and fighting corruption.

Tripathi Rahul, in research article “Good Governance: Origin, Importance and Development in India,” traces governance from ancient roots to its modern understanding. He emphasizes participatory, transparent, and accountable governance as essential for social justice and sustainable development in India.

Thakur Kuldip Singh, in research article “Good Governance: Analyzing the Government of India’s Numerous Initiatives and its Challenges,” lists initiatives like the Right to Information Act, Public-Private-People Partnership , e-governance, and CSR programs as examples of India’s efforts to improve governance. He also discusses major challenges such as

corruption, inequality, and lack of education, linking them to the overall effectiveness of governance.

Bhargava Vinay, in research article "Engaging Citizens and Civil Society to Promote Good Governance and Development Effectiveness," stresses that citizen and civil society participation are essential for transparent and accountable governance. Drawing examples from India and Latin America, he shows that citizen engagement helps combat corruption and strengthen development efforts.

Sahu Gyanendra Kumar, in research article on Democratic Decentralization, explains that true democracy depends on power being shared with local governments. He discusses the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, noting how Panchayats and Municipalities give citizens greater control over local governance.

5. Decentralized Democracy in the Indian Context

Decentralized democracy is the process of moving power, responsibility from central and state governments to local levels, fundamentally aiming to let people directly participate in their own development planning. This move enhances inclusivity, responsiveness, and accountability, echoing Mahatma Gandhi's vision of self-governing villages. The overall goal is to stimulate local self-reliance through job creation, wise resource use, and strengthening democracy by empowering citizens. Decentralization occurs in varying forms, from the weakest form, Deconcentration (moving administrative tasks internally), to the strongest, Devolution (granting real, independent authority to locally elected governments for political, administrative, and financial control). This process typically progresses through three stages: administrative, financial, and the crucial political stage. Governments are motivated by factors like rapid urban growth and public demand for accountability, emphasizing the need for political will and visionary leadership. For the system to succeed, three key relationships must be robust: between Central and Local Governments (power and fund transfer), Local Governments and Citizens (transparency and participation), and Citizens and the Central Government (protecting rights). India cemented its path to decentralized democracy with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which granted constitutional status to local self-governance, ensuring regular elections and transferring financial powers. Its ensure the decentralised democracy within India and contributing in development of people, committed to protection of citizen of India.

6. Decentralised Democracy and Good Governance Practices in Surat City

Surat, known as "The Silk City" and "The Diamond City," is a rapidly expanding metropolis in Gujarat, home to over 8.3 million people. Its economy is robust, fueled by major

industries like textile manufacturing, diamond cutting and polishing, and significant chemical/petrochemical operations at Hazira (hosting giants like ONGC and Reliance). This dynamic industrial activity has resulted in a near-zero unemployment rate and high immigration. Governed by the Surat Municipal Corporation, the city prioritizes transforming into a self-reliant and sustainable metropolis, aiming to enhance the overall quality of life for its residents. For this purpose Surat has established itself as a leading model for governance which ensure people participation in administrative set of the city and ensure their rights and

development within rules and regulations of government of India. The set-up of the Surat city open the door for the people to participation in each activity and that make the system more accountable and transparent. Below are the examples of people participation in Surat city administrative set up that examines good governance practices in the local administration of Surat and explores how decentralized democracy, through the devolution of powers, enhances accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.

6.1 Citizen Participation as the Foundation of Governance

Citizen participation is defined as the active involvement of individuals in government and administrative activities, serving as an essential foundation for a functioning democracy and the ultimate success of decentralized governance. This engagement is crucial because it allows governments to identify problems early and instills a vital sense of ownership among citizens regarding final policy results; the effectiveness of this process is measured by the number of participants and their influence on the outcome. The city of Surat exemplifies the power of mass participation through both large-scale mobilization and continuous service-level feedback. In a notable instance of mobilization, Surat set a Guinness World Record for the largest yoga session with 1.53 lakh participants, demonstrating the government's strong ability to engage the public using technology (QR-coded wristbands) and institutional commitment (training instructors). Furthermore, the Surat Municipal Corporation ensures a continuous feedback loop through its Bus Rapid Transit System, a key public service. By utilizing surveys and formal feedback mechanisms, the SMC actively integrates citizen participation into service improvement, demonstrating a commitment to responsive governance by using commuter input to refine and optimize the BRTS's efficiency and reliability. The practice of people participation is thus not merely an ideal, but the operational foundation of Surat city's governance model, providing both the legitimacy of mass engagement and the functional data necessary for service optimization. It enhances accountability and transparency in administrative system of Surat city at decentralised level.

6.2 Decision-Making in Urban Governance

Decision-making is the essential process through which an organization operates, involving problem recognition, information gathering, listing options, and choosing the best one; these decisions are broadly categorized as either programmed (routine) or non-programmed (novel). Effective urban governance, which relies on making swift, informed, and appropriate

decisions, finds a powerful case study in the transformation of Surat, which rapidly went from a "disorderly and garbage-ridden city" after the 1994 plague to one of the cleanest in the country, demonstrating the efficacy of expedited and effective action. Beyond crisis management, the Surat Municipal Corporation has become a professionally run civic body by adopting key decision-making initiatives like decentralization, implementing e-governance, and employing innovative taxation methods to cope with remarkable decadal growth, all while utilizing a consultative approach for managing complex issues. Crucially, the focus on the power of a single person in leadership is seen as vital for effective, responsible, and responsive urban governance, aligning with models that acknowledge the limits of bounded rationality and prioritize practical incremental or mixed-scanning approaches over purely optimal ones. This decision making model boost up the good governance model of Surat city and focused on decentralisation where people can be part of decision making bodies.

6.3 Public Services and Grievance Redressal

Public Services are the programs and services provided by the government to meet the needs of the general public, managed by public administration to ensure effective and responsive delivery. To enhance service delivery, efficiency, and transparency, the Surat Municipal Corporation implemented an automated complaint management system (Grievance Redressal System). This system is designed to provide a just and transparent process for handling complaints against the administration (such as bribery, delay, rudeness, or neglect of duty). Complaints are accepted through various mediums: a mobile application, toll-free number, commissioner's desk, and WhatsApp. Each complaint receives a unique tracking number. Once resolved, compliance is marked with location coordinates and photos visible to both citizens and management. This proactive monitoring helps build trust and address grievances like a "Deficient Redressal Mechanism." This system is an example of using e-governance to control the potential misuse of Power and Authority by ensuring public accountability which flourished again Surat good governance model.

6.4 Sustainability and Cultural Sensitivity

Sustainability is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, requiring a focus on environmental protection and maintaining a dynamic equilibrium. In Surat's industrial context, this is critical to avoid the depletion of resources and irreversible damage, with the Surat Municipal Corporation's efforts in wastewater recycling serving as a direct contribution to ensuring reliable water resource growth. Furthermore, Cultural sensitivity is the effort to understand the hidden aspects of a new culture to ensure fair, inclusive, and effective governance for diverse communities. Surat is noted for its affable, cheerful, and business-minded residents, predominantly Gujarati but harmoniously coexisting with people of various faiths. The city has a distinct identity characterized by its predominant language and unique culinary delights (Locho, Surti Ghari), along with the exclusive festival of "Chandi Padvo." The SMC exercises this cultural sensitivity by acknowledging and accommodating these diverse backgrounds and values in its policy formulation and service delivery to achieve the stage of integration, where it can effortlessly shift between cultures. The interconnection between these factors is also the responsibility of SMC and they are doing commendable work.

6.5 Public-Private Partnership in Surat

Privatization involves transferring responsibility for a function from the government to the private sector, motivated by replacing perceived inefficient public operations with streamlined and effective business practices through mechanisms like selling state-owned enterprises, granting long-term concessions, or outsourcing services to achieve cost savings and leverage private financing. Surat's industrial growth led to a surge in water demand, prompting the Surat Municipal Corporation to initiate a landmark wastewater recycling project in 2014 in partnership with the Asian Development Bank to build state-of-the-art tertiary treatment plants with a capacity of 726 MLD. Although initially intended as a wholly private venture and contracted to M/S Enviro Control Associates, the project was restructured in 2017 into separate contracts for Engineering, Procurement, and Construction and Operation & Maintenance, demonstrating the complexities and time required for successful Public-Private Partnership projects. The initiative successfully converted 57 MLD of sewerage into 40 MLD of treated water, generating significant revenue for the SMC, with user charges collected from industries purchasing the recycled water expected to cover the annual O&M costs, making it a sustainable model for wastewater treatment in India. Another key example of a successful PPP model is in the area of Solid Waste Management, where the SMC entrusted the work of plastic waste management to a private agency, Eco Vision Environmental Resources, for a 20-year

term. This agency manages a dedicated plastic waste management center at Bhatar Surat, which recycles around 30 metric tons of plastic waste daily collected from households and streets, and uses the processed material (pellets) to construct roads (approximately 22 km of road was constructed with plastic waste material in 2020), showcasing how the private sector provides effective solutions for both environmental sustainability and infrastructure development. As a part of sustainable development goal this environment friendly approach through public private partnership taken by Surat Municipal Corporation to enhance service delivery and promote good governance.

6.6 Capacity Building and Surat's Commitment

Capacity Building, as defined by the United Nations Development Group, is a holistic process that goes beyond simple training, focusing on developing abilities for leadership, management, goal-setting, decision-making, and accountability across three levels: systems, organizations, and individuals. At the systems level, this is critical for public administration in Surat, requiring skills in coalition-building and integrative thinking to build effective, transparent, and collaborative governance processes. Organizations, like the Surat Municipal Corporation , address policy implementation challenges through instruments like strategic planning and partnership approaches. A key example is the SMC's capacity-building workshop for 5,500 employees, designed to revive sensitivity towards citizens and emphasize a humane approach in public dealings, while a planned course on new inventions and innovations illustrates investment in cutting-edge skills. The individual level focuses on enhancing the professional competencies and merits of public servants, with the SMC workshop directly targeting leadership, good administration, and service satisfaction, thereby fostering a culture of professional merit and connecting individual ethical behaviour directly to the overarching goals of Good Governance and high-quality service delivery. By enhancing the capability of the public servants Surat Municipal Corporation prepared the strong based to run the good governance in city administrative set up.

6.7 Geopolitics and the Surat Diamond Bourse

Geopolitics is the study of how geography influences politics and international relations, significantly impacting investment drivers, economic growth, and market volatility, with geopolitical risk arising from international tensions that disrupt normal relations. The establishment of the Surat Diamond Bourse is a prime local initiative with major global implications, as this cutting-edge center is designed to centralize and streamline the international diamond and jewelry trade. Given that Surat already handles nearly 85% of the world's processed diamonds, the Surat Diamond Bourse solidifies India's global leadership

position, boosting foreign investment and demonstrating the industry's historical geopolitical and economic resilience. The Surat Diamond Bourse is a strategic response to current challenges, including inflation in major buyer markets, the rise of lab-grown diamonds, and the G7 ban on Russian diamonds starting in 2024. By consolidating operations, offering world-class infrastructure (like a Customs Clearance House), and aiming for enhanced transparency and ethical sourcing, the Surat Diamond Bourse seeks to mitigate geopolitical risk by establishing a secure, efficient one-stop shop, ensuring the continued flow of approximately US\$23 billion in annual diamond exports and creating over 150,000 new domestic jobs.

7. Conclusion and Findings

In conclusion, this study examines good governance practices in the local administration of Surat and explores how decentralized democracy, through the devolution of political, administrative, and financial powers, enhances accountability, transparency, and citizen participation. It is clear that implementing good governance practices and establishing systems of decentralised democracy yield a multitude of positive outcomes. They demonstrate a correlation between transparent decision-making processes, citizen participation, and overall societal well-being. Furthermore, this study highlights the tangible effects of good governance principles on service delivery, infrastructure development, and equitable resource distribution. Communities that embrace decentralised democracy often experience more efficient and targeted public services tailored to local needs and priorities. The emphasis on citizen participation not only strengthens the democratic spirit but also ensures that policies are more responsive to the diverse needs of the people. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the challenges and nuances associated with implementing good governance and decentralised democracy. This study makes clear, promoting good governance and decentralised democracy is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it is a dynamic and iterative process that requires commitment, adaptability, and collaboration.

8. References

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