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Marie-Hélène Zérah

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**I.S.A. Baud and Joop de Wit (eds.), *New Forms of Urban Governance in India: Shifts, Models, Networks and Contestations*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008, 402 pages + xiv, ISBN 978-81-7829-905-1**

Marie-Hélène Zérah

[1] Edited by the geographer I.S.A. Baud of the University of Amsterdam and the social anthropologist Joop de Wit of the Institute of Social Sciences, The Hague, this book is a welcome addition to the growing interdisciplinary research on large Indian cities. Its ambition is to analyze the major shifts in urban governance since the beginning of the 1990s and to assess to what extent they reflect international models of urban management reform. The book starts with a detailed and well-researched introduction. Relying on a comprehensive review of the literature, it presents the debates before analyzing how the Indian case follows or differs from international trends. The three main topics discussed in the introduction form the backbone of the book which is composed of 12 other chapters: four of them consider the theme of political decentralization, a set of five papers deals with the question of partnerships in public service provision and the last three chapters deal with contestation.

## **A disappointing process of decentralization**

[2] In their introduction, the editors start by presenting a balanced view of the benefits and dangers of decentralization, thereby avoiding the pitfall of deifying decentralization *per se*. For India, they have a pessimistic assessment of the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment (CAA) adopted in 1992 that increased responsibilities of local government, and enforced regular elections for urban local bodies (ULBs). The widespread absence of metropolitan planning committees, the

disappointing results of ward committees at the neighbourhood level, the lack of financial devolution from the State (provincial) government to the ULBs, the marginalization of municipal councillors, among others, are explained by the 'non committal nature of the legislation itself in contrast to the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment for rural areas' (p. 24), as well as the actual implementation of the amendment. Though this reviewer does agree with most of their conclusions, the disappointment (shared by authors in this volume as well as others) stems from the overly optimistic expectations generated by the amendment, whereas institutional change is by definition difficult to put in place, and can usually only be understood in a long-term historical perspective. Indeed, the long tradition of containment of elected municipal representatives in Mumbai despite their participation in various committees that take decisions related to budget and policies can be explained by the continuity of the Commissioner System over 150 years. This system discussed by Marina Pinto (chapter 2) gives large powers to the executive to make public policies to the detriment of the deliberative wing of local government.

[3] The next three chapters concentrate on the functioning and the structure of ward committees. According to the 74<sup>th</sup> CAA, these committees, constituted at the ward level, are intended to create a space where local issues are discussed and budget priorities established, contributing in the end to deepening local democracy. The chapter by de Wit, Nainan and Palnitkar provides a bleak picture of their decision-making powers, and does not foresee an important role for them in the future. Beyond the limits of the 74<sup>th</sup> CAA, the article points towards other explanations such as the existing power relationships among various groups competing for participatory governance. However, their line of argument is not very clearly established. The fifth chapter written by I.S.A. Baud and Navtej Nainan reinforces this view while highlighting the narrow participation within ward committees. They look at the specific case of Mumbai where NGOs are invited to join these committees. Though this is apparently a progressive provision, the authors show that NGOs tend to be co-opted, and are mostly voiceless. Contrary to the very pessimistic tone of these two chapters, Archana Ghosh and Madhulika Mitra (chapter 4) argue that a deeper understanding of the role, performance and functioning conditions of the ward committees is necessary before dismissing them. This reflects the specificity of West Bengal - their case study - where a Mayor-in-Council System gives more power to elected representatives, who have built capacity in policy-making and implementation. Further, they suggest that beyond

local variations, size matters and that ward committees could be a well suited tool for smaller urban settlements (p. 102).

[4] Briefly stated, this first section brings interesting case analysis but is limited in its scope in questioning the decentralization process. First of all, as already stated, it fails to include an historical perspective in its analyses of decentralization and consequently does not consider the potential for a process of 'learning by doing' (Crook & Manor 1998) that could be initiated in ward committees, for instance. The authors might indeed be right but the time is perhaps not yet ripe to draw definitive conclusions. Secondly, there is an insufficient discussion of other ongoing struggles between levels of governments that are more worrying as far as the implementation of the decentralization agenda is concerned. One can mention two of them here: the first one, recently discussed by K.C. Sivaramakrishnan (2010), relates to the recent decisions taken by the judiciary that validate the relevance of the MPLAD funds,<sup>1</sup> and undermine the linkages between the Bangalore Development Authority's development schemes and the municipal corporation. Such decisions could structurally perpetuate the subordinate position of local representatives, undermine efforts towards increased accountability of State agencies and parastatals, and strengthen State-level political leadership. Similarly, there is no reference in this book to the importance of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission and the incentives, especially because of the large amount of funding available, it provides for very large-scale infrastructure projects initiated and controlled by the State governments rather than the ULBs.

### **Indian diversity in ada(o)pting multi-actor arrangements**

[5] The second debate with which the book engages is the place and the content of 'Multi-Actor Arrangements', *i.e.* partnerships between public authorities and private actors and/or civil society groups. The editors, in the introduction, argue that these partnerships reflect a process of retreat of the state and take very diverse forms in the Indian case. Chapters in this section highlight the disjunctions between practice and policy, the unequal reach of services provided even when there is some improvement in service delivery (partly due to capture of some

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<sup>1</sup> Discretionary financial allowances that Members of Parliament and Members of the Legislative Assembly can use to undertake development work in their constituency.

schemes by higher and middle class groups), the lack of transparency as well as the increased reliance (and discourse on reliance) on civil society e.g. through resident welfare associations, community based organisations or non-governmental organizations. The chapter by Baud and Dhanalakshmi analyzes the project of two small towns in the periphery of Chennai to build an underground sewage system. Looking at the involvement of the residents and their interactions with public authorities and political leaders, the differences between the two towns are stark and explained by the trust (or distrust) between users and the state. This leads in one case to success and in another one to delays and investment problems in the short term; the chapter falls short of assessing long-term outcomes in terms of service delivery and sustainability. More importantly, I believe, this chapter points out that for peri-urban areas (and this would be the same for smaller cities), the construction of large infrastructure still relies heavily (if not solely) on State finances. It highlights the importance of the State in influencing urban governance, a point best made by Loraine Kennedy in chapter 10 on Hyderabad. This city's much lauded reforms of municipal management, inspired by international organizations and supported by corporate actors, were State-led and the recourse to participation in many programmes was carried out through parallel structures rather than reliance on local councillors. This chapter raises a central question on the need to 'strengthen fiscal responsibility and public accountability *within the framework of a democratically elected local body*' (p. 283). On similar lines, the respective roles of the State and central governments - critical for understanding the legislative and the policy frameworks that govern Delhi - form the subject of Isabelle Milbert's chapter. She presents the large range of actors from various levels of the administration to middle men, slumlords and civil society organizations that play a role in land development in the national capital. However, it remains primarily a descriptive account with regard to both space and time. The relationships between these actors (the networks, according to the book title) as well as the shifts in their power, place and influence over the 60 years and more since Independence are vaguely sketched but the major transformations that the city witnessed in the last decades do not come out clearly.

[6] The other two chapters in this part deal with specific schemes in Mumbai that initiated a diverse range of partnerships. Seema Redkar, who works for the Mumbai Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), presents a thorough description of some of the concrete programs of the MCGM to engage with CBOs, NGOs and resident welfare associations in the field of sanitation. The content and the positive outcomes (interactions between the users and the municipality, the

rise of expertise in civil society, the improvement of services) are put forward in a clear manner, but the author presents a rather uncritical assessment of these schemes despite raising the question of institutional stability of these arrangements. This might be explained by her position within the municipal corporation, where such schemes are seen as a major step undertaken by a public utility to go beyond a traditional engineering approach. Moreover, the author does not discuss how these schemes also buttress the voice of middle class groups and strengthen existing patronage networks in slums. Though partnerships can be innovative, they can also be very detrimental to city dwellers and the urban fabric as Amita Bhide demonstrates in her analysis of the Slum Rehabilitation Scheme, based on a partnership between the State government (via the Slum Rehabilitation Authority), developers, NGOs and slum dwellers in Mumbai. Taking three different examples ranging from success to failure, she highlights the central role given to the developer. If the developers are not committed to the projects, they are bound to fail as the SRA does not perform its regulatory function properly. NGOs play a marginal role (and not always a positive one). Residents are not consulted, and often too exhausted from running from pillar to post to prove their eligibility for rehabilitation to be in a position to participate further in any substantive participatory process. A. Bhide provides a nuanced but critical view of the SRS, which has been very strongly promoted by the State and highly criticized by planners, activists and some academics. She denounces the loopholes of the schemes and its inadequacy in building sufficient housing, without rejecting the principle of partnerships if revised and regulated.

[7] The chapters by Bhide and Baud and Dhanalakshmi indicate that local elected representatives can have a positive impact on projects. This resonates with ethnographic research on cities, such as the work by Solomon Benjamin (2004), that show the importance of municipal councillors as the (often) sole source for deprived groups to get access to services and/or housing, even though this process is embedded in local patronage networks. This is at variance with the editors who state in the introduction that some schemes would work better without political interference. This brings to the fore a critical paradox in India's urban governance that the book does not address upfront and for which it therefore cannot open avenues of reflection. Locally elected representatives are marginalized, not included in participatory programmes (as shown by L. Kennedy), but they are often central in the success or failures of programmes. The constant endeavour in urban reforms led by bureaucracies (international, national and local ones) to sideline them is bound to fail and serious thinking is required on how

to engage with them in the long run even though their level of expertise and uprightness might not be as expected. This brings us back to the first debate on how to deepen the decentralization process and ensure empowerment of local leaders. The importance of this link could have been brought forward in the introduction or in an unfortunately missing conclusion.

### **Competing views and interests rather than contestation**

[8] The third part of the book, also the shortest, is entitled 'Contestations and urban governance'. This is not a very convincing title for this collection of very interesting chapters, which seemed to have been clubbed together simply because they did not fit in the two other thematic sections. Independently, each chapter brings forward some new and important elements to understand the crucial issues in contemporary Indian cities. The first one (chapter 11), written by N. Sridharan, compares West Bengal, Kerala and Delhi and shows that these three states have different types of competition among government agencies as well as different practices of engaging with civil society. The chapter advocates a deeper understanding of the political economy that determines variations in city reforms. The last two chapters of the book are among the most interesting in the volume. Both of them deal with major issues such as eviction and displacement and allocation of available land. Véronique Dupont and Usha Ramanathan (chapter 12), with a very dissecting analysis, demonstrate that some shifts in urban governance are regressive in that they affect the poor adversely and in a brutal manner. Complicit in this change is the judiciary whose decisions on Public Interest Litigations against slums and squatters are pushing the poor away from the city, depriving them of mobility and livelihood, which is ironical given that the Public Interest Litigation mechanism was designed to ensure speedy justice to the more vulnerable sections of society. Though this chapter looks at Delhi, it exemplifies a national trend of adverse decisions by the courts towards the poor. The last paper of the book written by A. Adarkar on the transformation of the mills land in Mumbai (*i.e.* the large compounds where textile mills were located, most of which closed decades ago) is of great interest. The multi-layered analysis examines the struggles around land, one of the most critical resources in cities today. Clearly, the State government calls the shots, even when the urban local body does take a policy stand. In this case, changes in the Development Control Rules, by a stroke of the pen, transformed the sharing of land made available by the decline of textile mills in favour of real estate interests. From a sharing formula, proposed by the urban local body, of one third for

private development, one third for low income housing and one third for open spaces, the share of the last two got dramatically reduced, a scandal that drew widespread attention in Mumbai. That the State government, for reasons unfortunately not discussed in the paper that range from rent extraction to malpractices, can decide so strategically to alter the spatial land use in a city of 20 million people without consultation is the sad reality of urban governance in India. Furthermore, the National Textile Mills, a public undertaking, took a lead role in pushing for a speculative use of the land, indicating another shift in urban governance where public interest does not guide public action. This chapter is illuminating in this regard as it highlights competing views on land use. The last two chapters directly engage with the question of who the winners and the losers are in today's urban governance in Indian cities.

[9] As in any edited book, the chapters are of unequal quality. They do bring detailed case studies and provide insightful information on some of the ongoing shifts. However, this reviewer regrets that the editors did not structure the book in a tighter format focusing more on the issues at hand. This could have been done with a conclusion, complementing the solid introduction that raised avenues for thought on State-ULBs relationships, regulatory failures of public utilities, lack of stable coalitions and the larger political economy of urban reforms. For instance, the difficulty to assess and measure precisely the outcomes of these shifts, a problem also encountered while reading the edited book by Joël Ruet and Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (2009) on a similar topic, is a consequence of the absence of data and in-built mechanisms in public institutions to trace the improvement (or not) of service delivery mechanisms. Secondly, many chapters deal with similar cities (for instance, there are five chapters on Mumbai). Each of them gives an overview of the city, and this makes parts of the book repetitive. Finally, I would have personally preferred chapter-wise bibliographies rather than a consolidated one but this is a minor detail. Endnotes are wrongly numbered in one chapter making the reading uncomfortable and the full names of authors are never given. Notwithstanding these final remarks, this book offers rich food for thought for all those interested in urban governance in India.



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