



Between policy and people: The lived politics of decentralised urban governance in West Bengal

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Abstract

Decentralisation has been widely promoted as a pathway to deepen democracy, improve service delivery, and make urban governance more responsive to citizens. In India, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act and subsequent state-level reforms formally institutionalised this shift by empowering urban local bodies. Yet, the gap between formal policy and lived practice remains substantial. This study examines how decentralisation actually unfolds in the everyday governance of urban West Bengal, a state with a distinct political history shaped by decades of Left Front rule, intense party-society linkages, and a recent political transition.

Drawing on mixed-methods fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2025 in three contrasting municipal contexts -Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) as a large metropolitan city, Siliguri Municipal Corporation (SMC) as a rapidly growing Tier-II city in North Bengal, and Durgapur Municipal Corporation (DMC) as a planned industrial township - the paper explores how policies interact with local political cultures, bureaucratic routines, and citizen strategies. Data includes 72 semi-structured interviews with councillors, officials, civil society actors and residents, observation of 13 ward meetings and grievance camps, and 12 focus group discussions.

Findings reveal a variegated picture. While decentralisation has created formal spaces for participation, their functioning is mediated by party dominance, fiscal constraints, and administrative capacity. Kolkata exhibits institutional fragmentation across multiple agencies like KMC and KMDA, leading to accountability confusion. Siliguri and Durgapur face staff shortages and resource dependencies. Participation is often filtered through patronage networks where access depends on political affiliation. Nevertheless, residents are not passive recipients; they navigate the system through brokerage, everyday improvisation, and collective civic action. The paper argues that effective urban reform in West Bengal must move beyond formal institutional design towards a programmatic focus on fiscal predictability, metropolitan coordination, staff capacity, and protection of inclusive civic spaces, while remaining sensitive to the state's specific political economy.

Keywords: Decentralisation, urban governance, West Bengal, local politics, municipal service delivery, participatory governance, urban citizenship, patronage

Introduction

Over the past three decades, decentralisation has become a central pillar of governance reform across the Global South. The argument is straightforward: bringing government closer to people will make it more accountable, efficient, and participatory. In India, this agenda gained constitutional momentum in the early 1990s with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which sought to empower rural panchayats and urban local bodies (ULBs) respectively. State governments subsequently enacted conformity legislations, devolved functions, and launched schemes like the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), and Smart Cities Mission.

However, comparative evidence suggests that decentralisation does not automatically lead to better governance. Outcomes are highly context-specific, shaped by historical legacies, party systems, fiscal arrangements, and state-society relations. West Bengal offers a particularly instructive case. From 1977 to 2011, the state was governed by the Left Front, which pursued radical land reforms and party-led decentralisation in rural areas, creating a deeply entrenched party-society. In urban areas, however, reforms were more uneven. Municipalities remained financially weak and politically centralised despite formal devolution.

After 2011, the rise of the Trinamool Congress disrupted old networks but created new patterns of centralised populism and competitive clientelism. Urban governance thus became a terrain where formal rules of decentralisation coexist with informal practices of political brokerage.

This paper asks: How have decentralisation policies reshaped the everyday practice of urban governance in West Bengal? And how do local political cultures and citizen practices mediate their effects? By focusing on the lived politics - how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and contested by ordinary people-the paper contributes to debates on the gap between decentralisation as a normative ideal and as a lived experience.

Review of Literature

The literature on decentralisation can be broadly grouped into three strands. The first, represented by (Rondinelli *et al.* 1983^[9]; Cheema and Rondinelli 2007), provides typologies of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation. While useful, these typologies often assume a linear transfer of power.

The second strand critically examines outcomes. (Manor 1999) in his comparative study of Karnataka, Bangladesh and other cases shows that decentralisation can improve service delivery when accompanied by adequate funds, downward accountability, and political will. Conversely,

(Heller 2001) ^[4] studying Kerala, South Africa and Porto Alegre highlight the importance of organised civil society and left mobilisation in making decentralisation transformative. Without such mobilisation, participatory forums risk elite capture, as noted by (Jeffrey 2000).

In the Indian urban context, a third strand focuses on informality and exclusion. (Benjamin 2000) ^[2], in his Bangalore study argued that formal governance institutions often operate as "porous bureaucracies" where the poor negotiate access through informal channels. (Bhan 2016) ^[3] similarly shows how urban planning in Delhi marginalises informal settlements despite participatory rhetoric. (Prakash and Schachter 2015) ^[7] however offer a more optimistic view of participatory budgeting as a site for claims-making. West Bengal specific literature is limited but insightful. (Chatterjee 2004) conceptualises West Bengal's political society where populations negotiate welfare as beneficiaries through party mediation. (Banerjee 2008) ^[1] details how Left Front's party machinery shaped development delivery. Recent contributions by (Kundu and Sanyal 2013; Saha 2018) ^[5, 10] point to post-2011 shifts-antiunity in clientelism but change in party patrons, and new forms of urban entrepreneurial governance.

Our study builds on this by linking macro policy analysis with micro ethnographic observation in three cities, showing how decentralisation produces both invited spaces (formal forums) and invented spaces (informal negotiations) of citizenship.

Methodology

This research adopts a comparative case study design with mixed-methods. The choice of three cities was purposive to capture variation in city size, economy, and political salience. Kolkata is a megacity with over 4.5 million population within municipal limits and a complex multi-agency governance architecture involving KMC, Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), and parastatals for water and transport. Siliguri, located in northern West Bengal, is a strategic trade gateway with a population of around 0.7 million, experiencing rapid, often unplanned growth driven by migration and real estate. Durgapur is a planned steel city developed in the 1960s with around 0.6 million population, with a legacy of public sector industrialism and now facing deindustrialisation challenges. Fieldwork spanned 14 months between January 2023 and March 2025. In each city, we selected four wards using stratified criteria: two wards with high infrastructure index and two with low infrastructure index, and within each, one ruled by the ruling state party and one by opposition or independent. This allowed us to observe political variation. Data collection involved three instruments. First, 72 semi-structured interviews: 18 elected councillors (6 per city), 15 municipal officials including executive engineers, borough executive officers, and health officers, 12 civil society representatives from NGOs, resident welfare associations and slum development committees, and 27 residents including street vendors, slum dwellers, and middle-class residents. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes, were conducted in Bengali, Hindi, and English, and were recorded with consent.

Second, participant observation of 13 events: 7 ward committee meetings, 3 public hearing camps under the "Duare Sarkar" and grievance redressal initiatives, and 3 budget consultation meetings. Field notes focused on who

speaks, how decisions are recorded, and how dissent is managed.

Third, 12 focus group discussions (FGDs), four per city, segregated by gender and class to enable free expression. Each FGD had 6-8 participants.

Alongside, documentary analysis included West Bengal Municipal Act 1993 and its amendments, state finance commission reports, municipal budgets for 2020-2024, audit reports, and scheme guidelines. Quantitative data on staff vacancies, own-source revenue, and service coverage (water supply hours, waste collection frequency) was extracted to triangulate qualitative narratives.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Initial deductive codes from literature like "political brokerage" and "administrative capacity" were combined with inductive codes emerging from fieldwork like "civic bricolage" and "institutional bypass." Coding was done manually and cross-checked between two researchers to enhance reliability. All names were anonymised and ethical clearance was obtained from the university ethics committee.

Results

1. Institutional Access and Administrative Capacity

Our findings reveal stark inter-city differences in capacity that shape how decentralisation is enacted. KMC, despite having the largest budget at over INR 4500 crore in 2023-24 and nearly 25,000 staff, suffers from severe functional fragmentation. Citizens we interviewed often did not know whether to approach KMC for water supply or KMDA, leading to what one resident called "office to office ghora" (running from office to office). Executive engineers admitted that overlapping jurisdictions delay project approvals by 6-8 months.

In Siliguri, the problem is not fragmentation but sheer scarcity. SMC's own-source revenue is less than 30% of total budget, with high dependence on state grants. The sanctioned strength of engineers is 42, but only 24 posts were filled during fieldwork. One official noted, "We have funds for drains under AMRUT, but no surveyor to make the DPR." This leads to underutilisation of central schemes. Durgapur presents a third pattern: a planned city with relatively good infrastructure but a legacy of departmental silos between Durgapur Steel Plant's township and DMC areas. Services in peripheral wards that were merged later remain poor.

Formal participatory spaces exist but function unevenly. West Bengal rules mandate ward committees and Borough committees. In KMC, meetings were held more regularly (monthly in 3 out of 4 observed wards) but attendance was dominated by party workers. In Siliguri, two wards had not held a ward committee meeting in 6 months. In Durgapur, meetings were held but were largely informational, where officials announced decisions rather than consulted. A woman councillor in Durgapur candidly said, "Meeting dakle jhamela bare, tai jotota na dakle chole" (If we call meetings, problems increase, so we avoid them).

2. Politics of Participation and Accountability

Party politics emerged as the central mediating factor. West Bengal's intense party competition means municipal governance is deeply politicised. In all three cities, residents perceived that access to services like housing under Bangla Awaz Yojana, water connections, and even garbage

clearance depends on political loyalty. In a Siliguri slum, a resident stated, "Councillor ke vote na dile, joler pipe sarabe ke?" (If we don't vote for the councillor, who will repair the water pipe?).

Opposition-held wards systematically reported delays in file clearances and fund releases. One opposition councillor in Kolkata showed us a pending proposal for street lighting that had been stuck for 11 months. Officials privately acknowledged political pressure: "We get phone calls from the top; we have to prioritise."

However, decentralisation also creates openings. In three wards across our sites, we found active resident welfare associations that successfully used Right to Information and social media to pressure municipalities. In a middle-class ward in Kolkata, an RWA filed a collective complaint about irregular waste collection, tagged the Mayor on Twitter, and ensured a meeting with the solid waste department. This was possible because residents had education and time to mobilise - a resource not available to slum dwellers.

Thus, accountability is relational, not institutional. Formal accountability mechanisms like audit reports exist but are rarely discussed in ward forums.

3. Residents' Lived Experiences of Service Delivery

Residents adopt diverse strategies. For the urban poor, intermediaries are crucial. In Durgapur's non-company areas, local "dadas" linked to Parties mediate access to municipal services for a fee or loyalty. While exploitative, they also provide a crucial bridge in the absence of clear information.

Middle-class residents use different tactics: direct access to councillors via WhatsApp, formal letters, or RWA petitions. Yet even they face frustration. Water supply in Durgapur is officially 4 hours daily, but actual supply varies from 1 to 3 hours. Residents store water in buckets, reflecting everyday resilience.

We also documented "civic bricolage" - communities filling state gaps. In a Siliguri ward, residents pooled money to hire a private sweeper when SMC failed to collect waste for 10 days. In Kolkata's Chetla area, a women's self-help group maintained a community toilet after the municipality built it but did not maintain it. These initiatives show agency but also raise equity concerns: they shift the burden of service delivery onto citizens.

Discussion

Our findings contribute to three theoretical debates. First, on metropolitan fragmentation: Kolkata illustrates that political decentralisation without administrative consolidation creates "institutional congestion." This echoes Benjamin's (2000)^[2] idea of porous bureaucracy but extends it to a metropolitan scale.

Second, on clientelism and democracy: We find that decentralisation does not eliminate clientelism; it relocates it. Ward councillors become key patrons. This is consistent with Chatterjee's (2004) notion of political society but shows its urban mutation. The danger is that participatory forums become extensions of party offices rather than spaces for deliberation.

Third, on citizen agency: Contrary to victim-centric narratives, we find residents actively shaping governance through negotiation and self-provision. This resonates with Bhan's (2016)^[3] work on claims-making. However, such agency is unequally distributed; poorer residents rely on

patrons, middle-class on direct advocacy. Decentralisation therefore risks deepening inequality unless it actively protects the voice of the marginalised.

Extended Case Comparison: Kolkata vs Siliguri vs Durgapur

Kolkata illustrates a condition we describe as managed fragmentation. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation has a long institutional history, relatively strong staff strength inherited from Left Front municipalism, and well-established procedures. Yet service delivery is complicated by overlapping jurisdictions. In 2022, after revision of flood maps, a drainage upgradation project in Ward 82 was delayed for eight months because KMC officials argued that the concerned canal stretch had been transferred to Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority. Similar ambiguity exists in solid waste, where KMC handles primary collection but KMDA manages major dumpsites, and in roads, where Public Works Department maintains arterial roads inside corporation limits. This ambiguity is not merely administrative inefficiency; it creates political utility. Elected representatives can claim credit when work is completed and attribute failure to another agency. Citizens therefore learn to approach their councillor not primarily as a policymaker but as an institutional navigator who knows which office must be pursued.

Siliguri presents a different trajectory, which can be termed growth without governance. As a strategic corridor city linking North East India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, its municipal population expanded by more than 25 percent during 2011-2021, while sanctioned staff increased by less than 4 percent. The consequence is visible informality. Our field observation documented widespread building regulation violations in wards 18 and 33, dependence on private water tankers in newly added wards, and open dumping along Mahananda riverbanks. Decentralisation in this context is less about devolution of powers and more about administrative coping. Councillors reported using personal resources and mobilising MLA Local Area Development funds to fill basic gaps. As one councillor from Ward 27 noted, "Amar pocket theke ami rasta meramat korechi vote er age, na hole lok jabe kothay?" Such personalisation provides short-term relief but erodes institutional accountability.

Durgapur represents post-industrial duality. The core township area developed by Durgapur Steel Plant enjoys wide roads, relatively reliable water supply, and maintained parks. In contrast, wards 43 and 44, merged into Durgapur Municipal Corporation in 2015, lack underground sewerage and have intermittent water supply. During a focus group discussion in Ward 44, participants said, "Amra Durgapur er vitoreo achi, abar baireo achi". Territorial expansion increased service area by 50 percent, while own-source revenue grew by only 20 percent.

Theoretical Contribution: Three Modes of Urban Citizenship

First, mediated citizenship. This is the most common mode among low-income and slum populations. Access is filtered through political mediation. Residents do not approach municipality as rights-bearing citizens; they approach local party office. Entitlements such as water connection, housing lists, or waste clearance are experienced as favours granted for loyalty rather than rights. This was dominant in Siliguri's peripheral wards and Durgapur's merged wards.

Second, assertive citizenship. Observed among middle-class Resident Welfare Associations, educated youth, and trader associations, particularly in South Kolkata wards 89 and 95. These citizens use RTI, tagging Municipal Commissioner on social media, formal complaint letters, and citing court orders. They bypass local brokers and seek direct engagement with senior officials.

Third, resigned improvisation. Many residents, especially women managing water and waste, have adapted to irregular services by improvising privately. They store water in multiple containers, burn waste, pay private sweepers Rs. 100-150 per month, and coordinate informally. This is not apathy but rational adaptation to unpredictable state provisioning.

Extended Policy Discussion: Why Fiscal Decentralisation Remains Weak

West Bengal presents a paradox of strong political decentralisation and weak fiscal decentralisation. Own-source revenue of ULBs is only about 0.38 percent of state GDP, compared to 0.62 percent in Maharashtra and 0.71 percent in Gujarat (15th Finance Commission). Property tax collection efficiency was 42 percent in Siliguri, 51 percent in Durgapur, and 68 percent in Kolkata against national benchmark 85 percent. Councillors resist revaluation fearing voter backlash. State transfers are discretionary, delayed, and tied to schemes, creating upward accountability to state rather than downward to citizens. Recruitment is controlled by state municipal service commissions, vacancy 28-35 percent technical posts. Reform needs predictable untied grants (Karnataka 3-year envelope), GIS-based property tax assessment, and local contractual recruitment.

Integrating the Findings: Towards a Lived Perspective

This extended analysis reinforces that decentralisation gap is not just implementation failure but political economy. Kolkata's fragmentation diffuses accountability, Siliguri's growth outpaces capacity, Durgapur's expansion without fiscal matching creates internal peripheries. Citizens are not passive; they strategise. Policy needs fiscal predictability, metropolitan coordination committee with citizen representation, filling vacancies, and protecting civic spaces with independent facilitators and mandatory action-taken reports.

Policy Implications

1. **Fiscal Predictability:** Implement state finance commission recommendations fully and link grants to public disclosure of ward-wise spending on a portal to reduce discretion.
2. **Metropolitan Coordination Authority:** Create a legally empowered coordination cell with representatives from KMC, KMDA, and line departments, and mandate quarterly public metropolitan dialogues.
3. **Capacity Building:** Fill vacancies, especially technical posts in smaller ULBs, and create a municipal cadre with training in participatory planning and data management.
4. **Safeguarding Civic Spaces:** Make ward committee meetings mandatory quarterly, with independent observers from colleges and NGOs, and video-record minutes for public access.
5. **Anti-Exclusion Mechanisms:** Use lottery-based or need-based beneficiary selection for housing and

vendor licensing, and establish an independent municipal ombudsman for grievance redressal.

Conclusion

Decentralisation in West Bengal yields a mixed record. While procedural mechanisms for local participation exist and have created pockets of responsive governance, outcomes depend heavily on political configurations, administrative capacity, and civic mobilization. The lived politics of governance - how everyday actors negotiate, contest, and supplement municipal systems - reveals both the promise and limits of decentralisation. A programmatic focus on institutional coherence, fiscal predictability, capacity enhancement, and the protection of civic spaces can help translate decentralisation's potential into more equitable urban outcomes. Importantly, policy must be attuned to the historical and political specificities of West Bengal: reforms that ignore local political economies risk being co-opted or rendered ineffective. Conversely, approaches that build on existing practices of citizen agency and create incentives for inclusive governance offer the most promising pathway for strengthening urban democracy and service delivery in the state.

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