



Role of Guwahati's *Nagrik* Committees in fight against COVID

Complete lockdown in Guwahati yet again



Guwahati, the largest city in the Indian state of Assam, was caught up in a complete lockdown for most part of July amidst fear of community transmission in the city. However, lately, the 'unlock 3.0' guidelines are being followed in the city. Guwahati, being a gateway to the north eastern region of the country will need to take calculated decisions moving forward. There have been

various response actions undertaken in the city since the start of the crisis. Amongst these actions, there have been successful initiatives of restoring area level committees and practising localised management of the crisis.

Revival of Local Area Level Committees

Area Development Committees in the city were formed in the name of Area Sabhas which were brought out as a reform during the roll out of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The committee was constituted as the Area Sabha within the city governance structure of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). The committee consisted of 2-3 elected Area Sabha representatives, volunteers from the area and ward officials of the GMC for administrative support. Although provisions for Area Sabha were made in the Guwahati Municipal Corporation Act, 1971 and the Area Sabha was constituted as mentioned, the committee/ Area Sabha did not actively function as such. Area Sabha representatives had put forth that the committee never received adequate funds to conduct meetings and render service or undertake developmental activities at the local area level. The meetings were supposed to be held at least 3-4 times a year but were not followed. Overall, the Area Sabha was dysfunctional.

Having put forth the background behind the Area Sabha experience that Guwahati went through, interestingly, things have turned out different in the times of COVID-19. Area level

committees are formed in most parts of the city, which are being termed as ***Nagrik committees***. Former Mayor, GMC confirmed that, “The committee has former Area Sabha representatives, former councillors, area volunteers and resident members from the locality closely monitoring the situation in respective areas”. The police have also been supporting the committee in enforcement of social distancing norms, monitoring patient households if any, and safeguarding the institutional quarantine facilities. The committees are being supported by city-based NGOs for distribution of food and sanitary kits to the needy. The committee including former elected representatives are also working on spreading awareness, especially in the *basti* areas.

Shortfalls in city governance



With the *Nagrik* committee becoming active again, it clearly displays how decentralised governance is crucial for not only quick localised control on outreach and management of such crisis, but also for enabling bottom-up decision making that brings out the voice of citizens of the city. However, it is a sad state of affairs when it comes to city governance in general, as the municipal elections have not taken place in the city for the last three years.

This means that the GMC does not have its legislative wing functioning- with no Mayor or Councillors. Hence, the city government is being run by the administrators solely. This also means the *Nagrik* committee functioning currently is not formally under the GMC. Also, the sad reality to note is that the GMC’s role during these times have been limited to just carrying out sanitisation services across the city.

Moving forward on strengthening Urban Governance in the City

Needless to say, municipal elections need to be conducted soon, the legislative wing needs to get functioning quickly, the State Government must devolve more responsibilities to the City Government and lastly, it is imperative to prioritise strengthening the integration and decentralised functioning of Area Sabha across the city for better governance and resilience against such crisis in the future.