

Researching the Local Context of Good Governance

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Abstract:

This research paper has analyzed the concept of good governance by studying its usage and manifestations in the public discourse and politics of India. It aimed to bring out the ideological and political undercurrents of the seemingly non-political term of good governance. It reviews the international academic literature on good governance and the appearance of the term in media, political manifestoes and policy documents in India. Indian scholarship on this concept has largely viewed it as an aspect of policy studies and public administration. The paper proposes that Marxist theoretical framework can give us a more critical understanding of the term. A critical understanding of the term would save us from overburdening it with expectations and help us see its possible manipulations.

Introduction:

Good governance has become the central term in the development discourse today. Advocated and promoted by World Bank, world's leading development institution, the term has flourished and gained currency in the politics of Third World nations. It was first used in the sense in which it is used today in a 1989 World Bank Report on African economies. The said report defined it as 'exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs'. It has since been widely researched. The term has attained multiple connotations in theory but more so in its actual working in the political settings of individual countries. This paper seeks to review the different takes on the concept of 'good governance' and seeks to locate it vis-à-vis advancement of neo-liberal politico-economics. It seeks to demonstrate that politics that happen around the term in a given country can be an interesting point of departure in the study of this multi-faceted concept and help us develop a more critical understanding of the same.

The concept of good governance:

There is no universally accepted conception of good governance. Marilee Grindle defines it as 'fair, transparent, accountable, participatory, responsive, well managed and efficient working of institutions'. Thus good governance expresses the principles of the operation of governance. Good governance also indicates or assumes certain ends of the governance: poverty alleviation, providing basic services like health and education, security of citizens, protection of human rights, and economic stability. It diagnoses that developing countries fail to achieve development due to inefficient working of institutions. Failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in many African and Asian countries in the post-cold war era led to the realization that market only dynamics cannot sustain neo-liberal economy and that state has to play facilitating role.

Good governance discourse in India:

Good governance has become a key term in Indian politics in the twenty-first century. It has specially gained popularity under the BJP government. Prime Minister Modi says 'good governance is putting people at the center of development process'. 25 December, Christmas was chosen to be celebrated as Good Governance Day. The website of the ruling party has a page dedicated to narration of the party's commitment to good governance agenda. The PMO's website describes Mr. Narendra Modi's experiments with the concept in Gujarat when he was chief minister of the state. Rajya Sabha TV and other electronic and print media have discussed the term and government's performance on good governance front in special features. Government described its stance through the slogan 'Minimum government, maximum governance'. The elements of good

governance discourse have penetrated the political debate so well that the young voters' diagnosis of the ills of our polity follows the World Bank language exactly, though they might not have read or heard of it from World Bank or developmental scholars. Blame is laid for the slow pace of development on corruption, bureaucratic lethargy, caste politics and inadequacy of political elite. The words decentralization, empowerment, participation, war against corruption recur in political speeches at all levels.

The scholarship on good governance in the Indian context can be categorized in two parts: one that questions the idea critically situating it in the neo-liberal paradigm and the other that looks at good governance as a set of administrative and technical measures. The former addresses good governance from the perspective of social and political theory. Bidisha Choudhuri takes a critical view of the concept in her work entitled 'Good governance in India: Interplay of politics, technology and culture in e-governance projects'. She points to depoliticization that good governance agenda carries in itself by stating that 'technology is not ethically and socially neutral'.

It is nowhere acknowledged in the public discourse on good governance that governance reforms interact with the structures of power in society. Political competition in the country shapes the manifestations of such reforms. Anti-corruption crusade can become a tool against political rivals. Governance issues can be framed in a major way in defamation of earlier governments.

Because of its very broad contours, the term good governance escapes well-defined nature and can be shaped conveniently to meet political aims. For example, good governance being defined as good political will and lack of strong political will is held as the only reason for bad governance situation. Under good governance, such propositions can be made that will save the governments from addressing the more difficult structural issues. For example, corruption is made to be perceived as a technical issue. Systemic and historico-economic reasons of corruption are more difficult to address and are not very politically beneficial. When structural issues do not figure much in public discourse, social movements are weakened both in content and impact. The more basic injustices (like distribution of resources) are locked out of the diagnosis of the system and may cease to become awkward questions in the neo-liberal growth.

Because of the lack of precision in the definition of 'good governance', any government initiative can be listed by scholars as a good governance initiative of the government. This rebranding may help the government portray its regular responsibilities as special initiatives. For example, the Right to Information Act and Right to food security both are treated as good governance initiatives, the term further loses precision and becomes open to manipulation in the political sphere. The author proposes that 'citizens' becoming 'beneficiaries' can be seen in the context of the proposed government-governance transition. The Maharashtra government uses the word 'Labharthi' (beneficiaries) for the target groups of welfare schemes launched by it. It is observed by the author that the colloquial use of the term 'good governance', through the interpretation of the word 'good', shifts the focus to 'good (philanthropic) intentions of government' from the 'rights of citizens' as the basis of the system.

Good governance discourse simplifies the question of development by stripping it off the socio-historic dimensions. Inefficient working of institutions is an important bottleneck in development but it is clearly not the only one. The questions of historic injustice complicating the nature of human capital and reinforcement of unjust distribution of power and resources through development are not factored in while discussing development. This simplification leaves the more important question of justice and equality out of the discourse on development. Two recent examples can be cited here. The National Health Protection Scheme launched in the Union Budget of 2018 'promises Rs 5 lakhs per year per family for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation and aims to cover 10 crore families.' Citizens would be compensated for their access of healthcare in the listed private hospitals. This comes as a shift of focus from the goal of expanding public health sector. One of the reasons given for this shift is corruption and other inadequacies in public health sector. Insurance does not guarantee equal access. Efficiency and novelty thrive over the issues of equality

and justice, in the process favouring private interests. The second example is that of the merging of ministries and various government departments, being proposed and carries out at various state governments and central government level. These mergers are done in the name of maximizing efficiency and minimizing government. It reduces government expenditure. The specificities of rationale and functions of each department is overlooked. It also leads to loss of government posts. Both these examples reveal the ideological side/content of the concept of good governance. It shuns away from issues of distribution and directly or indirectly facilitates private interest.

Government and governance:

The conceptual difference between ‘government’ and ‘governance’ also underlines the change that is indicated through partial replacement of government with governance. Dr. Dinesh Arora compares James Rosenau’s definitions of the two terms in his paper on good governance in India. Whereas government initiatives are activities backed by legal and physical framework of the state but governance refers to ‘activities backed by shared goals’ that may or may not rely on legal and coercive authority of the state. Scholars believe that community participation in development work facilitates the withdrawal of state from development and welfare responsibilities at local level. The space created by minimization of ‘government’ is filled by international donor agencies. Developmental elite become the guiding authority. Thus the relation between participation and democracy is not straightforward in the concept of good governance.

By focusing on ‘competency’ as the criterion of evaluating development and government, the concept takes away the focus from conflicts of interest. Interests diverge and they compete with each other for their claim on the given society’s tangible and non-tangible resources. Democracy as a framework recognizes the inevitability of contestation and conflict and avails the space for these to be carried out in a relatively non-violent manner. Though not without contradictions and flaws, democracy has spread and progressed as a form of political organization through people’s movements. The concept seems to set the agenda on behalf of all and in the process *excludes* those whose interests do not stand in line with the said concept of development. It tends to reduce the space for alternative formulations.

Conclusion:

The concept of good governance assumes that the plane of operation of the concept would be politically neutral. In proposing the universal principles of governance, the concept ignores the politico-historical variations in local contexts. By reviewing some instances of manifestations of the concept of good governance in India, we can make a case for being cautious of overburdening it with too many expectations. Making ‘good governance’ the answer to all the problems may make us overlook other facets of democracy. Most importantly, we must recognize that ‘good governance’ is not an ideologically and politically neutral term. Neo-liberal ideological undercurrents in the term should be acknowledged in the public discourse on this increasingly popular term.

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