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Deepening of Democracy or De-democratization: Interrogating the New local Governance in the Context of West Bengal

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This recipe of good governance at the cutting edge level is informed by post-bureaucratic organizational precepts of flexibility, networking and negotiation. It also encourages the growing role of quasi-governmental bodies like quangos, NGOs as joint stakeholders in the local decision making process by bringing in a host of institutional and structural changes like restructuring, privatization, contracting out, entrepreneurship, hollowing out of state, downsizing of bureaucracy etc.

Despite much fanfare the concept smacks of a typical neo-liberal design of hollowing out of state and the provision of extra space for market. In fact, the paradigm on the pretext of expanding the horizons of decision making, has allowed a plethora of agencies, non-governmental organizations, user groups, stakeholder committees, self-help groups etc in the overall decision making process, which is said to have diluted the very essence of democratic process based on popular participation.

This paper in the light of the *panchayats* – the local government in the sub-national state of West Bengal (India), has investigated whether the new local governance led to deepening of democracy or de-democratization, as electoral spirit, the very essence of democracy got substantially diluted with the liberal inclusion of the host of non-governmental stakeholders in the process of governance.

The new local governance despite its redeeming features of inclusive and collaborative decision making is slowly strangulating the democratic fervor of local government. Hence, the neoliberal concept of local governance needs to be applied with utmost care so that the democratic spirit will not be compromised in quest of efficiency and economy.

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