

STEERING GOVERNANCE THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN THE SRINAGAR CITY OF JAMMU & KASHMIR

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the vulnerability, effectiveness and resilience of the governance institutions worldwide in mitigating the unprecedented challenges of the healthcare sector, personal safety and facilitating uninterrupted delivery of public services. The need for social distancing, rapid testing and vaccination became top priorities of every nation, including India. The vulnerability has been witnessed most in cities and towns due to congested population, increased threat of community transmission of the virus and loss of livelihood to daily waged earners due to economic shutdown. The response strategies of urban administration varied across regions, depending upon the level of socio-economic development and adapted governance mechanisms to ensure essential urban services like drinking water, electricity, and waste management. The paper analyzes the effectiveness and challenges of governance in the Srinagar city of Jammu & Kashmir, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on governance mechanisms in the region and the mitigation strategies adapted by the Srinagar City Administration to steer the governance during such times. This paper is based on data analysis collected from journalists, academicians, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) using Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and interview techniques. It revealed public dissatisfaction about basic urban services, poor socio-economic infrastructure, lack of institutional coordination and bureaucratic rigidity as vital governance challenges in the Srinagar city. It also provides suggestions to augment governance approaches to ensure responsive administration and prepare for unforeseen future challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Governance, Challenges, Services, Srinagar

I. Introduction

The governance paradigms worldwide are witnessing rapid transformation due to technological advancement and the need to adopt robust administrative policies to face emerging global issues of rising population, poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and climate change. United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals facilitated a rapid transformation in governance & public policy perspectives. However, the

unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has challenged human survival and personal safety. It has exposed inadequacies of governance institutions and mechanisms, particularly in developing countries including India, to mitigate its socio-economic impacts, continue public service delivery operations, strengthen healthcare facilities and protect vulnerable sections of the population. The pandemic has affected most urban areas, including cities and towns, due to the agglomeration of population clusters and loss of livelihood of vulnerable

urban residents, including daily waged earners and migrant labourers. The city administrations struggled to mitigate the pandemic challenges through enforcing economic lockdown, social distancing rules, personal hygiene & sanitization, rapid testing of suspected COVID-19 positive cases, contact tracing of relatives of affected persons to curb community transmission of the disease, upgrade public health infrastructure, and most essentially to continue basic civic services like drinking water, electricity, food security, and waste management. The impact of the pandemic differed across the regions due to varying levels of socio-economic development and the effectiveness of governance mechanisms in different cities & towns.

Srinagar, the capital city of Jammu & Kashmir, also got affected due to the pandemic. The prime challenges to city administration were the personal safety of huge city population (1.2 Million as per Census, 2011) residing in congested clusters and their economic security during the lockdown, as major income source of people being the daily earnings through trade & commerce activities. In collaboration with the regional government of the Union Territory, the city administration boosted the health infrastructure by increasing the bed capacity of the city hospitals, procurement of vital health care equipment and increasing the workforce through paced recruitment. Integrated Command and Control Centre is established to facilitate coordination among public agencies and ensure prompt crisis management strategies. Essential commodities, including food and medicines, are delivered through community-level localized delivery outlets, apart from ensuring paced COVID-19 testing, tracing and treatment protocols. However, due to the inherent low level of socio-economic development, volatile political environment and lack of financial support to the vulnerable urban population, the city faces immense governance challenges to steer through the ongoing pandemic.

2. Review of Literature

The theoretical & practical connotations of governance, its evolution, regional disparities, challenges, and impact on socio-economic development, particularly in the context of

emerging concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, have been debated by various researchers, scholars, and administrative practitioners across the world. Governance means managing a country's political and administrative affairs, protecting citizens' democratic rights, and an equitable sharing of socio-economic resources (CEPA., 2006).

Caroline Paunov (2013), using an analytical framework for evaluating different types of income inequalities, evaluated different in-depth perspectives of inclusive development, role and impact of technological advancement and innovations on leveraging economic inequalities, particularly among lower-income groups. The study findings suggest innovations in business mechanisms and technologies impact income inequalities through income distribution, the empowerment of middle-income populations (frugal innovation) and grassroots activities by lower-income populations. Apart from R&D-based innovation, the innovations in social and business are vital for diminishing socio-economic inequalities and ensuring inclusive development.

Glyn Williams (2004) analyzed the intricate relationship between participatory development and political control by exploring the multi-faceted interdependence of socio-economic development and the politicization of administrative institutions. The author emphasizes that empowerment must be an open-end ongoing engagement process wherein participation strengthens and stabilizes politics. Sabine Kuhlmann et al. (2021) analyze mitigation strategies for COVID-19 pandemic and governance models adopted in France, Germany and Sweden. The study reveals regional disparities in governance mechanisms as in France. The central government enforced tough containment measures while Germany adopted a bottom-up approach, and Sweden continued 'normal governance' with voluntary compliance based on recommendations.

Paul Joyce (2021) analyses public governance mechanisms adopted by the UK government to mitigate the Coronavirus crisis. The study reveals that ill-preparedness and overconfidence in the pandemic's initial phase cost the country the worst loss of human lives in the aggressive second COVID-19 wave and enforced strategic changes in response management and public governance policies. Yijia Jing (2021) evaluates

China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the country's mitigation strategies and governance mechanisms. The study reveals that the country promptly and effectively managed the pandemic due to strong political commitment, unitary government, high citizen trust, performance legitimacy, accountable leadership and grand administrative reforms. The unprecedented global health emergency has again brought the debate of public policy making at the centre stage and mandated the urgency for re-evaluation of administrative priorities as well as increased focus towards innovations in health care infrastructure, essential diagnostic equipments and treatment modalities. Personal health care, hygiene and holistic vaccination drive; must be the way forward in this new world order; to be augmented with development of basic health infrastructure at all levels & facilitating inter-institutional and multi-national synergetic collaboration for Global Health Policy formulation to face emerging concerns (Muzafer. R. Hajam et al. 2021).

3. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the governance challenges in the Srinagar city of Jammu & Kashmir.
- To analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on governance mechanisms in the Srinagar city of Jammu & Kashmir.
- To suggest measures for augmentation of governance policies in the Srinagar city of Jammu & Kashmir.

4. Research Methodology

The study is based on analysis and interpretation of data obtained from both primary and secondary resources. The primary data were collected from 05 journalists, 05 senior academicians and 05 non-government organizations (NGOs) based in the Srinagar city. While the focused group discussion (FGD) method was used to get deeper insights from the journalists about the governance challenges in the city, the interview technique was used to get wider perspectives from the academicians and management of the NGOs. Also, various secondary data sources, including published journals, books, government websites and

newspapers, were analyzed to explore diverse dimensions of governance approaches in the Srinagar city of Jammu and Kashmir.

5. Results & Findings

The results and findings obtained after in-depth analysis & interpretation of the data collected from focused group discussion of the journalists and the interviews of the academicians and the management of NGOs operating in the Srinagar city are presented below-

5.1 Journalists' perspective about governance in the Srinagar city.

The detailed and comprehensive insights about challenges of urban development and governance in the Srinagar city, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on city administration mechanisms and citizen satisfaction about basic public services were received during one hour-long focused group discussion (FGD) among five leading city journalists. The journalists provided gainful insights into the historical & cultural importance of the capital city and revealed the contribution of various saints & foreigners in the region's development.

They were unanimously unsatisfied about basic services' delivery like housing facilities, drinking water, electricity, road development & environment pollution in the city. They were particularly concerned with waste management challenges & choking of water bodies like the famous Dal lake. They cited lack of public awareness & ineffective institutional coordination as prime development & governance challenges in the Srinagar city. The respondents also highlighted the difficulties faced by the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic, viz scarcity of essentials like food, medicines, and means of livelihood (financial helplessness), particularly among the vulnerable population comprising daily wagers and migrant workers labourers. However, they were equally optimistic regarding recent government interventions to improve urban development in the city, like completion of flyovers, public awareness campaigns, city beautification programs & development of parking and green spaces.

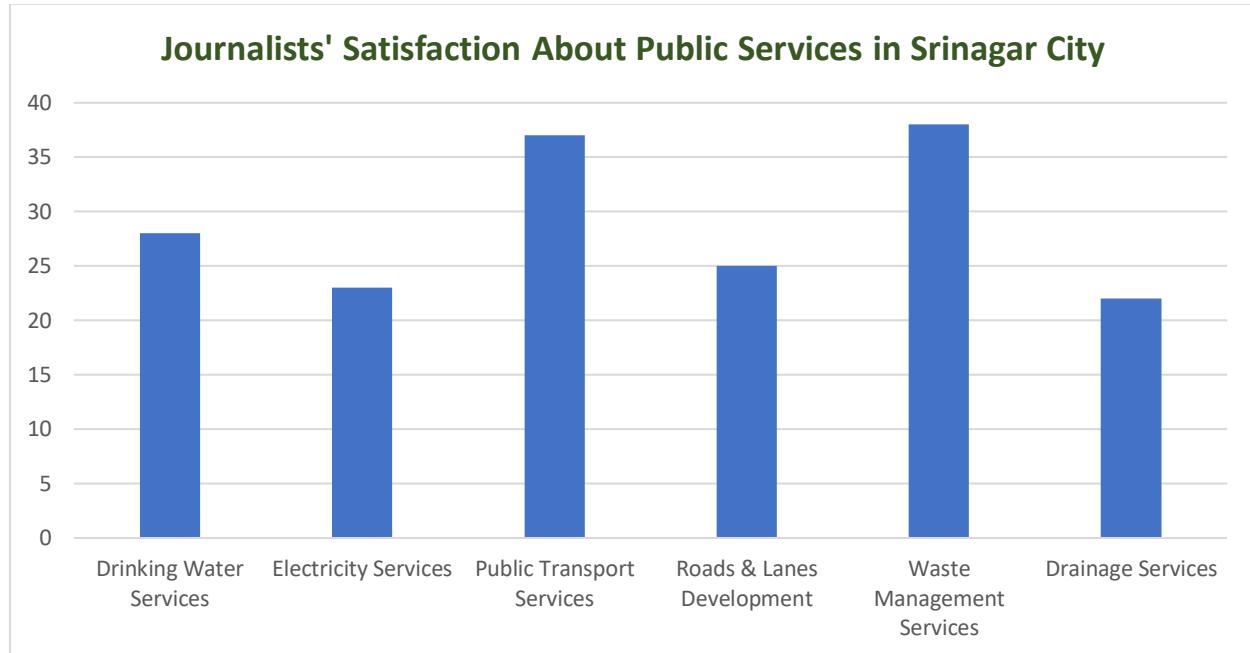


Figure 5.1: Journalists' Level of Satisfaction about Public Services in Srinagar City of J&K

As revealed in the above diagram, the satisfaction levels of the journalists about all the public services remain below 40% while as the satisfaction levels about the availability and quality of drinking water services, electricity services, development of roads and lanes as well as drainage services, are below 30%.

5.2 Academicians' perspective about governance in the Srinagar city.

Comprehensive & valuable information about the impact & challenges of urban development and governance in the Srinagar city was received from five senior academicians working in the Srinagar city, using a semi-structured interview method. The findings revealed that the persistent development issues include scarcity of drinking water & electricity, insufficient & dilapidated roads, lack of coordination among government departments, corruption & lack of public awareness regarding the development schemes. The respondents were least satisfied with basic services' delivery like housing facilities, drinking water, electricity, road development & environmental pollution in the city. One of the respondents highlighted the housing congestion in old city areas & rehabilitation concerns of Dal lake dwellers & choking of famous water bodies and drainage systems in the Srinagar city.

The respondents particularly emphasized the governance challenges during the COVID-19

pandemic and the scarcity of food and financial support to the vulnerable sections of the community during the testing times. They also revealed a deficiency of academic & policy research regarding urban development and governance in Srinagar.

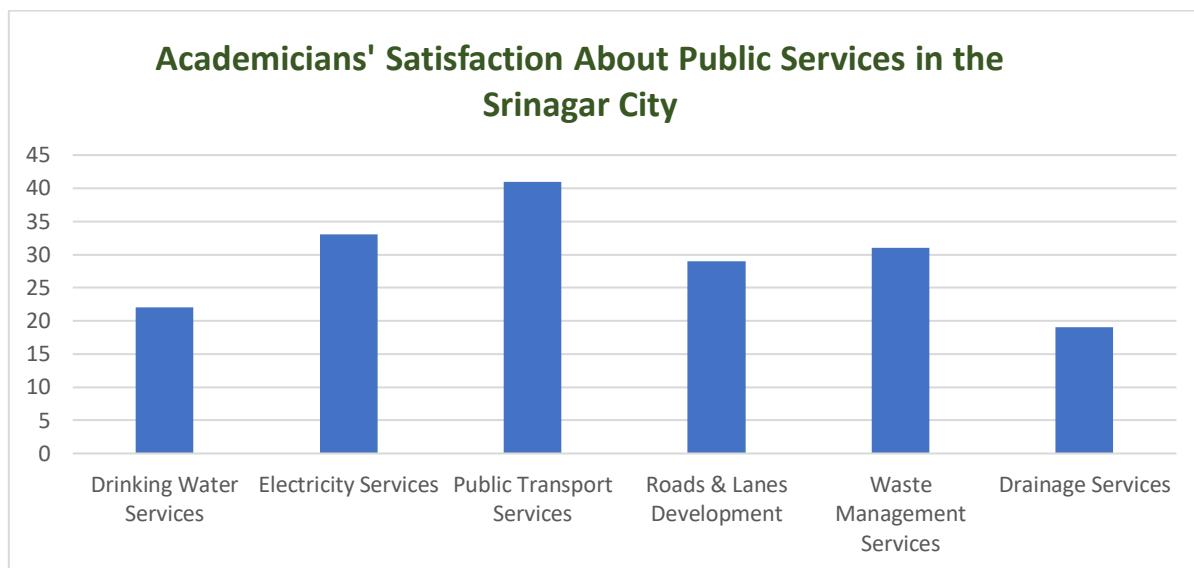


Figure 5.2: Academicians' Level of Satisfaction about Public Services in Srinagar city of J&K

The data analysis reveals poor satisfaction of the respondent academicians about the delivery of basic urban services in the Srinagar city with over all satisfaction level below 50%. The findings also suggest that the academicians were least satisfied about drainage services with satisfaction level below 20% followed by drinking water services for which the respondents show only 22% satisfaction. Also the results reveal that the respondents are more satisfied with availability and quality of public transport services in the city with 42% satisfaction level.

services and increasing environmental pollution levels in the city. The respondents emphasized scarcity of food, poor health infrastructure and lack of financial support, particularly to the vulnerable population during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the subsequent lockdown of businesses & trade activities.

5.3 Non-Government Organizations' perspective about governance in the Srinagar city.

The detailed and wider perspectives regarding the impact & challenges of urban development and governance in the Srinagar city were received from five non-government organizations operating in the Srinagar city, using the interview method. The findings suggest that major governance challenges in the city are insufficient availability of drinking water, electricity, dilapidated roads & lanes, poor waste management and drainage system. They also highlighted inadequate inter-institutional coordination, corruption and lack of public awareness as prime development challenges in the Srinagar city. They were also least satisfied with the delivery of basic civic

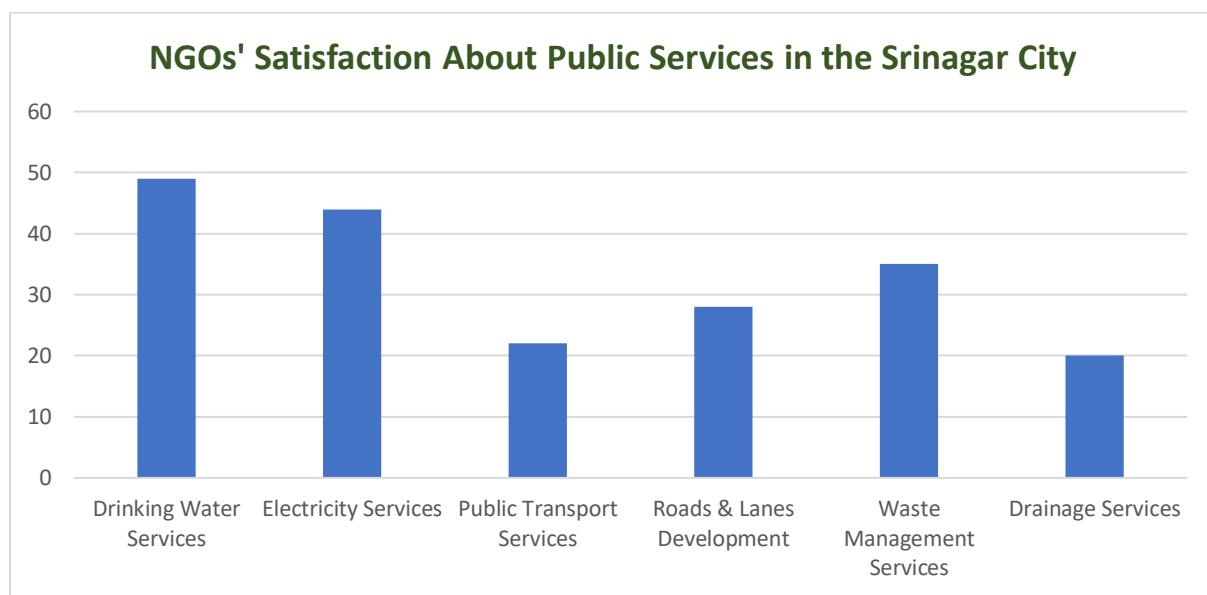


Figure 5.3: Non Government Organizations' (NGOs') Satisfaction about Public Services in Srinagar City of J&K

From the comprehensive analysis of the gathered data as depicted in the above bar diagram, it is revealed that the respondents from non government organizations (NGOs) are also less satisfied about the availability and quality of various urban services in the city with higher satisfaction level of 48% shown about the drinking water services and least satisfaction with satisfaction level of 20% shown towards drainagae services.

5.4 Governance Challenges in the Srinagar City.

The findings of the study suggest that prime governance and development challenges in the Srinagar city are- deficient manpower in the public offices, insufficient availability of government offices, particularly at the community level, thereby limiting social outreach of development schemes, insufficient financial support for the development schemes particularly social sector schemes targeted towards empowerment of vulnerable population, lack of inter-institutional coordination, bureaucratic rigidity, the non-responsive attitude of administrative officials responsible for public service delivery & corruption.

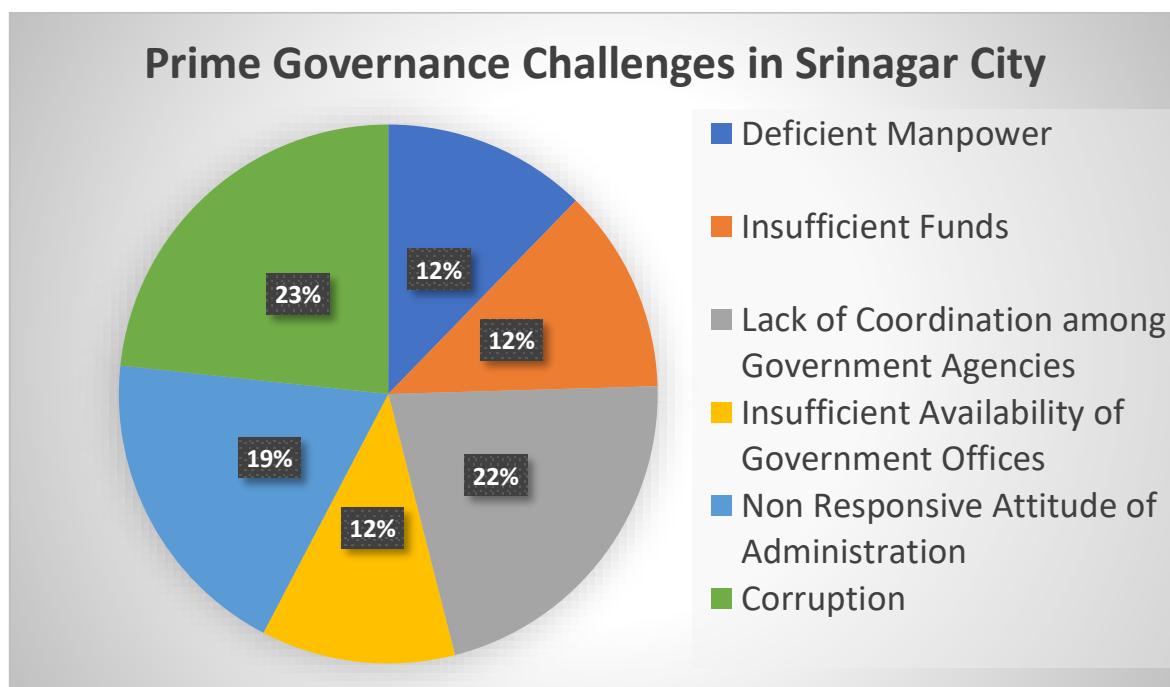


Figure 5.4: Prime Governance Challenges in the Srinagar City of J&K

6. Suggestions for Augmentation of Governance Approaches in the Srinagar City of J&K

To overcome the above-cited governance challenges and to ensure effective governance and citizen-centric administration in the Srinagar city of Jammu & Kashmir, the following suggestions may be incorporated in the relevant policies and programmes-

I. Establish ‘Command & Control Centers’ at the local level under the supervision of municipality ward councillors to oversee and monitor development works at the grassroots level and ensure social outreach of the development schemes.

II. Increasing budgetary allocation for the welfare programmes to facilitate their optimum outcomes because of the ever-increasing marginalized/vulnerable population their diversified needs, particularly in urban areas.

III. Under targeted job policy, special recruitment drives for vulnerable educated youth will address staff shortages in concerned departments and rising unemployment among marginalized urban populations.

IV. Geo-Spatial Tracking (GST) & Management Information System (MIS) technologies to be introduced in each public

office for real-time file tracking performance monitoring & to avoid red-tapism.

V. In collaboration with other field departments, the ward members and officials of the Srinagar Municipal Corporation be actively involved in creating public awareness regarding urban development and governance programs; through community meetings, roadshows, and using IT platforms.

VI. Capacity building workshops be conducted to instill social sensitization, public empathy, ethical and moral values among public officials.

7. Conclusion

The governance paradigms in the 21st century are rapidly evolving due to emerging global concerns and unprecedented technological revolution. Diversifying government functions and increased welfare schemes to curb rising global poverty, illiteracy, food insecurity, and climate changes have led to a radical shift in governance and public policy. The COVID-19 pandemic tested governance institutions’ resilience and effectiveness, particularly in developing countries, including India. The pandemic mostly affected the vulnerable urban population, including the Srinagar city of Jammu & Kashmir, due to stringent lockdown to contain the virus and subsequent loss of their livelihood. The pandemic also exposed the

inherent inadequacies of the governance institutions viz deficiency in the workforce, lack of inter-institutional coordination and poor socio-economic infrastructure. The need of the hour is to bridge the gaps in administrative systems to strengthen the public service delivery mechanisms ensuring responsive and citizen-centric governance in consonance with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

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