

Chapter 21

Fostering Civic Engagement in Smart Cities: An Opportunity for Public Libraries in India

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ABSTRACT

Smart cities are modern concepts that aim to provide better living conditions to their citizens by creating a sustainable environment. Citizens are the key partners behind the development of a smart city. They have to be aware about the civic duties and responsibilities towards the community. In this chapter, the authors analyze the concept of smart cities and what are the issues and challenges in India for developing a smart city. The authors also examine various civic engagement initiatives by the government of India. The objective of this chapter is to find the role played by public libraries in creating smarter communities and how they will help in promoting civic engagement activities.

INTRODUCTION

Man as a social animal is obliged towards protecting the environment that he lives in as well as maintaining the balance of the society. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle once said “Man by nature is a social animal, an individual who is unsocial naturally, and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precede the individual” (Albino et al, 2015). What makes a man or a human being unique is his or her ability to think, his power of speech and moral reasoning. Human beings are co-dependent on each other, one cannot live all by himself. Since man is a social animal, he is always found living in a community co-existing with others harmoniously. Being a part of the community, mankind is obliged towards fulfilling his/her duties to ensure in maintaining the balance of

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the community. Likewise, he should also be aware of the political and economic situation of the society which he lives in. Civic engagement is a term that is used for any individual or group activities that address the issues of public concern. People should always be aware of the political and socio-economic issues that concerns the community. Therefore, the term civic engagement refers to the participation of individuals coming together in a public realm where people can exchange their thoughts and ideas, where the public voice is resonated. Civic engagement becomes more meaningful in a society when healthy democracy prevails, because only a vigorous democracy would let the public to share their views on issues concerning the societal aspects. Citizens should make themselves involved in the decision-making process and deliberation, for it will enable them to become more proficient in the political sphere and transform the civilian from mere spectator to active agent. In order to achieve civic engagement, citizens must be educated about their basic rights. For this, the populace must come together in a shared platform to discuss and exchange their thoughts and ideas.

The concept of Smart cities is a good instance for engaging citizens in productive and innovative activities. Smart City is an emerging new concept without a universally accepted definition. The idea of smart city varies from country to country depending on its level of development. In India, the Smart City mission was launched by Prime Minister on June 25, 2015. The major objective behind this mission is to provide a better living condition to its citizens by providing good infrastructure, clean and sustainable environment. As part of this mission, the Government of India has collaborated with State/Urban Local Bodies for financial assistance as well as encourage the participation of private sector through Public Private Partnerships. The Central Government also converge with similar other schemes proposed by the government itself, like AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation), Swachh Bharat Mission, Digital India, National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojna (HRIDAY) that shares similar objectives but following a different path [2]. However, the authors cannot help but notice that community institutions like public libraries are evidently left out of the scene when these institutions can help the government to achieve the desired goal. The primary goal of the mission is the well-being of community, to enlighten the citizens by creating a platform where people can come together and engage in democratic activities, participate in debates thereby achieving civic growth and improving the standard of living for people. Public libraries can offer the best platform for the citizens to engage in the above said activities. Libraries has always been the most welcoming, neutral, safe civic spaces in our community. They accommodate everyone irrespective of their gender, age, social and economic background. Libraries are not just a concrete building with collection of decade old books. Besides offering conventional services, libraries can play an indispensable role in transforming the society by engaging the citizens in civic participation. Integrating new technological aspects into public libraries and by understanding the ever-changing need of the user community, public libraries can offer a whole new range of services that fits the need of smart city community.

In this chapter, the authors explore the smart city initiatives of Government of India that helps the citizens to become active participants in civic activities and the programs and services that can be offered by public libraries in strengthening the civic culture. The major question of this research is how public libraries in India can contribute in creating a smart community and how they will help in fostering civic engagement in smart communities.

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