# A national youth festival on city governance

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| **Region** | **Asia and the Pacific** |
| **Award Scheme** | **Shanghai Manual** |
| **Themes** | **Urban Governance and Legal Frameworks** <br> **Youth & Livelihoods** |
| **Sustainable Development Goals** | **Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable** <br> **Goal 16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels** |

## Summary

India's rapid urbanization, combined with a demographic where over half the population is under 30, presents both challenges and opportunities for youth engagement in governance. While young people hold immense potential to contribute to urban development, a lack of formal education on municipal structures and functions has hindered their participation.

## Background and Objective

As urban centers expand, and governance structures grow increasingly complex, young people in India often remain disengaged from local decision-making processes due to a lack of awareness and access. The Praja Foundation, with 26 years of experience in strengthening citizen participation, recognized this gap and launched Prajatantra in 2019 to create an inclusive space for youth to actively participate in local governance beyond their voting rights. The initiative aims to educate and inspire young minds by providing them with a platform to simulate real-world municipal roles, deliberate on policy matters, and understand the broader governance ecosystem. With the support of the National Institute of Urban Affairs, UN-Habitat, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Asia, Prajatantra 2023 sought to enhance youth engagement by expanding its outreach and deepening learning experiences.

## Actions and Implementation

The 2023 edition of Prajatantra was structured around three core elements: preparatory knowledge-building, interactive competitions, and field engagement. The journey began with a bootcamp in August, equipping participants with insights into inclusive and participatory urban economies. This was followed by four specialized knowledge sessions covering legal frameworks, municipal finance, water security, and urban resilience. These sessions ensured that participants entered the festival with a strong foundation in local governance and policymaking.

The festival itself unfolded in multiple stages, beginning with qualifying rounds in early September and culminating in a grand finale in November. Events included role-playing exercises such as the Mayor's Speech competition, policy presentations, debates, and quizzes, all designed to sharpen analytical thinking, leadership, and problem-solving skills. For the first time, field engagement activities were introduced, providing participants with hands-on exposure to urban economic policies, direct interactions with municipal actors, and real-world case studies. These interactions allowed young participants to critically assess governance challenges and propose innovative solutions, making the learning experience more tangible and impactful.

## Outcomes and Impacts

Over its five-year journey, Prajatantra has successfully built a robust network of academic institutions, youth groups, and municipal stakeholders across India. In 2023 alone, the festival engaged 343 teams from 106 municipalities spanning 26 states and 6 union territories, drawing participation from 202 academic institutes and 7 civil society organizations. With 1,919 direct participants and an extended outreach of 26,885 young individuals, the initiative has effectively nurtured a new wave of civic-minded youth equipped with the knowledge and confidence to engage in local governance. The impact of Prajatantra extends beyond the event itself. Many participants leverage their learnings to make informed academic and career decisions, while others actively contribute to policy discussions in their communities. By fostering direct cooperation between youth and municipal authorities, the festival has demonstrated the value of participatory governance, inspiring both young leaders and local governments to collaborate on urban solutions.

## Sustainability and Scalability

While Prajatantra has established itself as a significant national platform, its long-term sustainability depends on further institutionalization. Integrating the festival into academic curricula or securing formal government partnerships would strengthen its continuity and impact. Additionally, adopting a decentralized model where municipalities host local editions of the festival could enhance grassroots participation and ensure a wider reach. By embedding the initiative into educational and governance frameworks, Prajatantra can transition from a periodic festival to a sustained movement for youth engagement in urban governance.

## Gender and Social Inclusivity

Prajatantra is committed to fostering inclusivity, engaging a diverse spectrum of youth from various educational, social, and regional backgrounds. Participants range from high school graduates to mid-career master's students across disciplines such as engineering, media, medicine, and the social sciences. By creating a space where individuals from different socioeconomic contexts can interact, the festival promotes equity in governance education. While gender representation has been balanced, continuous efforts are needed to encourage greater female participation and leadership, particularly in policy deliberations and municipal finance discussions.

## Innovative Initiative

A defining feature of Prajatantra is its innovative approach to youth engagement in governance. Unlike traditional educational models, the festival utilizes experiential learning through simulations, debates, and real-world policymaking exercises. The role-playing format allows participants to step into the shoes of municipal officials, understand governance complexities, and develop solutions collaboratively. This interactive methodology not only enhances learning but also fosters a sense of agency and responsibility among young participants, equipping them with the tools to drive meaningful change in their cities.

## Resources devoted to delivery

The execution of Prajatantra 2023 was a result of extensive collaboration and resource mobilization. The initiative was driven by 433 virtual meetings, over 100 dedicated volunteers, and the expertise of 123 judges. Institutional support from academic organizations, municipal bodies, and international agencies played a crucial role in ensuring the festival's success. Financial and logistical resources were strategically allocated to support knowledge-building sessions, competition logistics, and participant engagement activities, ensuring a comprehensive and enriching experience for all involved.

## Conclusion

Prajatantra stands as a pioneering initiative that has successfully bridged the gap between youth and municipal governance in India. By equipping young people with knowledge, skills, and opportunities to engage in local governance, the festival cultivates future urban leaders committed to shaping sustainable and inclusive cities. The initiative's continued growth and institutionalization hold the potential to transform it into a permanent fixture in India's urban governance landscape, ensuring that youth remain active stakeholders in shaping the cities of tomorrow. Through its innovative and participatory approach, Prajatantra not only strengthens

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youth leadership but also contributes to a more engaged and informed citizenry, essential for the evolution of resilient and people-centred urban governance.