



IIAS Public Governance Series Vol. 7

VIKSIT BHARAT

@ 2 0 4 7

GOVERNANCE TRANSFORMED



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Viksit Bharat @2047

Governance Transformed

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Mathew, C.K., Tripathi, Surendra Nath, Reddy, C. Sheela, and
Singh, A.P. (2025), *Viksit Bharat @ 2047: Governance
Transformed*, IIAS Public Governance Series (Vol. 7, 2nd ed.),
Brussels: IIAS-IISA, 717+xvi p.

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The International Institute of Administrative Sciences, Brussels,
2025, <http://www.iias-iisa.org/>



IIAS Public Governance Series
Vol. 7, 2nd Edition
Series Editor: Steve Troupin
(IIAS)

ISBN: 9798306547237; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46996/pgs.v7e2>

Chapter 17. Democratic Decentralisation: Power to the People

Prof. Anil B. Suraj²³³

Introduction

Development, whether economic or social, is attributed to the efficient distribution and use of resources. In achieving public welfare, the eventual consumption of essential goods and services is not as challenging as its dependence on the efficiency of the distributive scheme that forms the basis of such provision. Public administration, as a subject, is the study of people, processes, and principles that ought to govern the efficient use of available resources towards achieving greater public welfare.

In designing systems for greater efficiency, especially towards large-scale distributive outcomes, localisation and decentralisation are the preferred modes. There is no greater challenge in distribution than that of achieving public welfare that is equitable and sustainable. In the Indian context, this challenge is of even greater complexity owing to the sheer size and diversity of the nation. Being the most populous country in the world today, public governance and public administration in India need to constantly reinvent themselves to address

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concerns of equity and efficiency in achieving social welfare and economic development. Population is just one of the factors of challenge. There is inherent plurality and heterogeneity across regions, be it in terms of language, culture, climate, or natural resources. For instance, there are 22 languages recognised in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, across 28 states.

The composition of the Constituent Assembly of India, in itself, speaks volumes about the diversity of the nation. The members were indirectly elected representatives from more than 40 provinces and princely states. The content of the debates and deliberations in the Constituent Assembly demonstrates the challenges of framing policies to govern the various regions of India. The universally acclaimed principle of “Unity in Diversity” quite aptly describes the objective of policymaking and governance in India.

Local Self-Governance in the Indian Constitution

The Preamble to the Constitution of India articulates the founding principles of the Republic of India. Beginning with the words “WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India ...,” the Preamble proceeds to identify the basic principles that must govern public administration in India. The Constitution is, through the Constituent Assembly, adopted and enacted by the people of India, thereby forming the Republic. A nation in which the supreme power is held by the People and their elected representatives is what makes it a Republic. Immediately following the Preamble, in its very first Article, the Constitution of India lays down that “India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States.” Foremost, this provision establishes the two levels of government in the Republic of India, that is, the Union Government and the Government of the particular State. The Constitution has a dedicated Part titled

“Relations between the Union and the States.” Article 246 and the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution define and enumerate subject matters for the exercise of legislative power—exclusively by the Parliament (Union List), the State Legislatures (State List), and the Concurrent List, wherein States may legislate, subject to the Parliament’s prerogative to also make laws. The federal relations between the Union and the States are designed to weigh in favour of the Union.²³⁴ In terms of purview and coverage of subject matter, the Union List has 96 entries, and another entry provides the residuary power to legislate on “any other matter not enumerated” in any of the Lists. The State List has 66 entries, and the Concurrent List has 47 entries. Concomitantly, the scope and extent of executive power is also based on the subject matter for the exercise of legislative power, by virtue of Article 73 (of the Union) and Article 162 (of the State).

A democratic form of government is designed as a social contract between two constituents: the general public, who are the governed, and the officials who administer the different departments of the Executive branch of governance. The Executive is further divided into the political leadership, which comprises elected legislators and ministers, and the administrative bureaucracy, consisting of different cadres of civil service officers bound by strict rules of conduct. The “will of the governed” is assumed to be conveyed through the process of periodic elections. The representatives elected are expected to uphold the will of the people by framing policies, making laws, enforcing rules, and reviewing and holding the government accountable. Elections are festivals of democracy. The electoral process celebrates the fervour and momentum of public participation and collective energy involving significant expenditure and considerable diversion of government

²³⁴ It must be noted that the framers of the Constitution have preferred the phrase “Union of States” and also have avoided using the term “federalism” in the Constitution.

resources. As much as elections are essential to sustain the tenets of democracy, there are also ethical and demographic concerns about whether the elected are indeed the true representatives of all the people in their constituency.

The closer the governed are to the government, the more likely the outcome is the achievement of the common good.²³⁵ The interaction between the people and their elected representatives must not be restricted only to the period of elections. It must be an ongoing process of deliberative iteration and exchange of ideas towards achieving greater public welfare in an efficient manner. The rationale for any form of local self-government is to bring the machinery of governance closer to the people, and to work in the spirit of cooperation and synergy with the other levels of governance.

The term “local self-government” is part of the text of the original Constitution itself. In Entry 3 of the Union List under the Seventh Schedule, the Constitution refers to the delimitation of cantonment areas and local self-government in such areas. More appropriately, in Entry 5 of the State List under the Seventh Schedule, the original text of the Constitution defines the term by stating: “Local government, that is to say, the constitution and powers of municipal corporations, ... and other local authorities for the purpose of local self-government or village administration.” The 73rd Amendment (the Panchayats) and the 74th Amendment (the Municipalities) to the Constitution became effective in April and June of 1993, respectively. The Panchayats are established as institutions of self-government in village and rural areas, while the Municipal Councils or Municipal Corporations are established as institutions of self-government in urban centres of towns, cities, and metropolitan areas. The 73rd and 74th Amendments further deepened the concept of “local self-government” in the Indian Constitution by making it more Republic through greater scope

²³⁵ “The government of a republic originates in the people and is intended to promote their common good.” Quoted from: Duncan (2022, p. 156).

for public participation in governance, and more Democratic by introducing local bodies of governance comprising elected representatives. These amendments have designed the process of devolution of powers to subsidiary forms of government by forming multiple authorities at the local level. Such authorities are typically constituted of representatives elected by the local population.

In drafting these landmark amendments to the Constitution, there appears to be a clear recognition of the formal role and authority of the State Legislature. In practice, this would essentially mean the exercise of authority by the respective State Government. Whether it is for the devolution of functions or the delegation of power to impose taxes, the prerogative of the State Governments is evident in the various Articles and provisions of Parts IX and IXA of the Constitution. It may be observed that the Articles, at various stages, confer discretion on the State Government to “endow,” “authorise,” “assign,” “provide,” “as may be entrusted,” and to provide for “such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them (Panchayats or Municipalities) to function as institutions of self-government,” and “for the devolution of powers and responsibilities.” These two major amendments also led to the inclusion of the Eleventh Schedule and the Twelfth Schedule in the Constitution. The Eleventh Schedule is pursuant to Article 243G and lists 29 entries of subject matter for which the Legislature of a State may devolve powers and responsibilities to the Panchayats to administer. The subjects include broad areas such as the preparation of plans and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice, poverty alleviation, social welfare, implementation of land reforms, agriculture, education, and small-scale industries. There are also certain specific areas included in the list, such as drinking water, fisheries, khadi and cottage industries, roads and culverts, fuel and fodder, and libraries, among other priorities of rural development.

Similarly, the Twelfth Schedule is pursuant to Article 243W, and it lists 18 entries of subject matter that the Legislature of a State may devolve powers and responsibilities for the Municipal bodies to administer. The subjects include broad areas such as the preparation of plans and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice, urban planning, urban poverty alleviation, public health, and urban forestry and ecology. There are also certain specific areas included in the list, such as slum improvement and upgradation, roads and bridges, provision of urban and public amenities, and water supply for different kinds of purposes, among other priorities of urban development. The Union and the States form the two levels of federal governance. The constitutional amendments in 1993 sought to establish a third level of local self-governance. In reality, it may be more appropriate to refer to the local self-governments as being more in the form of a subsidiary to the State Government than as an independent third level of government, as desired by the Constitution.²³⁶

Rural Local Governance and Panchayats

History and Evolution

The Panchayat system has been an intrinsic part of local life and governance throughout the ancient history and culture of Indian villages. The etymological foundation of the term *Panchayat* is attributed to a representative council or assembly

²³⁶ “Much we may talk of Gandhi and ancient *Panchayats* in India our local governments, *Panchayats* and municipalities, continue to derive not only their powers but also functions from their respective States.” Quoted from: NITI Aayog (2020, p. 20).

(*aayat*) of five members (*panch*). The role of Panchayats in governance, also termed “Panchayati Raj,” was constitutionally recognised and defined by the 73rd Amendment in 1993. This amendment has given legitimacy to what Mahatma Gandhi referred to as the basis of the “government of the village.” “The government of the village will be conducted by a Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required” (*Gandhiji on VILLAGES*, 2002a). He further stated that “this Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office.” On how villages define India as a nation, Gandhi is famously quoted as saying, “I have believed and repeated times without number that India is to be found not in its few cities but in its 700,000 villages” (*Gandhiji on VILLAGES*, 2002b). Panchayats have emerged as institutions of governance not only of a village (referred to as *Grama*), which predominantly survives on agriculture and related activities, but are also established in Blocks (referred to in some states as *Taluka* or *Mandal*) and Districts (referred to as *Zilla*), which are respectively larger regions of administrative units. The role and form of Panchayats have steadily evolved over the last several centuries. The Panchayati Raj system is a democratic amalgam of people’s trust and choice, serving as an institutional representative of their voice. Whether it is social aspirations or economic development, Panchayats embody the collective will of the people within their region. The local language, culture, traditions, climate, crops, and commerce are all considered relevant factors in making governance decisions by the Panchayats. Its members are elected representatives, usually from the local area, and are known to most people in that village, or the Block. Unlike the formation and functioning of Municipal bodies in urban areas, the Panchayats retain proximity to the governed, both as an accessible institution and in the fact that each of its members is intrinsically part of life in the village.

Current Status and Concerns

There are about 2.6 lakh Panchayats with more than 31 lakh elected representatives in India (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023–2024). A matter of considerable achievement and pride in public administration is that about 46% of the elected representatives are women, and the Panchayats also provide wide representation to the weaker sections of society, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). There is a dedicated Ministry of Panchayati Raj in the Government of India, formed more than two decades ago, which aims to make each of the Panchayati Raj institutions an “effective, efficient and transparent vehicle for local governance, social change and public service delivery mechanism meeting the aspirations of local population” (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023–2024). It is also relevant to note the Directive Principle of State Policy as mandated in Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, which refers to the organisation of village panchayats. It provides that “The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” Directive Principles of State Policy, though not exclusively enforceable by the Courts, are a unique feature of our Constitution by which we can evaluate the functioning of the Government. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, within a year of its formation as a separate Ministry in the Government of India, instituted the Devolution Index.

This exercise of assessing the “Improved Devolution Index” has involved a multi-pronged criterion of what would constitute the operational core of decentralisation and the support systems for devolution. In the Devolution Report of 2015–2016 (Unnikrishnan et al., 2016), this Index has been constructed based on considerable weight being given to foundational factors such as the transfer of finances, transfer of functionaries, transfer of functions, and autonomy of

Panchayati Raj institutions. In addition, operational factors of capacity building and systems for accountability and transparency form the comprehensive matrix of assessment on whether the States have indeed devolved enough autonomy and power to the Panchayat system to function as an independent form of local government. The Devolution Index is further broken into measurable points of data, including per-capita funds available from the respective State Finance Commission, percentage of functions actually undertaken by the Panchayats, percentage of local institutions over which Panchayats have full functional control, and percentage of activities in which the Panchayats can make decisions on expenditure with full independence. While the nature and extent of devolution is a challenge to objectively define or assess, the Devolution Index is indeed a fair attempt to measure the various States on their ability and willingness to cede democratic power and functions of governance to the Panchayats.

The working of Village Panchayats, also termed as Gram Panchayat, has not achieved the constitutionally expected levels of decentralised governance. As mentioned earlier, through the constitutional amendments, the State Governments have been vested with the power to decide the nature and extent of functional and financial devolution of authority to the Panchayats and Municipal bodies.²³⁷ This has led to a wide degree of variation in the devolution of powers across the country. The variations begin right from the instance of the names by which Gram Panchayats are addressed across different States (Rajasekhar, 2022). Even basic norms, like that of frequency of meetings of the Gram Panchayat or their quorum, are not uniform or standardised across the States. On the core concern of roles and functions of the Gram Panchayat, the variation across the States is indeed quite stark. The State-level legislations that devolve functions to the Panchayats have

²³⁷ Article 243A, Constitution of India.

been surveyed (Rajasekhar, 2022), and we may observe the following (with the maximum number of States being 28):

1. Only two States have devolved the function of “consider proposals for fresh taxation or enhancement of existing taxes.”
2. Only nine States have devolved the function to “examine annual statement of accounts and audit report” and to “review programme of work for the year or any new programme.”
3. Only eight States have devolved the function of having to “render assistance in the implementation of development schemes and rendering services in the villages.”

The extent of devolution of functions to Panchayats is certainly a matter of concern. In addition, shortfalls related to funds and functionaries also come forth prominently. In none of the States are the Panchayats given as much power and autonomy as is expected by the constitutional provisions. It is now more than three decades since the amendments to the Constitution, and with the increasing rate of growth of the nation's economy, the extent of devolution of powers to the system of local government ought to have been far deeper and more empowering.

Urban Local Governance and Municipal Bodies

History and Evolution

The 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India (popularly referred to as the Nagarpalika Act), which came into effect in June 1993, seeks to provide a common framework for the structure of urban local bodies across India. With the

introduction of Part IXA, titled “The Municipalities,” into the Constitution, the then existing laws of different States pertaining to urban local bodies had to be suitably modified to conform to the constitutional amendment. It was made clear that the features of local governance, as specified by the amendment to the Constitution, shall define the working of municipal laws across the country.

The etymological foundation of the term “Municipality” can be traced to the classical Latin term *municipalis* which refers to a “citizen of a free town.” There have also been references to a Roman *municipium*, a city whose people had the privileges of Roman citizens but were given autonomy to be governed by their own laws. In the Indian context, Article 243P(e) of the Constitution defines the term “Municipality” as an institution of self-government constituted as either a Municipal Corporation for a larger urban area, or a Municipal Council for a smaller urban area, or a Nagar Panchayat for an area that is in transition from a rural to an urban area. As is evident in Entry 5 of the State List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, the underpinning of self-governance by the Municipalities is based on the power devolved by the Constitution. The primary objective of such devolution may be found in the apparent necessity to diffuse power from the central authorities with respect to local governance. This is also to enable policy differentiation and greater diversity in the content of policy planning and implementation, thereby achieving better standards of local governance. Based on Entry 5 in the State List, read with the power of State Legislatures under Article 246(3), the Constitution provides for States to establish Municipal Corporations, Municipalities, Town and Country Planning Boards, Greater Metropolitan Authorities, and other local organisations in their respective jurisdictions.

Various laws of Municipal bodies, some of which came into existence even before India became independent, had to conform to the essential features of the 74th Amendment to the

Constitution. The leading features of urban local governance, as specified in the constitutional amendment, are:

1. Constitution and composition of Municipalities.
2. Constitution and composition of wards committees and any other related committees at the Ward level.
3. Reservation of seats in favour of women and SCs/STs, in every Municipality to enable diversity in representation.
4. Duration of the Municipalities has been fixed at 5 years, while at the same time providing a process for an untimely eventuality of dissolution.
5. Disqualifications for the membership of a Municipality.
6. Powers, authority, and responsibilities of a Municipality are also established in the Twelfth Schedule to the Constitution, which provides for about 18 different functional activities in relation to which a Municipality can undertake programmes and schemes for implementation.
7. Formation of District Planning Committee and Metropolitan Planning Committee.
8. Funding of a Municipality and its power to tax.
9. Role of the Finance Commission is to review the financial position of finances of local bodies and the maintenance of accounts and audit process.
10. Recognising the importance of elections for the local government, the State Election Commission has been authorised for superintendence, direction, and control of the preparation and conduct of all elections to the Municipalities.

Current Status and Concerns

Urban centres all over the world are facing the reality of migration from rural areas and small towns. The share of the population living in urban areas across India is estimated to have crossed 35%, and the rate of urbanisation is steady, with an increase of 4% in the last decade alone. Metropolitan and mega

cities in different parts of India, such as Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, and Bengaluru, are facing the challenge of a rising populace, and these cities would therefore, drag the policy and decision-making in the direction of feeding their growth through a phenomenon termed “urban primacy” (Vaddiraju, 2022). It is also predicted that the urban population in India would double by 2050. This demands much greater attention to content and design of governance systems.

The autonomy ceded to a law made by the State Legislature could have wide implications. For instance, the State law is enabled to determine the manner of election of the Chairperson of a Municipality or the Mayor of a Municipal Corporation. Article 243R provides that “all the seats in a Municipality shall be filled by persons chosen by direct election from the territorial constituencies in the Municipal area” (i.e., from the wards). However, this democratic and representative arrangement is subject to the possibility of a State law which may seek to provide representation in a Municipality to different categories of people who are not elected representatives of the wards. Of course, the State law cannot go beyond the following categories as mentioned in Article 243R: persons experienced in municipal administration (without the right to vote), Members of Parliament (MPs), Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Members of Legislative Council (MLCs), and Ward Committee Chairpersons. Furthermore, since there is an express denial of right to vote to such persons who have been given representation on the basis of their experience in municipal administration, it could be an inference that the MPs, MLAs, and MLCs are to be denied voting rights in the Municipality proceedings. However, given that MPs, MLAs, and MLCs typically would enjoy greater political clout, the denial of voting rights may not amount to restricting their ability to influence decisions being made at the local level. It is another legal issue as to what criteria could be adopted to select persons who have “special knowledge or experience in Municipal administration.” Should this criterion not be used to bring in

people who have expertise in urban amenities and affairs, rather than elected representatives of different levels?

There are close to 5,000 urban local bodies in India, and the constitutional power to delimit the wards, the basic territorial constituencies that compose Municipalities or Municipal Corporations, has often been used as a tool by the State Government to delay the elections to the Municipality concerned. Considering that the Municipal bodies are to be primarily constituted by elected representatives, the constitutional amendment lost an opportunity to lay down uniform requirements regarding the election of the Mayors of Municipal Corporations or Chairpersons of Municipalities. Direct elections to the position of the Mayor and a minimum or uniform term could also have been prescribed to preclude the varying forms adopted in different States. There is also no constitutional provision regarding the removal of the Mayors or the Chairpersons. These instances give only a flavour of the implications of allowing the State to continue to follow different models of urban governance and, consequently, the extent of devolution of powers to the local government. The State-centred approach of the constitutional amendment could considerably constrain the democratic basis of local self-governance. While the objective of the Constitution is to provide a basic structure of urban local governance across the country, it has been made to heavily depend on the discretion of each of the States to accord respect to the principles, and their uniformity.

Principles of Public Administration to Govern Decentralisation

Devolution of Powers: Functions, Funds, and Functionaries (3Fs)

Public policy and governance across the world are today broadly defined by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an agenda for the year 2030. The 17 Goals, as specifically laid out, provide a comprehensive framework to design policies and programmes of action to achieve the social and livelihood outcomes recognised globally. In a recent publication of the Indian NITI Aayog, along with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), about 160 policies of the Government of India have been mapped to the 16 thematic goals of the SDGs (NITI Aayog, 2024). This report rightly identifies the urgent need to design policies and governance to be able to achieve localisation of SDGs. Localisation is necessary not only to sharpen the objectives of policies to effectively address issues of public need but also to ensure prompt implementation by means of local governance.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1993 strengthened the focus on devolution in terms of what is popularly termed the 3Fs framework, that is, Functions, Funds, and Functionaries. The amendments have been designed to vest the responsibility of such devolution on the respective State Governments. It is indeed the appropriate manner of enabling such devolution of powers. Whether in terms of functions or the fiscal power to raise funds, institutions of local governance are necessarily be nurtured and sustained by the respective State Governments. The functional domain identified for the local government, which is laid down in the Eleventh Schedule (Panchayats) and Twelfth Schedule (Municipal Bodies) of the Constitution, considerably draws upon activities that otherwise

ought to have been the domain of the State Government. Concomitantly, the power to raise finances with regard to such activities is also primarily within the purview of the State Government.

Therefore, the devolution of power to local government institutions is entirely within the domain of the State Government. The constitutional amendments did recognise this obvious sequence of devolution of power. As reflected in various reports over the last three decades, the devolution of powers regarding the 3Fs may at best be described as inadequate. There is considerable reluctance and resistance to ceding powers by the State Government. For instance, the Eleventh Schedule lays down certain functional areas for Panchayats, such as Agriculture (including agricultural extension), Drinking Water, Rural Housing, and Social Welfare. These are major domains of policy and social influence in the context of governance across India. State Governments are naturally not forthcoming in devolving powers of policy formulation, fiscal authority, and staffing and personnel to govern such functions with wide implications for public welfare.

We may also similarly analyse the Twelfth Schedule of the Constitution that lays down functional areas for the Municipal Bodies to administer. It lists functions such as, urban planning (including town planning), roads and bridges, water supply (for domestic, industrial, and commercial purposes), public health (sanitation, conservancy, and solid waste management), and urban poverty alleviation. Given the rising rate of urbanisation and the evolution of globally renowned services sector and export-oriented global capability centres that prefer to be located in metropolitan cities, no State Government is willing to give up its policy authority to govern functions of urban planning and development. The potential to raise finances, which can sustain the growth of a larger region of the State, is too high for the State Government to not want to directly administer the entire facet of urban governance. If we take the

examples of Mumbai and Bengaluru, their respective States rely heavily on the economic growth and fiscal collections from these two cities to be able to fund the development across the State. This poses a relevant challenge of whether the devolution of power and independence in the domain of urban governance is indeed beneficial in achieving the larger objectives of growth and development of the concerned State as a region.

If we consider even one instance of urban transportation, there are demands for infrastructure, large-scale and long-term financing, raising of debts, and investments. These are the obvious priorities of the State Government and may also need to be achieved in partnership with the Union Government, as there may be international developmental assistance involved, as seen in the Urban Metro Rail projects. These projects would also involve issues of initial fare fixation and subsequent periodic revisions. Such decisions would have to be made in collaboration with multiple other modes of urban and public transport, involving their respective departments of the State Government. Does the Constitution expect that institutions of local government administer urban transport and the related infrastructure? We must believe that the answer is in the affirmative. However, the reality is that the Municipal Corporations and other urban local bodies are not currently involved in such issues of planning and managing urban transport and infrastructural projects, especially on a large scale. If there is any role for local government, it is merely a formality of being involved in consultations, and it neither involves responsibility nor any form of accountability. This is a clear denial of public voice and participation in the most crucial decisions of urban transportation and infrastructure.

The crucial aspect of “functionaries” is usually not given as much attention as that of the devolution of powers relating to “functions” or “funds.” Governments are functional only through their human personnel. While technology may assist and considerably support this structure of bureaucracy, staffing and cadre-based expertise remain the most critical elements of

any government and its effectiveness. Local government institutions need independence and autonomy in decisions relating to the recruitment of suitable persons and the engagement of professional experts and consultants. This would empower local governments to employ appropriate talent, often locally sourced, to not only support their immediate needs but also sustain aspirational growth and outcomes over a longer term. It may even be possible to establish a separate cadre of professionals to be employed by local governments, across different functions of public utilities and services. Devolution should also mean independence from traditional practices of official deputation from different wings of the State Government. These are officials who are deputed for a fixed time period and are then asked to report back to their parent department. This would be detrimental to the objective of creating a local government cadre of professionals. Given the demand for public services at the local level, there must be a systematic and concerted effort to enable personnel and staffing policies that are best suited to governance with, and among, people. Proximate governance requires a very different set of skills and understanding by the staff. There would have to be engineers and specialists, while we may also need staff trained in public relations, communication, and being humane under tough conditions of civic engagement.

Participatory, and Community-Based Governance

Stakeholder consultations and participatory modes of decision-making have become not only the basic minimum requirements of any process of (local) governance but have also evolved as enforceable rights of the citizens. There are no exceptions to seeking public opinion and feedback in a representative and organised manner. While there is enough space for institutional or administrative autonomy and

professional expertise in laying out the initial set of objectives, issues, concerns, and content, such initiatives are no longer considered legitimate for finalisation unless there has been a comprehensive round of public and stakeholder consultations. With the Internet and wide connectivity, the process of collecting and collating public opinion is further enabled. Governments at all levels and their departments do regularly engage professional support in drafting policy and, as a process, despite there being no particular mandate, do place it as a draft on their website for public feedback and suggestions. Government departments have also been receiving copious feedback which they consider carefully. They also undertake focused group discussions and, in some cases, seek opinions from other experts, academics, and occasionally even from international funding bodies.

The Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, has provided a model document in 2014, titled *Preparing a Comprehensive Mobility Plan (CMP): A Toolkit*. Annexure 2 of this document lists the multiple benefits of undertaking “stakeholder consultations.” It also goes on to identify relevant stakeholders in any typical urban transport-related policy to include not only representatives of various government departments and civic bodies but also professional experts, elected representatives, NGOs, private transport operators, and unions of auto and taxi drivers. In addition, it may be representative of public opinion to also consider taking feedback and opinions from the general public, neighbourhood communities, commuters, other transport mode operators, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), academic institutions, policy think tanks, and the research community, among other such stakeholders. This is especially important when undertaking policy or administrative measures that intensively impact public and user interfaces, such as enabling first/last mile connectivity, or decisions on densification and land use, or designing and implementing transit points, parking, or mobility plans. Policies and decisions arrived at after rounds of feedback

from a comprehensive list of stakeholders would help not only in making the process more effective but also in getting people to understand and accept the policies, and to expect them to eventually comply with them too (Ramesh and Suraj, 2021).

An aspect of local governance that is as crucial as stakeholder consultations is planning, which is the process of identifying certain goals and the methods of achieving them. The 74th Amendment to the Constitution, through Article 243ZE, seeks to respond to the need for a consistent urban and metropolitan planning process by providing for the formation of a Metropolitan Planning Committee (MPC) for every metropolitan area. Given the multiplicity of urban local bodies and the various services that they are to provide for the benefit of the people, it is hoped that the MPC will be able to integrate the efforts of various agencies in a planned and phased manner. To further supplement this constitutional effort, the Union Ministry of Urban Development has proposed certain Model Laws through the Urban Development Plan Formulation and Implementation (UDPFI) Guidelines for the States to enact laws to govern the establishment and conduct of the MPC within their respective jurisdictions. The Guidelines propose that the MPC should plan the policy priorities and resource requirements over different time periods and be responsible for preparing: (i) a Perspective Plan (for a period of 20–25 years); (ii) a Development Plan (for a period of 3–5 years); and (iii) an Annual Plan.

Based on the premise that local self-government needs to involve the representatives of the people in the process of planning, the Constitution mandates that two-thirds of the MPC shall be composed of elected representatives. These representatives are elected by, and from amongst, the elected members of the Municipal Corporation, Municipalities, and Chairpersons of the Panchayats, which are within the given Metropolitan area. The remaining share of membership can be determined by the State Government.

For instance, the Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Committee, headed by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, is usually composed of a total of 60 members, of whom 40 are elected representatives. The remaining 20 members are nominees of the State Government, and until some time back, these nominees included two MPs, two MLAs, eight senior bureaucrats of the State Government, and two urban experts among other ex-officio representatives. The question that we need to address is who represents the voice of the citizens, especially in such critical local bodies of planning? Are the elected representatives of different levels the only voice of the public? This appears to be the prevailing notion. However, the functional mandate of the MPC, as provided in the Constitution and enriched in the Model Law Guidelines of the Ministry of Urban Development, does envisage an active and regular consultation with the civil society formations which, unfortunately, are not represented in the composition of the MPC.

Furthermore, in the realm of urban governance, we have had various forms of legislation for several years laying down the decision-making processes, planning, and priorities for the municipal bodies. For instance, we can take the example of the city of Bengaluru, the capital city of the State of Karnataka, and a thriving city known for its good weather and Information Technology (IT) businesses and enabled services. There was the City of Bangalore Improvement Act, 1945, followed by the City of Bangalore Municipal Corporation Act, 1949, which was later replaced by the Karnataka Municipal Corporations Act, 1976, which was a common framework applicable to all Municipal Corporations across the State. Given that Bengaluru has emerged as “a major centre of economic activity,” and for “improving decentralization, integration of public participation at various levels of municipal governance and ensuring efficient decision making by the municipal authorities,” Bengaluru was given a dedicated legislation for its Municipal Corporation in December 2020. Titled the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike

Act, 2020 (Greater Bengaluru Metropolitan Corporation), this law provides a structure to comprehensively govern the Municipal Corporation of Bengaluru, on various aspects, including administrative structure, powers and functions, fiscal plans and sources of revenue, functioning of the Wards, accounts, and audit.

It has been recently reported that the State Government of Karnataka has tabled a Bill for new legislation to be titled “Greater Bengaluru Governance Act, 2024.” The preamble of this Bill states that the existing law of 2020 is inadequate to govern Bengaluru as it does not “address the fragmentation of governance in Bengaluru due to the multiplicity of civic agencies and lack of coordination among them,” and that, therefore, there is a need to establish the “Greater Bengaluru Authority” as an overarching body to coordinate and supervise municipal governance. This Bill also suggests that it shall empower Ward Committees to become “basic units of urban governance and facilitate community participation.” This Authority is proposed to be headed by the Chief Minister of the State Government and shall consist of 21 categories of members, of which 20 are in an ex-officio capacity, and predominantly consist of Ministers and administrative heads of para-statal bodies functioning across various aspects of urban governance. This may be necessary for the Authority to “discharge the role of coordinator among all the City Corporations and other agencies in the Greater Bengaluru Area.” However, the larger question of public participation and representation in urban governance persists. The true meaning of devolution is in the deeper extent of empowering the Panchayat and Municipal-level elected representatives, and in providing for citizens to be directly represented in the various bodies of local government. Whether it the political influence of elected representatives, or the empowered bureaucracy when elections are not held on time, both would work to the detriment of meaningful decentralisation (Nath, Suman, & Bhattacharya, 2022, p. 29). Direct representation may not necessarily mean that all views of

the public are given adequate attention, but the public being represented as an entitlement in itself is a legitimate commitment that we make to the working of democratic institutions and in upholding a republican form of governance.

Systemic and Procedural Reforms: Contractual and Regulatory Orientation

Local self-governance, as a concept, has always been viewed as an outcome of volunteerism and of collective and community action. While this may continue to be the underlying motivation, today we need to design institutions of local government in a manner that is dynamic, professional, and open to adopting innovative forms of governance. Today's institutions of local government must be adept at building collaborations and partnerships, often through long-term contracts. We need to build expertise not only in planning but also in regular monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement.

It would be useful to refer to the core principles that govern the concept of “public service,” for instance, in the realm of French Public Law. It has been stated that “public service is an activity in general interest, provided by a public or private actor and subject to a special legal regime requiring equality of treatment, adaptation to changing needs and security of supply, etc.” (Prosser, 2005, p. 103). Therefore, the relevant principles of public service, as also identified in France, can be summed up as being:

1. Equality of users of public services: Requires equality of access to public services for all citizens, and this is based on the concern to prevent discrimination on the basis of social status, and to also prevent any form of inequality between regions. A related value is referred to as “neutrality,” which seeks to remove any discrimination on the basis of political or religious beliefs.

2. **Adaptability of public service:** Aimed at achieving two objectives: firstly, to ensure the right of the citizens/consumers to receive services whose quality reflects the development of new forms of technology and responds to changing needs; and secondly, it also refers to the power of the Municipal government to modify the functioning of the public services as it thinks fit to meet new objectives.
3. **Continuity of public service:** An obligation to maintain the supply of a public utility without interruption and to the utmost satisfaction of the citizens/consumers.

Therefore, we need to design and empower local bodies to adopt regulatory practices and contractual modes of functioning towards be able to achieve the following (Suraj, 2011):

1. **Promote the welfare of the citizens:** By upholding a citizen rights-based approach, by securing prompt services, and by redressing any grievances of the citizens regarding public utilities and services.
2. **Purposive orientation of service providers at the level of local government:** By enforcing strict norms of quality through benchmarking and contracts, by building the capacity of service providers through certification and periodic assessment mechanisms, and by assuring opportunities to employ private investments towards enlarging the scope of public utilities being provided.
3. **Provide qualitative support to local governance:** By evolving and updating the norms and standards applicable to local government and related public services, and by consolidating “best practices” in the efficient delivery of public services across the different regions of the country.

Strengthening local government is possible only by providing the necessary independence for the Panchayats and Municipal bodies to grow as professional entities with suitable expertise and independent sources of revenue to sustain their governance efforts.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as “special purpose vehicles” for public service delivery across the world. The economic rates of return have made PPPs quite prevalent in the provision of physical infrastructure, such as, roads, bridges, airports, railways, warehouses, power, and renewable energy plants. Even in sectors like housing, tourism, health, and education, PPPs are now emerging as an economically symbiotic vehicle for social sector development. We are nowhere close to realising the benefits of PPPs at the local level, especially in urban governance, which has a much larger untapped economic potential to attract private investments. Local governments must prioritise building collaborative forms of engaging efficient private service providers. Whether it is electricity, solid waste management, water, network connectivity, schools, or health-care centres and hospitals, there is vast scope for partnerships to be built, based on strong contracts, for efficient public service delivery mechanisms. Legal and regulatory norms could be suitably modified and designed to address issues of local context. Established instruments of economic valuation of social capital formation do enable such collaborations to be undertaken based on a sophisticated understanding of returns over a longer period of time (Sriram and Suraj, 2023). It is neither subject to any philanthropic or charitable initiative of large enterprises, nor does it have to wait for a collective social movement to agitate to make a demand for such initiatives.

Decentralisation @ Next Level

Transformative Potential of E/M-Governance

Electronic governance (e-governance), or its more specific form mobile governance (m-governance), is now part of government at all levels and across regions. The advent of

artificial intelligence (AI) and its applications to various forms of public activities is a reality we need to accept and prepare for, considering its implications on governance. Technology has always been a multifaceted issue. The development of technology, its procurement, adoption and usage, training of staff, change management tools, maintenance, upgrading, and eventually citizen feedback and overhauling of the technology form the life cycle of technology in governance and its management. Obviously, technology has transformed the speed of governance and has considerably enhanced transparency and traceability of various processes of decision-making as part of public governance. We could also say that technology does play an important role in reducing the element of corruption and misuse of human discretion in governance.

We can also vouch for technology, especially thanks to the Internet and connectivity across the expanse of the nation, providing a medium for the expression of the voice of the public at a scale that was hitherto not even imaginable. Public communication has been tremendously strengthened by technology and its various modes of instantaneous dissemination of information. Disaster management and relief efforts, as was evident during the period of COVID-19 pandemic, have benefited immensely by the use of technology. Agriculture, and activities towards furthering its extension, is another area where technology has come about to play a very positive role in making governance deliver in tandem with public expectations. Aspirational levels of governance are today considered achievable owing to the rapid development and deployment of technology. E-procurement is an example of how technological prowess could transform traditional processes of governance. While there may be concerns that continue to plague certain aspects of e-procurement, nobody can deny that we have now taken a giant leap into a more transparent and verifiable method of procurement.

Data collection and analysis is another area of technology-driven transformation. Government at all levels is a repository

of an immense amount of citizen-related data. Subject to the emerging requirement of protecting privacy and safeguarding sensitive forms of data, government departments and agencies could very well harness technological tools, including AI, to draw upon aggregate forms of data and analyse it for policy formulation and effectiveness. Data analysis for policymaking must be viewed as a mandatory obligation of the government and not just as another activity that is lower down in the priority of day-to-day governance. Real-time data collection in local areas, and the potential of predictive analysis, form a great input to governance, just as it is viewed in the business world of analytics. While care must be taken that public welfare and benefits are treated with more attention to attributes of human dignity, equality, and sustainability, the government of today must not shy away from utilising readily available tools of data analytics.

Use of technology and tools of data analytics would effectively strengthen decentralised levels of government. Application and interventions as part of public governance are heavily dependent on accurate, verifiable, and updated data. Thanks to mobile telephony and related adoption of smart technology by people across different segments of society, it is imperative that local governments too keep pace with the aspirations of the governed to interact through digital platforms. Today, people typically own a mobile phone; usually undertake digital payments and banking; store digital copies of important documents and credentials; and wish to transact with the government and officials online. We may still have some time and distance to cover in terms of access to smart phones and high speeds of connectivity throughout the nation, but the governance processes need to be ready and prepared for this eventuality of “universal digital connectedness” that is not too far away in the future.

Trends in Public Administration and Public Management

For many decades now, literature, discussions, and experiences related to public administration confirm that enhancing people's participation in public governance is the future. Technology has emerged as a great tool for enabling such participation, at scale and quality. With the use of the prefix "new" in public administration and public management, there are traits and trends proposed to lead the traditional disciplines into the emerging frontiers of governance. The trends are not necessarily new, but they are indeed a reiteration of what ought to be the foundations of public administration. People's participation in public governance, representative nature of bureaucracy, citizen orientation in public policy, and achieving social equity in public administration are not values that have been discovered recently. These ought to form the basis of governments across the world. We are now made to realise the criticality of instilling these values as founding features of any form of government, especially at the local level.

We have to move beyond considering elections and elected representatives as the only means of public voice and participation in governance. Democracy needs elections to form and compose the legislature and executive parts of the government. However, we do have concerns about whether elections are indeed representative of people's expectations. As a part of a larger system, elections do keep the democratic flame burning, but we need to creatively look beyond elections to encourage a greater level of people's participation in local governance. Decentralisation and local governance require rejuvenation by involving people and their dynamic real-time choices as the leading determinants of local welfare policies, budgets, and any revisions. How often do we see citizens participating in deciding how much money needs to be spent on what form of welfare, or benefit, or infrastructure at the local level?

Porto Alegre, a city in Brazil, is credited with having introduced a form of “participatory budgeting” in 1989. With a population of 1.3 million at that time, the budgeting process was made more participatory to mobilise the poor to also be involved in the exercise and formulation of priorities for budget and expenditure. This process of participatory budgeting is said to have involved “three streams of meetings: neighbourhood assemblies; thematic assemblies; and meetings of delegates for citywide coordinating sessions (the Council of the Participatory Budget)” (Local Government Association, 2016). Meetings and discussions were held in public spaces and involved themes that were of a general nature, like setting criteria for the distribution of resources, whether on the basis of population, the extent of poverty, or any other measurement of need or shortage. It is said to have “brought those usually excluded from the political process into the heart of decision making, significantly increasing the power and influence of civil society and improving local people's lives through the more effective allocation of resources” (Local Government Association, 2016).

Not for a moment should we consider that this process is simple or easy to implement or replicate. Each city or region would certainly have its own limitations and challenges. The local government institutions and their leadership must be empowered to undertake such innovative measures of civic engagement and enable their involvement in essential activities of planning and budgeting. An area of emerging importance is that of grievance redressal. No system of governance can afford to overlook this essential part of public welfare and governance. Regular feedback and prompt redressal of grievances are, today, to be considered a mandatory part of any level of governance. Digital modes of grievance redressal facilitate this process considerably, and there is no excuse for local governments not to adopt the same. Public comments, feedback, and grievances can be collected in real time. Technology can suitably cluster several such sources of information and categorise them in a manner that is best suited for quick analysis and prompt action.

Social media accounts and handles, trending news stories, citizen blogs, and several such other modes and sources of information can be verified and form the basis for any purposive correction and further action. In addition, providing for a whistle-blower process, or any other form of grievance redressal mechanism, would comprehensively address any concerns that any citizen may have.

The clarion call of “Leave No One Behind” (LNOB) forms the basis for achieving the SDGs. Grievance redressal is a feature of public administration that cuts across all the goals identified by the members of the United Nations as a policy agenda for 2030. Collecting, analysing, responding to, and acting upon each and every comment, feedback, or grievance of the public shall have to be the responsibility of the government and its agencies. It shall be an effective form of participatory governance as well.

Conclusion

A truly democratic form of decentralisation is possible only by empowering local government and its institutions to become more *participatory* in their decision-making processes, such as planning and budgeting; more *professional* in their collaborations and service delivery, through private investments and enterprises; and more *promotive* of direct representation of the people’s voice through the effective use of technology. Institutions and processes of governance need to constantly adapt to the changing social and economic aspirations of the people being governed and also be vigilant about the rapid developments in technology. There is more inter-connectedness in issues of governance, involvement of multiple stakeholders, and layers of decision-making procedures that exercise authority.

Public administration and governance have indeed become far more complicated than what traditional notions have sought to address thus far. With the adoption of technology, the

redesign of institutions and processes, and the objective of reaching out to every person governed, local governments at the level of panchayats and municipal bodies shall be able to restore the primary power of governance to “*We, the people of India.*”

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