



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**BEYOND STRONG MAYORS: CASE
FOR MUNICIPAL AUTONOMY**

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BEYOND STRONG MAYORS: CASE FOR MUNICIPAL AUTONOMY

Context

- The subject of **municipal leadership in Indian cities** kept coming up in policy debates and there was a feeling that Indian cities, particularly the major metropolises, **needed a strong mayor**.

About Urban Local Governance in India

- Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)** are the **third tier of government in urban areas**, responsible for delivering essential civic services and facilitating local development.
- The **74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992** inserted **Part IX-A (Articles 243P–243ZG)** and the **Twelfth Schedule**, giving constitutional recognition to municipalities.
- The **Twelfth Schedule lists 18 functions**, including urban planning, regulation of land use, roads and bridges, water supply, public health and sanitation, solid-waste management, slum improvement and urban poverty alleviation.
- However, the Constitution largely leaves the **extent of devolution, finances and powers of mayors** to state legislation.

Evolution in India

- 1687:** Madras (now Chennai) established India's first municipal corporation.
- 1882:** Lord Ripon's Resolution promoted elected local self-government.
- 1957:** Balwantrai Mehta Committee strengthened the decentralisation debate.
- 1989: 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill** proposed constitutional status for local bodies but **failed in Rajya Sabha**.
- 1992–93:** The **73rd and 74th Amendments** constitutionally recognised rural and urban local governments respectively.
- Subsequent programmes such as **JNNURM, AMRUT and Smart Cities Mission** sought to improve urban infrastructure and governance.

Present Institutional Set-up of Urban Governance

- Under the Constitution, municipalities may take three forms:
 - ♦ **Nagar Panchayat** (transitional areas);
 - ♦ **Municipal Council** (smaller urban areas);
 - ♦ **Municipal Corporation** (larger urban areas).
- The **municipal council/corporation is the elected deliberative body**, while the executive administration is generally headed by a **Municipal Commissioner appointed by the state government**.
- The Mayor is elected according to state law and, in many States, has largely ceremonial or coordinating responsibilities.
- Thus, Indian cities often operate through a **dual structure**: elected councillors and a mayor on one side, and a state-appointed bureaucracy led by the commissioner on the other.

Why India Needs a Strong Mayor?

- The **Second Administrative Reforms Commission (SARC), Sixth Report on Local Governance**, argued that rapidly urbanising cities require **stable leadership, an enduring vision and democratic accountability**.

- It recommended:
 - ♦ a **directly elected mayor**, particularly for large cities;
 - ♦ a **five-year tenure**;
 - ♦ executive power vested in the mayor;
 - ♦ a mayoral cabinet drawn from councillors;
 - ♦ final mayoral authority over executive matters;
 - ♦ municipal corporations retaining checks through **budget approval, regulation-making, major policy decisions and oversight**;
 - ♦ an independent **Ombudsman** for accountability.
- A directly elected mayor can therefore provide a clear political mandate and make responsibility for urban outcomes more identifiable.

Related Issues & Challenges

- **Limited functional autonomy:** States frequently determine which functions ULBs perform and how they perform them. Even critical areas such as master planning may remain outside municipal control.
- **Fiscal dependence:** Municipalities have limited control over taxation and remain dependent on state transfers and grants.
- **Administrative dependence:** Commissioners and senior officials are state-appointed or deputed.
 - ♦ The provided context notes an **all-India average municipal commissioner tenure of only about 10 months**, undermining institutional continuity.
- **Weak mayoral authority:** The **Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act, 1998** recognises the mayor as a municipal authority but retains executive power with the state-appointed commissioner.
 - ♦ Similarly, **Sections 36–37 of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation Act** provide for election of the mayor by councillors and prescribe responsibilities largely centred on convening and presiding over Corporation meetings.
- **Accountability gaps:** The commissioner is primarily accountable upward to the state government, while the elected mayor is accountable to citizens.
 - ♦ It can produce friction rather than a unified chain of political and administrative responsibility.

Way Forward: From Strong Mayors to Strong Municipalities

- The reform agenda should move from merely **changing the occupant of the executive chair** to restructuring the institution itself.
- Implement the **74th Amendment in letter and spirit**, with genuine devolution of the 18 Twelfth Schedule functions.
- Give ULBs greater **functional, financial and administrative autonomy**.
- Ensure predictable municipal revenue through stronger own-source taxation and empowered State Finance Commissions.
- Provide **stable tenure** for municipal commissioners and professional municipal cadres.
- Clearly divide responsibilities between the **mayor, council and commissioner**.
- Strengthen metropolitan planning and coordination among municipalities, parastatals and development authorities.
- Establish robust **checks and balances, transparency, social accountability and independent municipal oversight**.

Conclusion

- India does need **strong political leadership in its cities**, but replacing a constrained commissioner with a constrained mayor will not cure institutional weakness.
- The real reform is to create **strong, autonomous, financially empowered and democratically accountable municipalities**.
- Only then can a strong mayor translate electoral legitimacy into effective urban governance.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, provided constitutional recognition to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), but failed to ensure their functional, financial and administrative autonomy. Critically examine.

Source: ORF Online

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