Concerns in Urban Local Governments

What is the issue?

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- It is quarter century since the creation of municipalities under 74th Constitutional Amendment Act.
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- It is imperative at this juncture to assess the progress of municipal governance in India.
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What are the concerns?

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- **Limitations** - Sates have fallen short of implementing the provisions of the 74th Amendment.
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- There are concerns in underlying constitutional design of urban local governments (ULGs).
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- Local governments are financially constrained.
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- They do not have the administrative capacity to carry out its functions.
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- ULGs are increasingly disempowered and depoliticised as an institution.
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- **Power** - The elected representatives at the city-level are rendered powerless.
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- In most municipal corporations, the mayor is largely the ceremonial head.
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- The executive powers are vested with the State government-appointed commissioner.
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- This disjuncture in municipal governance has been exploited by State governments.
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- **Parastatal agencies** - Various parastatal agencies are created by the State government.
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- These further deny municipal corporations their political role.
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- E.g. urban development authorities (building infrastructure), public corporations (water, electricity, transportation services, etc)
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- Even urban planning and land-use regulation is with State government-controlled development authorities.
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- These agencies function with certain autonomy.
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- Moreover they are accountable only to the State government, and not the local government.
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- Parastatal agencies and unelected commissioners are pre-74th Amendment legacies that have not been undone.
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- **Depoliticisation** - There is increasing depoliticisation of local government in recent years.
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- These seek to ring fence projects from local government.
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- E.g. Central government programmes such as the Smart Cities Mission.
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- This programme mandates the creation of special purpose vehicles (SPVs) for Smart Cities.
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- SPVs will have operational independence.
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- They will have autonomy in decision making and implementation.
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- State government can further delegate the decision-making powers available to the ULBs to the Chief Executive Officer of the SPV.
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- **Disempowerment** - Even for performing functions that are within its purview, local government requires State government permissions.
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- These include functions like levying local taxes or undertaking civic projects above a certain budget.
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- Municipalities are not yet autonomous units to be truly called as the “third tier” of government in India’s federal system.
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- The creation of parallel institutions further disempowers the elected local government.
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- It shows how higher levels of government distrust local politics.
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- **Functions** - Functions in 12th Schedule which a State government is expected to devolve to the local government should be relooked.
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- It does not include essential civic issues such as urban transportation, housing or urban commons.
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- **Civic activism** - This has often been focussed on the creation of two bodies mandated by the 74th Amendment.
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- They are the ward committees and metropolitan planning committees.
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- However, there is an over-reliance on such semi-representative bodies.
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- This does not augur well for creating a genuinely democratic city government.
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- Civil society’s emphasis on nominating its members into ward committees can further depoliticise local governments.
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- It could make them captive to the interests of certain elite resident welfare associations.
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- **Exceptions** - The 74th Amendment contains an industrial township exception.
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- A municipality need not be constituted in areas which are declared as industrial townships.
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- These provisions have been employed by State governments to keep local governments weak.
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- **Distribution** - The 73rd Amendment provides for three levels of panchayats at village, taluk, and district levels.
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- Unlike this, power in urban areas is concentrated in a single municipal body.
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- It could be the municipal corporation, municipal council or town panchayat.
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What is the way forward?

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- Local governments must be increasingly acknowledged as inherently political spaces.
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- The present model of urban governance vesting power in a singular municipality should be relooked.
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- Urban governance reforms should focus on political empowerment of local government that promotes local democratic accountability.
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Source: The Hindu

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