Empowering local bodies for effective urban governance

Why in News?

Recently heavy rains severely affected cities across Gujarat, and responses of local bodies have been commented.

What are Urban Local Bodies?

- **Urban local bodies (ULBs)** – These are the fundamental grass root democratic unit of urban governance in our cities.
- **Types** - Municipal Corporations, Municipalities, Nagar Panchayats.

The first municipal body was established in Madras in 1687, followed by Bombay and Calcutta.

- They are the first point of contact for citizens and are responsible for providing essential services such as waste management, sanitation, and urban planning.
- **Pre-colonial Governance** - Indian cities had informal governance structures that varied based on the city's primary activities, whether as trading hubs or religious (temple) towns.
- **Colonial Governance** - British established city level institutions such as improvement trusts to deal with the city's sanitation problems.

In 1882, Lord Ripon ,father of local self-government in India, introduced the resolution for local-self-governments, thereby laying the foundations of a democratically elected municipal government to manage cities.

- The improvement trusts were tasked with the responsibility of cleaning up the city and ensuring that epidemics were prevented.
- These trusts in Bombay or Calcutta were tasked to handle diseases like the plague by planning for wider streets, improving drainage systems and decongesting overcrowded housing.

Government of India Acts 1935 recognised the importance of local self-governments and they were treated under provincial or state subjects.

- **Post Independence** - 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 accorded constitutional recognition to ULBs as the third tier of governance, alongside the

central and state governments.

- **Constitutional Provision** - The Part IX-A , Article 243P – 243ZG, provides for the compositions, roles and responsibilities of these ULBs.
- **Functional Devolution** - The 12th Schedule of the constitution specifies 18 functions of ULBs ranging from urban planning and land use to public health and waste management.
- **Election** - Mandatory elections for every five years, with municipal councillors elected from local constituencies (wards).
- **Municipal Corporation Administration** - The elected(directly or indirectly) mayor serves as the ceremonial head, real executive power rests with the municipal commissioner, a state-appointed bureaucrat.

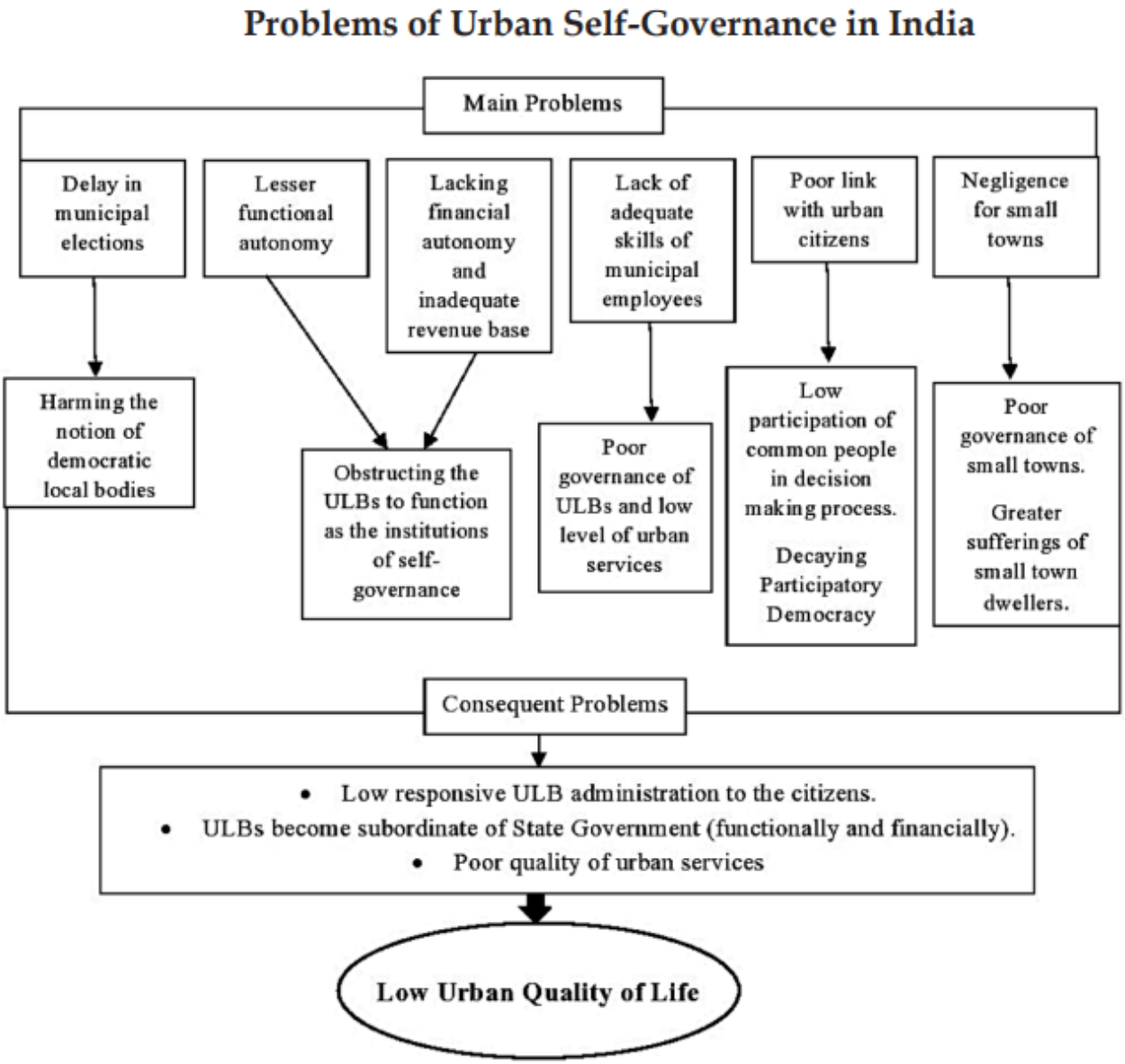
What are the significances of Local Bodies?

- Urban local bodies (ULBs) play a crucial role in the development and management of urban areas.
- **Deliver Essential Services** - ULBs are responsible for providing water supply, sanitation, drainage systems and waste management.
- **Protecting Public Health** - They ensure public health by managing waste collection and disposal, maintaining cleanliness, and providing urban primary healthcare facilities.
- **Providing Education -** ULBs often oversee the establishment and management of schools and educational institutions.
- **Social Welfare -** They implement social welfare programs to address the needs of vulnerable populations.
- **Urban Planning -** ULBs create and implement urban plans to guide development and ensure sustainable growth.
- **Land Use Regulation** - They regulate land use to prevent haphazard development and preserve green spaces.
- **Attracting Investment** - ULBs can create a conducive environment for businesses and attract investments by providing necessary infrastructure and services.
- **Managing Urbanization -** ULBs play a vital role in managing the challenges associated with rapid urbanization, such as housing shortages, traffic congestion, and pollution.
- **Climate Change -** They can implement measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change, such as promoting sustainable practices and improving disaster preparedness.

What are the issues in ULB governance ?

- **Constrained Political Autonomy** - More executive powers are entrusted to municipal commissioners than mayor leading to administrative overlaps, delayed decision-making.
- **Operational Dependency** – Inadequate devolution of functions to local bodies makes them depended on State governments devolves functions
- **State Interference** - State governments exert significant influence over city affairs and influence day-to-day functioning of ULBs, further diminishing the autonomy of local governance.

- This often leads to administrative overlaps, which reportedly delay decision-making, especially at a time of crisis.
- **Corruption -** Corruption can undermine the effectiveness of ULBs, diverting resources and hindering development.
- **Delay in Municipal Elections** - Despite the constitutional requisite to conduct elections every five years , in most of the states the local body elections are not conducted properly.
- **Inadequate Funding -** ULBs often suffer from insufficient funding, limiting their ability to provide essential services and infrastructure.
- A major source of municipal revenue is property taxes, with remaining funds coming from the state government.
- **Limited personnel -** ULBs often lack qualified personnel with the necessary skills and expertise to manage complex urban issues.
- There is one planner for 75,000 urban populations which is a low figure compared to other local governments globally.
- There are only 5,000 qualified town planners, and Indian cities would require at least 3 lakh town planners by 2031.



What steps can be taken to empower ULBs?

- Municipal governance reforms are needed for Indian cities to respond effectively to urban problems.
- Greater financial autonomy could enable ULBs to generate revenue and reduce dependence on state government funding.
- Enable ULBs to raise funds through pro-market measures such as bonds and securities or by levying user charges such as congestion charges, parking fees, etc.
- Innovative financial plans with diverse sources of income allow ULBs to be more flexible and creative to address their problems.
- Participatory budgets empower city residents to participate in deciding how their taxes can be effectively utilised.
- Upgrade technical expertise and state capacity by bringing in experts and personnel for improved service delivery.

Reference

[The Indian Express | Significance of Empowering Local Bodies]