

## 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?

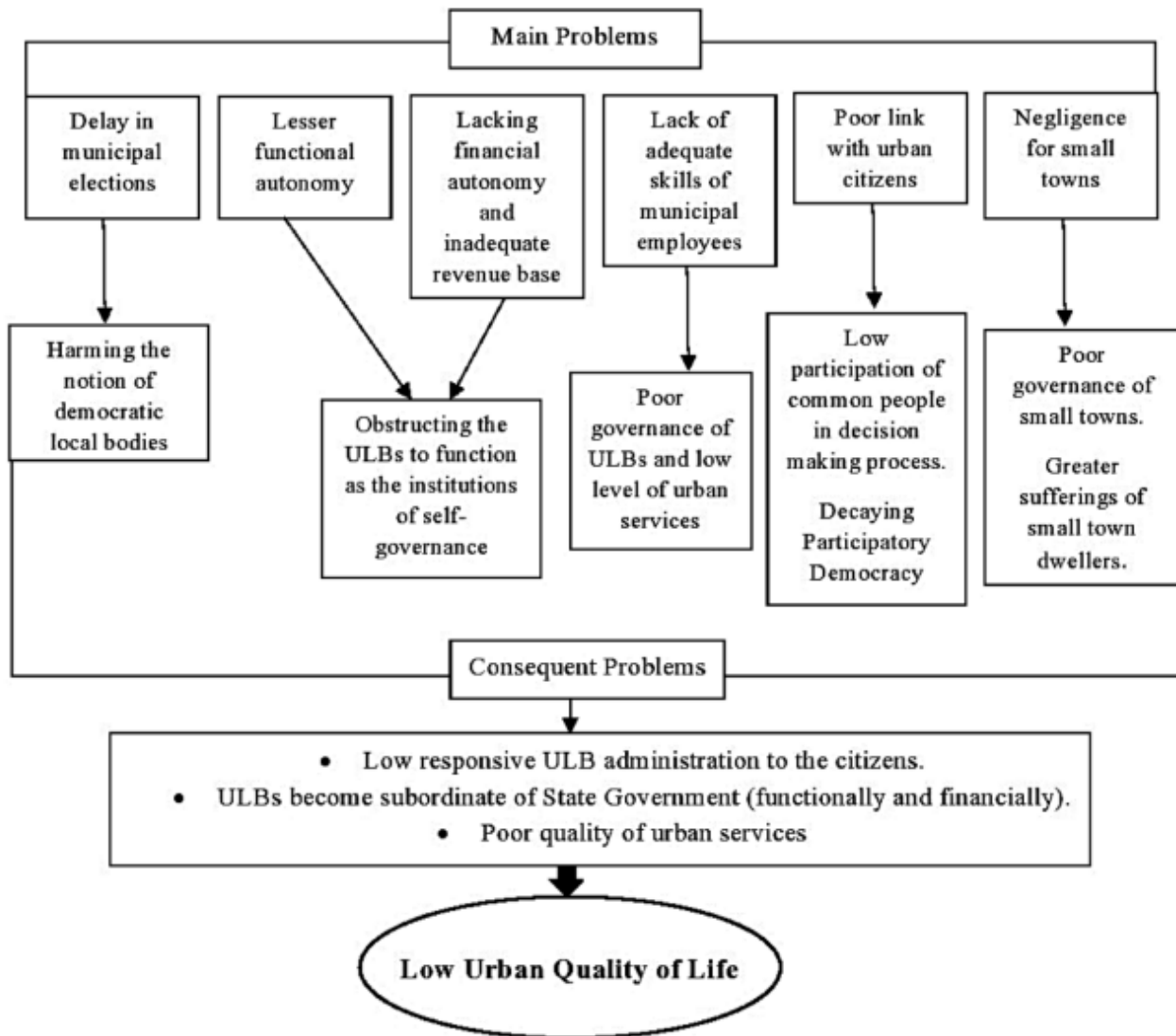
- Urban local bodies (ULBs) play a crucial role in the development and management of urban areas.
- **Deliver Essential Services** - ULBs are responsible for providing water supply, sanitation, drainage systems and waste management.
- **Protecting Public Health** - They ensure public health by managing 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.

## Problems of Urban Self-Governance in India



### 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

