



Grassroots democracy needs urgent attention

India's experiment with grassroots democracy, 30 years after mandating the creation of elected local government institutions, highlights the dangers of overcentralisation. To fix this, empowering local governments is crucial

In 2012, while surveying government primary schools in rural Bihar, I came across a unique government category — building-less schools. These were functional schools with a teacher and students, but classes were conducted under a tree as the schools awaited their building grant from the state capital. While documenting school functioning, we discovered that rather peculiarly, despite no physical building, these schools had utilised their annual maintenance grant to purchase fire safety equipment, though what they really needed were extra mats and teaching material. This wasn't corruption or even bureaucratic apathy. This was the outcome of administrative actions in a centralised system. You act based on orders received from the top, even if the actions have little relevance to

your reality, needs and citizen demands.

As India marks 30 years of the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments — mandating the creation of elected local government institutions at the municipal (urban) and *panchayat* level — I am reminded of these building-less, fire-safety-ready schools because their existence is emblematic both of the rationale for local governments (and, by extension, the glaring failures of an overcentralised system) and how elusive the goal of local governance remains due to the powerful impulse of centralisation that dominates our polity.

Bringing the government closer to the people in a manner that ensures citizens shape decision-making and hold the government accountable is the binding logic of decentralisation. But for local governments to function in this way, they need funds, functions and functionaries. The constitutional amendments in 1993 ensured the presence of a vibrant, competitive (though money and muscle dominate elections) political system at the grassroots; 3.2 million representatives are elected every five years, one third of whom are women. *Gram Sabhas* were mandated for citizens to participate in governance, thus expanding what sociologist Patrick Heller evocatively calls the "surface area of the state". In its scale and ambition, this is the world's most audacious experi-

ment in grassroots democracy.

However, their ability to perform constitutionally mandated functions has been sabotaged by the reluctance of state governments (with very few exceptions, notably Kerala) to empower them. Consider this: Local governments today account for a mere 3% of total government expenditure. Compare this with China, where the figure stands at 51%, and the United States, at 27%. Most states have refused to set up regular finance commissions — a critical institution responsible for allocation of financial and taxation powers to local governments. So much so that the 15th finance commission of the Government of India has made setting up finance commissions a condition for local governments to receive funds.

Thus, 30 years later, India faces a new reality. A highly competitive electoral space for local governments, where electoral legitimacy is entrenched, but with serious resource and capacity constraints. These limited resources have broken down the core accountability rationale of local governments. After all, voters are aware of their limited capacity to perform public service delivery functions. Thus, local elections are not about accountability for public services any more, but about power grabs that reproduce entrenched power structures. Consequently, the dominant narrative of local governments



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as dens of elite capture and corruption is legitimised. "Why should I give my scheme to those corrupt *panchayats*," a bureaucrat asked in a discussion with this author, to resounding applause from his colleagues.

At its core, decentralisation is about power-sharing. It is about arriving at a consensus on a fundamental governance question — what level of government should perform what level of function. This is not a straightforward administrative question. It is a deeply political act. It is the failure to navigate contradictions within our polity that has relegated local governments to the margins. India's experiment with local governance coincided with a deepening of India's federal politics in the 1990s as regional parties dominated state governments. Powerful chief ministers deftly aggregated power, running states and their political parties in a centralised, personalised manner. Rather than view local governments as political allies, they have positioned themselves in direct competition with them, seeking to bypass them by empowering parallel, unelected village institutions. This centralising culture pervades internal party structures. Barely any senior politicians at the state and national levels start their careers in local gov-

ernments. And in this reality lies the real political contradiction that decentralisation needs to confront: Can genuine administrative decentralisation co-exist with a culture of political centralisation?

Once Parliament passed the constitutional amendments and the hard work of building local governments began, champions of decentralisation assumed these political contradictions would be resolved through administrative action. The big push was on activity mapping (allocating functions) and training. Thirty years on, the cause of decentralisation needs a different political effort led by local elected representatives and citizens. After all, no chief minister, even in today's era of political centralisation, can stay quiet if the Government of India failed to set up the finance commission. As concerns over the state of India's democracy grow, the battle for democratic local governments is even more urgent. Only when citizens can have governments that are responsive to their local needs over Delhi's desire for fire extinguishers can true democracy thrive.

Yamini Aiyar is president of CPR
The views expressed are personal