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 over-centralisation. To fix this, empowering local governments is crucial.

In 2012, while surveying government primary schools in rural Bihār, 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 panchayati (rural) level—I am reminded of these building-less, fire-safety-equipped schools because their existence is emblematic both of the rationale for local governments (and, by extension, the glaring failures of an over-centralised 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 functional institutions.

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. Greater Sheba was mandated for citizens to participate in this, expanding what sociologist Patrick Heller executively calls the “surface area of the state.” In its scale and ambition, this is the world’s most audacious experiment 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 the local governments today account for a mere 3% of total government expenditure. Compare this with China, where the figure stands at 5%, and the United States, at 27%. Most states have refused to set up regular finance commissions, a condition that the government should ensure is met. This is a glaring failure of the Finance Commission, the body that sets the rules for local government funding.

As concerns over the state of democracy grow, the battle for democratic local governments is even more urgent.

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