Grassroots Democracy – Part 3
Local Government in Urban Areas

CHAPTER 12

> *I desire that ... a full-fledged local body should be immediately formed, ... so that people may know really what is an administration, what are the franchise, what are the powers, what are the rights and what are the privileges in a small sphere, in their own town, in their own villages.*
>
> *— Rustom K. Sidhwa, Member, Constituent Assembly*
> *(during the Constituent Assembly Debates, 13 October 1949)*

Fig. 12.1. The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (originally 'Bombay Municipal Corporation') was created in 1865.



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The Big Questions ?

1. *What are urban local bodies and what are their functions?*
2. *Why are they important in governance and democracy?*

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Introduction



Earlier chapters have shown us how, in a democracy, good governance aims to empower the citizens so they may actively participate in their country's functioning, whether it is at the rural, regional, urban, state or national level. This is the broader concept of **participatory democracy**.

We saw the basics of the system in a rural context. Let us now see how it works in an urban scenario. Since the latter is generally more complex and diverse than the former, it is understandable that the urban governance system needs to be more complex too. We will however limit ourselves here to its basic principles.

LET'S EXPLORE



→ Why is a city like Kolkata, Chennai or Mumbai more complex and diverse than a village or a town?

→ With your classmates, make a list of diverse communities residing in any city that you are familiar with. How many were you able to list? What else do you observe in the list?

Before we explore governance and administration in urban areas, it helps to take an overall look at the Indian system of governance, from rural to national, as depicted in Fig. 12.2 on page 175. The base of the pyramid is the local level, closer to the people, while the top is the national level. In Chapter 11, we explored the left side of the pyramid; we will now take a look at the right side.

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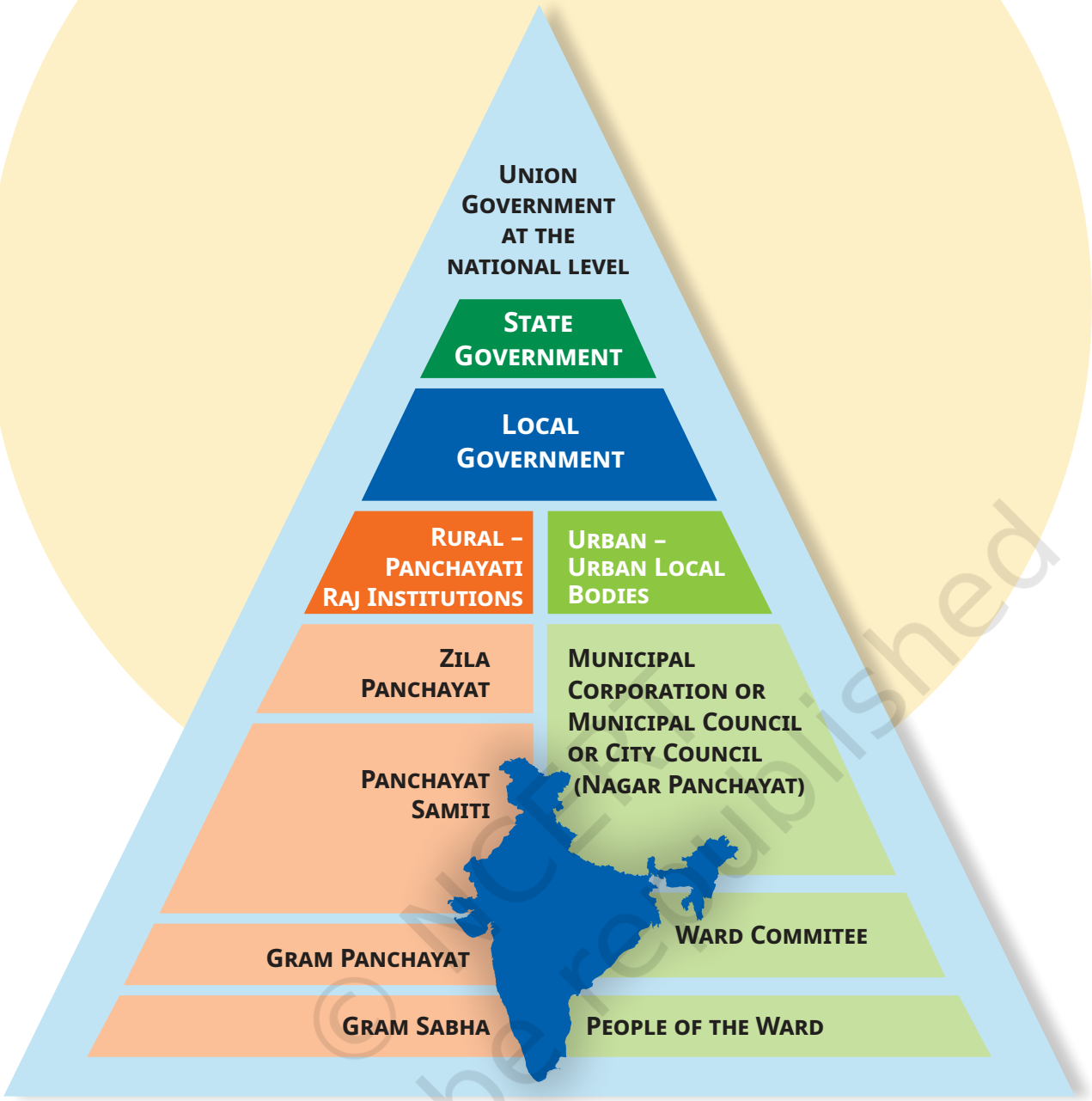


Fig. 12.2

LET'S EXPLORE



In Fig. 12.2 above, what similarities and differences do you notice between the Panchayati Raj system and the urban local government?

Urban Local Bodies

Local government structures in urban areas are called 'urban local bodies'. They are decentralised, which means that instead of operating under a central authority at the

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top, the local communities have a direct say on how their areas are managed or the issues they face. It is a mechanism for citizens living in an area to come together and take decisions about what is best for them.

Cities and towns are divided into smaller units called 'wards', and the ward committees facilitate activities such as conducting health camps, organising a campaign against the use of single-use plastics, and so on. They also keep an eye on anything that might go wrong — a water leak, a blocked drain, a damaged road, etc. — and report such problems to the authorities. However, the precise functioning of wards differs from State to State, depending on the rules they make.



Altogether, urban local bodies are responsible for a range of functions — helping take care of the infrastructure, maintaining the burial ground, garbage collection and disposal, checking the implementation of government schemes, collecting local taxes and fines, and so on. They also have some role in planning for the area's economic and social development. However, for these bodies to be

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able to perform their functions efficiently, people living in the city must also perform their duties, which means that they must show care and concern for their area (remember, this is a **participatory** democracy). For instance, if people carefully follow instructions regarding waste segregation, garbage collection becomes easier; or if they notice a water leakage in a street, reporting it promptly will prevent further wastage of precious water.

LET'S EXPLORE

Can you think of four or five more actions that responsible citizens might take to help their area of the city?



Fig. 12.3. The Madras Corporation

The Madras Corporation (now Greater Chennai Corporation), established on 29 September 1688, is the oldest municipal institution in India. The East India Company issued a charter the previous year constituting the town of 'Fort St. George' and all territories within 16 km from the Fort into a corporation. A Parliamentary Act of 1792 gave the Madras Corporation power to levy municipal taxes in the city, which is when the municipal administration properly began.

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SERVICES UNDER THE INDORE MUNICIPAL CORPORATION



PROPERTY TAX



WATER CHARGES



SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT



BUSINESS, HOARDINGS, TRADE LICENSES



CRM* — MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE



CRM — FIRE SERVICES



CRM — VARIOUS LICENSES



CRM — WATER TANKER, DEBRIS CLEARANCE



TREE CUTTING & TREE TRANSPORTATION



CRM — GRIEVANCES

CRM — SERVICES ON REQUEST



Water Tanker



Septic Tanker



Auditorium



Funeral Van



Mobile Toilet



Ambulance

**CRM: Citizen Relationship Management.*

(The list of services offered by the Indore Municipal Corporation is simplified here.)

Fig. 12.4. Services under the Indore Municipal Corporation

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THINK ABOUT IT

Indore in Madhya Pradesh has been awarded the cleanest city in India under the *Swachh Survekshan* government scheme for seven years in a row. What could have been the role of Indore citizens in this achievement?

As we see, Chennai and Indore have a Municipal Corporation at the top of their urban bodies. Only cities with a population above 10 lakhs have a Municipal Corporation (also called 'Mahanagar Nigam') as their highest body. Between 1 and 10 lakhs, the highest body is a Municipal Council (also called 'Nagar Palika'). Cities and towns with smaller populations have a Nagar Panchayat.

LET'S EXPLORE



- → Select a few cities, from your State and from a few neighbouring States. These may include the city you live in or the city nearest to your town or village. How will you find out if they have a Nagar Panchayat, Municipal Council or Municipal Corporation? Draw a table with the names of the cities and the type of urban local body each of them has.
- → How do urban local bodies fund their activities? *(Hint: Look carefully at the pictures of the functions performed by Indore Municipal Corporation in Figure 12.4 on page 178.)* Are some of them paid services?

Sameer: Hello! I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new to this village?

Anita: Hello! Yes, I'm visiting my grandparents who live nearby. I am from the city. It's quite different from here!

Sameer: Oh, really? What's it like in the city?



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Anita: Well, it's busy and crowded, with tall buildings everywhere. There are so many people rushing around all the time, and it's noisy compared to the quietness here. Also, people are more independent and often don't even know their neighbours.

Sameer: Wow! Here, everyone knows everyone else and pitches in to help each other out — we work together in the fields, celebrate festivals together, and even make decisions as a community.



Anita: Well, there's still some sense of community in the city. Just the other day, following heavy rains, a house collapsed two streets away. Dozens of people gathered from all over the place to help clear the rubble and make sure no one was trapped inside.

Sameer: Doesn't the local government help in such cases?

Anita: Yes, it does. In fact, we have local bodies and elected representatives who represent us and our interests.

Sameer: Well, it sounds like our village Panchayat, only bigger. Members are elected, too, but because they all know each other, a lot more people can participate and discuss all kinds of issues that concern the village. Sometimes, even us kids can get heard.

Anita: Really? You are not making that up?



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Sameer: Not at all! The other day a few kids noticed that an electricity wire was hanging dangerously low, almost touching the roof of a building. Not only did we report it, but we explained to one of our Gram Sabha members that an electric post should be shifted a little. And it was done!

Anita: Great! I suppose that's how democracy should work. It seems more complicated in the city, but the idea is the same — everyone's voice matters.

Sameer: Yes, it does! Sorry, I must make a move. My mother needs my help for a little shopping. Thanks for telling me about the city.

Anita: And thanks for telling me about your village! I am definitely going to look around.

Sameer: Well, maybe we'll meet again sometime. Bye!

Before we move on ...



- → In urban areas, decentralised governance works through different urban local bodies, which fulfil various functions affecting the citizens' lives.
- → As with the rural context, urban local bodies have elected members who represent the local citizens.
- → The citizens also have duties to ensure that the local bodies are able to perform their functions efficiently.

Questions, activities and projects

1. On your way to school, you and your friends notice that a water pipe is leaking. A lot of water is being wasted on account of the leak. What would you and your friends do in such a situation?
2. Invite a member of an urban local body near you to your class. Discuss with them their role and responsibilities. Prepare a set of questions to ask them so that the meeting is fruitful.

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3. Discuss with adult members of your family and neighbourhood, and make a list of their expectations from the urban local bodies.
4. Make a list of characteristics of a good urban local body.
5. What are the similarities and differences between the Panchayati Raj system in rural areas and the urban local bodies?

Noodles

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*'Noodles' is our abbreviation for 'Notes and Doodles'!

