

## STRENGTHENING GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Devolution of Powers & Finances up to Local Levels and Challenges therein - Panchayats & Municipalities

“The importance of local bodies cannot be discounted, especially in the context of their role in the public delivery of services.” Symbols of independent candidates of local body elections being painted in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu. G. Karthikeyan

It's been more than two decades since the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments were passed by Parliament, which accorded constitutional status to local administration bodies across India. Yet, the Tamil Nadu government delayed holding rural local body elections, due in 2016, by three years. This unconstitutional delay started when the Madras High Court cancelled the notification put forward by the State government citing irregularities in it. The reasons cited for subsequent postponements revolved around delimitation and carving out new districts.

After resorting to the infamous ordinance route to extend the tenure of the Special Officers of local bodies and some back and forth on the means of electing mayors and municipal chairmen, the State will now see elections being held for rural local bodies alone in two phases on December 27 and 30. The elections to urban local bodies are expected to be notified soon, which in itself raises questions on the constitutional and moral validity of the time gap between rural and urban local body elections. This piece attempts to situate the implications of the delay in the conduct of elections to make a case for the significance of local bodies in the domains of efficacy, inclusiveness, participation and strength of political party structures.

While discussions are abuzz on the political reasons and prevalent allegations over the delay, it would be pertinent to touch upon a few indicators on the performance of the State in local governance. The Devolution Report 2015-16, put together by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, for the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj, ranks Tamil Nadu well across parameters pertaining to policy formulation and practice, barring a few misses in the practice front and in devolution of functions. The relatively lower rank (9th) in 'Infrastructure Governance and Practice' parameter on the practice front hints at mishaps and acts of corruption, which in turn are often attributed to interference of the political class. However, when one looks at the ranks concerning 'policy adjusted with practice', the State stands at the 4th position hinting at a positive image overall.

Criticisms of bureaucratic hassles and delays apart, the importance of local bodies cannot be discounted, especially in the context of their role in the public delivery of services such as the Public Distribution System, pension schemes, and mitigation of disease outbreaks and disasters. While the ranks secured by the State are signifiers of the outcomes, primarily highlighting the efficacy in delivery of services to the public today, scholars argue that decentralisation and people's participation increased in the State since the 1970s, thanks to the sociopolitical movements in the State. At this juncture, the presence of a robust machinery at the local level is a measure of the health of democracy and people's participation. Its absence is bound to have an immense effect. It is in this context that the criticism on the government's laxity in holding the elections needs to be registered.

On the question of inclusiveness, in February 2016, a few months before the notification for local body elections was put forward, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly unanimously passed the much-needed bill that accorded 50% reservation to women in the local bodies, raising the quota from 33%. Moreover, reservations are in place for the depressed castes. A delay, therefore, has social justice ramifications too, a principle central to the sociopolitical history of Tamil Nadu.

Local body elections serve as a means to both strengthen political parties' organisational structures and in enabling them to stay closely connected with the voters. The numerous opportunities in terms of official posts that open up through local body elections serve as an opportunity for political parties to give a chance to party workers from multiple backgrounds to partake in government functioning. Narendra Subramanian, a Professor of Political Science at McGill University, argues that such broad-based accommodation results in 'organisational pluralism', wherein, with intra-party pluralism, a given party's engagement with society changes its orientation towards an atmosphere of tolerance. Put otherwise, in a diverse society like Tamil Nadu, one can argue that the presence of local bodies serves as a means to usher in societal syncretism through broad-based representation. On another note, local bodies provide opportunities for the emergence of leaders at the local level outside of political parties as well.

On the aspect of parties' organisational structures, it would not be surprising to note the relatively higher enthusiasm shown by the Dravidian parties, i.e., the DMK and the AIADMK (the patent differences between the two parties notwithstanding), more than the smaller parties like the Makkal Needhi Maiam, which decided to not participate in the impending elections. The enthusiasm to partake in the local body elections among the Dravidian parties is not extensive, however, owing to the timing of the elections, with the Assembly elections due to be held in early 2021. The resources that elections of late warrant and the fatigue stemming out of fighting elections continually since 2016, especially in the backdrop of stiff competition between the Dravidian parties and the competition posed by the smaller parties, are factors that one cannot overlook. That said, given the benefits accruing from partaking in the elections, it is not surprising that the Dravidian parties are not stepping away from participation.

Taking stock of the multifarious benefits stemming out of the existence and functioning of local bodies to all the stakeholders involved, the need for sterner fixing of accountability and instituting checks in the system to avoid any delays in the time ahead is only more urgent.

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