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Historical Development of Local Self-Government in India

Aadil Ahmad Shairgojri

[1] *Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Govt. Degree College, Ramban, Jammu and Kashmir, India.*

*** Corresponding Author:**

Aadil Ahmad Shairgojri
Email: darshowkat41@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

India's tradition of self-governance has grown over the years since political and constitutional changes have taken place. In this article, a historical perspective on local self-government from the village assemblies of ancient India to the institutions created after independence is provided. It discusses the structure and role of local governments in the Vedic, Mauryan and Gupta eras and explains the modifications made under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. The study also examines the changes in local administration under British rule, focussing on Lord Ripon's Resolution on Local Self-Government (1882), Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907–1909) and the Government of India Act 1935 which affected subsequent changes in administration. The article also explores the nature of the local self-governance after 1950 and the impact of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments passed in 1992 that provided constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. The study, based on historical accounts, a constitution, government reports and scholarly writing, suggests that the current system of local governance in India is the result of an evolutionary process of local institutions over a long period, and is not an administrative novelty.

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INTRODUCTION

Self-government has always been a crucial part of the administration in India for over two millennia. It has evolved in the history of interaction of indigenous institutions, successive political regimes and constitutional reforms. The current dispensation of local governance is rooted in the Constitution of India and the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, however, the concept of decentralised administration is not a recent phenomenon as it has been in practice for several centuries. Under the various political systems village communities, administrative institutions, and local administration bodies have played vital roles in collecting revenue, administration of justice, community welfare, and upkeep of public infrastructure. The development of these institutions has shown that Indian local governance has been the process of continuity and adaptation rather than an innovation in administration. The earliest evidence of local self-government is seen in the Vedic literature with Village communities recognised as basic units of administration. The Rigveda mentions the assemblies like Sabha and Samiti, in local assemblies, members engaged in public debating and gave advice to rulers on various matters of the community (Sharma, 2005). Under the rule of the Mauryan Empire (c. 322-185 BCE), Kautilya's Arthashastra outlines an administrative system that had a well-defined hierarchy, with villages being the lowest rung. The village administration was supervised by the Gramika who was charged with maintaining law and order, collecting revenue, taking care of land records, and enforcing royal orders. In spite of the central government's authority, the villagers have a lot of responsibility to run the affairs of their village, especially in agriculture, irrigation and dispute settlement (Kautilya, trans.). Olivelle, 2013).

During the Gupta era (ca. 320-550 CE), local institutions gained more autonomy in the land administration, irrigation and settlement of civil conflicts functions of the village council. Village administration in southern India was in a state of high institutionalization during the Chola period (c. 850-1279 CE). Detailed evidence of an organised system of local governance comes from inscriptions in Uttaramerur in present-day Tamil Nadu, dating from the reign of Parantaka I (c. 919–921 CE). They are inscriptions that describe how village assemblies (Ur and Sabha) worked, the qualifications to be a member of the assembly, committee-based administration and the Kudavolai system of electing representatives by means of a lottery system. Committees were responsible for irrigation, gardens, public works, taxation and administration of the temples, and were an early form of local administration several centuries before representative local government in Europe (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955).

Village communities remained in place for running the rural administration in the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) and the Mughal Empire (1526-1707) but central control was increased. The Village officers like Muqaddam, Patwari and Chowkidar had key administrative roles in relation to the collection of village's revenue, farming records and security. The importance of these institutions in revenue reform introduced by Raja Todar Mal was recognised by the Mughal emperors, especially Akbar (1556-1605). While the centralisation of administrative power took place, local institutions remained with the basic functions of administering within their respective communities (Habib, 1999). Local self-government system was established during the British Rule. In the wake of the Revolt of 1857, the administration was increasingly reforming to acknowledge the need for decentralisation. On 18 May 1882, Lord Ripon issued his resolution on Local Self-Government which captured the essence of modern local government in India by proposing elected local governments, non-official representation and increased local administration. Further transfer of administrative functions to local authorities was recommended by the Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907-1909) and local self-governance was put under the provincial governments as a transferred subject by Government of India Act, 1919. The Government of India Act 1935 further empowered the provinces to give greater autonomy to the elected provincial governments for further reform in local administration (Maheshwari, 2003).

On attaining independence, the Constitution of India accorded importance to decentralised governance in Article 40 which states that the State shall provide for the organisation of village panchayats as units of self-governance. Initially the authority and financial resources of local institutions were reliant on the state governments, however. Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended a three tier Panchayati Raj system, which was implemented in Rajasthan with a modern Panchayati Raj system on 2nd October 1959 at Nagaur followed by Andhra Pradesh. The 73rd (24 April 1993) and 74th (1 June 1993) Constitution Amendments had a decisive impact on the constitution. These amendments introduced Part IX and Part IX-A of the Constitution, gave Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies the status of Constitution, fixed regular elections at five years interval, reserved seats for the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and also reserved at least one-third of seats for the women and created State Finance Commissions and State Election Commissions. In the present times India has over 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats and over 31 lakh elected representatives which makes it one of the world's largest system of democratic local governance (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024).

Review of Literature

The historical development of local self-government in India has received considerable scholarly attention from historians, political scientists and public administration scholars. Early studies have primarily examined the evolution of village institutions, while later research has focused on constitutional reforms, democratic decentralisation and grassroots governance. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri (1955) provided one of the earliest detailed accounts of village administration under the Cholas, demonstrating the organisational sophistication of local assemblies and committee-based administration in South India. R. S. Sharma (2005) examined village communities in ancient India, explaining their role in land administration, revenue collection and local dispute resolution. Romila Thapar (2002) analysed the administrative structures of early India and argued that local institutions functioned within broader political systems while retaining considerable autonomy. S. R. Maheshwari (2003) traced the evolution of local administration from the colonial period to independent India, emphasising the significance of Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882 and subsequent administrative reforms. George Mathew (1994) examined the transformation of Panchayati Raj following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, assessing its contribution to democratic participation and decentralised governance. B. L. Fadia (2020) discussed the constitutional framework governing Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, with particular attention to their administrative and financial functions. While these studies provide substantial insights into specific historical periods and constitutional developments, comparatively few examine the complete historical evolution of local self-government from ancient institutions to the contemporary constitutional framework. This article addresses that gap by presenting a comprehensive historical analysis of the continuity and transformation of local self-government in India.

Research Objectives

1. **To examine** the historical evolution of local self-government in India from the ancient period to the post-independence era, identifying the major administrative institutions and reforms.
2. **To analyse** the continuity and transformation of local self-government, assessing the influence of historical administrative traditions on contemporary local governance.
3. **To evaluate** the significance of constitutional reforms, particularly the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, in strengthening democratic decentralisation and local self-government in India.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research methodology based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include ancient texts, constitutional provisions, government reports, committee reports and legislative documents, while secondary sources comprise books, peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly publications on Indian administrative history. A descriptive and analytical approach has been employed to examine the evolution of local self-government across different historical periods and to assess its contribution to contemporary decentralised governance in India.

Major Institutions and Administrative Developments

The history of local self-government in India is a long one, which has been influenced by the political system, administrative reforms and constitutional changes. The present structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies has constitutional legitimacy in the Indian Constitution, however, the roots of local governance can be found in the ancient village communities that had a high degree of autonomy in managing their local affairs. The local institutions experienced marked change, yet they played a crucial role in the administration and community life across the ancient, medieval, colonial and post independence period. The earliest traces of local self-governments in India can be traced to the Vedic period (c. 1500–600 BCE). The Rigveda mentions assemblies like Sabha and Samiti which deliberated matters in the public and gave advice to the rulers about the welfare of the community. The village (Gram) was the smallest administrative unit and was run by a village headman called Gramani. They had functions associated with dispute settlement, maintenance of public order and supervision of agricultural activities, indicating an organised system of local administration (Sharma, 2005).

Under the Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) administration became more organized at the local level. According to Kautilya's Arthashastra, there was a hierarchy in the administration, with villages being the lowest administrative unit. The Gramika became the village administrator and was in charge of revenue collection, keeping village records, carrying out royal instructions and maintaining justice and order. A higher authority of the group of villages was the Gopa and the Sthanika, who ensured the coordination between local authorities and the central government. The Mauryan state had a high level of central control, but the village communities were responsible for running local resources and agricultural production (Kautilya, trans.) Olivelle, 2013). There was more decentralisation under the Gupta Empire (c. 320-550 CE). Village councils had more powers in land management, irrigation, taxation and over the settlement of local disputes. Village communities got more involved in governance, as administrative functions were more transferred to local institutions via land grants and local bodies. During this time, the tradition of "community-based administration" that had been sustained in many parts of India continued (Thapar, 2002).

Chola dyanasty is the most advanced system of local self-government of ancient India in South India (c.850-1279 CE). The Uttaramerur inscriptions dating to Parantaka I (c. 919-921 CE) give detailed information about the organisation of the village administration. Villa assemblies like the Sabha in the Brahmindeya villages and the Ur in non-Brahmin villages were responsible for the administration of local affairs through the administration of special committees on irrigation, garden, public works, finance and temple administration. The members were chosen by lot from lots in pots filled with palm-leaf ballots, known as Kudavolai. The inscriptions also gave delineations of the qualifications of office, fixed terms of office and stipulated rules of disqualification in the event of misconduct, and there is evidence of a highly developed system of local government (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955). The village institutions remained in place in the rural areas even after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) which brought a more centralised administrative system. The village administration continued with the assistance of the officials like Muqaddam (village headman), Patwari (record keeper) and Chowkidar (watchman). These officials were in charge of collecting revenues, keeping records of agricultural activities and ensuring local security. Village panchayats, which remained in existence to settle civil conflicts and oversee community affairs, also continued to do so in customary manner (Satish Chandra, 2007).

These institutions were continued in the Mughal Empire (1526-1707) and their administrative control was enhanced. The revenue reforms of Emperor Akbar, which were followed by the measurement of land, the assessment of the crops and the collection of tax, based on the description of the structure of villages, relied on the village officials for these purposes. Panchayats continued to play an active role in resolving conflicts, keeping public utilities and organising community activities. Local institutions continued to have their own administrative functions due to the knowledge that they had regarding local circumstances and agriculture (Habib, 1999) though the Mughal administration had a greater central authority with the help of the Provincial Governors and the District officials.

The concept of local self-governance during the Colonial Period.

British administration brought a series of legislative and administrative changes that changed the local administration. At first the East India Company centralised administration and power in the hands of district officers and revenue officers, and gave minimal autonomy to the local institutions. The costs of administration of the public schools, however, increased and the need for public participation led to the introduction of decentralisation in the nineteenth century. Lord Ripon's Resolution on Local Self-Government, of 18 May 1882, was the most important. This Resolution was described as the beginning of modern local self-government in India, it called for the creation of local boards having elected non-official members, and more autonomy and financial independence in local administration, while lessening government control. It saw local bodies not just as revenue collection bodies but also as tools for political education and administrative efficiency (Maheshwari, 2003).

The Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907-1909) called for an increase of the power and finances of local institutions. These recommendations had an impact on the Government of India Act 1919, where local autonomy was given to the provinces under Dyarchy. The Government of India Act of 1935 also granted additional powers to the provinces, which were to be governed by elected provincial governments, to enhance the powers of the municipal government and district boards as per the local needs (Arora & Goyal, 2018). Following India's independence in 1947, the democratic government system was introduced, which emphasised good governance at the local level as a critical factor for national development. The Directive Principles of State Policy includes Article 40 which calls upon the State to establish village panchayats and confer upon them the powers they require to become units of self-governance. Several states during 1950s and 1960s had adopted Panchayati Raj institutions but their constitution and efficacy varied greatly. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) had suggested a three-level system of Panchayati Raj, which consists of the three tiers – Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad. The first modern Panchayati Raj system was started in Rajasthan on 2 October 1959 in Nagaur followed by Andhra Pradesh. Later committees, such as Ashok Mehta Committee (1978), G. V. K. Rao Committee (1985) and L. M. Singhvi Committee (1986) called for constitutional recognition and more autonomy for the local bodies.

Influence on Contemporary Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies

The establishment of local self-governance in India is an example of institutional continuity and administrative change. The institutional structure set up after independence has been fundamentally different from the previous system of governance, but a number of administrative traditions have been inherited from ancient and medieval India that are reflected in the organisation and functioning of present-day Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). Concurrently, political reforms have changed the goal of local governance to shift from hereditary leadership and state control to democratic representation, constitutional accountability and participatory development. The village is one of the things which have been unchanged more than any other, namely the basic unit of local administration. In ancient India, the village (Gram) was considered the building block of governance, with the village assembly taking part in the governance and overseeing local issues, resolving conflicts, and supervising agriculture. The Gramika undertook the administration of the village and the higher levels of administration, like the Gopa and Sthanika, managed the administration of groups of villages. The Gupta Period saw a further increase in the powers of village councils, especially in the field of land administration, irrigation and local tax. These early institutions laid the groundwork for the later idea that local issues should be handled by locally organised administrative units that are familiar with their local conditions (Kautilya, trans.)". Olivelle, 2013; Sharma, 2005).

In addition to this, the Chola government in South India continued the process of self-government with the creation of well-defined village assemblies, the Sabha and the Ur. The Uttaramerur inscriptions from the 10th century CE refer to irrigation, gardens, public works, finance and temple administration which were in the hands of committees. These committees were divided on the basis of qualifications, had fixed terms of office and specific duties. In spite of the constitutional and democratic structure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the electoral system of the municipal bodies, the committee system in operation in the Gram Panchayats and the Municipal Bodies is of similar nature and follows the same principle as the committee system in the traditional administration of Gram Panchayats, namely, the delegation of responsibilities to specialised committees so that the work can be carried out more efficiently and in a way that involves the people. (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955) The medieval period brought new centralisation with other local institutions remaining intact. The village administration was carried out by the Muqaddam, Patwari and Chowkidar, who carried out their duties as before during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Panchayats were still the ones to solve local issues, record the village's actions and govern the people's activities as per the local traditions. These local officials were key to the administration of Mughal revenues, performing roles in land measurement, crop assessment and tax collection. Such a tradition of establishing local institutions within a larger administrative structure is continued in contemporary India as Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies work under the aegis of the Union and State governments, having control over local development and civic administration (Habib, 1999; Satish Chandra, 2007).

British rule changed the nature of local self-government with the establishment of statutory institutions and elected local government. The recognition of local administration as a means of administrative efficiency and public participation was given by the Lord Ripon Resolution on Local Self-Government (1882). The Resolution proposed elected non-official members, more financial autonomy and less government involvement in the administration. The responsibilities of municipal bodies and district boards were gradually extended from then on, as a result of various other reform steps which were implemented such as the Royal Commission on Decentralisation (1907-1909), Government of India Act 1919, and the Government of India Act 1935.

These institutions were still subject to colonial rule, but laid the foundation for the modern local government system (Maheshwari 2003).

The most dramatic change, however, happened since independence when local self-governance was constitutionally guaranteed. The State was mandated by Art. 40 of the Constitution to establish a system of self-governance in the villages, but in reality little real decentralisation was possible until the implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992. These amendments added the Part IX and Part IX-A in the Constitution under which Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies have constitutional status. They institute regular elections every five years, reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and at least one-third of seats for women, State Election Commissions and State Finance Commissions, which substituted administrative discretion with constitutional guarantees (Constitution of India, 1950). The modern-day Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are a mix of continuities and changes. The three level system of Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad is an extension of the system of multi-level local administration, which has been followed in the country for centuries, and also includes the democratic feature of direct election of representatives. Likewise, Urban Local Bodies, including Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats carry out activities that traditionally form a part of the urban local authority's functions, including sanitation, water supply, public health, roads, street lighting and urban planning. But these are now done by constitutional means, statutory laws and financial controls, not by traditional or hereditary power (Fadia, 2020).

Administrative involvement has also been considerably transformed. In ancient village assemblies, the right to participate was sometimes limited by ownership, or by a caste or social class. Local government, on the other hand is a modern government based on universal adult suffrage and constitutional equality. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has set aside at least one-third of all seats and chairperson positions for women (under Article 243D) and many states have raised this to 50 per cent. The reservation is also provided for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes on their proportion in the population, which further ensures a greater participation of the historically underrepresented groups in the political process. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj revealed that women now make up over 46 per cent of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, making India one of the largest instances of women's participation in local democratic governance (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024). Continuity and change are also demonstrated through financial administration. Local institutions in the past relied mainly on local taxes, land taxes and community contributions. Modern Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies get their funds from local tax, grants-in-aid from Union and State government, recommendations of State Finance Commissions and transfers from the Finance Commission as per Article 280 of the Constitution. Even though there are constitutional safeguards, financial dependency of higher level governments is one of the main issues that pose challenge to the effective functioning of local institutions (Arora & Goyal, 2018).

Contribution of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments to Local Governance

The 73rd Amendment and 74th Amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1992 was a turning point in the history of local autonomy in India. Prior to these amendments, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) operated under state laws and were very uneven in terms of their structure, powers and effectiveness. Several local governments were plagued by irregular elections, lack of finances, and too much state government control. The changes aimed at having a uniform and constitutional structure that would enhance democracy, increase civic engagement and aid public service delivery. Concurrently, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (24 April 1993) and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (1 June 1993) gave constitutional status to rural and urban local government respectively. Part IX (Articles 243-243O) was inserted in the Constitution by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and Eleventh Schedule was added to the Constitution, which lists 29 subjects that can be delegated to Panchayati Raj Institutions. These are the subjects such as agriculture, minor irrigation, rural housing, drinking water, rural electrisation, poverty alleviation programmes, health, education and social welfare. The amendment introduced the three tier Panchayati Raj structure, comprising of the Gram Panchayat (village level), Panchayat Samiti (intermediate level), and the Zila Parishad (district level) in states having a population of over two million. This set up established a sound institutional foundation for decentralised governance in the country and gave states the discretion to enact laws on administrative arrangements (Constitution of India 1950).

Part IX-A (Articles 243P-243ZG) of the Constitution was added with the 74th Constitutional Amendment and the Twelfth Schedule was added to the Constitution which assigned 18 Functions to Urban

Local Bodies. The functions are urban planning, land use control, water supply, sanitation, solid waste management, public health, fire services, urban forestry, slum improvement and poverty alleviation. The amendment acknowledged three types of urban local bodies: Municipal Corporations for large cities and towns, Municipal Councils for smaller towns and Nagar Panchayats (transitional bodies between rural and urban administration). The amendment granted urban governance constitutional recognition, thus empowering the municipalities to address the challenges that rapid urbanisation and population growth had thrown at them (Fadia, 2020).

Institutionalisation of democratic decentralisation has been a significant achievement of both amendments. Local governments must conduct elections every five years to maintain representative government. It is the duty of the local body to hold fresh elections where it is dissolved prior to the expiration of its term provided that this must ordinarily be within six months. The amendments also created State Election Commissions under Articles 243K and 243ZA with the mandate of conducting free and fair elections for Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These measures minimised the chances of sustained state government administration and enhanced the democratic mandate of local institutions (Basu, 2023). The amendments had massive implications for political participation as they added additional constitutional clauses for reservation. Article 243D provides for reservation of seats for the SCs and STs based on their population and not less than one-third of all seats including the chairpersons' posts for women. The same is true for Urban Local Bodies as per Article 243T. Some of the states have raised the reservation percentage for women to 50 per cent by passing state laws and these include Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and Odisha. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2024) reported that over 46 per cent of elected representatives in Panchayats are female, making India one of the largest instances of women's engagement in local democratic governance. Such constitutional provisions have expanded political inclusion and allowed for more engagement of previously under-represented communities in shaping local decision-making.

Another significant aspect of the constitutional reforms is financial decentralisation. The amendments provide for the creation of a State Finance Commission at every five years in all states, under Article 243I and Article 243Y, to examine the finances of local institutions and to make recommendations for financial principles to be observed between state governments and the local institutions. Under state law, local governments have authority to impose, raise and enforce some taxes, duties, tolls and fees. Further, there are grants to enhance local governance under Article 280 in accordance with the recommendations of the Finance Commission of India. While these constitutional provisions have been in place, the financial independence of Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipalities is still quite variable across states, with many relying heavily on grants from the Union and State governments (Arora & Goyal, 2018). Administrative accountability and planning at the local level has also been enhanced by the amendments. Constitutional recognition was accorded to the Gram Sabha, which has all the registered voters within a village, as the basis of participatory democracy in rural areas under Article 243A. The Gram Sabha adopts plans of development, keeps an eye on the implementation of welfare schemes and ensures transparency in local administration. The District Planning Committees provided for in Article 243ZD incorporate plans for rural development into plans for urban development, and the Metropolitan Planning Committees provided for in Article 243ZE prepare coordinated plans for the development of metropolitan regions. These institutions encourage coordination between different levels of government and improve the planning process for local development.

The constitutional reforms have played an important role in promoting local governance in India. The nation boasts over 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats and over 31 lakh elected representatives, forming one of the world's largest networks of elected local government (ELG), according to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2024). These institutions have a major responsibility in the implementation of programmes covering rural employment, housing, sanitation, drinking water, health, education and poverty alleviation. ULBs also have vital roles on urban infrastructure, waste management, public health and municipal services. They are now in a stronger position in the constitutional sense, and have enhanced governance continuity and institutional stability. The effectiveness of local government, however, is still hampered by a number of issues. Administrative and financial devolution varies significantly across states since the devolution of functions, finances and personnel is still subject to state law and political will. There is a shortage of trained administrative staff members in many local bodies, limited revenue generation and a delay in the transfer of financial resources. It often leads to poor administrative efficiency in the urban context where overlapping responsibilities are present between municipalities, development authorities and state agencies.

CONCLUSION

The process of evolution of local government in India shows that local governments have undergone continuous change and were influenced by the political system, administrative changes and constitutional changes. Local institutions, though with different degrees of powers and structures, persisted throughout the governance of the village assemblies during the Vedic period, the organised local administration under Mauryan and Chola monarchs, adaptations under the Delhi sultanate and the Mughal and the British rule. These were some of the historical traditions that formed the administrative pillars on which a decentralised administration was built for independent India. With the Constitution of India and the introduction of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, local self-government came into existence as a constitutional and democratic institution. These reforms empowered Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies by providing for regular elections, increasing political representation through quotas, measures for decentralisation of finances and administration, and increasing the role of the public in local governance and decision-making. They also enhanced the role of local governments in planning and implementing development programmes.

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