A medical self-help group in Kanipur was inspired by the recent election of a significant number of women to the village council.

REUTERS/PARTH SANYAL

The ideal of village democracy is one thing: implementing it is another

Cities and villages in India push for greater powers

BY RASHME SEHGAL

MUMBAI, INDIA'S LARGEST URBAN AND FINANCIAL CENTRE with a population of more than 14 million, ground to a halt during the rainy season on July 26, 2005. In the city formerly known as Bombay, unprecedented flooding surged through several of its most densely populated districts. Even Mumbai International Airport was forced to shut down for the next two days.

Mumbai is not alone in having to cope with such problems. Indian cities have experienced exponential growth, and today there are more than 60 cities with populations greater than one million people. Such rapid expansion has meant growth of unplanned neighbourhoods with a high concentration of the poor. Shelter is the major problem of the urban poor and most municipal corporations are trying to address this issue, especially as the majority of residents are younger than 18. Council members complain of a lack of adequate financing and a corrupt bureaucracy in a number of cities. When councillors try to take action in some areas, they find themselves in conflict with the state or central governments, which share certain powers in municipal areas under the Indian constitution.

The floods in Mumbai, which left 600 dead and millions of rupees worth of property destroyed, came from the Mithi River that empties into the Arabian Sea. The floods were triggered by massive construction projects on both sides of the river, that shrank its flood plain and forced rain water to flow onto city streets.

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With India's federal system, to prevent or even reduce the damage from future floods, the Mumbai administration first needed to win support from the state of Maharashtra. In many cases, the central government in New Delhi also gets involved in municipal affairs. Municipalities receive funding directly and indirectly from both the state and central government. To carry out a plan to reduce flooding, Mumbai needed infrastructure projects that were beyond the city's resources. To fund the plan, Mumbai asked for financing from two federal ministries: the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Urban Development.

Floods continued to inundate the city in 2006 and 2007. Mumbai Mayor Shubha Raul has had to persuade all city council members to agree to several long-term measures to halt the flooding of the river.

One way to do this, Raul said, is to remove major obstructions that are blocking the natural flow of the river. Slum-dwellers on both sides of the river are being dissuaded from dumping sewage and garbage into the water, she said. One easy first step is to make the city plastic-free.

"I have launched a huge drive to stop the use of plastic bags in the city," Raul said. "The Mithi River is (full of) plastic waste. I am also keen to upgrade the slum rehabilitation program so that we can make Mumbai slum-free by 2020."

This, she concedes, is easier said than done, considering that more than 6 million Mumbai residents live in slums. "We are working towards this objective … we can certainly accomplish our objectives if we have the requisite political will," Raul said.

The Maharashtra state government has created a slum rehabilitation program for Mumbai with a target of providing new housing for every slum dweller in the city. The plan offers private companies the rights to develop part of the land in return for building new housing units for slum dwellers.

Political support does not come easily. In this case, there are different political parties or coalitions in power in the municipal, state and central governments. As well, municipal corporations operate directly under the jurisdiction of state governments, which have the power to overrule decisions. Mumbai and Delhi, each with 14 million residents, have state governments that are run by different political parties from those of the city councils. In addition, there are 19 towns in the National Capital Territory of Delhi plus suburbs which extend into the states of Haryana and Uttar Pradhesh. The city councils of many of these municipalities are also controlled by different political parties.

The mayors of both these key metropolitan areas are women. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution required that one-third of the seats on city and village councils be reserved for women elected to the councils – a revolutionary step. The two amendments also devolved greater powers to the local bodies.

Defanging the mayor

However, in Delhi, Mayor Aarti Mehra accuses the state government of having steadily encroached upon the powers of the municipality. "They want to leave us a toothless body. The 74th amendment ensures that municipal corporations be vested with absolute power, but that does not happen (in reality)," Mehra said.

"The Delhi state administration has very mischievously taken away some of our key portfolios," she added, in describing how the maintenance of key roads has been placed under the Federal Ministry of Urban Development.

Heading the Municipal Corporation of Delhi is similar to administering a small nation that extends over 1,453 square kilometres and has 150,000 employees working for it, with an annual budget of 35,000 million rupees (about US$880 million). The municipal corporation is responsible for the repair and maintenance of roads, the supply of water, sanitation and sewage disposal services, as well as the rural outskirts of the city. Ms. Mehra's council is the largest of three within the National Capital Territory, the other two being the New Delhi Municipal Council and the Delhi Cantonment Board.

The job of mayor should make Mehra a powerful woman, but she has her problems. The other municipalities are under the control of the federal government and are administered either by federal bureaucrats (in the New Delhi Municipal Corporation) or army officers (in the Delhi Cantonment Board.)

The development of roads and highways is crucial for Delhi, which is an industrial and commercial hub surrounded by satellite towns like Gurgaon and Faridabad, located in neighbouring Haryana state, and Noida and Ghaziabad, which belong to the state of Uttar Pradesh. People commute daily between Delhi and these satellite towns which provide both employment and housing. Traffic management becomes a critical issue with roads frequently choked during peak hours. In the greater Delhi region, mayors often feel as if they are walking a tightrope between their own municipality and the federal government.

REUTERS/PUNIT PARANJPE

Monsoon rains in Mubai flooded homes, submerged rail lines and forced hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets in June 2005.

Rotating mayors

In many municipal councils, the practice of rotating the mayor's chair each year often leaves little time for individual mayors to implement new programs.

A city of more than 200,000 can have its own municipality. In most cities in India, after the election of city council members, the councillors gather to elect one of their number as mayor during their first meeting. Every municipality enjoys a five-year term for its councillors, but in some municipalities the mayoral duties are rotated each year. In Delhi, it was decided to elect a female mayor for one year, a candidate from the "untouchables" category for the next year and then for the remaining three years to elect two different candidates from the general category, either male or female.

"One year is just too short a period to initiate any kind of meaningful reform. During the first eight months of my mayorship, I initiated payment of housing taxes online to stop needless paperwork. I have also taken steps to make the city greener. But by next March, I will have to step down," said Mehra.

In India, municipalities are responsible for maintaining roads, collecting local property taxes, maintaining parks, collecting garbage, and managing water supply and sewage disposal. They share responsibility with the state and central governments in the areas of health, education and welfare.

The largest part of municipal revenues comes from property taxes. This is not sufficient to pay for all city services and staff, so the cities also receive transfer payments from the central and

state governments. These two orders of government both contribute to paying for education, health and welfare facilities in municipalities. The central government, with matching funds from the states, recently launched the huge Nehru Urban Renewal Program to provide funds for infrastructure development in cities.

Seats reserved for women

The situation is equally difficult for municipalities at the village level. When one-third of all village council seats were reserved for women a decade ago, more than one million women were elected to village councils, called *panchayats*. Separate quotas were also established at that time for socially marginalized groups, including those castes and tribes that are granted special status under the Indian Constitution.

India's *panchayats* go back centuries, if not millennia. The culture of these councils is quite different from that of large cities. The central government in New Delhi even has a "Minister of Panchayati Raj," who is concerned solely with village affairs.

In the village of Chuttumail Doks on the India-Pakistan border, the government primary school was not operating and the dropout rate for children studying up to grade seven was so high that the school-age population was down to 17. A 40-member Village Education Committee made up of panchayat members and parents decided to take matters into their own hands. Every villager was asked to pay 10 rupees per month to build up a small fund to be used to hire additional teachers and purchase computers for the school. The result was a dramatic rise in school enrolment, which rose to 85 children. Neighbouring districts now want similar education committees to be set up in their villages.

Digging wells

Political parties dominate both village *panchayat* and municipal corporation elections. Candidates are selected according to their political affiliations, with huge amounts of money spent on these elections. Yet despite the diversion of politics, there were significant non-partisan efforts, in many cases spearheaded by the women, transforming the landscape of their villages by digging wells and installing hand pumps, building roads and public toilets, and also facilitating the building of schools and community centres.

Mayors and city council members are demanding greater autonomy. At present, they complain that they are facing increasing pressure from not being able to carry out projects that would help their cities. *Panchayat* experts believe that, except for Kerala, most state governments have not devolved power to the *panchayats*, the majority of whom are now working only in poverty alleviation programs, and not in other key areas that should have been given to them following the passage of the Panchayati Raj Amendment.

India's experiments with grassroots democracy and local self governance are coming of age. Slowly but surely, ordinary citizens in big cities and small villages are learning to wield political power, and use it effectively and responsibly to improve their own lives as well as the lives of those in the communities around them.

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within the state, or out of it. Diadema, the "ugly duckling" of the industrial south side, perhaps had less to lose, but it also had less to fight with. At the same time, starting in the mid-1990s, mayors faced severe budgetary constraints under a public-sector squeeze imposed by the federal government to end hyperinflation that had plagued Brazil since the mid-1980s.

"Cities faced new challenges, partly because of the new reality of the Brazilian economy, but also because of the new world economic order," the mayor said. "We had to start fighting for economic development within the context of globalization that was more and more hostile, more and more competitive." That meant working more efficiently, reducing costs and creating attractive conditions for new investment.

Escaping urban decay

Using a special team of policy advisers, Filippi – mayor in 1993-96 and again in 2001-08 – has managed to escape the low-revenue, low-investment trap, boosting tax revenue and spending the new funds in ways that attract further investment. Industrial output rose seven per cent in 2006 and another four per cent in 2007, after falling for eight straight years. The municipal budget is up 70 per cent in real terms from 2001, to a projected 2008 level of about US$270 million. His key measures include:

- Urban violence: In 1999, the municipality had the highest murder rate of the São Paulo metro region, at 109 per 100,000 population. The murder rate fell 59 per cent, thanks to a 2002 decree forcing all bars to close at 11 p.m. – a measure that sparked widespread interest in other cities.
- Urban development: Diadema built three large flood control reservoirs to catch water from heavy rains. This allowed development of low-lying areas, one of which attracted a major industrial investor who is now the city's largest single taxpayer.
- Urban renewal: New sidewalks, public lighting, street repair, litter bins, park benches and flower beds help create a more pleasant environment, which in turn becomes a safer environment, including for investors. "We make small revolutions – three years ago, one neighbourhood had 40 small commercial establishments, now it has 250. That's a lot of investment in small business, shops and services, and consequently a bigger tax base. This is a direct consequence of urban renewal," the mayor said.
- Creative incentives: Diadema shunned simple tax breaks, but offered reduced land taxes for investors who increased payments of other taxes.
- Social spending: Infant mortality declined to 12.9 per 1,000 births in 2006 from 85 in 1983 – improving from double the state average to slightly better than average.

"The best investment any mayor can make is in social programs," Filippi said. In Diadema, innovation by municipal leaders has made real improvements. For rural municipalities like Altamira to make comparable gains, a stronger role for local municipalities in joint planning with the state and federal governments could allow such local innovations to begin.