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The objective of the society is to contribute through research, to the understanding and implementation of a process of long run, sustainable and equitable development in developing countries like India. Equity as we understand it, extends across time and class and gender. One way of meeting our objectives is by providing inputs through our research into ongoing debates in society on matters of policy priority by collecting and analyzing information and presenting scenarios on different options that face the public.

An area in which CBPS has made a contribution is in the context of the ongoing process of democratization and decentralization following upon the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution. In this context, CBPS analyses budgets of different government bodies as important statements of policy priority. A report based on the study of Zillah Panchayats, formally released by the governor of Karnataka, her Excellency Smt. Rama Devi on July 4 2000, is being used in programmes of the government to orient those who have been newly elected to local government bodies. CBPS has contributed to the resource pool of the Planning commission on understanding the nature of the local economy. This is also being used as a tool to support planning and decision making at the local levels of governance. In addition, CBPS has made its contributions in studying Reproductive and Child Health services, drinking water schemes; water shed development, municipal finances and joint forest management to see how local bodies can contribute to the meeting of national objectives.

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Local Self Government in Colonial India: Self- Government by Natives and the Development of Municipal Institutions

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About the Author

Arkaja Singh works in public administration reform and urban governance as a development professional. She studied to be a lawyer at the National Law School of India University in Bangalore, and started out as a legal associate at a commercial law firm in Delhi. However, within a few years she left to do a masters degree in London, and has since worked on a number of research studies and governance projects in various parts of India. Of this, she spent three years working mainly with Gwalior Municipal Corporation as part of a DFID urban poverty and municipal governance project. Arkaja is interested in the politics, motivations, influences that drive public institutions, and relatedly, in the historical processes that lead to this over time.

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Foreword

After ten years of research and advocacy in the field of decentralization, we at CBPS, conducted an open peer review of our work in 2009. Based on the feedback and insights received during the seminar, we are now implementing a longer term programme in which we provide research based support to policy debates. This paper by Arkaja Singh is part of this larger research programme of CBPS.

We are grateful to Arkaja Singh, a development practitioner based in Delhi, for accepting our request to work on the larger theme of decentralization. Arkaja Singh started her career as a lawyer but later on switched to studying urban poverty and municipal administration. With her rich experience in urban governance and her background in law, she has succinctly traced the evolution of urban local self governments in India. Arkaja Singh's paper brings out the need for further work on the history of urban decentralization in India prior to independence and its links to subsequent influence on decentralization and devolution processes. We hope Arkaja's paper enriches the debates on the subject, and leads to new insights for both research and policy.

M. S. Ramaprasad
Secretary

Local Self Government in Colonial India: Self- Government by Natives and the Development of Municipal Institutions

- *Arhaja Singh*

Introduction

Decentralisation efforts in colonial India are, in popular perception, just an eyewash, without any real political authority, and that too for the instrumental purpose of raising local taxes to pay for the maintenance of civic services. Or so it has been summarily dismissed by Indian historians and politicians of independent India. Ironically, many politicians newly independent India had gained their early political experience in municipal affairs, where they had sharpened the municipal council debates with nationalist rhetoric. To a study of municipal institutions in colonial India, this class of municipal councillors was a culmination of a process that had modest beginnings in the early colonial towns.

In the colonial period the fundamental premise of participation in municipal government was quite different from what it is now. Participation was limited to municipal rate payers and electoral representation was organised around ethnic and social categories. Yet municipal bodies in colonial India were animated by a fundamental tension between the colonial state (provincial and district administrations) and the local 'self-government' bodies. Provincial and district administrators sought to control the political aspirations of municipal bodies, but at the same time were restrained from interference by government policy which sought to advance the space for

native political participation. The extent to which municipal committees were to be politically viable was a live question for colonial government because they were explicitly charged with the purpose of mentoring native political leadership and ameliorating the causes of political dissent in India, while at the same time reinforcing the structure of colonial rule by directing native political aspirations towards 'constructive' forms of political decentralisation.

Yet the mentoring project was always fraught with contradictions, especially after middle class Indian politicians grew in stature and positions hardened with the National Movement. It was these circumstances that brought an interesting dynamic of 'us' and 'them' to the municipal bodies, where the locally elected municipal leaders represented Indian political aspiration while the district collectors and provincial governments were entirely colonial. The challenge that this represented helped increase the level of political competition and activism around the municipal bodies, drawing in leaders with ambitious ideas who have been credited with energetic municipal improvements on the one hand, accompanied with strident articulations of municipal political identity. As the sphere of municipal politics became more active and new middle classes emerged in urban Indian society, participation that was earlier limited to the propertied elite now grew to include professional men and new middle classes. Municipal institutions were one of few venues where any form of sharing of power (and schooling for political participation) could take place, and so it ended up being the forum in which several variations of the relationship between higher and lower tiers of government were road-tested. This paper explores this fraught yet productive relationship even while recognising that the social base of municipal institutions remained narrow and elite.

Local ‘Self-Government’ – History of Sharing Power

The first urban local bodies of India were set up from 1688 onwards in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. At the time, about Calcutta it was said that “The city was little better than an undrained swamp, surrounded by malarious jungle and pervaded by a pestilential miasma”¹, which suggests that the impetus for creating a local authority might have come from the fact that urbanisation of the Presidency towns had created problems of civic management. But from early on it was also clear that local self-government was part of a policy to share power with Indians in the management of the towns and cities of colonial India. In 1687, the Court of Directors (of the East India Company) directed administrators of Madras Presidency to:

“(...) contrive a form of a Corporation to be established, of the Natives mixed with some English freemen, for aught we know some public use might be made thereof; and we might give the members some privileges and pre-eminences by Charter under our seal, that might please them (as all men are naturally with a little power); and we might make a public advantage of them, without abating any part of our dominion when we please to exert it.”²

The Court of Directors suggested that the body be made up of “the heads of several castes, being made Aldermen and some others Burgesses, with power to choose out of themselves yearly their Mayor (...)”³. As guidance the Directors sent a copy of the charter granted by the King to the Borough of

¹ S. W. Goode, *Municipal Calcutta: Its Institutions in their Origin and Growth*, 1916, intro.

² S. V. (ed.) Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 15.

³ Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947*.

Portsmouth (in Britain), but left Madras administrators free to make alterations and differences as they thought fit.

Quite some time elapsed between the setting up of municipal bodies in the Presidency towns and the extension of this practice to other urban centres in British India. By the mid-nineteenth century the colonial ambitions of the Company had scaled up, and this was reflected in the Govt of India Act of 1850, which provided a mandate for the setting up of municipal institutions all over British India. This was followed by provincial legislation and the gradual setting up of town committees in towns and cities across India. Local Company officials were left some discretion to see whether conditions were fit for decentralisation as there was no absolute mandate or imperative contained in the 1950 legislation. For the next fifty years or so, there were a series of steps that consolidated and built upon the institution of local government. Financial decentralisation, the ‘elective principle’ as it was called then, and the functional role of local government bodies were extended during this period.

The term commonly used at the time for this decentralisation was “local self-government”⁴, which was unique in the sense that while the form and nature of the institution was borrowed from Britain and elsewhere in Europe, it was simply called local government in these places. In the context in which it was used in India it had specific reference to the sharing of power between colonial government and native resident, as also the fact

⁴ The terminology of the time can be confusing: the government of a Presidency or British India province was the “Local Government”, while elected local bodies were “local self-government”. The term “decentralisation” was used to refer to any form of devolution of power, including devolutions from Calcutta headquarters to Provincial Governments, and in turn from Provincial governments to district authorities. Municipal councillors were referred to as ‘members of the municipal board’. In this paper present-day terms have been used as far as possible, and where this was not possible explanatory notes have been provided.

that it was the first attempt at sharing power between colonial government and private residents.

In 1882 came Governor General Lord Ripon's famous minute, which was widely referred to as the point of origin of modern local democracy in India. It was not actually the point of origin, because local self-government was well underway by this time, but what the famous Government of India Resolution on local self-government did was to clearly enunciate the logic of decentralisation, making the 'political education' and co-option of Indians central to the project of local self-government. Accordingly, the resolution stated that: "It is not, primarily, with a view to improvement in administration that this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly desirable as an instrument of political and popular education."⁵ At another place it observed that "The task of administration is yearly becoming more onerous as the country progresses in civilisation and material prosperity." So even though even though there might be failures and inefficiency that follow immediately after devolution, long term the interests of British administration would be better served by decentralisation for: "As education advances there is rapidly growing up all over the country an intelligent class of public spirited men, who it is not only bad policy, but a sheer waste of power to fail to utilise."⁶

In response to the claim that previous efforts at local self-government had not been entirely successful, Ripon noted that mostly previous attempts have been overridden by official interference, and that in the few cases where "real responsibility has been thrown upon local bodies and real power entrusted to them, the results have been very gratifying." In his resolution, Ripon (the Governor General in Council) laid down guidance principles

⁵ Ibid., 369-371

⁶ Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947*

for taking this project forward, though actual decisions were left to provincial governments. It was suggested that members of the local bodies should be selected by election wherever possible and that control of the provincial government over local bodies should be "exercised from without rather than from within." By this it was meant that the government should have the power to revise and check the acts of local bodies, but not dictate to them. Firstly, executive authorities of provincial and district administration should retain power of control over matters such as sanctioning of loans, imposing new taxes or over matters that affected religious questions or public peace. The provincial government should also have power to set aside proceedings of the municipal board in particular cases or even suspend the municipal board in cases of gross and continued neglect of important duties. However, for the exercise of these powers by the district administration there was no need for the chief executive officer of the towns (the Collector or equivalent official) to be the Chairman or even a member of the municipal board. Instead, the "Governor General in Council would be glad to see the Boards allowed, in as many cases as possible, to elect their own Chairman", for without this it was unlikely that non-official members would feel that "real power is placed in their hands, and that they have real responsibilities to discharge."

The functional logic that political education and decentralisation would ultimately serve the ends of empire was never completely accepted by administrators in the provinces – perhaps they never got around to a change of mindset, or they might have had more first hand influence of the discontent brewing in towns and cities of colonial India. As Indians grew more politically confident in the municipal bodies they also became part of the National Movement mainstream, and as the demands of the National Movement became more strident it became evident that the logic for

political education, and for mentoring Indians in self-government to prepare for the gradual introduction of power sharing at higher levels of government, was never going to run as smooth as the Governor General had supposed it would.

By the early 1900s it had become apparent that there were growing contradictions in local government policy. By articulating both a vision and a decision of the colonial government in India, Ripon's minute contributed to an emerging norm of local self-government, though it was hardly a legally enforceable right at this time. Yet, it was on the basis of this emerging norm that politically aware Indian elites in the cities demanded a clear set of rules that demarcated the sphere of local government be laid down and observed. Often it was only a question of demanding that district collectors and provincial administrators observe the formal rules and principles of separation, or to improve upon the formal rules in order to reduce the incoherence between rules and principle. However, there was also demand for increasing participation by, for example, extending franchise to graduates even if they were not rate payers. The municipal board's control over executive functions of local self-government was sought to be increased, and at times municipal boards asserted the space for independent action in areas of functional activity that had been decentralised (notably schools). Of Calcutta in 1916, Goode wrote that it often seemed as if government was resisting popular demand, and that "it is natural that as demand becomes more articulate it is raised against anomalies and compromises which might still fret and hamper the popular will"⁷.

As the middle class elites who garnered influence and power in the urban scene and at other venues of nationalist or political activity of the time were

⁷ Goode, *Municipal Calcutta: Its Institutions in their Origin and Growth 1916*

predominantly Hindu, the British Government in India was also faced with competing demands from Muslim groups for separate electorates. In this context, John Morley who had recently become Britain's reform-minded Secretary of State for India advised the Viceroy Lord Minto on a set of reforms that came to be known as the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909. The Minto-Morley Reforms sought to set up elements of British-style democracy, but with significant differences which amounted to retaining of executive control over elected institutions. Yet predictably, in seeking to appease conservative, liberal, sectarian and nationalist demands at the same time, the Minto-Morley measures did not go very far in resolving tensions of the time.

Unresolved tensions between the proponents and the critics of local self-government, as with other forms of decentralisation were, in a sense, being referred to the experts with the setting up of the Royal Commission Upon Decentralisation in the same year (1909). The Royal Commission looked at the technical detail of administrative decentralisation and looked at ways to resolve internal contradictions and inconsistencies in the sharing of power and responsibility between central and provincial governments, as also between provincial administrations and local self-government bodies. The Royal Commission enquired into financial and administrative relations between different levels of government, to look at whether those relations could be simplified and improved, and "the system of government better adopted to meet both the requirements and promote the welfare of the different Provinces, and without impairing its strength and unity, to bring the executive power into closer touch with local conditions."⁸

⁸ *Report of the Royal Commission Upon Decentralisation in India, Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty, September 1908.*

The Royal Commission observed that there were great differences between the different types of towns for which municipal bodies had been formed – from the large cities with around 2,00,000 inhabitants to other towns which were basically a collection of villages. It took that view that no universal standards could be laid down for all of British India, but strongly recommended that local bodies be formed wherever conditions were found to be suitable. By this time, in the towns and cities where municipal bodies had been formed, substantial urban management responsibilities had already been devolved including construction and upkeep of roads and public buildings, lighting and watering of roads, medical relief, vaccination, sanitation, drainage, water supply, measures against epidemics and education. A review of municipal finances revealed to the Royal Commission that municipal tax collections were not adequate to meet these responsibilities, but instead of proposing a more aggressive tax policy that might make local bodies unpopular with the people, the Commission recommended instead that municipal revenues be supplemented with budgetary subventions from the government.

The Royal Commission noted with disapproval that there was still a great deal of official activity (i.e., interference by district collectors and provincial government departments) in matters that were properly the domain of local self-government. This and other problems relating to finances and the uneven progress of decentralisation were discussed, but in the overall evaluation the project of local self-government was deemed to be a success. While recognising that local variations in progress might make a uniform standard unacceptable, the Royal Commission expressed its preferences for greater decentralisation, including measures for (a) expansion of the electoral system, (b) greater employment of non-official chairmen in municipalities (as opposed to nominations or deputation by the provincial

administration, and (c) the gradual relaxation of official control in matters of finance and administration. Based on the Royal Commission's evaluation of the state of decentralisation in India, the British government in India was "glad to be assured ... that the results have, on the whole justified the policy out of which local self-government arose."⁹

With slight variations of position, the themes of the Report of the Royal Commission Upon Decentralisation were repeated in the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1918¹⁰ that looked at the state of local self-government bodies again and it observed that there was still a lot of "all-pervading official activity" [of district and provincial administration], particularly in small towns and rural areas even after the setting up of local boards and municipalities. However, by this time the great presidency corporations which were "a class by themselves. Mainly elective in character, they work largely through an official chairman or executive officer, and are not subject to close supervision from outside." In these Presidency towns and other large urban centres municipal institutions were found to be a reality, forming an oasis of popular control in the midst of an official system.¹¹

Yet, for the rest of British India the report noted that by and large the avowed policy of directing the growth of local self-government from without rather than from within had been sacrificed to the need for 'results' (such as improvements in city sanitation and management efficiency). This was attributed in some part to the fact that "elected members of the board appear to have difficulty in facing the disfavour aroused by a raising of the rates [of

⁹ Govt of India Resolution of April 28, 1915 cf.H. Wheeler, "Local Self-Government in India," *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation*, New Series 17, no. 1 (1917): 153-164.

¹⁰ Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947*, 459-460.

¹¹ Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947*.

taxes], or a purification of the electoral roll, or drastic sanitary improvements unless they feel that the district officer is behind them”.

The Montagu-Chelmsford Report took the view that colonial administration at the time was transitioning from the “quasi-military organisation of the Moghul empire” to popular councils and local bodies, which drew on a conception of administration that sprang from English political thought. For this reason, the report did not recommend any drastic measures to break down the system of official control, even as it observed that “with the best intentions the presence of an official element on the boards has been prolonged beyond the point at which it would merely have afforded very necessary help, up to the point at which it has impeded the growth of initiative and responsibility.” On this topic, the report concluded that there can be no general improvement except by the awakening of public opinion, which we believe our reforms will stimulate.¹² Thus, though the report accounted for the inability to expand local self government in pragmatic terms, the normative arguments of mentoring Indians for self rule were always also present.

The stated project of mentoring Indians for participation in modern style democratic institutions which was first articulated by Ripon, was strengthened in every official pronouncement afterwards. Writing in 1924 of the local bodies reforms that followed a Reforms Act of 1920, P.D. Aiyangar, a Vakil in the Madras High Court and legal advisor to the Corporation of Madras tells us that “Local bodies have been withdrawn from official management and control. Democratic principles have been recognised (...) It cannot be said that local bodies attained such a high state of efficiency as can be desired. Before Indians can aspire to attain perfection

¹² Ibid.

in higher political spheres, it is absolutely necessary that they should attain perfection in the sphere of local self-government, which is but a stepping stone to higher political activities.”¹³ This Aiyangar suggests was only appropriate, in support of which he quotes De Tocqueville on *Democracy in America*, saying that “local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations. Municipal institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science. They bring it within the people’s reach; they teach men how to use and enjoy it.”¹⁴

Securing Participation through Limited Suffrage

The first elected local bodies were not elected or representative in any systematic way. Instead, colonial administrators would nominate some chosen Indians and Europeans to share power in the municipal council (variously referred to as the Board or Bench), with an ad hoc effort to have the principal castes and communities of the city present on the Board. Over time an electoral list was set up, although quite limited in nature, and at least some of the municipal council were elected. Provincial governments continued to nominate a percentage of municipal councillors, and through this maintained a degree of control over the activities of the local government bodies.

Yet this was not unusual given the fact that universal suffrage was hardly the norm even in Europe at the time. In 1860 John Stuart Mill’s idea of a representative municipal government was based on limited franchise for municipal tax payers: “As the principal duty of the local bodies consists of the imposition and the expenditure of local taxation, the electoral franchise should vest in all who contribute to the local rates, to the exclusion of all

¹³ P. D. Aiyangar, *The Law of Municipal Corporations in British India*, 1924.

¹⁴ Ibid.

who do not.” In addition, to provide for the representation of minorities, he commended the existing practice at the time of *ex officio* nomination of the Justices of Peace of the district as “It secures the presence, in these bodies, of a more educated class than it would perhaps be practicable to attract thither on any other terms” and that they act as “a check upon the class interests of the farmers and petty shopkeepers who form the bulk of the elected Guardians (i.e., elected municipal council members).”¹⁵

Accordingly, the municipal bodies of colonial India were elected bodies only in a nominal sense as franchise was limited to those on whom municipal taxes were levied (and had cleared all tax dues). The principle of election was further complicated by a constantly evolving system of multiple electorates and all types of complicated communal voting systems that were being designed to ensure the representation of Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians, Muslims and other minorities. In addition, anything between one-fourth to a half, and sometimes even a majority of the municipal council was nominated by the provincial government.

While there was a political aspect to the sharing of municipal power between ruler and subject, the constitution, nature and voting system of the colonial municipal institutions were designed for fully paid up rate-paying ‘citizens’ who paid property tax or other form of municipal tax, and to a few exceptional categories like university graduates – whose membership was no doubt to be encouraged even if they were not rate paying property owners yet. Each municipal tax payer was entitled to one vote, so a father and a son could be both listed as voters only if they were each tax payers in their own right¹⁶.

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Parker, Son and Board, West Strand, 1860).

¹⁶ E.S. Sunda, *The Law of Municipal Elections* (Madras: the author (Law Printing House), 1925).

While there was no specific restriction on women being rate-payers or voters, but their participation would have been limited by the qualification that they would have had to be owners in their own right of property or businesses. To stand for election to the council, the Madras law specifically required that the person was to be of male sex, but in Bombay this was open to women too after an amendment in 1922 to the Bombay law.

Since voting right seemed to follow from the levy of municipal tax, joint holders of property such as companies, associations and joint families jointly owned a vote against their status as municipal tax paying ‘persons’. This vote was exercised by a person listed in the electoral roll as a representative of a company, firm, association, body of two or more guardians or trustees, joint family or other body possessing joint rights.

In addition to elected members, the Governor General nominated members from trading houses, European businesses and also made appointments to ensure the representation of Muslims and other minority groups. According to the Madras Act V of 1920 the proportion of councillors to be elected was not be less than three-fourths of the body, in actual practice the proportion was often higher. The precedence given to European businesses and their right to be nominated to the council was often a cause of disagreement. In the debate on the reform of Bombay Municipality in 1871, better representation was sought for European businesses in the Bench of Justices (municipal council). It was argued that several large European firms in the city were not represented on the Bench of Justices (roughly Municipal Councillors) even though they were large rate payers and owners of house property, and that seven or eight great banks had between them one representative¹⁷. When the proportion of members nominated from

¹⁷ “Reform of the Bombay Municipality, Full Report of the Debates at the Bench of Justices on June 30, July 5, 6 & 7, 1871” (Reprinted from the Times of India, 1871).

European trading houses to the Madras Municipality was sought to be increased by amendment in 1904, it was vigorously debated in a special meeting of the Municipal Commissioners of the City of Madras¹⁸. The official position, supported by some speakers seemed to be that nomination by government was a way of getting the best men, “leading men of business habits, and of practical knowledge and experience” involved with the affairs of the municipality.

In opposition to the increase of nominees from European trading houses, T. Venkatasubba Aiyar argued that the only reason for increasing the number of members nominated from the Madras Chamber of Commerce could be to balance power of the majority (Indians/ majority community/ petty middle classes) with that of the non-majority (European/ religious and caste minorities/ wealthy): “let sixteen Commissioners be from those who do not form the majority of the tax paying population and let sixteen be from those who pay the greatest amount of taxes”. Aiyar protests against what he perceives to be the unequal treatment of different categories of rate-paying members when he makes the case that:

“The Chamber of Commerce does not represent a large circle of the citizens of Madras, but only a handful of gentlemen mercantile who have come here not to stay in Madras and to make Madras their permanent place of residence, but have come here as birds of passage to make profit and go. Are these the gentlemen... that will be fitter than native men selected from our own people, to sit in the Council and take part in deliberations?”

¹⁸ “The Origin and Development of Municipalities, Tamil Nadu Archives and Historical Research” (The Commissioner, Govt of Tamil Nadu, 1989), vol. 1.

In this he seems to be saying that having a pre-eminent share in the commerce of the city or a privileged position of proximity to the ruling class was not enough reason to expect seats in the municipal council. Even so, this was not a challenge to the principle of voting rights for rate-payers, but only against only a political/ racial preference being given to European traders over local municipal tax payers.

Given the limited nature of franchise at the time, it is unsurprising that municipal committees were not always very participatory or ‘political’. In his fascinating study of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in the 1970s, Oldenburg writes that in the pre-Independence period Delhi’s municipality had quite a low profile and members were mostly wealthy residents of the city. At election time there was little competition, and sometimes cases of consensus candidates being elected without opposition.¹⁹

In a particularly eccentric view of participation Sunda quotes a former member of the Municipal Council from Triplicane (in Madras) who notes that the ills of bribery, political one-upmanship and patronage politics “will spread with amazing fertility to India where the art of ingratiating oneself with Authority finds a congenial home among a population athirst for Knighthoods, CIEs and other gewgaws which enable the Government to view the onslaughts of the Apostles of the Spinning Wheel, of immediate Home Rule and of cognate inspirations of temporary insanity with immovable serenity and irritating self confidence.”²⁰

However even such a view is not entirely out of character when placed in the context of the debates on participation and probably had something to do

¹⁹ Philip Oldenburg, *Big City Government in India: Councillor, Administrator and Citizen in Delhi* (Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1976).

²⁰ Sunda, *The Law of Municipal Elections*.

with the nature of political mobilisation and the position of emerging middle classes vis-à-vis colonial rule in these cities. On the whole however, the debates suggest an incipient discourse of citizenship. In particular accounts of Allahabad, Calcutta, Ahmedabad and Bombay in the early 1900's suggest that local politics was far richer and more interesting than merely a case of colonial officials sharing power with a selected bunch of pro-government collaborators.

Local Taxation and Local Collaborators

In the mainstream history-writing of India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the history of municipal government in India tends to be subsumed within the larger narrative of the Indian National Movement, where mass movements and big events are at centre stage. Conversely, municipal politics at the time had a relatively narrow and elitist base and the political activity of Indian elected representatives in the municipal institutions was often limited to an insistence that the procedural autonomy and separation of power mandated by the municipal rules be observed. In always being less important than the larger National Movement, municipal politicians are persistently seen as "collaborators" or allies of the British Raj, people who were content to self-govern municipal drains and satisfied with the small honours bestowed on them by provincial and district administrators. Also, municipal history, with the narrow participation of property owning middle classes, naturally falls victim to the more general dismissal of elite histories.

In the nationalist narrative, local government naturally fell short of expectations because its intended purpose was to strengthen colonial rule and direct political aspirations to productive but non-threatening tasks. So it was that "an ideology of paternalistic benevolence, occasionally

combined with talk of trusteeship and training towards self-government, thinly veiled the realities of a Raj uncompromisingly white and despotic."²¹ Even Lord Ripon's moment, promising elected majorities and elected chairmen in local councils, is easily explained when he observed "the hourly increasing necessity of making educated natives the friends, instead of the enemies of our rule".²² In the same vein, Lord Mayo observed that: "We must gradually associate with ourselves in the government of this country more of the native element."²³

It has also been alleged the logic of municipal decentralisation in the colonial period was entirely about municipal taxation. In dismissing the power sharing project of local self-government textbooks on Indian history tend to take the view that "Even the local self-government introduced with much fanfare by Ripon was essentially no more than a measure of necessary financial decentralisation." In this Sarkar quotes Finance Member of the Board of Directors, Evelyn Baring who said "We shall not subvert the British empire by allowing the Bengali Baboo to discuss his own schools and drains."

The fact that fiscal decentralisation was central to the decentralisation of power has been well documented and was well within the stated decentralisation plan of the time. The Directors [of the East Indian Co.] with the consent of the Crown, advised the Madras Council on 28 Sept 1687 to set up a municipal corporation in Madras, observing that:

²¹ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi ; New York: Macmillan, 1985), 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

“the people would be more willing and liberally disburse five shillings towards the public good being taxed by themselves, than sixpence imposed by our despotical powers (notwithstanding that they shall submit when we see cause)”²⁴

Later, about the the scaling up of municipal institutions in the 1860s (a little before Ripon’s minute), Tinker writes that the immediate stimulus for this arose out of post-1857 financial embarrassment. Colonial income depended on inelastic land revenue, and a succession of wars had causes financial deficits to be filled with borrowing. Debt in 1858 stood at 98 million pounds. Financial decentralisation, i.e., transferring responsibility for roads and public works was one of the immediate remedies. In the Finance Member (James Wilson’s) budget speech of 1861:

“It is of the first importance to break through the habit of keeping everything in dependence on Calcutta, and to teach people not to look to the government for things they can do far better themselves.”²⁵

By this time, the economy of the cities was also changing. Cotton had brought boom to Bombay and given rise to new urban communities. This would have resulted in an increase of pressure on existing municipal services and created demand for public expenditure in the expansion of municipal service infrastructure. But the fact that this is actually quite a standard feature in the evolutionary history of modern government as we know it today is ignored by historians like Kidambi who see fiscal decentralisation as a part of a colonial exploitation narrative:

²⁴ Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947*, 15.

²⁵ Hugh Tinker, *The Foundations of local self-government in India, Pakistan and Burma* (London: Athlone Press, 1954), 35.

“The moves towards local self-government in the post 1857 period were a reflection of the political imperatives that determined the fiscal policies of the Raj. On the one hand, the need to reduce the tax burden on the countryside forced the colonial state to extract more resources from urban areas. On the other hand, financial constraints rendered it unwilling to pour its own resources into developing civic infrastructure that was necessary if urban centres were to fulfil the requirements of the urban agenda. It was in this context that the colonial state warmed to the idea of transferring to municipal bodies the onerous task of initiating urban improvement and raising locally the revenues needed to pay for it. Not surprisingly, civic governance conducted in the interests of an alien colonial regime failed to strike a chord amongst the vast majority of town dwellers, who tended generally to regard the activities of the municipality with a mixture of incomprehension and suspicion.”²⁶

Historically, local democracy or city government is founded in the notion of payment of municipal rates, either as property tax, excise or other form of tax. Even though it would be unusual for modern democracies to restrict voting or participation rights in local government to persons who are direct payers of municipal taxes, there is still in modern institutions a sense of the political autonomy of municipal government based on the fact that it raises at least a part of its costs from local taxation.

Moreover, municipal accounts and annual reports of colonial local governments do not suggest that local taxation revenues were ever

²⁶ Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay 1890-1920*, I. (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 41-42.

substantial enough to have generated surpluses based on which one could attribute a colonial extraction motive for decentralisation initiatives in the colonial period. In fact, while municipal officials made conscientious efforts to keep municipal accounts in the black as far as running costs were concerned, projects for construction of new works were taken up from time to time, and for these municipalities were dependant on budgetary grants and support from provincial governments²⁷.

The 1909 Royal Commission Upon Decentralisation reviewed the financial position of both urban municipalities and rural boards at the time and observed that while rural boards were dependent on a regular system of budgetary subventions, the position of municipalities was by and large better. However, even urban municipalities depended on regular government contributions for education, hospitals and veterinary work. For capital works such as large drainage or water supply works, as also for famine and plague relief, even the larger municipal bodies looked to provincial governments for financial grants and subventions. Based on this the Commission observed that while there was no need for a universal policy of government subventions to municipal bodies, in the case of smaller municipalities, some subvention towards normal services would be required.²⁸

On the other hand, even as the tax base increased and municipal revenue grew, both from new residential colonies and from taxation of trade, institutionalisation of municipal taxation remained a constant challenge

²⁷ In Madras Municipality records, water supply sources were augmented and supply lines constructed and new sewerage systems were constructed, for which the Municipality looked to grants from the provincial government of Madras Presidency cf. "Administration Report of the Madras Municipality 1967-1905" (Administration Report, Corporation of Madras, n.d.).

²⁸ Report of the Royal Commission Upon Decentralisation in India, Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty.

as every increase in taxation was intensely debated²⁹. The Royal Commission Upon Decentralisation was aware of this problem and thought that while municipal committees should have the power to raise taxation rates, they might make themselves needlessly unpopular if they were compelled to raise through taxation all the revenue needed to fund municipal activities. In public debates in Bombay in 1871 it was alleged that there was not enough to show for the money being budgeted and spent on city improvement, and on the other the excessive burden of taxation on the poor in the "native town". The large number of distress warrants, seizing and selling property, it was apprehended, could "result in a riot"³⁰. Similarly, when in Madras an amendment allowing for prosecution of persons who did not pay municipal taxes was sought to be introduced, it was vigorously opposed by Indian members of the municipal committee³¹. This attitude towards taxation however was an instrumental one: when the Congress radicals wanted to re-enter municipal politics in Gujarat in 1925-1928, they encouraged their supporters to pay taxes in order not to be disqualified from voting.³² And for the period when Nehru was involved with municipal politics of Allahabad, he pressed for an increase in sources of municipal revenue through pilgrim taxes³³ and new provisions for the taxation of vacant land³⁴. This he

²⁹ "Reform of the Bombay Municipality, Full Report of the Debates at the Bench of Justices on June 30, July 5, 6 & 7, 1871."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "The Origin and Development of Municipalities, Tamil Nadu Archives and Historical Research."

³² Douglas E. Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: the Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 247-260.

³³ In 1923, in a letter from the Chairmane Allahabad Municipal Board to the Commissioner, Allahad Division, cited from S. Gopal, ed., *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972), 5.

³⁴ In 1924, cited from Ibid., 66-69.

saw as a way to reduce dependence on grants from the provincial government, which in turn could create a greater degree of autonomy for the municipal council. Also, in larger context, he saw the prevailing system of high rural taxes (i.e., land revenue) paying for urban civic amenities as inherently iniquitous, argued for measures of financial sustainability such as staff retrenchments and increase of sources of revenue as a step towards reducing the fiscal burden of cities on rural tax payers.³⁵

On the question of whether municipal government failed to strike a chord amongst the majority of town dwellers – it is entirely true that municipal government of the colonial period had a narrow and elite base. Formally, participation was limited to property-owning classes, and even within them the underlying purpose of early decentralisation efforts is likely to have been to draw in elites with local influence. While this was entirely in line with ideas of suffrage and what constituted representative institutions of modern government at the time of inception of municipal institutions in India, the British policy in India subsequently failed to keep up with developments in Europe and North America. Yet within the limits of qualified voting, municipal politics grew to attract participation from a widening circle as the political stakes increased, till the time when it was abandoned by nationalists in the intense period of the national movement immediately before independence.

Emerging Middle Class Participation in Municipal Politics

At the outset it is unlikely that handpicked Indian nominees to the municipal committee made much of a splash – in 1874 Lord Hobart as Governor of Madras noted that: “The population of a municipality does not in any sense govern itself, except that some of its leading men,

³⁵ Gopal, Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru.

nominated by the Government, are placed upon the board. The Government of a Municipality is in fact an oligarchy dependent upon a superior power which may control its actions to almost any conceivable extent.”³⁶ Most of the members were reappointed year after year, and quite often appointments were made as a mark of social status, just as a gentleman was given a seat in a district durbar, as a token of his ‘loyalty’ and his standing in the district.³⁷ This was unsurprising given the limited nature of the electorate and the colonial policy of selecting pro-government elites and traditional authorities as ‘natural leaders’ of both rural and urban areas. However, as political representation increased with extensions of the franchise to new population groups (for example to college graduates, irrespective of whether or not they were rate payers, and with the development of new urban ‘colonies’ or residential neighbourhoods), the social organisation of cities also changed and new leaders emerged and municipal forums grew more active. These changes set in motion an interesting pattern of events: the emergence of deeper and richer municipal politics created leaders who took contributed in significant ways to the emerging National Movement for Independence, and at the same time, the nationalists in positions of municipal leadership imbued ‘local self-government’ with new meaning. The local changes that underpin this transition is mapped by Bayly in reference to Allahabad, who I rely on for understanding the context of emerging middle class participation.

In the management of rural affairs in nineteenth century, the colonial administration routinely relied on local traditional authorities such as the rural landlord, tribal chief or lineage head whose local influence was enough to contain disputes between local factions and maintain public peace. This

³⁶ Tinker, The Foundations of local self-government in India, Pakistan and Burma, 38.

³⁷ Tinker, The Foundations of local self-government in India, Pakistan and Burma.

system extended to the smaller market towns, but cities tended to be less cohesive and the influence of zamindari networks was not strong enough unless landed magnates also wielded urban influence through specific circumstances such as property-owning, acts of charity and philanthropy. In this context, C. A. Bayly, in this work about Allahabad local politics, has pointed out to us the phenomenon of the ‘urban notable’³⁸. The urban notable or *rais*³⁹ was not exactly a traditional authority. The cities may still have been divided into caste neighbourhoods and trades were dominated by specific castes, but by and large the power of the caste panchayat had declined, and in its place there were locals who acquired power through their control over trade or banking networks.

The rais already had wealth, social status and a network of patron-client relationships in the town, and were in a position to play a role in the maintenance of local authority. Conversely, there was also the factor that these urban elites, trading or house owning groups had moved into a position where they were also quite prominent in local society and that local authorities could not longer ignore them, or where they were powerful enough to get themselves or their nominees elected to local bodies⁴⁰. These notables tended to be predominantly from commercial families – in a study of the durbar lists of the time, Bayly found that of the 14-15 residents of Allahabad who had found place in the list, ten were heads of families that

³⁸ C. A. Bayly, “Local Control in Indian Towns - The Case of Allahabad 1880-1920,” *Modern Asian Studies* 5, no. 4 (1971): 289-311.

³⁹ Bayly uses the Persian term *rais* to designate magnates distinguished by their degree of control over resources and groups in the urban political system, and also by their degree of influence over the local authorities who controlled the inflow of wealth and confirmed the status of people in the town’s society.

⁴⁰ Bayly, “Local Control in Indian Towns - The Case of Allahabad 1880-1920.”

controlled the indigenous banking business and much of the retail trading. Four out of six honorary magistrates of Allahabad city in the early 1880s were from among the heads of the commercial families, as were Allahabad Municipality’s senior vice chairman, junior vice chairman (both of whom were frequent opponents of collectorate policy) and the leader of the pro-collectorate faction in the municipality⁴¹.

The power of the commercial elites was often shared with older forms of local authority such as local rajas and zamindars who held influence in the rural environs of the city and may have had zamindari rights over the city as well. However, most of their influence was extended through their own patron-client networks of trade, lending and house-tenancy and their control over labour markets. In addition, they took up acts of charity and philanthropy, and participated in the planning and patronage of religious festivals. Later they also supported religious sects, caste and sectarian schools.

The Municipalities Act of 1883 introduced a limited electoral system, while responding in some respects to the Ripon reforms and budgetary pressures for financial decentralisation. Before 1884 electoral politics in Allahabad was confined to a small number of householders, but after the Ripon reforms and in response to the pressing financial needs of provincial and imperial government a new system was introduced in 1884. A basic house ownership or rental value franchise of Rs 6 per mensem in the old town and Rs 50 per mensem in the Civil Lines was established. Of a total population of c. 1,50,000, the total number of electors (voters) was 2,858. This small number of voters, mainly house owners and traders elected 3 members from each ward, except in the case of the European dominated ward no. 1 which elected

⁴¹ Ibid.

6 members. While these members could wield some influence in small local matters by virtue of their office, effective control of the provincial government was maintained through government nominated members and the practice of nominating the Collector to be the Chairman of the Board.⁴²

As a result, the 1883 Act only served to formalise and reinforce pre-existing circles of influence, and this practice continued till the 1900s when municipal electorates in Allahabad could be effectively controlled by the commercial *rais* of the city that they or their representatives found prominent places in the municipal board, from where they were able to enhance their power through the distribution of subsidies, approval of building applications and by fostering groups of municipal employees⁴³. In turn the government appointed municipal commissioners as honorary magistrates, consulted them on income tax arrangements, worked with them on the planning of religious festivals and exempted them from the Arms Act and other such forms of restriction. All in all, Bayly writes that “As moneylender, magistrate, landlord and municipal commissioner a few families of commercial *raises* could attain a position of power in a town which was as absolute, if not as obvious, as that of a zamindar.”⁴⁴

Yet even as they remained prominent in the provincial government’s local political order, the *rais* were not all “collaborators” of the Raj. Some of the group were prominent in the opposition of the practice of the district collectorate interfering in local matters, and were also associated with Indian National Congress meetings. Particularly in matters of relating to the

⁴² C. A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics : Allahabad 1880 - 1920*, I. (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1975), 101-102.

⁴³ Bayly, “Local Control in Indian Towns - The Case of Allahabad 1880-1920,” 297.

⁴⁴ Bayly, “Local Control in Indian Towns - The Case of Allahabad 1880-1920.”

licensing and the regulation of commercial activity, as also taxation and municipal octroi, they may have been at cross purposes with the government policy. However, in municipal matters effective control by the provincial government was maintained through government nominated members and the practice of nominating the Collector to be the Chairman of the Board.⁴⁵ This order changed in the period from 1900 to 1925, when the grip of old *rais* families weakened, and they were in turn replaced by professional men and particularly the lawyers who grew prominent in the Allahabad High Court. In the period before this a few professional men had made inroads into the municipal set up, but their power bases were not so well established for this role to be sustained. However, all this while new forms of power and network were being consolidated through rate-payers associations, which helped manoeuvre neighbourhood leaders against old patrons, often around demands for better distribution of municipal subsidies.⁴⁶

In the 1900-1925 period Allahabad saw the emergence of a civic association called that Allahabad People’s Association that was almost a parallel to the town’s Municipality: it held regular elections from ward committees to be central council and sought to protect citizens from arbitrary action by the Municipality. It demanded circulation of municipal debates, initiated vigilante action in municipal polls and complained against conservancy failings in municipal wards.⁴⁷ That people associated with the leadership of these rate payers associations would be drawn towards the National Movement and would be associated with Congress meetings was perhaps

⁴⁵ Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad 1880-1920*, 101-102.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

⁴⁷ Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad 1880-1920*.

predictable, but at this stage most of the activities of the rate-payers associations were around demands for better performance of local government rather than any form of non-cooperation. In fact the original basis for this mobilisation might have been the increased incidence of municipal taxation on house owners and professional men, as also changes in municipal electorates and demographics at the time, which gave more weightage to graduates and the new residential neighbourhoods. This in turn would have led to demands for better municipal performance in the areas of education and sanitation.

A factor behind the change in profile of contenders for municipal seats was also the Government of India Act of 1909, for with this legislation municipal seats became stepping stones to Provincial Councils. In the 1900's municipal elections in Allahabad were more competitive, with fewer consensus candidates. Candidates campaigned from house to house, and elections of this time were given considerable publicity in the local press. While in 1908 the Municipality's committees and board were controlled by two mercantile groups, this changed by 1915 with a powerful group of professionals including members of the Nehru and Malviya families constituting a *progressive* faction. The pro-government faction was made up on an alliance of Muslim district bar lawyers and representative of the old rais families. The power wielded by the professional factions grew with time, also because while professional men who sat of the board earlier might have been lower level local vakils, they were now being replaced by more highly educated and influential barristers.⁴⁸

As Allahabad changed in the 1900-1925 period new fault-lines were emerging, most notably a demand for separate Muslim representation on

⁴⁸ Ibid., 304.

account of the predominance of Hindu leaders at the time. In 1911 the Congress and local political factions vigorously opposed the introduction of communal electorates through the Burns circular of 1911 that introduced communal electorates, increasing the proportion of Muslim representation, as also Anglo-Indian and Eurasian representation, with the ultimate result of prejudice to the political ambitions on middle-class (non-landlord) Hindus.⁴⁹ Ultimately the Congress grudgingly accepted the Burns circular, but sections within the Congress and other politically active groups continued to oppose it and, as we know, this issue was only resolved with Partition and the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

Interestingly, in 1923 Jawaharlal Nehru was put forward as the consensus candidate for chairmanship of the Allahabad Municipal Board when the other candidate for the post was opposed on account of his leanings towards Hindu factions and religious groups. Nehru wrote about his reluctance to accept the post of municipal chairman, but accepted that this was "training and preparation" and "only the means for serving the nation for hastening Swaraj"⁵⁰. However, in the years as Chairman of the Municipal Board, his writings reflect an active engagement with issues of social justice, municipal taxes, and administrative reform, including an early pitch for functionally separate political executive and expert 'City Managers' of the American style⁵¹. This of course was in addition to more typical Swarajist activities such as introducing nationalist messages in the schools curriculum and presenting civic addresses to nationalist leaders. Disapproval from the district or provincial administration for Swarajist activities was countered

⁴⁹ Ibid., 204.

⁵⁰ Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 1-5.

⁵¹ In 1923, Ibid., 21-26.

with recourse to the constitutional autonomy of local self-government, in a pattern typical of the Indian National Movement. Later the same year, from Nabha jail Nehru wrote to Braj Mohan Vyas, then Executive Officer of the Allahabad Municipal Board:

“I stood as a candidate for the Municipal Board six months ago much against my will and with a dislike for the usual municipal work...What I feared and disliked I have begun to like, and municipal work has begun to have some fascination for me. I feel that is it in the power of our Board to make like a little more bearable, a little less painful to the residents of Allahabad. This is worthwhile work. But to me, in spite of my new liking for it, it is only secondary work. My real passion, as I have repeatedly informed the Board, lies in a different direction...”⁵²

Nehru’s disdain for the practice of giving testimonials and chits to persons for appointments to various posts is perhaps his attempt to make a break with older patronage style politics of traditional elites (though as even he would have known, clientele politics is not a matter that can be wished away):

“I have been pestered with applications for appointments... Chits and recommendations have been brought to me from friends... Nearly everyone in India gives a testimonial and nearly everyone flaunts such chits... such chits and testimonials should be made taboo.”⁵³

With local variations of emphasis, this pattern of emerging middle class participation could be found in many of the important urban centres of

⁵² Ibid., 31-32.

⁵³ Cf. Sankar Ghose, *Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography* (Bombay: Allied Publishers Limited, 1992), 43.

colonial India. Reflecting its status as a prominent centre of new urbanisation, popular politics came to Bombay as early as 1872, when a draft bill was introduced in the provincial legislature of Bombay Presidency in March 1872 providing for a corporation where only 10 percent of the members would be elected and over which the government would exercise close control, it spurred heated debate, political competition and collaboration between mercantile and professional groups in the city. This draft bill came soon after the Bombay Municipality, under the leadership of its first Commissioner (1865 onwards), Arthur Crawford had incurred heavy public expenditure on expansion of municipal service delivery infrastructure as well as in development and beautification of Bombay. Crawford is credited for having cleaned the streets, improved water supply, drains and waste disposal arrangements and reduced the mortality rate from 35,000 to 18,000 per year, but also left a heavy burden on municipal finances, and was charged with financial misdealing and bribe taking in his time in office. The trial of Crawford incited public debate and contestation over what the proper role of the municipal executive was, with liberal reformers demanding management and control of municipal affairs by ratepayers through elected representatives. For this they demanded extensions of the franchise to graduates and poorer sections of the population through lower rate payer. The liberal position was challenged by house owner groups, who felt that by paying house owner taxes they had borne the burden of Bombay’s beautification and development. The house owners demanded not representation, but a reduction in tax burdens overall as well as a greater emphasis on taxation of consumption items and professional income tax⁵⁴. Both factions carried out this debate in the

⁵⁴ Christine Dobbin, “Competing Elites in Bombay City Politics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1852-1883),” in *Elites in South Asia*, ed. Edmund Leach and S. N. Mukherjee (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 79-93.

provincial legislative council where the draft bill was being debated, as also in public fora, newspapers and through privately organised meetings were representatives of both groups tried to work out a compromise.

At the root of this contest between interest groups was the fact that the colonial government had formerly looked to house owning and mercantile groups of the city as the 'natural leaders', but by the 1870s these groups were being undermined by the better educated 'intelligensia' of lawyers, bankers and men in government employment.⁵⁵ Finally, the law that came into force reflected a negotiated peace, though significant advances had been won by the pro-representation lobbies as half the members of the Municipal Committee were elected and substantial powers of the Municipality were delegated to a 'standing committee' of twelve members who supervised the activities of the Municipal Commissioner, and to whom all questions of expenditure were referred. Government control was limited to auditing accounts and approvals for loans, and more significantly, the appointment of the Municipal Commissioner.

Pherozeshah Mehta, a leading lawyer and one of the founding members of the Indian National Congress (often bracketed as a nationalist of the 'moderate' school) is widely credited for having led the demand for change and authored significant parts of the reforms that came into force. As an Oxford educated lawyer, Mehta's own milieu was the intelligentsia, but he was at least partly on the side of the house owners in this debate⁵⁶, and this was perhaps the reason for his success in authoring the compromise formula. His leadership role in this, and a subsequent amendment to the Bombay Municipality Act in 1883 ensured his own place as a civic leader – he was

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

once appointed the municipal commissioner and four times the president of the Bombay Municipality. He was also founding president of a civic association of educated and public spirited Bombay residents called the Bombay Presidency Association from 1880 onwards, and he was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1890, reflecting, in a single career the free flow of ideas between nationalist, civic and municipal institutions.

What the nationalists were doing inside municipal bodies is also reflected in the well documented municipal career of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel⁵⁷, who went on to become a prominent national leader and later the first Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of newly independent India. Patel was a successful and public-spirited lawyer in Ahmedabad at the time when friends and well wishers at the Gujarat Club convinced him to take part in municipal affairs. At little before the start of his career in municipal politics, where he was to make a mark for himself for his strong political positions, Patel had attended the Bombay Provincial Conference that was held in Ahmedabad on 21-10-1916 under the Presidentship of M. A. Jinnah, where problems relating to the office of the municipal commissioner (as appointed by provincial governments) were discussed and the meeting passed a resolution asking the government to abolish the office. In December 1916 Patel attended the thirty-first session of the Indian National Congress in Lucknow, where he came into contacts with mainstream nationalist politics. At a Congress meeting around this time chaired by Gandhi, Patel and R.B. Ramanbhai (then President of Ahmedabad

⁵⁷ For an interesting account of municipal micro-politics in Ahmedabad I have relied substantially on Arya Ramachandra G. Tiwari, *Making of the Leader Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel*, 1st ed. (Vallabh Vidyanagar: Sardar Patel University, 1967).

Municipality) proposed a resolution demanding a complete democratisation of the local bodies.

The immediate context to Patel's involvement in municipal affairs was that the Provincial Government (Bombay Presidency) brought in force a District Municipal Act, which allowed for the appointment of a government officer of I.C.S. cadre as the head of the Ahmedabad Municipality and also opened the way for much greater interference by the government in municipal matters such as education. There was a great deal of opposition to the appointment of I.C.S. officers for it was feared that such a highly paid and top ranking officer was not likely to remain subservient to the municipal set-up. A demand that the provincial (or state) government divest itself of the power to appoint the chief executive officer of the municipal corporation would seem radical today when such appointments are routinely made by state governments out of IAS and state government administrative cadres. In Bombay Presidency of c. 1916 too this issue was a contentious one – in the compromise brokered by Pherozshah Mehta in Bombay in 1872 the power to appoint municipal commissioners had been unequivocally reserved for the presidency government. However, in the intervening years municipal bodies in urban centres of Bombay Presidency had grown in profile and autonomy, even as the cities had prospered and a new leadership of middle class professionals had emerged. It was perhaps in view of these factors that the Bombay Presidency government sought to appoint officers from its elite ICS cadres as municipal commissioners.

In spite of local opposition and the Indian National Congress call for complete democratisation of municipal bodies, the presidency government persisted with the appointment of John Shillidy, an ICS officer as municipal commissioner of Ahmedabad. Shillidy obviously took upon himself a greater executive role than the municipal committee was willing to grant as it was

alleged that he repeatedly undermined the authority of the elected president of Ahmedabad Municipality was repeatedly undermined by Shillidy undertaking expenses without reference to the appropriate municipal bodies and his insistence on communicating directly with the provincial government, and thereby “committing the Municipality to great loss and blame.” A number of council resolutions of the time refer this controversy, with the president insisting that the proper channel for communication with the district collector and the provincial government was through the municipal president. In this stand-off the moderate municipal president and his associates felt the ground was set for “the reception of a person with tough temperament, rough manners and indomitable spirit who could set the matter right and also match the arrogance, obstinacy and irritability of Mr. Shillidy.”

Patel became sanitation commissioner of the Municipality in 1917, after which time he is recorded to have wrested some political control back from the municipal commissioner: resolutions were passed to set spending limits and procedures, the commissioner's purchase transactions and appointments were scrutinised, and at the same time he gained popular support by effecting new sanitation measures and city-wide improvements. In a pattern that was repeated (albeit less wholehearted) by Nehru a few years later, Patel and his friends combined an interest in municipal improvement with more explicitly nationalist ambitions. A series of Special General Board meetings of the Ahmedabad Municipality were held in October-November 1920 to discuss whether elections under the Montford Reforms for (provincial) Councils should be boycotted. There was some dispute over whether this question was within the ambit of municipal concerns (or *ultra vires*) and could be taken up was business of Ahmedabad Municipality, but the matter was put to vote and the nationalists narrowly

lost the round (and that too on account of the pro-establishment President using his casting vote against them).

Another stand-off came over the issue of schools, over which provincial and municipal governments shared control. As a part of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Programme, the Indian National Congress had called upon the nation to gradually boycott educational institutions managed or aided by the Presidency Government. Following this Patel manoeuvred to have a resolutions passed by Ahmedabad, Surat and Nadiad municipalities whereby they refused to accept government education grants and barred government inspectors from visiting schools. Instead he organised a People's Education Board, which ran 43 schools funded by Rs. 1.25 lakh worth of public subscription. Matters came to a head and in February 1922 the Government of Bombay passed a resolution superseding the municipalities of Ahmedabad, Surat and Nadiad.

Patel is also credited with having effected major extension of the city electricity supply, reforms in the school system, and improvements in the drainage and sanitation system. When there was a flood in the city and some parts of the district in 1927, causing destruction to life and property, Patel led relief efforts, established refuge centres, organised supplies and volunteers. In the 1925-1928 period, when the parallel schools system set up in 1922 was subsumed back in the state run system, Patel had to fight for the recognition and payment of teachers employed the parallel schools.

As in the case of Pherozeshah Mehta's Bombay of 1872, Patel's biographer also recounts that at the time when he entered municipal politics, there was a lobby of reformers who believed that the municipality owed a primary responsibility to rate-payers who were its constituents, and on this basis lobbied for greater democratisation of municipal bodies while there were

others who preferred to toe the government line. Yet, up until 1916 in Ahmedabad pro and anti government lobbies limited themselves to matters that were within the municipal sphere, and there was as such no "nationalist bloc" in matters that were put to vote before the municipal committee. In the course of Patel's municipal career over the next ten years or so nationalist positions grew clearer and the phenomenon of the municipal nationalism developed. In the progression of Indian nationalism both Patel and Nehru came from a generation after Pherozeshah Mehta and this was reflected in strident tone and nationalist activism that characterised their municipal careers, but it is significant that all three politicians thought it was important to display confident leadership and efficiency in matters of municipal administration.

The End of Municipal Nationalism

The phenomenon of municipal nationalism was helped produce national leaders in urban centres all over India. In this paper I have picked up threads from the social history of municipal politics in Allahabad and narrated incidents and plots lines from the municipal careers of Pherozeshah Mehta, Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru in recounting the emergence of popular municipal politics in the period from 1860 to 1930. Elsewhere Surendranath Bannerjea in Calcutta and C. Rajagopalachari in Salem also entered public life as municipal politicians and made their mark as nationalists and reformers of their times as municipal chairmen.

However, this phase of the development of municipal institutions was petered off as negotiations over the Government of India Act of 1919 between nationalists and the colonial government ended and the National Movement itself intensified in the final years before Independence. The nationalists had moved on from the time when they sought reform of

colonial institutions, and instead demanded that the British Parliament recognise the right of national self-determination of India and that “India has and possesses the right to develop her own individuality and to evolve her own destiny unhampered by what the British Parliament has decided or may decide for us.”⁵⁸

Even in the period between 1919 and 1929 the nationalist voice had grown steadily stronger, but as long as the policy was to boycott colonial institutions from within, the phenomenon of municipal nationalism continued to grow even as relations between municipal and provincial government grew unbearably tense. This was the period that saw Patel and Nehru infuse elements of nationalism in the schools curriculum, and in the case of Patel, in the management of the schools system.

Finally in 1929 the Indian National Congress called for total boycott and an end to its earlier Council-entry policy. In the sequence of events that followed, nationalists everywhere came to give up government positions of employment, medals of recognition and other forms of engagement with colonial institutions. In time all the nationalists gave up their municipal career to enter the more radical politics of the National Movement on a full time basis, and in with this the phenomenon of municipal nationalism came to an end. Up until this point, the tension between second and third tiers of government was all the more productive because of the nationalist flavour to relations between native (self-government) subject and colonial government, but as the nationalist dialogue changed there was less and less room for local self-government in nationalist priorities. If we disregard for the moment the significant impact this stand-off and policy of civil disobedience had on the course of nationalist politics, this abrupt end to a

⁵⁸ C.R. Das on the basic difference in approach between the Congress and Liberals, 1921 Cf. Desika Char, *Readings in the Constitutional History of India 1757-1947*, 489.

stimulating engagement on the proper place for local area self-government is somewhat disappointing for the municipal historian. Even more so when we consider that neither Nehru nor Patel made municipal administrative improvement or functional autonomy a priority in the years when the framed the Constitution or ran the government of newly independent India.

Concluding Note

It is with a practitioner’s interest in the politics of municipal decentralisation in India today that I approached this paper, but this is neither a note for practice nor an evolutionary history. A lot more needs to be done to cover the ground between 1930 and 1993 to help us understand where we stood in terms of doctrine, administrative practice and institutional culture at the time of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India. There are of course many policy notes, articles and references in ‘governance’ literature references to recommendations of government committees and white papers, but little investigation into what the principal actors at the time were thinking, what they wrote in private memos to each other, and how this was influenced by the politics of their times. The evolution and changes in municipal budgets over this time is scantily documented. We know from current social science literature, and from fly-on-the-wall and experiential accounts that municipal politics today is the domain of the non-elite: the municipal politicians circles of patronage and network are of the non-elite, the budgets they control most relevant to those who cannot make private provision for civic amenities, and their politics too messy for those who have privileged access to IAS officers, MPs and ministers. Unlike their forerunners in times past, municipal politicians are rarely promoted up the rungs of party hierarchy to positions of prominence in state government or national politics, a phenomenon which no doubt fuels the self-selection of non-elite to municipal politics. However,

we know little about how this phenomenon was brought about, what links it had to vicissitudes in municipal finance and functional decentralisation, as also the larger politics of city, state and nation.

In my research for this paper I was first struck by the textural similarities between now and then, in budget discussions, difficulties in raising taxes and improving administrative efficiency and the perpetual need for expansion of civic infrastructure. In time what became apparent is that local government (or *self-government* as it was referred to at the time) was more explicitly political than it is now, and this I think was a product of the tension between “self-government” and colonial government. For this reason it captured the imagination of the emerging middle classes and urban intellectuals, some of whom were nationalists in seeking “training and practice”. I have thought this phenomenon to be of interest especially because it throws light on the need for a more political understanding of decentralisation than is apparent in the post-73rd/74th Amendment efforts to strengthen local government in contemporary India. This is not, in any direct sense, a road map to the future, but rather a point of inquiry into past and present.

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