

16

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN INDIA

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I

Any meaningful assessment of the structure, organisation and working of political parties in India and the nature of the party system that has evolved in this context, would necessarily involve an in-depth evaluation of the dynamics of party politics at the grassroot level. In consonance with the fact that the spotlight of attention in discussions on Indian politics has, more often than not, been on developments at the national and regional level, studies on political parties in India too, have tended to focus on party politics and party structures at the central and state level.¹ The 'big narrative' appears to have pushed to the sidelines the 'little narrative' of the finer nuances of party politics at the local level.

This chapter attempts an assessment of the interface between the party structures and the working of democracy at the local government level in India. The impact of the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution—

which resulted in the local bodies being accorded a constitutional status, making them the third tier in the federal system—needs to be taken into account in any study of local government and political parties. Keeping this in mind, the chapter is divided into three parts. The first section attempts to briefly outline the importance that political parties in India have accorded to local government institutions and politics. In the second section a study of the role of political parties in local government politics in the pre-73rd/74th Amendment phase is undertaken and in the last section the emerging issues in party politics and local government after the passage of the 73rd and 74th Amendments are examined.

It has often been stressed that the philosophy underlying the power sharing arrangement within a political system is mirrored in the power equations and relative importance of the multiple levels of organisation within the political parties that operate in the system. Political parties in India are no exception. While it is beyond a shadow of doubt that the process of democratisation within a political party and the participation of party functionaries at various levels in decision-making, is an essential pre-requisite for carrying forward the process of 'democratic deepening' in any political system,² the democracy project in many countries—including India—has faced serious challenges in actualising the same. The culture of hyper-centralisation, which seems to have defined the nature of power relations within the political system has undoubtedly influenced and shaped the internal structuring of power in political parties. A natural corollary to this development is the near non-involvement or at best the mere formal involvement of the lower levels of the organisational structure of political parties in the decision-making process. Such a trend has important and significant implications for local-level politics.

A perusal of the election manifestos of major political parties is clearly indicative of the lack of serious commitment on their part to truly empowering local bodies. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) manifesto issued at the time of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections made out a strong case for the immediate implementation of constitutional and legal reforms. The need to activate 'Panchayats and local bodies' appears to have been included under this section

¹ See Myron Weiner, *Party Politics in India: The Development of a Multi-Party System*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; Paul Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress in Uttar Pradesh*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965; Stanley Kochanek, *The Congress Party in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968; Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970; Richard Sisson, *The Congress Party in Rajasthan: Political Integration and National Building in an Indian State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972; Myron Weiner and J.O Fields (eds), *Electoral Politics in an Indian State*, Delhi: Manohar, 1975; M.P. Singh, 'The Crisis of the Indian State: From Quiet Developmentalism to Noisy Democracy', *Asian Survey*, 30:8, 1990; Richard Sisson and Ramashray Roy, *Diversity and Dominance in Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990; Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Thomas Blom Hanson and Christophe Jafferelet, *The BJP and Compulsion of Politics in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

² See John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?* Cambridge: Polity, 1990; Arend Lijphart, 'The South European Examples of Democratization', *Government and Opposition*, 25:1, 1990, pp. 68–84; William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Guy Hermet, 'The Age of Democracy', *International Social Science Journal*, 43:128, 1991, pp. 249–58; Stanley Hoffman, 'Capitalist Democracies and Democratic States', *Political Studies*, 39, 1991, pp. 342–49; Giovanni Sartori, 'Rethinking Democracy: Bad Polity and Bad Politics', *International Social Science Journal*, 43:129, 1991, pp. 437–50; Alan Touraine, 'What Does Democracy Mean Today?', *International Social Science Journal*, 43:128, 1991, pp. 259–68; Lars Rudebeck (ed.), *When Democracy Makes Sense*, Stockholm: Akut, 1992.

as a belated afterthought.³ The Congress manifesto merely stated that the party was 'deeply concerned at the level of general stagnation and lack of meaningful movement forward' in implementing the scheme of Panchayati Raj envisaged by the Constitution.⁴ No concrete suggestions were offered on how best the constitutional provisions could be implemented in letter and spirit. Earlier, the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the United Front had complimented the Panchayati Raj institutions for providing much needed grassroot-level development and promised to 'strengthen this process further ... and devolve greater power and authority including financial to these bodies'.⁵ Though the manifestos clearly record the commitment of the political parties to devolve power and strengthen the local government system, they are silent on the steps being taken to initiate matching changes in the party structure. Their lack of sincerity in this regard is clearly transparent.

The faith reposed by citizens in local government on the one hand and their apprehensions regarding the credibility of political parties on the other, was clearly evident in the National Election Study Survey.⁶ The survey indicated that in the index of popular trust in institutions, political parties secured 39 points (out of a maximum of 100) while local governments secured 58 points.⁷ The same survey also indicated that less than 10 per cent of the respondents felt that political parties were serving a useful purpose. Nearly 70 per cent of the respondents did not feel close to any political party.⁸ The National Election Study, 1998 revealed that more than 45 per cent of the respondents felt that political parties do not care at all for the people.⁹ A study undertaken in Karnataka during the 1999 elections indicated a similar trend. When respondents were asked to comment on the working of Panchayati Raj institutions in their area, more than 55 per cent expressed satisfaction with their functioning. The main reason for this optimism was the manner in which the local bodies had afforded an opportunity for their participation in decision-making and the success of these bodies in solving local problems. Among the 45 per cent who were unhappy with the working

³ National Democratic Alliance, *For a Proud, Prosperous India: An Agenda*, New Delhi: BJP Central Office, 1999, p. 7.

⁴ The Congress spoke of stagnation in the process, merely three years after it was voted out of power at the national level. Indian National Congress, *Manifesto: Lok Sabha Elections 1999*, 1999, p. 27.

⁵ Common Minimum Programme, 'United Front's Policy Statement', *Mainstream*, 34:28, 1996, pp. 13–18.

⁶ National Election Study (NES), *Data Set*, Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 1996.

⁷ Yogendra Yadav, 'The Maturing of a Democracy', *India Today*, 15 August 1996, p. 40.

⁸ NES, *Data Set*.

⁹ NES, *Data Set*, Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 1998. Also see Sandeep Shastri, 'Democracy as Global Entitlement' in *Democracy, Security and Human Rights*, Khanna and Kueck (eds), Delhi: Shipra, 2003.

of local government institutions, the reason they assigned for the same was revealing. More than 80 per cent of those who had expressed reservations about local bodies blamed political parties for vitiating the political atmosphere at the local level by injecting personality-based inter-party competition. The respondents also felt that intra-party rivalry often expressed at the local level, in the process, severely undermined the functioning of these bodies.¹⁰

Thus, while local government institutions have the potential to provide the basic services and amenities that citizens seek and also afford an opportunity for citizen participation in decision making, the political parties have tended to neglect this level of government, preferring to focus their attention on the management of power at the national and state levels.

II

For a purposeful assessment of the constitutional provisions relating to local government, it would be useful to review the Constituent Assembly debates on this issue. Such an evaluation affords an opportunity to examine the attitude of the founding fathers of the Constitution and more specifically, the dominant political party (Congress), on issues relating to local government structures.

Article 40¹¹ of the Indian Constitution clearly represented a gesture of tokenism—on the part of the members of the Constituent Assembly—towards local government. In spite of the fact that not a single day passed in the Constituent Assembly without the name Mahatma Gandhi (for whom Panchayats represented true democracy) being invoked, on the issue of local government structures the framers of the Constitution preferred to ignore the advice of the Father of the Nation. The symbolic concern for local government that the Constitution makers came to express was verily, a by-product of multi-track factors and forces. A few of them merit attention.

A factor of crucial significance, in this regard, was the unitary mindset that appeared to hold sway both in the Constituent Assembly and in the Congress Party.¹² Ambedkar summed up the dominant mood in the Constituent Assembly on issues relating to federalism and local government while introducing the provisions of the Draft Constitution. He categorically stated that

¹⁰ Sandeep Shastri, *The Electoral Verdict in Karnataka*, Bangalore: Department of Political Science, 1999. Also see Shastri (2003), op cit.

¹¹ Article 40 of the Indian Constitution reads, 'The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government'.

¹² See Sandeep Shastri, 'Indian Federalism and National Integration: A Critique', *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 51:2, 1990, pp. 1–14; and Sandeep Shastri, 'Nehru and Centre-State Relations: A Study in the Dynamics of Indian Federalism', *Détente*, 10:1, 1991, pp. 8–10.

though 'the country and the people may be divided into different States for convenience of administration, the country is one integral whole ... under a single *imperium* derived from a single source'.¹³

Second, the issue of state and local rights was accorded a secondary status by the Constitution founding fathers. As a result, it was felt that 'local government' could be placed in the 'State List', as such a step would in no way jeopardise the unity and integrity of the country. Consequently, it was left to the states to decide the structures, power and functions of local government.

Third, several among the decision makers in the Constituent Assembly (and the Congress Party) believed that the sociology of local politics inevitably encouraged divisive forces and fissiparous tendencies. Ambedkar's intervention in the Constituent Assembly when he characterised the love of the intellectual Indians for village community as both infinite and pathetic, is a case in point. He went on to add that the village republics were responsible for the ruination of India and the Indian village was a 'sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism'.¹⁴ Nehru too, tended to view extreme localism as a threat to the unity and progress of the nation. Even as the Constitution was being drafted, in one of his fortnightly letters to the chief ministers he remarked that the 'first priority must necessarily be to preserve unity, strength and stability.... Everything that comes in the way of that may prove harmful'.¹⁵

Finally, Article 40 appeared to be a minor and inevitable concession that had to be granted to those who favoured a powerful and vibrant local government system. In a bid to appease the 'Gandhians' who had projected an alternative model of governance¹⁶ and in order to blunt the criticism that the Constitution makers had abandoned 'Gandhian' ideals, this article was included.¹⁷ In the general discussion in the Constituent Assembly, on the

¹³ *Constituent Assembly Debates* (hereinafter CAD) New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2nd Reprint, 7:43.

¹⁴ CAD, 7:39.

¹⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947-64*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 143.

¹⁶ See Shriman Narayan Agarwal, *Gandhian Constitution for Free India*, Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1946.

¹⁷ see Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 28-31.

¹⁸ Those who raised the issue included: Lakshminarayana Sahu, K. Hanumanthaiah, N.G. Ranga, K. Santhanam, S.L. Saksena, R.K. Sidwa, M.A. Ayyangar, H.V. Kamath, Damodar Swarup, Jaspat Roy Kapoor, Alagu Rai Shastri, A.K. Ghosh, P.S. Deshmukh, Lokanath Misra, Raj Bahadur, Upendranath Burman, R.V. Dhulekar, B.P. Jhunjhunwala, B.S. Mehta, O.V. Alagesan, Mahavir Tyagi and Krishnaswami Bharati (many among them were prominent Congressmen). If Shibban Lal Saksena asserted that strong local governments had the potential 'for holding the country together' (CAD, 7:264), Santhanam averred that local autonomy for each village must be 'considered the basic framework for the future' of India (CAD, 7:256). Damodar Swarup drew attention to the fact that by ignoring local

final draft of the Constitution, more than 30 members¹⁸ made a reference to the glaring absence of any significant provision in the Constitution on local government structures.¹⁹

It is also relevant to note in this context that the Constituent Assembly did not think it necessary to make any provisions in the Constitution to regulate the organisation and functioning of political parties. It was only when the 52nd Amendment to the Constitution (Anti-Defection provisions) was passed, did the term 'political parties' find a reference in the Constitution document. The neglect of this important institutional dimension of parliamentary democracy by the Constitution framers is also reflective of their priorities. The Constitution founding fathers appeared to be more concerned about legitimising and formalising existing political structures and relationships, and given the role and position envisaged for the Congress Party in post-independence politics, it was never felt necessary to try and regulate and discipline the functioning of political parties.

With the inauguration of the Constitution, one of the first government initiatives with regard to local government, launched in the 1950s, was the Community Development Programme. Nehru asserted that the community development movement had its basis in the 'village Panchayat'.²⁰ However, he underscored the fact that this movement focused more on the administrative and economic side of village life. A conscious attempt was made to insulate the programme from any form of political influence: Nehru advised chief ministers that the community development movement involved a new pattern of working, which bypassed 'considerations of caste and religion and even, to some extent, politics'.²¹ Many commentators have opined that the attempt to divorce the community development movement from politics was largely responsible for the lack of public interest in the programme.²²

By the late 1950s, on the basis of the recommendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, several states created a three-tier Panchayati Raj system. Nehru referred to this development as the laying of the 'foundation of democracy' in India.²³ With the Congress being the dominant party in most of the

government, the Draft Constitution missed an opportunity to build a structure of governance 'reared from the bottom upward' (CAD, 7:212) and H.V. Kamath charged that the ignoring of local government by the Draft Constitution was typical of 'urban highbrow' (CAD, 7:219).

¹⁹ CAD, 11:557-870.

²⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947-64*, Vol. 4, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 528.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157, emphasis added.

²² See W.H. Morris-Jones, *The Government and Politics of India*, Bombay: B.I. Publications, 1964; and George Mathew, *Status of Panchayati Raj in the States of India*, New Delhi: Concept, 1994.

²³ Nehru made this comment while inaugurating a Panchayat at Nagaur in Rajasthan on Gandhi Jayanti (2 October) in 1959, see *The Times of India*, 3 October 1959.

states, it attempted to ensure unanimity in the elections to the Panchayati Raj institutions. The basis of the Congress reasoning was that 'election would mean conflict and ... this would aggravate the already paralysing faction divisions of village life'.²⁴ A consensus choice was the more preferred option. More often than not, this resulted in the entrenched social groups continuing to monopolise power. It also served the interests of the ruling party, as the leaders at the local level could help mobilise support for the party at the time of the Assembly or Lok Sabha elections.²⁵ It has rightly been observed that it was the nexus between the dominant social group at the local level and the political leadership at the district and state level which resulted in the benefits of development not reaching the genuine beneficiaries.²⁶

With the passage of time, when 'consensus elections' to the local bodies could not be managed, the Congress expressed itself in favour of party politics being kept out of these contests. The advantage that it enjoyed was that in view of its position as the dominant local party, it managed to ensure that candidates who won became 'Congress representatives if they were not so already'.²⁷

With the political/electoral competition at the local level intensifying—often triggered by caste rivalries and also a reflection of the challenge to Congress domination at the state/district level—new political/social forces sought to occupy the political space created at the local level. Local politics then became the arena to settle scores between rival parties and leaders. Often, local politics became the site for resolving inter- and intra-party disputes.

Several states amended their Panchayati Raj Acts to permit electoral contests to be on a formal party basis. West Bengal is an interesting case in point.²⁸ With local elections being fought on a party basis, it was possible 'for a person to stand in opposition to the traditional village leadership and to draw upon external political resources to mobilize support'.²⁹ Based on the study of the working of two Panchayat bodies in West Bengal after the introduction of elections on a party basis, Webster concluded that the panchayat

raj system 'does not need a strong party, but that the party needs more than just electoral support if it is to continue the movement towards a people's democracy'.³⁰

As the initiative for creating and strengthening local government structures was left to the states, the nature, design and importance of local governments varied significantly from state to state.

III

It was only after more than four decades of independence—in 1989—that an attempt was made to accord a constitutional status to local government bodies and ensure uniformity in their structure all over the country. The 64th and 65th Constitutional Amendment Bills were introduced by the government in Parliament as an effort in this direction. The prime mover of the initiative, Rajiv Gandhi, stated that the Amendment had as its purpose vesting power 'in the only place where power rightfully belongs'.³¹ While participating in the debate in the Lok Sabha on the 64th Amendment Bill, Rajiv Gandhi asserted that as the Constitution had not made specific provisions for local government institutions, they had 'withered at the roots'.³² He went on to add that by according a constitutional status to local government bodies, a constitutional obligation was being imposed on all concerned, an obligation that could not be flouted for 'reasons of expediency or indifference' (*ibidem*). However, the Amendments were defeated in the Rajya Sabha and it was left to the Congress government under Narasimha Rao's leadership to introduce the 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills—which more or less retained the provisions of the 64th and 65th Amendment Bills—and get them approved by Parliament and the requisite number of State Legislative Assemblies. As a result of the passing of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, Panchayats and Nagarpalikas have now been conferred a constitutional position and can legitimately claim their status as the third tier of the federal system.

After the passage of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, the political competition at the local government level witnessed crucial changes of a positive nature. Some of these shifts were a direct consequence of the Amendments while other changes were generated by important political developments at the national and regional levels. Their implications for the role of political parties at the local level were far reaching.

The constitutional amendments ushered in an element of uniformity in the structure of local bodies all over the country. They also attempted to

²⁴ Morris-Jones, *The Government and Politics of India*, p. 227.

²⁵ Studies of local government politics in Karnataka during the chief ministership of Devraj Urs show that though Urs was successful in building a non-dominant backward caste coalition at the state level, he was unable to break the monopoly of power that the dominant castes enjoyed at the local level. See Amal Ray and Jayalaxmi Kumpatla, 'Zilla Parishad Presidents in Karnataka: Their Social Background and Implications for Development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 1987, pp. 42–43.

²⁶ See L.C. Jain (ed.), *Grass Without Roots*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1982, p. 205.

²⁷ Morris-Jones, *The Government and Politics of India*, p. 228; also, Neil Webster, 'Panchayat Raj in West Bengal: Popular Participation for the People or the Party?', *Development and Change*, 23:4, 1992, p. 135.

²⁸ In 1978, West Bengal reorganised its Panchayati Raj system and made elections open to party politics.

²⁹ Webster, 'Panchayat Raj in West Bengal', p. 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161, emphasis added.

³¹ *Lok Sabha Debates*, New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 7 August 1989.

³² *Ibid.*

ensure that across the states the local governments were entrusted similar responsibilities. However, the success achieved by local governments in fulfilling these functions varied significantly from state to state. The question of structures first. By mandating direct elections for all the three levels of rural local government, the Amendments changed the complexion of political competition. The reservation of seats for women in local bodies drastically altered the composition of the local bodies. By permitting the states to make a provision for reservation for backward communities, the Amendments opened a window of opportunity for the non-dominant backward castes to assert their voice in local government decision making.

The end of one party domination and the emergence of a competitive party system has had a trickle down effect on local politics, especially with direct elections to local bodies. With the epicentre of politics shifting to the states, local issues have tended to influence citizen/voter choice and preference.³³ Even though at the national level the number of political parties competing for power may have registered a sharp increase, at the constituency/local level the competition is essentially bi-polar or at the most tri-polar. A significantly low rate of seat retention in the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections has resulted in the electoral battle at the constituency/local level assuming tremendous significance.³⁴ A survey conducted at the time of the local body elections in Karnataka in 1994-95, reveals that though the Gram Panchayat (lowest tier) elections were conducted on a non-party basis, only 7 per cent of the elected representatives were independents. Those who contest elections today, no longer hide their political affiliations.³⁵

In spite of the above changes, political parties have not attempted to capitalise on these developments to build a strong grassroot support base. Little or no initiative has been taken, either by the party leadership or the party workers, to make use of the opportunities that are now emerging, to strengthen the forces of internal democracy in political parties. Two recent studies point to the nature and extent of internal democracy in parties and its impact on local politics. A study conducted by Lok Satta in Andhra Pradesh reveals that in none of the four major political parties in the state—Telugu Desam, Congress, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI [M]) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—is there a genuine democratic process for choosing candidates for local body elections. In all cases, the local Member of the Legislative

Assembly (MLA)/Member of Parliament (MP) played a decisive role.³⁶ A similar study conducted in Karnataka reveals that in the strongholds of both the Congress and the BJP, the grassroot party workers were rarely involved in the process of choosing candidates for local elections and the local MLAs/MPs had a major say in the decision.³⁷ It is also surprising therefore, that the biographical sketches of 156 of the 224 legislators elected in 1999 (to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly), make no mention of their being elected to or participating in elected local bodies prior to their becoming legislators.

Local initiative is further undermined, with MPs and MLAs being made ex-officio members of panchayati raj institutions. As a result, they tend to dominate the proceedings and prevent the local voice from asserting itself. In Karnataka, given the role that the ex-officio members played during the election of the Adhyaksha (Chairperson) of the Zilla Panchayat, the elected members threatened to resign in protest forcing the state government to amend the law. Though the state legislators and MPs from a district continue to be voting members of panchayats, they are now not allowed to vote when the Adhyaksha is to be elected or a motion of no-confidence against the Adhyaksha is being considered.

Yet another indicator of the approach of some of the political parties to the empowerment of local governments is the proposal initiated by them to amend

³⁶ The study revealed that in all the four parties there was no formal mechanism for securing public opinion/party workers' opinion on candidates. *Lok Satta*, Hyderabad: Lok Satta Publications, 1999.

Congress (I): As far as selection of candidates to local bodies and other representatives bodies is concerned, there is no procedure for taking opinion of their own party members by the leaders. It is the local senior leaders along with the MLAs who choose the party candidates for election to local bodies.

Telugu Desam Party: As far as selection of candidates to elected public office in TDP is concerned, the senior party functionaries along with the MLA decide the candidates for local bodies.

BJP: As far as the election of candidates to public office are concerned it is the senior level leaders along with MLAs who chose the party candidates for election to the local bodies which are to be finally approved by the State Election Committee.

CPI (M): As far as selection of candidates for public office is concerned, units of the party are consulted. But there is a unanimous mode of choice of the party candidates decided by the district leadership for the local bodies.

³⁷ Researchers in the Department of Political Science, Bangalore University, conducted the study on the eve of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. Two Lok Sabha constituencies, one a strong hold of the Congress (Kolar) and the other a stronghold of the BJP (Bangalore South) were selected for the study. The researchers interviewed party workers and office bearers in the district/taluk and ward offices. In the case of both parties, the party workers admitted that they were informed of the party choice of candidates (and asked to work for their success) and had little role to play in deciding who the candidate would be. Party workers also conceded that the prospective candidates had to secure the support of the local MLA in order to secure the party ticket. Sandeep Shastri, 'Parties Lack Internal Democracy', *Deccan Herald*, 12 July 1999.

³³ The National Election Studies, 1996, 1998 and 1999 have highlighted the fact that local issues have tended to dominate in the elections. Yogendra Yadav, 'India's Third Electoral System', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35:34-35, 1999, pp. 2394-95.

³⁴ In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, while the effective number of parties at the national level was around seven, at the constituency level it was around three. *Ibid.*, pp. 2394-95.

³⁵ K. Subha, *Karnataka Panchayat Elections*, New Delhi: Concept, 1997, p. 65.

the constitutional provisions relating to local government structures. The proposed constitutional amendment bill seeks to empower state legislatures to decide on the mode of election of members and chairpersons of the block- and district-level Panchayati Raj institutions. The implications of such an amendment would be far reaching. If implemented, it could result in indirect elections to or exclusively ex-officio membership in block- and district-level local bodies. Such a change would run counter to the original intentions of the 73rd and 74th Amendments and would seriously erode local government autonomy and initiative. Political parties would largely welcome this move as it would provide them direct access to manipulating and managing power at the local government level, given the near absence of internal democracy and the high level of centralisation in most of them. It is important to note that besides the BJP, important regional parties like the Telugu Desam, Akali Dal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Indian National Lok Dal all favour the proposed amendment. Such an amendment eminently suits the interests of regional parties, whose power centre is located at the state capital and any move towards indirect elections to block- and district-level local bodies will further empower the party leadership. Such an amendment would be favoured by most political parties, as it would permit them to exercise greater control over local governments as decision-making on local issues would not be on the basis of deliberations at the local bodies, but the preference of those holding important positions in the political party hierarchy.

Party competition at the state level having an impact on the nature and direction of local government politics was clearly evident in recent developments in Kerala. The decision of the government to legislate on banning defections in local bodies, when viewed in isolation, can be commended as a step in the right direction to arrest floor crossing in local bodies. However, in reality, the anti-defection reform was introduced in view of the intense rivalry between the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and United Democratic Front (UDF) percolating down to the local body level. This is clearly evident from the stand adopted by the different political parties on the reform measure. While the opposition welcomes the initiative, it expressed its serious reservations on the true intent of the ruling alliance.³⁸

In recent years caste polarisation at the local and state level has played a critical role in determining the composition of both local and state-level elected bodies. With provisions having been made for reservations for non-dominant backward castes in local bodies in most states, these sections are today represented in significant numbers in the local bodies. However, in the State Legislative Assemblies the dominant castes continue to retain control. Karnataka is chosen as an example to illustrate this point. The caste background of the members of the State Assembly and Panchayat bodies are mentioned in

Table 16.1. In the local bodies, the dominant castes in the state—Vokkaligas and Lingayats (who account for 36 per cent of the state's population)—account for one-third of the members. However, in the State Legislative Assembly they constitute more than half the members. On the other hand, the non-dominant backward castes (around one-third of the state population), account for 37 per cent of the members of the local bodies and less than 22 per cent of the members of the State Legislative Assembly. While in the local bodies, the non-dominant backward castes have been accorded fair representation, they continue to be grossly under-represented in the crucial State Legislature and in the state council of ministers,³⁹ where the dominant castes continue to be the majority.

Thus, an analysis of recent trends with regard to the interface between local democracies and political parties clearly demonstrates the fact that political parties have not been in a position to benefit from the political empowerment that local bodies have an opportunity to benefit from. In the process, they have also contributed to preventing the local bodies from developing to their fullest potential. Federal systems which have been witness to an overcentralisation of power (like India), have, as a natural and inevitable consequence, had local governments which have limited autonomy and very

Table 16.1: Representation to Different Castes in Karnataka Legislative Assembly and Local Bodies

Caste	Percentage of State Population	Percentage of Seats Won in the Assembly (1994)	Percentage of Seats Won in the Local Bodies (1994-95)
Lingayat	15.3	28.57	17.0
Vokkaliga	10.8	24.11	16.0
Brahmin	3.5	4.46	2.5
Scheduled Caste	16.7	15.63	15.3
Scheduled Tribe	6.7	2.68	7.0
Kuruba	3.6	4.46	7.5
Other OBC's	29.1	17.41	29.5
Minority	14.3	2.68	5.2
	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: For Legislature: Shastri, *Towards Explaining the Voters Mandate*, Bangalore: Vinayaka, 1994, pp. 54-57; Shastri, 'Twilight of Congress Hegemony: Emergence of a Bi-Polar Alliance System in Karnataka', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Aug-Sept 1999, 34: 34-35, pp. 2440-48. For Local Bodies: Subha. K., *Karnataka Panchayat Elections 1995*, New Delhi: Concept, 1997: 71.

³⁹ See R.L.M. Patil and Sandeep Shastri, 'Administrative Acumen Should Determine Composition of the Ministry', *The Indian Express*, 21 July 1997; also Mary Latha, 'Politics of Ministry Making in Karnataka', unpublished M.Phil Dissertation submitted to the Department of Political Science, Bangalore University, Bangalore, 1994.

³⁸ *The Hindu*, 24 October 1998.

few opportunities for translating into reality the autonomy guaranteed to them. In the first place, local government institutions get a raw deal in the conflict for power and jurisdiction between the central and state governments. Second, the state governments which have been already rendered more or less powerless by the Centre, obsessively hold on to whatever limited power they continue to enjoy, refusing to share the same with the local authorities. A linked development is the nature of the party system in India. The 'culture of centralisation' which dictates the nature and dynamics of the federal system appears to have become the defining character of the party system. Given the absence of internal democracy in parties and the increasing importance of the party leadership in decision making, the meaning empowerment of local authorities remains unfulfilled and limited success has been achieved in realising the lofty goals as enshrined in the constitution.