

## **Urbanising Democracy: Ideas for a decentralised, participatory and inclusive city**

People's Resource Centre is organising an online seminar on "How not to urbanise democracy: Critiquing the state of urban governance in India and exploring ideas for a decentralised, participatory and inclusive urban politics". This webinar is scheduled for April 4 from 11 AM-1 PM IST.

The discussion aims to present the case for substantial decentralisation of decision-making powers to bring authentic democracy through face-to-face participatory governance driven by municipal and neighbourhood institutions.

The discussion will also refer to the provisions guaranteed under the 74th amendment in the Indian constitution, which direct the state to strengthen urban local bodies towards autonomy in decision-making power and managing resources and finances.

### **Concept note**

Over the years, governments have become distant and alien from citizens who elect these governments in the first place. The decimation of the welfare state since neoliberalisation explains part of this negative evolution of the relationship between government and the public. This disappointment with the representative approach encourages us to give serious thinking to the idea of 'Nagar Swaraj' (self-ruling cities) based on popular participation in the decision-making process to achieve social and ecological harmony. It is naive to cast votes and then rely on elected representatives' goodwill to "solve" society's problems. To make democracy real for many and not just for a few, it is critical to build and empower the local-level institutions based in the urban neighbourhoods.

The World Bank and their likes consider cities the engines of economic growth, which they think is the only way to bring prosperity for all. Market-driven growth has led to rampant exploitation of urban resources, sabotaged the urban ecologies, and led to the decline of human-centric development. While urbanisation today is contingent upon robbing the urban ecology and further marginalising the already marginalised communities in a city, there is a need for a popular movement to make authentic political participation central to urban life. This process needs to be inclusive for all to break all class or social differentiation hierarchies. This kind of project should aim to build a critical urban self-consciousness to resist capitalism and patriarchy and nurture the ecological sensibility necessary to behave as part of nature. It becomes apparent by the very description of this project that building new urbanism of this sort will require a collective initiative.

To boost our morale, we can get motivated by the significant rise in city-based large-scale mobilisations to bring radical change in societies worldwide. However, it is vital to remain mindful of the ruling class's tendency to appropriate movements' energy. For example, the spirit of the popular urban movement for 'Right to the City' was trashed when multinational NGOs, the United Nations agencies, and even some municipal governments branded their programmes referring to 'Right to the City. Sustainable Development Goals have made participatory and inclusive urban planning a catchphrase in the elite policy circles.

Fortunately, our nation's constitution also recognises the need for decentralisation and guides the transition to localising urban governance. The 73rd and 74th amendments institutionalised decentralised governance at the local levels in villages and urban areas. While the 73rd

amendment has brought some progress in terms of self-rule at the village level, the 74th amendment is still not effectively implemented in most cities. Over the last few decades, the dawn of gated societies in Indian cities seemed to kill any hopes of institutionalising decentralised democracy in towns. The marvellous neighbourhood-level organising exhibited by ordinary people during the last couple of years, especially during the Anti-CAA protests or the Shaheen Bagh protests as these were popularly known, have lent power to the democratic spirit of cities in India. We need to think of ways to augment the people's power and not let the energies and consciousness emerging from these mobilisations fizzle out.