

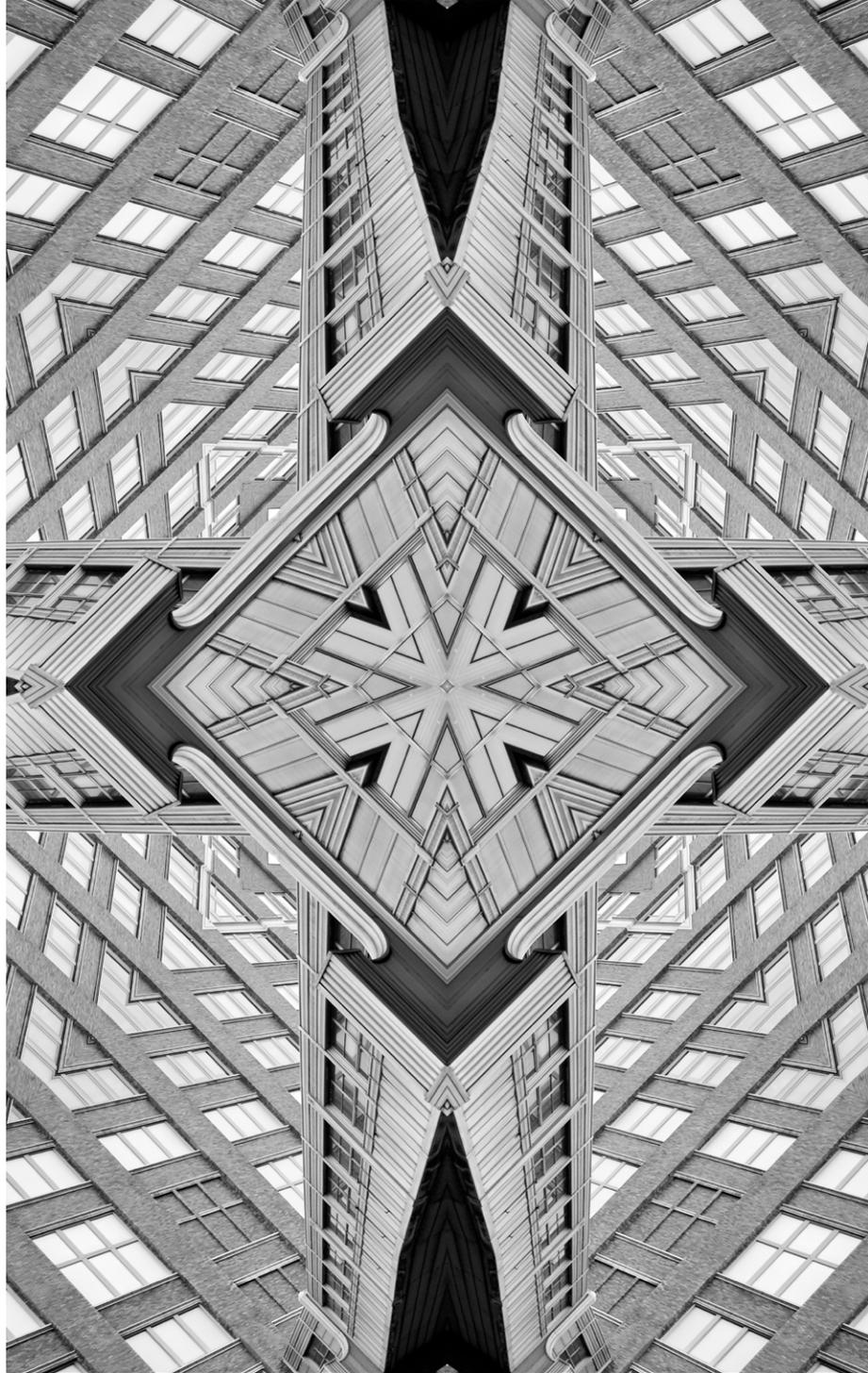
# Issue

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# Brief

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# The Greater Bengaluru Governance Act, 2024: Recasting Tools of Decision- Making in the Megacity

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## Abstract

The Government of Karnataka, in May 2025, decreed the Karnataka Act No. 36 of 2025, The Greater Bengaluru Governance Act (GBGA), 2024<sup>1</sup> for the Greater Bengaluru Area. This was in view of urban governance issues arising in the megacity of Bengaluru, for which the existing urban governance structure had become obsolete. Having replaced the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) Act of 2020, the GBGA, it is hoped, will introduce greater coordination and quality management into the city's urban governance. However, while the Act states that decentralisation, improved efficiency, and citizen participation are some of its primary objectives, its structure suggests a centralisation of authority under the state government and the weakening of the constitutional spirit of empowered local self-governance.

For the last five decades, Bengaluru has been facing unprecedented population growth and a resultant rise in density. While the megacity's economic growth has been impressive, it has also been witnessing the emergence of livability issues such as traffic congestion that tops the list of Indian cities, worsening air pollution, environmental degradation, the degradation of natural resources, loss of more than five dozen lakes since 1965,<sup>2</sup> problems of sanitation, water distress, and high costs of living.<sup>3</sup>

Before 2020, the Karnataka Municipal Corporations (KMC) Act, 1976,<sup>4</sup> constituted the statutory framework for the city of Bengaluru. When the city expanded in geography and population, the KMC Act of 1976 was replaced by the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) Act of 2020.<sup>5</sup> As the city's problems exacerbated, it became increasingly clear that the existing governance structure was no longer fit for managing the challenges facing Bengaluru. Thus, the Karnataka Act No. 36 of 2025, The Greater Bengaluru Governance Act, 2024,<sup>6</sup> was brought into force on 14 May 2025 (henceforth addressed in this article as Greater Bengaluru Governance Act or GBGA).

The GBGA, which replaces the BBMP Act, argues that the latter is now inadequate to address the “fragmentation of governance in Bengaluru due to the multiplicity of civic agencies and the lack of coordination among them.”<sup>7</sup> Many of Bengaluru's civic services are handled by agencies not answerable to the municipal administration. These include the Bangalore Development Authority and Bangalore Metropolitan Development Authority, responsible for the city's land-use planning; the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board, which handles the water and wastewater of the city; the Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation, which runs city transport services; and the Lake Development Authority, which is responsible for the upkeep of lakes. These agencies work in silos, neither sharing information, nor manpower, nor money. The consequences are inefficiencies, disinterest in the problems of other organisations, duplication of efforts and overall poor service delivery. In the process, citizens suffer. The Act asserts that the expediency of the GBGA flows from that requirement.

To address these issues, the GBGA has constituted a Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) to institute civic authorities and provide the core principles, institutions and processes for effective governance in the Greater Bengaluru Area.<sup>8</sup> The GBA is charged with coordinating and supervising the development

of the Greater Bengaluru Area.<sup>9</sup> The GBGA also proposes dividing the city of Greater Bengaluru into a maximum of seven city corporations for effective, participatory and responsive governance. It empowers ward committees to become basic units of urban governance and facilitate community participation.<sup>10</sup> The legislation thus seeks to integrate and streamline political accountability of all public authorities that deliver services in the Greater Bengaluru Area. It looks to enhance the quality of life of all citizens by instituting a decentralised, participative, efficient, and equitable governance framework in the city.<sup>11</sup>

The GBGA's passage, however, has been met with significant opposition. The establishment of a GBA for coordinating and overseeing the development of the Greater Bengaluru Area,<sup>12</sup> and the proposal that the city's singular municipal corporation be split into several smaller city corporations<sup>13</sup> was met with vehement hostility by the Opposition, which walked out of the proceedings in the legislative assembly.<sup>14</sup> A citizens' collective called the Bengaluru Townhall was equally critical of the Bill and wrote to the governor, imploring him to deny assent to it.<sup>15</sup> They found the Bill undemocratic and unconstitutional, as it went against the grain of local self-governance enshrined in the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992.<sup>16</sup> Another consortium of civic activists—Alliance for Sustainable Urban Priorities—were similarly concerned and wrote to the Chief Minister of Karnataka, expressing their anxiety.<sup>17</sup> Reports suggest that the state opposition party, the BJP, may challenge the GBA's formation in the courts.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of any delay due to opposition, the new statute will be in full effect only after some time, as the state government will have to undertake several consequential steps before the GBGA can become fully operational.<sup>19</sup> These include defining the boundaries of the Greater Bengaluru Area, splitting up the municipal corporation and establishing several city corporations, fixing their geographical boundaries, creating their governance architecture and staffing them, redrawing ward boundaries, and equipping the constituents for municipal elections. These steps are likely to take several months. In the interim, a restructured civic body will manage the city's municipal functions, and an administrator is likely to be appointed to oversee the implementation of changes.<sup>20</sup> It also appears that the Karnataka government may not roll out the entire gamut of re-engineering changes in one fell swoop.<sup>21</sup> Reports suggest the plan to extend the Greater Bengaluru Area to 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> and beyond though the merger of peripheral villages may be put on hold.<sup>22</sup> Civic elections, which have been due since 2020, may take place only after the city corporations are carved out and the jurisdiction of wards is finalised.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 1: Area<sup>24</sup> and Population<sup>25</sup> under the BBMP**

Year	Area (Sq Km)	Year	Population (million)
1949	69	1951	0.7
1964	112	1961	1.2
1969	134	1971	1.6
1979	161	1981	2.9
1995	226	1991	4.1
2007	741	2001	5.6
		2011	8.4
		2023 (est) <sup>26</sup>	13.6

## Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA)

### Overarching Role

The GBGA recognises three civic authorities—the GBA, the city corporations, and the ward committees. Of these, the GBA will function as the overall coordinator among the several city corporations. It will retain certain administrative jurisdiction over municipal corporations.<sup>27</sup> Of great significance is the fact that the GBA shall be the ‘Planning Authority’ for the Greater Bengaluru Area.<sup>28</sup> It will also be the coordinator and supervisor of all parastatals connected with municipal activities in the Greater Bengaluru Area with a view to streamline governance.<sup>29</sup> Its directions will be binding on these public authorities.<sup>30</sup> Major infrastructural projects will be formulated by GBA,<sup>31</sup> including the construction and improvement of arterial roads, elevated expressways and major flyovers, storm water drain networks, and the administration of distribution and supply of electricity and water and sewerage to main lines. The state government may assign the GBA to execute major infrastructure projects and also decide on what administrative functions the GBA will perform with regard to city corporations.

### Membership

The GBGA packs the GBA with state ministers, comprising the minister responsible for Bengaluru development, the urban development minister, and ministers representing constituencies in the Greater Bengaluru Area. The GBA is led by the chief minister, who also functions as the ex officio chairperson.<sup>32</sup> The newly-created position of the chief commissioner of the GBA<sup>33</sup> is important, as its bearer will be the principal executive officer of the GBA.

All mayors of city corporations find a seat on the GBA, with each civic body allowed to nominate an additional two members. The rest of the Authority will comprise state officers, city commissioners, and chiefs of parastatals. These officials, however, including the municipal commissioners, will not have the right to vote. Several other officers will serve the GBA, including a chief town planner equal to the rank of the director of town and country planning.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the GBA will be assisted in the discharge of its functions by an executive committee headed by a minister nominated by the chief minister; the chief commissioner will be the member secretary of the executive committee. The executive committee<sup>35</sup> can invite domain experts to its meetings.

### **Financial Structure and Expert Committees**

The provisions of the GBGA entail that the GBA will play a significant part in governing Bengaluru, necessitating many functionaries on its payroll and adequate funds to perform those functions. For this purpose, the GBA will have contributions from the grants of the Central and state governments that are equivalent to the establishment and administrative expenses of the Authority.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the GBA will be assisted by six sectoral expert committees that may prepare plans and lay down strategies for development.<sup>37</sup> It may also identify major interventions needed to ensure common strategies across the whole of GBA. Both these agencies are mandated to come into existence within one year of the constitution of the GBA.

### **City Corporations as Constituents of the GBA**

Under the GBGA, the existing BBMP will be split to form new civic corporations on the basis of the following criteria: a minimum population of 10 lakhs, a human density of 5,000 persons per square kilometre, a minimum revenue generation capacity of INR 3 billion and at least 50 percent employment in non-agricultural activities.<sup>38</sup> However, the geographical boundaries of a city corporation could be altered by the state government at any time it deems fit; any local area within civic boundaries could be excluded from the corporation's jurisdiction or included therein. Civic bodies may also be further subdivided; alternatively, two or more municipal bodies may be combined into one municipal corporation.

### **Functions**

Schedule I of the GBGA lists out the functions of city corporations.<sup>39</sup> These are trisected into core functions, general functions, and sector-wise functions. The core functions mirror those in Schedule 12 of the Indian Constitution, though some have been elaborated upon in the GBGA. They are 18 in number, as listed in the 12<sup>th</sup> Schedule.<sup>40</sup> The general functions are 15 in number,<sup>41</sup> and range from the promotion of community participation, building awareness against social evils, and mobilising local resources in cash or kind, to maintenance duties and the issuance of licenses. Sector-wise functions comprise duties related to urban planning, environment and social forestry, small-scale industries, housing, education and culture, public works, public health and sanitation, social welfare, the development of persons belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, public distribution systems and disaster relief.<sup>42</sup>

## **Taxation**

The GBGA details the taxation domains of city corporations.<sup>43</sup> These comprise local taxes, user charges, fees and fines and any other revenues levied by the corporations. City corporations can levy property taxes on lands and buildings, recover service charges on properties exempted from property tax, and charge a tax on professions, trades, callings and employments.<sup>44</sup> They can also levy an entertainment tax, a fee on advertisements, on transfers of immovable property through additional stamp duty, a solid waste management cess, an infrastructure cess, and an urban land transport cess. Additionally, city corporations are empowered to levy a development charge<sup>45</sup> for the development or redevelopment of any existing area, a surcharge on tax or fee and a duty on the transfer of immovable properties.<sup>46</sup>

## **Decentralised Governance**

### **Ward Committees and Standing Committees**

In view of the extensive geographical area that will fall under the GBA, the GBGA envisages a decentralised governance model in each municipal body. It has mandated ward committees for each ward of the city corporation.<sup>47</sup> The councillor of the ward will be the chairperson of the committee, and each committee will comprise 14 other members. These would include two members from the resident welfare associations and seven from among the registered voters of the ward to be nominated by the city corporation. The term of office of the ward committees will be 20 months.<sup>48</sup> The functions of the ward committee will comprise responsibilities like the preparation of a ward development plan and beneficiary lists, ensuring proper utilisation of funds and schemes, and the delivery of services. All ward committee recommendations, however, will be advisory in nature.

The GBGA also provides for the establishment of seven standing committees for the city corporations.<sup>49</sup> These include standing committees for administration; education and social justice; revenue and finance; public works and engineering; public health and disaster management; forest, environment, ecology, lakes, horticulture and fisheries; infrastructure, as well as for audit and accounts. Each standing committee will comprise a minimum of nine councillors and a maximum of fifteen members, including the chairperson. The committee's duration will be two and a half years.<sup>50</sup>

## Urban Heritage

The GBGA deals in detail with urban heritage.<sup>51</sup> Schedule II, devoted entirely to heritage,<sup>52</sup> defines three grades of heritage structures depending on their heritage content and outlines the objectives for and scope of change in each grade. While some room is provided for change, this is very restrictive for structures in grade I, less so for grade II and the most lenient for grade III.<sup>53</sup> It also lays out a definition for heritage precincts—areas that comprise several structures and streets that give a sense of a unique relationship between various elements and create “a special sense of place like mass, scale, building material, typology, roof profile and shapes or creating architectural style or elements”.<sup>54</sup>

On the basis of these definitions, city corporations are to prepare a list of heritage sites comprising heritage buildings, precincts and natural areas.<sup>55</sup> It further stipulates that city corporations will be responsible for the protection, conservation, and maintenance of urban heritage in the city. In this regard, the state government shall constitute a Heritage Conservation Committee, and city commissioners will frame regulations based on the committee’s advice.<sup>56</sup> The committee will be headed by the chief commissioner of the GBA and include city commissioners, government architects, experts from the Central and state archaeological departments, as well as experts in the areas of urban design, conservation architecture, environment and history. The committee will also have the right to co-opt three additional members. The corporations are further authorised to provide incentives to the owners or occupiers of heritage buildings in the form of financial support, property tax exemption, or other kinds of encouragement.

## Rules, Regulations, and Bye-laws

Chapter XXIV deals with rules, regulations and bye-laws. The state government retains powers to make rules and orders relating to the city corporations.<sup>57</sup> For instance, the state government can prescribe the manner of determination of wards and their territorial jurisdiction, the manner of allotment of seats reserved for SCs, STs, and women, and the rotation of reservation. It can regulate the sale or disposal of immovable property and land. The city corporations would be bound to follow these rules and orders. Similarly, the GBA would have the power to make model bye-laws and can direct any city corporation to adopt any of them.<sup>58</sup> In case the city corporation fails to adopt them, the GBA is authorised to enforce them through an order.

# A Preliminary Review of the GBGA

While embarking on a critical analysis of the GBGA, one must acknowledge that urbanisation in India is partly metamorphosing into mega-urban areas, with populations exceeding 10 million and geographies spanning over 1,000 km<sup>2</sup>. There has been growing concern that, as a single unit, municipal corporations are not up to the task of managing such urban giants. Recent examples, however, suggest that the two main political parties, the BJP and the Congress, think differently on this issue. For instance, in Delhi, the Delhi Municipal Corporation was trifurcated into East, South and North Delhi Municipal Corporations by the Congress government in 2011.<sup>59</sup> However, the BJP merged the three municipal corporations once again to recreate the Delhi Municipal Corporation by passing the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act 2022 in the Indian Parliament.<sup>60</sup> Thus, while the Congress has preferred splitting up municipal corporations to form smaller municipal entities, the BJP has chosen unification and larger urban local bodies.

There are pros and cons to both sides of the merger–demerger spectrum.<sup>61</sup> Larger municipal entities are more likely to achieve economies of scale, lower administrative overheads, lower per-unit costs due to shared infrastructure and a reduction in operating costs.<sup>62</sup> They have greater financial and technical ability at their disposal, greater specialisation and a larger ability to go out in the market and raise debt. Smaller municipalities, on the other hand, can achieve greater decentralisation, a key hallmark of good governance.<sup>63</sup> They give citizens a larger voice, as it becomes easier to interact with officials, provide inputs and impact decisions since the scene of decision-making is closer to them.<sup>64</sup> This, in turn, promotes greater accountability.

Keeping in mind these complex arguments, the merger–demerger front is beyond this article’s scope. Instead, it seeks to examine the quality of the GBGA in terms of achieving good urban governance in Bengaluru in the background of increasing metropolisation that is graduating to ‘megapolisation’.

The credit here is due to the state government for recognising the phenomenon and attempting a resolution in the form of GBGA. Since it is increasingly evident that mega-urban areas need more coordination so that units within the area do not work at cross purposes, the creation of the GBA is a welcome innovation. It is also apparent that individual units within a megapolis are not equipped to handle questions of planning, infrastructure, and governance. For instance, major transportation routes—trunk roads, metro, and bus services—must be planned in harmony. So must overall land-use plans and the distribution of resources such as water, solid waste infrastructure and environmental interventions. Further, financial investments made in any major infrastructure project would be better served if the money is pooled into one kitty.<sup>65</sup>

# A Preliminary Review of the GBGA

The GBGA also includes forward-looking provisions for local economic development<sup>66</sup> and climate action.<sup>67</sup> Urban settlements are primarily economic entities, and a megapolis has pivotal economic significance. In this context, the GBGA mandates the establishment of an Economic Development Agency (EDA),<sup>68</sup> with the minister for Bengaluru development as its chairperson. The EDA will be responsible for attracting investment and generating employment in the GBA through suitable public and private alliances. In light of global climate change and the need to build climate-resilient cities, the GBA seeks to establish a Climate Action Cell, with the chief commissioner as its chairperson. They will be tasked with the responsibility of formulating and implementing a climate action and resilience plan.<sup>69</sup>

Despite these strengths, the GBGA is shortsighted in not bringing in pressing urban governance reforms that have been flagged for decades. Some of these are detailed in the following paragraphs:

The issue of municipal leadership, either through an empowered executive mayor or the mayor-in-council system, has been completely overlooked. Against the background of increasing metropolisation and the rising complexities of municipal management, a separate municipal cadre is the need of the hour. However, no such idea has been floated by the GBGA.

Second, transparency and accountability are the hallmarks of well-governed institutions. However, the GBGA does not mandate the disclosure of financial statements, budgets, plans, works and contracts, as well as the disclosure of interest by elected representatives and the higher municipal bureaucracy.

Third, the GBGA falls short in its central purpose—to improve the quality of life of citizens through decentralised, participative, efficient, and equitable governance. The decentralisation it offers is only at the level of geography by splitting Bengaluru into several city corporations. Even this geography is at the mercy of the state government and could be altered at any point in time. Instead, the GBGA concentrates power in the hands of the chief minister, who is the head of the GBA. The city commissioners, for all practical purposes, will work under the chief commissioner of the GBA, and mayors will have their status compromised by the presence of the chief minister and other state ministers in the GBA. In addition, the ward committees are only advisory bodies, with no powers other than making recommendations. Moreover, the GBGA's claim that it will resolve governance fragmentation caused by multiple civic agencies also appears hollow, as parastatals that encroach on municipal mandates remain untouched and will continue to erode the powers of city corporations.

# A Preliminary Review of the GBGA

In addition, efficiency will scarcely be augmented, since the GBGA does not mention any kind of effort towards capacity building. Apart from adding a further layer to a cumbersome and failing urban governance architecture, very little has been changed, and an essential element of good governance—transparency—is completely missing. A worrying feature is the chapter on rules, regulations, and bye-laws. The powers of direction to the ULBs that have been allowed to the GBA may act as the thin end of the wedge through which progressively more and more power over the city corporations could be usurped by the GBA.

Other studies concur with this assessment. In its analysis of the GBGA, Janaagraha, a leading Bengaluru-based not-for-profit institution, has pointed out several significant deficits in the Act.<sup>70</sup> Using its city-systems framework to evaluate the GBGA, it has awarded the act points for its ‘overall quality’, as well as in the specific areas of ‘urban planning and design’, ‘urban capacities and resources’, ‘empowered and legitimate political representation’, and ‘transparency, accountability and participation’.<sup>71</sup> In Janaagraha’s assessment, the GBGA scores 3.35 for overall quality. It scores 6.5 on urban capacities and resources, 4.55 on empowered and legitimate political representation, and 2.36 on transparency, accountability, and participation.<sup>72</sup> The analysis also points out that the GBA’s architecture, as crafted by the GBGA, excludes the provision for a metropolitan mayor, now a global norm. It is especially critical of the complete lack of a mandate for digital governance policy, and argues for the introduction of such a policy covering civic technology, open data standards, open application programme interfaces and public disclosure in machine-readable formats. It also advocates for internal audits and lateral entry.<sup>73</sup>

All in all, the GBGA appears to be a further erosion of local body empowerment.

It is a fact that India is witnessing the emergence of mega urban areas. This huge, contiguous urbanisation - 'megapolisation' - raises issues not solvable by the traditional ULB governance apparatus, partly because solutions could lie beyond the boundaries of any single ULB. There is, therefore, a clear need for a larger coordinating body that sets up a platform where ULBs of the megapolis can discuss issues that impact them and resolve them with the assistance of this overarching body. However, such a body ought to be in keeping with the Constitution and should promote decision-making without dismantling local empowerment.

Sadly, the GBGA falls between two stools. On the one hand, the existence of parastatals within the greater Bengaluru area is likely to compromise overall governance harmony. On the other hand, the presence of the overpowering GBA, with the Chief Minister and Chief Commissioner strongly ensconced in the driver's seat, has the clear potential to inhibit independent decision-making in the ULBs. No real ring-fencing, as far as the GBA is concerned, has been attempted, leaving wide spaces for the GBA to tread into and claim them to be its preserve.

While GBGA promises decentralisation, citizen participation, and improved efficiency, its structure and provisions suggest a re-centralisation of authority under the state government. With key powers concentrated in a chief minister-led authority structure and local institutions relegated to advisory roles, the GBGA risks undermining the constitutional spirit of local self-governance. Unless amended to genuinely empower municipal corporations and grassroots bodies, the GBGA may exacerbate the very governance challenges it aims to solve. 

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*All views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author, and do not represent the Observer Research Foundation, either in its entirety or its officials and personnel.*

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