

CITY POLITICS

NEWSLETTER FROM JANAAGRAHA

March, 2021

Hello,

Our vision behind the 'City Politics' newsletter is to redefine what politics should ideally mean for our cities. In our efforts, we don't want to look at politics from the conventional lens of 'party politics' but 'politics of anything that affects our quality of life like garbage, transportation, electricity and footpaths etc.'. Through this newsletter, we hope to connect with & create a thriving community of people passionate about urban politics, policies, concerns, and reforms. We assure you that you will leave as a more informed and educated citizen of this country! Let's synergize our efforts and make a sincere attempt to make our cities a better place to live in.

REIMAGINING CIVIC TECHNOLOGY WITH COMPLEXITIES OF CITIES



The quality of life in a city is often related to the quality of infrastructure and services. A city is a complex system that has many elements in play. There are various civic agencies involved to make a city function the right way. All of them have their own way of operating and viewing the city; for example, BBMP looks at Bengaluru through 198 wards, but the police department looks at it through 108 jurisdictions. Defining a civic tech solution for this complex system is always a challenge that must accommodate every department's perspective, working models, citizens' information relevant to their neighbourhood, and tools to solve them by providing the right inputs. They should offer the right way to interact and call relevant people for the assistance they require.

A technology solution that maps a city needs to take care of the complexity and growing ways of how the city needs to perform and respond to citizens' needs and suggestions while mapping the quality of life transparently and collaboratively. Janaagraha, through its pioneering citizen engagement and open data platform, IChangeMyCity, has been working to bridge the gap between citizens and the governments. Since its launch in 2013, IChangeMyCity (ICMYC) has provided an easy way for citizens to report the issues they find in their neighbourhood and know about the quality of life around them.

With ICMYC and Swacchata Platform's launch in 2013, we analysed cities, citizen usage, mapped various departments, and interaction levels. We have been working on ways to more straightforward, quicker response from government officials to the citizens. We are in the process of reinventing I Change My City to I Change My City 2.0. The newer platform is being designed and architected in a way that it can be customised based on how each city and its different departments operate and what kind of information is most relevant to its citizens.

Critical elements of IChangeMyCity 2.0: To map a city's operations, the following are the essential functions the platform will have.

1. **City Mapping** - The strength of any civic tech platform depends on the simplicity for the user. The simplicity comes through the intelligent architecture of the platform, which makes it run efficiently. The automatic assignment of tickets or operations of the departments is done through GIS-based maps that capture the city's operational division. Based on these GIS-based maps, every service, operating zones, public amenities, and quality of life can be visually showcased.
2. **Civic Agencies** - The essential information of who is responsible for what work across the geography can be overlaid on the city mapping and showcased to citizens.
3. **Tickets** - Following the grievance resolution workflow from the original I Change My City, which consisted of a simple workflow for citizens to post a grievance without knowing the department and the civic agency responsible for the issue, the platform itself finds it for them. This module will be enhanced to take up any kind of work request, grievance, service application, and process based on the workflow of the relevant department.
4. **Budgets and Ongoing works** - It would be possible for the citizens to access, understand the budgets and the projects ongoing in the neighbourhood through the app.
5. **Citizen Feedback and data collection** - It would be possible to get constant feedback and do targeted data collection on specific aspects that need different technology implementation and budget priorities on what would need another data collection method.
6. **Campaigns, events and volunteering** - The platform will provide avenues for the citizens to actively engage. It will allow elected representatives to organise meetings such as ward committee meetings.

With the above modules and providing easy access to the platform through various channels like mobile apps, web apps or third-party applications like WhatsApp, this will also allow other civil society organisations (CSOs) or enthusiasts to use the information through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) and even build applications using this platform. We are actively working on putting together all the experience gained over the years. Hence, the new version of IChangeMyCity can cope with the complexities of various cities. It can be implemented with ease in India and abroad, providing one-stop access to all information the citizens need to work with the city government civic agencies.

Sumit Arora is Head, Civic Tech

A GLIMPSE AT MUNICIPAL PREMIER LEAGUE 2.0



The second edition of the Municipal Premier League (MPL 2.0) was launched in February '21 across 114 ULBs of Odisha by the Chief Secretary of the state, Mr Suresh Chandra Mahapatra. Municipal Premier League, conceptualised in the last financial year, aims to enhance the state's property tax collections by rewarding the tax officials across ULBs. Last year, the league was conducted across 9 AMRUT cities & expanded to all 114 ULBs of the state this year. In recent years, India has seen rapid urbanisation, and Indian cities are likely to house 41% of the country's population by 2030 compared to 31% in 2011. However, the need for making our cities financially sustainable is often overlooked, and our cities are largely dependent on central and state grants to meet the growing needs of the urban population.

Slowly but surely, the states and ULBs are looking at identifying innovative approaches to enhance their own revenues earned majorly through taxes and user fees/charges. Municipal Premier League (MPL) is one such innovative step taken up by the Odisha government across all the state's ULBs.

MPL 2.0 aims to enhance the property tax collections, focusing on improving the percentage of digital collections this year. One of the biggest challenges in the property tax system across ULBs in Odisha is the non-availability of digitised records of demand & collection details. More than 800 Mobile Point of Sale (MPOS) devices were deployed across the state for all the tax officials involved in Property tax collections to enhance the digitisation of collections & improve transparency in the system.

MPL 2.0 created healthy competition among the tax officials to maximise digital collections. Around 85% of the total collections that happened since the launch of MPL 2.0 happened through digital mode. MPL 2.0 also allowed the ULBs to engage Trans SHGs and Mission Shakti groups in Property tax collections. The daily updated dashboard launched to aid digitising collections under MPL 2.0 is also acting as a performance management tool for the administrators to monitor all the tax collector's performance across ULBs and devise strategies to enhance the same. Transparent mechanisms for digitising collections is the need of the hour to improve the collections and gain taxpayer's trust in the longer run.

Vipasyana Reddy is Associate Manager, Municipal Finance

QUALITY OF VOTER LISTS IN URBAN INDIA



India, the largest democracy in the world, holds union elections every five years. During the 2019 elections, INR. 55,000 Crores were spent, making it the most expensive election in the world. To exercise the right to franchise, citizens need to be registered on the voter list in any election. In India, lists are maintained at the Polling Part level, where up to about 1,400 citizens from the area are listed. However, the quality of voter lists, especially in urban India, is dubious, and the voter list management (VLM) process has systematic issues. This means many eligible citizens cannot cast their vote and, essentially, cannot have their voices heard in one of the most well-understood forms of civic participation.

In Delhi, Janaagraha found that 40% of entries on the voter list had some kind of error. More than half of these errors were listed person no longer living in that constituency, essentially an invalid entry. Furthermore, out of those living in the constituency, 49% were not actually listed on the polling part's voter list. Poor on-ground infrastructure actually makes it hard to validate the efficacy of the lists in many cities, for example, in Bengaluru and Patna. This led Janaagraha to research the VLM process, particularly regarding the role of Booth Level Officers (BLOs), who essentially do a lot of this same on-ground validation.

BLOs are the frontline workers of the Election Commission of India (ECI) tasked with collecting data on voters and, importantly, verifying their claims for registration. Janaagraha's landscaping study on BLOs in 21 cities indicated that it is challenging for citizens to reach out to a BLO. Only 23% of the total numbers called concluded with speaking to a BLO, and that was out of those numbers listed; many are blank. Many BLOs are not systematically trained or given the resources they need for the job. They also often do not live in the polling part they're tasked to manage the list for, adding to the likely problems of navigating poor on-ground infrastructure. Furthermore, only 68% of BLOs had been paid anything in the past year. Even under this, they were paid, on average, only over half of the allocated amount.

To ensure systematic participation in all eligible citizens' elections, the ECI must move towards ICT-driven VLM processes. This includes multiple database linkages allowing for automatic voter registration and more formal electoral roll management systems and tools to ensure systematic voter registration and validation.

Tarun Arora is Project Manager, Research and Insights

"90% of Citizens feel more positive about the Police Department since the Pandemic"

Ninety percent of Bengaluru's citizens feel more positive about the police now, than before the pandemic. A study titled, 'Policing in Bengaluru during the COVID-19 Pandemic', was jointly undertaken by Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy and Hans Seidel Stiftung. The outcomes of the study were discussed during Janaagraha's 10th City Politics webinar on February 24, held in association with Hans Seidel Foundation on the theme "Policing in Bengaluru during the Covid -19 Pandemic; learning and next steps".



Policing in Bengaluru during the Covid -19 Pandemic

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

P K H Tharakan
Former Chief of R&AW

Isha Pant, IPS
DCP, Command Center

Kavitha M C
ACP, Traffic East Division

Vikram Rai
Bangalore Apartments' Federation

Nalini Shekar
Founder - Hasiru Dala

Saraswathi Padmanabhan
Founder - Diya Char

Deepak Kumar BV
Area Suraksha Mitra

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24 FEB, WEDNESDAY
11:00 AM

"The duties assigned to police which are mostly coercitory in nature and worldwide have come to acquire an image that is not really endearing. It took a global pandemic to change all that. Enforcement has, of course, been familiar territory to the police. But enforcement of preventive health norms is not the same thing. Many suffered the consequences, falling ill themselves, and some succumbed," said P.K.H.Tharakan, Former Chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). "This pandemic provided a brilliant opportunity to show who we really are and that we can work with the public and, as the study pointed out, that there was a positive shift in the perception," said Isha Pant IPS, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Command Centre. The study highlighted that across gender, age and income, systematically, the majority of citizens indicated they have interacted with the police more during the pandemic than ever before. Over 70% of citizens (both men and women) 'strongly agreed' that the police effectively dealt with their need when they approached them.

Citizens felt police could be stricter where necessary and continue creating awareness around the pandemic. The police must be more attentive and not forget 'normal' crimes, engage with communities, listen to their needs, not fall back into old ways, and instead maintain consistency with this improved policing approach.

Understanding what the Andhra Pradesh youth think about Municipal Elections

Andhra Pradesh, a state that is 34% urban, held Municipal Polls on March 10. Lakhs of citizens from 12 Municipal Corporations and 75 Municipalities/Nagar Panchayats cast their vote. Some of these city governments like Visakhapatnam had not conducted elections for the last 14 years! Janaagraha, in its 11th City Politics conversation, tried to find out what the youth in Andhra Pradesh think about municipal elections. On March 6, the panel consisted of 5 youth leaders from different parts of the state, who discussed the problems, challenges and solutions on matters regarding local governance.



Youth and Municipal Elections in Andhra Pradesh

Srilekha Ati
Vizag

Chakravaradhan Reddy (YSRCP)
Nellore

Swathi
Guntur

Rajesh Kamireddi
Kakinada

Naga Sravan Kilaru (TDP)
Vijayawada

A LIVELY DISCUSSION ABOUT ROLE OF YOUTH IN UPCOMING MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS WITH YOUNG LEADERS OF AP

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<https://zoom.us/j/98866602230>

"Building the gap between bureaucrats, local representatives, college and school administrations is very important. There is a need to form youth councils who will actively engage in dialogues related to their cities," said Srilekha Ati, founder of City Speaks. "Let the information be accessible to citizens. Make the system more relevant for people to participate," said Swathi from Guntur. Chakravaradhan Reddy, a youth leader from YSRCP, stressed the need of having direct Mayor Elections, "There is a need to empower the Mayor, who currently seems to be overpowered by the MLAs," he said.

"Local bodies should have their own taxation systems and have enough power to spend the tax money," said Naga Sravan Kilaru, a youth leader from TDP. Rajesh Kamireddi from Kakinada said "We appreciate cities in western countries for their vibrancy and development. They mostly have citizens who directly control their city budgets and actively participate in city administration. We need to develop our cities, keeping every citizen in mind. Every infrastructure needs to be gauged to ensure it is disabled friendly, child and women-friendly."

"No matter which party comes to power in Tamil Nadu, they have to hold local body elections"

For close to the last 10 years, Chennai and many urban civic bodies in Tamil Nadu have not had local body elections. Instead of Mayor and councillors, the cities and towns are being administered by special officers appointed by the state government. In the run-up to the 16th legislative assembly election to be held on April 6 2021, in Tamil Nadu, Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy on March 12 held its 12th City Politics webinar to discuss, 'If the assembly elections can transform urban governance in Tamil Nadu'.



Prashanth Goutham, a volunteer with Arappor Iyakkam, is confident that local body elections will be conducted after assembly polls. However he doesn't believe that citizens' power devolutions recommended by the 74th amendment like ward sabhas will occur. "Decentralisation, devolution of power and more autonomy to grassroots democracy will be a focus of every party," said DMK Spokesperson Manuraj Shunmugasundaram. "While Tamil Nadu is asking for autonomy, they are not doing what needs to be done for decentralisation of power. Devolution of funds needs must be granted to the local government," highlighted Charu Govindan, Founder Member of Voice of People. Yuvraj, Joint Secretary (Research Wing) of Satta Panchayat Iyakkam, also asserted that the track record of the two major political parties commitment in Tamil Nadu regarding ward committees is not very encouraging.

Srinivas Alavilli, Head of Civic Participation at Janaagraha, urged the citizens to pressure all parties to empower local governments, hold elections and form ward committees and include citizens in the city budget-making process. "As citizens, we must engage not just during elections but between elections, and the citizen manifesto serves as a guiding light," he said.

"Kerala cities must be empowered, urban development must be on the state's agenda"

At the outset of Kerala's upcoming legislative assembly election on April 6, Janaagraha held its 13th City Politics webinar themed – "Can this assembly election transform urban governance in Kerala?" on March 19.

"Kerala has 87 municipalities and 6 municipal corporations. Even though an outdated one, Kerala has a state urban policy that no other state has. Urban areas are a part of the political discourse now. Place-based leadership is emerging in Kerala. Political candidates have started identifying local issues," said Dr Ajith Kaliyath, Urban Chair, Kerala Institute of Local Administration – KILA.

"Our city governments are not sufficiently empowered. As per what I have noticed, we have Mayors and Corporators who have great ideas. They are visionaries, but they are not in the position to execute their ideas. They end up being glorified clerks," said Dr D Dhanuraj, Founder Chairman and Managing Trustee, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi. Smrithi Harris from United Democratic Front (UDF) said the direct election of Mayors is not viable and practical. Dhanuraj also shared the same opinion adding that Mayor elected directly may not be able to solve anything. "There is a need for systems to be fixed and strengthened. Until this happens, we may not see effective change on the ground," he added.

"Funds, functions and functionaries are three core components needed for effective decentralisation," added K J Sohan, former Mayor of the Kochi Municipal Corporation. "Government and political leaders are generally talking about urban development. Actually, we can't develop urban without including the rural areas. So, Kerala needs a different approach. The state should also rewrite the current capacity-building system and make it outcome-oriented," said Jagajeevan Neelakandapillai, former programme officer, Kudumbashree.

