



Janaagraha: Curbing Corruption through Citizen Empowerment

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Social activist Anna Hazare and his fight against corruption have caught the imagination of the Indian people. When the 72-year-old Gandhian went on an indefinite fast in April demanding a comprehensive and effective Lok Pal Bill -- which would establish a body to act in the role of ombudsman, in hopes of rooting out fraud in India -- people across the nation joined him in large numbers. Hazare broke his fast after four days when the government issued a notification constituting a joint committee of ministers and civil society members to draft the bill. But he is keeping a watchful eye. Hazare is firm that if the government doesn't take the Lok Pal Bill to its logical conclusion, he will resume the fight. He has already marked August 15, India's Independence Day, for staging his next fast, if needed.



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Fighting the war on corruption from another front is the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, a Bangalore (Karnataka)-based nonprofit organization. On August 15, 2010, Janaagraha launched an online initiative called ipaidabribe.com that invites citizens to share their experiences of giving bribes. With more than 12,500 reports to date, ipaidabribe.com is among the largest repository of bribe reports worldwide. (Others include BRIBELine, nobribe and 5th Pillar.) But Janaagraha goes beyond collecting data and raising a public outcry. It analyses the data to understand the taxonomy of corruption in different areas and then uses that knowledge to work with the government to bring about systemic change.

Last month, Janaagraha was invited by the chief secretary of Karnataka to make a presentation to officials from the departments of stamps and registration, and electricity supply. During the interactions, Janaagraha highlighted the areas of corruption in these departments and gave recommendations on how this could be reduced. For the past few months, the organization has also been interacting with the transport department to help it minimize the scope for corruption across its various transactions.

"The fight for the Lok Pal Bill is a very important and critical step, but the definition of what constitutes corruption under the law is very narrow. A strong Lok Pal Bill alone will not suffice. It will not help tackle the day-to-day corruption that citizens are faced with," says Swati Ramanathan, co-founder of Janaagraha. "In order to eradicate corruption, the canvas has to be much larger. More importantly, we have to take a systemic approach towards eradicating it."

She points out that when citizens face corruption at every step in their daily lives, it cultivates passive acceptance as a survival strategy. Instead of demanding public services as an entitlement, they look upon them as favors. This in turn further fuels corruption and bad governance.

Building Civic Innovation

It is this vicious cycle that Janaagraha is seeking to break. The organization believes that a better quality of citizenship will demand improved infrastructure and services from the government and thereby drive greater accountability. "We are in the area of civic innovation," notes co-founder Ramesh Ramanathan. "We see Janaagraha's role as creating forums for citizens to engage with the government. We want to be a catalyst to make the democratic process deeper and more effective."

According to Samuel Paul, founder-chairman of the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), a Bangalore-based nonprofit organization, and formerly a professor of economics and director at the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad, organizations like PAC and Janaagraha are created in reaction to failures at

the government level. "They are an expression of the people's dissatisfaction with the government and seek to provide a platform for the common man," he says. In a note on Janaagraha, Jeb Brugmann, founding secretary-general of ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, an international association of local governments, writes that the organization's model combines the roles of a think-tank, a capacity-building organization and a grassroots movement, "which in most cities are split into separate organizations that struggle to coordinate efforts."

Founded by the husband and wife team of Swati, an architect by profession, and Ramesh, a former Citibanker, Janaagraha, which currently has a core team of 75, has had an interesting evolution. It initially started as a citizen's movement in 2001 with the support of volunteers. The Ramanathans had returned to India after a decade-long stay in the U.S. Inspired by the participatory budgeting system in Porto Alegre, Brazil -- which allows average citizens to decide how to allocate the city's budget -- they conceived and personally funded a similar campaign in the local ward works of Bangalore's municipal budget. (A ward is the smallest political unit in urban India.)

The campaign saw some success, with citizens coming forward and the government responding. Around 5,000 citizens participated in the campaign and 22% of the local budget was designed with their input. But the Ramanathans soon realized that in order to be sustainable and deliver concrete results the initiative had to grow beyond just a movement. Also, they realized that simply engaging citizens on individual issues was not adequate; a holistic approach and a strong advocacy with the government were imperative.

What began for the couple as a one-time campaign -- they had planned to return to their respective careers after that -- evolved into a long-term commitment and a formal organization with the mission of improving the quality of life in urban India by improving urban governance.

An Urban Focus

The Ramanathans say that they have chosen to focus specifically on urban India for two reasons: One, being city bred, this is the space where the couple is most familiar. Secondly, they view urban development as a hugely neglected area. Governance issues, they say, will only grow deeper in the years ahead if not addressed effectively. According to the 2001 census, 28% of India's population lives in urban areas. By 2021, this is expected to increase to 40%.

Janaagraha, which means "moral force of the people," examines quality of life in urban India from two aspects: infrastructure (such as roads, transport, water and sanitation) and citizenship (the role that urban residents play by participating in civic issues.) The organization has developed a comprehensive framework called REED for all its activities. REED is an acronym for what Janaagraha considers to be the four defining aspects of urban governance: regional perspective; enabled and empowered citizens and local governments, and direct accountability of the government to the people. Based on this framework, Janaagraha engages with the citizens as well as with the government.

V. Ramachandran, ex-chief secretary for the government of Kerala, who joined Janaagraha's advisory board when it was constituted in 2006, says he was attracted by the organization's unique approach. Pointing out that most organizations tend to focus on the problems of rural areas, Ramachandran notes that urban areas, especially large cities, are "a much neglected field in India. Janaagraha is one of the very few organizations addressing this space. What also makes Janaagraha unique is that it does not confine itself to grassroots projects, but is able to work with the government at the national level on policy reforms."

According to T.R. Raghunandan, a former senior government official who is now a consultant to Janaagraha, the organization's engagement with the government is something that sets it apart from many others in this space. "Some NGOs see the government as an enemy unless otherwise proven and take the path of agitation," he says. "Then there are others who are more like contractors. They take money from the government and perform certain tasks for them. That sometimes compromises their position. Janaagraha, on the other hand, collaborates with government but does not take any money from it. This allows it to work with the government at policy level without compromising on its independence."

In terms of advocacy, one of Janaagraha's most significant contributions is in the area of public financial

disclosure by government bodies. This effort began as a campaign called "public records of operations and finance (PROOF)" in 2002. Led by Janaagraha, a coalition of community service organizations campaigned for the quarterly public disclosure of Bangalore city corporation's financial records. Within six months of the launch of the PROOF campaign, the city corporation agreed to adhere to their demand. Over the next few years, the PROOF team created standardized service level benchmarks (SSLB) to evaluate urban public service delivery.

In 2007, this grassroots campaign was incorporated into formal policy. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, a central government urban development program covering around 60 cities, incorporated a disclosure law whereby municipal bodies are required to disclose financial records. Last year, the 13th Finance Commission included a service level benchmark framework as one of the criteria for judging state performance. At the ground level, PROOF currently operates in 28 cities in India through its SSLB model.

PROOF has found acceptance outside India, too. The United Nations Development Program has highlighted it as a successful accountability idea, and it has been chosen by the World Bank as one of the best practices in the Asia-Pacific region.

On the citizens' front, Janaagraha is currently active primarily in the city of Bangalore. Over the last decade, more than 7,000 individuals have volunteered more than 4 million man-hours. The organization's current programs include ward infrastructure services assessment; cleaning up electoral rolls and increasing voter registration; a joint initiative with the civil defense unit of the police to train citizens in first aid, emergency response and disaster management to create safer neighborhoods and strong communities; creating citizen change agents through specific training interventions, and creating civic awareness among school children. It recently also launched iJanaagraha, a social media platform.

Janaagraha has also developed various indices to measure the effectiveness of its work. These include the ward infrastructure index, citizenship index and the urban governance index. These systems have been developed using government indicators and best practices worldwide. The citizenship index, for instance, has been worked out in collaboration with the South Asia Study Program at Johns Hopkins University in the United States and the New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

"Empowering and enabling citizens is not just a means to an end. It is not just about putting pressure on the government to deliver. It is also an end by itself. It deepens democracy," Ramesh notes. Adds Swati: "Our biggest learning has been that in a democracy, the system does respond. It may respond slowly and unpredictably, but it does respond. You just have to be persistent and also create a critical mass."

In order to do this, Janaagraha needs to scale. Over the next five years, the organization plans to expand its activities to 10 cities. It has recently identified Hyderabad as its next city of focus. Team Janaagraha will begin its activities there by gathering information regarding the quality of the city's ward infrastructure and services; the level of citizen engagement and awareness, and the governance ecosystem. "This will give us the baseline data to measure the impact of our work over subsequent years," according to Ramesh.

Strengthening the Core

This systematic and metric-driven approach and its track record have won Janaagraha many supporters. In October 2010, global philanthropic investment firm Omidyar Network India Advisors committed funding of US\$3 million to Janaagraha over three years. This is the largest grant by Omidyar for projects of this nature outside the U.S. The funds will be used by Janaagraha to scale its operations.

Surya Mantha, director investments at Omidyar, lists the reasons for funding Janaagraha: The quality and reputation of the founders; their holistic, systems-oriented approach to addressing and solving the problems of urban governance; their emphasis on citizen engagement; the innovative use of technology to drive civic participation and engagement, and the emphasis on metrics/scorecard and rigorous measurement of social impact. "They are unique in their space in taking the approach they do," Mantha says.

The award from Omidyar is the first mainstream funding for Janaagraha. In its initial years, the organization was fully funded by the Ramanathans. It had a small core team of around 15 people and

worked primarily through volunteers. But as the organization and its scope and scale of activities grew, the duo realized that their funds alone would not suffice. (Since its inception, the couple has funneled around US\$1 million into Janaagraha. All of their work with the organization is pro-bono.) They also felt that to be a sustainable institution, Janaagraha should have funding from other sources.

But before they approached external donors, the Ramanathans took various steps to strengthen the organization internally. To begin with, they put together a formal organizational structure, including an advisory board with individuals like L.C. Jain (a noted economist, policy maker and winner of the Magsaysay award. Jain passed away in November last year); Ramachandran, the ex-chief secretary of the government of Kerala, and others.

A working council to oversee the day-to-day operations of the organization, and separate teams and strong external advisory groups for the various programs was also created. For instance, one of the programs for mobilizing voter registration had former chief election commissioner T.S. Krishnamurthy and Infosys co-founder N.R. Narayana Murthy as advisors. Other key measures included streamlining various processes, implementing an accounting system, developing clear performance metrics and adopting the balanced scorecard approach.

Ashish Dhawan, co-founder and senior managing director at venture capital firm ChrysCapital Investment, has donated over US\$1 million in his personal capacity to Janaagraha and is a member of its advisory board. He believes that Janaagraha is a thought leader in the space of urban governance and could have a huge impact over the next decade or two. He adds a note of caution, however. "It will take time to move the needle, nothing will change overnight. The biggest challenge for Janaagraha and its founders is to have the persistence to stay the course."

Janaagraha has had its share of critics, too. The most common criticism is that the organization is elitist and has an urban bias. The founders shrug this off. Says Ramesh: "We want the work of Janaagraha to ultimately impact everyone, especially the poor. But we are from middle class urban India and we can't walk away from our identity. For us, inclusive development is not about working exclusively with the poor. It is about bringing people together."

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