

THE BEGINNING OF PROOF

The idea first came when I was taking a break at the end of the intense first campaign that launched Janaagraha.

I was reading Richard Hofstadter's book on American Political Tradition, marveling at his writing skill. I was also dipping my head into other books that I had picked up in Singapore, some of which were to do with my old world of international finance; one in particular was interesting, about Alan Greenspan, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve.

It must have been the afternoon sun that worked its trick, because the two worlds of public governance and international finance collided. I sprang out of the deck chair, spilling the delicious apple-mint-with-crushed-ice drink that I had been sipping. What if we could combine the need for information from government, with one of the tested instruments of disclosure that the private sector used, the QUARTERLY STATEMENT? It would solve so many issues: the need for regular, standardized information; the ability to use the event as a public space, for various stakeholders to engage; the incredible potential to change the way in which we could look at performance information from government; the flexibility to build on a small skeleton structure, and gradually flesh it out over time.

We had been talking about getting more access to information from government, but what about the SPACE in which this information got disseminated. What this could provide was a single, periodic opportunity. And the content of this space could keep expanding, as we refined the process over time. The space could allow the citizens to get involved, but not restricted just to citizens, it could include elected representatives, NGOs, rating agencies, financial institutions that would be lending money to the government agency, the media etc.

This got me thinking, "How did the idea of the quarterly statement actually come about? What was the process of private-sector disclosure that led to the particular form of disclosure?" Surely, this must have originated in some form of RIGHT-TO-INFORMATION movement on the part of shareholders.

After returning to India, I dug deeper into the history of the structure of the corporation, and the evolution of disclosure standards. The parallels between the path we were on in asking for Right-to-Information from government, and that of investors in private sector companies seemed extraordinarily similar. Except a few hundred years apart, given that the stir for shareholder information began in 1630, a few decades after the form of the modern corporation began.

Rather than re-inventing the wheel, why not adapt a mechanism that was universally understood and accepted?

The operational questions abounded. How could we launch a campaign out of this? Who would be interested in a campaign of this nature? There were so many strands to the activity: citizen mobilization, analyzing financial statements and budgets, generating training material and then subsequently training the layperson to know how to engage in a process like this; getting citizens to own the process eventually, and communicate this themselves; the legal aspect: what was the basis to ask the government for this

information? Why would they give it? What existing legal options were available, or needed to be formulated.

Fortunately, Bangalore had a wealth of institutions that not only had the expertise in these areas, but also the passion for change in public governance. Could we come together as a group, each bringing our own capabilities, and launch this as-yet-unnamed campaign? Can a group of civil society institutions come together as a tight network and pull off something that could eventually be pretty extraordinary? What about the money, how much would something like this cost?

It was worth a try, for sure.

I put together a draft paper that outlined the idea. Called four friends who ran wonderful institutions in their own right. Over samosas and tea, we agreed that this thing could indeed take off.

Eventually, four of us came together. PAC, VOICES, CBPS and Janaagraha.

PROOF- Public Record Of Operations and Finance (thankfully, we moved away from the first acronym that had been coined, FROG – Financial Record of Government!) was launched on July 4, 2002.