

## **1. Briefly, tell our readers what Janaagraha is all about.**

One of the areas that Indians feel very disappointed and hopeless about is the quality of our governments. We term this area “public governance”. What all citizens want is better public governance. At Janaagraha we believe that it is not possible to get better governance without deepening the meaning of democracy from representation to participation. This means that in the alphabet of democracy, you cannot go from E to F, elect and forget; you need to stay on the letter E, elect and engage. For this to happen, citizens need to recognize their role and responsibility, and also that there is new language of constructive engagement that is required, where citizens and government are partners, not where citizens are out to expose government. The last piece of the framework is to do with communities. This essentially says that for citizens to engage, what is required is robust institutions of the people, which can be informal. Communities of citizens are the way forward, rather than just individuals.

So, the sequence of thinking is: good public governance needs participatory democracy, which needs constructive engagement, which needs communities of citizens.

Janaagraha is about making participatory democracy happen. To do this, we don't think that people need to give up their lives. We believe that this is possible for citizens to do, with a few hours a month, what we call PRACTICAL PATRIOTISM, where there is balance between a person's job, their family, their entertainment, and their desire to make a difference in society at large.

## **2. How would you define a community with a positive identity? In other words, what gives a community an identity, and what ensures it has a positive impact on society?**

One of the most important ingredients to making a community identity happen is affinity, the binding agent that brings people together. There is an NGO based in Bangalore called Myrada, which does a lot of work in rural development. Over the past 20 years, their work has shown that the path to development lies in creating people's institutions, what is called self-help groups (SHGs), which are clusters of 15-20 people. Myrada has learnt that the ingredient that keeps some of these clusters going is AFFINITY: where it is there, the groups flower, where it is missing, they wither away. This is not something that one can mandate from the top, it is something that comes from within.

This affinity could be anything: a common occupation, a common area of residence, a common interest or passion etc. As Al Fernandez put it, “Examples of various categories of people's institutions are the Self-Help Affinity Groups, Watershed Management Associations, Village Water and Sanitation committees, School betterment committees, Federations, Village Forest Committees and several others. Each category of institution is structured differently, but they were not structured from above, or a priori.”

I have had the good fortune to be associated with Myrada over the past four years, and subscribe a lot to this view.

There are also other writings about communities, but I would like to quote one here for you: this was by a French sociologist called Alex de Tocqueville who visited America in the 1830s and wrote a book called “Democracy in America”: “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute... Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”

It is interesting that you have used the word “POSITIVE”. Robert Putnam, a sociologist who wrote the book “BOWLING ALONE” in which he decried the decline of community spirit in America, and who has also done an interesting study on differences in governance based on community engagement in Italy, said that not all communities have a positive impact. He cites the Ku Klux Klan in the US, a community of white supremacists as an example. We have our own version of this emerging in the rabid nationalism of the RSS.

It is hard to **ensure** that a community has a positive impact on society. My belief is that there are enough communities that can have a positive impact, let's focus on those, and also recognize that the sailing is not going to be necessarily smooth, especially given that there are all kinds of communities out there.

6. (am putting your 6<sup>th</sup> question here, since it is related to identity) **You have said in an interview JT (Dec. 16-31, 2002), that "People should build up a community identity." How should they do this? Do you believe that they can further strengthen this by establishing an individual identity?**

My graduate business school was one that emphasized the understanding of group behavior, whether in a community or in an organization. Part of what I learnt there was the composition of our individual identities: we generally like to think of ourselves as unique individuals, with our own unique individual identity. Whereas, what we are is actually a composite of many group identities, and how we behave in any situation is a function of which group identity of ours emerges at that moment. Take me for example: I have a south Indian group identity; an engineer's identity; a banker's identity; an NRI identity; a cricket lover's identity, etc.

There was one interesting group session that illustrated this for me at business school: the class of 120 was asked to group ourselves sequentially in an increasing definition of identity: first, there were Jews from New York, while there were also Bangaloreans; then there were Indians, then South Asians, then Asians. As we grouped together as Asians, with people from Pakistan and Philippines, we realized that there was a group identity among us that was comfortable: it helped us "deal" with the other groups that were across the room: North Americans, South Americans, etc.

While this is clearly a complex area, I think that we do not recognize the degree to which we carry around various group affiliations within us. Our identities are composite sketches of these; we could strengthen our individual identities by seeing these group identities.

**3. What briefly is the information base you can share (give examples), and that citizens can use? Janaagraha's body of knowledge- what would you say it consists of? how can it help the average citizen?**

Janaagraha's aim is to create the CORE LEARNING for participatory democracy: how do the nuts and bolts of this process work? What is the discipline that is required for local citizen communities to come together and engage with their local governments at the ward level?

To this end, we are compiling a lot of information that is meant for communities: understanding how your local government works; what the budget of the city is; what are ward works; how can you get involved; what is the role of the corporator, your elected representative; how do you hold regular meetings among citizens and also with the city's engineering department; what information do you need to make sure that these meetings go off well, etc.

We even have material on how communities can organize themselves across a ward, in the form of informal federations, so that there is a structure within which they can function across several communities of citizens.

In fact, we are constantly building on this body of knowledge.

**4. What specific initiatives can people undertake to participate in upgrading their living standards - within the mandate that Janaagraha supports?**

One of the key goals of participatory democracy is that citizens start sharing the decision-making responsibility with the government. This means that all the kinds of issues that local governments are mandated with: good local infrastructure, good public schooling, public healthcare, garbage management, etc, all these are things that citizens can get involved in to improve their living standards.

While this is the end goal, it is important to build the bridge between citizens and government first.

Currently, Janaagraha is involved in some of these areas: local infrastructure and public schooling are two examples.

**5. What is Janaagraha's next project? How do you think people have responded to your initiative to energise citizens to participate in governance?**

We have three campaigns going on. Each of this is meant to strengthen the process of participatory democracy.

The first is meant for local infrastructure. The second is financial transparency from the city government itself, called PROOF (Public Record of Operations and Finance). The third is exclusively meant for the

urban poor residents of the city (while this has been going on for 6 months, it will be announced in the next few weeks).

In addition, we have other activities that are internal to us, that strengthen our ability to support citizens: Janaagraha Times is one example, our technology initiative called JAGRATI (JAnaaGRAha Tech Initiative) is another.

We do not envisage starting a new campaign for citizens in the immediate future, until these campaigns stabilize.

**7. Any specific help (jobs or tasks) that citizens can render to help Janaagraha reach its goals. Examples will help.**

The other side of what Janaagraha is about is PROFESSIONAL VOLUNTARISM. There are plenty of opportunities to engage with what we are doing, and our office always welcomes citizens who are willing to give their time, be it for an hour a week or a few hours a month. We have a detailed list of what we need: currently, there are over 45 SPECIFIC volunteer responsibilities that have been defined.