

## What is our original purpose?

### The role of civil society in democracy By Ramesh Ramanathan

I did a search on the internet for the term "Participatory Democracy". Result: 30,000 sites. Another search on "Public Governance", 20,000 sites. What about "Participatory Democracy and Public Governance"? 62 sites. So many words jostling for attention.

as we explore these important ideas, and try to contribute to a deeper understanding and internalization of the issues underlying them, my thoughts are, "What is new about what I have to say?"

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"All is one, and there is balance in interdependence."

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At one level, there are personal experiences that one can share: what we did, and how are we going about it. Tactical, workbook material continuum perspective, but not the right context.

At another level, there is the question of motive, what I call "original purpose". While the manifestation of our actions may look similar, the original purposes could be very different. We all know there is corruption, inefficiency, avoidable poverty and wretchedness. We all agree that transparency, citizen participation etc. will result in better quality governments. Some of us may choose the language of "right to information", others may choose "participatory democracy", some a tough confrontational attitude, others attempting delicate skips between the words "collaboration" and "engagement". But the central question is, in all this energy, what is the "original purpose"?

So this is what I choose to write about. Based on my personal experience.

There is a powerful concept in Mathematics called the "Möbius Strip". The experiment to understand this is fair straight forward: take a strip of paper of the approximate dimensions of a 12-inch scale. Bring the ends together to form a ring. This shape has two surfaces, one on the inside of the ring. Repeat this exercise, except twist one end of the paper before bringing it to meet the other end. This new structure has an astonishing property: it has only one surface. No matter where you begin on the surface of the paper, you end back there.

Discovered in 1858 by a German mathematician, the Möbius strip has moved beyond mathematics, and become one of the symbols of a unipolar world. All is one, and there is balance in interdependence. The familiar "recycling" sign owes its lineage to the Möbius strip.

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"There are no boundaries there is no "us" and "them", as in citizens and government. There is no private and public, as in our individual lives. There is only a continuum stretching in many directions."

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Let me use an example. Imagine a situation where our roads are perfect, our public schools and hospitals are running efficiently, our governments are delivering value -for-money on the decisions they make...

In such a situation, how would your interactions with government be? What would your own life be like? How would your average day feel?

The issue arose when I was asked by a person, "What I would really like is for the system to work properly on its own, so that I can devote all my energies to myself: being an effective person, running my company efficiently and creatively." She went on to say, "Each of us can do this, isn't it?"

Focus on our own priorities: family, profession, skills, etc."

The answer to this question reveals "original purpose". So let us examine the issue a bit more in detail.

If the idea of citizen participation is meant to fix things that are not working properly, if it is meant only as a check to keep the system honest, if communities of citizens need to come together only to inspect the work of the government, what happens when the job is done? Shall we dismantle the framework of citizen participation, since there is no need for it anymore? Focus on our own selves?

This goes to the root of what we mean democracy, as well to some personal questions about us as individuals. At some level, we are all involved in pursuing happiness. It means different things to different people. For most of us, we recognize that we live in a society that we exchange some of our personal independence for a common good in which each of us benefits. One way to see this is an unwritten contract. The issue is in enforcing that contract, since most people can be what is called "free riders": not fulfilling their role, but not being noticed.

At the next level, which is the relationship between the citizens and the government, there is no social contract. Many political scientists and philosophers have contributed to the understanding of what this social contract stands for, but three stand out: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was the last of them, and lived in France in the 18th century. Rousseau's ideas are the most popular today, underlining the sovereignty of the people and laying the foundation for democratic processes. The wonder of true democracy is that it is a universal process. We do not have to attribute suspicious labels to it there are no hidden colonial or northern hands behind it.

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In making democracy work, the role of civil society has merited much attention, dating from Alexis de Tocqueville in 1830s when he returned from a curiosity-led tour of America to declare that he had understood what held that country together. In his book titled "Democracy in America", Tocqueville stated that what made America great was the pervasive spirit of community in that country.

Today, this spirit of community has become a hot topic of discussion, under the label "social capital", where sociologists attempt to "measure" the level of community spirit in a society. In a famous but contentious piece written a few years ago called "Bowling Alone", Robert Putnam declared that these conglomerations of citizen communities-invariably not for political purposes-were at the root of efficient national processes, and that they were on the decline in America. The point however was about recognizing the impact of the community; the healthier that society is in a holistic sense. This presence of social capital has thus been positioned to be a key lynchpin even for the markets of the world, including the famed US-led system of capitalism. It is the invisible safety net that supports everything. So, how does social capital manifest itself? In many ways, almost always at the local, grassroots level: local cricket clubs, parent-teacher communities, music appreciation groups, resident welfare associations etc.

To many, this lifting of the veil of "social capital" may seem less than the most dramatic moment in the world. For the manic marketing executive in Mumbai, nothing could seem further from the

world that she occupies, with her KRA's and monthly targets. The glue that holds the world's markets together is the level to which the people participate in their local communities? Preposterous as it may sound, it is true.

We have all started living in a world where we believe that we have enough responsibilities to manage: that our contribution to society is happening through the taxes we pay, the "honest citizen" lives we live. That the unseen fabric called society we take for granted exists forever. Unfortunately, this healthy society is not a magic carper that allows us to indulge in the pursuit of our personal dreams, but rather a complex tapestry where each of us has a strand to weave. And there is nobody pulling the strings. Keeping this from tearing happens with continuous investment in and of communities. It requires constant participation. To put it another way, it really is what our lives are about. The rest is gravy: the jobs, the markets, the highways, the holidays...

To me, the question therefore is, "Why should citizens involve themselves only when things are not working? Why can this not have a positive approach, one that says, 'we will come together to build, and each of us plays a role.' Each citizen recognizes the role that she plays, and weaves this understanding into her definition of what her life is about. With balance, this is not temporary, not a chore, not a distasteful thing that somebody has to do. One of the manifestations of this engagement is good governance and participatory democracy.

To me, there is an intrinsic positive energy to this approach that provides strength from the bottom-up. It is consistent with personal belief, consistent with the idea that all learning comes from doing, consistent with the idea that simplicity is beautiful, consistent with the fundamental but forgotten idea of goodness, consistent with the original purpose of Gandhi's when he wanted our country to be a nation of 300,000 self-governing villages.

It fills out nicely from the inside out. It is my original purpose. It helps me answer the lady's question about focusing on her own life exclusively if only government worked well by itself. It helps me wake my children up in the morning and hug my wife at night. It allows me to understand my own role with a sense of balanced humility. Like the mobius strip, it allows me to recognize that we are all parts of a larger composite, interdependent. It also results in good governance, as many other paths do.

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