

In partnership with



COUNCILLORS: OUR FORGOTTEN LEADERS

OUR JOURNEY WITH COUNCILLORS OF INDIA



Diversity in
BALLARI

New perspectives in
BENGALURU

Adventure in
GUWAHATI

Gender disparity in
JAIPUR

Strong voices in
MUMBAI

Wait time in
PANAJI

Generosity in
PATNA

JANAAGRAHA CENTRE FOR CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY



JANAAGRAHA CENTRE FOR CITIZENSHIP & DEMOCRACY

Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy

Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy (Janaagraha) is a Bengaluru based not-for-profit institution that is a part of the Jana group. Janaagraha's mission is to transform quality of life in India's cities and towns. It defines quality of life as comprising quality of infrastructure and services and quality of citizenship. To achieve its mission, Janaagraha works with citizens to catalyse active citizenship in city neighbourhoods and with governments to institute reforms to City-Systems. You can read more about Janaagraha at www.janaagraha.org.

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National Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (NFSSM) Alliance

The National Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (NFSSM) Alliance, a national working group, comprises of 30+ diverse organisations and individuals across India. Supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the NFSSM Alliance was convened in January 2016, with the intention to build consensus on sanitation outcomes, present a unified voice to inform policies and drive forward the discourse on faecal sludge and septage management (FSSM) in India.

In the last 6 years, the NFSSM Alliance has strengthened the foundation of India's urban sanitation sector, especially championing inclusive, safe and equitable sanitation approaches like FSSM to ensure human health and dignity, and the health of urban ecosystems. For more information: <https://nfssmalliance.org/>

As part of Janaagraha's 'City Leaders' study, we travelled across the length and breadth of India to capture the voices of 65 councillors in 21 cities across 16 states in India. 'City Leaders' is a study on a systematic leadership programme to empower elected leaders, particularly women, in India's cities for a sustainable urban future.

Where did we go to capture the voice of councillors?

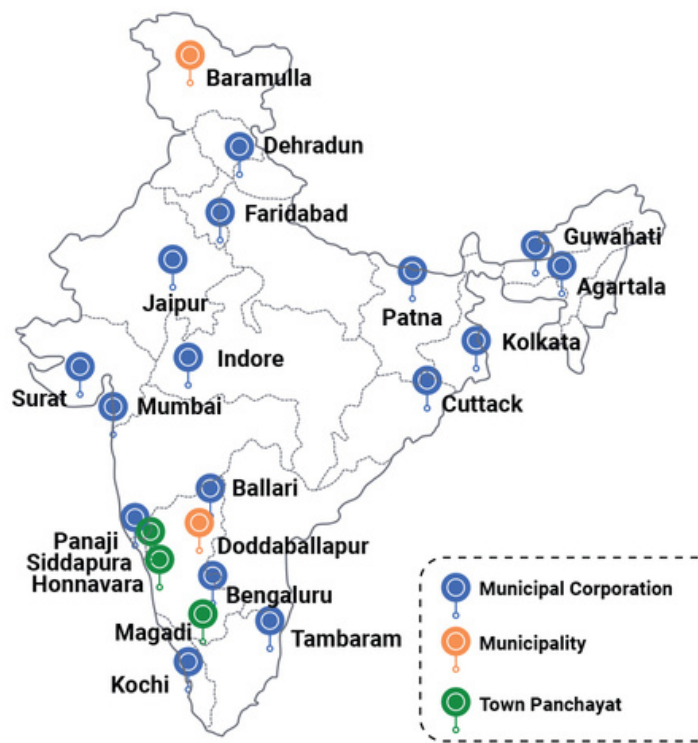


Fig. 1

The councillors we spoke to, hailed from diverse backgrounds across gender, religion, and socio-economic strata. Though our conversations were instrumental in understanding the extent of disempowerment of our local elected representatives, immersion into the environment in which they operate, helped us see the unintended consequences of institutional failures.

This report '**Councillors - Our forgotten leaders**' aims to capture the spoken and unspoken interactions of the Janaagraha team with councillors across India. Here we narrate our experience of interacting with councillors from seven select cities covered under 'City Leaders'. These are - Ballari, Bengaluru, Guwahati, Jaipur, Mumbai, Panaji and Patna. From learning about grassroots governance to questioning our own prejudices, our experiences in these cities were full of lessons. We hope through our stories you learn more about our cities and forgotten city leaders!



BALLARI, KARNATAKA

- Mythreyi Mugundan, Associate, Advocacy and Reforms
Dhavan Jahagirdar, Intern, Civic Participation



Parveen Bhanu, Former Councillor, Ballari

Arriving in the city of Ballari with the intention to interview a councillor, was a new experience and we would be lying if we said we didn't have jitters. As we set out a lot of thoughts were wandering in our mind during our travel to the councillor's home. News and videos about the councillor had built in our mind an image of a stereotypical politician who was vocal and lived a celebrated life.

Such is the beauty of life that all these assumptions came crashing down in a matter of seconds. As we requested a *paan* shop owner for directions to the councillor's home, the reply surprised us. He told us that the councillor was on a trip and may not be in town. Upon informing him that we had sought an appointment and confirmed beforehand, he directed us towards the destination. What surprised us was the connection the councillor had developed with the locals.

The simple manner in which the councillor lives was inspiring. Poverty is generally associated with struggle and disappointments. The interaction that lasted for more than three hours with the councillor painted a completely different picture. The councillor's will to work for the people, the drive to develop her area and care for the needy inspired us to re-examine the way we lead our lives.

"It made us realise that though education is important, it is not the only way a person's growth can be measured."



Team Janaagraha with Parveen Bhanu, Former Councillor, Ballari

The councillor's words were backed by evidence she had accumulated from all the work that she had done. While the interview was being conducted, the councillor received calls from several people reaching out to her for issues. She called several officers and councillors to ensure that the complaints were communicated and sought a speedy resolution. The capability with which the councillor navigates the complexity of administrative systems and gets work done for her community is noteworthy.

The house of the councillor may have been small, but her heart was big. She offered us delicious *prasadam* (a temple offering) and bid us farewell with good wishes for our endeavour. The journey back home was filled with inspiration, memories of a good experience, and a smile on our faces.



Parveen Bhanu, Former Councillor, Ballari

I do not look at each community differently. When people approach me with a grievance, I work towards resolving them. Getting trained in communication skills is important as councillors should know how to communicate with officials and others to ensure the work or grievances in their ward get addressed.

Parveen Bhanu, Former
Councillor, Ballari

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

- Mythreyi Mugundan, Associate, Advocacy and Reforms
Dhavan Jahagirdar, Intern, Civic Participation



Team Janaagraha with Padmanabha Reddy,
Former Councillor, Bengaluru

To plain eyes, it might seem that lack of an active council in Bengaluru since 2020 allows former councillors to sit back and wait for the next election cycle. Surprisingly, they were still busy and involved in solving civic issues. Even though it has been a year without elections, councillors still carry out their functions as elected representatives. The experience of interviewing a councillor from a city like Bengaluru was an insightful one. The problems that councillors face in Bengaluru are complex and impact the everyday lives of people.

"Once you become a public representative, you remain one for life. It doesn't matter if you don't have power but you have a voice that's heard."



Office of Abdul Wajid, Former Councillor,
Bengaluru

You need to know the various departments of BBMP. You need to know how much funds are available with the departments. Then you need to request the mayor and deputy mayor. You have to demand and request for funds. Only then funds will be sanctioned.

Abdul Wajid, Former Councillor, Bengaluru

It was a hassle to call up the councillors and schedule the interview. We recall reaching out and following up with a councillor for four days straight. He said he was extremely sorry for not being able to set aside some time for the interview. After multiple follow-ups, he gave us an appointment and said he likes to stay true to his word. Though scheduling an interview was an uphill task, once the interviews were scheduled, the councillors were punctual.

It was interesting to note the different functions a councillor must perform. One councillor had people come to him for the resolution of personal issues concerning property. A councillor is the first person who is approached by the citizens for the completion of public works and in some circumstances, resolution of public grievances. A councillor is also like a family member to the residents of the ward. The time of the year being marriage season, securing an interview was understandably cumbersome.



Team Janaagraha with Padmanabha Reddy, Former Councillor, Bengaluru

One thing that stands out in our interview with the councillors in Bengaluru is that they have dedicated spaces with staff to assist them to perform their role. While some have dedicated offices for people to approach them, the others have earmarked a room in their residences as offices. They set time aside every day to address people's grievances. Additionally, what was heartening to see was the vision for development that they had for their ward and city.

Despite facing criticisms and media glare, the councillors were great hosts. They took extra efforts to ensure we had eaten as the interview progressed for an average of one and half hours. They were generous enough to offer food and gifts to us. Power gives the councillors authority but it is heartening to see that they have continued to carry out their responsibility even though they are no longer mandated to by law.

GUWAHATI, ASSAM

- Shilpi Sinha Ray, Senior Associate, Civic Participation



Building of Guwahati Municipal Corporation

"Initially, it was disheartening as I had travelled 1,038 kms. to only face rejections."

The first thing I did after landing at the Guwahati airport was to call all the four former councillors whose appointments I had taken. The term of the councillors of Guwahati Municipal Corporation had ended in 2018 and elections had not been held since then. Only one of the councillors picked up and agreed to meet me the next day. The rest hung up on me mentioning an ailing family member as well as festival celebrations. Initially, it was extremely disheartening as I had travelled 1,038 kilometres to face rejections. As I was driving back to my hotel, one of the councillors who refused to see me earlier asked me to drop by at her house in the evening. After reaching her house without any difficulty, I met the councillor who possessed excellent leadership qualities and confidence. When I told her about my unfortunate predicament, she helped me by providing numbers of other councillors who agreed to meet me the next day.

On the second day of my visit, I met the first councillor who turned out to be confident and put forth several unique insights regarding the working of the standing committee in Guwahati. Not only did I meet the councillor but also her family who were kind, invited me to lunch. However, the experience of the next interview was harrowing. My taxi had dropped me almost two kms. away from the location. However, more than the distance the road itself was the problem. It was not even constructed!

It was scary and difficult in the middle but the generosity of strangers helped me reach her house accurately. The councillor was a very welcoming host and after a two-hour-long interview, I took my leave. Her husband accompanied me till the *pucca* road started. I was beginning to feel hopeful that even in the face of disappointments and difficulties, I am able to navigate my way and get the job done.



River Brahmaputra behind the Guwahati Municipal Corporation

However, the next hour was again a unique experience. 12 Ubers cancelled my ride before I got a taxi to my fourth and last interview. The last interview was the longest and continued for almost four hours. The person was very well-read and showed me copies of municipal acts of several states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Assam, etc. He also showed me a councillor training module published by the United Nations. It was indeed an important insight that a councillor had invested time and energy to understand aspects of city leadership despite the disempowerment of elected representatives in India's cities.

I hear several female councillors complain about facing difficulties in managing household chores and the duties of a councillor. I don't believe this. I think that if a female is strong headed and genuinely interested in helping people then she will find her way out to simultaneously manage household chores and duties of an elected representative.

Sunita Bhilwaria, Former Councillor, Guwahati

JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

- Shilpi Sinha Ray, Senior Associate, Civic Participation

The great Indian wedding season had just begun when I reached Jaipur to conduct interviews. I was there for four days and I had to undertake seven interviews.

The first interview location was in a very cramped place near a *Masjid*. There was no way that a car could go to the exact location, therefore I had to leave the car at least one km. away and walk to the office through narrow lanes. The councillor's brother came to receive me and walked me to the councillor's office. It is interesting to note that the councillor's brother was the one who communicated with me to set up the appointment and I had not spoken to the councillor even once before meeting her. However, talking to the councillor I felt that she had a great vision for her ward. There was no wait time here and her office was in the basement of her house. When I asked her the reason why her brother attends her phone calls, she mentioned that many people had pranked her over calls. Hence, she took the help of her brother to address unknown numbers. I kept wondering if this happens with male councillors as well.

The second, third and fourth interviews got cancelled as all of those councillors had gone to a wedding in Jaisalmer even though they had given me prior appointments to meet them on that particular day. After going through the details of Jaipur Municipal Corporation's councillors once again, I reached out to a couple of councillors. Among them, one female councillor agreed to meet me.

"In Jaipur, most of the female councillors are proxies and the male counterparts run the show."



Building of Jaipur Municipal Corporation

There has been not even a single council meeting for a year now due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am unable to put forward the issues of my ward in front of the mayor. Everything is getting negatively affected due to lack of council meetings.

Rajkumar Bugalia, Councillor, Jaipur

This councillor not only spoke to me for about two hours but also helped me to reach out to another councillor. I met the next councillor and took the interview but the only problem was that throughout the interview she was looking at her husband. He was the one who initiated conversations and she would only follow suit. It was evident that the husband was the de facto councillor as the seat was reserved for women. This councillor's husband helped me to get in touch with three other councillors whom I met in the following two days.

MUMBAI, MAHARASHTRA

- Priyanka Tibrewal, Associate, Advocacy and Reforms



Building of K-west ward municipal office, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation

One of the first councillors I called instantly gave me a time to come and meet her. However, I spent nearly two hours along with a couple of people waiting for her in a newly built Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation office. All of them complained about how they had been chasing her for two weeks now. The office housed 10 councillors in total but the councillor's offices bore a deserted look at 12 pm on a Wednesday.

"Several cutting chai, honest conversations and hope for a better city."

After the interview ended, the councillor confided that she felt embarrassed because she came to the office every day but nobody else did. She apologised for not offering tea/coffee because it would have taken too long to come. We both left the office together and she commented how there is no one accompanying or driving her because no one cared enough about a woman councillor.

The office of a seasoned councillor was in sharp contrast. He had personal assistants and party workers milling around and taking orders. I was offered a variety of beverages. The BMC main office is almost 40 kms. away from my house and the interview ended in the middle of rush hour. Due to mind-boggling traffic, my google search showed that I would reach home in three hours by car. Even though it was the height of Covid-19 pandemic, I decided to take the local train instead.



Building of Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation



Team Janaagraha with Sanjay Ghadi,
Councillor, Mumbai



Team Janaagraha with Geeta Singhan,
Councillor, Mumbai



Team Janaagraha with Asavari Patil,
Councillor, Mumbai

I recall one of the councillors I spoke to discussing with me the futility of the entire exercise of training councillors because she felt Mumbai was a very diverse city. It was exciting to see councillors not only as passive leaders but as individuals who actively try to question methods and processes. However, after she left the office the watchman complained that she rarely comes.

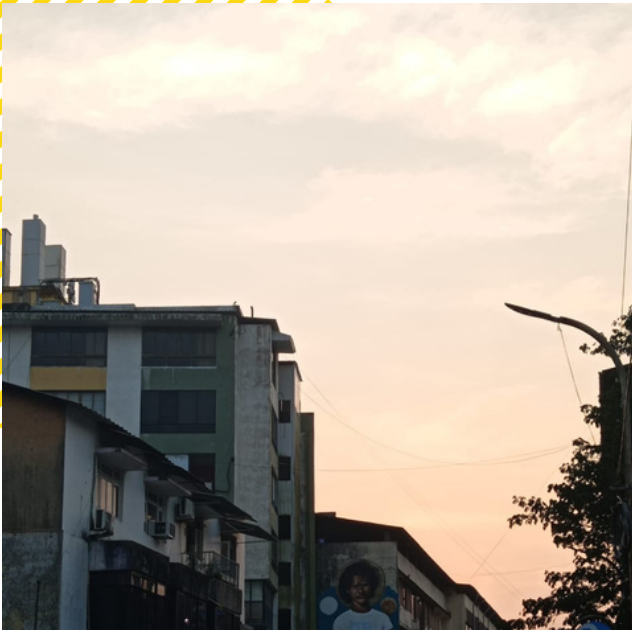
I want to educate my kids in a good school but I don't earn enough to even pay for the bus services. Should the children of councillors not get good education?

Councillor, Mumbai*

As public policy professionals, we often speak about incentives and penalties to keep the political system in check. Sadly, in cities, we usually see the breakdown of such structures. Most of the councillors complained about the low honorarium and lack of pension. They said that they pay for the office they sit in and the staff they hire. One of them said that councillors do more work than MLAs. They go around more and are in touch with the demands of the people. Why, then, should they not be paid more?

PANAJI, GOA

- Priyanka Tibrewal, Associate, Advocacy and Reforms



Sunrise in the city of Panaji

Dawn was just breaking when I landed in Panaji to conduct four interviews in the span of two days. All the partygoers on the flight must have been confused to see me on my laptop updating appointment trackers. After reaching Panaji, the councillor asked me to come to his office which was part of an electronics shop. The interview lasted for three hours. Not only was I offered food and beverages but also a chance to join a political party.

As councillors who had given me prior appointments refused to answer calls, the Panaji Municipal Corporation office became my hangout spot. The watchman and I became friends after my third visit and most of my evening was spent listening to him describe how his son excels at football but refuses to study. Every time he would see me come to the corporation office, he would spot me from afar and shake his head indicating that the councillor I wanted to meet had not arrived.

I remember that on my second day there, I had an appointment at 4.30 pm and no commitments in the morning. I decided to explore Panaji on foot. A friendly motorist dropped me off at Fountainhas, an art district in the city. Walking around and looking at Portuguese architecture was a small treat in the midst of chasing councillors.

"The watchman of Panaji Municipal Corporation office and I became friends after my third visit."



Building of Corporation of the city of Panaji



Team Janaagraha with Vasant Agshikar, Deputy Mayor, Panaji

I think my ability of constantly following up with my local MLAs, mayor and commissioner and the relationship I've built with them have helped me in carrying out my duties well. I have always been very vocal for the people and I feel responsible for them.

Sandra Da Cunha,
Councillor, Panaji

The last councillor had requested a slot in the evening five hours before my flight back home so, I set out early. As there had been a car accident, the traffic was really bad and I reached late and could conduct only half of the interview. I reached the airport approximately four hours earlier and tried hard to catch up on my sleep but to no avail!

PATNA, BIHAR

- Shilpi Sinha Ray, Senior Associate, Civic Participation

Patna offered unique insights into India's tryst with gender and politics. Despite taking prior appointments with six councillors, only one of them agreed to meet me the following day after I landed in Patna. As I had to conduct four interviews in the span of two days, I politely requested the councillor to meet me the same day instead of the next day. Following his affirmation, he asked me to reach his office at the earliest. It was difficult to reach his office as the taxi and my GPS could not detect the exact location.



Building of Patna Nagar Nigam

The taxi dropped me far away from the actual location and so I chose to walk the rest of the way. However, people were extremely helpful when I asked them for directions. The councillor's office was located in a small and cramped building. The councillor lived in the same building. He offered me a cold drink but keeping in mind the Covid-19 situation, I politely refused. However, he laughed and commented that I refused the drink owing to religious reasons. I observed that several large photographs of the councillor's parents were hanging on the wall. The councillor explained his parents' valuable contribution in encouraging him to be an elected representative.

"In order to reach a councillor's house, I changed three modes of transport and asked almost 20 people."

While I was conducting my first interview, I got a call from a councillor who had earlier refused to see me. Though her office was not far away, it took me more than an hour to reach as no one could direct me to it. I changed three modes of transport and asked almost 20 people. Little did I know that apart from the one hour I took to reach her office, it would take me another hour to actually get to speak to her. Even after that, the councillor requested that I speak to her associate who will answer my questions.



Patna Junction Railway station

I refused to leave until she spoke to me personally. After another half an hour, she gave up and agreed to see me. After the two-hour-long conversation, she offered me *prasad* as I had visited the city the day after Patna's most popular *Chhath puja* (A folk festival worshipping the sun for bestowing bounties of life). The next day, I met the remaining two councillors. For the last interview, I had to call the councillor almost 10 times to follow up. The councillor who belonged to an economically disadvantaged community ensured that I spent the time with her comfortably.

One key observation from the interviews from Patna was that the female councillors always have a male counterpart who receives their calls or addresses issues on their behalf. It took me multiple calls to convince the male counterparts that I have to meet the councillor and discuss things. The male counterparts were often very rude in the initial calls. Therefore, constant follow-ups were needed. The women leaders from this city seemed to be heavily dependent on their male counterparts.

Whatever bare minimum allowances we get as a councillor is not even enough to pay for the tea and snacks we have to provide to the hundreds of people visiting our office every day.

Sita Sahu, Mayor, Patna

INTERVIEWERS



In clockwise order - Priyanka Tibrewal, N M Varchiswimi, Aishwarya Ram, Mythreyi Mugundan, Sreya Vaidyan, Purba Pattnaik, Dhavan Jahagirdar and Shilpi Sinha Ray

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Rainmatter Foundation

Rainmatter Foundation is a non-profit initiative by the people behind Zerodha. It recognises that climate change is the biggest existential threat to life. Rainmatter has committed to using the resources available to enable, and to attempt to replicate at scale, the potential solutions that may help address at least some of these threats, and aid in the restoration of natural ecosystems.

Rainmatter Foundation aims to support fellowships and organisations engaged in solving these problems, as well as startups working to help scale ideas in this space. It focuses on ecological restoration, fostering distributed and federated green economies and livelihoods. You can read more about Rainmatter Foundation at www.rainmatter.org



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