

## *A CASUMM Working Paper*

### **Lobbying for change: the story of corporate India's engagement in urban governance**

**Interview done with V. Ravichandar on Feb 28<sup>th</sup> 2007 by Dr Lalitha Kamath, CASUMM**

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The corporate sector in India is eager to be part of designing and implementing change in urban India. Over the years we have seen several experiments in new forms of urban governance and public-private partnership, such as task forces, city connect cells, and corporate foundations. They reveal how corporate actors lobby for change, the inter-connections between the people who run them, and the clear linkages with state-sponsored national programs like the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and international financial institutions like the World Bank. The interview with V Ravichandar below reveals his perspective on this process, from his tenure with the BATF to his role in the CII/Janaagraha sponsored City Connect platform in Bangalore.

#### **How the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal mission began**

Four men in Bangalore are at the epicenter of the JNNURM. They are Nandan [Nandan Nilekani, Infosys], Ramesh [Ramesh Ramanathan, Founder Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy], myself [V. Ravichandar] and Srikanth (Srikanth Nadamuni, E-governments Foundation). After the death of the BATF we 4 continued to lobby for what we called a national urban mission. We made numerous trips to Delhi at our own expense and talked to a variety of people. Nandan used his wide circle of contacts to set up meetings including with Montek, Manmohan, Sonia Gandhi, ministers, bureaucrats etc. In time this idea formed the core of the NURM. So we were in effect the catalyst for the NURM. I tell everyone this not because we want credit but because it's a historical point.

I have a day life, a job and 100 men working under me but this is a passion. We spent our own money to go to Delhi to evangelize this. I'm saying all this to say I want to set the context for our discussion and I want you to understand how this all happened.

#### **Genesis of City Connect**

My experience working in BATF had led me to come away with certain understanding:

1. Among corporates there is no understanding of issues of urban governance
2. Their behavior is similar to trade unions- they made demands of government. They say, "My job is to pay taxes and government's job is to deliver."
3. The patience of corporates to understand urban governance is limited and they seek quick solutions to very large complicated issues

4. They still strongly believe that its for government to do and government needs to do it.

How did I arrive at this construct? It's a construct of my mind after all. What are my data points? Through interactions over 2000-2004 [when a member of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force- BATF]. I spoke at many CEO Forums and over time must have spoken to about 120 CEOs. This understanding also came from sound bytes from the media.

My approach is a constructive one- I ask what is the way out? How do I construct a collaborative platform that involves both industry and government but goes beyond these two? The other members of this platform are NGOs (who represent different groups), Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), social bodies like Rotary, other civil society organizations.

Coming specifically to industry, how do I get them involved? How can I change their language from one of arbitrary trade union-like demands to constructive collaboration? All industries care about is themselves, they have a selfish outlook. I was keen to change this into a more inclusive outlook. For instance, can we give precedence to water supply to Madivala slums over the expressway to Electronic City? Once industry buys this more inclusive outlook, they can bite the inclusive agenda and play a catalyst role.

I thought of using the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) platform to seed this idea because industry already has an association. I could have approached NGOs like Public Affairs Centre (PAC) but my experience is that NGOs are one-island groups. They don't work together. Corporate associations have cracked it better [than NGOs] at least from the point of view of lobbying. So I approached Daljit Mirchandani who was the local head of the CII chapter at that time- about one and a half years ago. He saw merit in the idea. He set up a presentation to the Chief Secretary (at that time) Mishra and other Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) and state officials. At that time there was also a Long Term Industry Partnership Empowered Committee- set up by State Government but for Bangalore. Several well known people were part of this empowered committee- Som Mittal, R K Mishra, Mohandas Pai etc. In one of their meetings I made a presentation on my idea for City Connect.

There were considerable reservations expressed from government and from industry. They said that Ravichandar is too optimistic, lets focus on short term projects. My idea died a natural death. But Daljit Mirchandani saw in it the seeds of a good idea. Lets not lose the political traction of this idea, he said. He put me in touch with Lakshminarayan, the CII Southern Region Head. He too thought it a good idea but the consensus was that the time was not right.

Meanwhile I kept Ramesh Ramanathan [Founder Janaagraha Centre for Democracy and Citizenship] abreast of this idea. He and I used to have discussions on this offline. This was the situation upto about June 2006. At about that time I met J (a Canadian who has a passion for cities). I put him in touch with Ramesh Ramanathan saying if you have a passion for cities then he is the person to meet. J has done some work with C K Prahlad

[management guru] who is very interested in emerging new opportunities for the corporate sector. CK told J that if he could get a gathering of CEOs together, CK would interact with them and share his ideas on industry involvement in emerging market areas.

At this point Ramesh Ramanathan said lets go to Lakshminarayan again and revive the idea behind City Connect. I said its important to have someone with a good understanding of industry and a good understanding of urban space so that institutions can take this forward. Janaagraha has the latter. I have the former. So the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Janaagraha and CII as a collaboration. Ramesh insisted that my name be there because both Janaagraha and CII felt comfortable with me. The starting point was to be an event in January with CEOs and CK Prahlad. It was to be anchored under the name of City Connect. So I was put in to make an event called the Urban Conclave happen.

### **Making the Urban Conclave happen**

The event was on Jan 5-6 2007. It was held at what most people would call an elitist place- Angsana Spa. Our target was 40 CEOs out of which we got 25. We did not get much attendance from government- most bureaucrats did not come although Lakshmi Venkatachalam (at that time Principal Secretary Urban Development Department, Govt of Karnataka) and M N Reddy (Inspector General, Police) came. The Chief Minister we asked to come but he wasn't interested. Anyway, on those same days he took his MLAs outside Bangalore. We called a few NGOs- Sam Paul [Chairman PAC] who couldn't come. Mr Ravindra [former Commissioner BMP and presently Deputy Chairman Karnataka Planning Commission], who stayed for CK's talk and then left. An NGO called Common Purpose UK who is setting up something in Mumbai. Some heritage NGO in Mumbai. The focus was really on CEOs. I'm not really sure about how we selected which NGOs to call. How we called NGOs was basically two ways: either they figured out what was happening and called us- like the Mumbai woman from Common Cause. Or we knew of NGOs who were interested and called them.

The focus of the Urban Conclave was experience sharing by CEOs. There were about 15 CEOs from Bangalore and 10 from elsewhere. Then we had presentations by 3 different groups from the US (brought by Jep). CEOs for Cities, a network of industry, mayors, and government representatives presented their model. Second, people from the transportation Dept at Michigan Business School came. Third, Nancy Keat from an NGO- I don't remember the name- on transportation issues in the US and Seema Parikh who works in the Bangalore office here presented. Arun Maira, from the Boston Consulting Group moderated the discussion. These folks all have models in place but no hard data. We have hard data but no models.

M Rajamani [Director, Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission- JNNURM] and Ramesh Ramanathan also presented to industry at the Urban Conclave. I spoke as well. The main points of my presentation were:

- Corporates should get involved for good business reasons. If the city you are in isn't liveable, you will lose talent. So you should get involved for good business reasons.

- If you are not ready to be inclusive in a collaborative platform that includes the poor then this effort will be a failure. There is currently no understanding of government, politicians, NGOs. Corporates have no idea of how the disenfranchised live. They need to learn and build it into an inclusive agenda. Corporates need to acknowledge this and be ready to learn.
- We are better off embracing ideas that already exist in the market- can we work with the JNNURM? We know the JNNURM is not flawless but it exists. Cities are already signing up to it and Bangalore has done so already. The biggest thing that corporates can bring to this is their expertise.
- My suggestion was can corporates come together to put up a pool of money to hire young professionals in GIS, planning, transportation etc and pay them market salaries. We can lend them to city government for what city government cares about. There is no compulsion for city government to use them or what to use them for.

There are 3 scenarios here. We have:

I. Dream scenario: where city government uses the pool of talent and goes beyond it to collaborate with corporates on different issues of urban governance.

II. Partly happy scenario: professional talent is used for whatever city government wants to use it for but that's it.

III. Business as usual scenario: where nothing changes but at least industry has made the effort.

### **The future of City Connect**

Looking at the outcomes of the Urban Conclave, well, industry said the pool of talent is a good idea and we would like to go down the City Connect route. But nothing much has happened since the event. I have said I will no longer take a lead on this, I will be happy to work in a team but want someone else to step forward to take this onwards. This is because I know I am in the "soiled goods" category. Too many people will accuse me of trying to bring in the BATF by the back door. I realize that there are many people and groups who do think this. So I think I will jeopardize this initiative if I am continued to be associated with it in a major role. I think similarly about Janaagraha- there are many people who do not think its doing good work for various reasons- but this is a call for Ramesh to make [whether to withdraw from the front seat]. I still regularly attend City Connect meetings but am not willing to take up any post. I was only in the MoU to make the Urban Conclave happen.

How I see this working in the future is City Connect will be a foundation which will function as a platform on which different stakeholders can come together to discuss and decide on a particular issue (if government does not want to give up too much power they can choose one issue, like transportation). Stakeholders of the City Connect Foundation will include politicians (MLAs, MPs, Corporators), government officials, NGOs, civil society organizations, RWAs, industry etc. Certain objectives will be prioritized within the issue area by the stakeholder group. Then they can choose whether to use the City Connect Cell which is the technical expertise cell comprised of paid professionals as well as volunteers (you can volunteer your professional skills). The City Connect Cell will be paid for by members of the City Connect Foundation industry.

Anyone can be a member if they subscribe to the ideas and principles espoused by the Foundation and are willing to contribute their share of subscription funds. Now this Foundation hires professionals for the City Connect cell. The projects these employees will work on will be governed by where government agencies seek assistance (it's on a 'pull' basis and not a 'push' basis) and the Foundation Board (consisting of different kinds of stakeholders) being ok with offering the assistance for the project. Will there be a bias towards projects favoured by industry - not necessary. And the primary driver will be the willingness of elected reps / government to want assistance. If they don't want it, there is no play for the idea of City Connect.

In an ideal scenario there would be an a la carte of projects under the City Connect platform. Members can be associated with projects that appeal to them and where they would like to contribute their inputs. One would expect members to be interested in seeing what outcomes the City Connect platform has delivered and City Connect cell in particular. The city connect cell can carry out reform experiments to achieve prioritized objectives. The city connect initiative can use JNNURM money and offer to help in both programme and reform implementation.

City government is not bound to use this cell, they can turn them down at any time. The bottom line on accountability is with Government. City Connect is an offer of help rather than just keeping on complaining and expecting government to deliver. If there is sign off on a typical project there would be a team consisting of Government reps, City Connect Foundation volunteers and City Connect cell professionals working on it. If Government wishes to use a private outsourcer and pay for it instead of City Connect no sweat. It's their choice. City Connect is an architecture that encourages and provides space for volunteerism and expertise to work with government on projects of their choice.

City connect in Ahmedabad happened because Ramesh was there for the JNNURM consultations and he happened to mention about the City Connect idea on the sidelines. Some local industry people picked up the idea and decided to take it forward without waiting for the CII to get involved. I don't know these details. This is what Ramesh mentioned to me. I don't follow NURM in detail because its not my full time job, like Ramesh's [Ramesh Ramanathan is Chair of the National Technical Advisory Group-NTAG- of the JNNURM].

I've told industry that with city connect platform, it's not CII any more. You have to include others- even other corporate associations like FICCI. Janaagraha too has to include other NGOs. They cannot allow themselves to be colored by personal views of other NGOs and their baggage.

If I was to indulge in self-analysis, my exposure during the BATF revealed my strength in cross pollinating ideas and coming up with pragmatic solutions on the ground. Fundamentally I am an entrepreneur in my private life. But this work is my passion. I guess social entrepreneurship does describe what I do but I can say clearly that I am not an organization person. I also care more for outcomes that claiming credit for myself. Of course I like to be acknowledged, I have some basic vanity, but the essence of my belief

is that an idea has greater chance of gaining traction if you can let go of it and let others claim it as their own. I am a shareware believer, you know, like Linux.

I have a website called [www.ideasforgov.org](http://www.ideasforgov.org). There I place these beliefs on record. I have 50 different ideas that I think might work. And I say clearly that anyone is free to use them in any way they want. There is no need to say that the seeds of that idea came from my website. I get many people writing to me about the ideas there- from Trichi, Tamil Nadu and even Africa.

When I pushed JNNURM along with the other 3 people, I didn't expect not to be a part of it. Other people become a part of it- Ramesh is on the NTAG and Nandan is part of the National Core Group. I didn't get an anchor role in NURM and yes, I guess I was a little upset at the time. Nandan asked me, I remember, if I was upset and what would happen now that I was not part of NURM. Then I said yes I'm a little upset but its not a catastrophe, life goes on, the idea moves on. I mention that we four were the catalysts of the NURM not to claim credit but as a historical point. 10 years from now the history of NURM might be noted down.

I absolutely think that the BATF made civic activism and social entrepreneurship more "cool" both on a general level and personal level. On a personal level: without the exposure that I got in the BATF I would not have been exposed to another facet of life. Entire vistas opened up to me as a result of the work I did there. On a general level people thought the BATF was a page 3 phenomenon and there were lots of people- then and now- who stepped forward to be a part of it. But it was a lot of hard work. I do believe that it will come back- maybe it will be called another name.

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**We welcome your comments and questions on this Working Paper**

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