

Stewards, not Bystanders: Civil society creates new opportunity to co-design cities

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This year, I have been from Bengaluru to Kabini and back several times. Every time I return from the forest and the rural countryside, my eyes and senses hit refresh, and I see my home city with a new perspective.

The overwhelming impression is of a metro undergoing a painful renewal. Masses of threatening concrete overhead, piles of rubble underneath. And through this grey canvas, dots of colour as hapless citizens weave through the traffic, without proper visibility or signposts, navigating past trucks and haulers, moody traffic signals and perplexing roundabouts.

It feels as if Bengaluru, like so many other cities in India, is testing its residents. The unfinished infrastructure is a poster promise of a better future. The city demands patience, demands faith, demands hope. The residents experience resignation, weariness, and a lasting numbness.

When I finally get home, I enter an urban version of the forest I left behind – my neighbourhood has a dense canopy of trees. Yet Bengaluru is not homogenous, and my sylvan surroundings are an anomaly now in the erstwhile garden city. It has a criss-cross of diverse identities and designs. It has layers and layers of privilege on top and tiers of disenfranchisement below. Yet, the dysfunctionality of the city creates a perverse equaliser. It brings an end to the secession of the elite. Our bubble breaks with the chaos of the traffic, the pervasive pollution and limitations on personal spaces.

But there are now new opportunities to engage with the city's future.

All over India, there are efforts inviting citizens to re-imagine belonging. To make the city their own. The discourse has firmly shifted from whether the city should grow to how it should grow and change, and who should participate in the change-making.

Today's technologies enable mass participation in civic design. In metropolitan areas and beyond, digital age civil society organisations (CSOs), often helmed by creative young leaders, use tech-enabled design to challenge the supremacy of the State in urban futures. Thriving Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) and dynamic CSOs seem determined to take back their city.

For example, during the lockdown, Yugantar filed a Right to Information (RTI) petition to find the total number of slums and their population in the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation. This data was then shared with local NGOs to better target relief work. Haiyya, through a local campaign called Health over Stigma, helped hold service providers accountable for providing safe, non-judgmental sexual and reproductive health services, especially for unmarried women. Reap Benefit in Bengaluru has developed an open civic platform that comprises a WhatsApp chatbot, a web app and a civic forum. The chatbot guides users with simplified steps through a variety of civic challenges that are engaging and fun. If you see a pothole on the road, you can send photos, but go beyond reporting to next steps. A friendly technology helps convert agitation into action and turn bystanders into stewards.

Civis understands that technical environmental legislation can sometimes bypass civil society, even though we are all heavily impacted by environmental degradation. In March 2020, a draft notification with radical new rules was put up by the environment ministry for public consultation. Civis put up a simplified version and more people were able to directly participate in the consultation.

We must encourage these and many other samaaj-based efforts. More importantly, we must each find our own way to participate in these ventures. Democracy cannot be a spectator sport. Good governance must be co-created, not just consumed. No matter who you are, you are first a citizen. Even if you head a government department or a successful business — you remain a citizen first, a part of your community. And I believe it is only the samaaj and institutions of the samaaj that can hold the State accountable to the larger public interest of making our cities more livable for all.

Luckily, today's new technologies allow us to participate more effectively with relative ease. I am not talking about simple clicktivism, but how a tech-enabled, societal ecosystem can distribute the ability to solve; can democratise civic engagement; and can help people co-create their city's future.

However, there is an important caution here. We need civil society itself to get more digital in the digital age. Especially because only an engaged digital samaaj can keep tech corporations more accountable and prevent them from unleashing tools that distort the political and democratic process or reduce individual and collective agency. Urban movements are critical for this cause.

The pandemic has forced us to speed up our thinking on what cities should look like in the future. Citizens now have more opportunities to take active part in building urban resilience. Young leaders are creating more options for empowered citizens to co-create more humane environments. When we return to the city from the forest, we should feel a buzz, not a burn.

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