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FROM AHMEDABAD BANGALORE BARODA BOMBAY CHANDIGARH COIMBATORE DELHI HYDERABAD KOCHI KOZHIKODE MADRAS MADURAI NAGPUR PUNE VJAYAWADA VIZIANAGARAM

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A meeting was held recently in the City between the BDA and citizens' group representatives in an attempt to decentralise services to reach the people more directly and to improve administration so as to enhance accountability and transparency.

When BDA goes public!

By Sharita Rai

It is an unusual initiative that is both welcome and timely. When a mammoth government organisation like the Bangalore Development Authority, traditionally viewed with suspicion by the public as being both inefficient and corrupt, seeks to open a dialogue with citizens' groups and NGOs, it can only suggest an optimistic trend.

A good deal of the credit for this goes to the present BDA Chairman Dr. A. Ravindra, under whose leadership such an interaction has been made possible. It has also, for the first time, brought into focus the possible benefits of a collaborative role between citizens' representatives and public service providers like the BDA.

As part of the "new effort in government to decentralise services to reach the people more directly and to improve administration so as to enhance accountability and transparency," a meeting called on June 15 by Dr. Ravindra, sought to make a preliminary beginning towards initiating an on-going dialogue between the BDA and citizens' group representatives.

A direct fall-out of the meeting was the suggestion to set up a citizens' cell within the BDA. The cell will be given definite shape in subsequent discussions, and would have both BDA and citizen representatives on it to screen and monitor specific public grievances and problems with regard to the BDA. Periodic review meetings for both the cell and the core group of NGOs were also proposed as a necessary adjunct.

While the identified core group of NGO representatives present at the meeting responded well to the much needed interaction, the BDA Chairman for his part, spelt out his organisation's commitment to certain broadly identified areas for improvement in its functioning through a reciprocal relationship between the BDA and public interest groups.

The government, he said, would not be able to solve all the problems by itself, particularly with respect to public-related services. Even in terms of basic information, a dialogue between public interest groups and the government is necessary to clear misunderstandings regarding various public issues.

Admitting the need for decentralisation of routine services to divisional offices, in order to ensure more direct access to the people and to facilitate their participation in the process, he said there had been no effort at collaboration so far. "We can't tackle corruption either, unless there is some cooperation from the public," he added.

In defining the broad parameters for a participatory dialogue between the BDA and the NGOs, the setting up

of residents' associations was suggested as an effective step in the solving of day-to-day problems. It would also ease the burden of the BDA in handling voluminous public grievances.

In the context of the day-to-day running of the organisation and its repercussions on the citizen in terms of delays, inefficiency and corruption, the need for setting up a transparent structure of administration was also underlined. Measures are also being considered to translate this objective into a viable model.

Clearly there are relevant demands from the public interest groups as well. Leo Saldanha of CIVIC, for instance, urged that the Land Use Policy be made public with a view to educating the people. "In some instances, the Government itself, violates the requirements of the

Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP). So how can we then force the people to conform to the expected norms," he asked.

Prabha Murthy of the Karnataka Forum for Consumer Action said information dissemination and a changed attitude among the BDA officials would go a long way in building public confidence in the organisation. Residents' Associations should also participate in BDA inspections and so on, to increase transparency.

While Saldanha suggested quarterly or half-yearly public hearings in every "planning district" and a booklet to explain the various planning processes, he also urged that basic information on the Nagarpalika Act be made available to the poor so that the "rules can be clarified." Equally, Anita Reddy of AVAS drew attention to

the fact that there had been no debate on the new housing policy announced by the State Government and that while the "CDP was at a much higher level," a clear cut position on the housing policy should be circulated and "taken to the poor" who are likely to be most affected by it. In the context, Anant Nadkarni of the Public Affairs Centre volunteered to organise local groups to discuss the various policy documents including the Nagarpalika Act. Prabha Murthy suggested introducing a "File Clearance Week" to get over this particular bottleneck in administration.

Keeping in mind the broader issues of policy and planning, there was consensus regarding the need for continuous dialogue on such matters as the Comprehensive Development Plan keeping in mind the current and future requirements of the city. "There is always a gap between formulating the plan or policy and its implementation. That is the main problem," said Dr. Ravindra pointing to the fact that when the CDP was conceived, the population was just two million and future projections made then, expected it to touch three million but not the existing six to seven million!

The problem of resource mobilisation was also considered as requiring attention in a context where demand outstretches supply at such a pace. Resource inadequacy has certainly been the bane of planning in the City. That's why, though the CDP contains proposals for the development of four regional parks at the four outer ends of Bangalore, only Matthikere has one today, the BDA Chairman pointed out.

Among other decisions taken at the meeting was the need to make available maps of all parks and open spaces in each planning district to the respective citizens' groups operating there, in order to ensure that there are no violations of Land Use Policy.

While a basic computer data system already exists at the BDA, the need to develop it into a full-fledged data system was also acknowledged. BDA Commissioner Mr. Vinay Kumar said that some work has already been done in this regard.

With proposals to draw up a time-bound action plan after prioritising the issues at the next meeting, the inaugural session which was also attended by Anselm Rosario of Mythri, Manjunath of CIVIC, Murlidhar Rao of Nagarik, N.P. Kumar and Ashwathnarayana, both citizen activists, drew to a close on what might be construed as a hopeful note. The commitment to turn it into a "campaign" called *Swabhimana* merely provided the finishing touch to what might be the beginning of an unusual enterprise.

Consultative Committees To Monitor Maintenance

In a simultaneous development that is also significant, various Consultative Committees are being set up by the BDA to monitor the speedy completion of maintenance and infrastructure works in the various layouts of the city.

The decision was taken at a meeting of office bearers of various Residents' Associations in the city with the BDA Chairman and the BDA Commissioner. The Consultative Committees would comprise the Executive Engineer of the concerned Division, the Deputy Secretary, the Revenue Officer, the President of the Residents' Association and the Secretary of the Association. The Committee will also coopt the concerned Assistant Executive Engineers of the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board and the Karnataka Electricity Board, respectively.

To begin with the Committees will be constituted in just three layouts including the Hennur-Banaswadi Road layout, the Old Madras-Bangalore Road layout and the Hosur-Sarjapur Road layouts. The first meetings of the three committees will be conducted by the BDA Commissioner, after which they are scheduled to meet once a month under the chairmanship of the respective Executive Engineer.

The scope of the consultations will specifically include such areas as the maintenance of BDA parks, playgrounds and open spaces; sanitation; time-bound completion of infrastructure works like roads, water supply and electrification; prevention of encroachment of vacant lands in the layouts and the reservation of CA sites for a specific purpose.

It was felt that in the interest of the speedy completion of these works as well as the orderly growth of the layouts, "a suitable mechanism could be developed to ensure periodic consultation between these associations on the one hand, and the field functionaries of the BDA on the other." Hence the Consultative Committees, which come in the wake of various complaints in this regard, made by the office bearers of the various Residents' Associations to the BDA Chairman and Commissioner, over the last few months.