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Does Bangalore's Good Man stand a chance?

Being a good citizen is something that we urban elite think about and struggle with. How do you become a good citizen? What are your rights and responsibilities?

The Good Life | Shoba Narayan

How does a bystander become a stakeholder? That's what this column is about. Some time ago, I got an email from a woman who lives in my building. Tara was supporting a Lok Satta party candidate, who is contesting the Bangalore Graduates Constituency in the Karnataka legislative council (MLC) elections to be held in a few months. She invited me to meet the candidate, Ashwin Mahesh.



Visionary: Mahesh seems sincere and is clearly competent in getting technology projects done. But will that translate to politics? Jagadeesh NV/Mint

development of Bangalore's 180-odd lakes and had designed the Big10 bus system (which connects 10 major Bangalore roads to the city's outer ring roads) along the arteries of Bangalore. Even so, I was hesitant to go. Frankly, I had enough on my plate and helping an election campaign was not something I wanted to do. How do you become a good citizen? What are your rights and responsibilities?

I struggle with this idea—erratically enthusiastic. Mostly, I feel impotent because I am not sure that my ideas or efforts will carry weight. For example, about 75 people from the community where I live rallied around to clean Ulsoor Lake. We had the lakes commissioner visit our building and talk about the sewage and stench of the lake. The beleaguered man said the money was available to clean the lake if someone from our community

I had heard of Mahesh. Bangalore, like most Indian metros is—in the end—a small town. A colleague had seen the traffic camera system Mahesh had installed for the Bangalore police and had come away impressed. Cameras at this city's intersections are able to zoom in on licence plates and catch offenders, stopping speeding taxis in their tracks. I had heard that Mahesh was involved in the

would take charge of the project. No one did.

Being a good citizen is something that we urban elite think about and struggle with—along with exercise, flossing teeth and—this may apply to you but not me—not reaching for that fourth *samosa*. Our intentions are good. We join civic action groups, neighbourhood resident welfare associations (RWAs), building committees and community affairs groups. We contribute to non-profits that are improving our neighbourhoods, and occasionally go and meet the politicians in charge of our ward. There is one challenge that flummoxes even the most ardent volunteer: The problem never stops. You can clean up a lake but the garbage keeps coming.

I anchor my building's recycling project but it fell apart when I went away for the summer holidays. I am helping a woman in our neighbourhood who wants to develop a composting system. I am an enthusiastic volunteer but I am not sure about whether her efforts will bear fruit. We have bought Daily Dump's composting bins but even if the system is in place, someone has to supervise. I don't want to be that person. How do you sustain your enthusiasm and effort towards finding a solution when the problem never seems to go away?

Over *dhoklas* at Tara's house, a group of us, including some scientists from the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, met Mahesh. The candidate is remarkable. He speaks with the slang of someone who has spent time in Silicon Valley. His campaign is run by Indians who have returned to India and are working for Sun Microsystems, Oracle and other technology companies. They are people like us. Mahesh talked about why he—a technocrat, scientist and professor at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Bangalore—decided to contest. I am used to new ideas but even jaded old me was impressed by his notion of how to scale. Scaling, he said, was not simply about replicating a good idea across the nation. It is about involving local problem solvers who can take an idea and modify it to suit their community's needs. It is about increasing the surface area of citizenry who want to participate. Mahesh's way to do this is by proving to his constituents that they have a voice and that their solutions will be implemented. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Governance is hard. It requires consensus, long-term thinking and dogged, relentless effort to tackle problems that never seem to end: road safety, traffic, garbage. After some haphazard volunteering, I have started thinking that maybe such efforts are best left to professionals. The trick is to vote in the right people who have the expertise, energy and time to do their job. Ergo my interest in Ashwin Mahesh.

Mahesh has a website (www.ashwinmahesh.in). He seems sincere and is clearly competent in getting technology projects done. Will that translate to politics? I don't know. Then again, the stakes are not high. Last term, the winner of the MLC elections garnered 11,000 votes.

Weeks later, I heard that *Wired* magazine had picked Mahesh for their *Smart List 2012: 50 People Who Will Change The World*. Tara told me that Mohandas Pai, previously with Infosys, was endorsing their candidate. I cold-emailed Pai to check if this was true.

Yes, Pai replied. "My support is my endorsement, a small contribution to his

election fund and my personal vote." As for why he was supporting the candidate, Pai gave a long list of the usual reasons: impeccable integrity, deep understanding of urban issues, great vision. "He is the right kind of person to represent the highly educated class in the legislature. He is liberal, very modern and symbolizes all that is best about Bangalore."

When does a bystander become a stakeholder? So far, I have been a bystander in Mahesh's candidacy. He has made the first cut. People I know and trust are supporting his candidacy. What Mahesh needs now are registered voters and the buzz of a winning team. He has his work cut out for him. Scratch that. We have our work cut out for us. I guess I just went from being a bystander to a stakeholder.

Shoba Narayan is a closet Formula One (F1) driver but Mahesh's traffic cameras are cramping her style. Write to her at thegoodlife@livemint.com

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