



WE THE PEOPLE – NEWSLETTER

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Spotlight on Citizenship: Hope Lives in India's Secondary Cities

*As we engage in discussions on responsible citizenship, we often dwell upon the abyss that lies between the urban and the rural in terms of differences in context, culture, interpretations and politics. While the citizenship discourse may vary largely between cities and villages, there are these luminal spaces that pull us back and push us forward simultaneously. Small towns and cities are such physical spaces that come with their own understanding of citizenship. While on one hand, their proximity to closed networks create a unique form of interaction, their interplay with the world outside is slowly breaking down traditional stereotypes and giving way to perspectives on global citizenship. In this article, Multa Naik enumerates how **We, the People (WTP)** has been travelling to some of these places to ignite conversations on citizenship, focuses on some of these multiple realities.*

<http://asiadialogue.org/spotlight-on-citizenship-hope-lives-in-indias-secondary-cities/>

The recently concluded 2014 Indian national polls were the largest exercise in democracy in the world. However, while franchise is a well-exercised right in the country of 1.2 billion people and over 800 million voters—60% was the voter turnout in 2009—this doesn't translate into active citizenship. Nor does it ensure citizens access to basic rights enshrined in the Constitution.

Citizenship problematic for urban Indian

The relationship between citizens and the State is particularly weak in India's cities. A recently launched pilot Citizenship Index for Bangalore, brought out by Bangalore-based NGO Janaagraha in collaboration with Brown University's Brown India Initiative, found that while Bangalore's citizens vote, they don't participate in civic or political life between elections. This seems true of urban Indians in general, and is problematic in the context of the governance and management issues that Indian cities face? Why don't urban Indians engage with the State? Do they just not care? If they do, what do they care about? How do they hope to access better services if they do not engage? Are there barriers for their engagement?

In an attempt to stimulate these conversations on citizenship, *We the People*, an organisation that aims to "expand an active, engaged and informed citizenry in India" organises Citizen Cafés across India. Vinita Gursahani Singh, Founder and Managing Trustee of We the People (watch her TED X talk [here](#)), explains the concept: "Through the Citizen Cafés, we are trying to get people to understand why they should be involved and what is their role as a citizen."

In the first three months of 2014, *We the People* held Citizen Cafés in the secondary cities of Kanpur, Lucknow, Agra, Ranchi and Patna in a bid to tap into the densely populated nerve centre of urban India and influence the discourse on citizenship here.

What pushes their buttons? Hearing impassioned voices from secondary cities

In each location, people surged in, eager to engage and discuss. Vinita is thrilled at the enthusiasm. "People are less cynical in smaller places. The sense of belonging and identity is much more," she says. However, the realities of India's urban story are starkly evident in the stories they told.

Education, gender and sanitation were the top-of-the-mind issues for citizens in these cities. Across cities, people believed that education has the ability to lift people out of poor circumstances. Citizens even knew about the Right to Education Act while they exhibited little or no legal knowledge about other subjects. "At the end of the session in every city we asked what issue would you like to get involved with, and across the board it was education," remarks Vinita.

In Patna, where gender equality is a distant goal, girls spoke out publicly about the atmosphere of repression and the fear of forced marriages at the Citizen Cafés. In Lucknow and Kanpur, cities where eve teasing of girls is an everyday occurrence, citizens spoke of the need for equal opportunities. They condemned acts of violence against women and demanded safer spaces.

Agra's citizens, in a departure from the norm of government blaming, took partial blame for the inner city's dirty streets. "If we clean our homes and throw the garbage on the street, how can the government help us?" said one agitated gentleman at the Citizen Café referring to the mess that central Agra is despite the tourist hordes that come in to see the Taj Mahal! His remark sparked an animated call for public campaigns that educate people and demand better civic behaviour.

Vinita found particularly encouraging the emphasis on personal integrity, a value rarely spoken about at a time when high-level corruption is one of the issues on which the national election is being fought. "If we ourselves aren't honest, how can we expect government officials to be," was one of the rhetorical questions that came up in the Lucknow Citizen Café.



Citizen Café with Teach for India Fellows

Citizenship in transition

This introspective strain of the discussions in these secondary cities is a welcome change from the rather feudal understanding of citizenship in India, where citizens have traditionally regarded the State as benefactor and governments have regarded citizens as beneficiaries of their largesse.

However, the transformation from subjects to citizens still has a long way to go. As the Bangalore citizenship index shows, factors like class, caste and religion can alter the experience of citizenship in different ways. The study found that in Bangalore, "the poor have less effective citizenship, but it matters more to them. They feel that if they participated less in political and civic life, they would receive less from the State."

That the State seems to be hard to find and even harder to trust is clearly a significant barrier! The index found that few people in Bangalore go to the State for services. Many people use intermediaries and as many as 19% paid bribes for services they were entitled to. Unfortunately, as Patrick Heller, Professor of Sociology from Brown University and an author of the study says, "While citizens respect the State, treating each other with respect is not that important. Community does not seem to be important. And that's where the change is needed." If this is so, then the voices coming from secondary cities perhaps indicate that change could come faster than we think.

Conversations on Citizenship

Citizen Cafes (CC) and Citizenship Programmes (CP) in the month of June reached out to a wide diversity of people across Northern and western India. While, 125 Teach for India (TFI) fellows in Delhi interacted over the values of the Preamble to the Indian Constitution, citizen's groups in Meerut, Lucknow and Pune went through CPs to build their capacities to analyse issues, understand Fundamental Rights and Duties, law making and steps to engage with civic action.

The CC with TFI fellows was a significant step in expanding the scope of such conversations. Since all these fellows are committed to teaching underprivileged children, conversations and thoughts triggered in the CC will inform meaningful discussions in classrooms.

In one such CP with children from Udayanghar (a home for orphaned children) in Delhi, the issue of police not abiding by laws came up as critical. It was insightful to see how children connected the fact a system meant to implement laws was fraught with instances of breaking them.

From another CC with children at Deep Foundation, Delhi, Aparna, the anchor brings out an interesting interpretation of 'Equality': "They discussed how they felt inferior and not equal to those who were from private schools. When they compared themselves to children from their villages with no access to education they felt very privileged."

Interestingly, both the CPs conducted in Lucknow and Meerut saw a missing case of female participants. Out of a total of 45 participants, there was just one woman. Also, while CCs and CPs generally emphasise deliberations on values, rights and the dichotomy between Constitutional diktats and social norms, both these CPs were limited to civic concerns and actions needed to address the same.

The CP in Pune was a delightful experience right from the beginning. Based on an eco-friendly ethos, participants had decided to get food from home to avoid generation of non-biodegradable waste. Here was a group of professionals (engineers, doctors, teachers, artists) who were deeply concerned about issues of secularism not being practised by the state.

There were enriching discussions about rights of women and manufactured consent in terms of *mangalsutra* for Hindu women and the *burqa* for Muslim women (both symbols of patriarchal dominance). For participants, the most significant aspect of the CP was studying judicial cases related to fundamental rights.

Upcoming Events for July 2014

Citizenship Programme with Manzil, Youth Alliance and Teach for India Fellows, Delhi (26-27 July)

Citizen Cafe at Goethe Institut, Pune

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