

Urban-46

Chung



***National Level Orientation Programme on
Strengthening Urban Governance in India
A Participatory Research Intervention***

October 9-11, 2000

Reading Material No.2

The Citizens' Charter by Praja



Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area

New Delhi-110 062

Telephone: 608 9559, 608 1908; Fax: 608 0183

Email: info@pria.org Web: www.pria.org

The Citizens' Charter by Praja



Following the example of Delhi, Praja conceived and developed a Citizen's Charter for the Mumbai Municipality. It is hoped that citizens will form 'Residents Groups', and play a more active role in municipal affairs. By Samantha J. Saidanna

PRAJA is voluntary organisation with 12 young members committed to principles of democracy. PRAJA was formed in February 1998 around a project "The Citizens' Charter".

How we started

The Citizen's Charter first commanded our attention in 1997 when one of the members of the PRAJA team attended a workshop organised by the Consumer Coordination Council (CCC) at the invitation of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung. It was here that the Citizen's Charter of the New Delhi Municipal Corporation was distributed and the idea of developing a similar document for the Mumbai Municipality began to take shape.

However, the initiative undertaken by PRAJA is distinct in that the Charter has been developed by a citizens' body in tandem with the Municipal Corporation. This is an important element as it truly makes it a Charter of, for and by the citizens.

Participation

Being residents of Mumbai, we had all interacted with the Municipality at some level or the other. Like most residents of the city, there was a high degree of frustration growing out of these experiences and we found ourselves dismissing the Municipality as "hopelessly inefficient" and "never going to improve".

We soon realised that this attitude was highly self-destructive, as the role of the municipality in our lives is inevitable and something we could not escape. Moreover, the realisation dawned on us that corruption is not a one-way road. We began reviewing what our roles as citizens were in the deterioration of the public services. There we found our answer: "Lack of people's participation".

Information gathered on the Charter

Collection of information

As co-ordination with the Municipality was essential, we approached Mr. Ratnakar Gaikwad, Additional Municipal Commissioner. He is a forward-thinking official who was

more than willing to oblige. He introduced us to the departmental heads. We met with each of them at length to develop a comprehensive idea of the functions, services and the system of complaint redress within each department. We restricted ourselves to those departments whose functioning involved consumer interface.

Data analysis

The information collected from each department was analysed and supplemented by additional facts extracted from the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) Act and other Municipal publications supplied

The initiative undertaken by PRAJA is distinct in that the Charter has been developed by a citizens' body in tandem with the Municipality.

LIBERAL CONCERNS

to us by the officials. After this information was compiled, it was authenticated by the respective heads of the departments. Simultaneously, retired municipal officials vetted the documents.

Armed with a mountain of information, we began the impossible task of confining pages of literature to tables and bullet-points. The layout was a job that required professional intervention, so we approached the Social Marketing Division of LINTAS. They undertook the task of designing the Charter draft in a manner that would be user-friendly and, simultaneously, grab every person's attention and inspire them to act.

Distribution of the Citizen's Charter

We were determined to reach out to as many citizens as possible. However with our limited monetary and labour resources this task seemed daunting.

To enhance our reach the Tata Press was approached. Important elements of the Citizens' Charter were printed in the Yellow Pages, published by the Tata

Press. This has a circulation of about 590,000.

We are also currently working with the Times of India Group of Newspapers to carry the Citizens' Charter Booklet as a supplement in their daily newspapers in English, Hindi and Marathi. The total distribution here should cover a population of about 600,000.

Above this, the Tata Power Corporation has offered to support us by contributing towards the printing of 25,000 copies of the Citizens' Charter.

Citizen-Municipality Interactive Workshop

The Citizens' Charter would only be effective if the municipal employees complied with the standards laid down in the Charter. To facilitate this, we organised a Citizen - Municipality Interactive Workshop. Through these workshops we sought to orient those officers in the Municipality working at the local ward level to the Citizens'

Charter and make them aware of the standards expected of them.

Through these workshops we wished to reiterate the idea of public service being consumer - oriented and elicit a commitment from them to serve the citizens better.

So far we have succeeded in conducting these workshops for 16 out of the 23 wards of the Municipality. The Mumbai Municipal Corporation has divided Mumbai into 23 administrative wards, their function is primarily concerned with service delivery.

The officials who have attended these workshops have been most open to the idea of the Citizens' Charter. With us they discussed the problems that they encounter in the course of their work. They spoke about their frustration with working in an extremely bureaucratic organisation and the difficulties in working for citizens. They all expressed their willingness to work with us to improve things.

Servicing the Charter

Incorporated into the Charter is a system of complaint redress for each department of the municipality. The idea is to facilitate citizens to take action independently when public service - providers fail. However, there are some complaints that require intervention at higher levels. These avenues of intervention are not open to all citizens. Therefore, an alternative complaint-monitoring system has been designed. Here, "chronic complaints" will be dealt with first through the volunteers of an NGO - DIGNITY FOUNDATION. They have a task force of senior citizens who work as liaisons between citizens and the municipal staff.

Incorporated into the Charter is a system of complaint redress for each department of the municipality. The idea is to facilitate the citizens to take action independently.

Creating a pressure group

This pressure group would consist of professionals, retired municipal commissioners, and others who are extremely concerned about improving the city. Among those who have consented are Mr. B.G.Deshmukh, Mr. Jamsheed Kanga, Mr. Gerson da Cunha and Dr. Shielu Sreenivasan. This Group would meet monthly with the Municipal Commissioner, Mayor, the Additional Municipal Commissioners to discuss macro municipal issues affecting citizens and major complaints.

People's participation

We expect to interact with existing Residents' Groups who work on civic issues. We would encourage other citizens, as well, to form such residents' groups to foster co-operation among themselves and collaboration with the municipality. Such associations of citizens could be the key to shake the service-providers out of their apathy and encourage people's participation, which is lacking in the current system of governance.

Updating the Charter

The Citizen's Charter will be updated by incorporating the suggestions invited from the persons using it- citizens as well as municipal employees.

Developing Citizens' Charters for other service-providers

We wish to develop Citizens' Charters for other service-providers such the police department, postal department, public distribution system, etc.

PRAJA wishes to go a step further and not only evaluate the public services per se, but the elected representatives as well. The rationale behind this is that these elected leaders have thus far escaped any kind of public scrutiny in their five-year term in office.

In England, the Citizen's Charter is supported by commitments that the service-providers are legally bound to abide by. However, in India, the Citizen's Charter is far from being such an effective instrument. There is a strong need to encourage the service-providers to furnish these commitments. To accomplish this, without waiting endlessly, for a visionary who would initiate the necessary legislation, we will undertake our next project, PROJECT PERFORMANCE.

PROJECT PERFORMANCE adopts the Report Card system of evaluation extensively used by the Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore to rate public services in the metropolitan cities of India. This project would scientifically provide feedback to the service providers as to the effectiveness of their services and how these services can be enhanced. While providing the feedback, the municipal officials will be called upon to give a commitment to taking action to improve those services with which there was a high level of dissatisfaction.

PRAJA wishes to go a step further and not only evaluate the public services per se, but the elected representatives as well. The rationale behind this is that these elected leaders have thus far escaped any kind of public scrutiny in their five year term in office. With a well-publicised evaluation of their performance, they will soon realise they are accountable to their electorate and act with integrity and fulfil their duty as representatives of the people.

In this way, we hope to bring to life our vision of a society where every citizen will feel empowered to come forward and hold the service-providers and the elected representatives accountable and assert their right to competent public services. Simultaneously, we trust that the service-providers will begin to respond to the feedback of the service-users effectively. This will foster a spirit of cooperation between the citizens, the service-providers and the elected representatives.

Ms Samantha J. Saldanha is the Programme, Coordinator of Praja.