A new voice in urban politics

Henrik Valeur, 2013

Interview with Ashwin Mahesh*

Interviewee

Ashwin Mahesh is a scientist who turned environmental activist, development worker and technology entrepreneur before becoming a leading candidate for a newly formed national political party, the Lok Satta, contesting from the city of Bangalore. He discusses problems of urban management in India today and proposes public participation and community building as means to solve the problems. For more information, see: http://ashwinmahesh.in/

Interviewer

Henrik Valeur is an architect-urbanist, founder and creative director of UiD, an independent researcher, curator, editor, educator and author. For more information, see: www.henrikvaleur.dk

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Henrik Valeur (HV): Sameera, could you take some pictures with the drawing board in the background? It might look like a new plan for the city.

Ashwin Mahesh (AM): It looks like the city, actually.

HV: Ashwin, thank you for taking time to meet with me. The first thing I would like to ask you is this: Given your background as a scientist, a technology entrepreneur and an environmental activist …

AM: Yes

HV: Why did you choose to become a politician?

AM: Well, first of all, weather you call yourself a politician or not, when you try to change things - as an advocate for change, when you demand reform, when you protest something - it is a political behavior. Secondly, to change things you have to participate in the political process because the fundamental problems are not technical or managerial; they are social and political. So, your response also has to be social and political. Thirdly, there is not enough capacity for problem solving in politics and public administration today. If you look inside most government departments and see who works there you will not be very encouraged by that, you will not think that these people can actually solve the problems. They don't know enough. I'll give you an example:

There are eight deputy directors of town planning in Bangalore municipality, but only one out of the eight has ever studied town planning. So the idea that they are going to fix your town planning problems is just an illusion. You may think they should do it; they may even be the guys in charge of doing it; but you have to ask a different question: CAN they do it? And if the answer to that question is "no" then all the other things don't really mean anything. It is like if you have a car and you loose the key to it, it doesn't matter what else the car can do you can't even drive it.

HV: So the administration of the city is not working properly?

AM: In any natural system a certain level of deviance from the ambient behavior can be tolerated but beyond that the deviance begins to destroy the very function of that system. In public administration the ambient behavior is very weak and the deviance from even that weak ambient behavior is very large.

People may ask: *"How can a single municipal commissioner run such a large city?"* What they usually mean is: How can he run a city of ten million people that spans 800 km2? They think of it as a spatial problem, as a quantitative problem. But it is not actually a quantitative problem; it is a maintenance flow problem. How can he make sure that the water distribution in every neighborhood is functioning properly? How can he make sure that if a pothole in a road becomes too big the response is quick and efficient in that neighborhood? How can he make sure that if garbage is not collected in one street on a particular day the problem is addressed immediately? If the municipality doesn't have the capacity to solve these problems then what is the solution?

I have been operating with a particularly theory, that in complex environments like cities, megacities especially - and Sassia Saskien says they are not only complex; they are also incomplete - in complex and incomplete environments you can never scale the correct solution. That is not possible. Instead what you have to do is to scale the number of problem solving people. So, the goal is not to find the solution to traffic problems or to find the solution to waste management problems. Those solutions have to be found, of course, but if you set up that goal you will always fail because without a proper maintenance flow that goal cannot be achieved in such a large city. Instead, the goal is to increase the number of people involved in solving those problems.

HV: How do you do that?

AM: You have to do two things. One, you have to increase the number of people who know what the problem is, the true nature of the problem. And two, you have to increase the number of people who know what the solution is … or what some of the solutions could be. I will give you an example:

When we first set out to clean up the lakes there were people who would say: *"Well, obviously, you should divert the sewage; you should fence the lake; you should stop the encroachment"*. But those are technical issues. You can't actually do those things until you understand what is the true nature of the problem: there is somebody encroaching on the lake and that is a political reality. For example, there was a woman there who said: *"Leave one portion of the lake unfenced for me to be able to access it"*.

Now if your strategy is to build a nice bund, fence the lake, paint it in green colors, put up a sign saying it is government property … it is not going to work. Your strategy has to address the true nature of the problem, which is that this woman, using a combination of vested interest and influence, is able to hijack the public space for her private use. How do you stop that?

We began to increase the number of people who knew what the problem was. As we did that there was pressure on the woman to stop behaving badly. At some point she said: *"Well, yes, we have to do the right thing here, we have to fence the lake properly, we cannot allow encroachment and if I am responsible for some of it I will withdraw my encroachment."*

Then the next thing to do is to increase the number of people who know what the solution is. For example, you go around to the rest of the lakes in the city and tell people that this is what we are doing here and it seems to be working. People will then start asking the municipality: *"If it can be done over there why don't you do it here?"* The municipality may say they don't have the resources or the manpower to take care of all the lakes. The solution to that could be to outsource maintenance of

the lakes to local communities under certain terms. So we try to get the people living around the lakes involved in protecting them.

HV: You are starting a process of change?

AM: Yes!

HV: And that is why you wanted to become a politician - to change things?

AM: No, I was already a politician. I was always a politician.

HV: Because you always wanted to change things?

AM: Yes!

HV: But you started out with a different approach so at some point, I guess, you realized that the technical, scientific approach was not enough?

AM: Well, I think I knew from the beginning that it was not enough. What you do at a technical-managerial level is necessary, but it is not sufficient. So, as you learn and get better at the technical-managerial level you feel you have the capacity to begin looking at the social and political aspects.

HV: As a politician, how do you define yourself compared to other, more traditional, politicians?

AM: I don't ask myself that question. Why would I bother to compare myself with them? It is not a relevant comparison in my mind. I am trying to solve public problems. And I understand the importance of politics in solving those problems. And therefore I engage in it. But the goal is not to become a politician. Politics is a means to an end. Politics is not the end in itself. Elections are not the goal. Elections

are the means to a goal. And the goal is … we have all these deficits in the economy, deficits in society, deficits in the infrastructure. How do we fix that?

Even though I am part of an opposition party I still get calls from the minister who asks me what he should do about this and that. So people understand that you are focused on problem solving, and they develop a certain amount of respect for the fact that you are trying to solve problems.

HV: But isn't that exactly what sets you apart from many other politicians?

AM: You may say that, but we will never develop as a country if politics remain the way they are. Until politicians can talk to each other and debate some ideas, we are not going to get good outcomes. In our country we have made the mistake of thinking that disagreement makes things difficult. Disagreement makes things easier. In order to work with you I have to take a leap of faith. When I do that I am not betting that I am right, I am betting that you are right. To do the things that I already believe in is easy. To do the things that you believe in, which I don't, is much harder.

HV: …

AM: So I might start to collaborate with people even if they are not in my ecosystem or on my side, it makes it easier for them to work with me too.

HV: Are you talking about another kind of governance?

AM: I see governance as a continuum from the individual to the state. There are some things that I can do myself. Waste management is a good example. How do we manage waste? You can say that the city should do this; the neighborhood should do that; the municipality should do this; the state government should do that. But there is a much easier way. If I don't generate waste the problem is finished.

It is the same for many problems. If I manage my behavior better I am already contributing to the solution. If I take public transport or if I stay close to my work and walk I am already contributing to the solution. For every problem there is a personal level of contribution to the solution. Then there are things you can do as good a neighbor. I can talk to my neighbors and ask how many of them work in the same area as me. Can I carpool with them?

HV: So when you say you want to involve people in solving problems you actually mean that you want people to behave better?

AM: I want to create an environment in which it is possible for people to behave better; that makes them realize that they can behave better; that makes them choose to behave better.

HV: What are the possibilities of that in a city like Bangalore with almost ten million people?

AM: Correct. You cannot influence everyone. You need to increase the number of responsible, problem solving people who can then influence the rest.

HV: I guess that idea might work in a small village …

AM: But it may also work in a city: each local geography separately. What I do in South Bangalore may not directly influence the behavior of people in North Bangalore, but if there is an example set in a particular place … the framework is the same but the effort may be different.

HV: You are talking about creating local communities?

AM: Yes

HV: To create …

AM: To create a sense of shared responsibility in solving common problems.

HV: But when you look at the city today you see that more and more people …

AM: Choose to be isolated?

HV: Yes

AM: That is not true. Look at where people choose to live in the city. Are people moving into single-family houses? No. People who used to live in single-family houses are getting rid of those houses and are moving into communities.

HV: Really?

AM: If people wanted to live in single-family houses why are all these large apartment communities coming up? People like certain things about them; they like the privacy, the eliteness. I don't deny that, but there are gated communities for the poor too. In Bangalore there are low-income communities that are gated.

HV: We worked with some slum areas and rehabilitation colonies in Chandigarh and we saw how the community of the slum dwellers is broken up when they are moved to the rehabilitation colony, which is supposed to be an improvement.

AM: People want to live in communities but the State is not helping them. The State has this stupid idea that they should be rehabilitated in this nonsense way. You have to construct the State in the imagination of the people. The State was constructed with some robot's imagination of what is good. That doesn't work. You don't want to live like a robot.

HV: What can you do about that?

AM: I am saying there is a better way to live.

HV: The gated community?

AM: The gated community is a community of choice. The reason why people choose it is because it brings together certain elements that they care about. The most obvious is security and people focus a lot on security, but when you talk to them you find out that most of them choose to live there because of the sense of community. They say: *"I feel isolated in my house. I live in a well-planned layout with nice houses on each street but I don't know anyone."* The distance to your neighbor is longer in a well-planned, street level layout than in an apartment block, and there everybody comes out of the same exit six times a day so the opportunity to actually see each other is much higher.

HV: This brings me to the issue of urban transformation and the prospect of maybe five hundred million people or something like that moving to the cities of India within the next 30 years or so. As I see it, there are many possible benefits, but I also see a lot of new problems being created, and in addition to that you have this massive transformation of society and culture, the living environment and people's everyday live. So I am wondering how you look at that?

AM: You can't stop it. Therefore you have to ask: What are the things you care about and how do you preserve them? And how do you preserve people's sense of culture and identity so it is not being lost to this transformation?

I am working on a local heritage documentation project, where we try to make people aware of the local heritage of this particular region. Many people have, what I call a six-step understanding of the Indian history: African caveman, Aryan people, Moguls, British, Indira Gandhi, television. In many parts of India nobody knows the

more locally rich history. You ask an average person out there, even a well-educated person: *"Tell me about the history of Bangalore?"* They won't know what to say. They have never been taught it. History has never been taught in a locally aware way. But if you want people to really know their culture and their history, to work with that and to have that sense of knowledge, you have to ask yourself how do I teach that?

Or, if you say people are not growing up with enough civic sense the question is how do you teach civics? The teacher in twelfth grade will tell you this is the constitution, this is article 14, it guarantees you this and that. That is not civics. Civics has to do with public life, with other people. So we have to see if the learning systems can be changed.

In relations to what I talked about before - that people need to know more about the problems and people need to know more about the solutions - here at Mapunity[1] we are building public information systems: traffic information systems, heritage information systems, environment information systems. The goal is to increase people's knowledge of what the problems are.

Then I am also involved in another project, which has to do with learning. It is called Praja Factory.[2] *Praja* means citizen. It is a way of teaching responsible behavior and problem solving.

So I am trying to scale the two issues: knowledge of the problems and knowledge of the solutions.

HV: Since you can't stop urbanization, as you say, the question is how to make cities work better?

AM: Yes!

HV: What do you see as the major challenges in that regard?

AM: The biggest problem is that we don't have a government structure of problem solving, which can address any situation, even status quo, let alone change. We don't have integrated planning for different sectors, we do land-use planning separately from water planning and energy planning. It cannot work like that. Besides, there is not enough decentralization. Cities are not autonomous enough to change their own destiny. There is not enough finance in local administration. State government and central government take most of the tax money.

Secondly, we need greater empowerment of the people rather than greater empowerment of the State. The State is not the answer to the problem. The State is the problem. The State has failed to set up the necessary governance infrastructure and public infrastructure. So the government is not going to solve the problems.

If you think of education, for example, you realize how true this is. Nobody in their right mind will ever send their children to a government school in India … if they have a choice. It is obvious to the overwhelming majority of the population that government schools are not teaching anybody anything. Even desperately poor people spend their own money on sending their children to private schools that are dubious. They are not confident of those schools, but they are certain they are better than the public schools. You understand? They are choosing a bad product, which they have to pay for, instead of the government product, which they don't have to pay for.

HV: Do you think urbanization will make a positive difference?

AM: We haven't yet decided in this country whether we like density or not. We understand that urbanization is being chosen by a large number of people. But we still have this romantic idea of the Indian village, which goes back to Gandhi. It is

okay to have that romantic idea, but if the village is such a great place why is it a universal phenomenon that people try to leave it?

Most of the people who have an idyllic view of life in the village live in the city. They have an idyllic view of someone else living in the village.

HV: So you have a lot of people moving from the villages to the cities, but the government does not really seem capable of …

AM: The problem is that politics do not reflect the aspirations of the people. The vast majority of elected representatives are from rural areas because we have stopped the process of converting rural seats into urban seats. The distribution of seats is based on the 1991 census. It should be based on the 2011 census. Then Bangalore would have many more seats. And places in rural areas, which have fewer and fewer people, would not have as many seats.

HV: But the reason why the government is not adapting to these changes …

AM: It is deliberately. It is because politicians of today are emerging from places that people are abandoning. If they adopted they would loose their seats. It is in their self-interest to resist these changes.

HV: How do you change that?

AM: Change the game. You can't change the rules.

HV: And how do you change the game?

AM: I can't say I compellingly know the answer, but one of the things I am trying is to increase the number of people who participate, who are influential in public live, in their local communities, in neighborhoods, in city government …

You can go to BMTC – the bus company – and ask them what are some things they have done recently that are new in transport? And they will say we moved from destination-oriented transport to direction-oriented transport. You go to the municipality and you ask what is something they do differently to maintain public spaces? And they will say we work with communities to give them the right to manage those spaces themselves. You go to the water supply department and ask them what they are doing that is new? They will say we are trying to revive some of the lakes to see if they can become sources of water. You can go to any department and ask them: *"what do you think is new that you are doing?"* And the answer you will get, in seven out of ten cases, will be something that people like me push them to do.

HV: But could the process of urbanization also, and in itself, be the game changer? Like the Arab Spring took place in cities; the riots today in Brazil take place in cities. Historically, all the revolutions have taken place in cities.

AM: Yes, in theory it could. But with the ongoing deprivation and every day being so harsh nothing is so much worse that you will go and protest in a public space.

I think the reason why other countries have these kinds of "springs" and India doesn't is that we have a 'culture of please' between the voters and their representatives. In the global movements you are talking about it is more like *"God damn, you morons"*. It is anger. Here, people are still looking at their elected representatives saying: *"Please don't hurt me!"*

Another reason is that the cost of surviving is higher in those countries. In India the cost of surviving is low. A purely minimalistic existence, where all you do is eat and sleep, can still be done in most parts of India for less than fifty … sixty rupees a day. Poor people can exist, not live, for 1500 – 2000 rupees a month. And they do. In Tunisia, if you only had 1500 rupees you would die. So, as the cost of living goes up people's incentive to secure ample opportunities and a well-functioning economy, is

much higher. The incentive to secure that by protesting is not high in India because living costs are kept artificially low in this country. Today, we are passing a food security bill that entitles cheap food to 65 percent of the population. It is the middle class that is demanding change because they have more to loose.

HV: So the change of the game, if it comes, will come from the middle class?

AM: It will come from the middle class and it will come from the more prosperous states first.

HV: And you are an example of the middleclass?

AM: Not really. In India, what we call the middleclass is actually quite well off. It is the middle class of some other country. What would have constituted the middleclass if we had lived in some other country; in this country it is more the upper class, to be realistic. The term is loosely used to mean professionally employed people who have a good civic infrastructure, learning opportunities for self-betterment, and even a certain amount of money and time for leisure. The idea of leisure is strongly connected to the middleclass. If you don't have the capacity to create leisure you are not from the middle class.

HV: How is the middleclass helping change the Indian society?

AM: The problem is that we have never had a liberation theology in this country. The idea of equality of all people is not an Indian idea. It is there in the constitution but it is not there on the ground. It is what made Gandhi profound, right? He was not only saying something that the majority of the population did not believe. He was saying that because he believed in the equality of all people he was actually a better man.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." Where is that idea in India? Gandhi was the only guy who stood up for that idea. Since Gandhi*ji*, you cannot point to a single politician in this country who has ever stood up for the idea that all men are created equal. Even people who are suffering from inequality never stand up for the idea that all men are created equal. What they are demanding is their own separate equality. The middleclass, however, is helping change this because in their meritocratic, professional life they are forced to believe in the idea of equality and they want the rest of society to be meritocratic too.

HV: And that middleclass is essentially an urban phenomenon?

AM: Entirely. The rural middleclass is a myth. They may have money, but they don't have leisure. They don't have opportunity for leisure even if they have time for it because rural India is an infrastructural pit. There is nothing. Ten kilometers from the centre of Bangalore the provision of infrastructure drops dramatically. People want to be inside that line, that invisible infrastructure line. It is like the Berlin Wall. People want to be on this side of the wall.

HV: But how do you see the possibilities for leisure in a city like Bangalore?

AM: People make false substitutions like television or they create parks and playgrounds inside the gated community. But it is not only the newly rich who live like this. The oldest gated communities in India were established by the State for various groups of civil servants.

HV: The reason why you engaged with the lakes is that because they also provide opportunities for leisure?

AM: I did it because it interests me. I try to do things that interest me. Leisure is not about free time. It is about being able to do want you want.

HV: Do you see a lot of people with the same visions as you in India today?

AM: Yes and no. I think a lot of people believe in the things we are talking about but not many people are acting on it. There is a great deal of inertia.

HV: But you are not going to change the game alone?

AM: No, but the number of people who are trying to change the game are increasing. Are the numbers increasing fast enough to change the game within our lifetime? It is hard to say. When we started five years ago there were hardly any of us. Now more and more are joining.

HV: What kind of India is it that you – and people like you – would like to see?

AM: India is like an ocean, right? You can throw anything into it and it will figure out a way to include that also. But we need some organizing principles. We don't have the organizing principles for getting together so we never have that conversation about what society should be. People's understanding of society is very narrow; it means, maybe, my brother in law, but it certainly doesn't mean the lady who works for me.

If you go to a modern mall, where you have a reasonable degree of quality of life, what is actually upper class life in India, you will see that people working there are all standing up because nobody had the inclination to figure out that they also need a place to sit, a place to clean themselves, a place to be dignified. We don't have the organizing principles for that. That is also the reason why occasionally the residents welfare association meetings are so charged up. People are thinking: *What an insult I should be called to talk to my neighbor. Why the hell would I want to talk to my neighbor? I know him"*. So the assumption is that because you know your neighbor there is nothing for you to talk with him about. And if you ever want to talk with him

it is not a conversation that needs to involve any other neighbor. So we need to build those organizing principles.

HV: In order to …

AM: In order to get order … and freedom.

The Chinese have an organizing principle. Because of that they are able to get order. They are even able to get a certain degree of apparent freedom. Because the Communist Party has said that there shall be no other parties, they have obliged themselves to deliver certain outcomes, like economic development. In India, well, nobody takes responsibility for anything. If you are poor it is not my fault. In China, if you are poor, it is the Communist Party's fault.

HV: The Chinese government has a contract with the Chinese people like Roosevelt had a contract with the American people.

AM: Yes, we don't have a contract between the government and the people. The government has set up some rules that have nothing to do with the people. The people don't even believe most of those rules.

HV: What kind of contract would you like for India?

AM: The idea of India is diverse, it is simply not uniform enough to organize … you should try to first organize it properly at the local level. Hopefully that will lead to a more responsible, if not a more sensible, society. There must be an element of responsibility in public life. If, in society, you can combine voluntarily compliance with responsible behavior, then you have actually achieved something!

HV: Do you think urbanization, the formation of an urban culture, will play a role in that?

AM: It can because every day it brings you closer to the idea that there are different people. Yesterday I went to the coffee shop. There was a Chinese-looking woman with a South-Indian name. There are many Chinese-looking people in the city but there are not many Chinese-looking people called Deepa. I am thinking she doesn't look like a Deepa. You understand?

It can only happen in the city.

Notes

[1] "Mapunity develops technology to tackle social problems and development challenges in India." Quoted from: http://mapunity.in/ (accessed 28.01.2014)

[2] "Knowledge production that leads to government by the people." Quoted from: http://prajafactory.org/ (accessed 28.01.2014)