

Why the Civic Project is Important

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On the 8th of October 2015, I visited JSS Public School in Bangalore to judge in one of the school-level selections, I helped to score each team's presentation and contributed to the final decision regarding which team would advance to the next round.

For anyone unfamiliar with the Bala Janaagraha Civic Fest system, here's a quick overview: Student groups from every school choose a road to survey, research the urban issues the road faces, and then formulate a plan to solve said problems in the form of a Civic Project. It is a multi-round competition in which each student group presents their Civic Project in hope of advancing to the subsequent round, commencing with a school-level selection, to the final round where the groups with best Civic Projects compete at a national level. Teams that manage to instigate change in their chosen road and show passion for the issues typically score well.

As demonstrated above, the process of the Civic Fest is an extremely meticulous and involved one, which begs the question, why bother? What is the benefit of this important part of the Bala Janaagraha syllabus? Sure, it is good to teach children about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, but what really is the profit from the unique means by which Bala Janaagraha achieves this?

My trip to JSS Public School illustrated the significance of Bala Janaagraha's work to me. A few interactions I had with some of the students showed me that there is, in fact a distinctly positive impression left on the students that are a direct product of the way the programmes encourages students to face the issues in a very practical way.

I asked one student (right) what he thought the biggest issue in his neighbourhood was and how he would fix it, he responded that the substandard quality of the roads and lack of pavements was definitely the most pressing problem, and that he would contact the local authorities to fill the potholes to fix it. Trying to gauge Bala Janaagraha's impact on him, I asked whether he would have known how to solve this problem before he had done the Bala Janaagraha course. His response: "No, I didn't even know bad roads had to be fixed. I just thought bad road, no pavement, potholes? Okay, some roads are just bad. I didn't know that was a big problem." In this



case, Bala Janaagraha had made the student confront the problems that plagued his neighbourhood and seriously consider issues that he'd previously just accepted.

Another student (pictured below) explained his group's civic project to me, explaining that they had convinced the local authorities to re-tar the road in question. The Civic Project gives the students the opportunity to face these issues in a hands-on way. Apart from allowing students to apply their learning to their contexts, when the participants experience successes like this one, they are empowered. It gives them the confidence to confront issues and faith that the system will listen to their complaints.



"You should give [our project] high marks" he tells me "we asked them to redo the road, and they did!" He was right; this group's persistence in accomplishing their goal of re-tarring the road impressed the judges, earning this group their well-deserved first place of the three teams at JSS School.

Let us know if you have any inspiring Bala Janaagraha stories to share!