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WOLDEMARIAM: This is an interview with Doctor A. Ravindra, currently advisor to the chief minister on urban affairs and someone who's held a very wide range of positions in the state government. At one time, you were the chief secretary of the state of Karnataka.

RAVINDRA: *Karnataka*

WOLDEMARIAM: Chief Secretary of Karnataka, which is the top administrative position, right? Top civil service position in the state.

So maybe we could start just with you telling me a little bit about your life story, where you come from, your education, background, and then we could probably go on to more substantive questions, yes?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, well, I come from Bangalore itself, so I spent all my life in the city, except for the time I worked outside Bangalore. I belong to Bangalore. I had my schooling, education, college education in Bangalore, so I'm a Bangalorean that way. After college, I appeared for this competitive exam, which is the All India Service's exam and got into what is called Indian Administrative Service (IAS), that is the premier administrative service in India.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And you went to the academy in Mussoorie?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, Mussoorie.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Mussoorie?

RAVINDRA: *That is the National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie where all those selected to this administrative service, IAS, they get trained. So the first part of training happens in Mussoorie. It is partly academic; partly some kind of practical orientation. And then we usually—*

WOLDEMARIAM: Can I ask, sorry, how was your time in Mussoorie, what was your—was it a good experience or fairly mundane, what was the—?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, Mussoorie, it was interesting because for the first time we had the opportunity—you know people coming from different parts of India. This is a federal service, like having candidates coming from different states in the U.S. (United States) coming together in one place. About 100 people. So that exposure and interaction itself is quite interesting for us.*

WOLDEMARIAM: What batch were you, what year?

RAVINDRA: *1965.*

WOLDEMARIAM: '65.

RAVINDRA: *I got in in 1965, that was one—of course, the actual training part, I would say those days, when we were there, it was not that rigorous. So it was sort of enjoyable, partly instructive, and we tried to learn more on our own. The academic part was essentially about the constitution, about the economy, public administration, and things like that. But usually we had several hours of group*

discussions, the usual sort of training that takes place. Now later, much later after we left, it has become a little more rigorous, much better designed curriculum.

After finishing the training in Mussoorie, officers are allotted to different states.

WOLDEMARIAM: Right.

RAVINDRA: *So I came to Karnataka.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And at this point is it common for people that went into the IAS to be posted to their province of origin?

RAVINDRA: Yes.

WOLDEMARIAM: It is common?

RAVINDRA: *No, no, not the province of origin, they can be posted to any province in the country. Sometimes you happen to go to your own home province, sometimes not. And as a matter of policy they ensure—the government of India ensures that some of them go to their home states and some to other provinces—it is a mix.*

WOLDEMARIAM: It is a mix?

RAVINDRA: *Some come from outside, it was 50 percent those days, let us say if six officers are allotted to Karnataka, three could be from within the province, three from anywhere else in India. That is the broad principle; that has undergone some change, but anyway it is a mix. So in Karnataka itself you will find a lot of officers who come from many other states in India.*

So once we come to be allotted to the state, one year we have training within the state, it is like practical training, we are attached to different offices—but you are primarily posted to a district because in India the district administration has been very important, mostly rural, it used to be, now India is getting urbanized. So you went to the district and there is the head of the district, who is called the “district collector”, or the “deputy commissioner” in Karnataka—slightly different nomenclatures.

So we spent time in the district in different departments, different sectors, it is not merely the collector’s office, it could be development departments or maybe agriculture, or industry or police. And then after completing district training we are given a regular posting. But now they have changed it slightly, now you spend a year in the district and then go back to Mussoorie for about two to three months to again exchange notes about what happened in the field and things like that. And that is why I said there is a change in the modalities of training.

So the first posting is what is called “assistant commissioner” in Karnataka or a “sub-collector”, in some other states like Tamil Nadu. You are in charge of a subdivision, part of a district, so you’ll head that subdivision and perform functions of district administration, which is partly magisterial. The sub-collector is also called “subdivisional magistrate” and the collector is called “district magistrate”.

WOLDEMARIAM: So really, you, as a district commissioner you have—

RAVINDRA: *District commissioner, yes.*

WOLDEMARIAM: —you have executive authority?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, executive authority. We are broadly responsible for law and order, keeping peace, a lot of regulatory authority, and development activities also. When I was the collector or deputy commissioner, even development functions, or all functions of the district were with the collector, the supreme head. But later, when this process of decentralization started—now they have created what is Zilla Panchayat, that is a District Panchayat, which is an elected body—they perform the planning and development functions, and the collector is more in charge of law and order, regulation, a lot of other miscellaneous work; holding elections, fighting emergencies, and all sorts of other things.*

So I spent my time in the subdivision as assistant commissioner and then as district commissioner, in two or three districts. I then worked in different departments in the state. I was head of the Food and Civil Supplies Department, I was commissioner of commercial taxes, and worked also in the secretariat, as secretary to government. So I was secretary to the government in a number of departments-- education, health, urban development and so on. During my career, I spent a considerable time in the urban sector. It just so happened.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, sure.

RAVINDRA: So I—

WOLDEMARIAM: So you actually developed some expertise?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, I developed some expertise on the job you can say, so I happened to be the city commissioner, the commissioner of the Bangalore City Municipal Corporation.*

WOLDEMARIAM: This was in what year?

RAVINDRA: *Actually twice, once in the late '80s and again in late '90s.*

WOLDEMARIAM: That is twice, okay.

RAVINDRA: *Yes, and I was also Administrator of the Municipal Corporation for some time. Then I was chairman of the Bangalore Development Authority, BDA, later, also headed the Bangalore Water Supply Board (Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board, or BWSSB)*

WOLDEMARIAM: Oh, okay, this was in what year?

RAVINDRA: *That was in '94, '95, some posts I held simultaneously. So I spent quite some time in the urban sector and I was also Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. So I could gain an overall picture of urban activities. Because of the interest I developed in the urban sector—urban affairs—I also did my Ph.D., I got my doctorate in urban studies.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Excellent. When did you become chief secretary?

RAVINDRA: *That was in 2002.*

WOLDEMARIAM: 2002 during Krishna's—?

RAVINDRA: *During S.M. (Somanahalli Malliah) Krishna's term, so that was the culmination as chief secretary and then I retired by the end of 2002. Subsequently, after a couple of years I was also deputy chairman of the state planning board for some time and then now of course I hold this position since a year or so. But soon after I retired from government, I set up and started an NGO (non-governmental organization).*

WOLDEMARIAM: What was it called?

RAVINDRA: *It was called Centre for Sustainable Development, CSD; focusing on environmental and social activities. I was also associated with PAC, Public Affairs Centre.*

WOLDEMARIAM: You sit on their board correct?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, I sit on their board. One of the things I did even when I was in government before retirement, when I was chairman of BDA and also administrator of the city corporation— at one time I held both these posts simultaneously. That was to really involve the citizens in the city governance, let us say, mainly the city resident welfare associations, so I set up a forum called Swabhimana; swabhimana, means self-respect. So there we tried to bring people together just like a public-private-people PPP partnership, the city municipal body, the BDA, at the same time some of the NGOs and resident associations, we all came together.*

WOLDEMARIAM: This was after retirement—during retirement that you did this?

RAVINDRA: *No, no. Much before.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Much before, much earlier?

RAVINDRA: *Even when I was in BDA, see that was the time when I started really experiencing the problems of the people firsthand in a large city. People directly approaching me for various grievances, the type of problems people face. In a democracy, and I thought—people act as a check too. Whatever wrongs may be happening within the government. So that is when I came across the first CRC (Citizen Report Cards) of the PAC and I was still in government and I responded. I was the first one to do so- they had commented on various government organizations; they had ranked them and the BDA for instance was ranked the last, the most difficult organization to cope with. So then I went back to Dr. (Samuel) Paul and said "You made an assessment saying that these are the citizens' perceptions, whatever it is. What can be done to remedy it or to improve the systems or functioning of the organization, how can we respond to the people better?" So that is when my relationship with PAC started even at that time, but I became a director on their board after retirement.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Of course.

RAVINDRA: *So that is—*

WOLDEMARIAM: So can I ask you about this, about the Citizen Report Cards and I guess I don't want to talk too much about the Citizen Report Cards today because it has been covered, but to talk—I'm very interested in your response as a civil servant to the findings of the CRC, because not every administrator responded in the way you did. Obviously there was some resistance and maybe I'm wondering, number one why did that resistance exist and why do you think—I'm not asking you to psychoanalyze yourself but—

RAVINDRA: *Oh, no, you can—*

WOLDEMARIAM: —but why did you respond in a positive way where others didn't and what explains some of their resistance?

RAVINDRA: *You see, when I saw the report card and I found the organization where I was working had got a negative image, as head of the organization I felt bad, naturally. So then I felt persuaded or provoked to at least know what needs to be done. So for a time after that period—*

[interruption] When one has a genuine concern for the people, for the city or whatever it is, we always feel. I also used to feel that there were certain things wrong within the organization, so the internal systems and procedures also needed improvement. There were a lot of things that needed to be done to change the image of the organization.

WOLDEMARIAM: In your mind what were some of the systematic problems within the BDA? When you took over what were some of the two or three things that—?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, for instance BDA is an organization that deals with developing land.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So they sell rights to land?

RAVINDRA: *—sell plots to the people and rights over the plots, but since it is a public organization, there is a public interest involved in it, even though land is a private issue. So sites are allotted to different categories of people, it is not like the private land market. There is a policy for allocation of land or sites for developing housing. We also did some housing but later on the focus was more on selling of sites. So the weaker section, the poorer people for instance, got small plots at a subsidized rate, then the larger plots were priced higher. And at that time when I took over there was a lot of demand for housing, as the city was growing.*

In Bangalore, suddenly from the 70's there was a spurt in growth; the '70s, '80s, '90s witnessed phenomenal growth. And government—or even the private sector—was not able to meet that demand for whatever reason and that was the situation then. So there was a lot of demand from people for land and housing and the BDA was not able to meet the demand in time; so the demand far exceeded the supply and this gave rise to all sorts of, I would say malpractices.

WOLDEMARIAM: So there was a bottleneck in there; it created an opportunity for corruption, yes?

RAVINDRA: *Corruption, to put it very frankly, corruption which gives rise to several other problems. Let me share one experience with you since you raised this issue.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *Within a few days of my taking over as chairman of BDA, there were a lot of people coming and presenting their grievance, "I didn't get my site (plot), I don't get the sale deed, I had to wait for a long time, I'm asked to come again and again." Again there is a problem with land acquisition, land is acquired through the Land Acquisition Act. So they would come and say it was taking a lot of time, we don't get the compensation in time. The contractors, complained they didn't get their payments in time. Financial systems were not sound.*

I started meeting the people, listening to them, trying to find out what exactly are the problems. Then some of them, some NGOs and all came and said "we are going to organize a meeting of people's organizations, or citizen forum. We want you to come so that we can share our problems with you." I said "fine". But I didn't realize what I was in for. When I went there I found a huge gathering. They had arranged in a big hall; some thousand people.

And then they just started letting out their ire on the BDA and the corporation saying "There is so much corruption, people's interests are not heeded" and all those similar problems. I didn't promise anything, I said "In the first place I admit there are certain problems like this and I'm not giving you any solutions saying that okay I'll do this and things will change." I said "If people also cooperated, if you try to cooperate in some measures, then maybe it is possible to do something." Later on, that point was appreciated, so I had a smaller meeting, then I called them again in small groups and I said "We'll work together."

So that is when I started Swabhimana, bringing people together in a common forum, having frequent meetings, even in smaller localities or communities, community meetings. So people for the first time felt that they are being heard, that there is some relief, out of ten things one or two might get solved, if not all of them. So that is how it all began.

Dealing with people's problems was one issue. I think the more difficult part at that time for me was the people within the organization. So the resistance that you mentioned earlier—there was certainly a lot of resistance from within. In the first place, they said "Now how can NGOs, citizens, all sorts of people come and sit here in the office and we, officials are supposed to exchange notes with them?" For a long time, in the government people never liked to share information. Only recently, we got our Right to Information Act and that has made a lot of difference. But prior to that it was difficult to get any sort of information.

So I had to go through that process and that is where I told Dr. Paul, "Can you hold some training or some orientation courses for some of our employees, create an awareness about citizens' issues and secondly how to address the problems of the organization." And the PAC did a few sessions.

So that was one period I went through and tried to do something and then of course government shifted me. We don't stay very long in our posts in India—it is chance, sometimes you are there for a year, two years or three years. It is called a generalist service, the IAS. So you are transferred from one post to the other.

WOLDEMARIAM: So you were at the BDA for how long?

RAVINDRA: *I was at the BDA only for one year.*

WOLDEMARIAM: For one year?

RAVINDRA: *But I went back again as chairman 2 years later, again for a short period.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So what explains some of the—I guess this raises another question for me, but what explains the fairly short period of time or the fluidity within the civil service and the time you spend in these positions? Because one would think this must be a great barrier towards reform. If someone can only serve a position for one year, it is difficult to change things, right? And also along these lines for potential, for civil servants who wanted to change things, was there ever any political pressure that you or others may have faced? Because this is something that has come up in my other conversations.

RAVINDRA: *This is a common question asked. But I think I should tell you something about our political system because you can't appreciate what civil servants do unless you understand what—*

WOLDEMARIAM: Right.

RAVINDRA: *We have this parliamentary form of government as you know, the British model. So we have the Prime Minister and the Cabinet at the center. In the states or provinces, the chief ministers and the other ministers. You see, unlike at the center or the federal level, it is not just policy making, in the provinces, it is more of day-to-day problems. Here the political pressures are bound to be far higher because here even a minister or a legislator comes into contact with the people directly almost every day. Or they themselves go to him everyday and say "I want this, I want a plot, I want a job for my son", so many things, which may not strictly be the job of a minister or a secretary. People come for such things because the Indian social situation is also like that.*

There is poverty, there is unemployment. Things might have changed quite a bit in the last few years because of economic growth and all that. In my view the social problems of India are more intricate, more complex than economic problems. Economy will develop, India has good talent whether in terms of economists, scientists, technologists, so in India along with economic progress, we find a divide, there is a dichotomy.

On the social side you'll still find poverty, slums, barriers like caste, religion, language. Each state has its own problems; you will find all these problems at the local level are faced directly by the ministers and the civil servants. So in turn, the politicians or the political leaders try to influence the civil servants in their own decision-making.

See, in theory, the civil servant in India is supposed to be neutral; neutrality of civil service. And that is why it is called permanent civil service as in Britain. It is a career. Whichever the party that comes to power, you are neutral and you give advice.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *But in practice things have changed a lot, maybe for the first two decades or so after independence it worked somewhat. It also depends on the political leadership. At that time soon after independence, there were very eminent people heading the administration at the center, and also at the states—*

WOLDEMARIAM: It also wasn't that competitive a political system at that time.

RAVINDRA: *Yes, that is right, so politics has certainly become more competitive, really competitive, more people wanting to occupy positions, have power. So sharing power, that is also a very good question. The role of civil servants also has become more complex. There are pressures on you—it is a matter of trying to reconcile the law on one hand and the realities on the other. You are supposed to enforce the law, implement the law, and take into account the political compulsions.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, sure. And civil servants can be rotated at the will of the chief minister?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, that is right. That is right. So the system of civil service appointment—although the system of recruitment in all is very good in the civil service streamlined, especially the All India Services. But in the state, it is the discretion of the chief minister to appoint the senior officers to various levels. And so it can be rotated and it can change in a matter of months or somebody can go on for years.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Right, right, it just depends.

RAVINDRA: *It depends on the political leadership; it depends on the stability of the government. See, this is another factor. Where a government is very stable and the chief minister is strong in a sense that he is able to take his team together, he is the unquestioned leader, then it becomes much easier. So in some states you will find civil servants continuing for three years, five years; programs, plans do well. But in some other states, they will also vary from time to time—short duration governments, coalition governments, the pressures are there. I have seen them for the last few years. Karnataka used to have a stable government earlier, there—*

WOLDEMARIAM: Congress Party dominated?

RAVINDRA: *Congress Party dominated and then the Janata Dal for a few terms. But for the first time in 2004 when we had the elections in Karnataka—no party got the majority. So the Congress and Janata Dal formed a coalition government.*

WOLDEMARIAM: —and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)?

RAVINDRA: *So for the first time the BJP was the second largest party next to Congress. But Congress and Janata Dal formed the first coalition government but it didn't survive. After two years or so it broke down. Later JDS (Janata Dal Secular) and BJP formed a coalition government, that was the time when we found a big change in Karnataka politics. So there you will find conflicts between party and party, and chief minister and deputy chief minister. So chief minister has the*

power to rotate but he is also subject to pressure and influence from his own ministers. Sometimes even against his own will, he may be forced to do things—because he is dependant on his own legislators for his support. Unlike in the US—

WOLDEMARIAM: So he can easily be unseated?

RAVINDRA: *His survival depends on support of the MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly). If he loses majority support he can be displaced.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Yes, now this is a big issue.

RAVINDRA: *So those influences also work.*

WOLDEMARIAM: These are big issues. Is it the case—and you can tell me if there is some truth to this claim—But is it the case—I've heard that in particularly in the latter half of the 1990's, the political support that S.M. Krishna gave to these reform efforts was very important. And is there some truth to the claim that he was able to insulate many of the civil servants from these political pressures because of the commitment he gave to this agenda, this reform agenda?

RAVINDRA: *See, as I said earlier, during S.M. Krishna's time, he had the advantage of a clear majority and a stable political government.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So there was stability?

RAVINDRA: *And as a leader, a chief minister he came to be respected, he commanded respect from his own party members. So he had that opportunity to bring in reforms. He was able to manage far better.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So maybe you could tell me a little bit about—given the public pressure on government and some of the demand for reform. What in your mind were some of the key reform efforts you were involved with or maybe you thought were just very important that one should mention?

RAVINDRA: *Well in the city level itself, for instance in the city corporation, bringing the citizen-government partnership for the first time, setting up Swabhimana. That was one effort, which did work, the setting up of new resident welfare associations, involving them and giving them a say. So that was one important reform.*

Another one related to property tax—

WOLDEMARIAM: Right, self-assessment, yes.

RAVINDRA: *Maybe Jairaj also might have told you. I actually initiated it, I conceived it. Full implementation took place during Jairaj's time, it was a continuation. Before that, it was a very irrational system, arbitrary, a lot of scope for corruption.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Of course, with the collector.

RAVINDRA: *Self-Assessment System, based on certain norms, how a property is to be valued. And since it became transparent, people were told these are the norms, criteria for assessing your property, you do it on your own, like income tax.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So revenue officials had a broad discretion on how they valued property?

RAVINDRA: Yes, yes.

WOLDEMARIAM: And that is a problem.

RAVINDRA: *That is right. One more important reform or step I took was—those days finances were a big problem, unlike now—we know the economy is far better and money is flowing in for various development activities. At that time, the city corporation faced a big problem, there weren't revenues, hardly any money for real infrastructure development.*

WOLDEMARIAM: This was in the mid '90s?

RAVINDRA: *Yes mid 90's, middle late '90s. So, for the first time I raised funds. I went to the capital market in the city; municipal bonds, in the US you also have these municipal bonds. So we raised money through municipal bonds for certain infrastructure works, roads, and drains. And I also tried to—in the process—bring in some reforms in contract management and construction work because that was a big problem. Contracts were being given to anyone and everyone who was not qualified; resulting in low quality of works, roads, potholes and all of that.*

So we engaged qualified, consultants, to develop certain norms, for instance in road building among other things; so that was one major step. Raising funds was one thing, despite the interest rates being high we succeeded in raising the money. The more difficult was the reforms in contracting, there was a lot of resistance again.

WOLDEMARIAM: I'm sure. So, speaking with Jairaj he told me about the engineering contracting?

RAVINDRA: *Correct.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Okay, and so did this begin during your tenure?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, it began then.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And so what were some of the—How were you able to overcome these—some of these vested interests?

RAVINDRA: *It was a struggle but you keep trying, so I succeeded in doing something [indecipherable]. This is where I thought I would also get the support of the people, though I was not a politician but I realized that even a civil servant or a bureaucrat can get people's support—So when the system became transparent, then people also started saying that we need quality work which meant good contracting systems. In the tender conditions we sought a guarantee on performance from the contractor for so many years.*

It took some time for things to settle down but the concept of performance based contracting has gained importance.

WOLDEMARIAM: So who followed you after your tenure at BBMP (Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike) or BMP (Bangalore Mahanagra Palike) at that time?

RAVINDRA: *BMP, one Mr. (Pankaj Kumar) Pandey, I think Mr. Pandey.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And then Jairaj was after him?

RAVINDRA: *After that I don't remember exactly, maybe, Jairaj.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So the reform of the contracts, contract awarding was a long process, right?

RAVINDRA: *A long process, yes.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And it must be difficult getting follow through when one commissioner changes and another commissioner—

RAVINDRA: *Yes, yes.*

WOLDEMARIAM: This must be a problem, yes?

RAVINDRA: *That is right. It all depends on the successor, he may or may not continue the same policy; he'll have his own perception. Somebody may improve on that as well, that is a part of the process in India, it happens everywhere.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And what were some of the challenges that you faced at the BWSSB (Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board), there must have been some big challenges there?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, BWSSB, the first—the real big challenge was augmenting water supply itself. Bangalore City doesn't have any source of water in the city or nearby. Long back, it used to get water from the lakes, At 30 km (kilometers) there used to be one big lake. It was okay for a small population of those days, but as the population started growing, Bangalore then had to go almost the distance of 100 kilometers to get water from a river called Kaveri (or Cauvery), it is a well-known river. It flows through Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, two states. And of course, we used to have water disputes also between the two states, the US also has this.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, sure.

RAVINDRA: *Riparian disputes. So fortunately in those days, in the '60s itself people at the helm of affairs, they had some vision and said "We should bring water from Kaveri." So we started the Kaveri Water Supply project. From then on it was stage one, stage two, stage three. When I joined we found the demand again outstripping the supply, less than 100 liters per capita, much below the norms for this metropolitan city [indecipherable] and the population was growing; we had to do something.*

So I initiated the next stage of the Kaveri Water Supply Project. For the first time we went to an external agency because until then the projects were small, so I thought that would not suffice. I approached the OECF (Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund of Japan), now it is called the Japanese Bank for International

Cooperation. Fortunately they came and saw things, how they were and we got the project. But the project materialized after I left.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *So I would say my role was—*

WOLDEMARIAM: So you were at BWSSB?

RAVINDRA: *—for one year. In many places, I was more of a founder and initiator than a finisher.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *I was not there to see the full structure or the finished product.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, you were at BWSSB in '99 right, '98?

RAVINDRA: No, '94.

WOLDEMARIAM: '94?

RAVINDRA: *'94, '95 at that stage. So the Kaveri fourth stage, which is still going on, they got another phase also, that is a big project, I initiated that. A few other things like—water loss is a major problem. Even now we're not been able to address it fully. I initiated some studies on how to cut water losses.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Leakage of pipes and—?

RAVINDRA: *Replacement of the pipes and all that; internal management of any organization is one thing which I always looked at; personnel, capacity building, that is a very important thing wherever you are, so that was another thing that I tried to look at.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, so you always had to invest, in almost every organization or institution you worked in, you had to invest time in building human capacity personnel. And at times did you find it necessary to simply bring in new personnel to some of these institutions?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, it is—but our recruitment process is such. It was not easy to bring in people laterally from outside straightaway. In fact, Jairaj tried to do that in the sense he got some people from the organization he was working earlier, Power Corporation engineers. But again they had to go back, that was temporary, it also gave rise to some internal problems, insiders saying "Why should people come from outside?"*

The local engineers, they had their problems. I keep emphasizing even now, the need for bringing in some professionals from outside.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *But now we are trying to change the rules relating to recruitment. Facilitating this professionalization. One of the weaknesses of the urban organizations in India I would say, particularly the municipalities, is this lack of internal capacity,*

professional town planners, engineers, health professional, public health professionals, financial managers.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure. So tell me a little bit about your time as chief secretary and what were some of the big—I mean the urban portfolio—you still must have been dealing with, but what were some of the big issues?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, there was always a separate secretary dealing with it but I had some interest anyway, that is there. But my tenure as chief secretary was marked by some very big problems the state faced.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, sure.

RAVINDRA: *So much so when I couldn't spend as much time as I would have liked to on other sectors, whether it was urban or education or whatever.*

WOLDEMARIAM: What were some of these big problems?

RAVINDRA: *I'll tell you the big problems. Number one was a severe—there was a very severe drought, it was across the state.*

WOLDEMARIAM: I've heard, yes.

RAVINDRA: *The monsoon failed, there were no rains at all and meeting that drought—.*

WOLDEMARIAM: '02 this was in '02? Yes.

RAVINDRA: *So that was a very big challenge. What happened was—that precipitated the problem as I told you earlier about the Kalveri water dispute we had.*

WOLDEMARIAM: With Tamil Nadu.

RAVINDRA: *With Tamil Nadu. So when there is a drought, when rains fail, whether it is this state or that state, the problem is the same. So they also had a similar problem and see, the water flows from Karnataka to Tamil Nadu, that is the downstream. There is an agreement to solve this dispute between the two states. The federal government set up a tribunal, Kaveri Water Tribunal. They had given some interim order, which said so much water should be released by Karnataka to Tamil Nadu. Because of the failure of rains, we couldn't release the water, so that became a big political issue, although politicians knew the problem—that is what happens.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *The chief minister of Tamil Nadu was Miss Jayalalitha (Jayaram) [indecipherable], S.M Krishna, the chief minister here was in great tension. So that took a lot of our time, to deal with the drought on the one hand as well as this dispute. What happened was Tamil Nadu went to the court, the Supreme Court, that was a very big case. They said that we had to release so much quantity of water. Unfortunately, that could not be released. They filed a contempt petition, so then we all had to go and spend time in Delhi in the Supreme Court. And it took months and months—that was one. Another major problem was—I don't*

know whether you've heard of (Koose Munisway) Veerappan in the jungles, he was a poacher, he was—

WOLDEMARIAM: He kidnapped somebody right?

RAVINDRA: *Oh, yes—*

WOLDEMARIAM: So he kidnapped a Bollywood actor?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, not Bollywood but our own Kannada actor—Raj Kumar, he was an all-time hero of the local language Kannada. That happened even before me, I wasn't chief secretary then. He was rescued later, after some months. Then when I was chief secretary following all these problems of Kaveri and drought, he kidnapped another person who was minister earlier. That led to a big problem and then we couldn't trace him at all and after some time he died. So these were some of the issues—at the level of the chief secretary you deal with bigger problems of the state.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Right.

RAVINDRA: *In any case, the chief secretary has to provide leadership, coordination, and deal with matters relating to the cabinet.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So from the perspective of the Krishna government this must have been—these problems must have required number one a big expenditure of political capital but also must have taken a huge amount of time?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, that is true. And fortunately that came to him after about three years, when it was quite stable, things were going well. But it just happened in the year I happened to be chief secretary. Afterwards again it smoothed out.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So you got the worst of it?

RAVINDRA: *I had challenges coming in different forms, it didn't matter.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure. So maybe I could ask you a couple questions about the politics of the time and the politics of that period. And one thing I've heard and it has come up in my conversation with the [indecipherable] is that S.M.—at least by the time—when S.M. Krishna is elected he puts a lot of political muscle behind these urban reforms by making Bangalore world class. And so a lot of people have credited him and his effort and his endeavors. And I guess I wonder a little bit about trying to understand why exactly this individual or this government was so proactive and why other governments before him were perhaps not as proactive? Or is that a mischaracterization?

RAVINDRA: *I don't think those before him were not proactive, that is not right to say. But you should understand the background of the leaders. You see, for instance before S.M Krishna the immediately preceding—*

WOLDEMARIAM: J.H. Patel?

RAVINDRA: *—Yes and before him, Chief Minister was Deve Gowda.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Deve Gowda?

RAVINDRA: *So Deve Gowda wasn't there for a full term because he became Prime Minister and then he was succeeded by another minister, J.H. Patel, so he was also from the same party. Mr. Deve Gowda came from a rural background, he's called a "son of the soil", a farmer. So the problems of farmers were uppermost in his mind and he had to project that image and—*

WOLDEMARIAM: He had a rural base?

RAVINDRA: *A rural base. So the priorities differ, while S.M. Krishna was more of an urbanite.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Even though he came from a rural area himself, correct?

RAVINDRA: *[Indecipherable], very close to Bangalore.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Close to Bangalore?

RAVINDRA: *But then he spent all this time studying in Bangalore, even went to the U.S. He did his law I think from one of the American Universities. So he cultivated in Bangalore his style—*

WOLDEMARIAM: A very urbane image.

RAVINDRA: *Urbane image, sophisticated, and all that. So it is a very different type of image and that is why his critics would say that he was ignoring the rural areas, that was one criticism by the opposition [indecipherable]. But those in Bangalore would say "Yes, we have some chief minister who is giving so much importance to Bangalore."*

Even earlier, for any chief minister Bangalore was always important in its own way. For instance, Ramakrishna Hegde took a keen interest in Bangalore affairs. But again, the time, the circumstances are also important. When S.M. Krishna became chief minister just a few years after liberalization, the economy was opening up and the IT (information technology) sector was becoming very vibrant. Actually, the IT sector's strength came much before Krishna because it started in the '70s and '80s.

WOLDEMARIAM: Infosys?

RAVINDRA: *Texas Instruments and Hewlett Packard they all came, to begin with, and then firms like Infosys and all that started developing. So the IT sector was gathering strength, it was already—*

WOLDEMARIAM: But really started growing in the—?

RAVINDRA: *Started growing, yes. So then it was, we said we'll encourage the technology sector, IT, or whatever it is. So an IT policy was formulated. Perhaps the right time found the right man.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Was the competition with Hyderabad quite a big issue?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, yes. It is interesting. See, Karnataka was leading in IT; Bangalore, apart from IT, had a very good image as a garden city. It was liked by people, even coming from outside.*

You see, because of growth, the infrastructure started crumbling so that is where it started getting a kind of negative image. But Hyderabad was far worse than Bangalore even in the early '90s, '80s, it was chaotic and then there was not much of IT and all that. Then, when Chandrababu Naidu became the Chief Minister (of Andhra Pradesh), credit must be given to him. He took up two things, two issues. One was developing IT because he saw Bangalore as a threat, in fact Bangalore and Hyderabad were two competitive cities at the time, so you see he took it as a challenge. He built an IT sector, he invited a lot of people, make investments in IT; and secondly he also started improving Hyderabad City. The transformation of Hyderabad must be credited to Chandrababu Naidu.

WOLDEMARIAM: And he was chief minister before, he was—his government came—?

RAVINDRA: *Even before S.M Krishna.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Before Krishna?

RAVINDRA: *But he had two terms, he had that advantage. The first time he became chief minister, he was an unquestioned leader of a regional party. So he could exercise his authority, get things done, faster than it happened even in Bangalore, but of course, Bangalore is still dominant in the IT sector but many other cities are catching up.*

See when people say Bangalore is slightly dipping and all that, it is not that Bangalore's importance by itself has declined but other cities like Chennai (formerly "Madras") are becoming very important now, Hyderabad, Pune, Delhi, [Indecipherable], Mumbai (formerly "Bombay"), so all these half a dozen cities; and Kerala. And industrialists also, it is not just they want IT in only one place, they're spreading out across the country. It is also a matter of business, business growth, so things are becoming competitive.

WOLDEMARIAM: What about the role of the—I guess one of the, one of the real symbols of Krishna's commitment to these issues was this—I guess what they call the BATF, the Bangalore Agenda Task Force. And I was wondering what your thoughts were on this initiative, was it a—in some ways it was a strategy; it was a strategy for reform.

RAVINDRA: *Yes, since he had a desire that Bangalore should be transformed. He set up what is called BATF, Bangalore Agenda Task Force and of course one can look at it from two angles, he packed it with technical people from the private sector. Nandan Nilekani, who was in Infosys was heading that.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Nandan Nilekani?

RAVINDRA: *Nilekani. And a few others, (V.) Ravichander was one and three or four others, they're not political, non-political I would say. So that was one criticism against BATF.*

You see, there are also people who say there was an elected body, the municipal corporation—they wouldn't voice their concern loudly at that time because the majority in the city corporation was again of the same party as S.M. Krishna. But internally there was this feeling, politicians are ignored, we are the representatives of the people.

Because of its very nature, BATF could function as a very compact unit and lay down some agenda and say okay, we'll do this, address these issues and it had the backing of the chief minister. So some reforms could get implemented, whether it is in BDA or in other places, generally that is what happened. Now also, the present chief minister, though he has a rural background, he understands that Bangalore is important and he has also set up a similar task force, it is called ABIDe (Agenda for Bengaluru Infrastructure and Development task force)

WOLDEMARIAM: Which you sit on the Board?

RAVINDRA: *I also sit on the Board. So the difference between the BATF and ABIDe is, here, you have the political representatives, chief minister is the chairman [indecipherable], one MP (Member of Parliament) is the vice chairman, another MP is the convener. And of course, the ministers of Bangalore—they're also there and there are a few other professionals.*

Secondly, a lot of money has been pumped into Bangalore, more than even during Krishna's time. Some decisions, for instance, this metro rail that was already planned for a long time, it started off now. Also, a lot of infrastructure projects have been planned and are being implemented. But of course Bangalore being a city with so many problems—

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *It takes some time—we are working on some kind of a plan. In the next three years we should see some marked change.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Is the BBMP as an institution—obviously I guess this is the prime governance institution of the city, the corporation. Is it a difficult institution to work with? Because it must be incredibly unwieldy?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, it is a very difficult institution to work with; very difficult and very challenging I can say in a positive way. That is because, number one you deal with elected representatives there, the councilors and well their own interests; number two, the political system has been designed in such a way, it is a kind of loose structure, the mayor has a tenure of one year.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Which is incredible.

RAVINDRA: *It is more ceremonial really, the mayor presides over council meetings and does a lot of ceremonial functions. But being a political leader, he tries to influence decisions saying that "You'll do this and you'll do that, right or wrong." So the commissioner, the appointed official, is under pressure. The commissioner is appointed by the state government, so he owes allegiance to the state government.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So that is the real locus of authority in Bangalore?

RAVINDRA: *It is the locus of authority. So now actually I must tell you this one, coming to the current scenario, we are now trying to bring in reforms and go in for a new structure in the BBMP corporation.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And give the mayor more—?

RAVINDRA: *More powers. I'm just busy finalizing a Bill, which could be introduced if all goes well in the next legislature session; again, there is a lot of resistance. Yes, we want to give a longer tenure to the mayor and along with the mayor, there will be a small committee, which exercises executive powers like a cabinet at the city level. And there will be further decentralization at the local level, ward level and some other streamlining of systems and procedures, we're working on that. At the same time so far as planning for the— [end tape one]*

WOLDEMARIAM: This is a continuation of an interview with Dr. Ravindra, so we were on which point?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, about the reforms within the municipal corporation. Secondly, so far as planning for the metropolitan region is concerned, now we are trying to envision Bangalore from a regional perspective, it is not merely the city, the city is growing, there is a big sprawl. So we want to plan for the region, which will cover a much wider area of 8,000 square kilometers. We are in the process of setting up a metropolitan planning council for the whole region, so that urban planning, metropolitan planning takes place in a wider perspective. In the metropolitan planning council, there are the representatives of the local bodies—the municipal corporation and other municipalities in the region, there could be some legislators and some experts, it will be a combination of political as well as non-elected people, professionals, etcetera. One criticism about Bangalore—in general about cities in India—is that your planning has gone awry.*

So how do we deal with the problem of migration, where do we accommodate new people or new activities, new industries? Because the tendency is always for the people to come to the larger cities. Large cities are growing larger. 38 percent of India's population lives in metropolitan cities. So dealing with this megacity governance is one of the biggest challenges, and so at the moment I am engaged in trying to find answers, both through legislation and other means.

WOLDEMARIAM: And how do you feel about the prospects for urban governance in India? I guess that is a big macro-level question?

RAVINDRA: *Oh, yes, it is.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Are you positive about the prospects? Some are quite pessimistic.

RAVINDRA: *I am, I am optimistic but it is subject to some riders. See, metropolises will grow in India, there is no doubt, because India is urbanizing rather rapidly. But urban governance needs to be addressed. For a long time Indian policymakers and planners were preoccupied with rural development, addressing the problems in rural areas. Agriculture and rural development and so on, for obvious reasons. So the importance of urban areas came to be realized very late, I would say in the '90s. Of course, we had that constitutional amendment, 74th amendment. For*

the first time the local bodies were recognized as a third tier of government, local government.

Otherwise, they were not even constitutionally mandated. But we are in a situation where we face a lot of complicated problems in cities but the municipalities lack capacity. However there is no alternative to addressing them in an urgent manner, as well as professionally. But I think in a number of cities these problems are being addressed. The government of India itself has realized the importance of urban governance and launched a new scheme called Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Fund.

WOLDEMARIAM: Which I've heard about, yes. Over twelve billion dollars something like that?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, so there is a realization at the federal level that the problems of cities in India need to be addressed more seriously. They selected some 63 cities, metropolitan cities and funds also came to be released for infrastructure development. Large water supply projects, sanitation projects, roads, etc.*

Transportation, I think is one of the biggest problems in India— in Indian cities— that is the problem we need to crack really- traffic and transportation, you'll find traffic is chaotic still; see, the increasing number of private vehicles and cars in particular. That is why there is this gap between economic growth and social and public infrastructure. So suddenly people have money in their hands and they start buying cars, but you will find the roads are the same width, the infrastructure is not able to absorb that sort of growth.

Now we are trying to focus more on improving public transport, that is why we are building a metro rail, and improving the bus system. I don't know if it is possible to reduce cars even in the US, I think it has not been possible.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *In my own discussions with some people in the US they say, "Cars, we cannot give up." So that is going to be a big challenge on how we deal with transport problems. But I think gradually we'll find answers to these questions. The political leaders at the local government have their own views. The governance system needs to be re-organized so that there is more accountability at the city level. Now, there is no city leader, in the sense—in New York, when you had that big bombing, 9/11, we found the mayor of New York assumed the leadership, he was everywhere. Here, we don't have a directly-elected mayor; he doesn't enjoy long tenure or executive powers. We need to develop political leadership at the city level. And there are conflicts between city, state, and center on some of these issues. Funding is coming in, I would say that is one bright prospect. But we need to build the capacities of local governments, the professionalism, so that the infrastructure and other issues are addressed well.*

WOLDEMARIAM: So along these lines, one—given what you've said about decentralization, empowering local governments, was this one of the problems with the—I guess when people talk about the Bangalore turnaround or the strategy pushed by the chief minister and by others, the reforms you had in the BDA and the BBMP. Was one of the problems that these were initiatives pushed from the state government, they were not necessarily initiatives—?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, I would put it this way—Although the constitution was amended in 1993 providing for a decentralized system of government, it did not materialize because it had to be done by the state governments. In many cities metropolitan planning committees were not set up because at the state level they feel decentralization would mean loss of power at that level, whether it is a chief minister or a minister or legislators. So it has been a highly and hotly debated subject. At the mayors' conference, they will say we need more powers but at the state level they are still reluctant, but reforms are taking place here and there, and I am currently engaged in that process.*

The question is, is the state interested in strengthening the local government? See, because they are weak politically, administratively, financially, they depend on the state. Their own resources, taxing powers are limited.

So the dependence of local governments on the state is very high. Here is the conflict: the reluctance to share power on the part of the state level leaders and at the same time—this is an interesting thing—the central government pushing for decentralization, that is why the constitution was amended. The same central government is now saying through projects like JNNURM (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission) “You implement these reforms, otherwise we will not release funds.”

So things are trying to happen gradually, but I think it may vary from state to state, city to city, the pace of reforms, the type of reforms. How much power to be given to your local body? It is again left to the state government and the state legislature even under the constitution. Although the Constitution has listed 18 function to be devolved—there are items like town planning, social development, economic development. That level of decentralization has not taken place.

But if you empower a local body, promote local leadership, maybe in course of time—and that is the argument of the champions of decentralization, city governments will become strong. But the other argument can be that it is easier to control from the center, this is done everywhere, even in US. All federal countries face this problem unlike smaller unitary countries. In the UK (United Kingdom) it is a unitary government, but there also they have counties which keep on demanding more powers and more money. That will be a continuing issue in all countries and all states.

But now that we are addressing these reforms, we must see. Kolkata (formerly “Calcutta”) for instance, long back set up this metropolitan planning committee and it is the first city, which gave a longer tenure to the mayor, mayor-in-council system which is somewhat like a cabinet form. Some others tried experimenting; Maharashtra for example wanted to do that and went back. So again, the tenure of the mayor has been cut to if not one year maybe twenty months or thirty months. So things like this, these experiments are going on in different parts of India.

WOLDEMARIAM: *So as it stands now and at the BBMP the council and the mayor really only have the—can they propose initiatives or they can only—?*

RAVINDRA: *Yes, yes, they propose, there is nothing preventing, they—.*

WOLDEMARIAM: They approve the budgets right?

RAVINDRA: *They approve the budget, not only that. They approve a lot of even financial proposals, you see there are certain financial limits. The commissioner can only approve up to a certain amount, one crore (1 crore = 10 million [rupees]) or whatever. Beyond that there is also what is called standing committee, those standing committees comprising of the elected councilors. They also have certain powers.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Right, so the legislative powers?

RAVINDRA: *Legislative. Not legislative, really it is executive because the local government, doesn't legislate on anything but it can sanction projects or schemes, so it is a more a financial power. And above a certain limit, it goes to the state government for approval.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Has to go to the state government?

RAVINDRA: *For instance, even in the BDA, there are certain powers of the board, beyond that it goes to the government. So the state government does play a major role in city governance, city administration, everywhere.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And there must be historically somewhat of a tense relationship between the commissioner and the elected body?

RAVINDRA: *Yes, it is there. It depends on how one manages, sometimes—*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, sure. Well that is—those are most of the questions I had, I guess we run almost an hour and fourteen minutes, but thank you, thank you for your time. Is there anything else you would like to add or anything else that you think is important for the discussion and giving some more contexts, I don't know?

RAVINDRA: *You're looking at more urban issues or even in general, other aspects?*

WOLDEMARIAM: Yes, mostly urban issues and obviously more—looking at Bangalore—

RAVINDRA: *Urban Issues. Civil service reforms and all that.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Yes, I mean, I think—?

RAVINDRA: *That is again another issue, it is again controversial, a lot debate about—one question you raised on whether you can bring in people from outside to manage things. So there has been an opinion voiced in favor of lateral entry, that is, you get experts or professionals from outside. It has some merit but at the same time until there is a big reform in the civil service system itself—now there is a system of recruitment, career civil service as they say and all that.*

There is another view put forth, which was even recommended by the Administrative Reform Commission some time back in India saying that in the IAS, in the civil service, after a certain period of time like ten years of going through the initial postings in a district, acquainting yourself, working with the government in various sectors, officers should be given the option to specialize in certain areas.

So they offered specializations such as economic administration, social administration, financial administration—but somehow it has not really happened for one reason what we discussed earlier. So long as the chief ministers have the power to rotate the officers, even if you say “Okay, I want to specialize in this sector and I work for some time, you can be shifted to some other sector and all those rules need to be changed.” The civil service reform is a difficult process.

WOLDEMARIAM: Right. Part of the reason why I ask these questions is because from talking with people thus far it seems—understanding the incentives that administrators have, and understanding the political pressures they face seems—I was struck by the fact that people are rotated so frequently—

RAVINDRA: *So frequently.*

WOLDEMARIAM: And it must make reforming any institution very difficult?

RAVINDRA: *In some states, for instance West Bengal, Kolkata (formerly “Calcutta”)—one reason could be the Left government continuing in power endlessly, they’re not changing officers that frequently. Given that fact, it cannot be said that West Bengal has made great strides.*

Because it depends on the political system and political leaders. But in a state like Gujarat, the officers now, under the present regime, have long tenures, they have demonstrated success—it is the whole system, the whole governmental system there I would say.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure, sure

RAVINDRA: *Political and bureaucratic, together, they have demonstrated it’s possible to bring about change.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure. Can I ask you one more clarification question, you had mentioned earlier about the different political basis that people like S.M. Krishna and H.D. Deve Gowda had and it is also the case that that H.D. Deve Gowda and those that followed him in Janata Dal, they also had a rural base, that was just—that has always been the cleavage, right? Janata Dal, they’ve had a rural base that has been the—

RAVINDRA: *They have a rural base, that is true. In fact, urban base is not that—.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Not significant?

RAVINDRA: *Now BJP has strengthened its urban base.*

WOLDEMARIAM: Well this is what I’ve heard, I heard for the first time in history—?

RAVINDRA: *Bangalore City Corporation, first time, they got a clear majority.*

WOLDEMARIAM: That is extraordinary. Why do you think that is?

RAVINDRA: *Well, there are two reasons; one is political, the other is—See, the last couple of years with all the problems we have, initiatives have been taken to improve the*

city in a number of directions, a lot of money is being pumped in. The people find things going on; the desire for change is demonstrated by the government.

Secondly, the political reason is that at the moment, in the last couple of years the opposition has been weak. See, the Congress [Party], which had earlier dominated, its political vitality seems to be declining—something is happening in the state itself, not merely in the city.

WOLDEMARIAM: Sure.

RAVINDRA: *In the city, here also. It is riven by internal factions, so the opposition—*

WOLDEMARIAM: Excellent, well on that note, thank you.

RAVINDRA: *Thank you, thank you.*