FIRESIDE CHAT

The Future of Governance Forum 7 Oct - 8 Oct

*ANURAG BEHAR OF AZIM PREMJI FOUNDATION
IN CONVERSATION WITH
YAMINI AIYAR OF CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH*

About the Panel

This conversation engaged with a primary question - what frame should be used to view the state, and how do core pillars of society view the state? What emerged from the discussion was that the state is not monolithic and that people matter. Disenchantment within the state and as a part of the operating ethos of the state were highlighted, as well as the space for bringing change. Within this paradigm, a way forward was discussed. This included creating a coalition of "good", and finding champions in the state who can take reform forward. However, the intention and competence of CSOs also shapes change.

The Future of Governance forum was curated by the Accountability Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, and co-hosted with Arthan from 7 October- 8 October 2020.

What frame should be used to view the state?

A series of questions between Ms. Aiyar and Mr. Behar started the discussion. Ms. Aiyar asked - what frame should we use to view the state? How do core pillars of society view the state? These pillars include private capital, philanthropy, institution builders - collectively aimed at engaging, drawing from, and shaping and changing the state.

According to Mr. Behar, from a business perspective, the state should stay out of most endeavours and the market. From a social sector or Civil Society Organisation perspective, the state has to improve and do so much more than it does at the moment. He said that these are two extremes, and that both have a degree of truth, but are not completely true.

Reflecting on his experience of working with the state at every level- from grassroots to the union government, Mr. Behar said that the state is complicated and is not a monolith. Second, it is useful to characterise parts of the state which one has to encounter in their own right. For instance, departments in development sector organisations function differently than other sectors. Additionally, the state that is encountered at grassroots-level, is different from that at the block-level. Third, people matter. Who each actor is matters, what they want matters, and each part of the state responds differently based on who they are engaging with. Lastly, it matters how different groups behave with the state.

Ms. Aiyar acknowledged that a question of note emerges. As people who sit at the interface of research and policy- is it their role to present ideas and leave it for the government to negotiate and allow politics to play out and shape policy, or do

they write policy? **Sometimes these boundaries have been blurred. She pointed out that civil society can confuse itself as becoming the state, rather than offering what they have to the state, and holding the state accountable for converting ideas/expertise into actual policy and practice.** This blurring of proverbial boundaries has been enabled by not holding the state accountable and choosing to almost 'become the state' when they are frustrated with it. This is true for both market fundamentalists and state fundamentalists.

Disenchantment with the state

Disenchantment with the state was a major talking point. **According to Mr. Behar, there is a lot of disenchantment within the government. He identified three kinds and felt that disenchantment is best evidenced in people who make up the state.** He elaborated by saying that disenchantment can be ideological or based in fanatical marketism - the idea that everything can be solved by the market. The second is pragmatic disenchantment. It is clear that education security and other social policies are to be implemented by the state, but the feeling is that it is unable to do so, and needs to partner with private players. The third kind is lazy disenchantment where the idea is that if people are demanding entitlements, then the government outsources services instead of providing those.

However, according to Mr. Behar, there is a sizable minority within the government who want to deliver public goods and believe the state should do so.

Ms. Aiyar further asked about disenchantment from the perspective of the frontline state as well. She noted that people want to be a part of the state for the prestige, and also be in service of the society. But they feel remarkably disenchanted. She added that some feel distanced from the power of state even as they embody some power in their relations with citizens. In general, people feel like "we have to discipline the frontline," but this is exactly the wrong approach, she emphasised.

Mr. Behar, agreeing with Ms. Aiyar, expanded on this aspect and said that the feeling of disenchantment or disempowerment is true of a primary school teacher or an ASHA worker, and also true for the principal secretaries in states and even in the Government of India (GoI). **He argued that this feeling has become a part of the operating ethos of the system.**

The space to make change

For Mr. Behar, market loyalists are "beyond redemption," as after 25-30 years of evidence, they are unwilling to see that profit mechanisms don't deliver. The pragmatic and lazy disenchanted are important and provide possibilities for various actors. One such problematic possibility is going back to markets and for-profits for efficiency, organising ability, etc. But this is an uneasy compromise that people make, is just the thin end of the wedge, and is a "slippery slope". Mr. Behar said that a better approach could be to assess and then seek out people with capacity and good intentions to work together and do something. **He emphasised that this space exists in abundance.**

In tapping into this space, there were two critical reaffirmations for Mr. Behar when he and his team have dealt with people in the state. The space cannot be taken as an entitlement, and it is important to acknowledge that state actors are creating that space. However, for CSOs or philanthropic actors, access to this space is a function of two things. First, the intention of the CSO or philanthropic actor and second, the competence of the CSO. He highlighted that even if a CSO has good intentions and thinks they can work together with the government, it may not be the case. He said that "we in the social sector sometimes believe that good intentions are a substitute for competence, capability, and capacity". Sharing again from experience, Mr. Behar added that the space for CSOs is shrinking, partly due to intentions, but also because of low competence.

Reflecting on 20 years of experience, Mr. Behar said it's very hard to make a dent in the operating

ethos of the system. He asked, "how do we frame what can be done." To begin with, he said that the person out there on the frontline is the average indian - some are hardworking, some are inspired by higher goals.
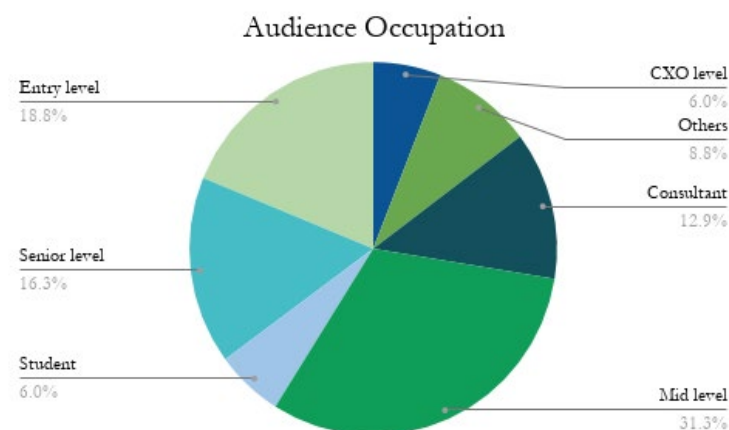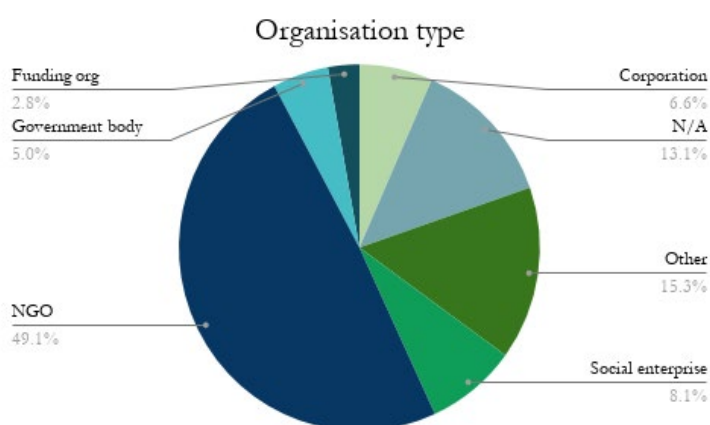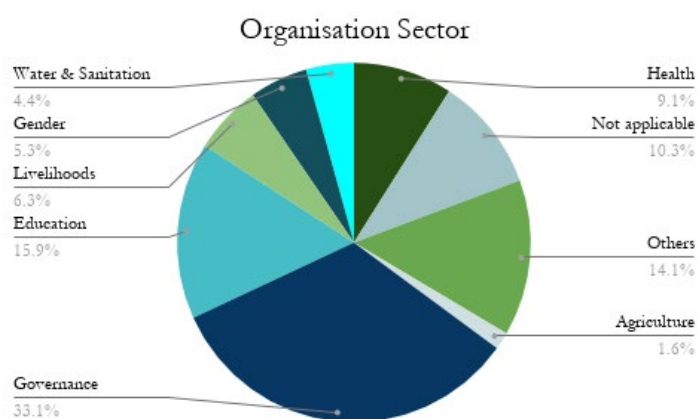
His suggestion was that **CSOs should collaborate with a coalition of the "good". CSOs should find mechanisms to work with them, and in spaces created by them, which is a better use of their time and focus.** It is effective when the "good" find a partner who has the right intention and competence as well. When the "good" in the government feel disempowered they will say let's get together and do something. Even principal secretaries will feel this way. Thus, if CSOs and the government can collaborate, then we can go far. He noted once again that people matter in this case as well. In summary, since CSOs can't influence the operating ethos as such, they can take the system as is, and try and do their best within it.

Ms. Aiyar added that since people and institutions matter, CSOs could identify role models within the bureaucracy who shape what can and cannot be done. As an example, she said that the simple act of a District Magistrate coming in, and instead of shouting at everyone, asking about challenges and working towards solutions has an impact on how people view themselves. She noted that perhaps it is not for the civil society to shape and change ethos, and that such institutions are a reflection of the relationship with the society.

This is a summary of the panel discussion, and has been paraphrased.

▶ *To view the recording of the Fireside Chat, click here.*

Who the audience were:

Organisation Sector

- Water & Sanitation 4.4%
- Gender 5.3%
- Livelihoods 6.3%
- Education 15.9%
- Governance 33.1%
- Health 9.1%
- Not applicable 10.3%
- Others 14.1%
- Agriculture 1.6%

Organisation type

- Funding org 2.8%
- Government body 5.0%
- NGO 49.1%
- Corporation 6.6%
- N/A 13.1%
- Other 15.3%
- Social enterprise 8.1%

Audience Occupation

- Entry level 18.8%
- Senior level 16.3%
- Student 6.0%
- CXO level 6.0%
- Others 8.8%
- Consultant 12.9%
- Mid level 31.3%