

Profile: Preetam Ponnappa, Mission Motivated Accountability in Karnataka, India (Social Auditor)

“A place where my existence mattered”

Preetam grew up in the small village of Coorg. As a child in this beautifully green but isolated town, Preetam always dreamed of what lay beyond the horizon. He reminisces, “we used to come out of the house and look at airplanes flying above thinking, *‘What kind of life would have been there on the other side?’*”

In an effort to find out the answer to that question, Preetam left for Bangalore, India’s “silicon valley,” after finishing his education. He landed a job in one of Bangalore’s best companies and earned a good salary with great employee benefits. He knew that his salary and benefits would become even greater if he stayed, but he longed for more meaningful and fulfilling work. “I have always believed that it's not the money that I want. It's the difference that I want to make somewhere.”

Preetam moved from job to job for years, always looking for “a place where my existence mattered.” When his father became ill he returned to Coorg; a neighbor who worked for the government referred him for a job opening as a social auditor. Preetam took the position with great hesitancy because he worried that he would not be able to have a positive impact as a bureaucrat.

He has now been working as a social auditor for 10 years. His job is to verify what happened as a result of government programs that provide guaranteed employment to citizens to perform public works. He also looks at the quality of the work, and examines “Has the beneficiary really benefitted out of it? Is it reaching him on time?”

Preetam’s job is meant to be oriented towards compliance-oriented accountability – but Preetam chooses a different path, one very focused on direct accountability to citizens. “I don’t booze. I don’t smoke. I keep my private life as good as my professional life. When I walk in town, it’s not a different person walking out there. I walk my work.”

This virtuous behavior allows him to “win the trust” of his fellow citizens who benefit from the Government schemes he audits. “What happens is in most of my cases, ... [people] are only listening to me because [of how] I have portrayed myself. Not as a social auditor, not the power that I actually execute at my office level.” Preetam works far more than the required hours because he feels accountable to the public; “these beneficiaries, these end users...are completely dependent on the system. They're hoping that this system will save them, because, for the beneficiary, it's *their life.*”

Preetam knows that he could do his work and meet his supervisor’s expectations without going above and beyond – indeed, most of his colleagues do. “At 5:00 o'clock, the bell rings to go home, so that's it” for many of his peers. Preetam stresses, “They're not cheating, they're not being non-ethical.” But it does lead to far different ways of working, and results.

If the government hires unemployed workers to build a well, Preetam’s superiors simply want to

know that the well was built. If the well was built, the employment scheme is understood to be successful, even if it was designed to support unskilled workers and only skilled workers were hired to do the construction. In this case, “the scheme [was] going right [according to my superiors], but the objective [was] not being followed.”

As we’ve discussed, compliance-oriented accountability regimes can undermine performance by reducing the mission motivation of employees. Preetam acknowledges that this dynamic is “very tough actually.” He sometimes worries, “maybe [a] bureaucracy which is [operating] in this manner is not actually helping anybody.” He admits that he spent the first years in his government job “cribbing, saying that I can't make a difference.” He was “carried away with those stories that people started to say, that you can't make a difference in the system. Your existence hardly brings anything, you know, ...you may not make any kind of an impact anywhere.”

Luckily for Preetam’s agency, he continues to be motivated by the mission and decided to meet both his supervisors’ requirements and his own standards for good work. “I make sure I give [my supervisors] the exact data... so they are happy about that on their part, and I keep this value system with these people also alive.” Without the compliance-oriented data, Preetam believes, the agency “will remove me and get a person who is working on the data.” After initially struggling, Preetam has found a way to combine upward-based and citizen-based accountability. Preetam works to fulfill the spirit, not just the letter, of the program. This leads to an ongoing tension - “There was always a friction... I stand on *values* and they stand on the *data*.”

Some of Preetam’s managers have started to support his value-based approach; they “feel that I'm a better social auditor—they have given me that credit.” What would make it easier for other social auditors to behave more like Preetam does, we ask? Performance management needs to change, in Preetam’s view; employee success should be seen not simply as meeting targets, but ensuring that the true purpose of the government programs is fulfilled.

Preetam thinks that these changes should be coupled with hiring process changes; “the whole selection process of people who are social auditors needs to be changed.” There are, in his view, many people – our Binās and Samirs – who would be attracted by management that focuses on conducting meaningful work and being accountable to citizens. “With a purpose, people can come into this system and make it really better.” Preetam’s confidence returns to his voice as he imagines this reality; if mission motivated individuals served as social auditors, “there will be an impact.”

Ultimately, career sacrifices, conflicting values at work, and managerial friction have brought strife to Preetam’s journey. A different agency-wide managerial conception of success would allow Preetam to have even more impact and give his job the meaning he hoped for when he first became a bureaucrat. Despite the challenges, “I'm happy that I'm here. I'm happy because I can actually do something better than what is required of me.” His mission motivation has not been suffocated by the compliance-oriented regime of his workplace and he has chosen to combine the compliance-based approach of his organization with a mission driven interpretation of his auditing role. “I've got a job where I'm supposed to be... That’s all that matters.”