

# MUMBAI MERI JAAN

## THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF AGNI



### Editorial

#### Fulfilling Gerson's dream for the BMC Elections 2022

**G**erson was a multifaceted personality, adman, theatre artiste and activist. His passing away has left a void amongst us but we must continue his legacy. Friends, relatives and colleagues have reiterated that he firmly believed in a better quality of life for Mumbaikars. He had a passion for the city.

As an activist he was involved with numerous citizens' organisations but most of all with AGNI (Action for good Governance & Networking in India) as he was a Founder Trustee.

AGNI has always played a central role in elections. He ensured that AGNI led from the front in elections to elect good corporators who would give Mumbaikars the excellent governance they deserve. In fact, in the 2017 BMC elections he devised the innovative method of using school children as a means of making their parents, relatives and neighbours vote for whomsoever they want but VOTE THEY MUST! This innovation, along with the activities of not only AGNI, but other likeminded citizens groups, increased the voting pattern from 44% to 55%.

Gerson started his efforts for the 2022 BMC elections well in advance. To ensure promotion through social media, he was one of the founders of JAAGO MUMBAIKAR ASSOCIATION to carry forward his mission of increasing the voting pattern in the forthcoming 2022 BMC elections to 75%, if not more.

So Mumbaikars let us take a pledge to make everyone vote. Gerson will smile from above if we are able to achieve this. May his soul rest in eternal peace!

Lastly, I wish to thank our Assistant Editor, Pamela Cheema, for the efforts she has made to make this special issue of Mumbai Meri Jaan dedicated to Gerson a really memorable one!

This issue is dedicated to our Gerson daCunha

#### Gerson daCunha — THE MEMORIAL ISSUE

**T**he legendary Gerson daCunha, whose name is indelibly associated with Mumbai and who was one of the founding members and the driving force behind AGNI (Action for good Governance and Networking in India) passed away on January 7, 2022. A multi-faceted personality, a man of many parts whose talent shone in careers as diverse as advertising, theatre and civic activism, he straddled different spheres with ease and deep commitment.

Among his numerous career highs, Gerson was the Head of the advertising and marketing communications company, Lintas and had also worked with UNICEF in Brazil where he had instituted several programmes on nutrition, health and vaccinations, particularly in Brazil's favelas. In 2018 he was awarded the Order of Rio Branco by the government of Brazil for his exceptional services to the country.

Gerson was a Bombay Goan whose family migrated to the city in Portuguese times and settled down at Mazagaon. Family and social influences kindled an interest in social change which remained the leitmotif of his life and led to his dedicated civic activism. Through its interviews with activists, a former Member of Parliament, family, theatre and filmmakers Mumbai Meri Jaan presents the sweep of Gerson's life and tries to decode the man and his desire for change in Mumbai.

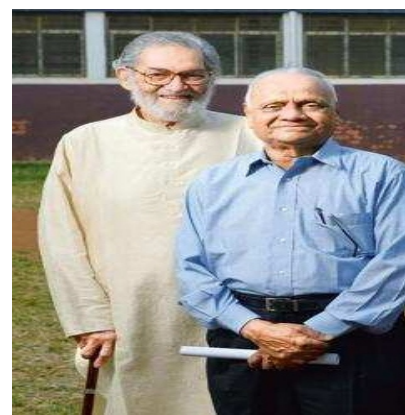


#### THE WORLD OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM

#### Mr Dattatraya Sukthankar Ex-Patron/Chairman of AGNI:

**M**r Dattatraya Sukthankar, Ex-Patron/Chairman of AGNI, struck up a deep friendship with Gerson which lasted until his death. "Gerson and Mr B G Deshmukh were two important founding Trustees of AGNI and I was persuaded to join AGNI," he elaborates. "AGNI was then almost a solitary NGO in the city seeking to give expression to and representing public grievances to the authorities, particularly the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, with whose working I was quite familiar having worked as the Municipal Commissioner from May 1981 to November 1984."

Mr Sukthankar pointed out that "with his consummate communication skills it was not a surprise that Gerson got picked up by UNICEF to work in Brazil as he had a good command over the Portuguese language, the national language of Brazil. After returning to India he worked in an advisory and often honorary capacity with several ministries



of the government of India, including Sam Pitroda's National Missions."

But what really impressed Mr Sukthankar was Gerson's deep love for Mumbai and his firm conviction that Mumbaikars "must themselves take up the challenge by evincing an active interest in the city's myriad problems as well as their possible solutions and participating actively with MCGM in implementing remedial measures, works and schemes."

Gerson believed in good governance to resurrect the city and he had an unshakeable belief in choosing the right candidates in elections, particularly the BMC elections,

to transform the city. Mr Sukthankar disclosed that Gerson believed that the candidates chosen as corporators by the city should be secular, cosmopolitan, committed to improving the life of the common Mumbaikar, who would work relentlessly to improve the state of governance of the city by acting as watchdogs on behalf of Mumbaikars! Said Mr Sukthankar: "I sometimes wondered whether he was not day dreaming, but I could at the same time 'feel' how firmly convinced he was that this was the way to proceed forward."

While Mr Sukthankar will acutely miss his very dear friend and their warm monthly get-togethers, he voiced clearly Gerson's deep concerns for the future: "With the next elections to the BMC approaching fast, he had already started worrying about AGNI and like-minded NGOs collaborating to achieve as much as possible the necessary objectives for the city of Mumbai."



## **NAYANA KATHPALIA, Trustee, NAGAR:**



**N**ayana Kathpalia recalled with great warmth her fellow activist and friend with whom she shared a friendship spanning decades. “I knew Gerson for more than 60 years,” she said quietly. “My husband and Gerson were friends since the 1960s and when they were young even acted in a few plays together. Gerson was also a Trustee of NAGAR and both organisations have co-related systems of information which complement each other's work.”

Travelling back in time Nayana explained how in the earlier years both AGNI and NAGAR struggled to learn the ropes of activism. But in those early years when activism was young and fresh in Mumbai activists were able to work closely with ward officers and civic officials. “But now bureaucracy has become far more opaque and we have not been able to conclude anything,” said Nayana in a voice tinged with regret. “Earlier we were able to motivate citizens to start more associations, but that synergy is no longer there. But I can say that if we were not there, things would be far worse.”

Was Gerson depressed by this erosion of civic values? “Not at all,” said Nayana firmly. “He was a man for all seasons who had total dedication and focus and continued to believe that things would improve.” **MMJ**

## **Gordon D'souza, Former President Bombay Catholic Sabha:**



**G**ordon D'souza was the President of Bombay Catholic Sabha for six years and an AGNI Coordinator for Andheri (W) from 1999-2010. He worked simultaneously for both organisations in the city.

Gordon met Gerson at AGNI's first anniversary at Don Bosco School at Matunga and was swiftly drafted into the organisation. “Gerson remained low profile but he was actually the engine behind AGNI,” remarked Gordon. “His immense desire to remove the ills of the city rubbed off on to everyone else and one can truly say that many leaders were born because of him.”

He pointed out that Gerson's

constant emphasis on the creation of Advanced Locality Management (ALMs) has helped the city in myriad ways — many of those ALMs are powerful in various wards now and are immensely influential in civic affairs.

In 2005 the state government actively promoted Special Economic Zones (SEZ). “I was one of the local leaders who was spearheading the movement against the SEZs in Gorai,” recounted Gordon. “Gerson supported this movement a lot and organised huge media support for us. He would drive down all the way from his residence at Churchgate to attend meetings big or small. He drafted the letters that we sent to the state government and Delhi. Ultimately the plan for SEZs fizzled out and today people in Gorai still have ownership of their lands. Its these qualities of Gerson which I appreciated ever so much.”

**MMJ**

## **SHISHIR JOSHI, CEO AND FOUNDER, PROJECT MUMBAI:**

**S**hishir Joshi believes that Gerson had an interesting link to the city. “He was so omnipresent in the city that from the time one has been in Mumbai one does not remember the city without Gerson,” he said animatedly.

While Gerson was the first CEO Shishir Joshi was the youngest CEO of Mumbai First. The two activists met regularly at meetings “where one was struck by Gerson because he was a towering personality both literally and figuratively. His flowing

kurtas and thundering voice impressed one immediately!”

Then Shishir paused and added reflectively “It's a pity that Gerson was not born in suburban Mumbai! South Mumbai benefited from his activities.”

**MMJ**



## **G O V E R N M E N T**

## **MILIND DEORA, FORMER MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, SOUTH MUMBAI:**

**M**ilind Deora had met Gerson socially before he entered politics but engaged actively with him from 2004 when he became the Member of Parliament from south Mumbai in the 15th Lok Sabha. “Mumbai needed greater central assistance and Gerson helped create an environment for that,” said Milind. “This

made it easier for me to be heard in Delhi. Gerson and I also traded ideas on how we could get this assistance and improve Mumbai.”

Reminiscing about NGOs including AGNI, Milind pointed out that “they have all raised awareness and made a large impact in the city. Some of them are doing incredible work

especially in education and healthcare. I have had great learnings and successes with NGOs in Mumbai and with their help I have been able to raise various issues with great success. While the activists have added a lot of value to the city Gerson also had the unique ability to get people to work together.” **MMJ**



## FAMILY AND THE AD WORLD

### Rahul daCunha, AD MAN, PLAYWRIGHT, COLUMNIST:

Despite being the nephew, Rahul daCunha is able to analyse lucidly the many-layered personality of his uncle. He attributes Gerson daCunha's versatility to the powerful influences around him. Journeying back in time, Rahul describes how influential voices among friends in the 50's and 60's as well as family moulded Gerson and his attitudes to society.

"People are not born great, a lot depends on who is around you," said Rahul. "Gerson had my father, Sylvester daCunha,

my mother, Nisha and illustrious friends like Shyam Benegal and Alyque Padamsee. When you have such relatives and friends, it increases your social interests. There's a lot to be said for nature and nurture."

The skills that Gerson daCunha developed as an advertising professional were eminently useful in activism. "In activism you begin to use the same skills that you use in advertising to bring about social change. Thus his work in advertising was complementary to his work

in activism," explained Rahul. "His biggest strength was that he did not think just about himself, he felt that the world was bigger than the Self."

Gerson had seen Mumbai in all its glory and he wanted to return it to its glory again. He was extremely persevering in his efforts to achieve his objectives. "Social change is an uphill struggle in India," observed Rahul and then he laughed and quipped, "if you don't want that, then you may as well pick gardening and grow roses and bougainvillea!"



In his last years Rahul spent much time with Gerson. He was curious about the enveloping love people had for him and discovered that he was an incredible listener. "When you spoke you were the only person in the world for him," he said quietly. "This quality never waned even at the age of 92."

MMJ

### PRAHLAD KAKKAR, ADMAN:

Prahlad Kakkar met Gerson daCunha in 1971 when he arrived in Mumbai to learn how to make films from Shyam Benegal. After great effort and much hand wringing he made a short film but needed a projection theatre to see his film. Lintas had the projection theatre and the young Prahlad hesitantly approached Gerson for the use of the theatre. "Gerson agreed and the film was screened. I was so nervous that I sat far away from him," laughed

Prahlad. "When the screening was over Gerson turned around and said 'Lovely! Now tell us what it means!' Not a single word of discouragement to a newcomer!"

Prahlad recalled that "Gerson never treated me as a flunky unlike the others in the industry. For them I was just supposed to be a fly on the wall, to be seen and not heard!"

When Gerson retired "we were sad," said Prahlad, "but actually he never retired." When he quit the

advertising industry Gerson created an opinion group of influencers to improve the city. "But when he realized that this group was reaching only 10% of the English speaking population of the city he created AGNI," pointed out Prahlad. "Most of the people working in the city are from the Konkan region. He wanted to reach out to these people. The city just empties out on occasions like Ganesh Chaturthi as everyone goes home. He wanted to give everyone



ownership of the city. He was really the voice of the unheard and the distressed."

MMJ

## THE WORLD OF FILMS AND THEATRE

### NASEERUDDIN SHAH, FILM ACTOR AND THEATRE ARTISTE:

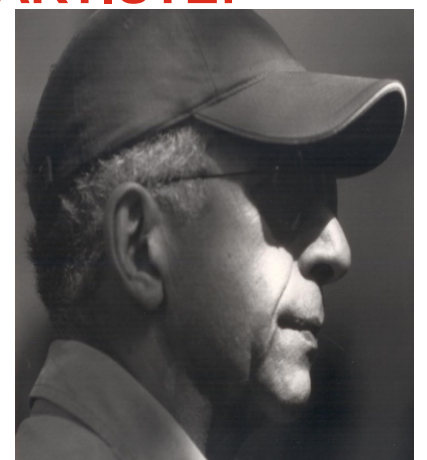
Naseeruddin Shah met Gerson daCunha in the early '70s as a young actor beginning his eventful journey in the film industry. As an actor in Delhi he had often read Gerson's name in 'Enact' magazine but met him for the first time in Mumbai at film director Shyam Benegal's home. "Shyam was going to

take me to Goa where he was shooting his film 'Bhumika'," said Naseeruddin in his deep baritone voice. "Gerson sang the praises of Goa; I was a bit sceptical but when I reached there I realised he was right!"

Naseeruddin also met Gerson in Brazil when he was working for UNICEF and later learnt about his energetic

foray into activism with AGNI. "I was amazed at the breadth of his interests," he remarked. "Although he was from the upper crust of society, he was very concerned about the man on the street. He was really like the village elder who sits on a charpoy with a hookah in his hand and advises every-one!"

MMJ





## SHYAM BENEGAL FILM DIRECTOR:

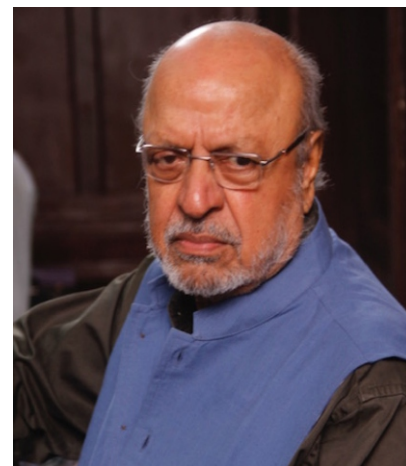
Shyam Benegal was one of Gerson's oldest friends with a friendship dating back to 1959. In a throwback to the past, Shyam recounts how he arrived in Mumbai from Hyderabad to make films and was advised by one of his cousins to make ad films instead! Shyam met Gerson at Lintas "where we talked about everything except advertising," laughed Shyam heartily. Gerson then introduced him to Alyque

Padamsee, the Head of the radio and ad films departments.

Going back into the misty past, Shyam recalled how he as the young, raw recruit and others in the creative department of Lintas were swept by Gerson's informal style of working. "He would arrive late in the office and continue working till late in the night. But no one in the creative department minded as everyone was influenced by him. His mother would

come to the office and shout from downstairs, 'Gerson your dinner is here' said Shyam as he narrated his stories with great relish.

Gerson was a success in many spheres, including theatre, maintained Shyam. "His Othello in the 1950s was outstanding and he was the life of the Theatre Group. When he moved to activism it was because advertising was not big enough to hold him, he was capable of more. But above everything else,



the key quality in Gerson was that he was a very compassionate man." **MMJ**

## DOLLY THAKORE, THEATRE ARTISTE & MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS:

Dolly Thakore knew Gerson daCunha for over five decades. The daughter of an Air Force officer who moved from Delhi to Mumbai, her friendship with Gerson grew from their work in theatre together. They acted in several plays and this deepened their friendship. "His knowledge

about books, arts, and films was phenomenal," said Dolly eloquent in her praise of Gerson. "Often he personally knew many of these people and was able to converse with them easily."

Dolly felt that Gerson's transition to activism was a corollary of his work in advertising, theatre,

broadcasting and telecasting. "When you're an actor you learn poise and delivery, qualities which can be used successfully in activism. So his switch to activism from advertising was an automatic progression. He had great concern for society and wanted to improve it and he



grew into social development with all the experiences he had." **MMJ**

## RAELL PADAMSEE, MD & CEO, ACE PRODUCTIONS, MANAGING TRUSTEE CREATE FOUNDATION:

Raell Padamsee's relationship with Gerson began as a babe-in-arms when her parents along with Gerson started the Theatre Group in the 1940s. "When I was growing up I was scared of Gerson because he had a beard," she laughed.

While Raell had never worked with Gerson in advertising she knew him deeply as her parents

constantly discussed him at home. According to her, his theatre performances were capped by "his outstanding performance as Pontius Pilate in the 1974 version of 'Jesus Christ Superstar'." In social activism "his decision to give up everything and do developmental work in Brazil was inspirational for me," she said in an admiring tone. "It subconsciously influenced many of my

decisions in life."

Raell observed Gerson's passion for activism right through his life and his refusal to be deterred by any situation or event. "He would be constantly trotting off to meetings and that made me feel very protective about him," she said quietly. "As far as social activism is concerned, my biggest connect with him was making the video for the BMC



elections five years ago. I was thrilled with the way it was transmitted to voters across the city." **MMJ**

## FROM TEAM AGNI

### Gerson - A Man for all Seasons

**Dinesh Ahir, Trustee & Convenor**

Gerson was the quintessential gentleman who exemplified the phrase 'A man for all Seasons.'

If we trace the origin of the phrase, Robert Whittington wrote this of Thomas More in 1520—"More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning I know not his fellow.

For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And as time requireth, a

man of marvellous mirth and pastimes, and sometimes of as sad gravity.

A Man for all Seasons."

Gerson was gentle, humble, easily accessible, open to new ideas, full of enthusiasm and optimism and at the same time strong in his convictions and fearless truly a Man for all Seasons.

I remember the first time, I met

him. Sometime in 1998, there was a meeting on the hawkers' issue. There were a lot of activists expressing their views and a tall person addressing the gathering attracted me. He was trying to convince the activists to save the city. After that first encounter, we met several times.

But the most memorable moment for me and AGNI was when five of us met in 1999 and

decided to launch a citizens' movement to address the civic issues of Mumbai. While we were toying with the idea about the name of this outfit, I suggested the name "Action for good Governance & Networking in India" with the acronym AGNI. Gerson with his long experience in advertising immediately accepted the idea. The name symbolised the mission which was our goal. A movement for good governance, **Contd. on Page 5**

## Gerson - A Man for all Seasons

Contd. from Page 4 which can network with NGOs and citizens groups and action in India. And that is how AGNI was born.

The next question that came to our minds was how can five individuals bring citizens together to transform the city. Gerson was very optimistic and said that "look guys, if a few like-minded people can bring about the Russian revolution, why can't we collect like-minded people and bring about change in Mumbai." And then the journey began. AGNI was formed in March 1999 to ignite the spark amongst citizens for good governance in Mumbai and the rest, as they say, is history.

But the journey is far from over.

MMJ

### THE SPIRIT OF AGNI

 Kishor Chudasama

Gerson was the main spirit behind AGNI, always smiling, positive and persevering, working hard even at the age of 92, keeping himself busy with some activity or the other associated with the good governance of Mumbai. AGNI has become handicapped with his absence but it is our moral duty to ensure that we follow in his footsteps and do our best to achieve his vision and dreams.

**Kishor K Chudasama,**  
Coordinator, N ward.

MMJ

#### Board of Trustees

Convenor:

Dinesh Ahir

Trustees:

Capt. Joe Lobo

Rajkumar Sharma

Sharad Kumar

Zahida Banatwala

#### Editorial Board

Sharad Kumar [Editor]

Pamela Cheema [Asstt. Editor]

Shrikant Soman

Mario Fishery

Email: mmj.agni@gmail.com  
https://sites.google.com/site/agnimumbaimeriyaan/

Published by

AGNI

Chadha Bldg. 1st Flr, Plot No. 95,

Wadala (W), Mumbai - 400031

agni.central@gmail.com

Ph: 2416 5956

www.agnimumbai.in

Printed at

Audumber Press, Wadala

Gerson was always till the end passionate about the transformation of Mumbai. When he last spoke with me he mentioned the forthcoming municipal elections and how to elect good candidates who would work for the city and citizens rather than their own self-interest. This itself is a tall order under the present circumstances. But we have to fight relentlessly and not give up if we firmly believe that this city must be made liveable for generations to come. The real tribute to Gerson would be to work with zeal and try to transform his dream of Mumbai into reality.

MMJ

### THE CHARISMATIC MAN

 Nutan Bhalla

My interaction with Gerson was confined to work but what really stood out was his go-ahead attitude, he was ever attentive and ever ready to provide the support to take a project forward. My one regret, as I read all the eulogies written about him is that I wish I had got to know him a little better. The best tribute to him is to carry on his work as foot soldiers committed to good governance for, we have in Gerson's very own words, an ideal to follow. My humble salutations to this charismatic person who never used the word 'never'.

**Nutan Bhalla is AGNI's**  
Coordinator in L ward.

MMJ

Rest in peace Gerson, in a land of tranquillity and definitely good governance. God bless.

**Joe Lobo, AGNI Trustee**

MMJ

### AGNI loses its torchbearer, Gerson daCunha Austin Nazareth

In 1999, some from Mumbai's MUM classes came together to ignite a spark through Action for good Governance and Networking in India. The Middle and Upper Middle Classes of Mumbai, otherwise known as MUM, are known for their silence and non-participation in Public Affairs. A far cry from the time decades ago, when they came together for India's freedom and did not fear the batons or being thrown into jails.

It required a person of Gerson's genius and experience to work life in the dormant embers of Bombay's citizenry. In a society, where politicians dominate, He brought in the Media to highlight and believed strongly in the Judiciary to correct those who were unaccountable.

Two decades and more, Gerson stood firm and held the line, letting not his age

## Gerson daCunha – A legend

 Zahida Banatwala, AGNI Trustee

Only once in a lifetime does one get an opportunity to meet and work alongside a person like Gerson daCunha. I would say I am blessed to have got that opportunity to learn some valuable lessons about life from him. Having achieved as much as he had in his 92 years he was a humble, simple man.

His love for the city of Mumbai is legendary. That is what prompted him to form the NGO AGNI and he got like-minded people together to bring about a sustainable change. His endeavoured hard to get more people to exercise their franchise, to come out in large

numbers and vote. He believed that citizens should be actively involved in the process of good governance. Even at 92, his death seemed abrupt and premature. We still needed him around to guide us, to be beside us.

However, he has left behind a legacy which we have to carry forward, inculcate in citizens a love for and responsibility towards the city and the country. We need to work with governing bodies to bring about the transformation which Gerson aspired to see. May we achieve his cherished aims and objectives!

MMJ

### Remembering Gerson

 Lillian Pais

His immaculate Kurta  
His trademark shawls  
His vibrant opinions  
His faultless diction  
This academic, the debater  
This writer, the journalist  
This actor, the performer  
This reformer, the activist  
His clarity of thought, our vision.  
His wisdom, our direction.  
His leadership, our path.  
His passionate fire, AGNI.  
No longer seen  
His presence missed  
No longer heard  
But remembered  
This unparalleled man,  
Who walked the talk.  
This grassroot man  
Dared change the city.  
Oh! Mumbaikar  
Learn from the experience  
Of this principled man,  
Of Bombay's Citizenry.  
Oh! Mumbaikar  
Dream his dreams  
Live his dream.  
Dreams for our city.

**Lillian Pais is Coordinator**  
H/West Ward

MMJ

### THE COLOSSUS

 Pamela Cheema

Words fail me as I write this tribute to the man who tried to fashion AGNI into a vehicle of change for Mumbai. For 19 years I watched as Gerson attempted new projects, tried to breathe fresh life into ideas as well as energise AGNI to improve the city. He was immensely patient, listened to your problems and gave his solutions. Courteous to a fault, persevering till the end, he gave of his best and encouraged you to do the same. When I formed an ALM in Powai last year, three weeks before he passed away, Gerson wrote an email to the Assistant Municipal Commissioner of S ward encouraging him to work with us to achieve our collective goals for the suburb. There is much to learn from Gerson!

**Pamela Cheema is AGNI's**  
Coordinator in S ward.

MMJ

nor health to cause him to falter and fall back.

He had been to Breach Candy hospital before the 2019 General Elections and was eager for AGNI to do its part even as he lay on the hospital bed. His hospitalization was hardly known as he was full of energy immediately on discharge. So, when we rushed him to Breach Candy Hospital on January 7, we expected him to come back and lead us into Action...

Gerson was named after his famous uncle, J. Gerson daCunha, who wrote the first history of our city called "The Origin of Bombay". When history is rewritten, our very own Gerson daCunha will stand as a colossus.

AGNI, now is a 'Thin Red Line' of those who will not go quietly into the night, and

their love for Mumbai will inspire others to rise and fight fear, hopelessness and beat both Corona and Apathy back.

The coming Municipal Elections offers us the opportunity to gather numbers and vote for candidates with good education, public service and clean police records.

I sign off by quoting Gerson daCunha's words from his essay 'Decline of the Great City': "We have destroyed India's cutting-edge city of the fifties. We have slowly got used to a city that works less and less well. Bad news because today's national economies depend on how well the nation's cities work. If Mumbai and India are to get anywhere, Mumbai must get globally competitive, and we are nowhere there."

MMJ