

E-Governance and Responsive Administration in India

Dr. Mahesh Chand Gothwal

Lecturer, Public Administration, MAJ Govt. College Deeg, Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

e-Governance can be defined as the application of information and communication technology (ICT) for providing government services, exchange of information, transactions, integration of previously existing services and information portals. The “e” in e-Governance stands for ‘electronic’. The Council of Europe referred to e-Governance as:

The use of electronic technologies in three areas of public action: relations between the public authorities and civil society, the functioning of the public authorities at all stages of the democratic process (electronic democracy), the provision of public services (electronic public services)

Reasons for Opting e-Governance: Governance per se has become very complex, Increase in citizens’ expectations from the government, e-Administration: The use of ICTs to modernize the state; the creation of data repositories for Management Information System (MIS) and computerization of records (land, health etc), e-Services: The emphasis here is to bring the state closer to the citizens, For Examples: Provision of online services, e-administration and e-services together constitute what is largely termed as e-government, e-Governance: The use of IT to improve the ability of the government to address the needs of society, It includes the publishing of policy and program-related information to transact with citizens, It extends beyond the provision of online services and covers the use of IT for strategic planning and reaching the development goals of the government.

e-Democracy: The use of IT to facilitate the ability of all sections of society to participate in the governance of the state. Emphasis is on bringing transparency, accountability, and participation of people. It includes online disclosures of policies, online grievance redressal, e-referendums etc. e-Governance originated in India during the 1970s with a focus on in-house government applications in the areas of defence, economic monitoring, planning and deployment of ICT to manage data intensive functions related to elections, census, tax administration etc. The establishment of the Department of Electronics in 1970 was the first major step towards e-governance in India as it brought ‘information’ and its communication to focus. National Informatics Centre (NIC) established in 1977, launched the District Information System program to computerize all district offices in the country. The main thrust for e-governance was provided by the launching of NICNET in 1987 – the national satellite-based computer network.

Objectives: Better service delivery to citizens, Ushering in transparency and accountability, Empowering people through information, Improve efficiency within Government i.e. between centre-state or inter-states, Improve interface with business and industry.

Pillars of e-Governance: People, Process, Technology, Resources

Types of Interaction in e-Governance: G2G i.e. Government to Government, G2C i.e. Government to Citizen, G2B i.e. Government to Business, G2E i.e. Government to Employees

KEYWORDS: e-governance, responsive, administration, India, national, empowerment, administration, council

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I. INTRODUCTION

India's public system performs poorly on the delivery of quality basic welfare services. Our decade-long work in public finance and public administration has uncovered multiple, complicated bottlenecks in governance which impact service delivery. Responsive Governance has emerged from these learnings. Its premise is a public system accountable to citizens in spirit and practice, which we believe is the foundation of efficient service delivery. Responsive Governance operates on three levels.[1,2]

- As a framework: By way of our research on the status of the public system, it aims to make existing accountability mechanisms stronger and facilitate their inclusion as a key feature in new policies.
- As a call to action: Responsive Governance rethinks the dialogue and sharing of knowledge in public policy. It seeks to reconfigure the interaction between government service providers and the public at the local, state and country-levels to facilitate conditions for transparent governance.
- As an ideal: Responsive Governance is also the guiding North Star for all efforts towards efficient and accountable public service delivery, within the government and those by civil society. The convergence of efforts will energise the demand for reforms.

Governance is neither government nor administration, nor even the apparatus of the state. Governance is a process or system or both to ensure that certain activities—be they of government, a corporate enterprise, a VO or NGO or any other institution, social, eco-nomic, political or cultural—are carried out, managed, governed, directed and controlled within the parameters of legitimacy, accountability and transparency as would be in the best interests of all stakeholders, internal as well as external. The central focus of governance is how the state as the agent of the society enables, facilitates and empowers its people, regardless of differences in caste, class, creed, colour, gender, faith, political ideology and social origin to think, reflect, critically analyse, internalise and take certain decisions which will be in their best interest, and which will enable them to lead a clean, decent, dignified, orderly, peaceful, happy and autonomous existence.

Good governance is neither too little nor too much of governance. Both have undesirable effects. While too little governance may lead to indiscipline, anarchy and chaos, too much of governance may stifle imagination, ingenuity, initiative and creativity and may spell disaster for a democracy. Good governance should basically aim at providing an environment in society where every person can have an equal opportunity to allow his genius to flourish, to promote a good quality of life based on the recognition of dignity, decency, equality, equity, social justice and freedom of all individuals and simultaneously promote order and stability. Good governance has to be universal, that is, it has to be caring, considerate and com-passionate for everyone in the society and not just for a few selected individuals, sections or factions. Good governance is to promote and sustain holistic and integrated human development. Human development as defined by the UNDP is a process of enlarging people's choices. To the extent governance promotes or facilitates this, it is good governance. While the community and the people as a whole including citizens, workers, producers and consumers etc. are internal stakeholders, women, children, physically, orthopaedically, visually and mentally challenged, the indige-nous population, the retrenched and displaced, the Dalits, the linguistic, cultural and religious minorities etc. in that broad division are entitled to draw and justify the first and priority attention of both the State and civil society.[3,4]

To the extent, governance fulfils a few basic needs of all human beings and in particular those of the deprived and disadvantaged sections of the society as above, it is good governance. Some of these basic needs are:

- access to good quality functional literacy and education which is relevant, joyous, attuned to day-to-day life and worthwhile;
- primary health care, immunisation and nutrition;

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- environmental sanitation and hygiene;
- potable drinking water;
- a roof above the head;
- all other basic facilities and amenities and a minimal rest, recreation and leisure.

DISCUSSION

A perceptive administration has or develops the perception, that is, having or showing keenness of insight, understanding and intuition about ground level realities surrounding and affecting lives of human beings. A perceptive mind is a razor-sharp mind which is capable of seeing through the various dimensions and implications of an issue, human character and situation and develop a strategy to grapple with them and eventually overcome them to its advantage as also to the larger good. A perceptive mind is ever on its toes, critically conscious, aware, agile, alert and does not leave anything to chance. It does not tend to ignore or belittle or minimise any issue but judges all issues entirely by their relevance and worth at a particular point of time. A responsive administration is one which responds or reacts to issues, characters and situations and takes decisions only after a thorough and dispassionate screening of all the implications as also the alternative courses of action open. Speed is the essence in the decision-making process although speed does not necessarily mean haste or inadvertence. Tomorrow will be too late and one has to take the bull by its horns at the appropriate moment without the slightest procrastination or vacillation or delay.[5] Any attempt to delay decision-making or allow a critical situation to drift could be suicidal in consequences. Listening to the other point of view, however disagreeable, with patience, tolerance of and respect for dissent is yet another attribute of a responsive mind. In a human society or polity where such dissent is pervasive, tolerance of dissent makes peaceful coexistence of numerous human beings known for differences in origin, faith, life styles, attitude, approach and ideology, a reality. Tolerance does not compromise with fundamentals but signifies respect for and recognition of the essence in the other person's point of view.

A sensitive mind responds to numerous stimuli. Some minds are highly sensitive or responsive to certain messages; some others are not so sensitive. In the present context sensitivity refers to a high level of moral and ethical responsiveness to human misery and suffering arising out of numerous macabre tragedies on account of communal riots, insurgency, human trafficking, drug trafficking, natural calamities (flood, cyclone, earthquake, landslide, tsunami) and enormous dislocation of home and family life and severance of the sacred ties of the kindred which have held Indian society together for generations etc. This fine attribute of the human mind has been brought out by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in his poem 'Upahar' (included in the anthology of poems called 'Manushi'). To quote from those inimitable lines: In the innermost recesses of human heart; The waves of the universe strike us off and on; Only that heart is sensitive; Which reverberates the sounds of those waves incessantly; It does not know what is day and night; What is food, sleep and rest. In more ways than one, a perceptive, responsive and sensitive human being is also coterminous with an empathetic, accountable and transparent being. Empathy is intellectual identification with the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another person 'Do unto others as you would like to do unto yourself' is the essence of empathy. An empathetic person would climb down from his/her high pedestal of power and authority to identify himself/herself with another person—who may even be the lowliest of the low and who has been a victim of poverty, deprivation, discrimination and disadvantage for which he is not responsible. Such identification generates new hopes, feelings and aspirations of survival and imparts a new dimension to life. Late Baba Amte, who is a legend of his time after Bapu, is perhaps the finest and best example of such identification. How many withered and forlorn hearts did he quieten and strengthen; in how many weary souls did he impart an unfailing and immeasurable feeling of peace and bliss! [6,7]

Meaning and Dimensions of Accountability- The dictionary meaning of accountability is answerability. It is the obligation of administration to report, to explain or to justify every action for which it has been made responsible or answerable. Accountability implies that one has to be responsive to all queries from the public, from the representatives of the people, from the financing agencies (banks) and funding institutions (the FES, DIFID, UNDP, UNICEF and other UN bodies etc., to name only a few) with whom the administration has financial dealings. Accountability also implies an objective and implies an objective and dispassionate ground-level assessment of the mandate of the administration, the extent of its honest and faithful implementation and sharing it accurately and objectively with all

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those who are concerned (the donors, government, community and people at large). Evaluation is not witch-hunting but is a tool of correction of deficiencies and infirmities in a programme. Evaluation of the content, process, quality and impact of any pro-gramme becomes meaningful only if (a) all the cards are placed on the table, (b) there is total sharing of information relevant to a programme, and (c) conclusions at the end of the evaluation are reached only on the basis of a thorough scrutiny of all the relevant documents with total candour and honesty. Accountability of the administration involves a lot of grit, courage and determination to own moral responsibility for the consequences of one's action. This, however, does not always happen. What invariably happens is the tendency to stonewall public outcry, if anything has gone wrong, or to evade and circumvent responsibility— statutory or otherwise while simultaneously indulging in a damage control exercise which does not result in any final or tangible solution. Very often due to lack of ethics in governance and business enterprises accountability as a concept and practice remains blurred beyond recognition.

To illustrate, right from the MNCs, the major global players in the LPG syndrome, to retail street-corner provision stores, there is no dearth of business enterprises which would not mind making a fast buck from the unsuspecting, ill-informed, gullible and reticent customers whose lives they have invaded through a ceaseless stream of colourful, but often deceptive, advertise-ments. Starting with adulteration of food articles of daily consumption, from flour to spices, from soap to shampoo, pirated cheap articles of amusement and electronic goods, the consumer is the eventual victim of deception and fraud in a large number of transactions. The victim, who is trapped, does not easily see any light at the end of the tunnel. On December 17, 2004, the Health Minister of India admitted on the floor of Parliament that 70 per cent of the needles used for treating the patients in government hospitals have been found to be contaminated. A survey has revealed that 30 per cent of the medical needles used in private hospitals are also contaminated. We have a Consumer Protection Act, 1986 and there are outlets of judicial redress available to deal with consumer complaints at the national, State and district levels. Regretfully, redress often remains elusive beyond the reach of an average consumer on account of the long-drawn-out and cumbersome procedure which is expensive and which is also a test of one's patience. When tragedy strikes nobody is prepared to own elementary responsibility. Whether it is latherysm (paralysis of the limb) of thousands of women, men and children on account of consumption of kesri dal in a few districts of MP (Satna, Rewa, Sidhi), whether it is instant death of 2500 on account of leakage of 60 tonnes of deadly poisonous gas that is, methyl isocyanate (MIC), through leaking valves and corroded pipes of the Union Carbide Corporation's pesticide plant at Bhopal on the night of December 2-3, 1984 and maiming for whole life of several thousand others, whether it is gunning down of innocent landless agricultural labourers in Barki-Karao village of Bhojpur district on June 22, 1996 and in Shankarbiga in Jehanabad district on January 25, 1999, whether it is 375 miners of Chasnala Colliery and 76 miners in New Kenda Colliery of Dhanbad belt meeting their watery grave in July 1975 and September 1995 respectively, instances could be multiplied where the action of a callous, negligent and insensitive administration could result in such macabre tragedies. Regardless of the categories to which workers and non-workers as above might belong, the central message is loud and clear. The message is [8,9]:

- all workers are human beings first and human beings last;- human life is the finest and best in creation;- human life, once damaged, mutilated or destroyed, cannot be restored to its pristine glory;- this notwithstanding, human life is treated with utter contempt, callousness and insensitivity;- there is no risk sharing and communication with a view to pre-empting disasters in an industrial plant, mining or any other enterprise;- local administration does not take minimal pains to pre-empt an accident or acknowledge its contributory negligence which causes the tragedy;- demand for minimum statutory rights (like demand for minimum wages) is met with severe reprisal. Neither are the culprits brought to book nor are the innocent victims ever truly compensated for loss of precious lives; there is a tendency to circumvent and evade statutory responsibility in the matter of enforcement of industrial/mining safety;- there is total lack of surveillance and vigilance on the part of supervisors/managers in dealing with the occurrence and recurrence of accidents causing human tragedies on account of the same contributory factors being repeated over the years; accidents are not reported to the statutory authority; instead, there is a determined and deliberate attempt to exonerate oneself, to disown moral and even statutory responsibility; advancements in science and technology have not been backed by a humane and sensitive understanding and handling of the affairs of human beings qua human beings, far less as citizens and workers and even less by a desire to recognise the dignity, beauty, sacrosanctity and worth of their lives.

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Transparency—Meaning and Implications: The dictionary meaning of being transparent is having the property of transmitting rays of light through its substance. In other words, that which is transparent allows objects to be seen clearly through it. Transparency, therefore, implies a total openness about a transaction which means putting all the cards on the table. Every transaction must stand public scrutiny and everyone in administration or, for that matter, in any organisation/institution must be accountable, answerable and actionable for any act of omission or commission which comes to the surface as a result of public scrutiny. It is important to identify the factors which contribute to the lack of transparency in a particular transaction or performance of task.

1. **The Culture of Targetitis**—Very often unrealistic targets are fixed or rather imposed by a department of government on different layers of administration. The functionaries of the administration vie with each other in a bid to report an exaggerated achievement of the target. This often results in inaccurate reporting or half-hearted and unprofessional reporting by the fudging of figures.

2. **Skewed Distribution of Funds**—both National and International—Skewed distribution is reflected by the following:

- inequity in transfer of resources from the Centre to the States and from the States to the districts due to overt and covert political and other extraneous considerations not related to merit or need;

- absence of correlation between the magnitude of the problem (poverty, unemployment, under employment, illiteracy, malnutrition, lack of access of potable water, sanitation etc.), genuine needs of the people in a particular area and quantum of funds released;

- inequity in building up of physical infra-structure;

- inequity in building up of social infrastructure;

- inequity in institutional support (both by way of strengthening old institutions and opening new ones). [10,11]

All these lead to regional disparities; the latter generate regional discontentment which in turn leads to political polarisation and economic isolation of a few areas which is not good for the health of the national economy.

RESULTS

Given the universal nature and agenda of good governance it will not be wrong to assert that India since 1947 has been denied good governance notwithstanding the following:

- we have a Constitution which stands out as the very sentinel of dignity of the individual and unity of the nation; the ethos of the freedom struggle based on suffering, sacrifice, self-abnegation, dedication and commitment to a sacred public cause; free press, the watchdog of human freedom; a massive bicameral Parliament; an impartial judiciary; lofty objectives of a series of Five Year Plans (1952-2007); collective efforts and contribution made by a number of educationists, scientists, technologists, social activists, voluntary action groups to carve out a niche for our nation in the comity of nations.

- To cap this all we have got today at the helm of affairs of the nation, a Prime Minister who is unmatched in terms of personal probity, rectitude, integrity, character and orderliness in public life and commitment to eternal values and principles, which lie at the root of Indian civilisation and culture, and about whom all the 1.027 billion Indian citizens could be justly proud of. Governance had limited drawbacks and failures in the early decades essentially because our first generation political leaders (many of whom had made large personal sacrifices during the freedom struggle) were persons of proven integrity and were committed to a set of high values and principles. They also had a holistic national perspective. The rot set in during the late 1960s, 1970s and in the subsequent years. Internal feuds and power politics overtook commitment to promote, protect and preserve good governance. A new breed of so called 'Committed' bureaucracy and coteries of extra-constitutional authority emerged during this period, joining the political bandwagon. The Rule of Law was subverted to subserve individual and sectional political ends—fiercely aggressive and self-interest oriented. It also witnessed the emergence of regional and sub-regional groupings which led to fractured electoral outcomes. The unbridled craze to seize and cling to political power at any cost and to use that power for

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unabashed acquisition of wealth for several generations witnessed an unholy nexus between corrupt politicians, unethical and unprincipled bureaucrats, industrial/ business houses as also the lumpen elements of civil society. Shri N.N. Vora, former Defence and Home Secretary, Government of India,[12] and currently Governor, Jammu and Kashmir, has in several articles and reports brought out this nexus clearly and forcefully. Democracy, development and governance cannot be compartmentalised; we have instead to fuse them into an organic whole. Such an organic whole or unity will not be possible without collective self-empowerment. What has, however, been found in the name of good governance today is centralisation of power and authority of all kinds and in every sphere by rendering people voiceless (the 92nd and 93rd Constitutional Amendments leading to democratic decentralisation notwithstanding). What we are seeing on a day-to-day basis is an unabashed concentration of income, wealth, knowledge and power in the name of nation- building, national integration and development planning. Governance has suffered as representatives of the people and government functionaries have discarded the dictum of austerity and societal empathy. Governance has suffered on account of progressive deterioration in the functioning of the wings of government at all levels.[13]

Perceptive, Responsive and Sensitive Administration hold the Key to Good Governance

The steps are:

1. Basic realisation

Philosophical

- What you are is the creator's gift to you.
- What you become is your return gift to the creator.
- The child of the creator has come down to earth not just to administer comfort to himself but to administer relief and succour to others who are in greater need than himself.
- 'Our lives no longer belong to us; they belong to those who are in need of the same rather desperately.'
- Ethics is not a matter of routine conformity to laws; it is a part of the quest for spiritual elevation and perfection.

2. Constitutional

- Social justice is the very signature tune of our Constitution.
- 'Our Constitution is not a non-aligned charter; it is not a dry and lifeless document. It is a document with a social purpose and economic mission. It is an instrument heavily weighed in favour of the weaker sections of the society and seeks to bring about a new socio-economic order based on egalitarianism and social justice.'
- 'Social justice is that justice which is not confined to the favoured few but takes within its vast compass millions of people who are leading a life of want and destitution, which penetrates and demolishes inequalities of race, sex, power, position or wealth.'[14,15]

3. Legal

- Since we are a democracy governed by the Rule of Law, the change to establish an egalitarian social order, which we wish to bring about, can be realised only through the procedure established by law. In other words, the legal process must be fully utilised to bring about a qualitative change in the working and living conditions of the poor. There are seven ways by which law can be used as a weapon of the poor and of good governance. These are: law can be used for formation of groups/associations/ collectivities of persons having an identity of interests;- law can be used as a potent weapon for redressal of genuine grievances of the poor;- law can be used for securing timely, just and positive relief to the poor;- law can be used to claim entitlements provided by the terms of the Statute law [Section 15 of Payment of Wages Act, Section 20 of Minimum Wages Act, Section 33 (2) (c) of ID Act] but which are often denied in practice;- law can be used to secure redress against the misuse of power by those who are responsible for enforcing the law;- law

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can be used to articulate concerns of the needy, claims for recognition of new rights and demands;- law can be used to press demands for substantive and procedural legal reforms.

4. Role of Government

- We have lots of gaps, lots of unfinished tasks and lots of failures.
- The oracles of promises do not often turn out to be the authors of their fulfilment but we lack the courage and humility to acknowledge the same.
- We need to acknowledge plainly and speak out with courage and humility, 'Government cannot do everything. Government does not have easy outreach to all areas (geographical). Government does not have the capability or expertise to enter all fields of economic activity (running a hotel or restaurant, running manufacturing units, running a telephone booth or call centre etc. to name only a few by way of illustration).'
- Let us, therefore, leave out certain areas like social mobilisation for literacy, primary education, primary health care, environmental sanitation, elimination of social evils like forced/bonded labour, sexual harassment at workplace, child trafficking, drug trafficking, dowry, foeticide, female infanticide etc. to good, reliable and committed voluntary organisations who are non-political or apolitical. They have the flexibility of structure and operations. They have workers who are social animation and, therefore, they are best suited to shoulder these responsibilities. They speak the language of the people—simple and intelligible. Instead of expecting the VOs to approach us with supplicating hands we need to go down to them and enlist/solicit their involvement and support in promoting development and improvement of the poor.

5. Time Management

- Human life is just not a collection of minutes, hours, days, months and years. Every man or woman lives for action and the latter—purposive, planned, coordinated and concerted action—is the quintessence of human life. The time at our disposal being short has to be managed and regulated to make life more organised, systematic, methodical and result-oriented.
- Time management is possible, feasible and achievable if the following tips could be followed:
 - ceremonies associated with events/activities are thoroughly discouraged; if, absolutely necessary and desirable from the cultural or traditional angle, these should be as simple and austere as possible without any ostentation;- the practice of reading out long and prepared texts in public meetings/ceremonies should be discouraged; the practice of speaking extempore and making short, simple, direct, to the point and factual statements which are also statements known for the richness of their human appeal should be encouraged from early school days;- similarly when a power point presentation is being made to transmit a socially relevant message, the practice of reading out from the written text of the presentation should be thoroughly discouraged;- the text of the power point presentation should be simple, precise and bulletised;- monitoring should be a tool of obtaining an accurate feedback of what is happening on the ground so that if there are gaps, omissions, deficiencies and infirmities, monitoring as a two-way process of communication should be used to remove them; there should be no reporting in a manner which amounts to orchestration or window-dressing;- evaluation should be used as a tool of correction and not as a tool of witch-hunting;-[16] evaluation should be with reference to content, process and impact of certain programmes and activities;- today's tasks have to be attended today with professionalism, integrity and dedication and cannot be postponed till tomorrow;- the tables of bureaucrats should not be cluttered up with files and papers; nor should files be splattered on the floor; its an ugly reflection of ineptitude and bad office management;- time should be so managed that there is a balanced disposal of paper work, attending meetings and conferences in a productive manner and making a positive contribution (as opposed to ceremonial meetings), meeting the public and patiently listening to them for redressal of public grievances.

6. Lifestyle

- It should be one of openness, simplicity, austerity and transparency.

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• It should not only be so but should appear to be so. It should be noted that an acquisitive lifestyle, conspicuous consumption and vulgar display of wealth are offensive to the sensibility and sensitivity of our mute toiling millions battling daily against the forces of a hostile environment characterised by limited avenues of productive work and spiralling of prices of essential commodities and, therefore, should be avoided at all costs.

7. Self-abnegation versus Self-aggrandisement

Day-to-day human life should be based on the principles of 'Aparigraha' of Jain philosophy or self-effacement as opposed to self-aggrandisement. In 'Aparigraha' even possession of wealth is seen as depriving the poor and the hungry of the means to satisfy their wants. In Jain philosophy, which Bapu had imbibed and assimilated fully, non-violence leads to a principle of non-possession of property.

8. Redressal of Grievances

In the day-to-day life of an individual and worker/employee, occasions arise when he/she is wronged for no fault and these wrongs need to be ventilated before and redressed by the competent authority. In a situation of deprivation and disadvantage, grievances could arise on account of the following:

- dues of entitlement are not at all paid or not paid in time;- arbitrary and unauthorised deductions take place by way of fine, payment of middlemen's commission, unilateral and arbitrary adjustment of advances paid with wages payable subsequently;- statutory benefits (provident fund, gratuity, maternity benefit and workmen's compensation etc.), facilities (provision of a safe, clean, well-lighted and well-ventilated and accident-free workplace, safety appliances, crèche, canteen, first-aid, washing and bathing facilities, conservancy facilities) and amenities at the workplace are honoured only in their breach;- inordinate delay in settlement of legitimate claims under the ID Act, PW Act, MW Act, PB Act, MB Act, WC Act, EPF and MP Act, ESI Act etc.- inordinate delay in payment of compensation to the persons whose land is acquired for a public purpose under the Land Acquisition Act, 1894;- inordinate delay in rehabilitation of the retrenched and displaced workmen/population.[17]

Timely redressal of grievances has the following positive dividends:- it brings cheer to the cheerless faces of the deprived and disadvantaged;- it brings positive financial relief particularly to widows who have been waiting for several years to get their legitimate claims (PF, family pension etc.);- it restores the trust and confidence of the deprived in the efficacy of administration; the gap between the two is bridged;- it establishes a new and better interface between the administration and people and reinforces the ethos and culture of selfless service.

CONCLUSIONS

What makes government responsive to citizens' needs. This paper from the London School of Economics and Political Science highlights the importance of information flows about policy actions. Having an informed and politically active electorate strengthens incentives for government responsiveness. Evidence from India shows that state governments are more responsive where newspaper circulation is higher and electoral accountability greater; there is a role for both democratic institutions and mass media in ensuring that citizens' preferences are reflected in policy. Understanding what makes government responsive to citizens' needs is particularly important in low-income countries where vulnerable populations rely on state action for survival. Politicians are more likely to respond to demands when electoral turnout is high and political competition intense. Mass media can play a role by enabling vulnerable citizens to monitor the actions of incumbents and to use this information in voting decisions.

These ideas are tested using data from sixteen Indian states from 1958-1992. India has an active press and a large vulnerable population which is regularly affected by natural shocks. Representative democracy and free and independent regional media are key factors in protecting vulnerable citizens. State governments are more responsive to falls in food production and crop flood damage where newspaper circulation and electoral accountability are higher. Newspapers published in state-specific languages tend to report localised events and have a readership of local vulnerable populations. Local language newspapers therefore play a role in making state politicians more responsive to

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local crises. Greater electoral turnout is associated with greater responsiveness. As food production falls or flood damage increases, having higher turnout in the previous election tends to increase government responsiveness. Levels of public food distribution respond to political competition and the timing of elections, (increasing in election or pre-election years), whereas disaster relief expenditure does not; public food distribution is more visible, and hence politicised. Economic development appears to be relatively unimportant in this data. [16]

Findings are consistent with earlier literature examining the importance of the media in famine relief policy. The results underline the potential role of civil society, and the media in particular, in an effectively functioning democracy. Elections provide an incentive for politicians to perform, which can be enhanced by development of the media. Responsiveness of government to issues such as crisis management is likely to be greater where the media is more developed. Institutions of political competition (such as open elections) are not sufficient to deliver a responsive government unless voters have authority to discipline poorly functioning incumbents. This requires effective institutions for information transmission to voters. Results point to the importance of mechanisms for improving accountability beyond the role of economic development in encouraging government action. This resonates with calls to improve governance in low income countries to enhance the well-being of the poor. There is scope for further work that seeks to link government policy to media development, especially in developing countries. [17]

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