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Right-to-Know Law Gives India's Poor a Lever

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A grant for the poor was elusive to Chanchala Devi until she used India's right-to-know law.

Credit Brian Sokol for The New York Times

BANTA, [India](#) — Chanchala Devi always wanted a house. Not a mud-and-stick hut, like her current home in this desolate village in the mineral-rich, corruption-corroded state of Jharkhand, but a proper brick-and-mortar house. When she heard that a government program for the poor would give her about \$700 to build that house, she applied immediately.

As an impoverished [day laborer](#) from a downtrodden caste, she was an ideal candidate for the grant. Yet she waited four years, watching as wealthier neighbors got grants and built sturdy houses, while she and her three children slept beneath a leaky roof of tree branches and crumbling clay tiles.

Two months ago she took advantage of India's powerful and wildly popular [Right to Information law](#). With help from a local activist, she filed a request at a local government office to find out who had gotten the grants while she waited, and why. Within days a local bureaucrat had good news: Her grant had been approved, and she would soon get her check.



A goat herder and her children in Jharkhand, a corrupt state where the poor use India's right-to-know law to solve basic problems. Credit Brian Sokol for The New York Times

Ms. Devi's good fortune is part of [an information revolution](#) sweeping India. It may be the world's largest democracy, but a vast and powerful bureaucracy governs. It is an imperial edifice built on feudal foundations, and for much of independent India's history the bureaucracy has been largely unaccountable. Citizens had few means to demand to know what their government was doing for them.

But it has now become clear that India's 1.2 billion citizens have been newly empowered by the far-reaching law granting them the right to demand almost any information from the government. The law is backed by stiff fines for bureaucrats who withhold information, a penalty that appears to be ensuring speedy compliance.

The law has not, as some activists hoped, had a major effect on corruption. Often, as in Ms. Devi's case, the bureaucracy solves

the problem for the complaining individual, but seldom undertakes a broader inquiry.

Still, the law has become part of the fabric of rural India in the five years since it was passed, and has clearly begun to tilt the balance of power, long skewed toward bureaucrats and politicians.

“The feeling in government has always been that the people working in government are the rulers, and the people are the ruled,” said Wajahat Habibullah, the central government’s chief information commissioner. “This law has given the people the feeling that the government is accountable to them.”

Rajiv Gandhi, a former prime minister, once said that only 15 percent of spending on the poor actually reached them — the rest was wasted or siphoned off.

That figure may have changed in the decades since he uttered it, but few Indians doubt that a good chunk of the roughly \$47 billion budgeted this fiscal year to help impoverished citizens is lost.

India’s Right to Information law has given the poor a powerful tool to ensure they get their slice of that cake. The law, passed after more than a decade of agitation by good-government activists, has become embedded in Indian folklore. In the first three years the law was in effect, two million applications were filed.

Jharkhand is an eastern Indian state where corruption and incompetence are rife, fueled by mineral wealth and the political chaos that has gripped the state since it was carved out of the state of Bihar in 2000. Here the rural poor are using the law to solve basic problems. Their success stories seem like the most minor of triumphs, but they represent major life improvements for India’s poorest.

In one village near Banta, a clinic that was supposed to be staffed full time by a medical worker trained to diagnose ailments like malaria and diarrhea and provide care to infants and expectant mothers had not been staffed regularly for years. A local resident filed a request to see worker attendance records. Soon the medical worker started showing up regularly.



In Jabri, a village in Jharkhand, a clinic was often closed, but a claim filed under the information law led to more regular hours. Credit Brian Sokol for The New York Times

The worker, Sneha Lata, an assistant midwife whose government salary is \$250 a month, denied that she had been neglecting her post. She said the information law was a nuisance. “Because of this law I have to listen to all these complaints,” she said. But with villagers now watching, she dares not miss work.

In a nearby hut, Ramani Devi sewed a blanket for a grandson born nine days earlier. In years past she would have been in the fields, toiling for a handful of change to make ends meet. As an elderly widow, Ms. Devi (no relation to Chanchala Devi) knew she was entitled to a \$9 monthly government pension. That may not sound like much, but in a rural village, it is the difference between eating and starving.

Middlemen at the government office demand bribes of \$20 to direct applications to the right bureaucrat, and many people ineligible for pensions were collecting them. When a local activist filed a request to find out which villagers were receiving pensions, Ms. Devi, who is a Dalit, formerly known as an untouchable, finally got her pension. Now she proudly shows off her savings account passbook.

Simply filing an inquiry about a missing ration card, a wayward pension application or a birth certificate is nowadays enough to force the once stodgy bureaucracy to deliver, activists here say.

But a more responsive bureaucracy is not necessarily less corrupt.

Sunil Kumar Mahto, 29, an activist in Ranchi, Jharkhand's capital, said he quickly learned that using the law to expose corruption was pointless. He gave the example of a road project. "The money was spent, but there was no road," Mr. Mahto said.

When he applied to find out what had happened, new money was allocated and the road was ultimately built. But no action was taken against whoever had pocketed the original money.

"The nexus of politicians, contractors and bureaucrats is very strong here," Mr. Mahto explained. "To get action against someone is very difficult."

Some critics wonder if the law is simply a pressure valve that allows people to get basic needs addressed without challenging the status quo. "It has been very successful in rooting out petty corruption," said Venkatesh Nayak of the [Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative](#). "But our accountability mechanisms are weak, and transparency has no purpose without accountability."

But Shekhar Singh, an activist who fought for passage of the law, said that in a nation recovering from centuries of colonial and feudal oppression, fighting corruption was secondary.

"Our main objective was to empower citizens," Mr. Singh said. "This law has done that — given the people the power to challenge their government. That is no small thing."

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.

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