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India's activists keep tabs on politicians' performances

By **Simon Denyer**

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NEW DELHI — For the first time in the history of the world's largest democracy, elected representatives are being held accountable in a meaningful way by their constituents — and not just on election day.

Six years after it was passed, India's powerful Right to Information Act is being used not only to keep bureaucrats on their toes, but also to find out how lawmakers have been spending their time and government money.

Activists are using the act to issue report cards on local and national elected officials, pioneering work that has become an important tool in strengthening democracy and improving governance in this country of 1.1 billion people and empowering a population not used to questioning authority.

"Somehow, elected representatives in India exist in a space which is totally unaccountable, where there is very, very little information on what their roles are and even less on what their performance is," said Anjali Bhardwaj of the group Satark Nagrik Sangathan (Society for Citizens' Vigilance Initiative).

"It is almost insulting someone if you ask, 'What are you doing?' — they are treated with such kid gloves," she said. "But when we are facing the kind of breakdown of governance that we are in India now, people find it extremely useful to know how effective their elected representatives are."

Bhardwaj's work began in the national capital territory of Delhi, where she investigated the role of members of the Legislative Assembly. The results were startling.

Residents of one Delhi slum, for example, would wake in the middle of the night to line up in front of a water tap that was turned on at 2 a.m. for one hour. For seven years, they visited their local elected representative and pleaded for a tube well, only to be told that he had no money.

Then, with Bhardwaj's help, the residents of the slum in Malviya Nagar filed a series of Right to Information requests.

Residents discovered that not only had their representative received $550,000 annually to spend on development, but also that he had spent a quarter of it in the past year building or refurbishing fountains — which would probably never be turned on — in a neighborhood renowned for water shortages.

Suitably shamed, the official turned up just before election day to inaugurate a tube well.

“With an elected representative, the poor are the biggest vote bank,” Bhardwaj said. “The voting percentage in a slum is typically 90 to 95 percent, and people understand they have the power to hold elected representatives accountable. So, for the first time, people have meaningful interaction with their elected representatives.”

During her work, Bhardwaj found that there was no written definition of what a legislative assembly member’s role should be, so she wrote one, requesting information on how often lawmakers raised issues in the assembly, how they spent development funds and what committee meetings they attended.

Then she went to work making the information more readily available, demanding that the government provide it proactively, “without people having to stick their necks out and ask for the information and get threatened.” And, not satisfied because the information was available only online — and inaccessible to many poor residents, who lack Internet access — she fought to have it posted on bulletin boards across Delhi.

In February, the Central Information Commission ruled in her favor, and eight such boards have been erected.

Similar work was carried out for members of legislative assemblies in poorly governed states, including Bihar and Jharkhand, and report cards were published for 250 members of India’s Parliament.

The efforts have exposed scores of lawmakers who had spent an entire year without raising a single question in Parliament, tens of millions of dollars in development funds that were left unspent and committees that were formed to supervise the distribution of “fair price shop” food rations to the poor — a system plagued by corruption — but never convened.

U.S. academics studied Delhi’s 2008 state elections and found that slum dwellers exposed to newspaper report cards on politicians’ performances “responded by increasing turnout and rewarding incumbents who spent more in slums and attended fair price shop oversight committee meetings.”

Activist Shekhar Singh played a leading role in drafting, defending and promoting the RTI Act, but he said Bhardwaj’s work to make legislators accountable “is the ultimate use of the act.”

Last year, 7 million RTI applications were filed in India, surpassing the United States for the most per capita applications under similar legislation anywhere in the world.

Studies show that the RTI Act has worked well in addressing grievances and tackling the kind of corruption that hurts the poor but not so well in preventing high-level scams in which victims are less easily identifiable and inside knowledge of how government works is needed to ask the right questions.

But the most profound change the act has brought could be cultural, in a country where traditional hierarchies of status, caste and age have often left those in authority unchallenged.

“A common person is now looking you in the eye, not looking down when an upper-caste person is present,” Singh said. “That gumption is the greatest success of the RTI, because people who don’t have that gumption can’t make democracies work.

“People are beginning to say, ‘I have the right to ask, and if you are not going to tell me, I am not going to vote for you.’ ”

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