Article

Citizen Participation and Political Accountability for Public Service Delivery in India: Remapping the World Bank's Routes

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Abstract

A state's accountability to its citizens for public service delivery constitutes a central component of the democratic polity. But how to assure this account- ability? The answer lies in the linkage between citizens and some combination of elected political leaders and those they direct to provide the services. In India over recent decades, a host of mechanisms has emerged to provide that linkage, some of them quite potent. Building on the World Bank's 2003 principal–agent model of long and short routes to state accountability, this article argues for a distinct third civil society route. It then explores the paths these three routes can take and their potential effectiveness in providing citizens a number of institu- tional mechanisms to hold political leaders and public service providers account- able, improve service delivery, empower poor people and ultimately enhance well-being.

Over the past quarter-century, the international development community has focused increasingly on 'good governance' as a critical component in develop- ment and on accountability as a key factor in making governance good. Numerous mechanisms have been devised to improve accountability of the state to its citizens, probably nowhere more so than in India with its seven decades of democracy and its federal system providing a huge laboratory for initiating public policy experiments.

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By 2003, the international development community's interest in public sector accountability had become prominent enough for the World Bank to devote its *World Development Report* to improving public services for poor people through enhancing state accountability for delivering those services (WDR, 2004). Most of the concepts and approaches set forth under the rubric of 'accountability' in WDR (2004) soon became better known as 'social accountability', which following Malena and McNeil can be defined as:

> (a) the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens can use to hold the state to account, such as access to and ability to monitor public budgets, participation in budget formation, and citizen report cards on service delivery, and (b) actions on the part of government, civil society, media, and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts.[1]

Several papers have analysed social accountability initiatives comparatively across different countries with regard to public service delivery, finding a variety of outcomes to the efforts assessed.[2] My objective in this article is to examine the whole range of social accountability in service delivery that has emerged across the last couple of decades in India, which arguably has had both a wider variety of mechanisms in a broader array of settings than any other country and more analysis of those mechanisms than elsewhere.

This essay begins with a brief account of the Bank's conceptual analysis of two 'routes' to state accountability in WDR 2004 and then enlarging it to include civil society as an additional route. A brief second section outlines the goals that effective efforts to improve accountability should realize. The following section, organized in terms of the three routes, looks at the array of mechanisms that have been developed in India to enhance accountability. The fourth section compares the mechanisms, and the fifth endeavours to assess the degree of effectiveness they have achieved in making public service delivery better. A final section concludes the article.

Earlier approaches to accountability addressed the 'supply side' (state capacity to deliver services), most pointedly under the rubric of a new public management, aiming to reform ineffective and corrupt bureaucracies, but in contrast the present article essentially analyses the 'demand side' of social accountability, looking at ways a citizenry can improve public service delivery.[3] The article does not attempt an overview of social accountability as a whole, as can be found, for example, in Joshi and Houtzager (2012), Kosack and Fung (2014) or Fox (2015).

The World Bank's Paths for Accountability and an Addition

WDR 2004 explored approaches to enhancing public service delivery for poor people. In its theoretical discussion (WDR, 2004, pp. 46–61), which uses a principal–agent approach, the 2004 *Report* offered two 'routes to accountability'—a 'long' one and a 'short' one. In between these two routes, a middle route can be posited, characterized by civil society activism.

The Long Route

Historically in the countries that are now advanced democracies, citizens have exercised 'voice' in electing political leaders who then formulated public policies that were implemented through bureaucracies that would provide services to the public. Over time this *'long route to accountability'* brought increased benefits to ever wider constituencies as politicians sought to widen their support bases by promising (and over time delivering) public services. As illustrated in Figure 1, in the long route citizens acting as principals impart instructions through elections to political leaders who, acting as agents, make public policy and through what amounts to a compact with the bureaucracy instruct the latter to implement that policy by delivering services to the citizenry. If enough citizens are dissatisfied with their political leaders, they exercise sanctions against them by voting them out of office at the next election. Leaders are thus incentivized to devote attention to popular demands, and much of India's progress in the decades since independence in such areas as food production, literacy and life expectancy can be attributed to politicians' desire to respond to citizen demands for a better life.

The long route, however, presents serious problems in its ability to deliver reforms in general, as well as public services in particular. First, it is generally long in terms of time as well as graphic inches in Figure 1. Achievements like the reservations for lower Hindu castes (known as Other Backward Classes) were the product of decades' worth of energy and effort (Blair, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2003; Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009). Second, elections constitute at best blunt instruments and can give only general direction to the political leadership returned to office.
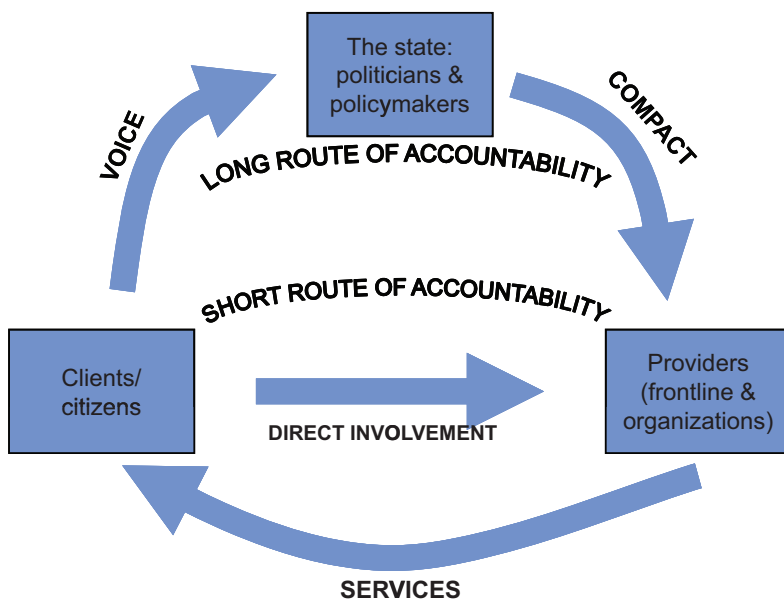
Figure 1. The Long and Short Route to Accountability for Public Service Delivery

Source: Adapted from World Development Report (2004, p. 49).

They inevitably include so many issues and factors that citizens cannot use them to hold officials to account for a single service delivery failure like teacher absence or police misbehaviour. At the most local level, there is greater opportunity to focus on specific issues, but even here many concerns get combined into the citizen's single vote (Manin, Przeworski & Stokes, 1999).

A third problem comes in that the long route is especially tempting to politicians as an avenue to practice clientelistic policies by directing benefits to particular constituencies in return for their votes (e.g., subsidies to farmers) or financial support (tax abatements to industrialists), rather than deliver services to the poor.[4] Fourth, bureaucratic providers can capture policymakers, thus reversing roles by turning policymakers into agents and themselves into principals, while policymakers can perform a similar trick by capturing voters through patronage. Finally, the long route requires truly contested elections, which India has done relatively well at, though crossing this hurdle is clearly not sufficient by itself.

The Short Route

The failure of the long route to deliver services adequately led the Bank to explore the *'short route'* as offering a quicker and surer path to accountability, here illustrated along with the long route in Figure 1. The idea is that citizens can in effect short-circuit the long route by directly dealing with service providers, rather like buyers in a market dealing with sellers. Actually, there are two short routes, which can be characterized as 'choice' and 'voice'.[5] In the 'choice' route, citizens can exercise 'client power' with providers, for example, with school voucher programmes in which parents choose among schools for their children's education. On the 'voice' side, they can become directly involved in state decision-making, as with participatory budgeting (PB) in Brazil, in which citizen representatives allocate state budgetary investments at the local level (inter alia, Baiocchi, 2005). India presents some instances of 'choice power', as with food rationing systems that entitle citizens to buy subsidized foodstuffs at vendors they can choose. But it is the 'voice' type of short route that has become more developed, in particular PB, citizen report card (CRC) systems and RTI legal provisions.

As will be seen, short route mechanisms can be highly effective in exacting some real accountability from state providers, they can target citizen demands specifically, and they can function within a relatively short timeframe such as an annual budget cycle.

As with the long route, there are problems here as well, some of them not surprisingly similar to those found in the market systems serving as a model for the short route. First, consumers often lack essential information about services being offered and so may not make good choices (e.g., illiterate parents judging school quality). A second constraint lies in the lack of competition stemming from one or a small number of providers can render 'choice' or 'voice' options unavailable.

Third, as with the long route, the causal flow can reverse itself such that citizen participants can be co-opted by the providers with whom they are engaged in a short route arrangement (e.g., clientelism for favoured customers). Moreover, the

short route is essentially a local one. Direct involvement of citizens can only work in reasonably small-scale settings.[6] Finally, and in the end most critically, the short route critically depends on political leaders for its creation and maintenance. If they cease supporting it, in most if not all cases there is no constitutional mandate to fall back upon to claim restitution of the mechanism. In other words, the short route needs backing—and often strong backing—from the long route to actually work.

The Civil Society Route

In between the Bank's long and short routes and in addition to them, *civil society* can be considered a middle route of accountability, as shown in Figure 2.[7] 'Civil society'—which can be defined as 'an arena, separate from the state, the market and the individual household, in which people organize themselves and act together to promote their common interests' (Sida, 2004, p. 9)—comprises a huge spectrum of activity running from groups concerned solely with providing services to their members (e.g., a sports club) to organizations devoted exclusively to advocacy (e.g., Amnesty International), but the interest in this article is on the advocacy end, specifically civil society organizations (CSOs) endeavouring to influence state policy in some form on behalf of a group of citizens.

Within the advocacy side of the civil society spectrum, two basic streams of activity can be identified. One deals with human rights issues concerning gender, ethnic minorities, religion or political prisoners and has generally operated at state
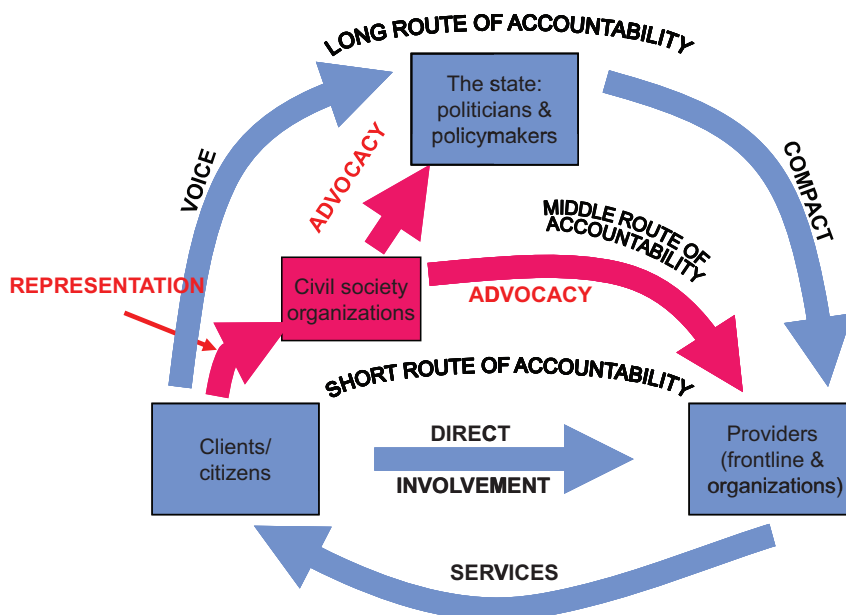
Figure 2. A Third Route to Accountability for Public Service Delivery

Source: Adapted from World Development Report (2004, p. 49).

or national level where it is possible to assemble the critical mass required to influence policymakers. The other stream has centred on public service delivery and has often been more local; it will draw our attention in the present analysis.

Civil society differs from the short route chiefly in that it does not originate from the state side of the citizen–state relationship, nor does it require state support, though it does depend on state willingness to respond, however reluctantly, to its demands. And its main distinction from the long route lies in its twin abilities to operate outside the electoral cycle (CSOs can advocate at any time) and to focus on single issues and goals, as opposed to the amorphous grab bags of agendas that political leaders and parties must incorporate into their overall programmes in order to contest elections.[8]

The civil society route can take two paths, as depicted in Figure 2. It can resemble the long route in targeting policymakers, with petitions, demonstrations, marches and the like, hoping to exercise enough influence to lead to a policy change, or it can look more like the short route, directly addressing the state bureaucracy in seeking changes in how a policy is implemented.

There are of course problems with the civil society route. First, as in so many sectors of life, elites here also play the game better than poor and marginal groups, so they are likely to get more than a fair share for themselves when engaging in civil society activism (e.g., real estate zoning preferences at local level, tax subsidies at national level). Second, given that each CSO pursues a special interest of some sort and that many of these interests are contradictory, civil society activism in the aggregate can lead to system gridlock (e.g., environmentalists vs. developers in so many countries).

Third, aside from those backed by well-resourced elites (e.g., chambers of commerce), CSOs in developing countries all too often find themselves strapped for operating funds, and so survive either by selling services (e.g., literacy training) to the state sector or by seeking financial support from the international donor community. In either case, their autonomy (which is part of their definition) can be at serious risk. Finally, CSOs can support democratically destructive interests (hate groups, anti-minority causes and so on) just as well as worthwhile ones.

The Goals of Social Accountability

What should social accountability efforts be accomplishing? What are the ends to which social accountability mechanisms furnish the means? Shortly after WDR (2004) appeared, Malena, Foster and Singh (2004, pp. 4–6; also Malena & McNeil, 2010) proposed that social accountability should realize three goals:

Better Governance

Given the failure of elections and such horizontal structures as separation of powers to hold governments accountable, social accountability mechanisms can allow 'citizens to access information, voice their needs and demand accountability between elections'.

Improved Service Delivery

By improving transparency, building citizen voice and offering structured engagement between providers and consumers of public services, social accountability mechanisms can ensure that needs and services match each other.

Empowered Poor People

Social accountability mechanisms can enable poor people to begin taking charge of their own futures.

To these three kinds of impact can be added a fourth, more downstream one, which actually constitutes the end goal of social policy in general:

Enhanced Well-being

If social accountability initiatives do deliver better governance, improve service delivery and empower poor people, then as a consequence citizen well-being should progress. People should eventually enjoy better health, live longer, consume more nutritious foods, gain educations that enhance their life prospects and so on. The time span required to realize such results has to be charted in multiple years and even decades rather than a single year or two, to be sure, but it is not too early to begin looking for some signs of achievement here.

After providing a survey of the various social accountability mechanisms used in India over the last couple of decades, the array of devices will be analysed in terms of these four goals.

The Three Routes to Accountability in Practice

In this article, some attention will be devoted to forms of the long route, but the major focus will, as in WDR (2004), be on various forms of the short route and to a lesser extent civil society, for it is here that the scope for exercising accountability with respect to specific areas of public service delivery is greatest. In the discussion that follows, Table 1 should be helpful in tracking the various mechanisms being analysed (the numbers in the following subsections refer to columns in Table 1).

Long Route Mechanisms

1. Periodic elections constitute the bedrock of the long route and the basic mechanism through which citizens hold their political leaders accountable. Absent genuinely contested elections, democracy cannot exist. Even so, elections can evict from office leaders found wanting for various reasons including failure to provide public services. India has for some time been known for an anti-incumbency factor

Table 1. Social Accountability and Citizen Participation Mechanisms in India

World Bank Route	Long Route		Short Route					Civil Society Long Route	Civil Society Short Route	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
System Type	Periodic Elections	Public Interest Litigation	24/7 Phone-in System	Right to Information Law	Social Audit	Citizen Report Card	Participatory Budget	Civil Society Advocacy	Citizen Review Board	Residential Welfare Association (RWA)
Level	All	All	Local	All	Local or state	Local or state	Local	All	Local	X
Legitimating authority	Constitution	Supreme Court	State	RTI Act	MGNREGA Act	CSO	State	Civil society	CSO	CSOs & municipal government
Citizen role	Cast ballots	Initiate suit	Make phone call	Write request	Answer survey	Answer survey	Allocate investments	Support CSO	Monitor & report	Represented by CSO
State response	Political leaders' discretion	Judicial decision	Formal response required	Formal response required	Improve services	Improve services	Comply	Depends on advocacy strength	Act on inputs	Adopt
State response required by	No one	Legal system	Individual bureaucrat	Law	Chief minister	Chief minister	State government	Strength of advocacy	Individual bureaucrat	State government
Degree of state support	Steady	Strong	Strong	Intermittent	Strong where sponsored	Ebb and flow	Strong	Minimal	Temporary	Willing
Sine qua non	Electoral integrity	Supportive judiciary	State compliance	State support	State support	State champion	State support	Continuous momentum	State champion	Both partners agree
Examples	All levels national to local	Delhi air pollution	Hyderabad sewage board	Delhi food rationing	MGNREGA	Bangalore surveys	Kerala PCDP	RTI movement	Mumbai food rationing	Major cities

in voting behaviour, especially one working against representatives from a ruling party. One analysis found Members of Parliament belonging to the ruling party were 9 per cent more likely to lose a re-election than incumbents from other parties, and Members of Legislative Assemblies at state level 14.5 per cent more likely to lose (Ravishankar, 2009), while another found ruling party incumbency disadvantage for the latter group to be greater in states with public sector services (particularly in heath) in shorter supply (Nooruddin & Chhibber, 2008; Uppal, 2009). Over the long term, the need for political leaders at all levels to find votes has led them to increase public service provision, which in turn has gradually helped to raise life expectancy in India from 32 years in 1951 to 66 by 2011 and has increased literacy from 9 per cent to 63 per cent for females and from 27 per cent to 82 per cent for males over the same period (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 6).

But while voters may reward or punish incumbents for their public service delivery, they vote for other reasons as well (e.g., caste, religion, patronage benefits, party leader's charisma), and in any case, a vote could at best express a desire for improved services generally, not for some particular service such as better roads or less price-gouging at food ration shops. Other mechanisms are required for such fine-tuning of demands for public services.

2. Public interest litigation (PIL) offers a second path on the long route shown in Figure 1, this one working through the judicial rather than the legislative branch. After the first case brought to the Indian Supreme Court in 1979, PIL has become a regular component of the country's legal system. These lawsuits, in which a plaintiff (often a CSO) brings suit against the state to require it to implement some measure that is already in the law but has not been implemented or enforced, are permitted within the Indian legal system. In one well-known example, two CSOs brought suit in the mid-1990s against the Delhi Municipal Corporation to compel it to implement clean air laws passed some 15 years earlier. In response, the Supreme Court directed the Delhi government to mandate use of compressed natural gas in all buses, premixed fuel for the ubiquitous two-stroke vehicles in use and other measures to reduce air pollution.

These measures dramatically reduced carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide levels within a few years (Blair, 2008, pp. 135–139; The World Bank, 2005). Unfortunately, within a very few years, Delhi's increasingly affluent citizenry combined with a rapid influx of new residents led to a huge rise in motor vehicles that in turn created even greater air pollution than before the Supreme Court mandates, as Delhi's air became the most polluted in Asia (Sindhawani & Goyal, 2014) or even the whole globe (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). Still, had the Court not acted earlier, pollution levels would have become even worse.

Short Route Mechanisms

The short route to social accountability includes a number of mechanisms, ranging in complexity and likelihood of success from individuals complaining to government servants to elaborate PB structures. This subsection will cover five such mechanisms.

3. Citizens have been lodging complaints with public service providers certainly since the beginnings of settled society, often with little effect, in that response has generally been at the discretion of the officials involved, but in recent years some local governments have instituted mechanisms to guarantee responses to citizen complaints. A 24/7 phone-in system in Hyderabad offers an excellent example of how government responses to citizen complaints on service delivery can be routinized. Instituted by the new managing director of the water and sewage board in the late 1990s, his reforms included a 24-hour citizen complaint system with a 4-day turnaround and a 'single window cell' to process and install new hook-ups. As a result, complaints surged by five times, revenues almost doubled (as more customers proved willing to pay their service bills) and coverage expanded greatly (Caseley, 2006). But just as the system was launched and maintained by an individual bureaucrat at his own discretion, so too it could be diluted or terminated by him or his successor. In other words, it lacks institutionalization.

4. India's Right to Information (RTI) Act, which became law in 2005 and parallels similar laws enacted in the USA (1966) and the UK (2000), entitles citizens to request state information on any topic not related to national security, ongoing court cases or cabinet deliberations (Government of India [GOI], 2005). The RTI law's passage capped a 15-year effort begun with the efforts of a Rajasthan-based NGO called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS or Worker–Farmer Power Organization) to obtain government data on wages paid in a drought relief project—a modest civil society initiative that eventually turned into a movement.[9] The ensuing act is significantly stronger than either the US or UK versions, applying to all levels of government, requiring every public authority to appoint public information officers (PIOs) who must respond to RTI queries within 30 days, and providing a multilevel appeals process whenever requests are refused.[10] The RTI law has generated much enthusiasm, being cited as a 'watershed moment' and a 'great and revolutionary act'.[11]

   A Delhi example will illustrate. In 2001 Parivartan (literally 'change'), a CSO in a poor Delhi neighbourhood, used the local RTI law[12] to gain access to state public distribution system (PDS) records on foodgrain distribution through the ration shop network, finding that some 87 per cent of wheat and 94 per cent of rice supposedly under the PDS had leaked out and been sold on the open market. Ration shop owners not surprisingly protested, but as in an earlier Mumbai case (Goetz & Jenkins, 2007), the Delhi Food Commissioner proved sympathetic to the CSO and supported its work, first with a pilot experiment and then across all of Delhi.[13]

   The RTI activism is especially interesting as a form of what might be called 'accountability jujitsu' in that the chief tool of Weberian bureaucracy—the paper trail—is turned against its users to expose wrongdoing.[14] But unlike the other mechanisms explored here, RTI also carries significant inherent risk, in that users can be subject to reprisals from bureaucrats whose malfeasance is revealed.[15]

5. Social audits, like RTI, emerged from the pioneering work of MKSS in Rajasthan, and also like RTI eventually came to be embedded as standard procedure in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) passed

by the Lok Sabha in 2006 (Government of India [GOI], 2013, Chapter 13; for a good synopsis, refer SSAAT, 2013?). In brief, MGNREGA requires that any rural household volunteering for it must be guaranteed 100 days annually of unskilled labour on public works. Every six months audit teams use the RTI law to gain access to the official muster rolls, and then a 'social audit gram sabha' is held—a village-level public meeting where in the presence of state officials, the names of labourers, days worked and wages due to them are read aloud, which the labourers can then compare to the entries in their own job cards. Discussions are recorded by social audit teams, and then as a final step, each block (township) holds a social audit forum which key MGNREGA officials attend, and reports are shared and discussed. Labourers are invited to raise questions, which officials are required to respond to at that time. Some decisions (e.g., recovering wages) can be made on the spot, while others (e.g., disciplining officials) must follow due process requirements at higher levels.[16]

MGNREGA's social auditing is arguably most advanced in Andhra Pradesh, where it has been analysed in considerable detail by Yamini Aiyar and her colleagues.[17] To minimize conflict of interest, the state set up an autonomous body for social auditing within the Rural Development Department and then organized a vigilance cell that would be independent of both organizations. As of the end of 2013, details of gram sabha social audits (including individual complaints) had been reported on the Internet for every block in the state for at least four and as many as six rounds.[18] As can be imagined, significant administrative effort is required to keep the programme running at this level, both in terms of computerized software (Aakella, 2015) and trained personnel to conduct successive phases of each audit.

6. Citizen report cards are quite similar to the social audits discussed above as a short route mechanism. Like social audits, they began with a civil society initiative designed to gather people's assessment of public service delivery with the aim of releasing the findings to those agencies and the general public in the hope of spurring improvement in specific services. And as with social audits, the idea was taken up by governmental units that began to sponsor such mechanisms. But unlike social audits, CRCs have not been incorporated in any laws like the MGNREGA; rather, they are commissioned on an ad hoc basic by municipal or state governments interested in obtaining public feedback on service delivery. And importantly, there is no public meeting at which complainants directly confront officials and thus no chance for immediate redress of grievances.

The CRC approach was pioneered by an NGO called the Public Affairs Centre (PAC) in Bangalore in 1994 when it launched an initiative to gather views of municipal service provision in the water, power, health and transport sectors. After the survey, the results were released to widespread publicity in the media. The exercise was repeated in 1999 and again in 2003. After these successive surveys, the city government did respond positively, which resulted in huge increases in public approval. Whereas those satisfied with water supply and electricity amounted to 4 per cent and 6 per cent respectively in 1994, nine years later in 2003, satisfaction had increased to 73 per cent and 94 per cent (Paul, 2006; Ravindra, 2004). Interestingly, slum households responded to the survey almost

as favourably as middle-income families, indicating that the improvements were well distributed over the city's population.[19]

A critical factor in the story lay in the fact that, while the improvements came at first on the initiative of the departments being evaluated, midway through the period state elections brought into office a new chief minister, who became an enthusiastic supporter of improving public service delivery. As if to underline the importance of high-level backing, the 2004 state assembly election brought a new government to office, leading to a distinct diminution of interest in citizen evaluations of Bangalore's public services (Balakrishnan, 2006, pp. 175–183; Paul, 2006, p. 339).

More recently, the PAC and its sister organization the Public Affairs Foundations (PAF) have conducted a number of CRCs[20] commissioned by state agencies in Karnataka and elsewhere. In 2009, a PAC team undertook a statewide survey of public service delivery in sectors such as bus transport, primary health centres and the PDS for food (Vivekananda, Sreedharan & Belavangala, 2012), followed by a second statewide study zeroing in on the PDS in 2012 (Sreedharan, Reddy, Prabhakar, Srikant & Poovaiah, 2014). And chief ministers in Delhi and Bihar have commissioned CRC studies as well (Public Affairs Foundation [PAF], 2009, 2013, 2014).

7. Participatory budgeting is arguably the strongest mechanism for exacting accountability to the citizenry from the state at local level. It can be defined as a process of democratic deliberation and decision-making, in which ordinary residents decide directly or indirectly through specially selected representatives how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget.[21] PB originated in the Brazilian City of Porto Alegre in 1989 when the incoming mayor instituted the practice, and over the years since has expanded to more than 400 municipalities in Brazil as well as many local government units elsewhere in the world.[22]

Although it has not become widespread in India, PB has established itself quite thoroughly in Kerala, where following the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993, it was instituted in 1996 throughout the state as the People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning.[23] Thus all of Kerala's urban structures (municipal councils and corporations) and its three tiers of rural councils (gram, block and district panchayats)—altogether numbering 65 urban units and more than 1100 rural ones—launched the programme simultaneously.

Every gram panchayat has 10–12 wards, each with a population averaging something over 2,500. The process begins here each year with open meetings (gram sabha), which are facilitated by trained key resource personnel. In the ward-level gram sabhas, priorities are established and delegates selected to the next higher panchayat level, where they meet with elected local government officeholders and bureaucrats in a series of development seminars to forge a unified panchayat budget. Task forces and sectoral working groups (e.g., for education, infrastructure, poverty reduction, watershed management) are formed to plan and implement projects to be taken up. The projects selected by the working groups are then prioritized into a plan document, which is vetted by a District Planning Committee at that higher level for technical viability. Once approved, the projects are implemented and monitored by the gram panchayats.

In anything so massive dealing with the 35–40 per cent of all state developmental funds that have been devolved to local government units, much support is needed. Accordingly, more than 100,000 key resource persons have been trained as facilitators for the budgetary process, and their training gets periodically renewed.

As in Porto Alegre, Kerala's programme was also launched by a leftist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, which was defeated at the polls in 2001, but the programme was continued by the succeeding Congress Party coalition, if with somewhat less enthusiasm (Heller, Harilal & Chaudhuri, 2007, p. 644). Since then, a CPM alliance returned to power in the 2006 election and then a Congress coalition again in 2011, but PB has survived all these turnovers. It has become an enduring component of Kerala's political system.

Civil Society Long Route Mechanisms

8. Civil society advocacy provides alternatives to both the long and the short routes to accountability, as discussed above in connection with Figure 2. Compared with the long route discussed above, it can be more effective than voting in that a CSO does not have to wait until an election to try to influence policy decision-making, and it generally focuses on a single subject of interest to its constituency rather than the broad issues at stake in an election.

After independence in 1947, the population of CSOs expanded gradually and after the Emergency of 1975–1977 it has multiplied rapidly, with the number of registered non-profit institutions estimated at around three million as of 2012 (Goswami & Tandon, 2013, p. 661). A substantial proportion of these concentrate on serving their constituencies, many of them no doubt exclusively (e.g., micro-credit and family-planning groups), but the number engaged in advocacy has to be huge. And the variety of issues CSOs are advocating for is also vast (e.g., agricultural subsidies, caste preferences, women's rights).[24]

Case studies are numerous. At the subnational level, Deo and McDuie-Ra (2011) provide accounts of CSO advocacy for human rights, environmental protection and ethnic identity in north-eastern India. CSO advocacy can also focus on the mechanics of governance, as Paul (2007) shows in his analysis of efforts to convince government in north-eastern Gujarat and the city of Bangalore to initiate PB. And CSOs can press for benefits to a particular constituency, as many farmer organizations have done (e.g., studies in Lindberg, 1994).

Civil Society Short Route Mechanisms

9. Citizen review boards can be effective instruments when given strong state backing. A good example comes from Mumbai, India, where in the early 1990s, a CSO named Rationing Kruti Samiti (Rationing Action Committee) set up local consumer groups to monitor prices and quality in the PDS shops, which were widely reported to gouge on prices, stint on quality and siphon off public foodgrain

supplies to private channels. Backed by the government bureaucrat then in charge of rationing, these vigilance committees were able to pressure shop owners to post prices publicly and offer samples for consumer inspection, while periodically reporting their findings to the city government. But when the rationing officer was transferred in 1994, reportedly under pressure from interested politicians, the initiative essentially collapsed as shopkeepers were no longer required to provide essential information to the monitoring groups (Goetz & Jenkins, 2007).

10. Residential Welfare Associations (RWAs) have developed as intermediary CSOs between citizen and state in a number of Indian cities over the last several decades. In many cases, the relationship has become a partnership (*bhagidari* in Hindi) in which the RWA and the municipal government jointly plan and even implement public service delivery (e.g., sanitation, electricity, water). Sometimes an RWA will actually provide the service itself (e.g., security). In some cases, the partnership begins with an initiative from the state side, while in others a CSO persuades the state to engage with it.

RWAs have enjoyed significant *bhagidari* success in elite and upper middle-class neighbourhoods in big cities. In Delhi, for example, RWAs which had sprung up as organizations to protest against electricity privatization and increased charges were invited by the government to a series of forums including government agencies, trader groups, industrial associations and other NGOs to work jointly on improving public services. The effort had the enthusiastic support of the senior Delhi bureaucrat who conceptualized it and Delhi's chief minister who was reported to see it as a vehicle to gain recognition for her government's achievements (Chakrabarti, 2007). Kundu (2011) found RWAs in Delhi assuming responsibility for maintaining streetlights, roads and parks, even building security structures for gated communities, all in cooperation with local government agencies. Mumbai has shown similar developments (Zerah, 2007).

Comparing the Mechanisms

One striking aspect of all the mechanisms depicted in Table 1 is that none is capable of delivering any public service without the active support of bureaucrats at some level in all cases and policymakers as well in most. In some cases, a single bureaucrat was enough. An individual lodging a local complaint could obtain satisfaction from the government servant being addressed, if only at the latter's discretion, a water and sewage director could set up a 24/7 call-in service, and the citizen review board in Mumbai was set up by the official in charge of food rations in response to demands from a CSO.

All the rest needed political support to function: elected lawmakers to enact new programmes, courts to respond to PIL,[25] parliament to enact RTI and MGNREGA, mayors or chief ministers to engage CRC surveys (and act on their results), a state legislature to launch PB in Kerala, and a municipal council to

agree to partner with RWAs. When such support is withdrawn, the mechanism fails, as when a new chief minister in Karnataka proved uninterested in continuing CRCs or the Mumbai food ration director left for another posting.

In a second pattern, four of the eleven mechanisms in Table 1—social audits, PB, citizen review boards and RWAs—really amount to community monitoring, some with more teeth (PB, social audits), some with fewer (citizen review boards). Though they differ widely in the details of their operation, all four involve citizens observing service delivery programmes and engaging directly with the providers.

Third, the various mechanisms discussed here are primarily *corrective* instruments enabling citizens to expose corruption, inefficiency or mismanagement in public service delivery. Referring to Table 1, the basic purpose of PIL, all the short route mechanisms (except PB) and citizen review boards is to induce public sector servants to perform their assigned functions, that is, to execute the laws and regulations already on the books. In contrast, PB and the RWAs could be said to be *prospective* in that they enable citizens to direct public resources into new or expanded channels. And a couple of mechanisms can be either corrective or prospective: civil society advocacy organizations and in some ways elections (which can both oust poor performers and install new leaders who promise new programmes).

Finally, it should be noted that three of the most successful mechanisms emerged from the efforts of two creative, energetic and persistent CSOs. Beginning in Rajasthan state, the MKSS's work with rural employment schemes led eventually to the RTI and MGNREGA acts, and in Bangalore, the Public Affairs Center developed the CRC survey which then came into widespread use.

Overall Effectiveness in the Three Routes

It is now appropriate to assess how well the 11 mechanisms have performed in realizing the four goals of social accountability set out earlier in this article: the three goals of better governance, improved service delivery and empowered poor people formulated by Malena et al. (2004)[26] and the added fourth goal of enhanced well-being. Table 2 will aid the discussion here.

Better Governance

As a long route mechanism, PIL has proved a highly effective tool in compelling state accountability for laws and regulations the state has promulgated but failed to enforce. But it needs a determined citizen or more likely CSO with ample resources to persist on this long route mechanism to achieve results. The PIL also raises a danger of judicial overreach into areas constitutionally the preserve of the executive and legislative branches of government (Gauri, 2009). The right to information (RTI) law has theoretically opened up a huge swath of government information to

Table 2. Social Accountability Goals and Citizen Participation Mechanisms in India

World Bank Route	Long Route		Short Route					Civil Society Long Route	Civil Society Short Route	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
System Type	Periodic Elections	Public Interest Litigation (PIL)	24/7 Phone-in System	Right to Information Law (RTI)	Social Audit	Citizen Report Card (CRC)	Participatory Budget (PB)	Civil Society Advocacy	Citizen Review Board	Residential Welfare Association (RWA)
Better governance	X	X		(X)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Improved service delivery	(X)	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Empowered poor citizens	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Enhanced well-being	(X)						[Brazil evidence]			
Examples	All levels national to local	Delhi air pollution	Hyderabad sewage board	Delhi food rationing	MGNREGA	Bangalore surveys	Kerala PCDP	RTI movement	Mumbai food rationing	Major cities

Source: Author.

Note: X indicates significant goal attainment; (X) indicates indirect impact.

the public, and many success stories of its use have emerged (e.g., Centre for Good Governance [CGG], 2009). But other studies have found serious shortcomings in RTI's implementation—uninformed citizens, untrained officials, little official monitoring, official resistance (Baviskar, 2010; PriceWaterhouseCoopers [PWC], 2009; RTI Assessment & Analysis Group [RAAG], 2009). Nor according to another study has RTI seen much use in investigative journalism, where it might have been expected to lead to some serious digging into state activities (Relly & Schwalbe, 2013).

But surely, it is not surprising that RTI was less than spectacularly effective in its first few years. After more than eight decades under the Official Secrets Act of 1923, during which government officials at all levels were accustomed to using it to block access to any state information at any and all times, it should be all too understandable that citizens did not rush to employ it and officials did not execute a 180-degree turn to implement it immediately after its enactment in 2005. The World Bank (2012) study reported serious bureaucratic foot drag-ging in implementing RTI, and even after 12 years of the RTI law, BallotBoxIndia (2017) found that only five of 28 state PIOs responded positively to an RTI request, while 10 rejected it and 13 did not respond at all. Hopefully time will see improvement in implementation. In any case, though, RTI by itself cannot make governance better; rather, it is an enabling tool, making it possible for individuals or CSOs or the media to exact accountability from the state, whence the qualified (X) in Table 2.

In the short route, the 24/7 phone-in system introduced in Hyderabad provides an effective way for citizens to voice their complaints about municipal water and sewage, and get their problems attended to. Because it is authorized by statute, the social audit provides a more secure short route mechanism, with its engagement of citizens and officials. This makes for a powerful engine of accountability, but when it is implemented across an entire state's public employment programme as in Andhra Pradesh, it requires a very sizeable investment of computational capacity and personnel training to be sustainable over time. The PB entails a much more intense citizen involvement in governance, as they participate in establishing, prioritizing and monitoring local government expenditures. But like social auditing, PB needs a substantial bureaucratic commitment to make it work, for example, Kerala's 100,000 facilitators.

Civil society advocacy has supported causes great and small, wide and narrow, national and local, for decades in India. Many have focused on service delivery, such as the MKSS in Rajasthan and the PAC in Bangalore, which have pressed state institutions to be more responsive in providing honest public employment schemes and urban public services, both cases of services for specific constituen-cies, it should be noted, which is typical of CSO advocacy.

A citizen review board improved governance in Mumbai by monitoring food ration shops for prices, quality and quantity and reporting their findings to the supportive head of the municipal rationing agency, but this system depended criti-cally on the official and collapsed when he was transferred to another post. Finally, RWAs effectively paired citizen groups with public service providers at neigh-bourhood level to establish a closer match between demand and supply.

Improved Service Delivery

Even though they form a blunt and imprecise tool, periodic elections can improve service delivery over time. Politicians searching for electoral support pay attention when Dalits or Other Backward Castes cast their ballots as blocs and may in return enlarge the benefits flowing to such groups in the form of increased scholarship assistance or stricter supervision of police to prevent brutality.

Among the short route mechanisms, the central purpose of Hyderabad's 24/7 phone-in system was to improve service delivery, which it appeared to do quite well, so long as it enjoyed the support of the bureaucrat who initiated it. Well-managed social audit programmes have found some success in keeping employment guarantee schemes honest, and CRC surveys have shown themselves able to bring public pressure on service providers to improve their performance, as repeat surveys have demonstrated in Bangalore and Delhi. Finally, wide-ranging surveys in Kerala have confirmed that large majorities of all groups believed public services had improved significantly after the introduction of PB (Heller et al., 2007).

Civil society advocacy directed at policymakers (its long route) can be effective in securing services when the demand requires a policy change, as in Lindberg's (1994) Maharashtra farmers wanting better crop irrigation that in turn would require serious capital investment. The CSO involved in the Mumbai citizen review board, on the other hand, could take the short route in dealing directly with food ration providers, though like the 24/7 phone-in system, the arrangement could only last as long as it had bureaucratic backing. In contrast, a number of the RWAs appear to have institutionalized relationships with municipal departments that give them an ongoing influence over service delivery.

Empowered Poor Citizens

As Christophe Jaffrelot et al. have abundantly shown (Jaffrelot, 2003; Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009), the 'rise of the plebeians' in the form of lower caste political activism in many Indian states over the last several decades has given people of low status and low income a share in power at all levels. While much of that share has come in the form of psychic income (a sense of dignity and respect), a good part has also come in an enhanced ability to assert that sense of empowerment politically in gaining access to public services. Their success in periodic elections has been a key element in their rise. The PIL also offers empowerment potential, but the cost and expertise required to bring a lawsuit generally excludes those without such resources (Deva, 2009).

In the short route category, the 24/7 phone-in system allowed anyone to call in with a complaint, but of course the complainer must be able to access a telephone to begin the process, a constraint that initially doubtless excluded most poor people. Given the incredibly rapid spread of mobile phone usage in India, however, most people even among the very poor by now have access to one, even if it is not personally owned. Using the RTI law might also seem largely restricted to the non-poor, but the Delhi example discussed above shows that

food ration shop patrons—who can be assumed to be low-income groups—have benefited from RTI.

The social audit in the Andhra MGNREGA involved poor citizens directly in its several steps and thus can be said to have empowered them, an experience that hopefully they will draw upon in dealing with other aspects of life. But the programme has been found ineffective in its redress and sanctioning functions; in their study of 100 mandals (development blocks), Afridi and Iversen (2014) found that while social auditing had proven reasonably effective in detecting malfeasance, it did little over three successive iterations to reduce it.

Kerala's PB draws in citizens from all social strata. One large-scale survey found women constituting around 40 per cent of both gram sabha participants and delegates elected to the higher-level bodies, while Scheduled Caste representation at both levels exceeded their proportion of the population (Heller et al., 2007, pp. 630 ff.).

Civil society advocacy organizations taking the long route have attempted to empower poor citizens over the decades, going back to the famous temple entry case in what is now Kerala state, successfully resolved in the 1930s (Jeffrey, 1976). Albeit with mixed results, advocacy on behalf of Dalits and Adivasis has been a prominent theme ever since (e.g., Omvedt, 1994). As for civil society's short route, by arranging for food rationing recipients to monitor the shops they dealt with, Mumbai's citizen review board empowered them for as long as the system lasted.

The RWAs offer an especially interesting case here. As wealthier neighbourhood RWAs in Delhi were engaging with state agencies to provide services, several scholars found poorer neighbourhoods relying on informal local leaders or party functionaries for this purpose in Delhi (Chakrabarti, 2007; Harriss, 2005; Jha & Samuel, 2011) and Chennai (Harriss, 2007). Harriss (2005) formulated a divide between 'old politics' and 'new politics', which comports with the World Bank's long and short routes outlined at the beginning of this article: poorer citizens have to work through a principal–agent link by convincing political leaders to press their cases while elites can use a more straightforward direct engagement with service providers.

Further research showed a more muddled picture, however. RWAs in lower middle-class neighbourhoods were found to be engaging with the state in Delhi's 'unauthorized colonies' (Lemanski & Lama-Rewal, 2013), Chennai (Coelho & Venkat, 2009) and Bangalore (Kamath & Vijayabaskar, 2009). Even slum-dweller associations have proven capable of convincing city governments to fund community toilets in Mumbai and also in Pune, where they designed, built and maintained some 400 toilet blocks with 10,000 seats (Baken, 2008).

Neighbourhood associations rich and poor, in short, followed both the civil society long and short routes (cf. Figure 2) in trying to improve amenities in their locales. Needless to say, elites do better on either path than middle classes, who in turn travel along the two routes more successfully than the poor and often at the latter's expense. For example, RWAs in Delhi's elite 'authorized' colonies (officially recognized residential neighbourhoods) and in middle class 'unauthorized' (not so recognized) spent considerable effort to have 'illegal'

squatter settlements removed by the authorities (Lemanski & Lama-Rewal, 2013). Of at least equal importance, the mindset of urban elites and middle classes seeing themselves as 'proper citizens' entitled to approach senior bureaucrats as equals in contrast with the lower strata who must petition the authorities for largess through intermediaries tends to 'undermine any prospect of the rich engaging in cross-class mobilization and thus deepen the gap between civil society and political society' in the words of Corbridge, Harriss and Jeffrey (2013, p. 230).

Enhanced Well-being

As discussed earlier, political leaders' quest for votes in periodic elections held at national and state level over the seven decades since independence has led to a steady increase in public services, which in turn has produced rising levels of well-being, particularly in education and health, but also in standard of living (e.g., transportation, electrification). This long-run impact has been indirect—whence the parentheses around the 'X' in Table 2—but over time it has been momentous. To put it another way, the long route has succeeded not only in delivering the developmental goods in terms of public services as outputs, but it has also led to improved outcomes in the form of better lives. But the long route has taken a very long time to bring these changes about, and, despite all the advances, India in 2014 still ranked only number 131 of 188 nations included in the United Nations' Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2016).

The short route offers the hope of a shorter time frame for achieving results as well as fine-tuning initiatives to specific sectors and within them to particular needs. Thus far, however, little evidence has emerged to show short route mechanisms actually producing improved outcomes in well-being. This absence of course can in significant part be attributed to the time required for better services to make an impact on well-being. Improved sanitation will lower the incidence of gastrointestinal diseases, which in turn will lower the death rate, but not right away. Better education will generate a more productive work force, but it will take years and even a decade or two for incomes to rise and families to prosper. Still, it should be time to begin looking for some indications of downstream impact from short route efforts, at least for mechanisms like social audits and PB that have shown the best signs of success.

Brazil's track record with PB can provide some guidance here. After Porto Alegre's programme had been in place for well over a decade, a World Bank (2008) study found that PB in Porto Alegre did reduce poverty rates, while increasing access to well-being services like piped water and sewage treatment. But a later study based on 220 Brazilian cities showed that while PB did decrease poverty, it had no real impact on broader well-being indices such as infant mortality, life expectancy or literacy (Boulding & Wampler, 2009). In contrast, Gonçalves (2014) found in her study of more than 3,500 municipalities that PB led to increased spending on health and sanitation, which in turn led to significant reductions in infant and child mortality. So there is some indication of short route

efforts leading to enhanced well-being. But worldwide as yet little evidence exists of positive downstream PB impact on well-being (Speer, 2012).

As for India's experience with PB in Kerala, an extensive survey (Heller et al., 2007, pp. 630 ff.) conducted in 1999–2000 including politicians, government officials and CSO representatives as well as citizens found that large majorities of all groups thought public service delivery had improved across all sectors (health care, education, water and sanitation, housing and assistance to the poor, women's employment and so on) and had improved as a result of the new system. But these indices measure outputs, not outcomes.

Unfortunately, there is no way to undertake a randomized control trial study in Kerala, or social audit in Andhra, for that matter, since both are 'big bang' programmes encompassing an entire state with no opportunity to monitor an unincluded 'control group'. But perhaps some study could be devised comparing these two programmes with experience in Tamil Nadu state, which borders both Kerala and Andhra, and has a reputation for reasonably effective local governance. In the meantime, these two programmes have shown that short route initiatives can be scaled up to state level, which is no mean feat given the large populations of Kerala (33 million in 2011) and Andhra Pradesh (85 million in 2011 before partition).

Conclusion

In the end, the real test for short route social accountability mechanisms will be to ascertain whether the programmes that appear most effective (RTI, social audit, PB, RWA) can—either by themselves or in combination with other mechanisms (e.g., RTI + social audit, as in AP's MGNREGA)—really enhance human development for the poor and marginalized, or whether India will have to rely on the long route with its periodic elections and PIL as its principal engines to enhance citizen well-being. Hopefully future studies along the lines pursued by Gonçalves (2014) in Brazil will reveal some answers on this front.

Meanwhile, though, what can be done to increase the use of short route mechanisms? A number of possibilities emerge, all of which will require political will at the apex of state political structures and municipalities:

> Political leaders can encourage state agency directors to set up **24/7 phone-in systems**, and **citizen review boards**. They can also use repeated **CRC surveys** to press state agencies to provide better services.

> **RTI laws** can be made truly operational at all levels of government.

> The **social audit system** that legally should be operating for MGNREGA in all states could actually be implemented in them.

> More states could institute **PB systems**.

> The **RWA idea** could be spread beyond the few large cities now covered to smaller ones.

Notes

1. Refer Malena and McNeil (2010, p. 6). This follows an earlier formulation by Malena et al. (2004, p. 3).
2. For example, in addition to Malena and McNeil (2010), refer Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2014), Devarajan, Khemani and Walton (2014), Gaventa and McGee (2013) and Blair (2011).
3. For a succinct summation of new public management, refer Batley (1999), and for a more recent analysis critiquing both supply and demand-side approaches, refer Fox (2015).
4. Such clientelistic tendencies are exacerbated by the increasing prevalence of elected officeholders at all levels in India facing serious criminal charges (Vaishnav, 2017).
5. In addition to WDR 2004, refer also Joshi (2007).
6. Participatory budgeting in Brazil has been implemented at the state level though successive tiers of indirectly elected representatives, but this kind of set-up resembles representative democratic government more than a short route of accountability.
7. There are other 'routes' to accountability aside from the three I focus on in this article, for example, 'horizontal accountability' through legislative oversight, ombudsman arrangements, the media and, ultimately, insurrection and revolution. For an exploration of the spectrum of accountability mechanisms, refer Blair (2011). For an account of why so many approaches at exacting accountability from the state have proven unsuccessful, refer Shah (2008). Among these many approaches, though, it is civil society activism that most closely resembles the long and short routes, and along with them offers the most scope for participation of ordinary citizens in exercising accountability against the state.
8. Distinctions between the three paths shown in Figure 2 are clear enough conceptually, but somewhat murky in practice, with significant overlap among types in some cases. But the actual mechanisms discussed in this article are reasonably discreet from one another.
9. MKSS's work and what emerged from it are closely analysed in Jenkins and Goetz (1999) and Goetz and Jenkins (2007); refer also Aiyar and Mehta (2015) and Baviskar (2010).
10. Sarangi (2012) provides a good account of the RTI's mandates.
11. Quotations cited by Roberts (2010, p. 926).
12. Delhi had instituted a RTI law in advance of the 2005 national act.
13. Refer Pande (2007), from which this example is drawn. For another good case study, refer Peksakhin and Pinto (2010). Baviskar's (2010) analysis is also insightful.
14. Refer Baviskar (2010, pp. 144–145) for more on this.
15. Pande (2015) explores this problem in some detail.
16. The process is explained in at length in GOI (2013).
17. Except where noted, the account in this paragraph is based on Aiyar and Samji (2009), Aiyar (2013) and Aiyar and Mehta (2015).
18. Refer Government of Andhra Pradesh [GOA] (2015) and Government of Telangana [GOT] (2015). In 2014, Andhra Pradesh was divided into two states, one carrying on the name and the other designated as Telangana. After the split, each state reported online separately.
19. The two-track survey can be seen as providing a quasi-'treatment group' (the slum households) and a 'control group' (the middle-income families). To the extent that the slum respondents lagged behind the middle-income group, the initiative could be said to have an anti-poor bias, which in this case was negligible.
20. In a number of cases, these CRC exercises are titled as 'social audits', although they do not include the public meeting step, and they have not become institutionalized by law like the social audits discussed in this article.

21. The term can be and is used to describe a wide range of mechanisms, some of which exercise only minimal accountability from the state (refer Blair, 2013), but here the focus will be only on its strongest forms.
22. As befits an institution that has proliferated so widely, a huge literature has developed, much of it scrutinizing the original experiment in depth. Refer, for example, Baiocchi (2005).
23. Data in this and the next paragraph are taken from Heller et al. (2007) and George (2014). For an exhaustive examination of Kerala's experience in the programme's early days, refer Thomas Isaac and Franke (2002). On similarities between PB in Brazil and Kerala, refer Heller (2012).
24. Goswami and Tandon (2013) offer a good *tour d'horizon* of current civil society activity in India.
25. A court acts in effect as policymaker when it rules in favour of a public interest lawsuit.
26. Similar exercises have been undertaken by Malena and McNeil (2010) for several African nations, and by Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2014) for African and Asian countries, though the focus was more on inter-country comparison than on intra-country analysis.

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