

# ESCOR (DFID) FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

## GRASSROOTS ANTI-CORRUPTION INITIATIVES AND THE RIGHT-TO-INFORMATION MOVEMENT IN INDIA (R7220)

Anne Marie Goetz  
Institute of Development Studies  
University of Sussex  
[a.m.goetz@ids.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.goetz@ids.ac.uk)

Rob Jenkins  
Birkbeck College  
University of London  
[r.jenkins@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:r.jenkins@bbk.ac.uk)

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### **Summary**

This study documented selected efforts by citizens in India to fight the kind of corruption which most directly afflicts the poor: namely, the appropriation or diversion of anti-poverty resources by officials, or lax enforcement of labour and environmental regulations. Particular attention was paid to the way a right to information could support citizen's efforts to obtain better accountability. Anti-corruption initiatives in five Indian states were observed over three years to enable the researchers to draw conclusions about the conditions for their success, and about the practical innovations that make public institutions of policy oversight more directly accountable to the poor. The research findings have attracted considerable interest from international development policy-makers, and from development activists in India, because the research identifies effective ways in which citizens can improve public accountability. A considerable number of published outputs in local journals and magazines, as well as in academic journals, have ensured the dissemination of the research findings in India and internationally.

### **I. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The contemporary good governance policy agenda is emphatic about the importance of civil society's role in scrutinising government actions in the interests of improved accountability. However, developing and supporting constituencies to perform this 'watchdog' function has proven a challenge, particularly amongst the socially excluded groups worst afflicted by corruption in public spending on social and anti-poverty services. Reasons for this include:

- The difficulty of mobilising people to struggle for a seemingly abstract right such as the right to information; though critical for transparency and accountability, it seems remote from the practical survival concerns of the poor;
- The ethical challenge of expecting those who have the most to lose to take the biggest risks in challenging the privileges of the elites upon whose patronage they may depend for survival;
- The practical and technical challenge of identifying corruption in official accounts, in the actual execution of public works, or in service delivery;
- The political challenge of making connections across different social classes and groups (especially between the poor and the middle classes) to help broaden and sustain anti-corruption struggles.

Some contemporary anti-corruption initiatives in India have tackled these challenges through innovations which can be classified as:

*Conceptual:* new ways of interpreting a civil right such as the right to information as a crucial *enabling* right – one which assists in the realisation of others.

*Organisational:* approaches to mobilising the poor and supporting them when they challenge elites;

*Technical:* new methods for extracting (or sometimes producing) and analysing information about government spending in order to expose malpractice, and also to make technically difficult information accessible to illiterate people;

*Political:* generating support from social elites for struggles against the ‘everyday’ forms of corruption which afflict the poor, rather than for the more spectacular high-level scandals which normally animate middle-class anti-corruption struggles.

**The objectives of this study** were to document and analyse a selection of citizens’ anti-corruption initiatives in India in order to flesh out the details of these conceptual, organisational, technical, and political innovations, and to assess the impact of grassroots anti-corruption struggles on local and state-level governance. In the process, the research set out to deepen understanding of the contribution of a right to information to accountability relationships, and to determine, on the basis of empirical observation, the conditions for a successful engagement of citizens in public oversight functions.

## **II. METHODS**

Core to the methodology was the development of case studies of citizens’ right-to-information and/or anti-corruption initiatives in five states. The tactics and experience of one particularly influential anti-corruption group, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan, was important to setting up the key concerns of the study because of its successful methods of exposing local corruption, and its effectiveness in mobilising poor people to struggle for a state-level and national right to information. Case studies were selected in Rajasthan, Kerala, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Mumbai, and Western Maharashtra. These were identified after detailed ‘inventories’ had been conducted of civil society efforts to promote government accountability in these and other states. Regular repeat interviews with key informants and observation of the activities of the association or initiative in question resulted in the production of case studies on their objectives, tactics, membership, allies and opponents, organisational form, successes and failures.

This was done for at least two (sometimes more) anti-corruption initiatives in each study location. India-based researchers in each of these locations produced the regular reports on these anti-corruption initiatives, as well as analyses of political developments at the state and local levels. They also regularly conducted interviews with local and state-level politicians, government officials, and social activists.

The principal researchers participated in this case study work on their five periods of field research in India. They also traced, over the three years of the project, the fate of national and state-level right-to-information legislation, and changes to local government (Panchayati Raj) regulations in various states in relation to the right to information and accountability provisions. This involved analysis of legal and official documents. Documentary analysis was also required to understand how technical information on local government spending, public works and service delivery patterns, was analysed by anti-corruption groups, and 'deciphered' into accessible form for their memberships.

To evaluate the research process, findings, and analysis, two methods were used: peer review of written outputs of the research, and workshops. Most important was the reactions of key right-to-information activists to the written outputs of the research. Written outputs were also circulated to the project's advisors for comment, and to all of the Indian research partners for review, correction, and critique. Finally, review by anonymous readers in the academic journals in which work has been published, reactions of policy-makers to the findings, and review of the book proposal, have provided a means of evaluating the credibility and relevance of the findings. Two workshops held in Goa enabled the researchers to share results and to test the validity of the findings in front of an audience of anti-corruption and right-to-information activists, as well as academics, journalists, and lawyers. Similarly, presentations at international conferences provided occasion for independent scholarly reactions to the research, while presentations to Indian policy-makers at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (Mussoorie) provided the opportunity to obtain feedback from officials.

### **III FINDINGS**

#### ***Impact of anti-corruption struggles***

In the judgement of activists and observers, only one of the grassroots anti-corruption groups studied had succeeded in significantly undermining the culture of corruption at the local level. This was the MKSS, whose vigilance in monitoring local development spending in its small geographical area has curbed the impunity of local politicians and bureaucrats. However, the MKSS has been persistently confounded by an inability to trigger mandatory legal investigation or prosecution of the offenders it identifies. Up to late 2000, neither the identification of accounting discrepancies, nor even admissions of guilt from local officials at the MKSS's unofficial public hearings, propelled the police into initiating follow-up action. Nor have other arms of the state's official oversight agencies been cooperative. For instance, the Rajasthan local government ministry, responsible for monitoring the performance of local government, is unresponsive when the MKSS brings *prima facie* evidence of misconduct of local officials.

Resistance on the part of complaisant or collusive bureaucracies to civil society's efforts to improve public accountability has highlighted the near-impossibility of fundamentally controlling corruption through civil society actions alone. Ideally, citizens' accountability initiatives need to seek changes within state institutions to be sustainable and effective in changing incentives and practices which produce corruption. This can occur through civil society partnership with the state. This logic underwrites not just the MKSS's campaign for a state-level right to information law (passed in spring 2000), but also its (successful) campaign for amendments to the state's local government law to create mandatory legal procedures for the investigation of corruption and to officially institutionalise the public-hearing audit method at the village assembly level. Village assemblies are now legally empowered and required to conduct collective audits of the development activities initiated by their local elected councillors and by local bureaucrats. Higher-level officials such as the Sub-Divisional Officer are now legally required to register and investigate any cases of corruption identified by village assemblies, and to report their findings back to the village assemblies.

### ***Implications for the promotion of public accountability***

The most significant policy-relevant conclusion of this research is that effective measures to control corruption can be designed to accommodate the direct participation of citizens. This moves considerations about anti-corruption measures beyond technocratic solutions (better reporting relationships within the bureaucracy), or market-based solutions which remove discretionary power from officials (transferring power from the state to market agents). It moves considerations about enhancing the 'watchdog' role of civil society beyond measures to enhance state-civil society 'dialogue' or to create 'consultative forums' – measures which do not assign civil society observers any practical rights to official information, to lodge complaints, receive a proper hearing, or demand that sanctions be imposed for illegal or mis-judged actions by public officials.

*This research finds that methods such as citizen audits of local budgets, or citizen monitoring of service delivery patterns, are modelling new institutional forms for official accountability functions.* These engage citizens directly in previously closed official functions in ways that are constructive for channelling citizen needs to policy-makers, and for controlling official corruption. By bringing citizens into public oversight functions, conventional accountability relationships are altered, blurring the lines between the 'vertical' relationship between citizens and elected politicians, and the 'horizontal' relationship between different state agencies and politicians.

Although more research is needed to assess the effectiveness of these 'hybrid' new accountability measures, the research suggests that key *conditions for institutionalising citizen-state accountability partnerships include:*

- legal standing or formal recognition for non-governmental observers within policy-making arenas or the institutions of public sector oversight;
- a continuous presence for these observers throughout the process of the agency's work;
- structured access to the flow of official documentary information;
- the right of observers to issue dissenting report directly to legislative bodies, and

the right of service users to demand a formal investigation and/or seek legal redress for poor or non-delivery of services.

### **Other main policy-relevant findings**

#### **Conceptual**

*A right to information is a key element in enabling citizens to realise not just basic civil and political rights, but a range of human rights.* It is by making the connection between a right to information, the quality of governance, and basic survival or livelihood concerns, that grassroots anti-corruption struggles have succeeded in attracting the membership and commitment of poor people. However, in some ways, the *struggle* for this right is more effective in generating improved accountability than the attainment of the right. Where it has been extended *pro forma*, not in response to a citizens' demand, as in the local government regulations in Kerala, it has seen remarkably little use, partly because of the absence of a mobilised demand for it.

#### **Organisational**

The *organisational factors* explaining the successes of some grassroots anti-corruption initiatives also explain the relatively low civil society take-up of direct and confrontational means of exposing local corruption (through, for instance, the 'public hearings' on local spending). Significant constraints on efforts to 'scale-up' grassroots anti-corruption initiatives stem from the following problems:

- *A massive prior investment in mobilisation and mutual support* is needed to generate the social capital necessary to protect poor people who jeopardise their social standing and security by challenging local elites. Few development NGOs or CSOs have made this social investment, or are able to offer institutional survival alternatives to their members should they take this risk. The MKSS has made a notable investment in organisational solidarity by focussing primarily on the corruption problems facing the poor in their area (non-payment of wages on employment-generation schemes, and non-delivery of subsidised food), keeping its membership small (about 1000 people), and restricting its activities to a small geographical area.
- *Social homogeneity works as a protective device for both accusers and accused in local exposures of corruption.* There is a remarkable degree of homogeneity in the caste composition of the MKSS's members *and* the local government officials and politicians it accuses of corruption. This may account for the relative rarity of serious 'backlash' attacks on the group by aggrieved local elites. When the accusers and the accused are from the same caste, the matter is to some degree kept 'in the family', in spite of being exposed publicly.

#### **Technical**

The MKSS and other citizens' accountability initiatives have *pioneered innovations in making official information more accessible to poor people.* For instance, public hearings in which accounts of local spending are read out to villagers for their verification can compensate for poor people's lack of literacy in identifying and

publicising gaps in local government accounts. In Mumbai, a slum dweller's association which investigates 'leakages' of commodities from the Public Distribution System onto the black market has compensated for the illiteracy and limited surveillance capacity of its mainly female membership by demanding that samples of commodities are displayed in tamper-proof plastic containers. This enables poor women to detect any adulteration. These and many other experiments in enabling citizens to decipher and analyse information about government spending and service equality demonstrate that practical changes to the way information is presented can make previously opaque official processes accessible to ordinary citizens, and even to socially marginalised groups.

### **Political**

*Elite connections facilitate successful networking and influence beyond the local level.* An important factor explaining the success of the MKSS in catalysing a national right to information movement, and in preventing excessive backlash attacks on its poorer members, are the elite connections of its leaders. The MKSS's small core leadership has been able to use its connections to liberal national and state-level politicians and bureaucrats, national journalists, constitutional lawyers, judges, celebrities, and leaders of development NGOs and social movements to raise national awareness about its activities and concerns. Few other grassroots anti-corruption initiatives benefit from this kind of dedicated elite leadership.

*Civil society collusion in corrupt practices limits alliances and networking on an anti-corruption platform.* The limited take-up by organisations of the poor or mobilised constituencies such as workers of the right-to-information struggle or of anti-corruption efforts owes to the dependency of these groups on the state, or their implication in corrupt practices. Many civil society groups are unwilling to compromise their relationships with the state by protesting corrupt practices because they may rely upon the state for funding, or may even owe their existence or power to the state (as is the case with officially recognised trades unions). Alternatively, groups of socially excluded people may depend for their livelihoods on living on the margins of the law, which is often made possible with the collusion of corrupt officials (who can turn a blind eye, for a price, to illegal squatting in slums or on forest lands). Civil society groups challenging official corruption must themselves have an unimpeachable record in their own financial management and treatment of clients or members. This is often not the case, as the MKSS discovered in its attempts to encourage development NGOs in India to hold public audits of their finances. The MKSS demonstrates its own probity through transparency in its own accounts, and an extremely austere life-style on the part of its leadership.

## **IV DISSEMINATION**

**Published outputs:** Three academic articles in scholarly journals, one book chapter in an edited book, newspaper, magazine, and newsletter articles in India and internationally, and a book and newspaper articles in Marathi. (Please see Annex 1 for full references for published material and other outputs).

**Unpublished outputs:** Manuscript in progress for a co-authored book (book proposal [attached, Annex II] is currently under review by Cambridge University Press). Extensive case study materials on accountability initiatives in five Indian locations; inventories of civil society accountability activism in seven states (adding Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka to the others), several conference and workshop presentations.

**Impact on current debates on accountability.** The findings of this research have raised interest among donors, NGO practitioners, and academics in citizens' efforts to improve government accountability in India. The analytical work produced through this project has influenced on-going development policy debates on:

- New types of accountability or anti-corruption institutions which engage citizens in holding the state directly to account;
- Methods for citizen audits of local spending, and citizen monitoring of service delivery;
- Rights-based approaches in development;
- Gender and accountability in local government.

Findings from this research have been cited in a range of discussion papers produced by international development NGOs such as Transparency International, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, and Save the Children, as well as in the policy papers of multilateral agencies, for instance:

- UNESCO, Contribution to Poverty Eradication: Development, Poverty and Exclusion, Paper for Executive Board (Doc 159 EX/INF.6 Paris 27 April 2000)
- UNIFEM, 2000, Biennial Report: Status of the World's Women;
- World Bank, 2001, Engendering Development;
- UNDP, 2000, Budgets as If People Mattered.

The most significant influence this work has had on policy debates has been through the *participation of the principal researchers in on-going DfID and UNDP thinking on improving government accountability to the poor*.

- The principal researchers conducted a commissioned study for DfID in 2000 – 2001 on 'Citizen Voice and Client Focus in Service Delivery' (now published as IDS Working Paper No. 138). This identifies the conditions under which citizens are successful in promoting more responsive public service delivery.
- The principal researchers contributed to the foundational conceptual work for the UNDP's Human Development Report 2002, which is on the subject of 'Voice and Accountability'. They drafted the main conceptual chapter for the Report in which they refined understandings of the voice-accountability relationship and identified emergent accountability practices around the world which engage citizens more directly in public oversight functions.

The principal researchers have been invited to present findings of this work at a number of international *donor conferences on corruption and accountability*, including:

- the New York UNDP/UNIFEM conference on Pro-Poor, Gender- and Environment- Sensitive Budget Analysis in June 1999;

- the Washington World Bank Annual Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Conference, July 1999;
- the Oslo Transparency International seminar on Anti-Corruption Strategies (hosted by NORAD) October 1999.

Findings were also presented to Indian policy-makers at

- the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (Mussoorie, India), Training Programme, 9 April 1999

The research findings have also been used as *background material for international meetings on good governance* such as the World Bank West Africa summit on Good Governance in Ghana in mid-1999, and the DFID Asia Heads of Mission Meeting, Delhi (Summer 1999).

Findings from this work have been *published in the Indian press*, both by the principal and India-based researchers (for instance in Business India, and Marathi-language publications). Findings have also been cited by independent journalists in the Indian press, for instance: “Garrotting the Girangaon”, Business Standard (India) , 22 August 2000. The principal researchers have also published in activist media read by members of accountability initiatives in India (Transparency: The Bulletin of the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information). The articles and book (Nilu Damle, 2000, Right to Information: A Practical Guide) published in Marathi have greatly helped to promote the dissemination of the findings in India.

## **V ANNEXES**

- I. List of Outputs
- II. Book proposal: ‘Accountability from Below: People’s Movements Against Corruption in India’
- III. Jenkins, R.S. and A.M. Goetz, 1999, ‘Accounts and Accountability: Theoretical Implications of the Right-to-Information Movement in India’, Third World Quarterly, Vol 20, no. 3, pp. 603-22.
- IV. Jenkins, R.S., and A.M. Goetz, 2000, Constraints on Civil-Society’s Capacity to Curb Corruption: Lessons from the Indian Experience, IDS Bulletin, Vol 29, No. 4, October.
- V. Goetz, A.M., and R.S. Jenkins, 2001, ‘Hybrid Forms of Accountability: Citizen Engagement in Institutions of Public-Sector Oversight in India’, in Public Management Review, July.



## ANNEX I

### ESCOR (DFID) FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

#### GRASSROOTS ANTI-CORRUPTION INITIATIVES AND THE RIGHT-TO- INFORMATION MOVEMENT IN INDIA (R7220)

### OUTPUTS

- a) **Inventories:** Unpublished inventories of grassroots initiatives for public accountability have been produced for Rajasthan, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Western Maharashtra, and Mumbai.
- b) **Case Studies:** Detailed case studies (unpublished), based on continuous observation of selected examples of grassroots initiatives for public accountability, and including analysis of accountability measures in the context of decentralisation, have been compiled by the India-based researchers for Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Mumbai, Western Maharashtra.
- c) **Selected findings published in Marathi:** A book on the right to information in Maharashtra has been published by the research partner studying citizen initiatives for state accountability in Western Maharashtra: Nilu Damle, Right to Information: A Practical Guide (2000). Damle has also published a number of articles on this subject in the Marathi press.
- d) **Workshops and Conference presentations:**
  - Facilitated workshop in Goa on the Right to Information in April 1999 (attended by activists from the MKSS, the National Centre for Advocacy Studies, and leading Right to Information activists from Goa), in which a presentation of interim findings from this research was made.
  - Presented findings at Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (Mussoorie, India), Training Programme, 9 April 1999.
  - Workshop of all the project researchers in Goa in April 2000, to review findings, and refine the conceptual framework and analytical concerns. Leading right-to-information activists from Goa participated and commented upon the findings and analysis.
  - Presentation by principal researchers at International Political Science Association biennial conference in Quebec City, August 2000.

Seminars at the Institute of Development Studies (Sussex) by key activists involved in the Rajasthan right-to-information struggle:

- the President of the Rajasthan People's Union of Civil Liberties, Advocate Prem Krishnan Sharma, September 1999;

- the leaders of the MKSS, Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey, September 2000;
- the head of Action Aid India, and drafter of right-to-information legislation for Rajasthan, Harsh Mander, May 2000 and May 2001.

and by one of the local research partners (for Mumbai): Mayank Bhatt, journalist, on the subject of slum dwellers' efforts to combat corruption in the Public Distribution System in Mumbai, May 2001.

### **e) Articles in Newspapers/Magazines**

Jenkins, Rob, 2000 , 'A Tax of the Worst Kind', WorldLink, January/February.

Two articles in Transparency: The Bulletin of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information: "The Right to Information Act: One Year On" (February 1999), "People's Planning to People's Monitoring? Right to Information and Panchayati Raj in Kerala" (April 1999)

Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins, "Politics of Information", *Business India*, My 4-17, 1999, pp. 117-18

Reprint of extracts of IDS Bulletin (2000) article (see below), in *Business India*, December 1999.

Goetz, A.M., and R.S. Jenkins, 2001, 'Gender-Sensitive Local Auditing – Initiatives from India to Build Accountability to Women', Development Outreach, World Bank, Summer.

### **f) Academic articles**

Jenkins, R.S. and A.M. Goetz, 1999, 'Accounts and Accountability: Theoretical Implications of the Right-to-Information Movement in India', Third World Quarterly, Vol 20, no. 3, pp. 603-22 (attached, Annex III).

Jenkins, R.S., and A.M. Goetz, 2000, Constraints on Civil-Society's Capacity to Curb Corruption: Lessons from the Indian Experience, IDS Bulletin, Vol 29, No. 4, October (attached, Annex IV).

Goetz, A.M., and R.S. Jenkins, 2001, 'Hybrid Forms of Accountability: Citizen Engagement in Institutions of Public-Sector Oversight in India', in Public Management Review, July (attached, Annex V).

### **g) Book Projects**

The principal researchers are drafting a book about this research. The proposal for a book entitled Accountability from Below: People's Movements Against Corruption in India is attached (Annex II). It is currently being reviewed by external referees for Cambridge University Press. A draft will be completed by mid-2002.

*Chapters in books/Reports:*

“Reconceptualising Transparency: Grassroots Movements for Accountability to the Poor”, in United National Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), Cities In A Globalizing World: Global Report On Human Settlements 2001, pp 220-222.

Goetz, A.M., and R.S. Jenkins, ‘Accountability to Women in Development Spending: the Local Level’, in Diane Elson and Nilufar Catagy (eds), (forthcoming), Gender-Poverty- And Environmentally- Sensitive Budgeting, UNDP, New York..

ANNEX II  
ESCOR FINAL REPORT  
Book Proposal

**Accountability from Below:**  
**People's Movements Against Corruption in India**

**Rob Jenkins**  
Birkbeck College, University of London

*and*

**Anne Marie Goetz**  
Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

### **Summary**

This book is about how citizens attempt to combat corruption, defined generically as the abuse of public power for private gain. The analysis is based on field research in six case-study locations in India: Rajasthan, Kerala, western Maharashtra, Goa, Tamil Nadu and Mumbai. The book argues that the most effective citizen-initiated movements against corruption have not been from among privileged social groups, but rather from those of lower social and economic standing. The most successful among the latter have catalysed a rethinking (in India and beyond) of the relationship between legal rights and government accountability. The book thus calls into question widely accepted conceptual frameworks in the theoretical literature on how democratic states can be more developmentally effective, such as the distinction between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' mechanisms of accountability, or the classification of rights into first, second and third 'generations'. Though anti-corruption campaigners have achieved several striking victories – getting stolen funds returned to public coffers and back wages paid to workers – even fairly broad-based movements have found it difficult to build sustained pressure for change. However, this failure has less to do with the overweening power of the post-colonial state than it does with the compromised, and in many instances corrupted, nature of civil society itself.

### **Gaps in the Comparative and Theoretical Literature**

There is no shortage of studies on corruption's causes and consequences. Economists have identified the systemic policy failures that can give rise to corruption. Quantitative studies have analysed the adverse impact of 'rent-seeking' on public expenditure, economic productivity and even income distribution. Qualitative research by anthropologists into the cultural 'meaning' of

corruption is also a growing field. Sociologists and political scientists have measured perceptions of corruption, as have non-governmental organisations such as Transparency International, which produces a much-publicised annual league table comparing the relative propensity of the world's governments to engage in bribe-taking.

The literature on how corruption can be curbed, or its effects mitigated, is slightly less voluminous, but is overwhelmingly concerned with the actions and inactions of governments and international agencies. For the most part prescriptive and evaluative, studies on the best means for combating corruption focus mainly on two areas of government action: (1) creating and reforming institutions of public oversight, such as anti-corruption commissions, ombudsmen, and parliamentary public accounts committees; and (2) framing economic policies capable of reducing the incentives for illicit rent-seeking among state officials. These are both important issues. But their predominance within debates on corruption leaves a gaping hole in the existing literature. What is missing is documentation and analysis of the role of ordinary people, and the associations into which they organise themselves, in the fight against corruption.

This gap is all the more glaring given the emphasis in contemporary development thinking on fostering democratic participation and empowering civil society. Using case-study analysis to support arguments with broad theoretical relevance, this book explains why people sometimes organise themselves to combat corruption, and why most of the time they do not; why they occasionally succeed in their efforts, and why they mainly do not. The answers to these questions are by no means obvious, and certainly not uniform across regions, economic sectors or social groups. Indeed, the pattern of activity documented in this study contradicts much of the received wisdom that has informed the institutional and policy reforms outlined above.

## Gaps in the Literature on India

India has been among the countries where corruption has been most intensely studied. This is not surprising. India has both the intellectual resources and the raw empirical material to make it a leader in this burgeoning academic industry. In the late 1990s, historians and political scientists began to complement the work of quantitatively inclined economists by tracing the evolution of corruption in India's public life, most notably in *Foul Play: Chronicles of Corruption 1947-97*<sup>1</sup>, edited by two of India's most highly regarded public intellectuals, Shiv Visvanathan and Harsh Sethi. Journalists were, unsurprisingly, reluctant to be left behind. In addition to exposés on the many 'scams' that have dominated India's news headlines, they have also pursued the issue of corruption in broader form, as in Chandan Mitra's *The Corrupt Society*<sup>2</sup>. Government officials have entered the field of corruption studies in a big way as well. S.S. Gill, a retired high-level civil servant, examined what he called *The Pathology of Corruption*<sup>3</sup>, and a book by the former head of India's Central Bureau of Investigation, N.K. Singh, emphasised the link between politics, organised crime and corrupt practices<sup>4</sup>. Samuel Paul, a former World Bank advisor, and S. Guhan, a one-time bureaucrat, outlined their *Agenda for Action*<sup>5</sup> to fight corruption, in an edited volume with contributions by four other government officials.

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<sup>1</sup> Banyan Books, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Viking, 1998

<sup>3</sup> HarperCollins, 1998

<sup>4</sup> *The Politics of Crime and Corruption* (HarperCollins, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Vision Books, 1997

These and earlier works have uncovered the mechanics of corruption, allowing readers to grasp the basics of how money changes hands. But the question of what kind of people join in collective action to fight corruption – and why and how they do so – has hardly figured in academic debates at all, despite the current obsession with civil society’s role in promoting accountable governance. To remedy this shortcoming, the interpretation of the case material – based on over three years of in-depth field work and a review of several intersecting bodies of literature – takes issue with the presumed relationships among five of the most prevalent concepts in today’s development field: transparency, accountability, participation, civil society, and rights.

### ***Chapter One – Introduction and Overview***

This introductory chapter will provide an overview of the book’s main and subsidiary arguments, and will introduce, in non-technical terms, the basic theoretical concepts with which the subsequent analysis will engage. It will also provide capsule profiles of the main case study organisations and the regions in which they are situated (500 words each), and furnish the rationale for grouping them analytically into three pairs. Each of the pairs will form the subject of its own empirical chapter: Rajasthan and Kerala (Chapter 3), Goa and Tamil Nadu (Chapter 4) and western Maharashtra and Mumbai (Chapter 5).

### ***Chapter Two – Contested Theories of Democratic Accountability***

This chapter situates the book’s empirical material within current debates on democratic accountability. The aim is to identify critical shortcomings in the existing literature, and to indicate how the case-study evidence can promote fresh thinking on the role of civil society in holding the state to account. It argues that the Indian experience has led to the emergence of new types of accountability institutions that bridge the state/civil society divide.

The institutional framework for liberal representative democracy assigns ordinary citizens a very limited role in fighting corruption and demanding better performance from the state’s accountability institutions. Their job is to vote for fresh governments if unhappy with incumbents, or to agitate and lobby for more probity in the behaviour of officials. At best they can demand that official agencies investigate allegations of corruption, but they have few opportunities to participate in these and to prevent official systems from obscuring the extent and impact of malpractice. Some of the citizens’ initiatives which form the empirical basis for this book, however, demonstrate a radical new approach to civil society engagement with the state on issues of accountability. This has forced a reassessment of assumptions about democratic accountability. Some of these initiatives involve citizens rejecting the ‘external’ lobbying role to which democratic convention assigns them. Instead they insist on challenging the government’s ‘internal’ accountability functions. This is what is involved, for example, in efforts to hold ‘people’s audits’ of village development spending (see Chapter 3).

Any such approach to ‘hybrid’ state/civil society accountability institutions requires new mechanisms for ensuring substantive transparency in official circles, and a new perspective on citizens’ rights to engage with formerly closed government functions. Thus we pay particular attention to the notion of ‘the right to information’, which has been heavily emphasised by Indian anti-corruption movements but is notably absent from so-called rights-based approaches to development. The activists struggling for the realisation of this right have redefined its

meaning, in the process relocating it within conventional systems of classifying rights. This chapter also considers issues of class and social power in civil society efforts to engage with state accountability institutions, and asks how far anti-corruption struggles, and struggles for liberal rights like a right to information, can be of immediate interest in the survival struggles of the poor.

### **Chapter Three – Rajasthan and Kerala: Adapting the Global Discourse of Rights to Struggles for Local Government Transparency**

This chapter compares two very different struggles for accountability: one in Rajasthan, among India's poorest and most socially 'backward' states; the other in Kerala, known worldwide for its achievements in promoting human development. What they have in common is their focus on accountability in local government. In Rajasthan, a social movement called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana (MKSS), or 'Workers' and Farmers' Power Association', has organised villagers to demand information about local spending patterns in order to track the many malpractices that have denied development resources to the poor, particularly to labourers on government public works programmes. The MKSS exposes discrepancies between official expenditure records (which are hard to obtain given the absence of a right to information) and the results of its own painstaking research to document under- or non-payment of wages to labourers, over-billing by suppliers, and false invoicing. It then holds public hearings in which official accounts are read aloud to villagers and contrasted with the MKSS's findings and the testimonials of villagers. Through this direct form of "people's audit" the MKSS is able to establish *prima facie* cases of corruption. The MKSS's work has also triggered a national movement for a constitutional amendment to reform India's antiquated official secrecy laws.

Many of the provisions for which the MKSS has been struggling in Rajasthan – transparency in local government accounts and citizen control of planning and management of local development works – have been available to Kerala's citizens since the passage in the mid 1990s of radical participatory provisions for local government. Yet there has been astonishingly little take-up of any of these provisions – certainly not by the poor or women, who tend to suffer disproportionately from the pilfering of funds from anti-poverty programmes intended for them. This is not what would be expected given the high levels of political mobilisation, literacy and human development in Kerala, even among the poor, women, and certain lower-caste and tribal groups. In this chapter we argue that this can hardly be read as an indication of problem-free, egalitarian and uncorrupted local government. On the contrary, we suggest that the limited uptake of Kerala's transparency provisions, compared with the eagerness with which they are struggled for (and, in part, obtained) in Rajasthan, reveals the importance of civil society mobilisation in supporting citizens' efforts to hold officials accountable. To substantiate our argument, we follow several cases of tribal and women's groups in Kerala who were rebuffed and harassed when they requested official accounts of how funds earmarked for them were actually spent. Finally, we document the role of intense partisan competition in 'crowding out', in a sense, the emergence of civil society groups capable of pressing for the investigation of alleged corrupt practices.

### **Chapter Four – Goa and Tamil Nadu: The Politics of Middle-Class Protest**

Tackling the same concerns for government transparency, but from a very different perspective, are contemporary anti-corruption efforts in Goa and Tamil Nadu, the first two states to pass Right to Information legislation. In neither case was legislation prompted by a social

movement. This chapter argues that this fact goes a long way in explaining the reason why efforts to make use of the legislation's provisions to tackle official corruption (and improve the quality of government decision-making) have been confined to the middle class. These initiatives tend to be backed by fairly small civil society groups, sometimes even one-person crusades. This chapter also, however, examines the way in which even middle-class groups, under certain conditions (such as prevail in Goa, but not Tamil Nadu), can catalyse action on the part of a more socially inclusive coalition of interests. Thus, we take issue with the increasingly widespread belief that rights granted by the state without having been the focus of a popular struggle are of no use to the poor.

In Goa, we concentrate upon two groups: the All-Goa Citizens' Committee for Social Justice and Action, an organisation of concerned, mainly urban, citizens, and the Gomantak Bahujan Samiti (GBS), a federation of "backward caste" associations. The first has used the state's right-to-information legislation to pursue issues of primarily middle-class concern, such as the perceived decline in standards in higher education. The latter – seeing that such techniques could be successful – has sought to gain access to official records that could expose the politically motivated process by which "backward" status was granted to a large and, according to the GBS, socially and economically privileged caste. In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, the numerous middle-class citizens' initiatives we have studied have not had a similar 'demonstration effect'; the state's many radical organisations representing the politically marginalized have failed to make use of the right to information or to build any kind of sustainable anti-corruption movement. Several key differences in social geography of the two states helps to explain this divergent outcome.

### **Chapter Five – Western Maharashtra and Mumbai: Livelihood Issues in Rural and Urban Contexts**

In this chapter we consider three very different anti-corruption struggles. In Mumbai, we look at the Rationing Kruti Samiti (Action Committee on Rationing), a coalition of 40 tiny community-based organisations struggling to safeguard slum-dwellers' access to cheap basic commodities through India's government-subsidised Public Distribution System (PDS). We also examine the Mumbai-based GKSS (Girni Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti), an independent trade union fighting for the employment rights of textile mill workers. In Western Maharashtra we look at the idiosyncratic personal crusade of Anna Hazare, a rural reformer whose efforts to pioneer village self-sufficiency in water management have brought him head-to-head with corruption in the government's agriculture, rural irrigation, and public works departments. The result has been the formation of a state-wide anti-corruption organisation.

The tactics of these organisations could not be more different. The very poor women members of the RKS work in small groups to physically monitor food deliveries to PDS outlets and to limit the 'leakage' of these commodities onto the open market where they are sold, illegally, at much higher prices. The GKSS's workers employ strikes and sit-ins to demand that the moribund textile mills they used to work for pay back wages. The GKSS's leadership also engages in complex legal battles to secure government information about the closure and redevelopment plans of mill owners, and to enforce a ruling giving one-third of the proceeds of mill-land sales to workers. Anna Hazare employs Gandhian discourses to support his vision of rural social harmony and his personal attacks on corrupt ministers. He secures their resignations (or, at minimum, official investigations into wrong-doing) by going on extended hunger-strikes. The strength of Anna Hazare's state-wide organisation is the technical skill in rural irrigation engineering gained from massive training camps held at his rural base, which enables his



workers to contrast official accounts of spending on specific rural public works with their own estimates of the likely real costs.

The chapter argues that, despite their differences, these three movements are united by two factors: a political context of Hindu communalism, and an economic context of liberalisation and globalisation. Hindu chauvinism has meant greater social exclusion for immigrants in Mumbai (directly affecting claimants on the PDS), as well as an intensified culture of violence and crime (affecting the mill workers). It has also shaped the way Anna Hazare and his allies, some of whom are associated with the Hindu religious right, have approached social mobilisation. Economic liberalisation has eroded the public resources available for redistributive programmes such as the PDS or the rural public works schemes that Anna Hazare's organisation investigates. Liberalisation has also undercut sympathies for workers' rights, making it harder for unions like the GKSS to find reliable political allies. Thus, the motivations and prospects of movements for accountability cannot be considered in isolation from the broader trends shaping the social, political economic contexts in which they will have to operate.

### ***Chapter Six – Conclusion: Accountability from Below***

In this chapter we deploy the analytical findings from the three previous chapters to explore themes relevant to contemporary debates on how accountable governance can be achieved. The discussion will have implications not just for current theories of how to combat corruption, but also for thinking on broader issues, such as the 'democratic deficit' in many states, the relationship between social and economic change and the formation of social movements, and the problems of class and gender biases in state institutions. The key thematic clusters are:

- *The conceptualisation of rights in anti-corruption social movements* – under what conditions can a first-generation liberal right like the right to information, and a civil liberties concern like transparency, galvanise poor people into an effective social movement?
- *The impact of corruption on the poor* – what forms of corruption are most damaging to the poor, and are these addressed in official anti-corruption measures? What is the impact of this type of corruption on the citizenship rights of the poor, and on their capabilities in the market and in politics?
- *The role of civil society in combating corruption*, and the implications of our findings for contemporary anti-corruption strategies – is the current focus on strengthening formal institutions of horizontal accountability (the judiciary, the auditor-general's office, the legislature, the administration's merit-based rules) missing the mark by confining citizens (and their associations) to conventional roles?
- *The role of socially excluded groups, particularly the poor and women*, in struggles for accountability – how can these groups be engaged in these struggles in such a way as to promote better accountability and more responsive official behaviour in relation to their specific developmental concerns?
- *Decentralisation and accountability* – under what conditions does localising government fracture civil society and its potential to hold decision-makers to account? And under what conditions does it focus attention on the use and abuse of local funds?

## **Proposed Length**

The book is likely to run to approximately 110,000 words, inclusive of footnotes but exclusive of bibliography.

## **Target Audience/ Market**

This book centres on the following themes: civil society anti-corruption struggles, democratic accountability, transparency in government decision-making, and the theory and practice of rights. Subsidiary themes are: the role of the poor and women in accountability struggles, the constraints on decentralisation, and the potential for citizens' movements to harness certain aspects of globalisation to temper its downside risks. These themes are of current interest to a wide range of academics, policy-makers, and activists, and indeed are likely to be of interest to a non-specialist audience interested in current affairs. Key specialised constituencies include:

### *Academics*

Political scientists, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, policy analysts, and specialists in women's studies and South Asian area studies will find this book of use for its conceptual and theoretical work on democratic accountability, corruption and poverty, Indian state and civil society politics, and class and gender politics in social movements. The empirical material will make this book of particular use for teaching in these areas. Students will find this book a useful entry point for understanding the way insights from empirical work can challenge and inform theory. Students at both undergraduate and graduate levels will be able to use this book in courses on the politics, economics and sociology of developing areas, as well as for course units on governance, gender and development, and public administration.

### *Policy-makers*

Officials in national-level accountability institutions, public sector reformers in developing countries, and aid agency officials (both bilateral and multilateral) working on good governance will find the empirical and theoretical material here of great interest in their current efforts to build public-sector accountability. The findings of this research have already attracted considerable interest from this audience. The authors' findings on the effectiveness of citizens' efforts to audit local spending have been cited in the World Bank's *World Development Report 2000-01*. Observations about the role of women in promoting local accountability have been cited in the World Bank's 2001 publication on gender-equity, poverty and growth, *Engendering Development*, as well as UNIFEM's *Biennial Report 2000: Progress of the World's Women*. The UN Commission for Human Settlements' *Global Report 2001* contains a brief article by one of the authors on the role of access to information in promoting social responsibility in international investment. The UK's Department for International Development (DfID) has cited our observations about liberal rights in people's anti-corruption movements in its 2000 strategy paper on human rights in development.

### *The NGO and Activist Community*

It is hoped that this book will be of interest to the large community of activist and advocacy organisations, north and south, seeking analytical tools for supporting innovative methods of tackling official corruption and improving state capacity. The book will be of interest to public-interest lawyers in their efforts to pursue legal action against the state, or in their campaigns for reforms to legislation that obstructs the transparency needed for litigation and investigation of

poor official decision-making and policy implementation. Media activists will also be interested in the empirical material here and the conceptual analysis on the right to information.

### **Support, Presentations and Publications to Date**

The research on which this book is based has been supported by the Ford Foundation, the UK Economic and Social Research Council, and the UK Department for International Development.

Presentations of interim findings have been made at seminars organised by the UK Dept for International Development, the United Nations Development Programme, Transparency International, and the International Political Science Association.

Selected aspects of the findings have been published as:

- “Hybrid Forms of Accountability: Citizen Engagement in Institutions of Public-Sector Oversight”, *Public Management Review* (forthcoming, July 2001)
- “Rights, Gender, and the Politics of and Corruption”, *World Bank Development Outreach*, April 2001
- “People’s Movements Against Corruption in India”, in Robert Williams (ed.), *The New Politics of Corruption* (London: Palgrave, 2001)
- “Accounts and Accountability: Theoretical Implications of the Right-to-Information Movement in India”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1999), pp. 603-22
- “Constraints on Civil Society’s Capacity to Curb Corruption: Lessons from the Indian Experience”, *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 4 (October 1999), pp. 39-49.

### **About the Authors**

Dr Rob Jenkins teaches in the School of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is a political scientist specialising in political economy, the politics of multilateral trade governance, and national and provincial politics in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. He is the author of *Democratic Politics and Economic Reform in India* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Reassessing the Commonwealth* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997), and the editor of a forthcoming volume, *Democratization, Governance Reform and Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

Dr Anne Marie Goetz is a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She is a political scientist specialising in feminist political theory, gender and development, and the politics of Africa and South Asia. She is the author of *Women Development Workers: Implementing Rural Credit Programmes in Bangladesh* (Sage, 2001), co-author of *Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), and editor of *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development* (Zed Press, 1997).