EXPLORATIONS
IN THE CONCEPT OF
SOCIAL
ACCOUNTABILITY

From Theory to Practice and from Practice to Theory

CBGA

Explorations in the Concept of Social Accountability
From Theory to Practice, and from Practice to Theory

By their very nature, social accountability theories draw from reiterative practice. This paper similarly, draws its experience from the pursuit of applications of participatory democracy attempted over the past two decades such as the roll out of the Right to Information Act and other rights-based legislations, primarily from Rajasthan and other parts of India. All thoughts and formulations articulated in the paper are based on the collective experience and struggles of countless citizens, campaigns and organizations striving towards enabling a more equal and just world by holding power to account, and in turn keeping the essence of democracy alive.

This paper has been put together by me, and therefore all limitations arising in articulation are a function of my own. However, the very rich processes, thoughts and conceptualization have originated from the creativity, perseverance and faith of citizens, individually and collectively.

- Rakshita Swamy

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I. BACKGROUND

Challenges faced in the evolution of social accountability and its practices in the Indian context emanate from them having to operate within a feudal social structure which has had control over society, and a colonial administrative power structure that has had control over all instrumentalities of governance, for centuries. Traditionally, where attempts have been made by citizens to demand power and accountability from below (which in turn have even led to wresting some authority from current institutional structures), it cannot be guaranteed that its advantages will accrue to the most disadvantaged sections of the community in the way pervasive social accountability demands. In fact, it is often difficult to predict the results of demands for bottom up accountability because of the continuing hold that caste, gender, community-based power structures have over society who act on 'behalf of' and in the name 'of' people.

In spite of the inherent challenges that it is constrained by, Indian experiences on social accountability present both lessons and opportunities.

It is universally recognized that the natural human instinct of demand for dignity, justice and equality exist everywhere- more so amongst the most marginalized and vulnerable in our society. But what needs to be further underlined is that the latter remain the custodians of knowledge on how everyday principles of justice and equality are continually undermined through manipulation of systems and the twisting of concepts. It is when they begin to articulate and define a framework of democratic engagement through social accountability that a sub-altern concept emerges. This is why despite all its shortcomings, all battles for democracy in India have gained the most sustained support from the poorest and most marginalized people. These movements in turn have resulted in victories for democracy in the way of universal rights, and not exclusive rights. For instance, the campaign for the Right to Information Act was fought by peasants, rural workers and those suffering from countless manifestations of injustice. But their demand was one that envisioned greater democratic access to all sections of society, not just theirs.

Mainstream and traditional academic discourses on social accountability, particularly in context to policy and public service delivery, have been dominated by techniques and tools projected as solutions for complex longstanding issues of power and access. Such techniques rely heavily on trained cadre, resources and funds. Whereas, principles that emerge from struggling groups negotiating and re-negotiating legitimacy and recognition for challenging illegitimate concentration of power result in demands for universal application of wider principles of transparency, bottom up accountability, and participation in decision making.

This paper attempts to illustrate one such indigenous theory of social accountability that has emerged from decades of practice. By doing so, the paper attempt to make a modest beginning towards building a theory of social accountability based on practice.

II. SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE BHILWARA PRINCIPLES

The lack of accountability is felt most acutely by ordinary citizens, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized, in their daily engagement with the State for accessing basic essential services that is their legal right. It takes the form and shape of violation of rights, denial of access, discrimination, deliberate exclusion and democratic marginalization. Therefore, the definition of what constitutes accountability is one that is best defined by people suffering the acute lack of it.

From a small set of villages in central Rajasthan comes a story of just this kind of subaltern conceptualization of social accountability. This was the same area where twenty years ago village based public hearings organized by *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) showed the way for using transparency for accountability in an indigenous manner to hold power to account. It also was the seed of the energetic and robust right to information campaign that spread across the country, subsequently.

A group of Dalit students from Bhilwara, Rajasthan had reached out to the MKSS for support in their extremely challenging struggle to fight atrocities against Dalits. On being asked by the MKSS what they felt were the basic components from their point of view of a citizen centric social accountability framework, after due deliberation they articulated it in a public meeting on *Ambedkar Jayanti* in 2011. This paper uses their articulation as a theoretical framework for defining social accountability and its essential elements. They spoke of five ways in which their routine engagement with the State results in their disempowerment. Thereby, any administrative framework that in turn enables and provides them with an inversion of these five elements, will be one that is accountable to them.

And that is how the **Bhilwara Principles of Social Accountability** were first theorised. The principles have also been acknowledged by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) of India, and have been incorporated as the "minimum principles" laying the foundation of the Auditing Standards of Social Audit,[1] formalized by the C&AG. The fact that a conceptual framework was derived from the felt needs of citizens, is an acknowledgement of the fact that peoples' lived realities are what should form the basis of any genuinely meaningful theoretical discourse.

The following section outlines the five essential elements of a Social Accountability Framework, as conceptualized and articulated by people facing the repercussions of a lack of accountability:

1. Jaankari: Access to relevant information

Information is power. People need information to know, act, self-govern, make informed choices and hold those who govern, accountable to their mandate. Access to information that is credible and comprehensible is therefore an essential element of social accountability. In spite of living in the age of 'open government' and 'big data' a huge gap persists between information disclosed in the public domain, and information relevant for citizens requiring public disclosure.

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[1] Auditing Standards on Social Audit, 2015 prepared by a Joint Task Force of Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), C&AG and civil society experts. They are based on the principles of Public Sector Auditing (ISSAI 100) and Operational Guidelines for coordination and cooperation between SAIs and internal auditors in the public sector (ISSAI 9150) as issued by INTOSAI

Administration and elite power structures find multiple ways of withholding relevant information from people to prevent decentralization of power. Not having a widespread understanding of the entitlements, of the prescribed time frames, of who's responsible for what, of the prescribed standards and rates, of the decision-making processes, of the possibility for appeal, complaint or grievance redressal, and of the reasonably expected outputs and outcomes is the first cause of unaccountable governance. For example, citizens are continuously exposed to TV advertisements, radio jingles, WhatsApp forwards about *Swachh Bharat Mission* and the importance of sanitation, but find it difficult to obtain information pertaining to how one can apply to get funds to build a toilet at home, what form needs to be filled, whether there are any payments that are required to be made, number of instalments to be received and under what norms, who to complain to when instalments are not credited in time etc.

Therefore, the first component of a social accountability framework is to have access to relevant, actionable and meaningful information in order to unpack decisions, evaluate performance and assess outcomes.

2. Sunwai : Right to be heard

Very often, even if citizens are informed about their entitlements and recognize its violations, they cannot do much about it because they have no platform or mechanism of being heard. Statements such as *'hamaari kaun sunega'* are far too common and are a reflection of widespread popular perception.

For a system to facilitate accountability, there must be *adequate, inclusive and multiple modes* for citizens to articulate grievances. In most cases, citizens are forced to report complaints at the very same offices and officials, who are the cause of the complaint. For example, a citizen harassed by members of a majority caste reaches the police station to file a FIR, but the officer on duty does not register her complaint and instead asks for a bribe. If the citizen is to make a complaint, it would have to be made in writing to the very same police station in which she faced the problem, thereby greatly discouraging her from making any such complaint and complying instead.

Grievances are often not acknowledged with a dated receipt that can reassure citizens that time bound action will be taken. Currently institutional systems of grievance redress are inadequate due to the fact that such systems are entirely under the control of implementing agencies. This gives little scope for there being a credible enquiry into the cause of the grievance, and imposing firm action on those found responsible for causing the grievance.

Moreover, there are certain categories of people such as the elderly, children, illiterate, single women, disabled, minorities, members of the LGBTQ community and others who need pro-active facilitation in articulating and registering their grievances. They are unable to reach locations where such grievances can be submitted owing to limitations on account of language, distance, cultural norms etc. For example, there may be cases where the elderly and the infirm cannot walk long distances to submit their complaint. In such cases, there is a dire need for independent people and platforms that

facilitate the most marginalized and excluded sections of the community and reach out to them to inform them and assist them in filing and tracking their grievances.

Therefore, the second component of a social accountability framework is the presence of independent facilitation to support complainants in articulation of grievances in their own language and formulation through multiple modes.

3. Karyawahi : Time bound grievance redress

Even if citizens are able to identify their grievances on account of being informed and manage to have a mechanism by which they can register them, there is little guarantee that their grievances will be redressed within an assured time frame. There are variations between the time that complaints are mandated to be redressed in, as they depend on which scheme the complaint is pertaining to. Some schemes don't even have fixed time frames within which grievances are to be redressed. As alluded before, grievances don't have a chance of being honestly redressed as long as it is heard and adjudicated upon by the same Department against which the grievance is filed. Therefore, a lack of uniform and minimum time periods within which grievances should ordinarily be redressed, lack of norms that mandate those investigating complaints need to follow and the absence of an independent authority free from the administrative controls of the Departments that can hear and adjudicate on the quality of grievance redress- citizens face an enormously uphill task of being heard and expecting action to be taken on any such complaint lodged. For example, if a worker makes a complaint to the Programme Officer that she was not allocated work under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act within 15 days of her demanding it, her redress would have to be sorted within 7 days as per Section 23 of the Act. However, if the same worker make a complaint that her application for availing pensions has not been responded to in more than a year, and that she has submitted repeated applications with the same motive, the Ministry has no specified time frames within which this complaint would be redressed. Some grievances such as deliberate exclusion while selecting beneficiaries, discrimination whilst allocating resources etc. are not even recognized as programmatic grievances that can be redressed within stipulated time frames.

Therefore, the third essential component of a social accountability framework is for citizens to have a guarantee of getting their grievances redressed and responded to in writing with a "speaking order" detailing the nature of corrective action taken, within a stipulated time frame.

4. Suraksha : Protection

It is often the case, that the first person to be harassed or intimidated for complaining and disturbing an established status quo, is the complainant herself. Making relevant information accessible to citizens, enabling them to register their complaints and have them redressed within guaranteed time frames skews the balance of power between those who govern and those who are governed, in favour of the latter. For this reason, vested interests do not fall short of methods to suppress and intimidate those who reveal the nexus of power perpetuating injustice. Protection of citizens, particularly whistle-blowers, who enable the unearthing of social, political and financial corruption is therefore of

immense significance. For instance, nearly 70 citizens who were using the Right to Information and other legal means to access information and ask questions have been murdered.[2] This grave situation has been magnified by the absence of a legal framework for whistleblower protection, with the Whistleblower Protection Act 2011 still not operationalized.[3] Citizens wanting to expose acts of corruption and discretionary use of power for private again as of today have no guarantee of their identity being protected and safety accorded to them and their family from all kinds of threat and intimidation.

Therefore, the fourth component of a social accountability framework is for citizens to be protected from any adverse consequences from asking questions, registering grievances and pursuing them up till their logical conclusion to expose injustices.

5. Bhaagidari : Participation

A citizen cannot effectively participate in processes of governance without institutionalized platforms of participation. Participation plays a central role in enabling the voice of communities to reach the State while accessing services, planning for use of public funds, monitoring programme delivery and registering grievances. Through participation, citizens can claim for just allocation of resources, bring instances of fraud and misappropriation and demand retribution and restoration. Participation also needs to be incorporated into the process of investigation and redress as far as possible so that all sides are given an opportunity to present and give their point of view, at a location closest to them. However, for participation to reach these objectives, it must be institutionalized. Otherwise only some sections of the community will be consulted and thereby the feedback from the entire community will be recorded as taken which is not true. For example, a planning Gram Sabha that includes only the field functionaries residing in the *Gram Panchayat* and their family members will result in the endorsement of a plan that is dramatically different from the nature of a plan that would have emerged by consulting the elderly, children, schedule caste and schedule tribe communities, migrants, functionaries, farmers, agricultural labour etc. Additionally, for participation to result in change there must be some accountability for suggestions or feedback given by the citizens. This is possible only when the State is responsible for providing space for citizens to give the suggestions, for recording their suggestions, for justifying why certain suggestions were accepted and certain suggestions were dropped. Peoples participation is not a uni-directional mechanism, and needs to be responded to with equal responsibility. This is what will entail continuing participation. For example, if Municipality Meetings are conducted by a local Councillor to invite suggestions for planning the annual budget, the Councillor is responsible for recording each and every suggestion that was made, treating each suggestion with equal attention and share with people on why certain suggestions reflected in the forthcoming budget and why some didn't.

Therefore, the fifth component of a social accountability framework is for citizens to have opportunities to participate in the planning, implementation, monitoring of public programmes and redress of grievances, through institutionalized platforms of the State.

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[2] http://attacksonrtiusers.org

[3] https://thewire.in/government/whistle-blowers-protection-act-five-years

To the above five elements, a sixth element was added to the framework by a collective of civil society organizations.

6. Janta ka Manch : Public Collective Platforms

Even when citizens manage to access information, be aware about their rights and entitlements, are able to register their grievances, a major limitation that comes in the way of their meaningful engagement with the State is the imbalance of power between the former and the latter. The State, its administration and its multiple manifestations by design yield more power than individual citizens. This leads to the State's narrative always dominating the individual citizen's actual reality and truth. The absence of such makes it difficult for the citizen's "truth" to stand a chance against the official record, when they are different. For example, it is unlikely that an individual complainant will have a fair chance of being heard about her inflated electricity bills when she visits the officer concerned alone at the District office. However, if the District Officer is made to respond to a class complaint of inflated electricity bills faced by all migrant labourers residing in the area in the presence of the larger public and the officer's own supervisors, her likelihood of responding responsibility will increase greatly. This imbalance can only begin to get corrected when citizens are able to engage with the State collectively and publicly, which gives the former a chance to question and dialogue on a more equal footing. Public collective platforms thus plan an important role in facilitating the discussion of multiple complaints that are given a chance of being sorted out through a dialogical process.

Through public collective platforms of dialogue, the spirit and culture of questioning and enquiry is introduced, strengthened and established. It also plays a significant role in informing people of their entitlements and directs their awareness towards knowing the level of resources deployed for local development and how they are being spent. They serve as living and breathing examples of a Freirean conception of empowerment by creating a democratic peoples' platform, where they can develop a critical awareness of social realities. In the course of engaging in such platforms, individuals and communities get empowered and politicised in a way that they experience the practical potential of participatory democracy. Once power is taken into their hands by people acting in collective platforms, faced with the challenge of making informed choices; democracy moves beyond the two-dimensional aspect of electoral majorities, to the complex sphere of deliberation, dialogue, and ethical decision making. Every voice counts: individually, persuasively, and collectively.

Therefore, the sixth component of a social accountability information is for citizens to have a right to participate in public collective platforms which are attended by both citizens and representatives of the State, wherein the former can learn, ask questions, and pursue grievances and the latter have a responsibility to respond and take actions.

Access to information, mechanism to register grievances, having complaints redressed within a time frame, securing citizens participation in all aspects of governance, ensuring the protection of complainants and right of citizens to engage with the administration through public collective platforms, form the contents of a social accountability framework from the point of view of citizens.

# III. ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK
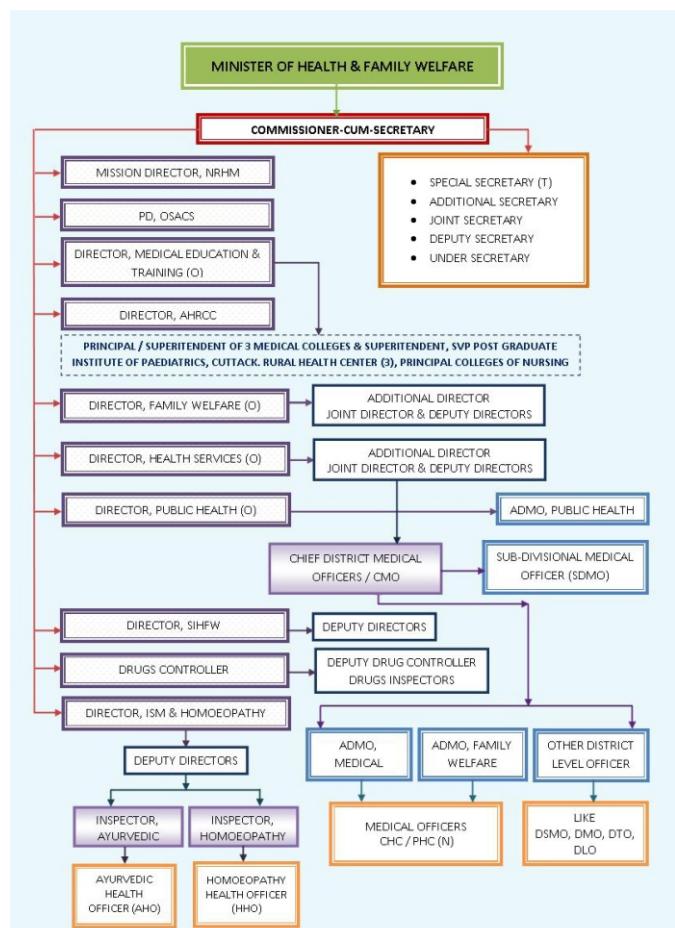
Development practice in India has seen varying degrees of success from the application of the above components over the past three decades. However, before we proceed towards an assessment of these practices, there are enough learnings that have emanated from practical experience over the past two decades that can help us unpack the minimum elements of each of the components of the Bhilwara Social Accountability Framework listed in the previous section.

1. Access to information

While citizens having access to information is no longer a demand that it publicly contested, especially with the passage of the Right to Information Act which mandates disclosure of information, the exercise of providing information needs to be unpacked into its elements so as to better understand what facilitates access, and what in turn limits it. It needs to be clearly understood that sharing and dissemination of information 'pro-actively' is mandated by the RTI Act. Therefore, any attempt to assess the adequacy of efforts undertaken for greater transparency needs to be measured against this legal standard.

i.   Is the shared information meaningful, relevant and actionable

For example, when a Department discloses its organogram on its office wall, it may consider its duty of disclosure as complete. However, a mere organogram does not inform a citizen (who is perhaps visiting the office to seek a benefit) about the description of tangible duties of each officer in the Department, their working hours, their supervisory officer, timelines within which each officer is expected to complete tasks of each duty, channel of filing a grievance if the officer is not executing her duty according to the job description etc. A detailed description of an official's job chart for each service rendered by the Department is what would entail meaningful disclosure.

(E.g. 1: Organogram of the Ministry of Health as available on its website)

(E.g.2: Job Chart of an Assistant Executive Engineer of the Public Works Department, Government of Kerala detailing the precise roles and responsibilities of the functionary)

ii.   Ability of the information to be both disaggregated, and aggregated
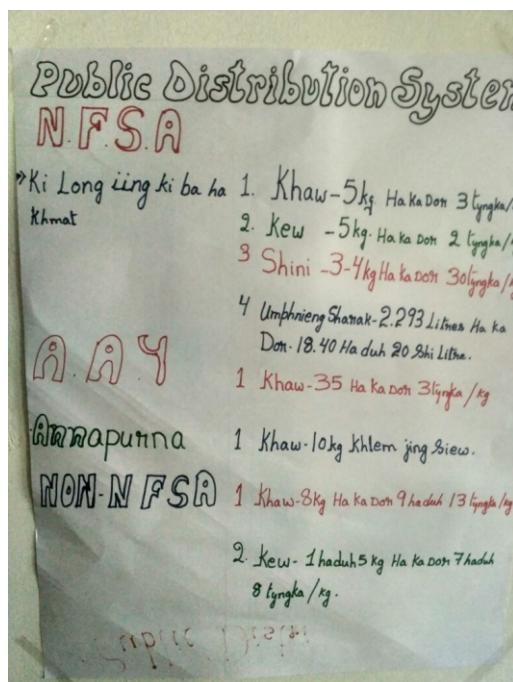
For instance, when the Government shares the amount of material expenditure incurred under MGNREGA at a District Level as Rs 25 crore, it is of no consequence to a resident of a Panchayat where works undertaken within MGNREGA are in poor condition. However, if the same material expenditure is broken down into the number of bags of cement, number of trolleys of gravel, number of bags of sand, per unit rate of material consumed, then the citizen can compare the disclosure to actual work done and assess whether the two matches. Whereas in another scenario, aggregated trends of material expenditure across Districts help an action researcher to identify whether there are some Districts where material intensive expenditure is being concentrated at the cost of other Districts. It is therefore relevant to provide information that is both, disaggregated and cumulative, as both are meaningful for different interests.

iii. Asymmetry of access to information between the state and the citizen

For instance, can the Principal Secretary, Department of Social Justice see the *Gram Panchayat* wise list of pension beneficiaries who have been removed as beneficiaries with reasons for each. Whereas, the very same information is being denied public consumption resulting in citizens who have suddenly stopped receiving their pensions reapplying for the benefit not knowing that their names have been struck off the list and leaving them with no information on having to appeal that decision. Such a situation unravelled in Rajasthan where 10 lakh pensioners were struck off the pension list. There was no information in the public domain about who these pensioners were and what was the cause of their deletion from the list. Whereas this information was compiled and made accessible to the State Administration. The lack of access to information that was in fact produced and maintained by the State Administration caused enormous hardship and injustice to pensioners across the State.[4] Hence, it is relevant to assess whether the information being shared in the public domain is a sub set of the information that can be accessed by the administration. If such is the case, it is a deliberate step down in a regime for transparency as it attacks the basic essence of democratic distribution and access of information and power.

iv. Use of local language

Information needs to be disclosed in the local language at the local level for it to result in any action. When work measurements of roads are shared in cubic square metres they are rarely understood by the residents of the local area in which the road is constructed. Measurement units need to be aligned to local usage of terms in order to bring more symmetry of information access.

(E.g.3: Disclosure of PDS entitlements in Khasi in Meghalaya)

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[4] http://www.im4change.org/news-alerts/eligible-beneficiaries-dropped-from-pension-list-in-rajasthan-4679745.html

	Estimate for Common person				
Name of Work :-- Scheme/Year:---------------					
Village/Ward :------------- Block/Taluka-----------------District:------ -------					
Material Required					
S.No.	Material's name	Unit	Quantity required	local supplies unit(Trucks)	Quality/Mark
1	Stone	cum			quarry
2	Sand	cum			quarry
3	Cement	bags			Brand
4	Stone Gravel(Grade-I)	cum			quarry
5	Stone Gravel(Grade-II)	cum			quarry
6	Stone Gravel(Grade-Iii)	cum			quarry
	Granula Sub base	cum			quarry
7	Blindage	cum			quarry
8	Bitumen	tons			Brand
9	Reinforcement	qtls			Brand
10	Others(if any)				quarry

(E.g.4: Model format for disclosure of material procurement to build
a road developed with the Public Works Department, Government of Meghalaya)

v. Availability of information through multiple modes and means

Recognising that, despite best efforts, both the modes of providing information and of getting feedback can be corrupted or blocked, multiple modes and routes must be used in order to make it progressively difficult to inhibit the free flow of information to and from the people. For instance the shelf of works planned for a given *Gram Panchayat* under MGNREGA should be available on the website, painted on the wall of the *Gram Panchayat* Office and stored as a file in the *Panchayat Bhawan*.

(E.g.5: Availability of information related to MGNREGA through the website)

(E.g.6: Availability of MGNREGA information through wall paintings
in Rajsamand District, Rajasthan)

vi.   Facilitation provided to help understand the information being shared

The mere provisioning of information does not translate directly into that information being used by citizens productively. Active facilitation is required to contextualize official information being shared to the local reality so as to generate interest, awareness and reflection. For instance, the Peoples' Plan Campaign in Kerala relied extensively on community volunteers and elected

representatives to share information with the community in a demystified fashion so as to enable the latter to participate in an informed planning process.

(E.g.7: Facilitation being provided by independent volunteers in Jharkhand and Meghalaya to make people understand information being shared)

vii. Credibility of the information being shared

In order for information to be actionable, the information being shared needs to be credible, updated and authenticated by the State. For instance, the administration finds it hard to deny social audit findings that are inconvenient for them simply because the findings are based on official records shared with the social audit team by them.

viii. Cost of accessing information

To widen the reach of information, efforts need to be made towards providing information to citizens free of cost.

ix. Purpose limitations

A citizen having to explain locus standii and purpose of accessing information before being provided with the same severely undermines the citizens unfettered right to information. For instance, the Right to Information Act clearly states that the citizen does not have to justify the reason behind seeking information under the Law. Whereas the proposed Data Protection Bill mandates that information can only be used for the purpose that it was stated to be used at the time of access.

x. Use of digital technology to facilitate information disclosure

Digital 'Information Technology' (IT) is projected by policy makers as a "fool proof" mechanism for ensuring transparency in implementation of public programmes. With the launch of the Digital India campaign, the State seems to be investing increasing attention and financial resources towards laying down a digital architecture for service delivery on a mission mode

apparently for the more effective implementation of the latter. However, in the collective work of trying to make public programmes run more efficiently by demanding greater transparency and accountability in its implementation, it is understood that accessing services and entitlements by the State is a political exercise. The unequal balance between the State and the citizen that plays itself out when citizens access services implemented by the State, cannot be wished away with the mere introduction of digital technology in the access, implementation and evaluation of public programmes.

Since January 2017, there has been a conscious effort to engage with the impact of this increasing 'digitization' of public service delivery on citizens' access to welfare entitlements including those that they are entitled to by law in Rajasthan through a process called 'Digital Dialogue'. The principles that guide the development of digital architectures are those conceptualized from the perspective of the administration. This entails building information systems relevant for the management and used primarily to monitor trends, aggregate outputs, relative performance of officials/regions, reporting norms etc. Whereas access to information when understood from the perspective of citizens needing it to access their entitlements or hold the administration accountable lends to a different kind of an information system. There is a marked difference in the nature of information collected and disclosed depending on whether the information system is designed to serve the interests of the management or the citizens

Digital Dialogues have therefore been initiated to make the transition from a 'Management Information System' to a '*Janta* Information System' with the objective of negotiating the power that citizens can exercise over digital technology, to suit their requirements instead of those of the administration. It is an attempt to bring more parity between citizens and administration in accessing and designing information. Programme wise suggestions of the on information currently captured that needs to be in the public domain, formats in which information needs to be disclosed to enable people to access their entitlements and follow up and identification of modes of information that need to be captured and disclosed henceforth, were made.

There has been an evolving understanding that access to actionable and reliable information available through offline and online modes, is crucial for governance. This is in fact a necessary pre-requisite to move from a representative democracy to a participatory democracy. The term '*Janta* Information System'/'Citizen Information System' has evolved organically from deep rooted efforts such as those listed above to facilitate this endeavour. It refers to an end to end process of information disclosure given life to by institutionalized platforms and processes at various stages of the implementation process. Each of the above examples have taken forward the concept of a *Janta* Information System and demonstrated a practical option for institutionalizing mandatory information disclosure.

2. Ability to register grievances and be heard
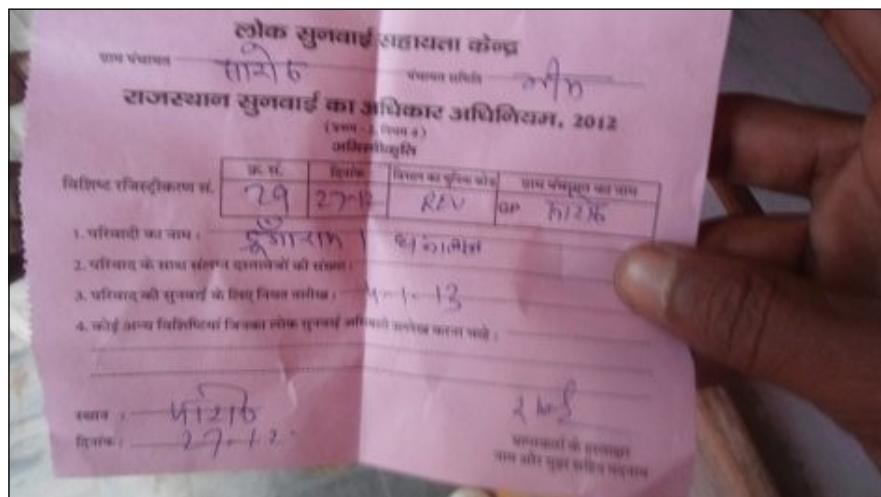
Enabling a citizen to register a grievance in her own words and be heard necessitates the following:

i.   Oral and written

Citizens should be given the choice of filing their grievances orally, or in writing. For instance, a citizen should have the option of submitting a written grievance at the Department counter, and also lodge a grievance telephonically.

ii. Acknowledgement of grievances with dated receipts

Each and every grievance should be acknowledged with a receipt that contains the date, time, place, unique complaint number, documents submitted by the complainant and particulars of receiver of complaint, of concerned Grievance Redress Officer, along with the stipulated time frame within which the complaint will be redressed.

(E.g.8: Acknowledgement of a grievance with a dated acknowledgement
receipt under the Right to Hearing Act, Rajasthan)

iii. Neutrality of the physical point of grievance submission

It is difficult for complainants to visit an office publicly and submit a grievance. For instance, it is intimidating for a complainant to go to the police station to register a complaint to the same constable who is the cause of the problem. Whereas, it is more conducive for a citizen to visit a Single Window located in the Panchayat where all grievances are submitted and eventually sorted to communicate to the concerned offices. The nearer and more neutral the physical point at which a grievance can be submitted, the more likely that it will be used by citizens.

(E.g.9: Presence of an independent single window for receiving grievances at the *Gram Panchayat* Level under the Right to Hearing Act, Rajasthan)

iv. Provision of facilitation while registering grievances:

Due to complicated administrative categories, citizens are often confused about the correct Department to which their grievance must be forwarded. In such scenarios, facilitation needs to be extended to citizens. For instance, the NREGA Information and Facilitation Centres in Jharkhand support and facilitate NREGA workers in finalizing the language of the complaint and advise them on the most appropriate officer to which it should be addressed.

v. Opportunity to agree or reject articulation of grievance on behalf of the complainant

Citizens should always have the right to define and confirm their grievance in their own terms. For instance, when complaints are made telephonically the citizen is unaware of the precise language that her oral complaint translated into with respect to the written word.

vi. Presence of multiplicity of platforms

As with the case of access to information, citizens need to have multiple modes of filing grievances such that access is unfettered. For instance, citizens need to have both online and offline recourse of filing grievances.

vii. Scope of complaint

Citizens should have the right to define their complaint and therefore any administrative framework for grievance redress must have a wide enough scope to enable the same. For instance, the Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their

Grievances Bill, 2011 defined a grievance as any violation of a Citizen Charter, Guideline, Policy, Act and Scheme. It stated that a "complaint" would mean "any grievance, relating to or arising from, any failure in the delivery of goods or rendering of services pursuant to the Citizens Charter, or in the functioning of any public authority, or any violation of a law, policy, programme, order or scheme". This stands in contrast with State Public Service Delivery Acts that severely limit the freedom of citizens to define their complaint by restricting the definition of a grievance to only the violation of services notified under the Law.

Given the extent to which public service delivery now includes contractual services and private sector, any company or body that supplies goods and services in pursuance of an obligation imposed by the Central/State Government, including those non-governmental organizations owned, controlled or substantially financed by the appropriate Government, directly or indirectly need to be identified as agents against whom complaints can be legitimately made.

3. *Having grievances redressed in a time bound manner*

Time bound redress of grievances extends beyond the mere redressal within a stipulated time frame. It also includes providing for the following:

i. Sanctity of time frames

    Are stipulated time frames within which grievances are required to be redressed backed by Rules/Orders. For instance, the State Right to Public Service Delivery Acts mandate time frames by law, whereas the time frames for complaints made for poor implementation of *Swacch Bharat Mission* are without time frames backed by administrative orders.

ii. Accountability for breaching of stipulated time frames

    It is relevant to consider what kinds of mechanism sets in when the time period is breached. Does the complainant have to again pursue the officials concerned when the time line is breached, or does the administration initiate action suo-moto. For instance, complaints that are not redressed within the stipulated time frame under the Madhya Pradesh Grievance Redress Portal and the *Rajasthan Sampark* are automatically forwarded to the Head of the Department to review and initiate necessary action.

iii. Independence in the process of inquiry and appeal

    The most significant cause behind the poor level of satisfaction of citizens with current grievance redress mechanisms is that the oversight on the quality of redress is not independent. The very same Department that is redressing the grievance, is expected to redress the complainant's appeal complaining against poor/incorrect redress as a result of which there is minimum incentive to independently assess the matter. For instance, the State Public Service Delivery Acts have no independent forum of appeal. Whereas the Grievance Redress Bill provided for an independent District level Grievance Redress Authority to adjudicate on appeals filed by citizens

citing poor/incorrect redress of grievances by Departments to independent assess whether the Department indeed executed its duty.

iv. Difference in treatment for certain grievances

There are some grievances that affect the life and liberty of citizens that warrant immediate attention and redress. For instance, if a malnourished woman on the verge of starvation has complained that her ration card has not been issued despite her application being filed 3 months ago, the administration needs to immediately review and redress the matter so that there is no further delay in enabling her access to food at the earliest. A delay in redress on a priority basis could potentially result in the loss of life. Therefore, it is pertinent to assess whether the grievance redress framework provides for such cases.

v. Feedback from the complainant

Very often it has been observed that grievances get "closed" or "redressed" without the active consent of the complainant. This is actively encouraged by Departments to showcase their respective performance by indicating high numbers of "closed" cases. But more often than not, a large number of grievances are closed while the issue due to which the complainant cannot access her right still persists. It is therefore recommended that Departments not have the option of closing complaints without a written approval from the complainant. For instance, as per the protocol of *Rajasthan Sampark*, an independent call centre calls up the complainant to inform him/her that as per the Department the grievance is redressed and it is considering closure. If the complainant concurs, the call centre confirms closure. If the complainant rejects the claim, the call centre re-forwards the information within the system and the same is required to be addressed within a shorter time frame. In another example, the Right to Hearing Act, 2012 of Rajasthan gives every complainant the right to participate in a weekly public hearing and personally corroborate or reject the grievance said to be redressed by the Department concerned.

vi. Provisions for penalty and compensation

One must consider whether the process of redress provides for imposition of penalties on erring officials, and awarding compensation for the costs incurred by complainants. For instance, though the State Public Service Delivery Acts provide for both compensation and penalty the reason behind such low realization of the same is because the agency responsible for ordering penalties and compensation is not independent from the Department which is the cause of the grievance.

vii. Participation of citizens in process of redress

Does the citizen have a right to participate in the process of redress and state her account in her own words which has a bearing on the eventual decision. In many IT enabled grievance redress platforms such as web portals, telephone help lines, SMS services, the scope for a citizen to actively participate in the process of redress is non existent. Whereas, as per Bihar's Right to

Public Grievance Redress Law a complainant has the right to participate in the public hearing of her grievance at the Sub District Level in the presence of the Grievance Redress Officer and an independent official tasked with hearing the matter.

(E.g.10: Participation of citizen in the 'hearing' of her grievance as under the Right to Public Grievance Redress Law, Bihar)

4. *Ability to participate in planning, implementation, redress and evaluation*

Citizen participation has grown to be accepted as a non-negotiable practice for a robust participatory democracy. To move it from rhetoric to an institutionalized practice, requires attention to the following factors.

i. Institutionalization of platforms for citizen participation

In order to enable credible participation of citizens in the planning, implementation and monitoring of government interventions their platforms of engagement need to be institutionalized and systemic. Only then would every citizen have an equal voice (at least in principle and theoretically) in decision making and the outcome of participation does not remain a function of the numbers of people and the loudness of the voice raised. For instance, social audits are an institutionalized platform for citizens to evaluate Government performance where every citizen has an equal voice. But in contrast, the "OpenGov" platform that invites citizen feedback on Government policies is one that can be used only by those having access to internet and are literate with internet technology.

It is also relevant to acknowledge that a 'face to face' dialogue is essential to confront and challenge power inequality, at the time of participation. However, this face to face dialogue is likely to intimidate the marginalized, exploited and discriminated communities the most. Therefore, additional efforts must be made to ensure that those willing to challenge the status quo by actively participating, are protected from adverse repercussions and intimidation.

ii. Does participation entail a cost

When the State plans for means of developing institutionalized forums for citizen participation, it assumes that citizens will participate in spite of costs they have to incur. For example, the MGNREGA provides for Village level Vigilance and Monitoring Committees which are populated with NREGA workers tasked with visiting one work site a day and observing whether work is taking place as per official guidelines. One needs to acknowledge that for participating in citizen vigilance activities such as this, the NREGA worker will be losing a day's wage and needs to be adequately compensated for her loss. If this cannot be provided, then either the vigilance conducted is superficial, or it will be conducted by only those less marginalized workers who can afford to lose a day's wage. It is not being suggested that citizens be monetarily compensated each time they participate in governance. This fact is being brought to attention to simply illustrate the point that citizens, particularly the poorest and the most disadvantaged, incur costs (in terms of finances, time, travel) in participation and therefore must be compensated either for the cost of participation, or with a tangible outcome that germinates from such participation.

iii. Is the participation a prerequisite for official purposes

Many times administrative officials decide to not consult citizens in planning and roll out of schemes, unless they are explicitly ordered to do so. For instance, for a land acquisition to be completed, conducting a public hearing to inform them of the purpose and consequences of the land acquisition is a necessary pre-requisite. The fact that a public hearing is mandatory does not translate into the public hearing being an effective forum of decision making as there are multiple ways in which vested interests can undermine even statutory public hearings to prevent free and fair participation. However, the provision of a mandatory public hearing prior to acquisition does give citizens an opportunity to assert their will following due process, like was done for instance when the *Gram Sabha* of Rayagada and Kalahandi Districts rejected any mining operations under the proposed Bauxite Mining Plan.

iv. Who is the "citizen"

The citizenry is not a homogenous entity where every citizen has the identical ability and rationale for participation. In any area, citizenry would comprise of children, women, men, elderly, formal employees, unorganized workers, government officials, criminals, schedule tribes, schedule castes, representatives of the LGBT community and many more. Any honest effort to seek participation of such a varied collective of citizens would entail special efforts to seek the participation of each kind of citizen while providing them with the required support to overcome their limitations and vulnerabilities in doing so. Moreover, the requirement of proving oneself to be a citizen should not even be a mandatory requisite. For instance, the RTI Act itself does not make it mandatory for a person to prove that he/she is a citizen before requesting for information (Section 6).

v.   Is there facilitation to encourage and ensure the participation of citizens

For citizen participation to be meaningful it must be informed. Independent facilitation needs to be provided to citizens to help them in understanding the official narrative and place their local reality in its context. Relevant and effective participation cannot be assumed to have taken place just because it was mandated to. Efforts and resources need to be invested in deploying independent, local, community led facilitators who can assist people in the process of participation. For instance, a statutory social audit of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) cannot take place with the District Supply Officer providing official files at the village level and expecting residents to complete the audit. It requires sensitized and trained village level facilitators to categorize *Panchayat* level information into ward level records, demystify official jargon into local language, present the information to people in a way they can understand, note down discrepancy observed between official record and actual reality, facilitate people in filing applications and registering grievances and present the sum of this information in a collective hearing where citizens have the courage and confidence to ask questions and demand answers.

(E.g.11: Volunteers in Meghalaya spending days and nights at the village to inform people about the records and make them aware about their rights)

vi.   Accountability of seeking citizen participation

Any effort undertaken towards seeking citizen participation must also be accountable to its outcome. Very often citizen feedback, comments and inputs are collected and subsequently citizens are left with no information on whether they were incorporated into policy change or whether they were rejected, and if so for what reason. There must be an accountability of those who seek citizen participation to inform decision makers and citizens about the status of their input and engagement. For instance, in the Pre-Legislative Policy of the Department of Law, officials are required to tabulate responses that have been submitted by citizens for an upcoming

policy, and present the reasons behind the Department accepting and rejecting the same. This tabulation is then required to be made public, and put up to the Cabinet in order to inform their decision on the matter.

vii. Need for dedicated funding

For participation to be taken as a legitimate component of an administration's duty, it is essential to provide a dedicated source of funds for its operationalization. Deploying a team of trained community level facilitators, capacity building, sharing information and organizing collective platforms need resources, albeit at a much lower scale than other programmatic interventions. Funds should be provided and its slow should be independent of the implementing agency at the field level so as to facilitate its routine access. For instance, the Government of Meghalaya provides 0.5% of the budgeted allocations of 21 Departments to finance the implementation of the Meghalaya Community Participation and Public Services Social Audit Act which provides for concurrent social audit, grievance redress and pro-active dissemination of information.

5. *Ability to engage with administration through public collective platforms*

Participation of citizens in public and collective platforms such as *Gram Sabha*, Ward *Sabha*, Social Audit, Planning Meetings etc to engage with the administration is an attempt to tilt the balance of power in favour of the former. Nevertheless, years of experience with attempting to roll out and solicit participation in such forums at the time of planning, implementation and evaluation of Government schemes have demonstrated that to make such forums inclusive, fair and conducive to free participation, the following need to be taken care of:

i. Fair participation

For citizens to have the courage to speak up, state the truth, ask questions from those who have been in positions of power, citizens need to feel a sense of confidence that the platform is unbiased, independent, objective and their intervention will indeed be fairly heard and acted upon. The representative chairing a collective platform is therefore a very significant consideration. It should not be an official directly in charge of implementing the programme and it should not be a representative who is the sole decision maker. Collective public platforms should be chaired by a panel comprising of representatives from a wide range of stakeholders such as CSOs, elected representatives, official representatives, SHG members etc so that the panel is not dominated by only one interest. The panel must consist of an appropriately senior Government official who has the authority to take decisions and order action where necessary. For instance, in social audits there is a significant need for an officer of the level of Sub Divisional Magistrate to preside over the hearing, and order action on each finding.

ii. Location

Care has to be taken that the location of the platform is unbiased and is easily accessible for all sections of the community such as the elderly, disabled, sections of the schedule caste and

schedule tribe, transgenders etc. to participate. For instance, it is advisable to situate such platforms in the section of the village/ward where the most marginalized sections of the community live so as to solicit their participation proactively.

(E.g.12: Social Audits taking place in an interior location in Garo Hills, Meghalaya to solicit maximum participation)

iii. Quorum

Very often the conduct of such exercises has a tendency to be routinized and trivialized. Decisions are taken at such platforms on the basis of superficial participation. It is therefore important to ensure that a minimum quorum of not just numbers, but also nature of participation is ensured for the exercise to be held valid. For example, to prevent social audits of MGNREGA from being co-opted by functionaries, the guideline mandates that the quorum would be 25% of the MGNREGA active workers of the area including 25% of the SC workers.

iv. Periodicity

To prevent such exercises from being a one-time phenomena, the conduct of such platforms must be systemized and made an ongoing part of governance.

v. Ensuring participation of the most marginalized

Ensuring the participation of the most marginalized representatives of the local community is the onus of the agency/team facilitating the collective exercise. Given that marginalized communities such as the elderly, single women, disabled, schedule caste and schedule tribe, representatives of the LGBT community, religious minorities face disproportionate limitations, hurdles and

vulnerabilities in participating in such forums compared to other members of the community, care must be taken to pro-actively facilitate and support them in participation. This may take the shape of holding the exercise in locations where their physical participation is easier, or ensuring that adequate law and order arrangements are made at the venue so that each participant can speak freely and fairly.

vi. Recording of decisions

Outcomes of discussions and decisions must be recorded by an unbiased individual and must be read out publicly before being individually signed.

v. Follow up and administrative/legal sanctity of the platform

For collective deliberations to have meaning, they must lead to legally and/or administratively sanctioned outcomes. This is essential to maintain an intrinsic accountability of the process, and for people to trust the platform and participate in spite personal and social costs that are incurred. For instance, inputs solicited from a planning *Gram Sabha* needs to translate into a plan with corresponding budgets. Social Audit findings need to have time bound actions of redress.

(E.g.13: Presence of implementing agencies at the public hearing to announce corrective action on outcome of deliberations)

6. *Right to be protected*

Citizen participation is an inherently political act where the balance of power between those who govern and those who are governed begins to shift. Whether it will shift in favour of the former or the latter depends entirely on the attention paid in incorporating the various elements outlined above into social accountability mechanisms. The mere act of raising questions and pursuing their answers through legal and democratic means, is seen as an act of offense against vested interests who are in favour of hiding information and thereby perpetuating arbitrary decision making. The fact that more than 70 citizens who filed RTI applications to unearth acts of corruption have been murdered is a grim reminder of the fact.

Various means have to be thought of to protect citizens in their attempts at engaging in governance. The option of filing anonymous complaints in some situations can help. In other situations, the ability of victimized citizens to engage with the administration in the presence of their own community and in their own location, can give a sense of comfort and confidence. Providing citizens multiple administrative options, apart from just the Police and the Courts, to whom they can write to and seek protection from is also a step forward in attempting to institutionalize citizen protection.

IV. EXISTING STATE LED SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICES

India has been at the centre of conceptualizing and rolling out social accountability mechanisms for a variety of programmes. Where some attempted to focus on providing easier access to information, some looked at enabling smoother grievance redress and facilitating social audits. The mode of interventions include (but were not limited to) legislations, setting up of statutory bodies for oversight and monitoring, ground interventions, IT enabled mechanisms, making decisions through participatory forums etc. However, there has not been any attempt to assess the efficacy of these mechanisms against any common standard of accountability.

The section below is a nascent attempt at doing so, with the Bhilwara Principles of Social Accountability as a benchmark for assessment.

i. Right to Service Acts passed in more than 21 States are presented as a 'breakthrough' in terms of good governance and accountability. While it is a beginning towards making the administration more accountable to its citizens with mandating time bound delivery of services and legal provisions for penalty and compensation, the Law has been found to be inadequate and the Bhilwara Principles actually provide a reasonable framework to understand why so. It does not provide for institutionalized means of sharing information related to government schemes and programmes with citizens; extending independent facilitation to citizens for filing grievances; providing an independent appellate mechanism in the redress of grievances; and any forum of collective participation of citizens in the public domain.

ii. Many States such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and others have introduced toll free numbers to enable citizens in filing complaints and a comprehensive back end software to sort grievances, forward them to the appropriate officers and report the status of redress of grievances to heads of departments for taking action. However, the law does not provide for institutionalized means of sharing information related to services and programmes; physical facilitation to citizens in filing grievances at their place of residence; offering an alternative to those who cannot access telephones and internet; automatic action against those officials found responsible for non redressal of grievances within stipulated time frames; collective monitoring of grievances by citizens in a public forum.

iii. Social Audits are now mandated across a range of interventions such as MGNREGA, National Food Security Act, Persons with Disabilities Act, National Social Assistance Programme, *Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Swacch Bharat* Mission, *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana*, Building and other Construction Workers Act and Juvenile Justice Protection Act. The quality and state of progress of social audits across these interventions are varied and sporadic. In principle social audits provide an institutionalized forum of sharing information with citizens; facilitation of citizens in filing grievances at the decentralized level; solicit peoples' participation to unpack decisions and provide a collective forum for citizens to ask questions and demand answers. It has

also set a precedent of securing a dedicated allocation of funds for carrying out social audits (i.e. 1% of the budget). Social Audits however fall short on ensuring time bound redress on deviations and findings, as this responsibility rests entirely with the implementing agency which is not bound to redress grievances within a stipulated time frame in the absence of an active and sensitive administrative machinery. Moreover, with the scope of social audit extending to so many programmes the challenge of devising a workable framework that can facilitate social audits across multiple programmes while maintaining standards of credibility, efficiency and economy, continues to remain.

iv. The Right to Hearing Act passed in Rajasthan in 2012 and subsequent Rules formulated for it , was a breakthrough in terms of meeting most requirements of a social accountability framework. It provided for a legally sanctioned means of sharing information; registering and acknowledging grievances; having them redressed in a time bound manner; solicit peoples' participation in the redress of their grievances and provide a public collective platform. However, the Act and Rules though pathbreaking, were never really implemented by the State in a steadfast and concerted manner leaving much to be desired. In addition, it did not secure an independently functioning commission that could adjudicate on the complaints in a fair and unbiased manner.

v.   The Pre Legislative Policy passed by the Department of Law provides an institutional framework for citizens to participate in legislation making. The Policy provides for a means of sharing details relating to the proposed legislation in a manner that can be easily understood by citizens. However it does not mandate provision of any manner of facilitation to citizens in order to seek their input, develop alternatives for citizens who may not be able to engage with the internet for providing feedback and any public collective platform for discussion.

vi. The exercise of citizen report cards are based on information and user feedback based on physical interactions with users of the public institute being assessed. Therefore, citizen report cards further the objective of sharing information amongst the community in a significant way. However, since citizen report cards are not mandated by the State/statutory requirements, the provision of information required by the State to the agency facilitating the exercise of citizen report cards is not binding. The exercise facilitates people in being informed about minimum norms and standards of service delivery, and therefore identify and articulate their grievances. Since report cards on public service delivery and public institutions do not carry an explicit State mandate, there is no guaranteed redress of grievances that emerge through the exercise. However, public pressure from the communities involved in the exercise can help sustain follow up with the local administration. Citizen report cards facilitate participation of users and citizens through focus group discussions. Participation is centred around articulation of feedback based on pre-determined parameters and is therefore largely dependent on how wide in scope the questionnaire designed is. Some exercises of generating citizen report cards do culminate in public hearings with citizens and implementing agencies, which gives an adequate platform for deliberation and discussion. Given that the exercise does not carry a State mandate, the onus of

extending security and prevention of any threat or intimidation on those participating in the exercise rests on the organization facilitating it.

vii. Subsequent to the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution, *Gram Panchayats* and *Gram Sabhas* presented themselves as an opportunity for truly democratic and inclusive participation from communities. In spite of them being the only structural and institutional means of strengthening participatory governance at the village and ward level, the robustness and efficacy of the *gram sabhas* conducted leaves much to be desired. The State has not provided the *Panchayat* with adequate resources and technical assistance to actively inform residents of about all aspects of planning, implementation and expenditure taking place in the community; provide facilitation to citizens in order to make their participation in decision making more informed; provide forums of registering grievances and taking action on them in a timely manner. The *Gram Sabhas* are the true spirit of the public collective platform sorely needed in any accountability framework. However, the lack of attention paid to ensuring the representation of the most marginalized sections of the community in the *Gram Sabhas* and not being able to steer collective deliberation based on evidence and information, has severely limited the potential of such forums. The conceptualization of this manifestation in urban areas has been far more challenging, with limited best practices to learn from. Some states and programmes have made an effort to facilitate participatory planning and budgeting in order to invite peoples' participation in identifying priorities for financial allocation and conceptualizing programme design. Some notable examples include the Peoples' Plan Campaign, Kerala and the *Yojana Banao Abhiyan* under MGNREGA in Jharkhand. For instance, the Peoples' Plan Campaign in Kerala laid out clear stages that went into the operationalization of a democratic campaign such as peoples' planning. This included: need identification, situation analysis, strategy setting, projectization, plan finalization plan vetting and plan approval.[5]

viii. Chief Ministers typically lead initiatives such as *'Janta Darbars'* in various States in order to reach out to citizens directly, take their feedback on programmes and present them with an opportunity of being heard. However the scale of such initiatives reduces them to events rather than systems. While grievances are collected in large numbers, they are not redressed in a time bound manner. Apart from a few citizens getting a chance to utter a few words, citizens are not presented with an opportunity to be truly heard. Hardly any relevant information related to programmes is shared with people. This is particularly inadequate because it is not a decentralized system and lends itself to a paradigm of benevolence, more than rights.

ix. The Right to Grievance Redress Law passed by Government of Bihar is a recent development towards providing citizens a legal right to get their grievances redressed. It provides a legitimate means for citizens to register grievances; be facilitated while registering and tracking grievances through Information and Facilitation Centres; have an opportunity to participate in the process of redress by being provided an opportunity to be heard. However, the law does not provide for a

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[5] Social Accountability and Participatory Planning- Lessons from the Kerala experience by SM Vijayanand, Secretary, Local Self Government, Government of Kerala

means of sharing information related to entitlements, norms, standards and procedures of various Government programmes and does not give a citizen the right to participate in a public collective forum.

x.   Information and Facilitation Centres of one form or the other have been set up in various States by the name of *Pragya Kendras,* E *Mitras, Sahayta Kendras, Jan Suvidha Kendras* etc. The Centres in principal serve as a means of sharing information with citizens and providing them hands on facilitation in registering and tracking grievances. However, due to their functioning not being intrinsically linked to that of the parent Departments they by themselves cannot ensure time bound redress of grievances, participation of citizens in the process of redress and participate in a public collective forum.

xi. Many Government programmes have provided through guidelines the setting up of village level monitoring committees such as Vigilance and Monitoring Committee for MGNREGA, School Management Committee for SSA, *Anganwadi* Monitoring Committee for Integrated Child Development Services, Fair Price Shop Monitoring Committee for Public Distribution System amongst others. The committees were conceptualized to be a decentralized forum by which citizens can participate in operational decision making and be vigilant about its implementation. However, though the committees are constituted on paper, in reality very few examples exist of such committees holding an administration accountable through their participation. Ther is not because of a lack of will, but a lack of seriousness and investment on the part of the administration to make them truly functional. The composition of the committee is decided arbitrarily, adequate efforts are not made by the administration to share the most updated and relevant information pertaining to the programme with the committees to enable them to share it further down to the community, adequate investment is not made to build their capacities and sensitize them on existing grievance redress mechanisms that they can engage with to represent the grievances of their communities, they are not delegated adequate power to ensure timely redress of grievances that surface in the implementation of their respective programmes.

It is aptly demonstrated from the above that for social accountability to take root as a system of governance, it needs to be perpetuated through a framework consisting of multiple processes and platforms which provide citizens with a right to access relevant information, register grievances and have them acknowledged, have grievances redressed in a time bound manner, participate in collective decision making publicly, participate in planning and evaluation and receive protection when threatened or intimidated.

V. CONCLUSION

Social accountability needs to be recognized as a means of establishing citizenship and re-politicising the engagement of the citizen with the State. The indigenously evolved and articulated Bhilwara Principles offer one such very powerful and practical theory of social accountability built on practice. For it to result in outcomes such as improved participation, decentralized planning and persistent vigilance, accountability frameworks need to be seen beyond mere programmatic interventions initiated to comply with administrative and legal requirements. Going a step forward, social accountability needs to confront itself with contemporary challenges that have permeated governance such as decision making by elected representatives, the unresisted use of digital technology in public service delivery and its unquestioned premise of neutrality, involvement of private entities in public service delivery whilst being outside the scope of traditional accountability frameworks; and offer lessons.

Given the rich experience that the Indian State, Civil Society Organizations, social movements, campaigns and citizens have in conceptualizing, attempting and participating in manifesting social accountability over the past few decades, it is obligatory for the practice of social accountability in India to define the academic discourse and theory of social accountability nationally and globally.