



A view of the public meeting at Katakah addressed by Shri N.V. Gadgil Minister for Works, Minister and Power, Government of India on 25/3/1948. Public Resource via Internet Archive

People's Watch: Principles of Social Accountability

Social accountability refers to mechanisms within public programmes that seek to make the state responsive to citizens' claims by creating direct linkages between citizens and government. These mechanisms have expanded state–society interfaces for participation, claim-making and oversight, extending the downward reach of the democratic state.

The development and functioning of social accountability mechanisms in India's welfare state can be understood through key instruments such as social audits, grievance redress systems and public information platforms. Rights-based legislations since the 2000s have transformed governance by embedding transparency, citizen participation and oversight within state institutions. However, persistent challenges remain and perhaps the gravest threat to these social accountability systems are sweeping legislative changes which undermine transparency and the retrenchment of social rights.

People's Watch: Principles of Social Accountability

*Anindita Adhikari**

Rights-based legislation introduced in India in the early 2000s marked a profound shift in welfare governance and was characterised by several distinctive features. First, these laws emphasised legal entitlements rather than discretionary benefits. They also moved away from narrow below poverty line (BPL) targeting toward a quasi-universal approach. A traditionally opaque bureaucracy was pushed towards legally mandated transparency. Civil and political rights were now brought into closer relationship with social and economic rights institutional and procedural arrangements. These enabled citizens and their associations to participate in implementation and oversight, most notably through social audits under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). These laws also went further than earlier welfare initiatives in empowering local self-gov-

* The author is grateful to Hardik Parmar and Abhishek Punetha and the Social Accountability Forum for Action and Research team for their support in collecting, compiling and analysing the data presented in this chapter. The analysis presented here builds on the work of many collectives, campaigns and individuals committed to a more transparent and accountable democracy.

ernment by making the gram panchayat central to planning and implementation and by designing local institutions that sought to counter state–citizen power asymmetries through participatory governance rather than top-down patronage. Despite India's reputation for bureaucratic size, however, the state remains institutionally thin, especially at the local level. These laws relied on limited budgets to create new social accountability structures and expand frontline capacities through significant recruitment. In addition, new forums and procedures, collectively termed 'social accountability institutions', now provided citizens with multiple points of access to the state.

Civil society organisations and governments in India have pioneered the collaborative design and institutionalisation of practical interventions intended to deepen democratic governance, including proactive disclosure of government information, social audits, facilitation support for accessing basic entitlements and grievance redressal (Adhikari and Heller 2024). In this chapter, social accountability refers to mechanisms within public programmes that seek to make the state responsive to citizens' claims by creating direct linkages between citizens and government at the local, state and national levels for participation in and oversight of implementation and governance (Fox 2015). Together with earlier decentralisation reforms, these mechanisms have expanded state-society interfaces for participation, claim-making and oversight, extending the democratic reach of the state downward. Yet the embedding of social rights remains uneven and incomplete, and ongoing efforts to dilute MGNREGA and other rights-based welfare provisions have made the future of this architecture increasingly uncertain.

The rapid digitisation of welfare has profoundly altered the terrain of social accountability over the past decade, simultaneously opening up new possibilities for claiming rights and entitlements, while also entrenching power along caste and gender faultlines. The digitisation of attendance at public worksites, birth and death registration, social security pensions, hospitals, schools and welfare systems has centralised authority within the state without adequate legal safeguards or accountability mechanisms. When confronted with systemic failures, officials routinely place the blame on algorithms or data systems, thereby denying citizens tangible forms of accountability. This reproduces a new form of what Akhil Gupta (2012) calls 'structural violence', in which repeated bureaucratic action produces arbitrary outcomes even when the intent is the provision of care. Such routinisation generates indifference towards arbitrary outcomes. The burden of proof is placed on marginalised citizens, who must demonstrate the harms inflicted upon them by systems they neither designed nor consented to and cannot oversee.

Despite these pressures on the architecture of welfare, social accountability mechanisms have not been entirely dismantled. In fact, they continue to evolve, expand and assume new forms. Extending the principles and practices of social

accountability, which creates openings for citizen oversight, participation and claim-making within an increasingly digitised welfare system, therefore becomes even more urgent.

16.1 Distinctive features of social accountability mechanisms

Traditional forms of accountability, rooted in the New Public Management-inspired good-governance agenda, emphasise administrative oversight mechanisms such as national monitors and external auditors, prioritising efficiency and compliance (Roelofs 2023; Doornbos 2010; Leftwich 1994). These approaches are largely post facto, assessing performance only after actions have already taken place. They frequently outsource accountability to third parties, distancing citizens and frontline functionaries from the process. As a result, governance and accountability become externalised technical exercises (Sajjanhar 2024).

A first distinctive feature is the institutionalisation of accountability mechanisms or what Jenkins and Manor (2017) call ‘governance rights’. These mechanisms are funded and established by the government, yet designed to operate with a degree of independence from it. This represents a significant shift away from the earlier models in which accountability relied heavily either on oversight bodies embedded within government, such as audit institutions and vigilance commissions (also called horizontal accountability), or on citizens and civil society organisations holding elected representatives to account (vertical accountability). These new mechanisms opened up concrete pathways for ‘diagonal accountability’, which involves direct citizen participation within state institutions or in official oversight bodies at local, state and even national levels (Fox 2015). Instead, rights-based laws invest directly in building the government’s own capacity to facilitate transparency, oversight and responsiveness. By embedding these functions within the architecture of government, accountability becomes a stable and predictable component of governance rather than an ad hoc or externally driven effort.

A second feature concerns the universalisation of participation. Rights-based laws move beyond the idea that only ‘affected persons’ have the legitimacy to demand accountability. In its place, they establish procedures through which all citizens have the right to engage with the government, ask questions and participate in oversight processes. This broadening of participation transforms accountability from a reactive, issue-specific practice into a proactive, democratic right that any individual can exercise, regardless of whether they are directly affected by a particular programme or grievance.

A third distinctive feature is that these laws directly address asymmetries of power between citizens and the government. By creating mechanisms that allow citizens to monitor implementation, scrutinise decisions and challenge administra-

tive irregularities, rights-based legislation sought to redistribute power downward. It enhances citizens' ability to hold officials to account while limiting opportunities for discretionary or opaque decision-making within the bureaucracy.

This debate between approaches to accountability was reflected in the contrasting positions of the India Against Corruption movement and the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) in 2011. While the former advocated for a centralised and overarching anti-corruption body, the Jan Lokpal, as a solution to all forms of corruption, NCPRI proposed a 'basket of measures'. In addition to a national anti-corruption body and the Central Vigilance Commission, NCPRI argued for a decentralised grievance redress system to address arbitrary uses of power and everyday corruption. The proposed system would integrate public vigilance processes such as vigilance committees and social audits, while also facilitating the filing of grievances through block-level information and facilitation centres in rural areas and ward-level centres in urban areas. The grievance redress mechanism was envisioned as a three-tier structure consisting of local grievance redress officers within departments, independent district-level grievance redressal authorities and central and state-level grievance redress commissions.¹

More recently, a framework for social accountability has emerged directly from young Dalit activists reflecting on the denial of accountability and justice in caste-based atrocities through a series of dialogues in rural Rajasthan.

This chapter first briefly discusses how social accountability differs from other forms of accountability and traces its institutional and legal evolution in India. The next section focuses on three cases: social audits as a pioneering approach and practice of social accountability; decentralised grievance redress systems in Bihar and Telangana centred on public hearings; and Rajasthan's people's information system, which offers lessons for other states. Each section provides context on the evolution and performance of these systems, highlights challenges to their functioning and considers how they may be strengthened.

The framework (see Box 16.1) has been used to design, assess and reflect on a range of initiatives introduced for transparency and accountability in welfare service delivery, including programmes framed explicitly as social accountability interventions (Swamy 2020). Institutionalisation is an important cornerstone of this framework, which relies on a delicate balance between government sponsorship and independent facilitation. This form of facilitation is endorsed by law or policy, while retaining an autonomous implementation architecture. Social audits exemplify this balancing.

¹ Email correspondence by Aruna Roy, including a note from the NCPRI, dated 22 August 2011.

Box 16.1: Six principles of Bhilwara framework for accountability

Access to Relevant Information
(*jaankaari*)



Complaint Protection
(*suraksha*)



Grievance Registration
(*sunwai*)



Citizen Participation
(*bhaagidaari*)



Time-bound Redress
(*karyawahi*)



Public Collective Platforms for
Dialogue (*janta ka manch*)

Icons: Information by Ricoster; complaint by Hanbai; fix by kholifah rokhman; Security by Funtasticon; Participation by tatia salsabila; collective by SeeMo; all from Noun Project (CC BY 3.0)

16.2 An approach to social accountability: Three cases

16.2.1 Social audit: Scale, scope and roadblocks

Social audits began as an experiment in strengthening transparency and accountability in Rajasthan in the late 1990s. When the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a workers' and peasants' collective, began its work in rural Rajasthan in the early 1990s on issues of land redistribution and minimum wage regulation in drought-relief works, it encountered large-scale corruption and underpayment of workers. In the absence of access to official government records, corruption in the form of siphoning of funds and leakages had proliferated unchecked for decades. The MKSS began mobilising communities and demanding access to government records and information related to local development works. From this process evolved a popular form of auditing called *jun sunwais* (public hearings), where welfare expenditure was verified through a collective and participatory process. The first stage of the *jun sunwai* process involved a painstakingly meticulous household-verification exercise in which expenditure statements relating to wage and material payments were matched against people's testimonies and discrepancies carefully recorded. The findings from this exercise were then presented at a public hearing where citizens, officials and elected representatives engaged in open debate and discussion before deciding on further action. These were often heated and conflict-ridden deliberations, and frequently generated serious backlash when local networks of privilege and power were exposed and challenged.

Early *jun sunwais* exposed corruption but lacked legal force. While hunger strikes and sit-ins were used to press for action, the effectiveness of these methods also reached its limits. As activists recount, ‘street struggle was seen in the true Gandhian spirit of satyagraha, non-violent civil disobedience, but the state was seen as Ambedkar visualised it – an institution that must deliver constitutional promises. The notion of engagement with the state, opinion-makers and policy began to take shape’ (Roy and MKSS Collective 2018). From this popular practice emerged the demand for a statutory right to information, which was passed in 2005, followed by another major legal breakthrough with the MGNREGA. For the first time, the practice of *jun sunwais* gained legal recognition and thereafter became the responsibility of the state to facilitate periodic social audits through panchayats. The Act specified that independent audit institutions would be set up in every state and that 1 per cent of programme expenditure would be allocated to conducting social audits.

Since then, this experiment has proliferated geographically as well as in terms of the number of schemes and programmes to which it now applies.² Social audits are now widely mandated by law, most prominently under MGNREGA (now VB-GRAM-G) and the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. The Supreme Court has also endorsed social audits as a tool for transparency and accountability in the implementation of the Building and Other Construction Workers’ (BOCW) Act, 1996 and has called for the auditing of childcare institutions under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. In addition to public works and food security, social audits are now mandated through legislation, scheme guidelines, judicial orders and executive policy frameworks across a range of other welfare programmes, including social security for workers, disability entitlements and primary education. In 2016, social audits were endorsed by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India through the issuance of social audit standards. These standards elevated the status of social audits and placed them alongside ‘formal audits’,³ although important distinctions remain. For instance, while the CAG signs a non-disclosure agreement with the government that explicitly states that all information received from the state will remain confidential and be used for audit purposes, the explicit mandate in social audits is that all information must be publicly disclosed.

² For a detailed history of social audits see:

Pande, Suchi. 2014. *The Right to Know, the Right to Live: Grassroots Struggle for Information and Work in India*. PhD diss., University of Sussex. https://sussex.figshare.com/articles/thesis/The_right_to_know_the_right_to_live_grassroots_struggle_for_information_and_work_in_india/23401088?file=41125916.

Pande, Suchi. 2022. “State-led Social Audits: Enabling Citizen Oversight in India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Program.” Case Study. Washington, DC: Accountability Research Center. https://accountabilityresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Case-study_6_State-led-Social-Audits_Suchi-Pande-8-21.pdf

³ Excerpt from a speech delivered by the CAG on 10 March 2015

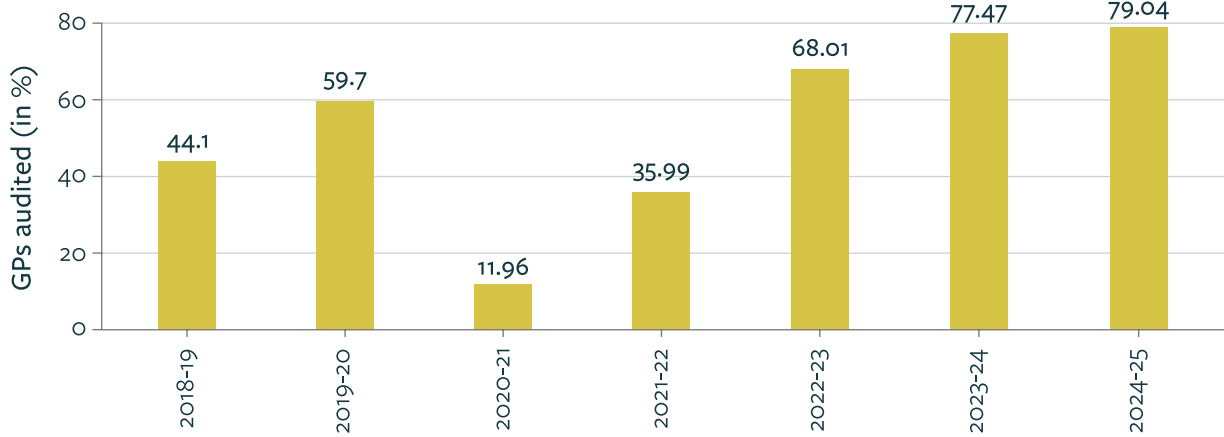
“...‘Social audits serve as an important mechanism of complementing formal audits conducted by the CAG by supplementing the latter with feedback relating to the implementation of the programme from the field.’ Conceptually, social audit goes beyond realm of traditional financial audit as it focuses on issues such as awareness, grievance redressal, feedback about the programmes, physical verification, etc., in its ambit. It is more akin to the concept of Performance Audit. Further, the depths and details up to which social audit goes for examination is not possible in any other evaluation or feedback mechanism. Therefore, when conducted effectively it can provide us valuable feedback on efficiency of a scheme or programme.”
(Excerpt from a speech by the CAG)

With the evolution of social audits from a largely movement-led process into one embedded within government institutions, both the theory and practice of social audits continue to evolve. The first state government to implement the legal mandate for regular social audits was the Government of (undivided) Andhra Pradesh through the establishment of an independent social audit unit. Today, social audits have been institutionalised with varying degrees of independence across most Indian states. Although questions of quality remain, the scale of social audits in India is unprecedented. Since 2019, week-long social audits culminating in public hearings have been conducted annually in nearly half of India’s more than 2.5 lakh panchayats. More than 90,000 resource persons from local communities have been deployed across the country to facilitate these audits. Table 16.1 gives a timeline and status on the provision of social audits for the corresponding law and its implementation status.

The Meghalaya Community Participation and Public Services Social Audit Act, 2017, marked an important legislative development in expanding both the scope and scale of social audit implementation. By establishing social audits as a mandatory requirement for welfare programme evaluation, Meghalaya became the first state to enshrine citizens’ right to evaluate government programmes in binding legislation. This pioneering approach represented a significant breakthrough for civil society organisations advocating national legislation that would extend and strengthen existing social audit frameworks through standardised guidelines and implementation protocols. However, despite this legislative mandate, social audits in Meghalaya continue to face problems similar to those observed elsewhere, such as a lack of financial resources, poor follow-up and difficulties in appointing village-level social audit committees (Seth et al. 2023).

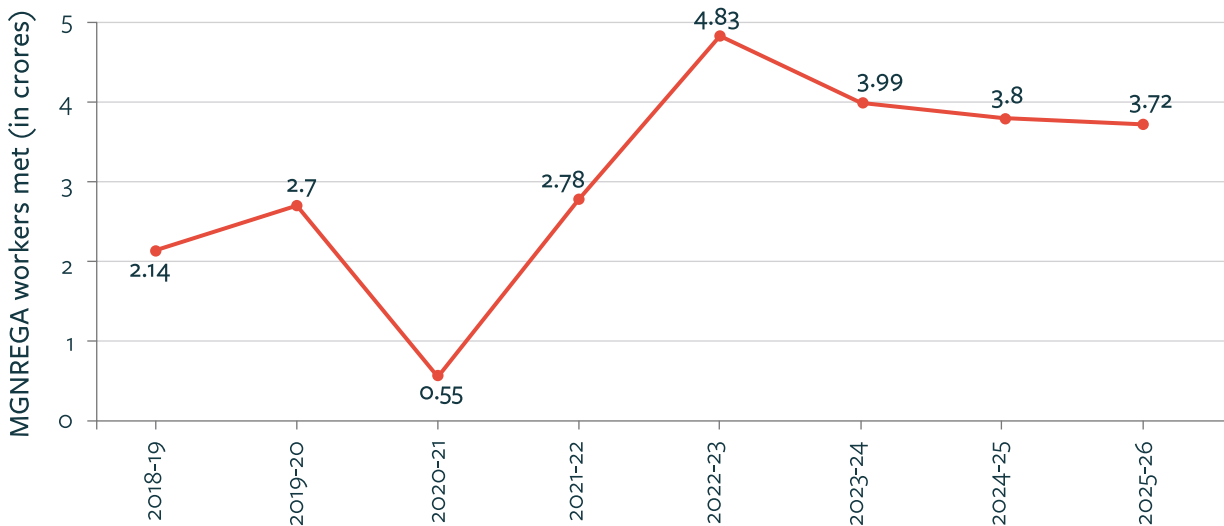
Since 2019, social audit implementation has expanded considerably, except during the years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024–25, social audits were conducted in nearly 80 per cent of all panchayats in the country. Many social audit units (SAUs) were established after 2016 alongside efforts to strengthen their capacity

Figure 16.1: Percentage of Gram panchayats audited once in given financial year



Sources and notes: MGNREGA MIS Report

Figure 16.2: Number of workers met during the social audit process



Sources and notes: MGNREGA MIS Report

and widen their mandate across welfare schemes. SAUs are working to increase coverage and align with social audit standards, aiming for universal implementation.

Social audits: Methods and challenges

Social audits are intensive exercises, with teams spending three to seven days in a panchayat. While quality varies across regions, the scale of coverage is significant. These audits involve in-person, household-level verification of entitlements followed by participation in public hearings. According to the social audit reports published on the Ministry of Rural Development's (MoRD) MGNREGA Management Information System, in the financial year 2024–25, 3.2 crore workers were met and 5 crore people attended public hearings.⁴ No existing monitoring and evaluation mechanism for welfare programmes matches the reach of social audits in terms of geographical coverage or citizen participation.

⁴ As per MGNREGA MIS Report 9.1.4, accessed in July 2024.

Table 16.1: Social audit provisions under different laws and their implementation status

Year	Policy	Provision for social audit	Implementation status
2000	Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act	Mandates monitoring and evaluation of children's homes through social audits (rules issued in 2007)	No clear record of implementation; Act replaced in 2015.
2005	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)	Gram sabhas mandated to conduct regular social audits; dedicated Social Audit Units (SAUs) established	Most institutionalised social audit system; conducted regularly, though quality varies
2012	National Health Mission Framework	Encourages community oversight, including jan sunwais and social audits	Limited pilot audits in states such as Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Meghalaya
2013	National Food Security Act (NFSA)	Periodic social audits mandated for welfare schemes under the Act	Largely not operationalised; limited pilots in some states
2014 / 2022	Mid-Day Meal / PM POSHAN guidelines	Guidelines for social audits through community participation and SAUs	Implemented in several states; about 2% of schools audited per district
2015	14th Finance Commission Grants Advisory	Allowed use of grants for social audit costs	Pilots conducted in Jharkhand and Karnataka
2015–2016	District Mineral Foundation Trust Rules (select states)	Gram sabhas mandated to conduct social audits of projects funded by DMF	No public reports available
2016	Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act	Requires social audits of schemes affecting persons with disabilities	Not operationalised

Table 16.1 (contd.): Social audit provisions under different laws and their implementation status

Year	Policy	Provision for social audit	Implementation status
2017	Supreme Court orders (NFSA, JJ Act, BOCW Act cases)	Directed governments to establish and strengthen social audit mechanisms	Partial implementation; some pilots conducted
2017	Meghalaya Community Participation and Public Services Social Audit Act	Institutionalises participatory social audits across public services	Regular audits conducted through Meghalaya Social Audit Unit
2019	PMAY-G and NSAP guidelines	Social audit guidelines issued by the Ministry of Rural Development	Conducted in some states along with MGNREGA audits
2022	Samagra Shiksha Social Audit guidelines	Social audits covering ~20% of schools annually	Implemented in multiple states with support from audit societies
2024	PMAY-Urban 2.0 guidelines	Social audits mandated for at least 10% of projects	Conducted in some states but reports rarely public

The implementation of social audits faces several challenges. The first is weak action and recovery. Financial misappropriation data reported in social audit reports under the MGNREGA management and information system highlights the genuine efforts of SAUs to identify leakages and strengthen programme implementation. However, action on audit findings and recovery of funds remain highly inadequate. In 2024, 11,42,000 issues were raised through social audits across the country and close to 70 per cent were reported as ‘satisfactorily’ closed. While no independent studies have systematically evaluated action taken reports, anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these closures are little more than perfunctory. Only five states had initiated criminal proceedings, and the number of such cases typically remains in the single digits. Negative sanctions are applied sparingly and rarely extend beyond warnings and show-cause notices. Given the low rates of recovery and punitive action, the conclusions of existing studies ([Afridi and Iversen 2014](#); [Aiyar and Mehta 2015](#); [Shankar and Gaiha 2013](#)) on social audits are largely pessimistic. Some punitive measures have been initiated by the Union government, but these have often weakened the process rather than strengthened it. In 2022, for

instance, the MoRD made the release of funds for centrally sponsored welfare programmes conditional on the conduct of social audits and the resolution of claims (Nair 2022). Civil society groups have also begun to use social audits as a lever for seeking accountability, including through litigation, as seen in the Swaraj Abhiyan case.⁵ Even where formal sanctions remain elusive, the institutional design of social audits creates spaces within which local and organised civil society can mobilise. While there is considerable subnational variation in the quality, volume and resolution of claims, a public paper trail is nonetheless created.

A second major challenge concerns delays and instability in funding. Significant delays in the release of funds have undermined the effectiveness of social audits across states. In 2024, for instance, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya received only a single tranche of funding. The situation was dire in states such as Assam, Bihar, Tripura and West Bengal, where no funds were allocated by the MoRD for the financial year 2023–24. In some of these states, village- and block-level resource persons continued to work without wages. Volatility in fund release and the clustering of disbursements towards the end of the fiscal year compel SAUs to compress audit schedules, rush completion and submit utilisation certificates. This pattern undermines audit quality. Delays between funding requests and actual allocations further exacerbate the problem, leaving SAUs engaged in continual fund-chasing whilst managing audit operations. The duration of these delays varies considerably, ranging from around thirty days in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh to more than 130 days in Tamil Nadu. In Assam, Bihar, Tripura and West Bengal, delays have extended beyond an entire financial year.⁶ This instability directly affects field-level resource persons, leading to financial hardship that compromises audit integrity, enables malpractices and undermines the credibility of the process.

Despite these vulnerabilities, social audits have gained increasing political recognition across party lines. In 2023, the then Union minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Giriraj Singh, emphasised that *jan bhagidari* (people's participation) must be central to social audit initiatives. Governments have also sought to leverage social audits to project accountable and transparent governance. Most recently, as MGNREGA was repealed and replaced with a hollowed out employment-without-any-guarantee programme (VB-GRAM-G), the social audit mandate within the law continues to hold.

16.2.2 Grievance redress systems

If audits are commonly understood as the official examination of accounts in public discourse, a more expansive meaning comes from the Latin word *auditus* (a hearing, a listening) and *audire* (to hear). The official examination of accounts

⁵ Swaraj Abhiyan v. Union of India, 2016 See <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/19199787/>.

⁶ Data provided by Social Audit Units, June 2024.

was originally an oral procedure. Grievance redress and the right to be heard constitute an often overlooked form of political participation but feature centrally in the Bhilwara framework as the second and third principles of *sunwai* and *karyawahi*. A people-centric grievance redress mechanism also flows from the constitutional mandate of participatory governance, non-arbitrariness (Article 14), procedural fairness in access to public services (Article 21) and promotion of the welfare of people (Article 38). In addition, the Constitution provides a foundation for legislative action on grievance redress under Entry 8 of the Concurrent List – ‘Actionable Wrongs’ – which empowers both the Centre and the states to enact laws to hear and redress citizens’ grievances.

India’s efforts to institutionalise time-bound service delivery and grievance redress have evolved through a combination of proposed national legislation, state-level laws and administrative and civil society innovations. At the national level, a key initiative building on the ‘basket of measures’ proposed by the NCPRI was the Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011. The Bill laid out provisions for a decentralised grievance redress system with independent appellate structures and proactive disclosure of information. It was introduced in the Lok Sabha and unanimously endorsed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee in 2012. However, despite this broad political support, the Bill ultimately lapsed. Some central welfare legislations, such as MGNREGA, the Forest Rights Act and the NFSA, set out grievance redress mechanisms alongside their implementation architecture. For example, the NFSA provides for an internal grievance redressal mechanism (Section 14), district grievance redressal officers (Section 15), state food commissions (Section 16–21), vigilance committees at fair price shop, block, district and state levels (Section 29) and reporting and public disclosure obligations (Section 27). Provisions for grievance redress under MGNREGA (Section 25) have been retained under the VB-GRAM-G Act, 2025 (Section 28), which calls for ‘institutional mechanisms for receiving grievances at the ward, gram panchayat, block and district levels’. However, implementation has been uneven, with rules either absent, non-functional or minimally utilised, helplines underused and commissions defunct ([Nayak 2020](#)).

In the absence of an overarching central law, progress has been minimal at the state level. As of 2026, twenty-two states and union territories have enacted Right to Public Service Delivery Acts, beginning with Madhya Pradesh in 2010. These laws establish enforceable entitlements for citizens to receive notified public services within stipulated timelines, backed by penalties for delays and structured appellate mechanisms. However, their scope remains limited to pre-notified services and does not extend to broader or systemic grievances. A notable initiative is [Rajasthan’s Right to Hearing Act, 2012](#), which guarantees citizens timely hearings and decisions, supported by appellate provisions and facilitation centres to enhance

accessibility. The Act also establishes information and facilitation centres, which include call centres and help desks for receiving grievances, offering filing support and the effective redressal of grievances. After initial enthusiasm for implementing its most notable features of grievance filing support and hearings, the act has lapsed into cold storage with the digital portal becoming the primary platform for grievance redress.

Most states have established dedicated online grievance portals with state-wide coverage, with the exception of Jharkhand, Assam, Nagaland and Sikkim. These platforms, often managed by the chief minister's office, receive complaints and route them to relevant departments for resolution (see Table 16.2). These systems have evolved from ad hoc cells into permanent digital infrastructures characterised by significant fiscal commitment and high levels of citizen engagement. Some states, including Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, now allocate close to ₹100 crore⁷ annually to support unified grievance portals and 24/7 helplines. These investments sustain large digital backends, call-centre personnel and real-time monitoring dashboards, indicating that grievance redress is becoming integral to state service delivery.

The sheer volume of grievances reflects this high citizen reliance on these systems. In Uttar Pradesh, more than 74 lakh grievances are handled annually, while Rajasthan processes approximately 22 lakh. In Odisha, the number has increased from nearly 43,000 in 2021 to over 6.4 lakh in 2024–25, reaching an intensity of 151 complaints per 10,000 population.⁸ Despite this scale and investment, a critical legal vacuum persists. Most portals operate under executive mandates rather than legislative frameworks. These digital-only systems often lack physical interfaces or facilitation support for filing grievances, limiting their accessibility to those with greater familiarity with government systems. They can therefore be characterised as 'techno-administrative', focused on 'data collection processes that enable fine-tuning of government programmes' (Hossain, Joshi and Pande 2023). Interaction with citizens during verification and resolution is minimal, and reported satisfaction is often treated as a box-ticking exercise rather than a substantive measure of redress quality. High reported resolution rates displayed on these portals further obscure underlying limitations. These systems also foreclose opportunities for collective engagement, offering no space for citizens to challenge power through shared political action.

⁷ Based on RTI responses from states on budgetary outlays for grievance redress portals in 23 states. Approximately 70–75 RTI applications were filed between March and September 2025, with substantial responses received from 12 states. These RTIs were filed by the author and researchers associated with the Theory and Practice of Social Accountability Project, National Law School of India University.

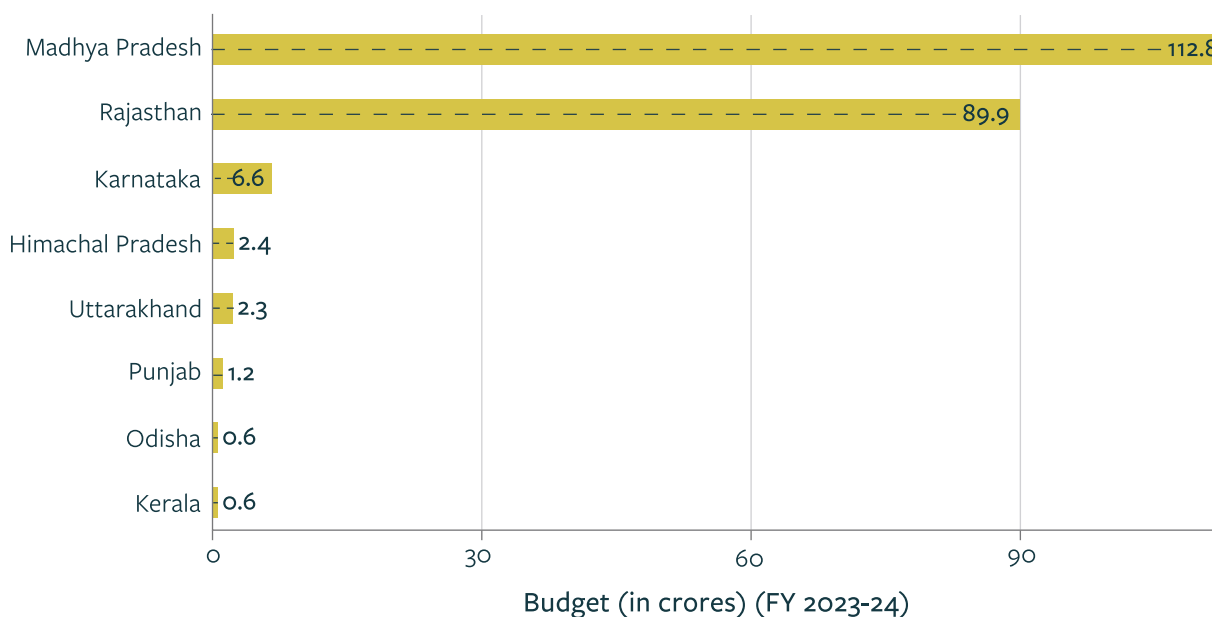
⁸ See note 7.

Table 16.2: State-wise online grievance portals

State	Grievance redressal portal	Date of inception
Andhra Pradesh	Public Grievance Redressal System (PGRS)	2016
Arunachal Pradesh	CM Jansunwai	-
Bihar	Lok Shikayat	2015
Chhattisgarh	Jan Shikayat Nivaran Vibhag	-
Goa	Directorate of Public Grievances	-
Gujarat	SWAGAT (State Wide Attentions on Grievance by Application of Technology)	2003
Haryana	CM Window and Jan Samvaad	2014
Himachal Pradesh	E-Samadhan, CM Sankalp	2008
Karnataka	Janaspandana	2021
Kerala	Santhwanam	2023
Madhya Pradesh	CM Helpline – Jan Hetu-Jan Setu	2020
Maharashtra	Aaple Sarkar	2015
Meghalaya	Meghalaya One	2012
Odisha	Jana Sunani	2021
Punjab	Connect Punjab	-
Rajasthan	Rajasthan Sampark	2014
Telangana	CM Prajavani	2023
Uttar Pradesh	Jansunwai-Samadhan	2019
West Bengal	Sarasari Mukhyomontri	2023

Sources and notes: Meghalaya Public Grievance Redressal and Monitoring System (MegPGRAMS) changed to Meghalaya One since 2025.

The proliferation of grievance portals was preceded by the legislative movement around right to public services laws. In 2010, Madhya Pradesh became the first state to pass such legislation, followed by a wave of similar laws across nearly fifteen states between 2011 and 2013. By 2026, twenty-four states will have enacted these laws to ensure the time-bound delivery of notified services such as

Figure 16.3: State budgets for grievance redress portals

Sources and notes: Responses to RTIs filed by the author and researchers associated with the Theory and Practice of Social Accountability Project, National Law School of India University.

licenses, certificates and permits. These laws guarantee delivery within stipulated timelines, impose penalties for delays and defaults, designate appellate authorities and create enforceable citizen entitlements. However, they are limited to pre-notified services and do not address broader grievances such as delays in non-notified entitlements, systemic failures or other ‘actionable wrongs’.

More comprehensive grievance redress frameworks have emerged in select states. The Bihar Right to Public Grievances Redressal Act, 2015 goes furthest in aligning with the principles of social accountability. It establishes a statutory right to time-bound grievance resolution across government schemes and services, supported by a multi-tier structure of designated officers, appellate authorities, timelines of 30–45 days, penalties for delays and facilitation centres for in-person filing. The centrepiece of this system is the hearings conducted by independent grievance redress officers, bringing complainants and implementing officials face to face. The Act could go further by making these hearings public; at present, they remain individual and closed-door processes. Moreover, the absence of public disclosure of complaint data limits transparency and minimises the scope for collective action. Similar patterns have been observed in grievance systems globally, as a multi-country study shows (Hossain, Joshi and Pande 2023)

Administrative and civil society collaboration has complemented legislative efforts. A notable example is the decentralised grievance redress *Prajavaani* pilot in Adilabad district, Telangana, launched in January 2025. The pilot integrated multiple measures, including proactive disclosure of welfare entitlements, information facilitation centres for accessing application status and registering complaints, and

designated officers mandated to resolve cases within thirty days through written action taken reports. Between January 2025 and March 2026, 12,652 grievances were processed, 82 public hearings conducted and more than 100 officials trained, with 7,924 action taken reports issued.⁹ Public hearings were held at the mandal level, and more than 50 per cent of complainants attended public hearings, with participation reaching up to 80 per cent in some mandals, indicative of higher expectations. Women accounted for 63 per cent of complainants compared to men, partly reflecting the nature of grievances included in the pilot, such as gas subsidies and electricity billing. Extensive outreach by local civil society organisations, social auditors and panchayat-level functionaries contributed to this participation.

To strengthen grievance redress architecture in India, an overarching and interdepartmental statutory framework is necessary to transform grievance redress from discretion to right. Such a framework needs to be grounded in the principles of social accountability and extend to a clear and comprehensive definition of grievances, enforceable timelines, multiple modes of filing and independent administrative and appellate structures, with public hearings at the heart of the resolution process. A campaign to introduce such a nationwide law, a '*jawaabdehi kanoon*', has been initiated in Rajasthan. However, despite political assurances and consultations between the state government and civil society, the Rajasthan Guaranteed Delivery of Public Services and Accountability Bill remains pending and has yet to be enacted.

16.2.3 Public data portals

Access to relevant and actionable information (*jaankari*) is essential for enabling citizens to realise their rights and participate effectively in governance processes. This principle is embedded in Section 4(2)¹⁰ of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which mandates proactive, *suo motu* disclosure of information by public authorities. The provision emphasises that information should be regularly disseminated through multiple channels, including digital platforms, so that citizens are not compelled to rely on formal RTI applications to obtain basic information. A study by Satark Nagrik Sangathan (2014) found that 67 percent of RTI applications sought information that should already have been proactively disclosed under Section 4 (49 per cent) or supplied without requiring an application (18 per cent). Only 4 per cent of surveyed central ministries and departments were proactively disclosing information under the RTI Act (Tiwari and Ansari 2018).¹¹

⁹ Data collected by the Social Accountability Forum for Action and Research. (Punetha et al. 2026)

¹⁰ RTI Act, Section 4(2): 'It shall be a constant endeavour of every public authority...to provide as much information suo motu to the public at regular intervals...so that the public have minimum resort to the use of this Act to obtain information'

While there is no shortage of public dashboards on welfare programmes launched by the Union and state governments, these rarely meet the needs of ordinary citizens and the information asymmetry persists. Many dashboards disclose aggregate data rather than lists that can be independently verified. Instead of enabling ‘open government’, these portals often remain limited to ‘open data’, which is largely inert and unactionable. They function primarily as management information systems serving administrative interests and do not substantially enhance political accountability (Yu and Robinson 2012). In most cases, usable data – such as beneficiary-wise lists of payments for housing schemes or real-time application status (accepted, pending, rejected), reason for rejection, sanctioning authority and payment timelines is either not disclosed or remains accessible only through administrative logins. Information is therefore restricted to those with state-authorised access.

The Jan Sookna Portal represents a significant breakthrough in operationalising the proactive disclosure mandate of the RTI Act within a digital governance framework. Conceived through collaboration between civil society and the Government of Rajasthan, the portal places non-exempt public information directly in the public domain in line with Sections 4(1) and 4(2) of the Act. It marks a shift from reactive information access – where citizens must file applications – to a system of routine disclosure.

The development of the Jan Sookna Portal reflects the linkages between multiple principles of the Bhilwara Framework and offers insight into the design of People’s Digital Infrastructures for welfare. In 2015, the *Sookna evum Rozgar Abhiyan* (SR Abhiyan), in collaboration with Rajasthan Patrika, led a campaign called *Shiksha Ka Sawal*, which advocated improvements in public education, greater community participation in government school management and greater transparency. It became evident that students, parents and local communities lacked adequate information to monitor school functioning. Over the course of the campaign, nearly 5,000 RTI applications were filed across thirty-three districts. These revealed a wide range of grievances, including delays in granting forest rights titles, delays in MGNREGA wage payments, exclusion of eligible households from ration card lists under NFSA and instances of corruption. Nearly 10,000 grievances were documented (SAFAR and SR Abhiyan 2021).

It became clear that timely grievance redress was constrained by the lack of accessible and relevant information at the appropriate administrative level. Many grievances stemmed from inadequate budget allocations, staff vacancies, poor communication of entitlements and complex application procedures. However, the absence of systematic disclosure of information across stages of planning,

11 Central Information Commission. 2018. Transparency audit of public authorities.

Figure 16.4: Screenshot of Jan Soochna Portal

Sources and notes: <https://jansoochna.rajasthan.gov.in> (Accessed May 2026)

application, verification, sanction and expenditure limited the ability of citizens to hold public officials accountable when their rights were violated.

The portal was developed through a series of forty 'Digital Dialogues' – tripartite consultations involving line departments, the IT Department and civil society organisations – conducted over two years. These dialogues helped identify the nature, scope and format of information to be proactively disclosed across government programmes. This collaborative approach has enabled continuous identification of information gaps, iterative improvements in data presentation and closer alignment with citizen priorities.

The Jan Soochna Portal addresses information asymmetry by reorganising government data around citizens' needs rather than administrative objectives. It integrates data from 117 departments and covers 344 schemes, providing scheme-wise, entitlement-holder-level and transaction-level information. This enables individuals to verify entitlements, track application status and identify discrepancies. The portal discloses disaggregated and actionable information across sectors, including toilets constructed under the Swacch Bharat Mission, panchayat works funded through finance commission grants, distribution of free medicines, Ayushman Bharat, RTI applications, ration distribution, farm loan waivers, functioning of educational institutions, benefits for labourers and persons with disabilities, social security pensions, mining lease contracts and land titles under the Forest Rights Act. Since its launch in September 2019, the portal has recorded over 16.7 crore visits.

To illustrate, under the BOCW Act, lakhs of construction workers are registered and entitled to benefits such as insurance and scholarships for their children.

Historically, however, information on welfare cess collection and disbursement was not publicly available. This forced people to rely on intermediaries for basic information; who was registered, eligibility for benefits, amounts received, processing timelines, selection and rejection criteria, pending applications, employer details and issuing authorities. This dependency enabled large-scale irregularities. Ineligible individuals accessed benefits in the names of workers, while eligible workers were unable to file complaints due to lack of information. These issues were documented through social audits in Salumbar block in Rajasthan and Shalimar Bagh constituency in Delhi.

Following extensive consultations with the Labour Department during the Digital Dialogues, Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) were developed to enable data integration. Information on all BOCW rights holders – such as name, address, age, application status, reasons for rejection, sanction details and payment records – was made publicly available on the portal. Using registration numbers or geographic filters, this information became easily searchable and verifiable by workers and their collectives.

A similar initiative, *Mahiti Kanaja* (information repository), was launched in Karnataka as a single-window public information portal. Developed by the Centre for e-Governance, Government of Karnataka, it provides information across nineteen sectors and has recorded 97 lakh visitors since its launch. However, unlike the Jan Soochna Portal, which is embedded within a broader ecosystem combining digital access with offline facilitation through civil society networks such as SR Abhiyan, *Mahiti Kanaja* has not progressed beyond its initial phase of disclosure.

16.3 Conclusion

One of the gravest challenges that face transparency and the freedom of information in India today, on which much of the future of social accountability rests, is the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act. The Act amends Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, representing a violation of the fundamental right to information under Articles 19(1)(a) and 21. The DPDP Act conflates ‘personal’ with ‘private’, contrary to constitutional doctrine. Privacy, as recognised in *Puttaswamy* case,¹² protects against unjustified state intrusion into an individual’s intimate sphere, not information relating to public functions or state action. By extending privacy to all personal data in public records, the amendment shields state activity from public scrutiny. The consequences for the social accountability initiatives outlined in this chapter are significant.

First, social audits rely on collective disclosure of identifiable data. By classifying muster rolls, payment records and workers’ lists for MGNREGA, for example, as exempt ‘personal information’, the amendment renders statutorily mandated

¹² *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd) v Union of India*, 2018.

social audits largely unworkable. Public hearings depend on access to official records – names, amounts, dates and designations – to enable verification. By exempting such records, this provision undermines a central mechanism of scrutiny. Second, platforms such as Jan Soochna Portal and Mahiti Kanaja depend on the disclosure of data on individual rights and entitlement holders. The amendment places this framework at risk by allowing such information to be withheld.

An important argument advanced by civil society in opposition to the DPDP Act is that, for marginalised groups such as landless workers, Dalit workers, women and communities dependent on the public distribution system, the RTI Act – particularly its proactive disclosure provisions – has been a key instrument for documenting, exposing and challenging unequal and discretionary treatment by the state and its officials. It has enabled comparisons of who received work and who did not, who was paid and who was not and who was included or excluded from beneficiary lists. In that sense, it underpins the ability to enforce Article 14's guarantee of equality before the law. That ability depends on access to personal information in government records, and the impugned amendment effectively undermines it. Further, identifying officials by name, disclosing their decisions, payments to contractors and the exercise of discretionary powers all involve personal information about identifiable individuals. By placing such information beyond the reach of the RTI Act, the amendment shields not only private details but also officials' public actions from scrutiny.

Finally, this chapter has focused primarily on institutionalised social accountability mechanisms such as social audits mandated by the CAG's auditing standards. However, the practice and evolution of social accountability ultimately rest with people and their collectives. While the future of social audits depends on programme implementation, adequate resourcing and follow-through on findings, people's audits led by civil society have continued to evolve in diverse forms, albeit at a smaller scale. These are assessments of public services and institutions driven by citizens and civil society organisations as an extension of their democratic right to know, speak and be heard. Civil society groups across India have conducted public audits of various programmes for decades and offer models that can be adapted.¹³ The government and SAUs need to recognise the legitimacy of such processes and engage with them as part of a broader commitment to transparency and accountability.

The trajectory of social accountability in India reflects both a deepening of democratic practice and an intensifying contestation over its future. Innovations such as social audits, grievance redress systems and public information platforms have expanded citizens' capacity to engage with and hold the state accountable.

¹³ Reports of civil society-led audits are available at <https://socialauditindia.org/>

However, their effectiveness remains contingent on how digitisation enables or restricts their use, the adequacy of resources and the strength of legal frameworks. Challenges, particularly the curtailment of access to information, threaten to erode these gains. Safeguarding and strengthening social accountability will require reaffirming transparency, participation and enforceable rights as foundational principles of welfare governance.

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