

1. What is a citizen charter? Do you agree with the assertion that citizen charters act as mere optics and have no substance on ground?

Introduction

Citizen charter is the written voluntary declaration by service providers highlighting the standards, timeline, grievance redressal mechanism and other service-related information.

Body

Started after the 1997 conference of chief ministers, citizen charter has changed the way of service delivery, but not living up to its expectations. There are issues in real time like

- Public consultation: is largely absent and hence the charter prepared is not in tune with the citizen requirement.
- Personnel training: is not done prior preparation and therefore implementation suffers. It is like putting cart before the horse.
- Impractical standards/timeline: without adequate internal preparation making it very difficult if not impossible in field.
- Awareness programmes are not conducted systematically and hence most clients are not even aware.
- Some of the citizen charters are just information brochures like the Delhi transport without any interaction whatsoever.
- Update: of the citizen charter happens very rarely making it not in tune with the ground requirements.
- Even a research conducted by IIPA and report of 2nd ARC highlights the issues like poor design, too verbose, lacks precision. No benchmarks, inadequate grievance redress mechanisms and so on.
- Lack of accountability for missed services has made the citizen charter a mere rhetorical document.

For the above reasons, citizen charter seems to be acting as mere optics with no actual substance on ground. **However**, citizen charter being a complete failure is an exaggeration. It has produced and is a reason for many reforms and successes like

- Sevottam model as suggested by 2nd ARC and 6th pay commission has been adopted by many ministries and departments. Citizen charter of Indian post is one of the success stories.
- Almost, 70% of the central government ministries have working citizen charters as per the government report.
- As a next step to citizen charter, states like Madhya pradesh, Kerala etc., have passed right to service.
- Citizen report card, Jan Bhaagidaari in cities like Bangalore, Delhi etc., are offshoots of citizen charter.

Though, there are shortcoming, citizen charter has brought awareness among citizens that the services provided by the government or an organization is their right. It is acting as a hindrance to the wrongdoings of the institutions and provide a channel to air the grievance.

Conclusion

‘Any policy will be as successful as its implementation’. It is true that the citizen charter has been implemented more in letter than in spirit and reforms is needed.

Recommendations of 2nd ARC has to be implemented which includes achievable standards adoption, internal restructuring, wide consultations before formulation, periodic review, accountability for non-performance and so on.

Right to service is the way forward along with the above and ‘The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill’, 2011 (Citizens Charter) which failed to pass has to be taken up and implemented.

2. What are the institutional measures to ensure transparency and accountability in governance? Discuss. How effective have these measures been? Critically comment.

Introduction

Transparency and accountability in administration are sine qua non of participatory democracy. Government secrecy fosters disbelief of government on the part of the citizenry and transparency eliminates the wall of secrecy built against the common people by those holding power. Accountability goes beyond the mere responsibility of delivery of a task or service. It also means answerability if a service is not delivered in a timely and efficient manner such that it becomes a burden.

Body

- UNDP describes governance as "a system of values, policies and institutions by which a society manages its economic, political and social affairs through interactions within and among the state, civil society and the private sector."
- Transparency is broadly accepted as a major principle of good governance. Transparency allows stakeholders to collect information that may be critical to uncovering abuses and defending their interests. Likewise, transparency increases accountability of the Government officials.
- Transparency means that the criteria, process and systems of decision-making are openly known to all in a public manner. Citizens charter becomes an important measure for transparency in institutional setup.

- The declaration of Right To Information Act (2015) set the stage for transparency in the functioning of the government and its various agencies. Under this Act, access to information from a public agency has become a statutory right of every citizen.
- Major Initiatives to Enhance Transparency in India include - Right to Information Act, Public Services Bill, Citizens Charters, e-Governance, e-Bhoomi, e-Choupal, e-procurement.
- Transparency is required to make the system of public service delivery effective. However, sheer knowledge of what entitlements are, and who is responsible for fulfilling them, is not sufficient to ensure that public services are passably and effectively delivered to the 'intended' recipients.
- Accountability become another crucial concept in maintaining good governance. Accountability means being answerable for the performance of tasks assigned to a person.
- Accountability necessitates the clear specification of tasks to be performed, the time frame and budget available for performing those tasks. Additionally, it is also important to be clear about the responsibility for performance of those tasks; person responsible and whether it is clear to them.
- Citizens Charter Bill 2011 aims at providing rights to citizens for time bound delivery of goods and services and provide a Grievance Redressal Mechanism. Such a bill was previously recommended by the Second Administrative Reforms Commission.
- Lokpal and Lokayuktas aims at reducing corruption by setting up of a separate institution of Lokpal at the Central level and Lokayuktas at the State level. These organizations investigate cases of corruption against public servants in the respective Government organizations.
- E-Governance initiatives for providing an accountable administration include a framework for efficient handling of public grievances through the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) which is already in place.
- The governance involving transparency and accountability suffers from the weakness that disclosed Information's Genuineness can also be dubious and Wrong Interpretation of available information can give detrimental results to an organization.
- Further, the abundance and availability of information means that the user needs skill to determine what it is that they want. The user of information has major role to play in affecting information sharing.
- Change in the mindset of the government employees is necessary as it becomes a great hindrance in the process of ensuring transparency and accountability in governance structures in India.
- Limited digitalisation of government offices and inadequate infrastructure has further been a stumbling block in ensuring effective transparency and accountability measures.

Way Forward -

- There is imperative need to strengthen and widen the national public information infrastructure through developing information networks for wider access of digital information through wider use of information technologies.
- Changing the mindset of the government employees is important. This will be addressed to organizing programmes for orientation, training and capacity building.
- States may be advised to establish an independent public grievance redressal authority to deal with complaints of delay, harassment and corruption.

Conclusion

Accountability is the complementary function of Transparency. Further, if the system of governance is transparent enough it would promote accountability, transparency and accountability are linked vis-a-vis its mission of an organization where the main objective of achieving public welfare needs to be prioritised.

3. With the help of suitable examples, illustrate the ways in which Right to Information (RTI) has ushered Indian administration and governance into an era of transparency.

Introduction

India is the world's biggest democracy. Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005 ensures that the people put in power remain answerable to the citizens always. It has marked a move from opaqueness to the beginning of an era of transparency and it fundamentally restructures the debate on governance from what should be revealed to what must be kept secret.

Body

- An information-driven society leads to transparency and accountability. Since transparency involves sharing of information it thoroughly reduces chances of corruption, nepotism, favouritism, which is ensured by RTI.
- The RTI act is immensely vital for the functioning of any democracy as it sanctions its citizen the right to inspect the work of the government and ask for certified copies to know the status of the work of different government projects. The RTI Act mandates timely response to a request for information from a public authority.
- Indians file nearly 60 lakh RTIs every year, the highest number of such information requests in the world. A total number of 2,74,737 RTI applications were filed under standalone in different departments and agencies of Delhi.

Further, RTI brought in the changes in governance in the country through the following ways :

- Participation - Participation of both men and women is the cornerstone of good governance. The Right to information acts gives people a chance to participate not just one in five years, but every day and question any decisions.
- Accessibility- Right to Information makes it possible to easy access of information from government departments, documents, records, services, finances and policies to all sectors of the community. By providing easy access of information, it reduces the traditional long gaps between citizens and administration and thus helps in nation building process.
- Transparency- Transparency is the milestone of good governance. The enactment of Right to Information act 2005, people are now able to seek information from any government department with a definite time frame. The Right to Information act is intended to promote accountability and transparency in government by making the process of government decision making more open.

Transparency is considered essential for controlling corruption in public life. Transparency and accountability in Government are mutually reinforcing. The effect of RTI in this regard can be seen from the following examples:

- The impact created through this legislation can be seen through some of the landmark judgements, for instance, in the matter of Adarsh Scam, where crucial links between politicians and military officials was disclosed. This 31-storey building had permission for only 6 floors which was meant entirely for the welfare of war widows and veterans. Instead, these flats went to several politicians, bureaucrats and their relatives.
- In an another matter an RTI filed by an NGO based in Punjab it was revealed that the funds that were meant for victims of the Kargil War were used by bureaucrats to buy cars and air-conditioners. The court charged these bureaucrats with fraud and the funds were then transferred into Prime Minister's Relief Fund.
- People in Rural Karnataka have combined the campaigns for the Right to Information and the Right to Food to fight hunger. Poor villagers have successfully participated in social audits and public hearings to demand that the rations due to them are allotted to them at the correct prices.

RTI also has its share of issues and shortcomings, which can be seen from below –

- The RTI Act is in a state of dismay. According to a study done by Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS) and Centre for Equity Studies (CES), the number of appeals and complaints pending as on December 31, 2016, in the 23 information commissions were 1,81,852.
- It is also seen that Section 4 of RTI Act which is suo motu disclosure of information by public authorities is itself violated by information commissions. Eventually either the information is not available in the public domain or if it is, then such information is obsolete.

- If the information is used to make allegations to malign public servants or create disorder it can negatively impact the working of public bodies. Adequate checks and balances are needed in the systems to ensure that information is not misused by such elements.

Conclusion

No country can progress without having transparency and accountability in its governance and RTI isn't just a law but a tool for the functioning of better democracy. It is a citizen's fundamental right derived from Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. There is a general consensus in India that the institutions of transparency taken singly and collectively are ushering in the road towards fulfilling the ideals of 'New India'.

4. Does accountability always lead to better and more efficient governance? Critically examine.

Introduction

In ethics and governance, accountability is answerability, blameworthiness, liability, and the expectation of account-giving. Accountability involves both a horizontal and vertical dimensions.

The horizontal dimension is the system of checks and balances among the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches. Example: Judicial reviews, Parliamentary Committees, question hour etc

Vertical accountability entails the relationships between citizens and decision makers, including the ability of citizens to influence political decision-making processes. Example: RTI, Social Audits

The ability of citizens to demand accountability and more open government is fundamental to better and more efficient governance.

Body

Accountability always leads to better and more efficient governance

- Accountability ensures rule of law. It ensures decisions and actions of public officials are subject to oversight.
- It guarantees actions and decisions taken by public officials regarding government initiatives and respond to the needs of the community.
- It helps in improving the delivery of public services, measuring performance and providing incentives to achieve targets and sanctions in case of non-performance.
- It empowers citizens and aids their development through citizen-centric policies.
- Accountability is important in good governance to keep the public servants tuned to the right perspective. It ensures judicious use of public funds and resources and hence, infuses the efficiency in governance.

- It reduces corruption and builds trust among the governors and the governed.
- Ensures that the grass roots level problems are effectively addressed.
- Improves last mile outreach and helps bring in a change in attitude of bureaucracy.

Accountability always leads to better and more efficient governance

- In the recent past, a few instances have surfaced wherein civil servants have been implicated for bonafide mistakes, through instruments like accountability like RTI. They have often been prosecuted and even imprisoned. The instances have greatly rattled the moral fibre of the civil servants.
- These have led to underutilization of funds shelving of many projects.
- Accountability also allegedly impacts the independence of institutions. Supreme Court, for instance, for a long time was not willing to divulge information under the RTI act.

Conclusion

As per 2nd ARC open, transparent and accountable government is an imperative prerequisite for community oriented citizen centric public service delivery. Because without it covert unethical behaviour will result.

Through series of reform measures such as Financial Management Initiative, creation of Executive Agencies, Citizen's Charter, and Public Service Agreement, complete transformation of bureaucratic structure and efficient public service, accountability is embedded.

Max Weber observed that the power position of a fully developed bureaucracy is everywhere overpowering. Without accountability bureaucracy will become like Frankenstein's monster that divorced his own master.

5. India is a democratic country with diverse religious beliefs, cultural practices and political ideologies. In this light, examine the significance of a professional bureaucracy.

Introduction

Bureaucracy refers to a specialized system and processes designed to maintain uniformity and controls within an organization. The adjective 'professional' has the following connotations in connection with bureaucracy –

- Having experience in the activity.
- Having standards to which the job is expected to be done.
- Having the requisite values like courage, impartiality, non-partisanship among others.
- Give advice without fear or favour.

- Being worthy to be paid for it.
- Being committed to the activity as a career.

Body

Significance of a professional bureaucracy is a diverse and democratic country like India

- Different groups in a diverse society have different aspirations and demands. To fulfill all of them may not be possible at all times. However bureaucracy should not be seen as doing undue favor to any particular section. This is important for social capital, credibility and legitimacy of administration.
- People in a diverse society believe in the rightness of Laws which are enacted through uniform procedure.
- People accept the authority due to their faith in the exceptional professionalism of officials.
- Probity is said to be important for socio-economic development of a nation. Maintenance of probity requires high professionalism.
- In diverse religious beliefs, cultural practices, rights of minorities can be protected and constitutional ideals can be reached, if bureaucracy remains professional and impartial.
- Rules of law can be enforced. The saying, “Be you ever so high the law is always above you”, if bureaucracy does its job professionally in maintenance of law and order and crime investigation.

Conclusion

The bureaucracy has to prevent the disruptive efforts of a society that is ridden with caste and patriarchal consciousness. Bureaucracy has to intervene in public life to see to it that society does not degenerate into aggressive obscurantism. The bureaucracy has to protect the very state of which it is a part, from being disrupted or being undermined by the disquieting elements of the civil society. This can be effectively done if there is professionalism in bureaucracy.