

# IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

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CITIZENS BUILDING  
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## Winning the Right to Information Campaign in India

In 2005, after a nine-year campaign by people's organisations, the Indian government implemented a far-reaching Right to Information (RTI) Act. The Act, which requires all central, state and local government institutions to meet public demands for information is one of the strongest in the world. It empowers citizens to demand greater government accountability, improve their participation in decision-making, and help reduce corruption. This Research Summary shows how a national network of people's organisations helped enact this legislation and ensure it was put into practice.

### **New political opportunities**

Since the early 1990s India has been gradually liberalising its economy, a process increasingly criticised by various people's organisations. The debate became more and more adversarial, with less and less room for negotiation and compromise. However, a major political opportunity for activists opened up in the 2004 elections. The ruling coalition government led by the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was defeated, in part due to growing public concern about rising unemployment, inflation and worsening economic disparities. The Congress Party formed a coalition government with Communist parties based on the negotiation of a Common Minimum Programme, which included a commitment to various pro-development policies, such as a commitment to a RTI Act. There was widespread opposition within the coalition government with support from Communist parties to a comprehensive RTI bill partly because of fears that it would be used to challenge government decisions or reveal corruption.

### **Civil society engaging with government**

A key actor driving the legislative change was the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), a network launched in 1996. The success of the campaign was particularly impressive because the NCPRI's member organisations belonged mainly to small, local and often marginalised groups that were neither Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that drew on donor funding, nor formal political parties. The network drew much of its inspiration from these organisations. The groups - known as people's organisations or *jan sangathans*, and people's campaigns/movements or *jan andolans* - included national and local groups campaigning about rural or urban development issues, such as dams and mining projects, the entry of corporate firms into agriculture and urban infrastructure and state services. Two of the most important members of the network were the Workers' and Farmers' Power Union (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan) based in southern Rajasthan, and Parivartan based in a working class area of East Delhi.

Various government allies also played a vital role in driving change. A key actor was Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Congress Party. Immediately before the 2004 elections she reportedly contacted the NCPRI saying that Congress wanted to include the RTI in its manifesto. After winning the election she set up and headed a National Advisory Council (NAC) to implement the Common Minimum Programme, including the RTI. Other government officials saw the RTI as an opportunity for reform, and a few senior bureaucrats used their power to push through progressive orders even before the national legislation came into effect. Since 1996, nine out of 28 Indian states have enacted legislation to grant citizens the right to information.

# Winning the Right to Information Campaign in India

“ Activists succeeded in bringing together a wide range of disparate people’s organisations and individuals to campaign under a common umbrella for national policy change ”

## Building support for the right to information

In the early 1990s very few organisations were directly campaigning on the RTI; neither was it immediately obvious how the RTI could benefit them. To encourage alliances across disparate groups and cut across class lines, the NCPRI successfully framed the RTI as a fundamental enabling right, essential for the effective exercise of rights in all other spheres. This involved persuading:

- Middle class welfare associations that they could use RTI to investigate why their streets were not being cleaned by the municipality
- Poor slum-dwellers that they could use RTI to find out why their ration cards had been delayed
- State officials ‘that if workers built better roads, their motorcycles would run better’
- Left-wing groups that RTI was a tool to empower people to claim their rights, rather than a sop to legitimise a neo-liberal agenda that was undermining people’s livelihoods.

From the outset, the NCPRI sought to create a broad-based coalition of grassroots people’s organisations. It did this by approaching groups working in different sectors, and by holding workshops where they would discuss issues specific to each sector, and their particular information needs. Moreover, the NCPRI also built alliances with key government officials, and involved them in a policy dialogue. Unusually too, the NCPRI’s membership included well-connected leaders from the intelligentsia and ex-government workers, some of whom had spearheaded the local campaigns by the *jan sangathans*.

## Mixing tactics to ensure success

While the NCPRI developed allies within the state, it also derived its power from sustained public pressure from a vigilant and mobilised citizenry. This involved public hearings or *jan sunvais* to compare official records with actual services provided by village committees or *panchayats*, as well as state and national level meetings and conventions of activists. The NCPRI also organised journeys or *yatras* involving a caravan of activists, ordinary villagers and students travelling from place to place with the RTI message, communicated through songs and sketches. The movement also printed newsletters in Hindi and English, and received media attention. Although the NCPRI leadership sought to distance itself from the international neo-liberal agenda on transparency and accountability, it also indirectly benefited from it. The prevailing ideology of economic liberalisation, with its critical view of state intervention, prompted greater openness among some government officials about the failure of service delivery and governance, and the need for greater accountability.

## Insights

One of the most interesting aspects of this campaign is the way activists succeeded in bringing together a wide range of disparate people’s organisations and individuals to campaign under a common umbrella for national policy change. The case study shows how inspirational grassroots campaigns can be scaled up by strong leaders and good networking to form effective national campaigns. It also suggests that policy achievements driven by grassroots organisations are more likely to be sustained and actually implemented, than those driven only by national NGOs.

## Credits

This Research Summary was written by Ruth Mayne, Independent Consultant, and is based on a study by Amita Baviskar, Associate Professor at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi.

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