

## ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN INDIA

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**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18850055>**

### **ABSTRACT:**

The concept of civil society has undergone significant evolution within the framework of international governance debates over the decades. In the Indian context, particularly during the past decades considerable prominence and influence have been attained by the Civil Society movement in shaping the governance process. Civil Society refers to voluntary organization and associations, which operate independently from the government and market but influence the Public Policy and decisions. Transparency and accountability are major fundamental principles of good governance which ensure awareness and openness in the decision making process and are answerable to the public.

Transparency and accountability matter in governance to reduce corruption, enhance public trust, ensure responsible use of public funds, to improve policy effectiveness and strengthen democracy. Civil society promotes transparency and accountability as a watchdog over government institutions. Through mechanisms such as the Right to Information (RTI), Public Interest Litigation (PIL), media engagement, monitoring of public schemes, and advocacy for responsiveness, transparency and accountability are strengthened.

Civil Society an autonomous body which plays an accountability crucial role in promoting transparency in India. It is an indispensable part for a governance and democratic country like India. It not only monitors but also enhances integral integrity which contributes towards good governance. An examination of the conceptual foundation, contributions, challenges, and future prospects of civil society in advancing transparency and accountability in India is undertaken in this paper.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Civil Society, Transparency, Accountability, Democratic Governance,  
Anti-Corruption, Public Participation.



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**INTRODUCTION:**

“Civil society is a political community bound together by common laws and shared interests”-- by Cicero

The idea of civil society has developed progressively across different phases of political thought. Early thinkers such as “Aristotle” viewed active political involvement as an essential aspect of human existence, stressing that individuals should participate in collective deliberation and governance. In modern political philosophy, “G.W.F. Hegel” described civil society as a realm separate from both the family and the state, encompassing economic interactions, legal structures, and voluntary associations.

In contemporary democratic theory, civil society is understood as the sphere of organized social activity that functions autonomously from the state while shaping public policy and governance processes. It comprises non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, professional bodies, trade unions, media organizations, and grassroots movements. These institutions represent public interests, oversee governmental functioning, and facilitate avenues for citizen participation in democratic decision-making. Civil society as a stakeholder of ‘Good governance’ represents citizen collective interest, acts as a balancing force, preventing misuse of state power. It enables moral leadership and consent, not just force-essential for legitimate governance. Which creates a bridge between citizens and the government by promoting participation in governance.

**“Strong Civil society= active citizen= Accountable governance”**

Transparency and accountability, core principles of good governance. Transparency implies openness in decision-making, accessibility of information, and clarity in administrative processes. This principle ensures that every citizen equally accesses information related to public policy and decisions should be provided in an understandable form. Accountability refers to the answerability of the government for its decision towards citizens. It ensures that public officials are answerable for their actions and subject to oversight and corrective mechanisms, thereby enhancing governance and strengthening the government’s responsibility to the public. Together, these principles reduce corruption, enhance public trust & strengthen democracy.

India's democratic trajectory illustrates that civil society has been instrumental in institutionalizing transparency through legislative and participatory mechanisms. The enactment of the 'Right to Information Act' marked a transformative moment in democratic accountability, and 'Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan' laid the foundation for this landmark legislation by demanding openness in public expenditure and wage records. Similarly, sustained public advocacy and anti-corruption movements contributed to the passage of the 'Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act', which established an institutional mechanism to investigate allegations of corruption against public officials at national and state levels, thus reinforcing accountability.

In the Indian context, where governance structures are vast and bureaucratic processes often appear distant from ordinary citizens, civil society plays a crucial role in making state institutions more responsive and responsible. In constitutional democracy like India, where fundamental rights and citizen participation are vital which are guaranteed by the constitution of India. The encouragement of public participation by civil society

### **Civil Society as a Watchdog: Monitoring Government Transparency:**

Civil society in India serves as an important monitoring force that enhances governmental transparency and holds public authorities responsible for their actions toward citizens. It refers to voluntary organizations and associations that actively oversee state activities, and through their efforts limit bureaucratic secrecy, expose corruption, promote transparency in policymaking and administration, and ensure that governance remains accountable and subject to public oversight. One of the key roles of civil society is exposing corruption and misuse of public resources. Through investigative studies, field inquiries, public consultations, and media engagement, NGOs reveal irregularities in welfare programs and development projects. By examining budget allocations and actual spending, they identify gaps in implementation. This scrutiny pressures officials to follow legal and ethical standards, making civil society a strong complementary accountability force alongside institutions like the 'Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)' and the judiciary. A major breakthrough in transparency was the enactment of the 'Right to Information Act' strongly supported by civil society movements that viewed access to information as essential for open governance. The

Act authorizes citizens to obtain details about official decisions and spending, while NGOs assist with applications and awareness efforts. At the grassroots level, social audits and public hearings enable communities to verify records and question authorities directly. Organizations such as 'Association for Democratic Reforms' promote electoral transparency by analyzing candidate disclosures and political funding. Investigative media platforms like The Wire and Scroll.in collaborate with civic actors to expose governance irregularities. Civil society also challenges environmental clearances through 'Public Interest Litigations', monitors relief funds such as PM CARES Fund during crises like COVID-19, and promotes open budget analysis to enhance fiscal transparency. Together, these efforts illustrate a comprehensive ecosystem of civic engagement reinforcing democratic accountability across multiple sectors. Civil society also promotes policy scrutiny and public debate through advocacy and litigation. Acting as a democratic watchdog, it strengthens transparency, participation, and accountability in India.

### **Civil Society and the Institutionalization of the Right to Information**

The institutionalization of the Right to Information Act represents a landmark achievement of civil society in advancing transparency and administrative accountability in India. Emerging from grassroots struggles in Rajasthan led by 'Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan' and activists such as Aruna Roy, the movement transformed local demands for wage transparency into a nationwide campaign for legal access to government information. Since its implementation, the 'Right to Information Act' has become an effective instrument for strengthening administrative accountability. Since its enactment, RTI has functioned as a powerful tool for administrative accountability. It enables citizens to seek information regarding policy decisions, expenditure details, recruitment processes, public procurement, and service delivery mechanisms. By legally mandating disclosure within a fixed time frame, the Act has reduced bureaucratic secrecy and strengthened answerability. For instance, citizens have used RTI to uncover irregularities in the Public Distribution System (PDS), delays in pension payments, and misuse of development funds at local levels. In many states, RTI applications have exposed ghost beneficiaries in welfare schemes and inflated infrastructure project costs, leading to corrective action. A recent and relevant example of RTI's impact can be seen in cases where citizens sought transparency regarding

government appointments, examination processes, and local development expenditures. RTI applications have been used to question discrepancies in competitive examination results, bringing greater scrutiny to recruitment bodies. Similarly, during the COVID-19 period, RTI requests were filed to obtain data on hospital preparedness, vaccine procurement, and fund allocation. Even when full disclosure was contested, the very act of filing RTIs generated public debate and compelled authorities to justify their decisions more clearly.

### **Social Audits and Participatory Accountability Mechanisms**

Social audits are an important participatory accountability mechanism in India that promote transparency in welfare schemes. Unlike traditional government audits, they involve citizens directly in reviewing records and monitoring implementation. Civil society organizations have played a key role in institutionalizing social audits, especially under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, where beneficiaries verify muster rolls, wage payments, and project details. In states like Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Telangana, such audits have exposed fake job cards, inflated costs, and delayed wages, leading to fund recovery and action against responsible officials. A key element of social audits is the Jan Sunwai (public hearing), where findings are openly shared with villagers, officials, and observers. These forums allow citizens to question authorities directly, reducing fear and power imbalance by raising concerns collectively. Such transparent discussions expose irregularities and affirm that public funds must remain under public scrutiny. Civil society plays a crucial role in organizing these hearings and promoting active community involvement.

Beyond Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, social audits have expanded to schemes like the Public Distribution System and housing programs, helping detect diversion of resources and ensuring proper welfare delivery.

Social audits play a crucial role in empowering marginalized groups, including women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically weaker sections, by increasing awareness of their rights and encouraging them to question authorities. Women have actively participated in audit meetings, raising concerns about wage discrimination and payment delays, thereby promoting social justice and inclusion. Although challenges

such as official resistance, limited institutional backing, and political interference persist, social audits remain a strong model of participatory governance. By enabling community monitoring and amplifying marginalized voices, they have significantly strengthened transparency and accountability in rural development programs.

### **Anti-Corruption Movements and Demand for Institutional Accountability**

The 2011 anti-corruption movement represented a significant moment in India's democratic journey toward transparency and accountability. Sparked by major corruption scandals such as the 2G spectrum case and irregularities in the Commonwealth Games, civil society mobilized widely under the banner of India Against Corruption. Led by Anna Hazare, the movement demanded the establishment of an independent Jan Lokpal to investigate corruption among public officials. Sustained public protests and media engagement pressured the government to enact the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, institutionalizing anti-corruption oversight and reinforcing accountability mechanisms in India. This act established an independent anti-corruption body at the central level and required similar institutions in the states to investigate complaints against public officials. Although its implementation was delayed, with the first Lokpal appointed in 2019, the Act stands as a clear result of civil society activism and demonstrates how collective public pressure can drive reforms to strengthen institutional accountability. In the current context, anti-corruption efforts in India have shifted from large-scale street protests to sustained institutional and legal engagement. Organizations such as the Association for Democratic Reforms continue to advocate transparency in political funding, particularly questioning opacity in electoral bonds through petitions and public campaigns. Digital activism, investigative journalism, and Public Interest Litigations now serve as key tools to challenge irregularities in recruitment, procurement, and governance decisions. However, concerns regarding regulatory measures like the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, shrinking civic space, and risks faced by whistleblowers highlight ongoing tensions. Despite these challenges, civil society remains central to strengthening transparency and institutional accountability in India.

## **Media, Digital Activism, and Open Governance**

In contemporary India, media and digital activism have become vital tools for promoting transparency and strengthening accountability in governance. Unlike earlier periods dominated by traditional information channels, the digital era enables civil society actors, journalists, and citizens to scrutinize government actions in real time. Investigative journalism by platforms such as The Wire, Scroll.in, and The Indian Express has exposed irregularities in procurement, regulatory decisions, and public administration, often prompting parliamentary and judicial responses.

Social media campaigns, online petitions, and crowdsourced reporting have expanded public participation in anti-corruption efforts. During the COVID-19 crisis, digital volunteers tracked oxygen supplies, hospital beds, and relief resources, highlighting administrative gaps and encouraging greater transparency. Open governance initiatives, including government data portals and digital service platforms, have further improved access to information. Civil society groups analyze public datasets, monitor direct benefit transfers, and publish simplified budget reports to enhance public understanding and oversight. However, digital transparency also faces challenges. The spread of misinformation, concerns about online surveillance, and legal pressures on journalists may weaken credibility and restrict free expression. Additionally, the digital divide limits access for rural and marginalized communities, potentially excluding them from accountability mechanisms. Overall, despite these constraints, media and digital activism remain central to civil society's efforts to promote openness, participatory governance, and institutional accountability in India's evolving democratic framework.

## **Challenges and Future Directions for Strengthening Transparency and Accountability**

Although civil society in India has significantly advanced transparency and accountability, the current context presents complex challenges. A major issue involves regulatory controls under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, where stricter funding norms and compliance requirements have affected the functioning of many NGOs, particularly smaller organizations. While the state defends these measures as necessary for financial integrity, critics argue they constrain operational independence. Shrinking civic space and increasing political pressures further complicate

civic engagement, as activists and journalists sometimes face legal or administrative obstacles. Digital governance initiatives such as e-procurement and Direct Benefit Transfers have enhanced traceability and reduced corruption, while open data platforms encourage informed oversight. However, bridging the digital divide and ensuring data security remain essential for inclusive and effective transparency.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, civil society remains a cornerstone of democratic governance in India.

Through advocacy, mobilization, legal interventions, and public awareness campaigns, it has strengthened transparency and accountability across multiple domains. Landmark legislations such as the RTI Act and the Lokpal Act demonstrate the transformative potential of civic activism. Although regulatory and political obstacles continue to exist, an active and independent civil society remains essential for maintaining democratic credibility and ensuring that government actions reflect the needs and aspirations of the people. The consolidation of democracy in India ultimately depends not only on formal institutions but also on active citizen participation and vigilant civic engagement.

Beyond that, Civil society is a strong democracy by encouraging participation and bridging the gap between citizens and the state. It remains an essential pillar of good governance in India.

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**Funding:**

This study was not funded by any grant.

**Conflict of interest:**

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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