

PARIVARTAN: COUNTERING CORRUPTION IN DELHI*

I. Abstract

Parivartan, which means “transformation” in Hindi, is a voluntary organization active in Delhi since January 2000. It is run by some concerned citizens who are dissatisfied with the operation of the government and the growing corruption in the political system. Its first activity focused on publicizing corruption in Delhi’s Income Tax Department.¹ The taxpayers in Delhi were advised to approach Parivartan with their complaints and not to pay bribes. Parivartan also made some suggestions to the Income Tax Department for improving transparency in its work. Since then, it has looked at improving transparency in other public departments.

With the passage of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Delhi in 2001, Parivartan’s activities were greatly enhanced. However, it was soon realized that just helping people with their individual grievances would not solve the problem of rampant corruption in society. Citizens themselves had to learn to combat corruption with the help of the RTI Act. Parivartan is now working on raising awareness of the RTI Act and educating people on how to use it, in addition to continuing to solve grievances where individual efforts do not work. Recently, Parivartan had also organized a public hearing or *jansunvai*, in which the people living in a locality could actually ask questions of the concerned authorities and hold them publicly accountable for the lack of development in their area.

II. Background

Parivartan is a nongovernmental, nonpolitical, nonprofit organization founded by lawyers, doctors, journalists, academics, social scientists, artists, and even government servants to raise awareness about and combat corruption.

Initiated in January 2000, Parivartan supports and helps people victimized by corruption. It does not charge any fees for its services, but operates on voluntary donations and services offered by individuals and organizations keen to promote its ideals. A large number of volunteers devote their time and expertise to run Parivartan. There are around 1,300 volunteers across the world and about 450 registered volunteers in Delhi, of whom around 60 contribute regularly to its activities. The organizational structure of Parivartan is devoid of any hierarchy—all of the volunteers are equal and carry out various responsibilities according to their expertise. A core group, composed of volunteers who devote more time and energy than others, meets regularly and takes decisions.

Parivartan’s objectives are as follows:

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¹ <http://www.parivartan.org>

- make citizens aware of their rights and duties with respect to various government departments, and explain the procedures in those departments to the public in simple language;
- provide a platform to unite people on issues of public importance about which the general public feels strongly, but finds itself helpless individually;
- encourage people to find lawful and ethical solutions to problems, rather than subvert the system in various ways, such as paying bribes to get preferential attention;
- urge people to assert themselves and not take abuse from public authorities;
- make people realize that there can be no change without the involvement and personal sacrifice of each citizen; and
- generate positive thinking among people who have become cynical and have given up the fight against corruption.

In order to remove corruption from society, Parivartan has a two-pronged strategy:

1. Systemic removal of corruption by studying the systems and practices within various government departments that allow corruption to thrive, and by suggesting and ensuring implementation of alternative practices which would reduce opportunities for corruption through people's participation.
2. Providing Indian citizens with a platform through which they can get their work done in government departments without paying bribes

Soon after starting its operations, Parivartan realized that, while its activities provided immediate relief to the public suffering on account of corruption, they neither empowered citizens to get their grievances resolved directly in the future without Parivartan's assistance, nor did they bring any permanent systemic changes. Parivartan then used the Delhi Right to Information Act extensively to get information on individual issues in different government departments in Delhi. The act proved quite effective in resolving public grievances.

Box 1: The Delhi Right to Information Act, 2001

Right to Information Acts have been recognized the world over as important instruments for checking corruption and misuse of power. The Delhi Assembly passed the Delhi Right to Information Act in May 2001, and it became effective on October 2, 2001. About 119 government departments in Delhi have been brought under the purview of this act. Under this act, any citizen can approach any department and seek information as well as make copies of any documents.

III. Impact/Results

The first activity of Parivartan was to provide relief to taxpayers from the widespread corruption in Delhi's Income Tax Department. Taxpayers were exhorted not to pay

bribes, but to approach Parivartan with their grievances. About 700 grievances received to date have been resolved. Parivartan also filed public interest litigation in Delhi High Court to get certain systemic changes introduced in the Department so that such grievances would not recur. Since then, the Department has issued instructions to all of its officers to implement the measures suggested by Parivartan, such as the following:

- Every Assessing Officer should provide taxpayer services according to the Citizens' Charter and ensure timely processing and refunding in case of grievances.
- A Permanent Account Number (PAN) should be allotted immediately on the receipt of an application, and a formal statement should be sent to the account holder.²

In August 2000, Parivartan advised customers of the Delhi Vidyut Board (DVB), which supplies electricity in Delhi, not to pay bribes, but to approach Parivartan if they have any problems or complaints. Parivartan has helped around 2,500 customers of DVB so far. In a unique experiment, Parivartan workers used to sit at the entrance of three DVB offices every day during business hours and exhort every consumer going in not to pay bribes inside. This had a salutary effect on the workings of these offices.

Although the Right to Information Act became operational in Delhi in October 2001, in practice the concerned officials at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) did not implement its directives. Parivartan staged a demonstration at MCD in March 2002, which drew attention to the issue and compelled officials to share the required information. Parivartan is now educating people on use of the act to get individual and community-based grievances resolved. As part of its initiative to encourage the public to raise its voice against corruption, Parivartan held a *jansunvai* (public hearing) at Sundernagari in December 2002 to examine the work of the Engineering Department of MCD in two resettlement colonies. It was the first public hearing to be held on urban development expenditures after the state government of Delhi passed the Right to Information Act. During this *jansunvai*, the public held officials and local leaders responsible for the lack of development in their area and for huge discrepancies between the details in government records of work supposedly carried out and the actual work done in the area. This was the first audit of its kind of MCD's development work, and it brought residents face-to-face with the persons responsible for their quality of life. It is too early to comment on the impact of these type of meetings, which can be very conflictive. However, Parivartan promised to people to organize many such *jansunvais* in the future.

² For further information on PAN, see <<http://incometaxdelhi.nic.in/payers/pan.htm>>.

IV. Key Elements of Empowerment

Information

Parivartan has tried to make the citizens of Delhi aware of their right to information and of the bureaucrats' obligation to supply the information. A citizen can now access the desired information after filling out a form and paying a nominal fee of Rs 50. This transparency brought by the free flow of information in the system is a vital factor in the efforts to curb corruption.

Inclusion/Participation

The general public has been included in the process continually as Parivartan tries to solve their individual, as well as community-based, grievances. Citizens have started participating actively in demanding information. For instance, the jansunvai held at Sundernagari provided a common platform where the people participated and got a fair chance to demand answers on their issues from the relevant officials.

Accountability

The main agenda of Parivartan has been to ensure transparency and accountability in the system. With the help of the RTI Act, Parivartan tries to pressure the bureaucracy to act decisively to uphold the law and it holds officials accountable.

Box 2: "I am not in a hurry"

A Parivartan volunteer was pursuing the complaint of an electric power consumer of the Delhi Vidyut Board (DVB) for over two months and made four visits to DVB. Every time, the relevant Executive Engineer (EXEN) would speak very politely, apologize for the delay, and seek more time. Finally, the volunteer went with a resolve to come back with the corrected bill only. He met the EXEN again, who, as usual, regretted the delay and asked for a few more days. The volunteer said, "Sir, don't be apologetic. I am not in a hurry. I have told my family at home that I will come back only after a week. So, you complete all your work and then, when you get time, you can attend to my work." The EXEN stated that he was running late for a meeting with his Chief Engineer, and that then he would go directly home. The volunteer said, "Sir, please don't worry. I will keep sitting here until you come to the office tomorrow. You may go ahead with your meeting without worrying for me." The EXEN was left with no other option but to attend to the volunteer. He got the revised bill issued and then went for his meeting.

Local Organizational Capacity

Parivartan has worked effectively in countering corruption, and is also encouraging people to raise their voices against corruption. It is educating people about using the RTI Act and is thereby building their capacity to fight against corruption at the individual or

community level. It is enabling people to think in a positive way and to restore the lost faith of those who were victimized by corruption in the past.

Box 3: Practical Suggestions to Implement the Right to Information Act

Parivartan made five suggestions to the Income Tax (IT) Department relating to systemic changes for reducing corruption. Noting the lack of response from the department, Parivartan's filed a public interest litigation in the Delhi High Court to get these changes introduced. The IT Department filed an affidavit in April 2001 that instructions had been issued to all officials to implement these suggestions. Later, Parivartan found that no such instructions had been issued, and that the department had filed a false affidavit. Parivartan volunteers sat in a *satyagraha*³ outside the room of the IT Chief Commissioner in July 2001 to get these instructions issued. Ultimately, the instructions were issued, and for the first time the provisions of the Citizens' Charter became the legal rights of citizens. Parivartan is now educating people to demand that their work be done in the IT department in accordance with these instructions; if the work is not done, citizens should inform Parivartan, which will pursue violations of instructions and of the Citizens' Charter at appropriate levels.

V. Issues and Lessons

Historically, citizens had very limited access to relevant public officials and public information. Now, with the RTI Act, citizens can hold such officials accountable and can demand answers and action from them. However, to reduce corruption in public offices, people also need to resist the temptation to follow the easier option of paying bribes to get their grievances resolved quickly. The Parivartan experience shows that a resolute approach helps.

Parivartan realized that for minimizing corruption and establishing transparency in governance, the mere existence of the RTI Act is not enough. It must be properly implemented in all government departments. To ensure this, concerned citizens need to act and demand compliance from a reluctant bureaucracy.

Parivartan followed a two-pronged strategy. It made the officials work for the people without demanding any bribes, and it encouraged the people to resist paying bribes to get their rightful work done.

Instead of helping aggrieved individuals by approaching officials on their behalf, and thereby developing dependency, Parivartan tries to empower people by (1) making them aware of their right to information, and (2) exhorting and training them to assert their rights themselves.

The jansunvai provides a platform where people can collectively raise their voice against corruption and inefficiency. It empowers them as a group to demand action and accountability from the system. It is hoped that public participation on a greater scale should result in a reduction of corruption.

³ Mahatma Gandhi's policy of passive resistance, or a nonviolent campaign for reform.

VI. Further Information: References and World Wide Web Resources

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Web Links

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