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Citizens, politicians and accountability for public service delivery in India

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A central feature of the democratic polity concerns a state's accountability to its citizens for public service delivery. To what extent does the state find itself obligated to provide its citizens with the public services that its citizens want? The answer to this question lies in the linkage between citizens on one side and the elected political leaders who decide public policy and those they direct to provide the services on the other side. In this paper I propose to explore four topics:

- The types of linkages between citizen and politician;
- The paths these linkages take in connecting citizens to politicians and service providers;
- Some prominent mechanisms currently in use in India that facilitate these linkages; and
- As a prospective example, how increasing citizen participation might ameliorate the abiding problem of teacher absences in Bihar, which has until recently been among the least accountable of Indian states in delivering public services.

Citizen-politician linkages

The connections between citizens and their elected leaders in a democratic polity can be any of three basic types:

In a **patronage** system, leaders dispense favors to individuals and families in the form of jobs, contracts, school placements, intercessions with the police, and the like in return for support in the form of votes, participation in rallies and demonstrations, etc. In India, this kind of patron-client relationship traces back at least to the era of the *jajmani* system outlined most clearly over seven decades ago by William Wiser (1936), which tied together landowners, tenants and artisan in an asymmetric arrangement of service exchange providing most of the benefits to the *jajman*/patron but guaranteeing survival to the *kamin*/client. Their personal basis ensures that patronage systems are inherently local, though they can operate between individual players at higher levels as well (e.g., in the selection of ministers, awarding of large-scale contracts).

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In a **clientelistic** system, political leaders devise policies to deliver benefits to specific groups at the cost of other groups in the population, usually on the basis of ascriptive characteristics (caste, religion) or economic interest (farmers, union members), again in return for the groups' political support with such activities as voting and demonstrating but also contributions to campaign costs. Caste preferences in university admissions, agricultural subsidies, and job protection would be some of the commodities exchanged here. Clientelistic linkages generally encompass large groups of people (Dalits, sugar farmers) and operate on a more macro level like the state in India.

Finally, in a **programmatic** linkage, policy makers deliver benefits such as universal primary education, health delivery, fire protection, which are available to all citizens of a political entity. These linkages could occur at local (municipal) or higher level.¹

In a sense, these three linkage types form a progression from tradition to modernity, but a moment's reflection shows that even in the most advanced political systems, all three types coexist, if not always peacefully. Political officeholders will give jobs to loyal supporters, legislatures will provide tax exemptions to farmers, and most Western governments will fund emergency medical services for everyone.

Not all citizen-politician links fit neatly into one of my three types. Patronage on a local level if replicated at successively higher levels becomes clientelism, leading for example to the entrenchment of Kayasthas in so many of the expanding North Indian bureaucracies after independence. And are the quotas for women members of elected councils mandated in the 73rd Amendment more clientelistic (benefits for an ascriptively determined group) or programmatic (redress for half the population that had been denied an equal right to participate in policy making)? So the boundaries are fuzzy, but the types should be clear. It should also be clear that the successive types bring benefits to successively larger numbers of people.

Politicians in South Asia have inherently (but not exclusively) favored patronage at local level and clientelism at higher levels, because these linkages fit in with hierarchical tradition, are easier to manipulate, bring recognition to the political leader and reinforce the patron-client bond. But operating patronage and clientelistic systems requires time and energy to maintain the necessary networks of touts and intermediaries, as well as resources from higher level to provide at least some actual benefits and keep the structure lubricated through leakage of public funds. Programmatic linkage, if it is to be actually universalistic, does not require such networks but instead can operate through the state bureaucracy in Weberian fashion, at least theoretically, though the combination of scarce resources and corruption tends to turn objective and impersonal service provision into patronage transactions at the point of actual delivery and indeed throughout the whole structure, as careers in the state bureaucracy become dependent on patronage, purchase of positions, etc. Despite all these shortcomings, however, programmatic politics has led to primary education expanding, roads getting built and even maintained.

¹ For a thorough exploration of these different types, see Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007), in particular their introduction to the volume. They combine my first two types, but for my purposes it works better to separate them.

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Whether the relationship is patronage, clientelistic or programmatic, it is easy to interpret politicians' behaviour as cynical and opportunistic. Patrons get the better end of the deal with their dependents. Clientelistic leaders usually do produce something for their special interest constituencies, though it comes at the expense of the citizenry as a whole, for example when government subsidies and foreign aid go to support irrigation for growing sugarcane, which is then sold at high prices sustained through tariff barriers. And in programmatic politics, citizens beguiled by campaign promises of economic expansion or education for all too frequently find the anticipated jobs and schools fading into the ever receding future or targeted to favored audiences. But in the clientelistic example, employment is generated on farms and in sugar mills, and in the programmatic case additional children can get primary schooling over time. The politician's opportunism, in other words, can lead to public benefits.

Three routes to accountability²

The World Bank's *World Development Report 2004* devoted itself to exploring approaches to enhancing public service delivery for poor people. Historically in the countries that are now advanced democracies, citizens have exercised "voice" in electing political leaders who then formulated public policies that were implemented through bureaucracies that would provide services to the public. Over time this "**long route to accountability**" brought increased benefits to ever wider constituencies as politicians sought to widen their support bases by promising (and over time delivering) public services. As illustrated in Figure 1, in the long route citizens acting as principals impart instructions through elections to political leaders who, acting as agents make public policy and through what amounts to a compact with the bureaucracy instruct the latter to implement that policy by delivering services to the citizenry. If enough citizens are dissatisfied with their political leaders, they exercise sanctions against them by voting them out of office at the next election.

Much of American history from Andrew Jackson's expansion of the franchise in the 1830s down to Barack Obama's 2010 health reform initiative can be explained this way. To continue with the American example, some of these developments were pure patronage (the spoils system of the Jackson administration), others later on were clientelistic (price supports for farmers beginning after World War I, protection for union workers in the Roosevelt administration during the 1930s), and still others were programmatic (Social Security, the G.I. Bill providing education for veterans after World War II, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration). In India, such initiatives as Scheduled Caste reservations, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, universal primary education, and the 73rd and 74th Amendments *inter alia* can similarly be accounted for.

The long route, however, is generally long in terms of time as well as graphic inches in Figure 1. Achievements like SC/ST reservations and the 74th Amendment were the product of decades' worth of energy and effort. In addition to time, the long route also presents other problems:

² This presentation of the three routes is based on a paper I did recently for the World Bank (Blair 2010b).

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- Elections form the bluntest of instruments and can give only the most general direction to the political leadership returned to office.
- Bureaucratic providers can capture policymakers (e.g., through unions), and policymakers can in effect capture the voters (through patronage linkages), thus reversing roles by turning the citizenry into agents and themselves into principals.
- It requires truly contested elections, which India has done relatively well at, though crossing this hurdle is clearly not sufficient (witness the combination of electoral competition and lack of accountability in Bangladesh).

The Bank's "**short route**" offers a quicker path to accountability, as illustrated along with the long route in Figure 1. The idea here is that citizens can in effect short-circuit the long route by directly dealing with service providers, somewhat like buyers in a market dealing with sellers. Actually there are two short routes, which can be characterized as "choice" and "voice." In the "choice" route, citizens can exercise "client power" with providers, for example with school voucher programs in which parents choose among schools for their children's education. On the "voice" side, they can become directly involved in state decision making, as with participatory budgeting in Brazil, in which citizen representatives allocate state budgetary investments at the local level. India presents some instances of "client power," as with food rationing systems that entitle citizens to buy subsidized foodstuffs at vendors of their choice. But here I will focus on the second type of short route, in particular participatory budgeting, citizen report systems, and right-to-information legal provisions.

As will be seen, short route mechanisms can be highly effective in exacting some real accountability from state providers, they can target citizen demands specifically, and they can work within a relatively short timeframe such as an annual budget cycle. Their main drawback, as will also become apparent, is that by bringing citizens into direct engagement with state service providers they require strong state support, either from political leaders or higher level bureaucrats. Such a need is understandable, inasmuch as citizen inputs invariably require that providers do things they would not otherwise do (or refrain from doing what they would otherwise do).

As with the long route, there are other problems as well, some of them not surprisingly similar to those found in the market systems serving as a model for the short route:

- Consumers often lack essential information about services being offered and so may not make good choices (e.g., illiterate parents judging school quality).
- The lack of competition stemming from one or a small number of providers can give too much power to the supply side, rendering "choice" or "voice" options essentially impotent (if there's only one rice ration shop, customers may feel reluctant to report vendor misbehaviour).
- Just as the causal flow can reverse itself in the long route when political leaders become captives of the providers or citizens become dominated by their political leaders, so also citizen participants can be coopted by the providers with whom they are engaged in a short route arrangement.

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- The short route is essentially a local one. Direct involvement of citizens can only work in reasonably small scale settings.³

In between the long and short routes, **civil society** can be considered a middle route of accountability, as shown in Figure 2.⁴ “Civil society” – which can be defined as “an arena, separate from the state, the market and the individual household, in which people organize themselves and act together to promote their common interests” (Sida 2004: 9) – comprises a huge spectrum of activity running from groups concerned solely with providing services to their members (e.g., a sports club) to organizations devoted exclusively to advocacy (e.g., Amnesty International), but my interest here is on the advocacy end, that is, civil society organizations (CSOs) endeavouring to influence state policy in some form.

Civil society differs from the short route chiefly in that it does not originate from the state side of the citizen-state relationship, nor does it require state support, though it does depend on state willingness to respond, however reluctantly, to its demands. And its main distinction from the long route lies in its ability to focus on single issues and goals, as opposed to the amorphous grab-bags of agendas that political leaders and parties must incorporate into their overall programs.

There are of course problems with the civil society route:

- Given that each CSO pursues a special interest of some sort and that many of these interests are contradictory, civil society activism in the aggregate can lead to system gridlock (e.g., environmentalists vs. developers in so many countries).
- As in so many sectors of life, elites play the advocacy game better than poor and marginal groups, so they are likely to get more than a fair share for themselves when engaging in civil society activism (e.g., real estate zoning preferences at local level, tax subsidies at national level).
- Aside from those backed by well-resourced elites (e.g., chambers of commerce), CSOs in developing countries almost invariably find themselves strapped for operating funds, and so survive either by selling services (e.g., literacy training) to the state sector or by seeking financial support from the international donor community. In either case, their autonomy (which is part of their definition) is at serious risk.
- CSOs can support democratically destructive interests (hate groups, anti-minority causes, etc.) just as well as worthwhile ones.

³ Participatory budgeting in Brazil has been implemented at the state level though successive tiers of indirectly elected representatives, but this kind of setup resembles representative democratic government more than a short route of accountability.

⁴ There are other “routes” to accountability aside from the three I focus on in this paper, e.g., “horizontal accountability” through legislative oversight, public interest lawsuits, ombudsman arrangements, the media and, ultimately, insurrection and revolution. For an exploration of the spectrum of accountability mechanisms, see Blair (forthcoming). For an account of why so many approaches at exacting accountability from the state have proven unsuccessful, see Shah (2008).

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The short route in action

The long route to accountability has received much attention in extensive detail over the decades of India's independence (e.g., P. Brass 1994, Kohli 2001, 2009). And studies of civil society activism are fewer and more recent, but have also become relatively plentiful, both as overviews and case studies.⁵ Accordingly, neither needs recounting here in detail. But the short route is probably less familiar and in addition will become my central focus in the latter part of this essay, so I will illustrate it with some types and examples at this point.

Participatory budgeting (PB) can be defined as a process of democratic deliberation and decision-making, in which ordinary residents decide directly or indirectly through specially selected representatives how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget. It originated in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1989 when the incoming mayor instituted the practice, and over the years since has expanded to more than 200 municipalities in Brazil as well as many local government units elsewhere in the world.⁶ The process warrants at least a brief examination.

PB begins each year with neighborhood public meetings at the outset of the annual budget cycle. Citizens debate the previous year's municipal efforts, determine priorities for the upcoming year, and elect delegates to a regional meeting, at which neighborhood proposals are consolidated and prioritized. These delegates elect higher-level representatives to a citywide body which merges all the proposals according to a formula that weights investment toward the poorer regions of the city. The elected city council can make changes in the final proposals but rarely does so, and thus the PB process effectively determines municipal investments. The citywide PB body then monitors implementation of the year's budget, and the results are reviewed when the cycle starts again the following year.

In addition to mayoral backing, PB requires significant bureaucratic support to manage the weighting system mentioned above, which is quite complex and needs considerable facilitation. In fact, a whole array of technical agencies has been set up to provide this support, in particular the municipal planning and coordinating offices. (Santos 1998). PB in Porto Alegre has also brought in many new participants, especially among the poor, who appear not just to have attended meetings but to have taken an active role in speaking up and getting elected as delegates to the higher PB levels. Finally, PB has become thoroughly institutionalized, having survived the electoral ouster of the party that instituted it in Porto Alegre and still enduring robustly after more than two decades.⁷

Although it has not become widespread in India, PB has established itself quite thoroughly in Kerala, where it was instituted in 1996 throughout the state as the People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning (PCDP) and has remained in place over successive changes in gov-

⁵ For overviews see Jayal (2007), Bebbington et al. (2008). A good collection of civil society case studies in the agricultural sector can be found in T. Brass (1994).

⁶ As can be imagined for an institution that has proliferated so widely, a huge literature has developed, much of it scrutinizing the original experiment in depth. See for example Baiocchi (2005). For a short general overview of PB, see Blair (2010a).

⁷ For current data on PB in Porto Alegre, see CIDADE (2010).

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ernment.⁸ The process begins each year with open meetings (gram sabha) at the ward level, which are facilitated by trained Key Resource Personnel. Here priorities are established and delegates elected to the next higher panchayat level, where the delegates meet with elected local government officeholders and bureaucrats to forge a panchayat budget. As in Brazil, Kerala's PCDDP requires much support (Key Resource Personnel number around 100,000 overall in the state) and deals with substantial resources (fiscal decentralization has allocated something like 35-40% of all developmental expenditures to local government units).

An extensive survey including politicians, government officials and CSO representatives found that large majorities of all groups thought public service delivery had improved across all sectors (health care, education, water and sanitation, housing and assistance to the poor, women's employment, etc.) had improved as a result of the new PCDDP system. Women constituted around 40% of both gram sabha participants and delegates elected to the higher level bodies, and Scheduled Caste representation at both levels exceeded their proportion of the population. Corruption was also perceived to have diminished under PCDDP in the minds of 74% of those surveyed (including a majority of opposition party politicians).

Citizen participation in budgeting has some similarities to participatory budgeting, but the two are not the same. In Bangalore, four CSOs supported a campaign called Public Record of Operations and Finance (PROOF), which undertook municipal budget analyses, including financial statements in detail, as well as performance indicators and assessments. Results were presented at public quarterly meetings attended by citizens, CSO representatives and city officials including the mayor. Transparency improved significantly in this process, but unlike PB it did not include any direct citizen participation in allocating public funds.⁹

The **Bhagidari ("partnership") program** initiated by the Delhi government in 2000 represents a kind of cross between participatory budgeting and citizen participation in budgeting. Residential Welfare Associations (RWAs), which had sprung up in middle class neighbourhoods to protest against increased electricity charges, were invited to a system of dialogues with state officials, elected officeholders and other CSOs like industrial chambers and marketing associations. As a result, budget allocations to these neighbourhoods increased. The Bhagidari setup was restricted to these wealthier areas, however, apparently for fear that giving state recognition to CSOs in slum areas would legitimize squatter settlements (Chakrabarti 2008). Other cities like Chennai also have RWAs, but without the Bhagidari arrangements sponsored by the Delhi government, they have become essentially CSOs advocating constituent interests to the state rather than inside players as in Delhi (Coelho and Venkat 2009).

Citizen report cards and similar monitoring initiatives have an extended track record in India. In 1994, an NGO called the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore launched an initiative to gather views of municipal service provision in the water, power, health, and transport sectors. When completed the results were released to widespread publicity in the media. The exercise was repeated in 1999 and again in 2003. After these successive surveys, the city gov-

⁸ Data in this and the next paragraph are taken from Heller et al. (2007).

⁹ This experience is recounted in Paul (2007).

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ernment did respond positively, which resulted in huge increases in public approval. Whereas those satisfied with water supply and electricity amounted to 4% and 6% respectively in 1994, nine years later in 2003, satisfaction had increased to 73% and 94% (Ravindra 2004; Paul 2006). Interestingly, slum households responded to the survey almost as favorably as middle income families, indicating that the improvements were well distributed over the city's population.¹⁰ A critical factor in the story lay in the fact that, while the improvements came at first on the initiative of the departments being evaluated, midway through the period a new chief minister of the state became the program's champion and pushed it to enhanced achievements (Paul 2006).¹¹

Citizen review boards can likewise be effective instruments when given strong state backing. A good example comes from Mumbai, India, where in the early 1990s, an NGO named *Rationing Kriti Samiti* (Rationing Action Committee) set up local consumer groups to monitor prices and quality in the public distribution system shops, which were widely reported to gouge on prices, stint on quality and siphon off public foodgrain supplies to private channels. Backed by the government bureaucrat then in charge of rationing, these vigilance committees were able to pressure shopowners to post prices publicly and offer samples for consumer inspection, while periodically reporting their findings to the city government. When the rationing officer was transferred in 1994, reportedly under pressure from interested politicians, the initiative essentially collapsed as shopkeepers were no longer required to provide essential information to the monitoring groups (Goetz and Jenkins 2007).

Social audits offer another form of monitoring, as pioneered by the Public Affairs Foundation, a sister organization of the Public Affairs Centre, with its Delhi surveys conducted in 2006 and again in 2008 (PAF 2009). Here the initiative came from the state side, as Delhi's chief minister launched the first survey of citizen perception of nine public services. Results were disseminated to the relevant departments, prompting internal reviews and reforms, and then the second survey assessed what changes had occurred over the two year period. Many improvements were recorded in the second audit (e.g, in 2006, 58% of patients at public health centers reported receiving medicines that were prescribed, a figure that increased to 80% in the second audit), though there were some declines as well (while 70% of patients said they had received a receipt for services rendered at health centers in the first audit, only 56% responded similarly in the second round).

An individually initiated mechanism was the **24/7 phone-in system** instituted by the new managing director of the water and sewage board in Hyderabad, in the late 1990s. His reforms included a 24-hour citizen complaint system with a 4-day turnaround and a "single window cell" to process and install new hookups. As a result, complaints surged by five times, revenues almost doubled (as more customers proved willing to pay their service bills), and coverage expanded greatly (Caseley 2006).

¹⁰ The two-track survey can be seen as providing a quasi-"treatment group" (the slum households) and a "control group" (the middle income families). To the extent that the slum respondents lagged behind the middle income group, the initiative could be said to have an anti-poor bias, which in this case was negligible.

¹¹ For another example of citizen report cards focusing on health services in Andhra Pradesh, see Misra and Ramasankar (2007).

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Right-to-information (RTI) laws provide another mechanism that has enabled direct citizen participation in governance. India's Right to Information Act of 2005, which parallels similar laws enacted in the United States (1966) and the United Kingdom (2000) entitles citizens to request state information on any topic not related to national security, ongoing court cases or cabinet deliberations, etc., and requires a response within 30 days (GoI 2005).

In 2001 Parivartan (literally “change”), a CSO in a poor Delhi neighbourhood, used the local RTI law¹² to gain access to state Public Distribution System (PDS) records on foodgrain distribution through the ration shop network, finding that some 87% of wheat and 94% of rice supposedly under the PDS had leaked out and been sold on the open market. Ration shop owners not surprisingly protested, but as in the earlier Mumbai case (Goetz and Jenkins 2007), the Delhi Food Commissioner proved sympathetic to the CSO and supported its work, first with a pilot experiment and then across all of Delhi. In contrast to Mumbai, however, Delhi's local politicians did not intervene on behalf of the shopkeepers, perhaps because their main patronage operations lay in other sectors like water and solid waste disposal.¹³

More recently, the RTI law was featured in a *New York Times* article datelined from Jharkhand state. The law enabled poor citizens to access housing allowances and monthly pensions earlier denied and led to absentee medical staff actually showing up for work on a regular basis (Polgreen 2010b), though despite government efforts to promote it (e.g., GoI 2010), knowledge of RTI has remained thin (Times of India 2010), especially among the poor (TII 2008).

Short route effectiveness

The short route has the capacity to be and in fact often is quicker than either the long or civil society routes in improving service delivery, but how effective is it in actually delivering the developmental goods in the sense of improving well being? Most short route efforts have not been in place long enough to attempt assessments that would answer this question, but PB in Brazil has been subjected to just this kind of inquiry.

After Porto Alegre's PB had been in place for well over a decade, it became possible to undertake serious studies of its impact on poverty and well-being. A World Bank study (2008) found that PB did reduce poverty rates, while increasing access to well-being measures like piped water and sewage treatment. But a later study based on 220 Brazilian cities showed that while PB did decrease poverty, it had no real impact on broader well-being indices such as infant mortality, life expectancy or literacy (Boulding and Wampler 2009). The authors did not doubt the substantial evidence indicating that improvements in empowerment, government efficiency and accountability had made progress, however.

Rigorous studies using randomized sampling and treatment-and-control groups have been rare with respect to the short route, but one World Bank assessment of a village level educa-

¹² Delhi had instituted a RTI law in advance of the 2005 national act.

¹³ See Pande (2007), from which this example is drawn. This is the author's speculation about politicians' motives.

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tion experiment in Uttar Pradesh has been published (Banerjee et al. 2008). Village Education Committees (VECs) included three parents (nominated by local government officials), the local school's head teacher and the head of the elected village panchayat. These bodies monitored school performance, exercised control over hiring and firing supplemental teachers (shiksha mitras or "friends of education"), and could allocate some additional resources to local schools. The interventions consisted of publicity drives with large public meetings, training in creating and managing a citizen report card system, and training volunteers to operate an after-school reading course.

The first two interventions showed no effect in terms of VECs exercising control over schools or improving school performance, while the third did improve student reading skills. The authors concluded that parents were indeed interested in better education (demonstrated by their support of the reading program) but the direct participation in state service provision (the first two interventions) simply didn't work. The VECs were basically non-functional; few villagers knew about them and even some of the appointed members were in fact unaware of their status. The VECs failed to discipline the supplemental teachers (perhaps due to some social pressure not to do so) or ask for extra resources, and the report card system collapsed (possibly a social action problem in the minds of the authors).

An alternative explanation might lie in the fact that parent members of the VEC were appointed by local officials rather than elected (cf. the Porto Alegre model) and thus could be considered as captives of the system rather than representatives of the parents' community. Also the head teacher members of the VECs may well have had strong incentives to promote inaction as a defensive maneuver. Thus while the state at the macro level may have been supporting the initiative, local officialdom may have been undermining it

The VEC study points to a critical feature of all short route mechanisms presented here: strong support from the state side is a sine qua non for success. To the extent that they succeeded in increasing state accountability all my examples received vigorous state backing. Some were initiated by state officials (PB in Kerala, the RTI act of 2005, the Delhi social audit, the Hyderabad phone-in system), while others originated with CSOs and were embraced by state officials who could make them work (the Delhi Bhagidari partnership, Mumbai food rationing monitoring, Bangalore citizen report cards). When that support weakened or disappeared, accountability sagged or vanished (the Bangalore surveys ceased, Mumbai shopkeepers stopped providing useful data to the monitors).

Critical to all these monitoring mechanisms, it should be noted, is that they received backing from the state, either from political officeholders or bureaucratic officials. Changes in the Karnataka chief ministership removed support for the citizen report card effort, which has not been repeated since 2003 (though it is hoped that a new round will take place in the near future¹⁴), and the Regional Controller of Rationing's departure in Bombay meant the end of any effective citizen monitoring of the ration shops there (Goetz and Jenkins 2007).

These observations are included in Table 1, which attempts to sum up the Indian experience with short route mechanisms so far as I have been able to track them down. The table sug-

¹⁴ Personal communication from Samuel Paul, July 2010.

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gests a very rough spectrum of short route mechanisms moving from little or no accountability on the left to a very high degree of accountability on the right. Effectiveness of the Mumbai citizen review board and the Hyderabad phone-in system depended on their bureaucratic champions remaining on the job. RTI rests on a national law, but like so many laws on the books, implementation depends on many factors including bureaucratic discretion in each case. The Bangalore citizen report card and Delhi social audit systems have depended on political support from the chief minister's level, which means successors may think differently. So far only in Kerala have successive state governments maintained the participatory budgeting system essentially intact. One hopes the other mechanisms will become similarly institutionalized, but this has not happened as yet.

Controlling teacher absences as a testing ground for the short route

Absentee teachers have been festering sore in subcontinental education systems for decades. Hired on a patronage basis, ill-paid and effectively unsupervised, they have little incentive to attend classes and much temptation to earn a decent living by offering paid tutorials outside of school. As the survey recapitulated in Table 2 attests, even in the best of states, around one-seventh of primary teachers proved absent in a physical check, while in the worst states upwards of two-fifths or more were not present at their schools.¹⁵ Bihar makes an especially interesting case here, inasmuch as it was the site of my own doctoral field research some decades ago and shows up here – along with Jharkhand, which was part of Bihar until it split off in 2000 – as usual at the bottom of whatever developmental measure is being employed.

Long a sinkhole of casteism and corruption, and more recently one of gangsterism, rampant kidnapping and rural violence, Bihar reached a nadir during the long regime of Laloo Prasad Yadav and his wife Rabri Devi during 1990-2005.¹⁶ Patron-client linkages were the norm in this semi-feudal, rural state dominated by the “twice-born” landowning upper castes, though beginning in the later 1970s and more so the 1980s, a kind of clientelist politics became dominant, in which charismatic leaders from the lower castes (Other Backward Castes) were able to mobilize vote bases and take over state power. In this intercaste struggle, state funds became resources to fuel identity-based competition and build vote bases, so economic and social development took a back seat as caste-based “armies” (*senas*) contested the countryside.

After the 2005 state assembly election, a new lower caste leader heading a different coalition assumed power. Nitish Kumar became the state's chief minister and launched a new development-oriented agenda leading to high economic growth (the state was found by the Central Statistical Office in New Delhi to have had an 11% annual growth rate – second only to Gujarat – over the years since Kumar took office), improved school attendance, health cen-

¹⁵ Kremer et al. (2005). The survey reported in the article involved actual physical verification of teacher presence. Absences in the health sector are generally even worse than for teachers; see Devarajan and Shah (2004).

¹⁶ There are many accounts. See for example Thakur (2000) and Witsoe (2009). Things did not suddenly go sour with Laloo, of course; there was a long history of mismanagement before that (see Blair 2008 for an overview).

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ter performance and reduced crime.¹⁷ The public appears to agree that the present government has been doing well. Some 88% of respondents in a 2009 survey said they were satisfied with the state government's performance (58% said "fully satisfied").¹⁸

What could the short route contribute here? Bihar appears to be expanding its polity from one based on patronage and clientelism to one that can include some real programmatic politics (while of course keeping the older models in place to some degree, just as other polities do). But as elsewhere, the long route of programmatic politics will take a good while to unfold. In the meantime, given the support which it seems not unlikely that the present chief minister could and would provide, some short route mechanisms might be put into play. Not real participatory budgeting like that in Brazil or Kerala, to be sure, for it would take the state bureaucracy some time even under heavy pressure from the top to get up to the administrative speed needed to facilitate PB, but some of the other mechanisms discussed in this paper and presented in Table 1 could bring some genuine improvement at local level. And it will take extra effort to generate upward demand from below; two years after passage of the RTI Act in 2005, only 1.4% of Bihari respondents below the poverty line had heard of it, a figure among the lowest in India (TII 2008: 19). To be sure, even the mildest of mechanisms could stall out absent some real determination from the political leaders and willingness from the bureaucracy to cooperate, as the Village Education Committee evaluation in Uttar Pradesh showed Banerjee et al. 2008). But certainly the idea is worth trying.¹⁹

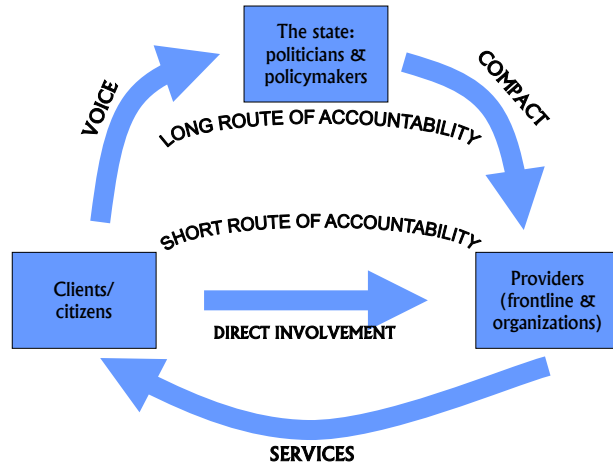
¹⁷ For a good brief summary, see Polgreen (2010a). The 11% growth rate was reported in Times of India (2010). Despite the high growth rate over the last five years, however, Bihar remained at the bottom of Indian states in terms of per capita net state domestic product, with only 40% of the All-India average (CSO 2010).

¹⁸ These data are from Kumar and Ranjan (2009), an article analyzing the 2009 Lok Sabha election in Bihar.

¹⁹ Any such initiative in Bihar would depend on the outcome of the next state assembly election, which is due in the fall of 2010, but given the momentum achieved by the present government, it can be hoped that the next one would be willing to give the short route a try.

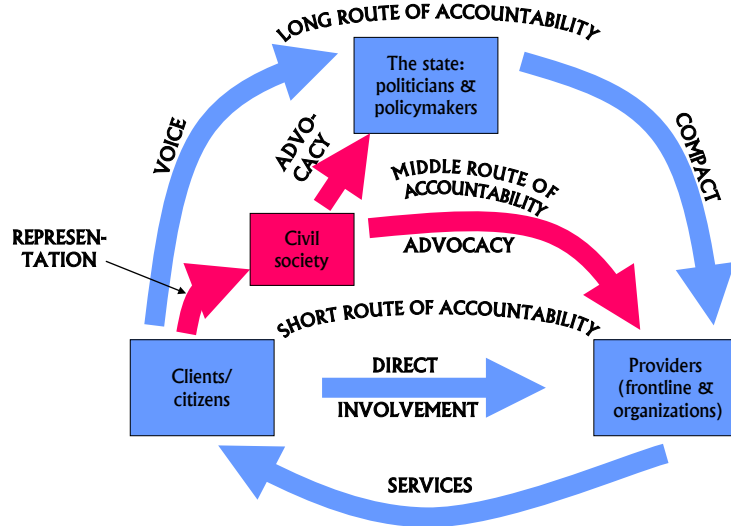
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Figure 1
The long and short routes to accountability for service delivery



Adapted from: World Development Report, 2004: 49

Figure 3
An alternate middle route to accountability



Adapted from: World Development Report, 2004: 49

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Table 1.
Spectrum of accountability with various citizen participation mechanisms



System type	Citizen complaint & petition	Citizen review board	24/7 phone-in system	Right-to-information law	Citizen report card	Social audit	Partnership	Participatory budget
Origin	Citizens or CSOs	CSO	State	State	CSO	State	CSOs	State
Citizen role	Make request	Monitor & report	Phone call	Write request	Answer survey	Answer survey	Share in allocation	Allocate investments
State response to citizen input	Discretionary	Act on inputs	Formal response required	Formal response required	Improve services	Improve services	Adopt	Comply
State response required by	No one	Individual bureaucrat	Individual bureaucrat	Law	Chief minister	Chief minister	State government	State government
Degree of state support	Discretionary	Temporary	Strong	Intermittent	Lasted a decade	Strong	Eager but middle-class bias	Strong
Examples	Many places	Mumbai food rationing	Hyderabad water & sewage	RTI Act 2005	Bangalore surveys	Delhi surveys	Delhi Bhagidari	Kerala PCDP

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Table 2. Teacher absence in public schools, 2003

State	Absence rate (%)
Maharashtra	14.6
Gujarat	17.0
Madhya Pradesh	17.6
Himachal Pradesh	21.2
Kerala	21.2
Tamil Nadu	21.3
Haryana	21.7
Karnataka	21.7
Orissa	23.4
Rajasthan	23.7
West Bengal	24.7
Andhra Pradesh	25.3
Uttar Pradesh	26.3
Chhatisgarh	30.6
Uttaranchal	32.8
Assam	33.8
Punjab	34.4
Bihar	37.8
Jharkhand	41.9
Weighted average	24.8

Source: Kremer et al. (2005).

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