

Governance as ‘Action -oriented’
Listening: People’s Voice and Policy
Choice

An Inception Report

Pratichi (India) Trust

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Introduction

There is an old adage that says that ‘the king sees, as he listens’. (‘Nripaha karnena pasyati’). This word of wisdom about gaining an eye-view of ground realities by paying heed to what people say is perhaps more apt for a democracy than a monarchy. A vibrant democracy requires vigorous governance, and vigorous governance ideally draws its energy and direction from the aspirations and ambitions of and even accusations from its citizens. Good governance, therefore, is the ‘art of listening’ to people’s voices and views and the allied capacity to act upon such concerns, criticisms and complaints through appropriate policy choices. A readiness to listen to people’s predicaments that an active democracy and its administration demonstrate is thus integrally connected with an interest in their amends. Ideally, therefore, in such a political regime people’s pleas and petitions are documented, sifted and analyzed for a definitive purpose of remedial action. In this brief inception report on one of the imaginative programmes introduced recently by the Government of West Bengal to record and redress public grievances as a means of achieving the end goal of responsive governance , we therefore focus on this issue of their action-orientation, that is to say, their effectiveness, or otherwise, in bending the arc of policies in tune with people’s expectations, towards reform, improvement and social justice.

What is new in the recent governance projects?

The Public Grievance Redressal Cell (PGRC), set up in 2019, under the aegis of the Chief Minister's Office, Government of West Bengal, has emerged as a novel governance project in the country as a technology-based (ICT enabled) platform for public grievance redressal. Over a short span of one and a half years, the cell appears to have dealt with more than ten lakhs of grievances through online and around 2.75 crore people through camp mode (Duare Sarkar) with an impressive record of 95 per cent grievance resolution rate. Since this is a community-based service, rather than a institution based one, huge number of people are reached through this system. People who could not come to the institutionalized infrastructure to avail entitlements now can access the infrastructure better.

Transcending beyond grievance recording and redressal as a routine administrative affair, the initiative has significantly contributed towards conceiving and implementing new corrective measures as well as better implementing the existing schemes and programmes. For example, a careful scrutiny of the data on grievances has spotted deteriorating road conditions as one of the top concerns among citizens. Based on this finding and in tune with people's expectations, the Government has launched the

“pathoshree’ programme on 1st October 2020; under this initiative a little over 14000 kms of roads have been reconstructed and repaired in comparatively inaccessible parts of the state.

The Cell has also played an active role in addressing the concerns of citizens during the covid- induced lockdown, including facilitating the return of a large number of migrants from the various states of the country. Also, the state was witness to a severe and widespread devastation caused by a super-cyclone called Amphan. Rising up to the unprecedented challenges that followed, the Cell took up prompt measures to ameliorate people’s woes. About 0.3 million people in the state were given assistance through this initiative. The initiative has already won some accolades like SKOCH Digital India Platinum Award and Express Technology Award in 2020.

A deeper motivation that seems to animate the vision and practice of the public grievance redressal project at CMO, WB is to strive to nurture a culture of responsive, accountable and answerable governance. The initiative also closely aligns with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Section 16, for example, underlines the need to “promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies” and correlatively prescribes “effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. Several other international instruments and practices also highlight the importance of responsive and accountable governance. For example, Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lays down the

provision of people's participation in the governance of their country. The 2015 world Public Sector Report titled *Responsive and Accountable Public Governance* underscores "the need for public governance to become more responsive and accountable for the State to lead the implementation of a collective vision of sustainable development".

A. Centering People in responsive governance

An accountable and responsive system of governance, ideally, engages people in the process of policymaking, as well as in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of welfare programmes. The government aims to identify the needs of the people by involving people in identifying those needs. It provides "access to public information, constantly listens to the people and ensures that government and its agencies are open to people's inputs and scrutiny".

Public scrutiny of social welfare schemes offers feedback to the government on public policy implementation. More broadly, it ensures bottom-up citizen engagement in public policy priorities whereby citizens get a foothold in the 'decision space' to articulate their voice in those areas of decision-making that affect their lives. This engagement contributes to an inclusive public planning process in which the concerns of a greater number of the beneficiaries of public welfare schemes can be examined,

corrective measures can be taken, and a new scheme can be planned.

Ideally speaking, this also irrigates a culture of active social citizenship by making it possible for people to participate in the process of governance on a regular and recurrent basis, extending beyond their involvement as voters in infrequent elections.

Another key aspect of responsive public governance is to build and nurture trust in governance. Public policy scholars have observed that trust is essential for maintaining the legitimacy and stability of the political system. Trust in public institutions and their policy goals and performance is a kind of ‘democratic dividend’ that consolidates both an electoral and a deliberative democracy.

Given this notion of inclusive governance in mind, the inception report aims to closely examine and understand the purpose of the project, and its functions as well as their impact on people’s lives in light of the key lessons that will spring out of an impact study that is proposed. The inception report for the Impact study will primarily draw on several rounds of discussions with the key stakeholders through various modes at public grievance redressal cell at CMO.

The inception report is structured as follows: The introductory section deals with conceptual understanding of the notion of public grievance redressal; the second part deals with the methods to be undertaken for conducting the impact study, the third section

focuses on the key indicators of its functions that will be looked into such as the reach and coverage of its activities, the nuts and bolts of the grievance redressal mechanism, categories of grievances and their spatial features if any, and to what extent and in what forms feedback from the concerned citizens has been translated into a public programme, and the final section will dwell on key learning based on the secondary level data and how has it impacted in transforming the system of governance into a more sustainable and responsive one.

B. Plan for an impact study

The Government of West Bengal has initiated a plethora of welfare schemes over the last ten years, aiming at improving the quality of life of its citizens. Yet the sheer volume of beneficiaries and the implementation of these programmes are fraught with occasional deviations and distortions. To enhance the accountability and transparency of scheme implementation, and to address the grievances that arise in the process of implementation, the government has adopted two – pronged approaches: 1) a regular and in- built system called public grievances monitoring platform which collects and addresses the grievances, and 2) many corrective measures including micro-schemes and direct outreach and campaign programme

‘DuareSarkar’, to address the grievances and deliver services, reaching out to the doorstep of beneficiaries

These initiatives have already impacted the lives of millions citizens across the state in terms of getting their grievances heard and possibly redressed. The objective of the proposed assessment is to critically assess the nature of the grievances, to promote timely redressal through evidence- and experience-based findings and evaluate the quality of suggestions and feedback generated through the process.

The study will be implemented in two phases: a) The first phase will primarily involve desk research, b) the second phase will consist of an extensive sample survey and case studies. The first phase will undertake a detailed review of programme through interactions with the key stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Public Grievances Monitoring Cell. The core component will be the analysis of existing data. Based on the findings a set of recommendations will be offered. The second phase of the study will focus on a primary sample survey with the complainants to understand the quality of grievance redressal, and their level of satisfaction with the same, with a larger aim to look for a way forward

- Detailed analysis of state level data on the implementation of the Public Grievances Monitoring Platform;

- Detailed analysis of state level data on the implementation of the Duare Sarkar scheme;
- An analysis of selected case studies of the beneficiaries benefitted by both Public Grievances Monitoring Platform and Duare Sarkar
- Primary survey will be conducted to collect data from the complainants from different districts

C. An overview of preliminary findings

Reach of the initiative

Within a short period of time, CMO's grievances Redressal system has addressed more than 10 lakhs of grievances through online mode , and another 2.75 crore people through campaign mode (Duare Sarkar), covering every district of the state. Paschim Medinipur(17 percent) tops in the list of number of complaints, followed by Purba Medinipur(11 percent) and South 24 Parganas. The Impact study will look into the causes as to why the percentage of complaints is high in these districts and how the most disadvantaged communities can also take part in an equal measure in articulating their voices and concerns

Profile of the Complainants

The age profile of the complainants reveals that mostly (63 percent) the people of advanced age, i.e., persons aged above 50

have registered their grievances, possibly indicating the role of head of the household in the family. About 16 percent youth had

Districts wise distribution of complainants 1,107,372

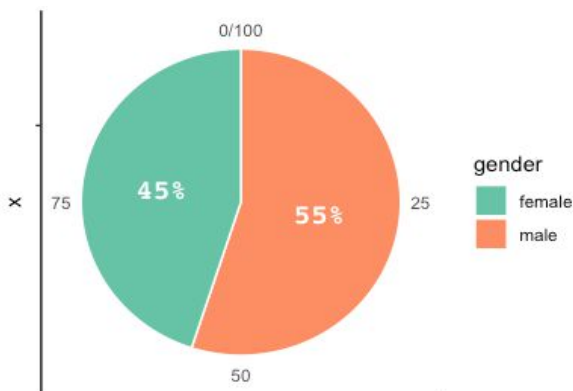
ALIPURDUAR	22,194 (2.0%)
BANKURA	49,931 (4.5%)
BIRBHUM	29,841 (2.7%)
COOCH BIHAR	23,118 (2.1%)
DAKSHIN DINAJPUR	23,118 (2.1%)
DARJILING	7,311 (0.7%)
HAORA	66,877 (6.0%)
HOOGHLY	39,865 (3.6%)
JALPAIGURI	13,862 (1.3%)
JHARGRAM	31,397 (2.8%)
KALIMPONG	1,231 (0.1%)
KOLKATA	8,058 (0.7%)
MALDA	29,793 (2.7%)
MURSHIDABAD	62,732 (5.7%)
NADIA	42,082 (3.8%)
NORTH TWENTY FOUR PARGANAS	64,552 (5.8%)
PASCHIM BARDHAMAN	56,440 (5.1%)
PASCHIM MEDINIPUR	191,979 (17%)
PURBA BARDHAMAN	51,243 (4.6%)
PURBA MEDINIPUR	120,069 (11%)
PURULIA	26,086 (2.4%)
SOUTH TWENTY FOUR PARGANAS	126,853 (11%)
UTTAR DINAJPUR	18,740 (1.7%)

Table 1

agegroup distribution of complainants 1,105,898	
above50	694,836 (63%)
Below20	21,794 (2.0%)
between21&35	172,572 (16%)
Between36&50	216,696 (20%)
Unknown	2,888

¹ Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 2

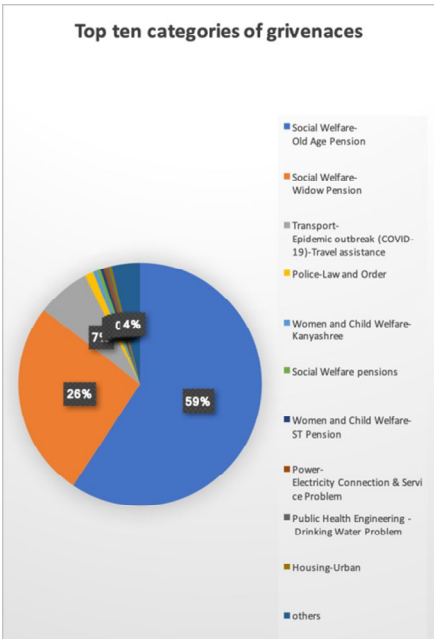


Graph 1

It is encouraging to note that participation of women in airing their grievances is almost 45 percent despite the fact that most of the households are headed by men. The figure indicates women's interest in claiming their rights and entitlements. A close analysis of the categories of grievances also reveals a large proportion of women respond and react to a plethora of schemes specially

designed for women including programmes such as ‘Kanyashree’, ‘Rupreshree’, and educational scholarships for specific social groups and widow pension schemes etc. Speedy redressal of such grievances will likely improve girl’s educational attainment and other core capabilities. We have also observed that a sizeable percentage of women have registered their grievances during the covid-induced humanitarian crisis and the devastation caused by the natural disaster like Amaphan.

Categories of Grievances



The MIS has 182 broad categories of grievances which include a wide array of complaints ranging from poor road condition to those related to functioning of several social pension schemes, and educational scholarships for the disadvantaged communities. The nature of complaints, in a way, also gives inkling about the

ambitions and aspirations of communities and individuals, the diminution of which agitates them and gets them exercised. Their anxieties regarding educational scholarships, for example, signal

their rising educational ambitions about their children. A complaint, therefore, is a potent indicator of what people value. The data also shows that there has been a surge in complaints during the Covid induced lock down period and Amphan. There is an absence of data on the social categories of complainants, but a close look at the data shows that their participation is also high as evident from the categories of grievances which includes ST pension and other schemes primarily meant for the SCs, STs, and Minorities.

Concluding Remarks

Reaching out to the most marginalized communities perhaps needs a more carefully designed communication strategy, since due to their spatial disadvantages they are often denied their entitlement and rights. On the other hand, they can't articulate their voices because of the myriad barriers including their languages and lack of access to ICT tools. A preliminary study found that public awareness about the cell was created largely through the newspaper reports. To fill the gaps in reaching out to the hitherto unreachable sections of the people, household- and neighborhood - centred programmes such as “Duare Sarkar’ and 'Parai Samadhan’ were launched, aiming to reach out to the last person.

After communicating with the people, who have lodged complaints in this centralized system, we come to know that the most important feature of this system is its speedy and proactive way of action in resolving issues. People are much satisfied with its functioning mechanism. They said it is a speedy and responsible system.

Since this grievance cell is digitally connected with 4500 administrative units, it is prompt and much holistic in nature.

'The Grievance - redressal at a phone call away' is likely to modify and strengthen the older mechanism of grievance mitigation. The traditional systems included repeated physical visits to public institutions, and submission of letters to public authorities which more often than not remained unacknowledged and unanswered for a long period. A visit to the Block office or District Headquarters often evoked a typical answer : 'come tomorrow'. And tomorrow often ended up in months and years. The old system of addressing the public grievances was both time-consuming and resource-intensive, causing a 'trust deficit' in governance.

Traditionally the complaints have been registered in a sporadic manner. People were not aware of specific and authentic authority for redressal of their specific grievances. In many cases it had been

seen that issues of specific area had not been settled or resolved in concerned departments.

Due to centralized public grievance redressal, people have started lodging their complaints much more than they used to do earlier. With the introduction of this system they do not need to find out the concerned office for redressal. People are encouraged to come up with their suggestions, problems and necessities through this arrangement.

This is perceived by the people as a citizen friendly system. Moreover, as the suggestions and complaints are accessed by the highest office, i.e., the CMO, the accountability of concerned offices has gone up. Speedy redressals are better ensured.

In contrast, a portal based platform has significantly reduced the cost and time of the citizens who are availing of this mechanism. Once the basic connectivity of the phone is assured, an aggrieved citizen can lodge a complaint using a mobile phone, emails and other social media platforms. The gestation period of resolving grievance has drastically improved as the present system, as indicated previously, seems to have connected with over 4000 administrative units. The system entails a time-bound response on 'action taken' to address the grievances.

Beyond addressing the immediate grievances, the grievance mechanism cell has also expanded as a window to understand the gaps and weak links in the government schemes/programmes/policies and its public service delivery mechanism. The citizens' response, including its collective content, is taken as a valuable suggestion and feedback both for corrective measures and formulation of new policies.

It is possible to scale up this programme. It is replicable too. The success of this system indicates its viability and possibilities and holds much promise for re-imagining the governance system to the aspirations of the people by making it more accessible, accountable and responsive. Scaling up of this system, more intense nodal infrastructure would ensure more benefit for people.
