

ACCOUNTABILITY IN GOVERNANCE: A ONE-SIDED OBLIGATION OR A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY WITH PUBLIC

Arshma Parveen¹, Jesika Minj², Prayukta Katela³, Aditi Singh⁴, Leena Chauhan⁵

^{1,3,4,5}Student, Department of Public Administration, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

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ABSTRACT

Accountability is a basic principle of democratic governance, ensuring public officials and institutions remain answerable to the citizens they serve. In the Indian democratic framework, accountability is often emphasized in legal and policy discourses, yet its practical implementation reveals significant gaps. This paper explores the central question: is accountability in governance a shared responsibility between the state and its citizens, or has it become a one-sided obligation where the burden primarily falls on the public and lower-tier officials? Through an India-centrist lens, this study delves into the multifaceted dimensions of accountability—political, administrative, legal, and social—and evaluates the extent to which current systems uphold this ideal.

Using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative analysis, case studies, and empirical data, the paper investigates how accountability is enacted and experienced in India. Key mechanisms such as the Right to Information Act (2005), the Lokpal and Lokayukta Act (2013), the Whistle blower Protection Act (2014), and digital governance initiatives like MyGov and Aadhaar are examined for their role in promoting transparency and responsiveness. While these tools were introduced to empower citizens and increase institutional responsibility, their effectiveness is often undermined by weak enforcement, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic resistance. The study also draws on data from the Open Government Data (OGD) platform, CAG audit reports, and surveys conducted with citizens and civil society representatives to assess perceptions of government accountability and trust.

The research finds that accountability in India remains largely asymmetrical. Citizens are expected to fulfill numerous civic duties—from tax compliance to participation in democratic processes—while many political leaders and senior bureaucrats operate with minimal scrutiny or consequences. This imbalance fosters public disillusionment, weakens democratic engagement, and erodes trust in institutions. However, the study also highlights emerging examples of participatory governance, grassroots activism, and judicial interventions that suggest shift towards inclusive accountability practices.

In conclusion, the paper argues that for accountability to function as a shared responsibility in India, there must be systemic reforms, stronger institutional mechanisms, and a cultural commitment to transparency and justice. It emphasizes the importance of public awareness, robust oversight bodies, and continuous citizen engagement in creating a governance ecosystem where accountability is not a burden, but a mutual and empowering civic value.

Key Words: Accountability, Good Governance, Democratic Governance, Transparency, E-Governance, Right to Information (RTI), Participatory Governance, Digital Governance, PRAGATI

1. INTRODUCTION

Accountability is often assumed to be a cornerstone of democratic governance, yet in practice, it frequently manifests as a one-sided obligation. Citizens are routinely held accountable through taxes, laws, and civic duties, while many political leaders and public officials operate with relative impunity. This imbalance undermines democratic ideals, as evident in repeated corruption scandals, the misuse of public resources, and systemic lack of transparency. Reports by organizations like Transparency International have consistently exposed the absence of effective accountability mechanisms for those in power, especially in developing nations.

A poignant example is the Flint water crisis in the United States, where government negligence led to a public health disaster. Despite clear evidence of institutional failure, accountability was delayed and limited, illustrating how governance systems often shield those in power while ordinary citizens suffer the consequences. This asymmetry weakens trust in institutions, discourages civic participation, and erodes the legitimacy of the state.

However, accountability can also function as a shared responsibility. Democratic tools such as elections, public consultations, investigative journalism, and judicial oversight create pathways for citizen engagement and institutional checks. Initiatives like participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and citizen report cards in Bangalore, India, show that collaborative accountability can enhance transparency and service delivery.

This report investigates whether accountability in governance is fundamentally one-sided or genuinely shared. By examining political, administrative, legal, and social dimensions—through both theory and real-world cases—it aims to unpack the complexities of accountability and its critical role in fostering inclusive and responsive governance.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research paper, titled *Accountability and Governance*, follows a mixed approach combining qualitative and quantitative research design to provide a descriptive analysis on the matter of accountability of the government, which is an important factor in the better functioning of governance and makes the functioning transparent for the public. These approaches mainly focus on systematically measuring accountability mechanism and observing the outcomes, using different types of data (numberi and theoretical data)

All these methods of research study are used to answer some of the major questions related to the functioning and transparency of the government towards the citizens and the responsibilities of the citizens towards the government, rather than choosing the government. These questions are: How does accountability help citizens understand the internal functioning and development, as well as the shortcomings of the government ?

What form of transparency is needed for the smooth functioning of the government in a diverse country such as India?

The study in this research highlights India's governance system and helps in examining the role of accountability mechanisms such as transparency laws (e.g., the Right to Information Act 2005), anti-corruption policies (for example, Lokpal and Lokayukta act 2013 and the whistle blower act 2014) and the digital governance platforms e.g.(Aadhar, my gov.) influence measurable outcomes such as corruption levels, public trust, and service delivery efficiency as well as encourage citizen involvement and participation, ensuring informed and better decisions.

The research methods include a thorough literature review that aims to establish a strong theoretical foundation by referring to the academic literature, policy documents, and other formal reports related to the topic. The tools used in the literature review were JSTOR and Google Scholar databases specific to governance and administration. Another method used in the research study was a case study in which certain cases related to the topic were referred to in order to provide an example based on a detailed description of the topic, which further helped in its clear representation.

Data were primarily collected from secondary sources that included publicly available datasets such as the Open Government Data (OGD) platform, which acts as a central archive/database for government data and aims to encourage transparency between government and citizens. Other data sources used in this research study are the formal public reports of the organization like the World Bank's world wide government indicators, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and reports from India's Comptroller and Audit General (CAG) such as 'Performance Audit Reports ,' Compliance Audits, financial audits and several other reports including the report on public account, union government and state government were referred. Additionally, primary data were gathered through structured surveys targeting citizens, government officials, and civil society representatives across various states, aimed at understanding people's perceptions of the government 's accountability and transparency and their trust in administration and experiences. Some of the statistical data were also collected on the policies made by the government in the last few years and their implementation and the rates of corruption in order to understand the effectiveness of those policies for the accountability mechanism.

Several focus groups were explored to determine the opinions and experiences of different communities. Thus, realistic and practical conclusions were drawn. Key variables include independent factors such as institutional capacity (strength of oversight bodies like the central vigilance commission) and socioeconomic indicators (e.g., literacy rate, poverty levels, etc.). and administrative efficiency metrics. This approach allows for an objective evidence-based evaluation of accountability in India's governance systems, enabling comparisons across states, sectors, and time periods, while addressing challenges unique to India's diverse socio-political landscape.

The theoretical framework used in this research study includes accountability theories used by the government and administration. Several governance models used by the government from foreign countries were also referred to and helped draw useful conclusions as well as some of the suggestions for changes in the transparency policy of the government.

Existing documents regarding the topic are analyses, and observations are made on the basis of data analysis.

Based on all the analyses in this research, some of the outcomes made are that accountability is important for maintaining the trust of citizens and the government, ending corruption in the administration, and for making a more effective and appropriate government needed for the overall development of the country. This study highlights that accountability is one of the main pillars of governance. Itt also promotes the maintenance of law and its rules and limits the rule of individuals by making the public informed of the working of the government. Some more suggestions to improve

accountability based on this study are that the government should keep regularly updating the people regarding the laws and decisions as well as the initiatives taken through the social media and online portals which are easily accessible by the people nowadays the government should take the disciplinary actions against the corrupted officials and protect those who inform the wrongdoing of the public servants.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, accountability has been conceptualized as a hierarchical chain that runs in opposition to the delegation chain. Citizens are the ultimate principals who 'have transferred their sovereignty to popular representatives who, in turn, have transferred the drafting and enforcement of laws and policies to the government. The ministers subsequently entrust the execution of their tasks to thousands of public servants at the ministries, who proceed to delegate part of their tasks to more or less independent bodies and institutions' (Bovens Citation2007, 463; see also Strøm Citation2000). Implementing organizations are contractually and/or statutorily obliged to inform civil servants of their performance regarding the delegated task. Public servants are, in turn, accountable to the minister by means of hierarchy within the ministry, and the minister is accountable to parliament, whose members are accountable to the people during elections. Accountability can be said to function properly in this model when every actor is required to account for its superiority so that a single accountability chain runs from the policy implementer all the way up to voters.

This model of accountability has been stressed as an indirect consequence of public sector reforms (Considine Citation2002). A wide variety of new accountability practices, both mandatory and voluntary, have been introduced to remedy accountability problems caused by the structural disaggregation of the public sector that has taken place over the last couple of decades (Michels and Meijer Citation2008). These new practices are often enacted outside the hierarchical relationship associated with the 'ideal-typical' unitary model of delegation and accountability (Strøm Citation2000). As such, reforms in the public sector 'have stretched the elasticity of our received notions of accountability to the breaking point' (Considine Citation2002, 23).

In response to these changes, many new concepts, including voluntary accountability, have been proposed with the aim of aligning the accountability idiom with a new empirical reality (see Table 1 for an overview). Together, these concepts reflect the increasingly complex, multidirectional 'web of accountability' (Page Citation2006) in which public institutions operate these days. The growing role of the internet as a platform for societal accountability (Bovens Citation2007) has led to the development of concepts like web-based accountability (Saxton and Guo Citation2011) and dynamic accountability (Schillemans, Van Twist, and Vanhommerig Citation2013). Related concepts such as direct accountability (Meijer Citation2005), citizen accountability (Meijer and Schillemans Citation2009), participatory accountability (Damgaard and Lewis Citation2014) and citizen-initiated accountability (Schillemans, Van Twist, and Vanhommerig Citation2013) were coined to describe the growing influence of citizens in accountability processes. Other authors have proposed concepts that describe the growing role of all kinds of stakeholders in horizontal, multi-actor and multi-level governance settings, such as media accountability (Maggetti Citation2012), informal accountability (Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar Citation2012), mutual accountability (Whitaker, Altman-Sauer, and Henderson Citation2004), extended accountability (Hall, Scott, and Hood Citation2000) and stakeholder accountability (Meijer Citation2007).

The term governance is usually used in reference to more complex issues, and even at this moment, the definition has attained social consensus even if it is applied incorrectly, which becomes clear when one looks at the various definitions given by different institutions. In as much as the political domain is concerned, governance was first used by UK's Department for International Development as Ex-UK's Aid Administration was labeled a good government". The government comprises of four main components. Legitimacy is one of the most important factors that proves that the government should, in all circumstances, move with the will of the governed; thus, he/she is able to give or not give consent. The second point where the UK policy guarantees legitimacy is through pluralism and a multi-party system that all these parties must contest. Accountability requires the presence of what can be termed legalistic assurance that civil public servants and the political heads of the government use public funds and the generally accepted norms of freedom and openness. He or she is responsible, and the media is free with various public funds, which means an open government. Have the competence to formulate and execute appropriate public policies, including the provision of adequate and efficient public services to citizens.

In spite of being crucial for democracy accountability lacks "an important academic," critique and further stimulated debate and "there is, however, minimal consensus" concerning "its fundamental characteristics and the diverse processes through which it operates."

For the 50th anniversary of Local Government Studies, the current reflection began with the question: "How are accountability-related processes and outcomes being explored by the authors of Local Government Studies?"

Accountability is a prominent concept, especially when applied to public sector organizations, and is described as "a synonym for many loosely defined political desiderata, such as transparency, equity, democracy, efficiency, and integrity" (Bovens Citation2009, 183). In this context, accountability is viewed as a political process (Schillemans Citation2022) where politicians and public leaders respond to institutions, often encountering conflicts of interest, polarization, and forms of authoritarianism. Accountability can be understood as the process of providing accounts to citizens or entities exercising scrutiny (e.g., audit courts, ministries at central government, judicial courts, international courts or commissions, and non-governmental organizations), a value to be preserved or enhanced (a government perceived as open, transparent, and accountable), or an outcome created daily through governmental routines, such as compliance with the law, transparency, and legitimacy of budgeting, procurement, and service provision. Alternatively, it is a critical dialogic process in which governments engage with constituencies of interest seeking public support (Dillard and Vinnari Citation2019), for example, through social media (Agostino et al., and Steccolini Citation2021).

To investigate this question, a systematic literature review covering 50 years of Local Government Studies was conducted within the journal's full content. The selected 109 research papers included quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, literature reviews, and reflections by practitioners. Through careful reading, I identified emerging categories of methods, contexts (country and specific public policies), and accountability-related themes that have evolved over the past decades. By examining the different periods in the journal and the contextual timeline, I gain a better understanding of how the subject is explored by the authors of Local Government Studies.

In the journal's early days, British authors reflected on the pressures faced by local authorities to report their performance. This was followed by more diverse authorship from Europe and North America, which introduced qualitative-oriented studies and explored new contexts and different countries. Recently, quantitative studies from Europe, North America, and China have shifted the nuances of this topic. However, accountability often remains a peripheral construct in empirical studies, and its implications and theoretical developments are not linked to accountability. For example, Boyne et al. (Citation2001) examined the impact of the Best Value on local government performance, including accountability. As I will explore further, we can enhance our understanding of the effects of accountability by shifting the focus to the process of accountability and the impacts of accountability and its institutions rather than merely observing accountability as an output. To pursue this avenue, cross-fertilization with accounting scholarship would be beneficial.

Public Housing in Karnataka (2017): Politics, Visibility, and Control

Public housing in India, particularly in rural areas, represents one of the most tangible and politically visible welfare interventions by the state. Unlike employment schemes that distribute benefits across many individuals, housing subsidies are concentrated—each unit represents a large allocation of public funds to a single family. This visibility generates both political capital and administrative focus. Houses are physical assets that symbolically and materially uplift beneficiaries, creating gratitude and allegiance. For politicians and officials, this makes housing a valuable tool for image-building.

However, the process is not without complications. Corruption often seeps in through material procurement and beneficiary selection. Recycled or substandard materials are sometimes used to reduce costs while still meeting basic standards. Beneficiaries, eager to receive any housing support, often overlook these compromises. On the other side, officials and contractors may gain both financially and reputationally. This imbalance highlights how public goods are co-opted to serve elite interests, even as they meet genuine needs.

The case of a proactive Deputy Commissioner in a poor district in Karnataka exemplifies how administrative leadership can accelerate housing delivery. By coordinating closely with gram panchayats and contractors, and by personally overseeing subsidy disbursement, he succeeded in completing over 2,400 houses—an unprecedented figure in that district. Yet, this very success drew political backlash. A local MLA, displeased by the reduced scope for political patronage, accused the officer of ulterior motives, suggesting that rapid execution diluted political control. The officer's vision of universal access clashed with the entrenched system of selective, demand-based distribution.

This case reveals how governance is often contested not in terms of capacity but of control. Bureaucrats and politicians may diverge in their goals—one pursuing efficiency and equity, the other preserving influence. Despite legal reforms empowering gram sabhas under the Karnataka PRI Act of 1993 (and later amendments in 2003), the politics of beneficiary selection remained contentious. The High Court of Karnataka distinguished between "identification" (a bureaucratic task) and "selection" (a political prerogative), reinforcing centralized control despite decentralization efforts.

Ultimately, the housing case in Karnataka demonstrates that governance reform is not just a matter of policy design but of navigating the deeply political terrain of local implementation. Legal clarity and administrative innovation are necessary but insufficient without alignment among stakeholders.

PRAGATI India (2015): Digital Governance and High-Level Accountability

Launched in 2015, PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) is a digital platform designed to monitor and expedite large-scale infrastructure and social sector projects across India. Spearheaded by the Prime Minister's Office, PRAGATI integrates video conferencing, geo-spatial data, and real-time dashboards to enhance coordination between central ministries and state governments.

By June 2023, PRAGATI had reviewed 340 high-value projects worth ₹17.05 lakh crore (~\$205 billion). These included national highways, airport expansions, and broadband infrastructure. What distinguishes PRAGATI is its emphasis on top-level leadership and technological integration. The Prime Minister personally reviews project progress monthly, intervenes to resolve bottlenecks, and ensures interdepartmental collaboration. This direct engagement has fostered a culture of urgency and accountability among officials.

One of the key impacts of PRAGATI lies in its ability to unblock “wicked” projects—initiatives stalled for years due to interagency disputes or bureaucratic inertia. For instance, the Pakri-Barwadih coal mine, delayed since 2006, progressed swiftly after PM Modi's intervention in 2016, reaching completion in 2019. Similarly, the Ennore-Thiruvallur-Bengaluru gas pipeline, entangled in state-level land disputes, was resolved after PRAGATI coordinated a single-point authority, ensuring timely execution in 2024.

Beyond coordination, PRAGATI also incentivizes proactive problem-solving. Officials, aware of the possibility of being reviewed directly by the PM, often preemptively address delays. The National Broadband Mission, for example, secured half of its pending right-of-way permissions in just five months prior to its scheduled PRAGATI review.

The platform also reflects a broader shift towards digital governance and cooperative federalism. Its success is rooted in the combination of strategic project selection, leadership from the top, and integrated data-driven decision-making. More than a monitoring tool, PRAGATI symbolizes a new governance ethos—focused, responsive, and inclusive.

IMPACTS OF PRAGATI: Accelerating infrastructure Development

The PRAGATI INDIA is launched since 2015, it has emerged as a powerful tool for transforming India's infrastructure landscape. In June 2023, the platform had reviewed 340 projects valued at ₹17.05 lakh crore (\$205 billion) significantly expediting their implementation. It includes development of 50,000 kilometers of National Highways and doubling of Country's airports, reflecting a decade of unique progress.

The selection of these 340 projects was highly strategic, which is focusing on the initiatives of national importance that presented in a unique and complex challenges. PRAGATI has been instrumental in addressing these ‘wicked’ projects, often considered the most frightened in terms of execution.

Accountability and Good Governance in India: A Cornerstone of Effective Public Administration

Accountability and good governance form the backbone of effective public administration. While governance refers to the systems and institutions guiding the functioning of a country, accountability ensures that those in power are answerable for their decisions and actions. The two are inextricably linked—accountability is the engine driving the vehicle of governance. In the Indian context, this relationship has evolved dynamically through legal reforms, civil society participation, digital innovations, and institutional mechanisms.

The Evolution of Accountability in India

India's journey toward accountable governance has seen major legislative and institutional developments. Among the most significant milestones is the **Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005**, which empowered citizens to demand transparency from public authorities. RTI served as a catalytic tool for exposing inefficiencies and corruption, placing vital information in the hands of citizens.

Additionally, institutions such as the **Lokpal and Lokayuktas**, **Central Vigilance Commission (CVC)**, and the **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** play central roles in upholding accountability. These bodies are tasked with combating corruption, overseeing administrative vigilance, and auditing government expenditures. However, their effectiveness is often hindered by limited autonomy, political interference, and bureaucratic inertia.

The Role of Civil Society and Grassroots Mechanisms

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in shaping India's accountability narrative. These organizations act as watchdogs, pushing for transparency and reform. Initiatives like **social audits under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)** have empowered local communities to monitor

public programs. These audits, by involving villagers directly, help ensure that funds are properly utilized and issues are publicly discussed.

Similarly, the **Suwidha project in Punjab**, which simplified public service delivery through digital platforms, stands out as a model of successful e-governance. These examples show that accountability can be fostered not only from the top down but also from the ground up.

Digital Governance: Bridging Gaps

Technology has revolutionized accountability by facilitating real-time monitoring and streamlining service delivery. Platforms like **MyGov**, **Aadhaar-enabled services**, and **PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation)** have enhanced transparency and citizen engagement.

PRAGATI, launched in 2015, is a standout initiative that integrates central ministries, state governments, and the Prime Minister's Office through video conferencing, digital dashboards, and geo-spatial mapping. It has accelerated over 340 high-value projects and resolved numerous public grievances, showcasing how digital tools can drive cooperative federalism and implementation efficiency.

Yet, the digital divide remains a concern. Limited digital literacy and infrastructure disparities in rural and remote regions risk excluding vulnerable populations from the benefits of e-governance.

Institutional Strengths and Challenges

India's accountability framework includes robust institutions:

Lokpal and Lokayuktas address corruption at higher levels but often lack operational independence.

CVC monitors administrative conduct but suffers from limited enforcement power.

CAG audits public expenditures, though follow-through on its reports is inconsistent.

RTI Act empowers citizens, though increasing restrictions and delayed responses pose challenges.

Despite the presence of these institutions, several systemic issues persist:

Judicial delays and backlogs reduce the deterrent effect of anti-corruption mechanisms.

Political interference undermines the impartiality of investigations.

Enforcement gaps weaken accountability structures.

Regional disparities create unequal access to governance and justice.

Accountability: A Shared Responsibility

Traditionally, accountability has been perceived as the sole responsibility of the government. However, in a functioning democracy, it is a **shared responsibility** between the state and its citizens.

Government's Role: It must establish legal frameworks, build independent institutions, ensure transparency, and respond to grievances. The lack of accountability on the part of public officials can lead to governance failures, eroding trust and hindering development.

Citizen's Role: Citizens must remain informed, vote responsibly, participate in debates, and use platforms like RTI to seek answers. A vigilant public, supported by a free press and an active civil society, is essential to democratic accountability. Social media has further empowered citizens to highlight issues and demand change, though its use must be responsible to avoid misinformation.

Policy Recommendations

To strengthen accountability in Indian governance, several reforms are essential:

Empowering Institutions: Provide bodies like the Lokpal, CVC, and CAG with the autonomy and resources to function independently and effectively.

Time-Bound Resolutions: Establish faster judicial and administrative processes to resolve cases, reducing delays and backlog.

Digital Transparency: Expand real-time digital dashboards that track government performance and project status.

Citizen Engagement: Institutionalize mechanisms for public participation in audits, consultations, and decision-making processes.

Minimizing Political Interference: Legal safeguards must be enforced to protect investigative agencies and oversight bodies from political pressures.

Conclusion: Stitching the Tapestry of Accountability

India's democratic governance is a complex tapestry—rich in structure, but with visible gaps that need urgent stitching. Accountability is not a static concept; it evolves with political will, institutional integrity, and civic engagement. While India has laid down a robust framework, translating intention into effective action remains a formidable challenge.

Good governance thrives on trust, and trust is built through transparency, participation, and justice. The road to an accountable future lies in collaborative governance—where governments are responsive, institutions are strong, and citizens are engaged. Only by embracing accountability as a **shared, dynamic responsibility** can India strengthen its democratic fabric and ensure inclusive, equitable development.

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