

## The paradox of public benefit schemes in India

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### Abstract

Every country in the world has created some sort of scheme for the benefit of underprivileged citizens; this is also the case in India. However, what can now be observed is that the simple creation of these schemes is not enough as the main problems lie in proper implementation. A peculiar situation exists in India wherein the supposed recipients of a governmentally-formed and constitutionally-backed public beneficiary schemes are often not aware of the existence of such aids and are thus not able to make full use of these reliefs so as to improve their ragged conditions. This paper will try to demonstrate that only by educating the intended recipients of beneficiary schemes can we achieve an improvement in the delivery of public services as well as a significant advance in the conditions of underprivileged citizens.

“The freedom of a nation cannot be upheld by laws alone but also by the light of the nation and knowledge of their use.”

Anders Chydenius

### Introduction

In line with international practices, India has created many schemes for the benefit of underprivileged citizens. Today we can see that proper implementation is a trickier business than creation alone. An example of this is the Fair Price Shop (FPS) which is a form of public distribution system brought about by the government to distribute rations at subsidised prices to the underprivileged.



The poor supervision of the FPS and the absence of any form of accountability mechanisms has resulted in its benefits being ripped not by the poor strata of society but by a great range of bureaucratic middlemen. Furthermore, there exists a lack of knowledge amongst the rural (poor) section of society about the very existence of the Public Distribution System or the FPS; exploitation of recipients is the norm (Yadav, 2014).

This paper will try to emphasize that educating the population about the current schemes in force will be much more effective (will lead to a better delivery of public services) than just enacting a new schemes. This is one of the core philosophies of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) named 'Sehgal foundation' which followed this strategy by practicing "Sushasan Abhi". "Sushasan Abhi" (which basically means 'Good Governance Now') is a program devised to empower villagers so as to recognise and make the most of their governmentally ensured rights. The focus lies on informing the citizenry about how to have access to the benefits of welfare services. The target beneficiaries are also taught the generals on how to access the government grievance redressal system in order to forward their complaints or in extreme circumstances to hold either the middleman or the government agent himself accountable to the law (Sehgal Foundation, 2017).

While conducting my research I interacted with the villagers where the practice of "Sushasan Abhi" was being conducted. The main focus of this paper is to show the success of the natives from two villages in Nuh, Haryana (where the Sehgal foundation conducted classes of "Sushasan Abhi") in being able to obtain the benefits of governmental programs for their children. We aim to demonstrate that a little awareness goes a long way. We also try to show the importance of the Right to Information Act (2005) in helping underprivileged citizens to obtain justice.

### Veil of 'Good Governance'

In consonance with the main objectives of this paper it is important to point out the importance of seeing beyond the government's veil of 'good governance' and understand the 'actual' application of state-conducted governance.

Budget sessions always intrigue the citizens of a country as they display the commitment of a particular government to a specific cause. Jacob Lew, the 76th United States Secretary of the Treasury, once said that "The budget is not just a collection of numbers, but an expression of our values and aspirations" (J. Lew, 2011). Each year in India there seems to be an increase in the budget allocated to welfare

schemes, which brings hope to ‘watchers’ that the government is striving to improve the conditions of the underprivileged. Yet this hope is not shared by the welfare receivers. For example, in the 2017-18 budget there has been an increase of 27% in the budget provided to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, which now stands at INR 220.95 Billion (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2017). However, beyond all the budgetary increases in various welfare schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Midday Meal Scheme etc., proper implementation must also be taken into account. Let’s look at Anganwadi, the most foundational level of dispensing basic health care by the government. Anganwadi’s function is to act as an informal mother by providing food, immunization, education, nursing etc. to entitled beneficiaries. It had an allotted budget of INR 152.45 Billion. However, according to a research conducted by ‘Child Relief and You’ on March 2015, 14,573 positions of Anganwadi Supervisors, 62,970 positions of Anganwadi Workers and 1,18,609 positions of Anganwadi helpers were unoccupied (Ganotra, 2017). Thus even though there are ample funds, the 1.331 Million Anganwadi and mini-Anganwadi Centres as of 31.01.2013 (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013) are heavily understaffed. This is due to indecorous use of allocated funds for private purposes of government officials.

In addition to this let us take the example of the Mid-day Meal Scheme, which is a school meal programme created by the Government to provide free lunches to primary and upper primary schoolchildren in government-run schools. The Mid-day Meal Scheme had a budget of INR 91.44 Billion in 2015 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2017). However, it was often shown in the news that the scheme suffers from irregularities wherein school authorities buy low-quality meal for the schools. A shocking example of this was the 2013 Bihar incident where 23 students died after consuming a midday meal contaminated with pesticides. In addition to this the Comptroller and Auditor General of India in its report had found huge financial mismanagement and diversion of funds meant for the scheme. This specially highlights the total disregard for the quality of the meals being served to students (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2015).

Jacob Lew was right in pointing out that the budget of a country shows its aspirations. However it needs to be said that a country should not be judged only in terms of its aspirations but also according to its power to implement those aspirations. The Government needs to focus more on the proper allotment of its welfare schemes instead of escalating their funds.

## Background

Nuh is one of 22 districts of the Haryana State, which is located in Northern-India. Meo-Muslims are the predominant population in this area. Meo-Muslims are a unique ethnic group belonging to the Muslim-Rajput category; they are essentially Rajputs (a social class historically associated with warriorhood) who profess the beliefs of Islam.

Nuh is the 12th most populous district in Haryana with a population of 1.081 M. as per the 2011 Census (Mewat Development Agency, 2017). A major portion of the populace lives in rural areas (88.6%).

The literacy rate in Nuh is abysmal, especially in respect to female literacy. The literacy rate is 54.08%, way below the State average of 67.91%; female literacy rate is 36.60% (the State average is 55.73%).

Nuh's sex ratio, 905 females for every 1,000 males, is much above Haryana's 877: 1,000. Yet almost every woman in Nuh suffers from anaemia due to lack of nutrition and multiple pregnancies. Among these families, which average 8-10 children, almost every household cited cases of infant deaths. The mother mortality rate (MMR) hovers between 160 and 170, while infant mortality rate (IMR) is 64, both figures again highest in Haryana and one of the worst in the country. The institutional delivery rate is a meagre 40-42% (Dev, 2013).

Thus socio-economic development in Nuh has not been impressive. In fact, low ranking in HDI exhibits the profound backwardness affecting the district.

It should be noted that in spite of a large number of rights and entitlements guaranteed on paper by both the Government of India and by the Government of Haryana, the rural population of Nuh experiences numerous difficulties when it comes to concrete access to said rights and entitlements.

The Nuh Development Agency (NDA), a self-governing state organism, has been an active contributor in bringing forth numerous welfare programs in Nuh. However, and in spite of the efforts made by the NDA, the sheer lag in terms of even simple basic resources is going to require mammoth energy to bring development to the area.

### Intervention by the Sehgal Foundation

The Sehgal Foundation, which fights so that every person across rural India can lead a more self-assured, buoyant and dignified life, began its development interventions in the Nuh area. The mission

of the foundation is to toughen community-led development initiatives so as to achieve positive social, economic, and environmental change across rural India. In order to achieve its mission, the foundation's team works together with rural population in order to generate workable as well as viable projects for managing water resources, increasing agricultural productivity, and solidifying rural governance. One of the major initiatives pioneered by the Foundation is the Good Governance Now (GGN) or as it is called in the villages of Nuh, the "Sushasan Abhi" initiative. It was launched in 2008 to eradicate the lack of awareness relating to rights and entitlements as guaranteed under some of the prominent government programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guaranteed (MGNREGA), the Mid-Day Meal Scheme etc.

In order to combat this lack of awareness, and following a spirit of urgency and confidence, the GGN program started structured training sessions wherein collectives of rural citizens are trained not only about their rights and entitlements under various government programs, but also on how to use the existing grievance redressal mechanisms in case of any malfunctioning. The main idea is to create groups of active citizens in the villages who are capable enough to fight for their own rights. Initially, the foundation started with Block Leadership Schools (BLS) under which a group of trainees or 'Sushasan Champions' were trained in each of the five blocks. However, since 2014 the Foundation initiated the concept of Village Leadership Schools (VLS) under which training sessions are conducted in selected villages with 25-30 Sushasan Champions in each village.

The Sushasan Champions are trained through Village Leadership School (VLS) so that they can share their knowledge with community members and enable other citizens to connect with government officials to solve local problems.

Currently VLS are being held in around 437 villages. To select individuals for the training sessions staff members of the foundation hold a meeting with the key persons of each village, for example the sarpanch (an elected head of the village), in which the details of the Foundation's program would be explained and suggestions about the most appropriate local participants would be asked for. After this an informal meeting is held with the volunteers; participation by women is mandatory. Two of the most important criteria on which an individual is selected are that the individual should show interest and zeal in bringing about developmental reforms of his/her village and have time to attend the training sessions. After the training of the selected individuals is complete they would be termed as

‘Sushasan Champions’. As of this day, there are 11,781 Sushasan Champions. (Sehgal Foundation, 2017)

### Details about the Village Leadership School/Good Governance

Jeremy Bentham once said that “Without publicity, no good is permanent; under the auspices of publicity, no evil can continue.” (Bentham, 1843) The Good Governance Now (Sushasan Abhi), as mentioned above, is a program intended to raise awareness among the rural populace of Nuh about prominent government programs. Villagers are able to learn about pivotal issues related to governmental schemes such as the Guaranteed Rural Employment, the Right to Information, Right to Education, Social Security services and Food Security. They are taught how to apply for and claim their entitlements under the aforementioned government schemes and how to appeal about delays and disavowals to an appropriate government official. Using the training provided they are able to overcome issues of poor service delivery and corruption by government officials and other authorities in Nuh. The GGN creates informed and knowledgeable community leaders that are able to improve the transparency of key government schemes which results in the better delivery of public services.

Under the GGN initiative, certain individuals are chosen from different villages who are called to receive training through Village Leadership Schools (VLS). The training centres share knowledge and information regarding government schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services, Public Distribution System, Right to Education, Mid-Day Meal, Social Security measures like pensions etc. as well as grievance redressal mechanisms including the Right To Information and ways of writing applications or filing complaints. Meeting are held at both the block and village levels (Sehgal Foundation, 2017).

After receiving training in the VLS sessions the individuals were able to identify the inadequate implementation of the aforementioned schemes and started to utilize the knowledge that was provided to them on matters related to government schemes.

### The right to information

A pivotal pillar of a country which has decided to adopt the democratic model of governance is ‘transparency’ of the representative government. It has been stated by Justice A.P. Shah, former Chief

Justice of Delhi and Madras High Courts, that “Information is the currency that every citizen requires to participate in the life and governance of society.” (Secretary General, Supreme Court v. Subhash Chandra, [2010]).

It was with this aim that the Right to Information (RTI) Act (2005) was created. The goal was to bring accountability and transparency in the functioning of the government. It has been acknowledged as the most effective grievance redressal mechanism available before taking more serious steps such as filing a FIR or going to Court. Many scandals have been uncovered with the help of RTI in the last decade (for example the Adarsh Scam, 2G Scam, etc.).

Many villagers studied in the context of this paper have used this mechanism to solve their problems; and, as an RTI application costs only INR 10, it is an extremely inexpensive yet greatly efficient form of facing corrupt and tormenting public officials.

## Success stories

The following passage is concerned with a few success stories from two villages, Dhadholi and Rithad, which are located in the Nagina block of Nuh. The aim is to bring into focus the importance of the Village Leadership School and the Sushasan Abhi program in bringing forth awareness of various welfare programs so as to combat inadequate delivery. As the primary source of data, an informal interview was conducted with two Sushasan Champions; a group discussion has also subsequently taken place with six Sushasan Champions.

### I. In the village of Dhadholi

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) is an act enacted by the Parliament of India on 4 August 2009. It made education of children between the age group of 6 and 14 in India free and compulsory. The act came into force on April 1st, 2010; on that date India joined a group of 135 countries which made education a fundamental right (Article 21A of the Constitution of India).

One of the highlights of the RTE concerned the fact that it covered even the private sector by making it mandatory for private schools to reserve 25% of seats to non-paying children (an expense compensated by the relevant state department as a measure of public-private partnership plans). It needs to be noted that the children receive admission into private schools on caste-based reservations.

(Caste-based reservation systems are programs of affirmative action aimed at protecting underprivileged castes from fair admission processes).

In the village of Dhadholi it was seen that the local private school was not adhering to the rules stated in the Right to Education Act. The act clearly stated that 25% of the students in that private school should belong to socially disadvantaged groups; however the school headmaster was not following this rule.

When one of the villagers of Dhadholi got to know about this specific provision in a VLS training session he went to the school and raised this issue with the headmaster. The headmaster answered that “no such rule or government provision exists and [as] we are a private school and we will always charge full fees”. After receiving this reply from the headmaster, the villager with the help of Sehgal Foundation filed an RTI against the school and asked for information regarding its admission policy under the Right to Education Act. When the reply came he took it to the headmaster, who asked for forgiveness and urged the villager not to file a complaint.

## II. In the village of Rithad

1.1. The Midday Meal Scheme is an initiative by the Government of India specifically aimed to improve school attendance by providing free meal to primary as well as upper primary classes school children enrolled in various state-sponsored organisms (Government, Government-Aided, Local-Body, Education-Guarantee Scheme, Alternate Innovative Education Centers, Madrasa and Maqtabas supported under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and National Child Labor Project schools run by the Ministry of Labor nationwide).

1.2.

In the village of Rithad it was seen that the school authorities were not following the provisions under the Mid-day meal scheme and not giving lunch to the children on every working day. In addition to this the school teachers would not turn up every day or would not teach the children properly. After the VLS training session the trainees got to know about all the requirements of the MDS. Before this the people of the village did not care if the children got lunch every day or not; as one villager told me, ‘agar bacho ko khana mil jata toh achi baat hai agar nahi milta phir ghar ake khila deta’ (if the child gets food it’s a good thing and if they don’t then they would eat at home). After the training session, the people went to the headmaster and demanded that he correct the school’s practices or else they would file a complaint. The headmaster answered that he would make sure that from then on the children

would get lunch every day. A School Management Committee (SMC) has been formed in the village whose work is to keep a check that the children are receiving lunch every day and that the quality of food is good. It also ensures that the children's attendance in the school remains consistent and tries to prevent the problem of temporary dropping out. Furthermore, a teacher's uninformed absenteeism is reported by the SMC to the standing committee.

1.2. According to the RTE act, scholarships are provided to the children whose parents belong to the Below Poverty Line category or to the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe category.

The headmaster of this village was given INR. 35, 000 to be distributed as scholarships to various children's parents. The villagers were not aware of this scheme before the VLS training session. After they learned about the scheme the parents went to the headmaster and said that they have not received any money under the scheme and that he should look into it. The headmaster replied that the money had returned to the government agency. Thus the group of villagers went to the government agency and asked for the money. There the person in charge said that the money can't be returned and that the headmaster has cheated them. After a second confrontation with the headmaster he apologized and returned the money.

### Conclusion: The power of awareness

The main goal of the GGN program, raising awareness about pivotal government schemes, is being achieved gradually. The above-mentioned stories show the power of awareness as well as the growing strength to enforce proper implementation of the welfare schemes. Margaret Fuller once said that "If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it"; with the help of information and knowledge now passed on to the villagers through the above mentioned 'initiative' they are able to claim their benefits under the various government welfare programs. Before this, the license holder of the ration depot or the school authorities were easily able to cheat the villagers. Now with the VLS in place the villagers are able to identify the inadequacy of the services provided and are successfully able to demand progressive change. The people of Nuh had spent a lot of time blaming the government for a huge array of problems but now they have realized that the government is not entirely at fault. Many progressive welfare schemes were created by the government; not existence but lack of awareness was the problem. Hence, this paper endeavours to suggest that simply 'forming' a scheme is not enough for the government to provide benefits to the intended recipients. Said benefits can only be reached through 'awareness' amongst recipients and proper implementation.

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