

Want to Make a Difference? Then initiate it.

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Good governance is a term that has been used quite liberally in the past couple of decades, both internationally and in India. Even if we do not know its exact definition, we all know what we mean by the term.

To most of us, it means that our government and the elected representatives work to create or enable the public infrastructure and services that allow citizens in a democracy to live their lives fully. We know it means that the government is accountable to citizens; that it should be transparent in its decision-making processes; that it upholds the rule of law. We know it means that there is universal access to justice and an independent, free media. Most crucially, we know it means a government and a society that manages painful but necessary trade-offs based on widely accepted principles of justice and inclusion. In the 21st century, good governance also requires a fair balance between short- term and long-term needs of humans, of other life forms and of the planet as a whole.

It is impossible, perhaps, to expect perfect governance. But many countries around the world have shown that it is possible to have a high level of it. Indians travel abroad in larger numbers each year, and surely it is no coincidence that they go mostly to countries with highly developed infrastructure and rule of law. They have witnessed just what a difference it makes to public life when governments deliver and when civic institutions flourish.

Yet, we often lament that there is not much hope of seeing the same transformation in India any time soon. Perhaps we forget that those countries had to struggle for decades if not centuries to reach where they are. That it took good leadership, not just in politics, but also in civil society, in academia, in the courts, in the media. That it also took good “followership” of citizens who understood that you have to give up something to get something of a higher order, that you had to always do your bit to achieve a larger, more inclusive vision.

In many of those countries, there was also big philanthropic capital that went into supporting the innovations and the movements that brought about better governance. Movements for the rights of minorities, for protecting the environment, for changing regressive laws, for building new institutions of democracy; innovations through research and technology to make governments more transparent and accountable, and so on.

It is time now that Indian philanthropy supports Indian governance initiatives in a big way. The time is certainly ripe for it. There are hundreds of organizations with innovative ideas, with passion and commitment that are laying the foundations for improving governance in a myriad ways. Let's try and imagine what such initiatives could do.

What if one organization focused on enabling parliamentarians to better understand the issues being debated and the bills being tabled in Parliament? Would it not help members of Parliament (MPs) to make up their own mind on issues? Despite party whips and current law, which do not allow MPs to vote against their party's stand, would such empowerment push for changing such a retrograde law? Would we then be a democracy in which we could directly influence our own MP to speak out for us and not necessarily only for the party?

And what if another organization simply decided to take the government's own data and show it to us in readable form? Not as lines and numbers and squiggles, but as data stories that tell us things we could not know from the way government presents its data to us? What if that way of splicing the data informed us that in fact, some programme which politicians like but taxpayers hate was in fact doing worse than was reported, or equally, what if taxpayers had to face that they got higher subsidies than the poorest of the poor? Would that help make politics become more about evidence and universal values?

And then, what if a group of highly qualified young lawyers decided that their energy was best spent trying to make sense of the world's longest, largest compendium of laws? What if they decided to work on making our legal structures more explainable, more contemporary, more integrated? Would it help ordinary people who run from pillar to post in the legal system actually get fairer and speedier recourse to justice?

What if a group of people worked long and hard with several panchayats, enabling them to become more autonomous and use the best management practices to deliver better on their obligations? What if that movement became viral as panchayat representatives and villagers saw the benefits from it?

What if some practitioners came together to pool data, to share best practices, and to work with governments and barefoot engineers to enable the conservation of India's one million springs, which provide local, reliable water to 75% of India's villages? What impact would that have on the growing water crisis and the governance of our key resource?

All over the country, there are people who are working on exactly these and other such problems. Together, it makes for a tantalizing possibility. If such people had sufficient support, what could they together achieve? How would the governance of our resources, our institutions, and our public delivery systems change? And what impact would that have on the dreams of a billion people?

The best way to find out is to support such efforts. After all, government alone cannot design good governance. If the privileged in society can use that privilege to privilege others, then the consequences can be tremendous. We cannot be mere consumers of good governance, we must be participants; we must be co-creators. There are no short cuts to this process.

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