

## Citizen's Charter in India

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**N**avigating through the corridors of the government to apply and receive a benefit has often been a frustrating and bewildering experience for the average citizen in India. The main reason for this is the information asymmetry that exists between the government department and the applicant or the consumer. While the former has all the information but may not have put it in the public domain, the latter may not have either the awareness or the information to follow laid down procedures. Add to this the lack of a grievance redress mechanism and the consumer may have no other option but to turn to a middleman to get the work done, invariably at a higher cost.

Citizen's Charters were introduced in India in the 1990s as an attempt to address this very lacuna in the system. However, concerns have been expressed time and again regarding the effectiveness of this reform measure both as an information-sharing mechanism as well as a grievance redress solution. Though the last two decades have seen the introduction of the Right to Information Act and the Right to Public Services Act that make information sharing a legal requisite, the importance of Citizen's Charters cannot be undermined. It is high time that this programme is revived and reintroduced to government departments so that they can become

accountable not only to their customers but to themselves as well.

### Citizen's Charter Initiative

The United Kingdom pioneered the Citizen's Charter initiative when Prime Minister John Major of the Conservative Government announced it in 1991 as a measure to refocus public services towards the needs and expectations of their users. This included adopting certain operating principles by those public service providers who planned to implement a Citizen's Charter; they included -

- Set standards of service.
- Be open and transparent.
- Consult and involve end-users.
- Encourage access and the promotion of choice.
- Treat all fairly.
- Put things right when they go wrong.
- Use resources effectively.
- Innovate and improve.
- Work with other providers.

This Initiative by the UK created a pathway for many other countries to emulate, albeit with different names - 'Public Service Users' Charter' in Belgium, 'Service Charter' in France, and 'The Quality Observatory' in Spain all in 1992; 'Client Charter' in Malaysia, and 'The Quality Charter in Public Services' in Portugal, both in

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1993; 'Citizens' Charter' in Jamaica in 1994; 'Service Standards Initiative' in Canada in 1995; and 'Service Charter' in Australia in 1997. In the UK, the same programme was modified and re-introduced again as 'Services First' by the Labour Government in 1998. However, the most critical features, namely, improving quality of services, standards conformity, and the grievance redress process, remained consistent across all the Charters.

In India, the concept of Citizen's Charters was first introduced in 1994 when consumer rights activists drafted a charter for health service providers at a meeting of the Central Consumer Protection Council in Delhi. It saw fruition as an initiative, when, in a state level conference of Chief Ministers held in May 1997, the "Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Government at the Centre and the State Levels" was adopted, paving the way for the formulation of charters among ministries, departments and agencies that have significant public interaction. The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG) of the Government of India took on the task of coordinating, formulating and operationalising Citizen's Charters.

The DARPG defines the Citizen's Charter in the following manner – 'Citizen's Charter is a document which represents a systematic effort to focus on the commitment of the Organisation towards its Citizens in respects of Standard of Services, Information, Choice and Consultation, Non-discrimination and Accessibility, Grievance Redress, Courtesy and Value for Money. This also includes expectations of the Organisation from the Citizen for fulfilling the commitment of the Organisation'<sup>1</sup>. It is interesting to note that the DARPG emphasized the need for consumer organizations, citizen groups, and other stakeholders to be closely involved when Citizen's Charters were being drafted in order to focus the documents towards the needs and requirements of end-users. Based on the UK model, the DARPG outlined the following six

components for inclusion in charters drafted by public agencies:

- Vision and mission statements.
- Details of business transacted by the organization.
- Details of clients.
- Details of services provided to each client group.
- Details of grievance redress mechanisms and how to access them.
- Expectations from clients.

The DARPG website currently indicates that 144 Citizen's Charters have been formulated by departments at the Centre as of December 23, 2013<sup>2</sup>; however, this number will come down considering the fact that last year witnessed the amalgamation of all the State Banks under the State Bank of India, and many of the Citizen's Charters were that of the previous avatars - State Banks of Hyderabad, Travancore, Bikaner and Jaipur, Mysore, Patiala, and the State Bank of India. Among the states, 729 Citizen's Charters have been formulated by 24 State governments and Union Territories as of January 24, 2011<sup>3</sup>. The dates that these webpages have been updated on also reflects a disappointing fact – Citizen's Charters no longer seem to be an exercise worth investing in.

Which brings one to the question – are Citizen's Charters that difficult to create and implement? If so, what can be done to invigorate the remaining departments at the Centre and the States/UTs to carry out this exercise?

#### Modalities of a Citizen's Charter

The Citizen's Charter Handbook created around the time of the launch of the Citizen's Charter Initiative, is one of the most comprehensive documents to be created by DPARG. The Handbook gives detailed outlines of the process to be followed to create an effective and implementable Citizen's Charter. These include – (i) Formation of a Task Force; (ii) Identification of all Stakeholders and major services to be provided by the Organisation; (iii) Consultation with Clients/Stakeholders/



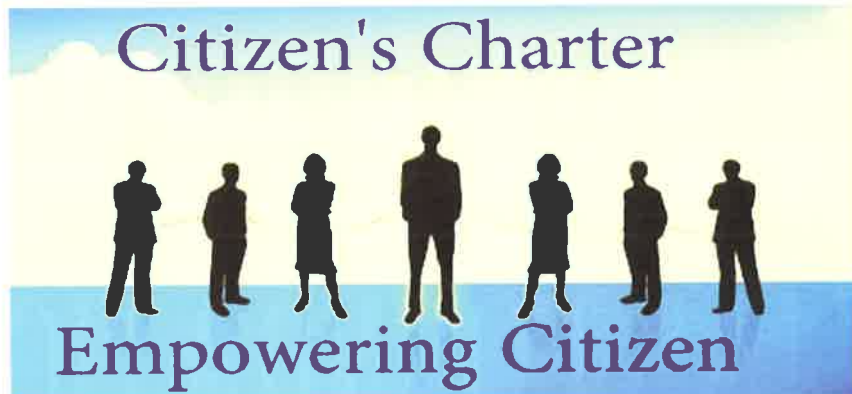
Staff (primarily at cutting-edge level) and their representative associations; (iv) Preparation of Draft Charter (Circulation for comments/suggestions; Modification of Charter to include suggestions); (v) Consideration of the Charter by Core Group; (vi) Modification of Charter by the Ministry/ Department on the basis of suggestions/ observations by the Core Group; (vii) Approval by the Minister-in-charge; (viii) Submission of a copy of the charter to the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances; (ix) Formal issue/release of Charter and putting up on website; (x) Sending copies to People's Representatives and all stakeholders; and (xi) Appointment of a Nodal Officer to ensure effective implementation<sup>4</sup>. The process clearly indicates a bottom-up approach involving all the staff of the department especially those who deal with citizen interfaces. The handbook additionally provides model guidelines, general structure guidelines, do's and don'ts and a model format that could be followed. To motivate other departments, the handbook provides examples of best practices from different states and suggested readings. An updated version of this handbook can now be found in the form of another document brought out by the DPARG called the 'Compilation of Guidelines for Redress of Public Grievances including Employee Grievances, Citizen's Charters and Information Facilitation Counters in Government of India' brought out in 2010. It lays major emphasis on 'systemic reforms component of grievance redress mechanism'<sup>5</sup> and introduces the CPGRAMS (Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System) and the 'Sevottam Framework' that incorporates not only Citizen's Charters but public grievance redress

and public service delivery capability as well.

How effective have these efforts been in improving public service delivery? Time and again there have been evaluations carried out by DPARG itself and other institutions to assess the same.

### Evaluations of Citizen's Charters and Way Forward

DARPG, with the Consumer Coordination Council, New Delhi, undertook an evaluation of the Citizen's Charters programme in 1998. Subsequently, a professional agency was engaged from 2002 to 2003 to develop a standardized model for internal and external evaluations of charters. The Public Affairs Centre (PAC) undertook a preliminary assessment of Citizen's Charters drafted by eight major departments in the Government of Karnataka with substantial public dealings. The review critically evaluated the contents of charters and assessed the quality of their contents by analysing the various components of Citizen's Charters: basic information about the department; standards of services; grievance redress system; and, citizen-friendly criteria. Transparency International (TI), India conducted a study of 10 Citizen's Charters of the Government of the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi and two departments of the Central Government. The National Productivity Council (NPC) conducted a far-reaching review of Citizen's Charters in Gujarat to benchmark the implementation of such charters, assess the charters themselves, and suggest possible improvements to enhance the effectiveness of the charter programme by analysing the views of beneficiaries and employees. Another critical and influential study was the one carried out by PAC again in 2007 that included a comprehensive review of Citizen's Charters on 10 parameters: 1. Vision/Mission/Objectives of the Department/Agency, 2. Details of Business Transacted or General Services Provided, 3. Name, Address, and Phone Numbers of Key Officials, 4. Procedures to Avail Services, 5. Information on the Costs of Services Provided, 6. Standards of Services



(Time limits, etc), 7. Grievance Redress Mechanism, 8. Names, Addresses, Phone Numbers of Officials in Charge of the Grievance Redress Mechanism, 9. Duties of Citizens, and 10. Simple and User-friendly Language and a primary data collection that included interviews with officials of various departments across India and users of various services<sup>6</sup>.

The findings from these varied studies threw up some consistent facets, the most important being that many of the Citizen's Charters were incomplete – details regarding services provided, procedures to be followed for applying for a service, process of grievance redress, names of key officials and their contact details – some aspect or the other was either not or only partially provided. The studies that involved interviews with department staff clearly revealed that most members were not involved in the process of drafting their department's Citizen's Charter.

The way forward on the basis of these findings is clear – there needs to be a two-pronged approach to ensure that every department of the government has a Citizen's Charter – firstly, a revision of existing Citizen's Charters to ensure that they meet with all the 10 critical parameters, and secondly, a systematic consensus-based formulation of every Citizen's Charter that is practical and whose commitments are achievable as endorsed by those staff members who are at the cutting edge of citizen interface.

This cannot be a half-hearted attempt. Any renewed effort will require the following pre-conditions –

an impetus from within, that includes a strong movement within the department to motivate staff to be part of a 'Mission' to set standards for themselves; rethink factors for success, that will help set realistic standards and commitments based on current constraints and capabilities; take external assistance by including experts (either individuals or Civil Society Organisations) who have proven track record of consultation-based document formulation; put accountability mechanisms in place, especially with regard to grievance redress to ensure that officials handling cases are able to carry out their duties responsibly; and commit to a regular feedback loop, that will help the departments to continuously improve themselves. A well-defined Citizen's Charter backed by a committed department will not need any other crutch, such as new service delivery or grievance redress Bills and Acts, if a final and sincere effort can be made to ensure their formulation and implementation in the next two years. Otherwise, this Programme should be laid to rest forever.

#### Footnote

1. <http://goicharters.nic.in/faq.htm>, accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2018.
2. <http://goicharters.nic.in/charter.htm>, accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2018.
3. <http://goicharters.nic.in/charter-state.htm>, accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2018.
4. <http://goicharters.nic.in/cchandbook.htm>, accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2018.
5. [http://goicharters.nic.in/PGR\\_Guideline.pdf](http://goicharters.nic.in/PGR_Guideline.pdf), accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2018.
6. <http://pacindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Indias-Citizen-Charter.pdf> □

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