“Right to Information and Democratic Governance in India: A Critical Analysis of Transparency, Accountability, Citizen Participation and Contemporary Challenges.”

Abstract

Few institutional reforms in India have done as much to change how citizens relate to the government as the Right to Information (RTI). The Right to Information Act, passed in 2005, gave people a legal route to obtain information held by public authorities, and with it a stronger basis for taking part in public affairs. The law did not appear from nowhere. It grew out of a long demand for openness, accountability and popular participation, voiced most forcefully by grassroots groups such as the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). Under the RTI framework, access to official information stopped being a favour granted at the discretion of administrators and became an entitlement that citizens could enforce. Its stated aims are to make the government transparent and accountable, to curb corruption and to equip citizens to keep watch over public institutions.

This paper looks critically at how RTI relates to democratic governance in India, focusing on four themes: transparency, administrative accountability, citizen participation and the problems that arise in implementation. It traces how the right developed historically, sets out its constitutional basis, reviews the key provisions of the Act, and considers the work of Information Commissions and the courts. It also surveys the existing scholarship and the main disagreements about how well the law works. A central concern is the distance between the law on paper and the law in practice. Citizens, journalists, civil society groups and activists have used RTI to learn about public spending, official decisions and the working of public bodies. Yet the law's reach is limited by delays, low awareness, poor record keeping, long queues of pending appeals, patchy proactive disclosure, institutional weaknesses and unresolved tension between openness and privacy.

The research is qualitative and descriptive, and it relies mainly on secondary material: the text of the Act, government documents, court judgments, journal articles, books and institutional reports. The paper finds that RTI has done a great deal to build a culture of openness and citizen scrutiny, but that a statute by itself cannot deliver accountable government. For the law to work, public bodies need capacity, proactive disclosure, accessible digital systems, informed citizens, protection for those who seek information, well-functioning Information Commissions, and a sensible balance between openness and genuine confidentiality. The paper concludes that RTI remains central to Indian democracy, since people cannot participate meaningfully or hold power to account without being informed.

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Keywords: Right to Information, Democratic Governance, Transparency, Accountability, Citizen Participation, Good Governance, RTI Act 2005, Information Commissions, Public Administration, India

1. Introduction

Elections alone do not make a democracy. Between polls, citizens and governing institutions must keep engaging with each other. People need to be able to follow what the government decides, examine how public bodies behave and have a say in matters that shape their social, economic and political lives. None of this is possible without information. A citizen who does not know what the government is doing has little ground on which to judge its performance, challenge its decisions or take part in public life.

RTI is one of the main tools India has adopted to narrow this gap in knowledge between the state and the people. The Right to Information Act, 2005 lays down a statutory procedure through which citizens can request information held by public authorities. Its purposes are to open up the working of government, make officials answerable, reduce corruption and deepen democratic participation. The Government of India itself frames the law's core purpose in these terms: giving citizens more power, making government more transparent and accountable, and helping democracy work better for ordinary people.

For this reason, RTI should be read as part of the machinery of democracy and not only as an administrative procedure. When government information is available, citizens can see how public bodies operate, where public money goes and how official decisions are reached. Information also gives people evidence. With it, they can point to irregularities, ask for explanations and press for correction.

The story of RTI in India shows that the law was more than an exercise in administrative reform. It was the result of persistent public pressure against official secrecy and unaccountable power. Under colonial rule, and for decades after independence, government worked within a culture of secrecy. A range of laws and administrative rules limited what officials could disclose. The Official Secrets Act, 1923, along with service rules and other administrative codes, created a system in which information was treated as the property of the state and not as something citizens had a legitimate claim to see.

Over time, the call for openness became tied to a wider democratic idea: that citizens are entitled to know how their institutions work. Civil society groups did much to bring about this shift. In Rajasthan in the 1990s, the MKSS showed how access to government records could be linked to people's daily struggles over wages, development spending and local administration. Public hearings (jan sunwais) and social audits gave communities a way to go through official records together and test them against what had actually happened.

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This local work fed into a national campaign for a law guaranteeing access to information. The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) went on to play a leading part in shaping the national framework. Parliament's first attempt, the Freedom of Information Act, 2002, fell short in several respects, and its weaknesses strengthened calls for a more robust law. The Right to Information Act was finally passed in 2005 and took effect on 12 October 2005.

The Act gave citizens an enforceable right to information held by public authorities. It created the post of Public Information Officer, set up a system of appeals, and established Information Commissions at the Central and State levels. These arrangements were meant to ensure that the right would be usable through a defined process and would not stay a mere statement of principle.

The right also has a constitutional basis. The Supreme Court of India has read the freedom of speech and expression in Article 19(1)(a) as including, in suitable cases, a right to know. The reasoning is straightforward: people cannot express themselves in any meaningful way if they are denied the information they need to form views and assess public action. RTI connects these constitutional freedoms to everyday administrative openness.

RTI can also be examined through the idea of good governance, which is usually understood to include transparency, accountability, responsiveness, participation, effectiveness and the rule of law. RTI serves transparency and accountability most directly, since it lets citizens see records and question how decisions were made. Section 4 of the Act deserves particular mention here. By requiring proactive disclosure, it signals that openness should not rest entirely on individual applications.

Having a legal right, however, is not the same as being able to use it. Studies of RTI point to recurring problems: limited public awareness, delays, poor record keeping, backlogs of appeals, thin institutional capacity and resistance inside the bureaucracy. Ghuman and Sohail (2017), for instance, list low awareness, badly maintained records, weak compliance with proactive disclosure, insufficient training and pending appeals among the main obstacles to implementation.

Later work reaches a similar conclusion, stressing that the law's success depends on how information seekers and the institutions meant to serve them actually interact. Relly et al. (2020) interviewed information seekers and information commissioners and analysed commission decisions. They found that political, bureaucratic and social factors all shape implementation in important ways, and that the design of institutions may not be enough on its own to overturn long-standing habits of bureaucratic secrecy.

The move to digital government has opened up new possibilities and new difficulties. Online RTI portals and the routine publication of information can lower the cost of seeking information and make it easier to obtain. Going digital does not, however, make a

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government transparent by default. Mandowara and Thomas (2023) argue that digitalisation can support proactive transparency, but that its impact varies with the capacity of institutions and the way systems are put into practice at different levels of administration.

The current debate on RTI comes down to one basic question: how far has the law actually changed the relationship between citizens and the state? Answering it means weighing what RTI has achieved against where it has fallen short. The law has given people new openings to obtain information, but whether those openings matter depends on how responsive institutions are, how aware the public is, and whether citizens are able to put the information to use.

Accordingly, this study treats RTI as a tool of democratic governance and not simply as a legal channel for obtaining documents. It considers what RTI has contributed to transparency, accountability and citizen participation, and it examines the present-day problems that limit its implementation.

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2. Historical Evolution of the Right to Information in India

The growth of RTI in India is bound up with a gradual shift away from administrative secrecy and towards more open government. Until the RTI Act was passed, citizens had no general statutory right to see government information. Access was routinely restricted by administrative rules, secrecy provisions and entrenched institutional habits.

The Official Secrets Act, 1923 was a key part of this secrecy-based system. Rules on official records and the conduct of government servants placed further limits on sharing information. As Indian democracy became more participatory, this arrangement looked increasingly out of step with what citizens expected.

The courts helped give the right to know a constitutional footing. The Supreme Court accepted that freedom of speech and expression includes access to the information people need in order to express themselves meaningfully in a democracy. In this way, the judiciary laid the constitutional ground for information rights well before Parliament passed a comprehensive law.

The grassroots campaign in Rajasthan marked another turning point. The MKSS showed that access to official records could make a real difference to ordinary people's lives. Records of spending, employment and development works could be checked against the situation on the ground in villages, and public hearings allowed any discrepancies to be raised and discussed openly by the community.

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From there, the movement grew into a national campaign. The NCPRI, together with other civil society groups, pressed for a comprehensive law. The Freedom of Information Act, 2002 was a first step, but it was widely regarded as too narrow and was never effectively put into operation. The RTI Act, 2005 provided a far more complete legal framework.

This history shows that RTI took shape through a combination of constitutional principle, judicial interpretation, civil society activism and legislation. It is better understood as the product of democratic struggles for more open government than as a reform handed down by the bureaucracy.

3. Constitutional and Legal Framework

The Right to Information Act, 2005 sets up a working system through which citizens can obtain information held by public authorities. Section 3 declares that all citizens have the right to information, and Section 4 places duties on public authorities to maintain records and disclose information on their own initiative.

Section 2(f) defines information widely. It covers material in any form, including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advice, reports, papers and data held electronically. Section 2(j) sets out what the right to information involves: inspecting work, documents and records, taking notes and extracts, obtaining certified copies, and receiving information in electronic or other prescribed forms.

Public Information Officers are appointed under the Act to deal with requests. Section 6 lays down how a request is to be made, and Section 7 sets the general time limit for a reply, subject to particular provisions and exemptions.

The Act also provides for appeals. Under Section 19, an applicant who is unhappy with a decision, or who receives no reply within the set time, can file a first appeal and then a second appeal before the relevant Information Commission.

Section 20 allows penalties to be imposed on a Public Information Officer who, without reasonable cause, has failed to meet the Act's requirements. The penalty provision shows that Parliament intended the right to be enforceable and not merely advisory.

The right has limits. Sections 8 and 9 list exemptions from disclosure, covering, among other things, certain information relating to national security, strategic interests, commercial confidence, fiduciary relationships, ongoing investigations and personal privacy. These exemptions reflect the need to weigh openness against other legitimate public interests.

From the standpoint of democratic governance, Section 4 stands out. It asks public authorities to publish information on their own so that citizens are not wholly dependent on filing

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individual applications. Proactive disclosure can help move administrative culture away from answering requests reluctantly and towards openness as a matter of routine.

4. Literature Review

4.1 RTI, Democracy and Accountability

Scholars generally agree that transparency and accountability are the main democratic functions of RTI. Ranjan (2009) studies the effect of RTI on Indian democracy and argues that access to information improves citizens' capacity to examine how the government works. The core point is that people cannot hold a government to account without knowing enough about what it does.

Chitra (2017) discusses RTI as a fundamental right and draws out its link with Article 19(1)(a). This reading places RTI inside the wider constitutional guarantee of free speech and expression.

The government's own justification for RTI makes the same connection between information and accountability. The Department of Personnel and Training names citizen empowerment, transparency, accountability and the control of corruption among the Act's basic aims.

4.2 RTI and Good Governance

Singh (2019) treats RTI as a means of strengthening good governance and connects access to information with transparency, accountability and better administration. On this view, RTI does more than help people get hold of documents; it can help improve administrative culture as a whole.

Tabbasum and Sadashivam (2012) give an overview of the RTI framework and stress its value for transparency in public administration. Their work sets out the legal and institutional setting in which RTI functions.

Gupta (2021) discusses RTI in India and the importance of access to information for accountable public administration. Work of this kind suggests that transparency is closely tied to citizens' ability to judge how well the administration is performing.

4.3 Implementation and Institutional Challenges

A large body of research concentrates on the difference between how the law was designed and how it works in practice. Singh and Karn (2012) studied implementation and found that

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awareness and use of RTI differ widely from one administrative setting to another. Their findings matter because they show that passing a law does not lead to uniform implementation.

Looking back on ten years of the Act, Ghuman and Sohail (2017) point to several persistent problems: low public awareness, poor record maintenance, weak compliance with proactive disclosure, inadequate training and a build-up of pending appeals. Their study underlines how much administrative capacity matters in turning a legal right into real access.

Relly et al. (2020) offer a broader empirical study of implementation. Drawing on interviews with information requesters and information commissioners, and on an analysis of commission decisions, they conclude that political will, bureaucratic culture and public engagement all strongly affect how the law is applied. The study is valuable because it goes beyond legal analysis to look at the institutional and socio-political conditions that decide whether RTI works.

4.4 RTI, Transparency and the State

Sharma (2013) takes a critical look at RTI by examining the politics and limits of state transparency. She draws attention to a paradox: a state can build transparency into law while its bureaucratic practices go on restricting or reshaping access to information. Her analysis suggests that transparency has to be understood as something institutions do in practice, and not only as a principle written into statute.

This point is important when assessing RTI. A right to information does not by itself remove imbalances of knowledge and power. Administrative procedures, record-keeping habits, the way exemptions are interpreted and the behaviour of institutions all affect how much information citizens actually receive.

4.5 RTI and Democratic Empowerment

Agarwal (2018) looks at RTI in terms of accountability and democratisation. The study argues that RTI can work as a foundational, or "seed", right, because it helps citizens pursue other kinds of democratic engagement. Its value lies not only in the information obtained but in the collective action that information can make possible.

This argument fits closely with the grassroots beginnings of RTI. The MKSS experience showed how official documents, public hearings and collective mobilisation could be brought together. Information becomes politically powerful when citizens are in a position to understand it and act on it.

4.6 Digitalisation and Proactive Transparency

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Digital governance has opened up new possibilities for RTI. Mandowara and Thomas (2023) study the digitalisation of RTI systems in central and state governments and argue that digital tools can support proactive transparency. Online access can make government information easier to find and can simplify parts of the process of seeking it.

Digitalisation can also deepen existing inequalities, since many citizens lack internet access, digital skills or knowledge of online systems. New technology should therefore sit alongside accessible offline mechanisms and not replace them.

4.7 Research Gap

The literature has approached RTI from legal, constitutional, administrative, democratic and socio-political angles. Even so, several gaps remain.

First, much of the existing work deals either with the legal framework or with particular implementation problems. What is still needed is an integrated account that links transparency, accountability and citizen participation within a wider framework of democratic governance.

Second, the link between formal legal rights and real citizen empowerment needs further study. Obtaining information does not lead to accountability unless citizens, civil society groups, the media and other institutions are able to make effective use of it.

Third, the present RTI environment calls for closer attention to digital governance, proactive disclosure, institutional capacity and the shifting relationship between transparency and privacy.

Fourth, the literature shows wide differences in implementation across institutions and regions. RTI should therefore be studied not as a single uniform national institution but as a framework whose results depend on local administrative and social conditions.

5. Significance of the Study

The study matters for a number of reasons.

5.1 Democratic Significance

RTI gives democracy a firmer base of knowledge by allowing citizens to learn about government activity. Citizens who are well informed are in a better position to take part in public affairs and to examine how the government performs.

5.2 Administrative Significance

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The Act encourages a culture in which officials are expected to be able to justify their decisions through records and information that the public can see. This can make administrative procedures more accountable.

5.3 Accountability Significance

RTI gives citizens a formal way to question decisions, ask for records and appeal when information is withheld.

5.4 Anti-Corruption Significance

Public records can reveal gaps between what officials claim and what has actually been done. Information of this kind supports social audits, investigative journalism and monitoring by citizens.

5.5 Citizen Empowerment

The Act reduces the imbalance of information between public authorities and citizens. It allows individuals and communities to ask for information directly, without having to rely only on what the government chooses to announce.

5.6 Academic Significance

The study adds to the literature by treating RTI as part of democratic governance instead of limiting the discussion to its legal provisions.

5.7 Contemporary Significance

The spread of digital governance has changed the ways in which citizens reach public information. Studying RTI alongside digitalisation, proactive disclosure and privacy is therefore more relevant now than before.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study follows a qualitative, descriptive and analytical design. It explores the relationship between RTI and democratic governance through an analysis of legal provisions, academic literature, court decisions and institutional developments.

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6.2 Nature of the Study

The research is mainly doctrinal and draws on secondary data. It does not offer original statistics on RTI applications or on public attitudes. It brings together and interprets existing legal, academic and institutional material.

6.3 Sources of Data

The study draws on the following sources:

- The Right to Information Act, 2005.
- Documents and RTI guidelines issued by the Government of India.
- Material from the Central and State Information Commissions.
- Court judgments on RTI.
- Academic journal articles and books.
- Research reports.
- Publications of institutions and civil society organisations.
- Secondary literature on democracy, transparency and good governance.

6.4 Method of Data Collection

Data were gathered through documentary analysis of legal, academic and institutional sources. This material was used to identify the main themes of the study, namely the evolution of RTI, its democratic importance, its legal provisions, key court cases, current challenges and possible reforms.

6.5 Method of Analysis

The material was analysed thematically, around four linked dimensions:

Transparency → Accountability → Citizen Participation → Democratic Governance

The study also examines the gap between the formal legal framework and how it is implemented.

6.6 Scope of the Study

The study concentrates on RTI within Indian democratic governance. Its main focus is the period after the RTI Act came into force in 2005, although the earlier history of the movement is discussed to explain where the law came from.

6.7 Limitations

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Because the study rests mainly on secondary sources, it cannot claim to speak for all RTI applicants, Public Information Officers or Information Commissioners. Implementation also differs from state to state and from one institution to another. The findings should therefore be read as analytical conclusions drawn from the available literature, not as the results of a national statistical survey.

The study also does not examine sector-specific uses of RTI, such as in health, education or policing, in any detail. Each of these would merit separate study.

7. Main Findings

The study arrives at the following main findings.

7.1 RTI Has Strengthened the Transparency Framework

First, RTI has put in place a legally enforceable framework for access to information held by the government. It has pushed Indian administration towards accepting transparency, at least formally, as part of how it governs.

7.2 RTI Strengthens Accountability

Second, access to information makes administrative accountability possible. Citizens can ask for records on decisions, spending, procedures and public programmes, which opens these up to scrutiny.

Information alone, though, does not produce accountability. For that, institutions must be willing and able to act on evidence and put irregularities right.

7.3 Citizen Participation Is an Important Dimension

RTI can support citizen participation by giving people the information they need to engage with public affairs. The MKSS experience shows how information can become a resource for collective democratic action.

7.4 Legal Rights and Administrative Practice Do Not Always Correspond

An important finding is that there is a gap between the rights granted by statute and what happens in practice. Delays, poor record keeping, low awareness and institutional limitations all reduce the effectiveness of the Act.

7.5 Awareness Is Central to Effective RTI

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People cannot use a right they do not know they have. Public awareness, legal literacy and familiarity with how to apply and appeal remain essential.

7.6 Proactive Disclosure Can Reduce Dependence on Applications

Section 4 makes clear that transparency should not rest only on individual applications. Publishing public information on a regular basis can ease the administrative load and make access easier.

7.7 Information Commissions Are Central to Enforcement

How well the RTI system works depends heavily on whether Information Commissions can handle appeals and complaints promptly. Delays at the appeal stage can defeat the time-bound nature of the right.

7.8 Digitalisation Creates Both Opportunities and Challenges

Online portals and digital publication can make information more accessible and administration more efficient. At the same time, unequal access to technology and differences in institutional capacity can limit what digital RTI achieves.

7.9 Transparency Must Be Balanced with Privacy

Transparency is not absolute. Privacy, security and other protected interests must also be respected. The task is to allow as much openness as is reasonable without needlessly compromising legitimate confidentiality.

7.10 RTI Alone Cannot Eliminate Corruption

The literature shows that RTI can bring to light information about corruption and maladministration, but it cannot end corruption by itself. Real accountability needs supporting institutions, enforcement, investigation and public involvement.

8. Contemporary Challenges

The RTI system today faces a number of connected challenges.

8.1 Delay in Information Delivery

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The Act sets time limits, but delays still reduce the practical worth of information. Information on a time-sensitive issue may be of little use if it arrives after the relevant decision has been taken or the event has passed.

8.2 Backlog of Appeals

Large numbers of pending appeals weaken the statutory remedy. A right to information depends on an effective appeal process as much as on the first response.

8.3 Lack of Public Awareness

Low awareness is still a major obstacle, especially for citizens with little access to legal help or digital resources.

8.4 Weak Record Management

Information cannot be disclosed properly if government records are incomplete, badly kept or hard to trace.

8.5 Bureaucratic Resistance

Moving from a culture of secrecy to one of openness can meet resistance within institutions. Old administrative habits may persist long after the law has changed.

8.6 Proactive Disclosure Deficiencies

Section 4 stresses proactive disclosure, but compliance is uneven. More standardised and closely monitored disclosure would reduce the need for repeated RTI applications on the same matters.

8.7 Digital Divide

Digital RTI systems can make access easier for citizens who are online, but they may create new hurdles for those without digital skills or internet access.

8.8 Privacy and Personal Information

As transparency has expanded, the question of personal privacy has become more pressing. Requests for information about individuals have to be weighed against the statutory exemptions and the wider public interest.

8.9 Institutional Capacity

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Public Information Officers and Information Commissions need proper training, adequate staff, sound record-management systems and suitable technology.

8.10 Protection of Information Seekers

The wider climate in which people seek information also matters. Citizens and activists who use RTI to uncover wrongdoing may need effective protection from the state.

9. Way Forward

Making RTI stronger will require changes at the legal, administrative, technological and social levels.

First, public authorities should do more to disclose information on their own. Details of budgets, spending, welfare schemes, administrative decisions and how institutions function should be easy to find wherever the law allows.

Second, records should be digitised and indexed in a systematic way. Access to information depends on good record management.

Third, Information Commissions need enough staff and resources to decide appeals and complaints without long delays.

Fourth, citizens should be made more aware of RTI procedures and trained in how to use them. This can be done through schools and colleges, local governments, civil society groups and community programmes.

Fifth, digital RTI platforms should be simple and accessible, and offline options should remain for citizens who need them.

Sixth, Public Information Officers should receive regular training on their legal duties, the exemptions, record management and dealing with the public.

Seventh, compliance with proactive disclosure should be monitored more closely. Public authorities should treat Section 4 as a core part of good governance and not as a box to be ticked.

Finally, clear legal standards are needed to balance transparency with privacy. The goal is not to disclose everything in every case, but to achieve meaningful public openness within legitimate constitutional and statutory limits.

10. Conclusion

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The Right to Information is now a key part of how democracy is governed in India. Its importance goes well beyond the mechanics of obtaining government documents. RTI responds to a basic democratic problem: public authorities know far more than the citizens they serve.

The RTI Act, 2005 made citizens' access to information part of the institutional order and set up procedures for applications, appeals and enforcement. The history behind it shows how much judicial recognition, civil society activism and democratic mobilisation mattered. The MKSS movement in particular shows how information held by the administration could be turned into a means of collective democratic participation.

The analysis shows that RTI has advanced transparency by obliging public authorities to supply information and by encouraging them to publish it proactively. It has also increased the scope for accountability, because citizens can use official information to challenge decisions and administrative practices. In this sense, RTI helps supply the knowledge on which democratic governance depends.

Even so, RTI cannot be judged by its legal provisions alone. A real gap remains between formal rights and practical implementation. Delays, pending appeals, low awareness, poor record keeping, bureaucratic resistance and limited institutional capacity all weaken the right.

The study therefore concludes that RTI is best seen as an enabling institution and not as a complete answer to the problems of governance. Information can make accountability possible, but accountability also depends on responsive institutions, effective enforcement, public participation and other democratic mechanisms.

In the years ahead, the fate of RTI will depend more and more on how legal rights interact with digital governance. Online access, open data and proactive disclosure offer real chances to make government information easier to reach. Digital exclusion, privacy concerns and institutional inequalities will have to be dealt with at the same time.

In the end, democratic governance needs citizens who take part in public affairs as informed participants, not people on whom administrative decisions are simply imposed. RTI provides an institutional basis for that kind of participation. Better implementation, fuller proactive disclosure, stronger institutions and greater public awareness can help build a more transparent and accountable system of government in India.

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