

11. Keep Your Promises

Campaigning to hold government to account in India



Activists highlight the difference in scale between promises and delivery.

Despite its booming economy and burgeoning middle classes, India is a country where hundreds of millions remain in severe poverty. In 2004 a new government was elected largely due to its promise to improve the lives of the poorest and most marginalised people by creating health centres, schools, and jobs. Also in 2004, the World Social Forum in Mumbai brought a diverse range of Indian organisations together, who later formed Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, the 'Keep Your Promises' campaign, to ensure a collective movement for change. This paper explains how the campaign succeeded in mobilising hundreds of thousands of people in India to pressure the government to deliver on key promises, and in demonstrating the huge demand of people across India for social justice and a better future for all the nation's children.

Introduction

India has long been a country of contradictions. The country boasts the largest number of billionaires in the world.¹ Its economy is booming, and it is seen as a hotspot for global investors. But it is also home to at least 25 per cent of the world's poor people. One in every three illiterate people in the world lives there,² at least 35 million children aged six to 14 do not attend school, and the country accounts for more than 20 per cent of global maternal and child deaths.³ It comes close to the bottom of the list in the 2007/8 United Nations Human Development Report, at 128 out of 177 countries. It is a country of huge inequalities, where poor and marginalised people are among the most deprived in the world.

In 2004, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) won the elections and formed a government. Its coming to power was largely due to its promises in its election manifesto to meet the aspirations of the large masses of poor and marginalised people under what was known as the national 'Common Minimum Programme', or CMP. These promises included raising expenditure on education from 3 to 6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), and expenditure on health from less than 1 per cent to 2 to 3 per cent.

Since then, the government has rolled out key flagship schemes for education, health, and livelihoods. These include the National Rural Health Mission to expand health care for rural poor people; and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which provides 100 days' employment a year on demand, as a right, for rural households whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.⁴ The government has also promised to look into the needs of marginalised groups like Dalits (formerly known as 'untouchables', who are outside the caste system and considered to be unworthy to enter the social and religious life of society), indigenous peoples, religious minorities, and women.

In the same year that the new government was elected, civil-society groups gathered in Mumbai for the World Social Forum to articulate a joint agenda focusing on governance and accountability, asking the government to deliver on key promises to poor people. A core group of 40 organisations was involved in the process, which emerged as Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA - also known as the 'Keep Your Promises' Campaign). Its thematic focus was on livelihoods, education and health, and social exclusion. It was to be a watchdog on the government's progress. Its aim was to give a collective voice to disparate movements across the country by joining them under one unified umbrella.

Oxfam, as a founding and very active board member of WNTA, played an important role in supporting the alliance, and fellow members of the alliance were very clear that they wanted Oxfam's

involvement to go well beyond funding. In particular, Oxfam was the key resource for research and policy analysis, for media and communications and events support, and for facilitating lobbying and advocacy. At the same time, however, Oxfam made a deliberate decision not to use the campaign to highlight Oxfam's own brand. WNTA's convenor, Amitabh Beher, confirms this, noting, appreciatively, 'Oxfam has participated not in the style of donor but as one of the constituents, ready to subsume the Oxfam identity within the campaign identity and work passionately for the campaign'.

From small beginnings

The success of WNTA has been spectacular. Since 2004, it has grown from a small idea to a large organisation with a federal structure reaching 23 states. It has 3,000 networks and a core membership of 105 organisations. Initially, no one believed that a national coalition of this size would really come together and be taken seriously by the government. But the organisers planned well. From the beginning, it was envisaged that as well as creating a national advocacy agenda, emphasis would also be on decentralised state-level campaigns to ensure that local priorities were included. The focus was not on setting up a 'super body', but on harnessing and bringing together what already existed at all levels in Indian society.

What the campaign has done

The campaign focused on three main areas – livelihoods, education and health, and social exclusion.

Its programmes have included:

- Public awareness and action on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Scheme, National Rural Health Mission, and the Right to Education Bill.
- The 'Nine Is Mine' campaign for the allocation of 9 per cent of GDP to health and education, as promised in the CMP.
- Civil-society reviews of the CMP in May 2007, in particular looking at gender and caste issues.
- Release of the Citizens' Reports on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in December 2006.
- Advocacy with legislators on livelihoods, health, and education.
- A People's Summit Against Poverty (PSAP) in September 2005, involving more than 12,000 people.

WNTA is also the national partner of the Global Call for Action against Poverty (GCAP) and has directly engaged with United Nations systems, especially the Millennium Campaign.

Ashok Bharti, convenor of the National Conference of Dalit Organisations, a network of over 300 groups, and also the national convenor of WNTA's steering group, says: 'Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, which works around the issues of governance and accountability, has not only provided Dalits and other marginalised sections with a civil-society platform to collectively raise their issues and concerns with the government, policy makers, and other institutions of governance and accountability, but has also helped them to share their experiences with the wider society and hence compelled them to look critically even at their own programmes focusing on governance and accountability'.⁵

Three strategies

From the very beginning, WNTA used three strategies: mass mobilisation, policy audits and citizens' reports, and budget tracking and advocacy. These involved direct engagement with marginalised groups such as Dalits, women, indigenous (*adivasi*) peoples (referred to by the government as 'tribals'⁶), children, and people with disabilities.

Mass mobilisation

WNTA has repeatedly managed to organise events with a large and active mass presence and extensive media coverage. In the very first year, it organised a People's Summit Against Poverty, which was supported by major political parties and even the members of the Planning Commission, the principal constitutional body responsible for planning the development process in India. A People's Charter calling for immediate action to meet the MDG commitments and end poverty was set out. These were not merely rhetorical calls to end poverty; they were related to specific actions mandated by the people.

WNTA has regularly staged mass protests on 17 October, global 'Stand Up Against Poverty' day. On that day in 2007, WNTA partners across 15 states organised a diverse set of actions involving 1,236,979 people from communities and *panchayats* (local decision-making bodies), including students and government representatives. These actions were designed to remind the government to fulfil its commitment to end poverty and social exclusion, as promised in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and India's National Development Goals.⁷

The campaign has also actively involved children in campaigning for health and education spending. The children bring an energy and freshness to the campaign. When they ask questions of government, it is difficult for politicians to avoid giving a straight answer. The children even met the Prime Minister. The children's alliance mixes children from slums and those from wealthy cities. Some have very

little or no education, others are much better educated and comfortably off, but are concerned and aware of the country's inequalities and have a real sense of empathy. It is basically a cross-class alliance for social justice; a vision for the future of India.

The link between mass mobilisation, media coverage, and access to decision-makers was clear. After the campaign got schools across the country involved through grassroots mobilisation, an inspired (and inspiring) teacher volunteered to work with the campaign to organise a concert in the national stadium and a children's rally. Everyone pitched in. When thousands of children – from the poorest slums and the most elite Delhi schools – attended the concert and rally, dancing together and marching side by side, the media rushed to cover this unusual social phenomenon on TV. The day after the TV coverage, the Prime Minister's office invited the children to come and meet him. And when they met him, he accepted the 100,001st postcard petition and assured the children, on the record, that he would boost funding for schools and health centres. In the following budget, he did just that, raising health spending by a quarter and education spending by a third in a budget in which defence spending went up by just 9 per cent. The increases in health and education were still not enough to fill the historical shortfall or fully meet the government's promises, but analysts agreed that they were larger than they would ever have been without civil-society pressure.

Children as leaders: 'Nine is Mine'

The 'Nine is Mine' campaign was led by children across the country. The 'nine' refers to the 6 per cent of GDP on education plus the 3 per cent on health that the children claim as their right. The campaign was launched on 16 October 2006 in Delhi, and over 4,500 children participated from ten states. A nationwide petition was launched. A statement on the petition said: 'We are the children of India. We are not voters, but we believe that the voices of children can be stronger than the votes of adults. And we know that it is necessary for us to speak up now to secure our future'.

Consistent and wide mainstream media coverage ensured that the Prime Minister met a delegation consisting of 20 children to listen to their demands and assure them of his support. About 80 MPs were briefed about the demand through various partner delegations.

On 13 November 2007, the 300,001st signature was signed in the presence of Planning Commission member Abhijit Sen and handed over to him to be passed on to the finance minister. The next day, children also met the Chairperson of the Child Rights Commission, seeking her support for their demands.

The second phase of the campaign, from November 2007 to January 2008, has seen increased activity, with 5,000 signatures being sent off to the finance minister each day. An indicator of the enthusiasm the movement has generated among children comes from 14-year-old Yayabangarababu, who said: 'I'm in Delhi to listen and to talk about our rights. I am here to urge the government to keep its promises for better education and health. I am here to make sure that those in power give the promised 9 per cent of the GDP for the children of this country'.

When the Five-Year Plan for 2008 to 2012 was approved by the government, it tripled the total outlay on education, aiming at a target of 6 per cent by the end of the period.

Policy audits and citizens' reports

In order to press for the full implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which aims to provide 100 days' employment a year for rural households, WNTA organised a *Rozgar Adhikar Yatras* ('March for the Right to Employment') in six states. These marches were accompanied by People's Tribunals, where local officials were told about the inefficiencies and gaps in the implementation of the scheme. Following this, a National Tribunal was held at the India Social Forum in October 2006, where over 50 representatives from 14 states spoke. The outcomes and verdicts of these processes were taken to different parliamentarians on the first anniversary of the NREGS. This led to further intensification of a 'social audit' of the scheme, which examines the impact of specific government activities on certain sections of society. Although many gaps remain in implementation, the government has acknowledged the importance of the campaign by integrating the audits in its monitoring mechanisms and also increasing the reach of the NREGS to 595 districts from the initial 200.

WNTA used the idea of citizens' report cards to put constant pressure on the government and to hold them to account. In its first year, WNTA brought out a report focusing on the MDGs, particularly in relation to education, health, and employment. A survey involving the local community was conducted in 1,514 villages, which was then released at the Poverty Summit in September 2005. It was followed by a mid-term MDGs checklist and a status report card in July 2007 which was presented to the Prime Minister. Extensive media coverage had titles like 'UPA [United Progressive Alliance - the party of government] secures only 30 per cent marks in People's Report Card' and 'UPA Report Card has Red Marks', which succinctly sent the message home. The current survey involves 10,000 people from 17 states across 100 districts.

Among WNTA's most important annual events has been its review of the CMP. This checks on the major promises made by the government through a rigorous process where experts and groups working on a range of issues like local governance, education, health, land rights, employment, and so on, develop a report card to pick out the positives and negatives. The report is then presented and passed through various state networks to get their feedback and assent before it is finally released. Increasing numbers of people are involved - in the second review in 2006, 250 people from 12 states participated, while in 2007, 400 people from 23 states took part and feedback was taken from over 500 organisations. An elephant showing 'CMP Promised' and a goat showing 'CMP Delivered',

illustrating the difference in scale, became a popular image widely used by the media.

Budget tracking and advocacy

The third strategy involved a new and different way of looking at budgets. The budget exercise normally projected by the media is all about cuts in income and sales tax on consumer durables, which mainly affect the middle classes. The media rarely focuses on social-sector issues like health and education that affect the vast mass of poor people.

The Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), a member of the WNTA alliance, has led on providing direct inputs to the campaign on budget tracking and advocacy. Each year, in November (when the government's budget-making process begins for the next year), it organises a National Consultation, and creates a People's Charter of Demands, looking at various aspects of the social sector like agriculture, education, and health from the perspective of marginalised groups. This is forwarded to various ministries of the government. A follow-up is then organised, consisting of a quick yet informed reaction by experts, and a public discussion where government, policy makers, civil-society groups, and media representatives come together to evaluate the implications of the Charter for poor people. The campaign is promoting the right to be heard in an innovative way, where policy analysis from the top has led to grassroots mobilisation from the ground.

Giving a voice to the marginalised

As mentioned above, while the framework of the movement has been to build the capacity of the people to mobilise themselves around the demands of basic rights, there has also been a focus on bringing in the voices of those who are particularly marginalised. This includes a whole range of people such as Dalit groups, women's groups, and indigenous people or 'tribal' groups.

The WNTA wanted to harness the work that these groups were already doing on the issues on which WNTA was mobilising. So, for example, Dalit and women's groups were often focused on issues of exploitation and violence, and WNTA hoped to add to their strength and capacity by including them in its quest to secure their economic rights as well. In this way, it hoped to build both individual and community awareness of these broader issues.

Who are the Dalits?

The caste system in India was abandoned by law in 1949, but continues today in many parts of the country. Dalits, formerly known as 'untouchables', are considered by caste Hindus to be outcasts. Traditionally, they worked in trades considered 'unclean' because they were associated with death or animals – such as leather workers, cobblers, scavengers, sweepers, cremation workers, drummers, and removers of animal carcasses. This resulted in physical segregation (for example, not being allowed to drink from the same cup as higher caste people), social segregation, and debt bondage. There are approximately 179 million Dalits in India today – around 20 per cent of the population. They face high levels of illiteracy, poverty, and landlessness. Prejudice means that Dalits are often discriminated against and victimised. A 2005 government report states that a crime is committed against a Dalit every 20 minutes, but this often goes unreported and rarely results in a conviction.

The two major Dalit organisations, the National Consultation on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and the National Conference of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR), organise around the exploitation and especially the physical oppression of Dalits. It is through the WNTA network that they have now cast their net wider on issues of basic services like education and health, and their share in the budgets.

Another process in this regard has been to look at the CMP through the lens of these groups. A report called 'Fulfilling the Promise to End Social Exclusion – A Review of the Dalit Agenda in the National Common Minimum Programme'⁸ was launched at the Indian Parliament, asking for key policy changes from a Dalit perspective.

Similarly, a paper entitled 'Gender and Governance – A Review of the Women's Agenda in the National Common Minimum Programme'⁹ was released on 8 March 2007, International Women's Day. Twenty-seven events were organised across ten states involving 12,000 people through the national network of women's organisations. On the occasion of 'Stand Up Against Poverty' day in 2007, a 'Women's Tribunal Against Poverty' was organised in which 400 women from 20 states participated to narrate their stories. Nijhula Kachua, one of the participants, drew attention to the plight of labourers and their families in the tea gardens of Assam. She highlighted the fact that these people had little awareness of and almost no access to national government schemes that were operational in other Indian states. The tribunal's final outcomes were presented to the first woman President of India, Pratibha Patil.

Since these successful events, there has been follow-up to the tribunal. International Women's Day 2008 was celebrated by WNTA partners across 44 districts in 11 states of India, bringing together more than 10,000 women. Between 6–17 March 2008, the partners released the 'Women's Charter Against Poverty', which reinforced the demand for women's access to power, resources, and services (originally articulated in the tribunal). This charter also contributed to a national report called 'Divided Destinies: Unequal Lives –

Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in the Indian State, NGO Report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights'.¹⁰

WNTA has also addressed gender in its own structures: in 2006, the WNTA steering group was expanded to ensure women made up 50 per cent of members. A specific task force was formed to steer the movement's future course of action on gender.

Successes and future plans

The campaign has had a number of successes at local and national levels.

In 2007, the budget for health was increased by 25 per cent and the budget for education was increased by 33 per cent, while the defence budget went up by just 9 per cent.¹¹ The education minister is planning to make the right to education a fundamental enforceable right. He wants to introduce a Bill towards the end of 2008.

The campaign now has weight with politicians – members are actively invited to give feedback and hold discussions, where two years ago this would never have happened.

Between July 2008 and January 2009 the campaign is organising a 'People's Manifesto', mobilising 300 parliamentary constituents, including MPs, civil-society organisations, and citizens. The main political party knows that this plan is under way and that it is being carried out in collaboration with three major TV channels. Education and health are now high up the political agenda and they are now seen as human-rights issues.

Challenges

One of the major challenges of managing such a large platform is, predictably enough, to keep all the constituent parts on an equal footing and to ensure that they present a united front. This has been possible through giving different groups leadership on different issues; for example, while one group concentrates on economic rights, the other focuses on educational rights.

The campaign drew in a very wide range of different groups across ethnic, caste, class, and political divides. It was not only a campaign of already active citizens, but also a campaign that inspired those who normally wouldn't think of themselves as activists but merely as people who cared about their children's and the country's future. The main challenge at the start was to get such a disparate group of people and organisations working well together. People were very aware of their differences. Building joint alliances around the issues and concerns of marginalised people has not been easy. In particular,

it has been a challenge to involve the middle classes, who were initially reluctant to join up with activist groups, and sceptical about a campaign that called on government to spend more money on government schools and health centres that middle-class Indians do not themselves use. But by explaining the campaign in terms of giving all children a chance, and of enabling all Indians to contribute to the country's development, the campaign was able to dent some of that scepticism.

Over the years, trust has built up between alliance members. Now when they discuss what needs to be done, they know that they are all collectively responsible, and so work together to achieve what they want. People are much more aware of what they have in common: a commitment to social justice in India.

At regional state level it has been more of a mixed experience. In some states, groups divided into factions, each of which wanted to dominate the state secretariat. Problems at state level are not helped by the fact that while there is intense and ongoing interaction at the national level, states usually only galvanise at key moments instead of being part of a continuing flow, which makes it difficult to keep the momentum going.

This is a challenge, but is especially important for groups working at the grassroots, as they need constant motivation to remain engaged in what is not an easy task. This motivation has to come from an understanding that national work can only succeed when supported at state and local levels.

Key lessons

The campaign has learned a lot in its four years of existence. Some of its key lessons are:

- **Overcoming isolation:** Marginalised groups, for many reasons, tend to work in isolation. Building alliances and overcoming isolation without giving up one's identity, perspective, and sensibility has strengthened the partners' faith in working with civil society.
- **Putting local priorities first:** For any large network to be successful in ensuring poor people's right to be heard, the priorities have first to be drawn from local, regional, and national contexts and then draw on international frameworks.
- **Bringing in different perspectives and voices:** The national framework has to take account of the perspectives and voices of groups that are marginalised in social and economic terms, as well as groups of differing gender and age (for example, children), in order to seek their support and build their capacity.

The campaign has also reached out to the middle classes in order to use their lobbying strength.

- **Seeking common ground:** It is important not to organise separate or new fronts but to look at the opportunities to bring isolated or disparate movements together on common ground, making them a unified and much stronger voice that cannot be ignored by the government. It was very useful, for example, to bring together three major coalitions to work towards the right to universal education on a common platform when there was a call for the Right to Education Bill to be passed as an act of Parliament. Similarly, getting those groups working on budgets and the social sector on a common platform has helped mainstream budget advocacy and made this a core area of concern for many civil-society groups.
- **Building on strong points:** The strong points of each of the constituents must be harnessed for the interest of the whole. Such strengths include, for example, grassroots groups providing input from the ground; policy groups providing macro analysis in a language that is informed by grassroots realities; media-based groups providing support for media advocacy, and so on. One of WNTA's advantages is that different activities can be led by different member organisations according to their areas of strength, building skills and experience in the process.
- **Using the right language:** It is possible to create excitement and enthusiasm for issues such as health and education. The key is to articulate these vital issues in a language that people understand and want to respond to.
- **Adapting for appropriate contexts:** There is a recognition that the Indian model is specific to the Indian context and is not a 'one size fits all' approach. However, adapting the model for use in other countries could make a real difference to campaigning in developing countries across the world. In the Indian context, the already thriving civil-society movements on people's rights have of course been very helpful, as people didn't need to start from scratch. However, the focus was on rights to health and education, which had *not* previously been the main agenda of most of the organisations. So building on pre-existing foundations and using their strategic inputs is a proven successful strategy for the campaign.

Notes

¹ NY Daily News (2008) 'India ranks first in the world in number of billionaires, new Forbes list shows', www.nydailynews.com/news/us_world/2008/03/05/2008-03-05_india_ranks_first_in_the_world_in_number.html (last accessed September 2008).

² The Times of India (2004) 'India has a third of world's illiterates', <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/916814.cms> (last accessed September 2008).

³ 'Children in India', www.smilefoundationindia.org/ourchildren.htm (last accessed September 2008).

⁴ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Act', www.nrega.nic.in/ (last accessed September 2008).

⁵ From a speech made at the annual review of the Campaign Co-ordination Meeting of Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, organised in Delhi during April 2008.

⁶ A tribe can be defined as a social group which existed before the development of states or which lives outside of states. In terms of socio-economic status they are at the bottom of Indian society. 'Adivasi' is the Hindu word for 'tribals'.

⁷ National Development Goals are defined in accordance with the Five-Year Plans undertaken by the Indian government. India is now in its 11th Five-Year Plan phase. See Social Watch India, 'Commitments: MDGs, Common Minimum Programme, National Development Goals', http://socialwatchindia.net/commit_5.htm (last accessed September 2008).

⁸ Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (2007) 'Fulfilling the Promise to End Social Exclusion – A Review of the Dalit Agenda in the National Common Minimum Programme', New Delhi: Wada Na Todo Abhiyan.

⁹ Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (2007) 'Gender and Governance – A Review of the Women's Agenda in the National Common Minimum Programme', New Delhi: Wada Na Todo Abhiyan.

¹⁰ People's Collective for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (2008) 'Divided Destinies: Unequal Lives – Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in the Indian State, NGO Report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights', New Delhi: People's Collective for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The report was initiated by the Programme on Women's Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

¹¹ Expenditure Budget Vol. I, Union Budget 2008–09, Government of India.

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