



TEN ASKS FOR THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF NEW GOVERNMENT

The general elections are slowly moving towards their last phase of voting. 16th May is the day when votes are to be counted and a new government is to emerge out of this. The elections were preceded by a prolonged conversation around 'policy paralysis' in the mainstream media and policy makers circle. While the predominant interpretation of this was triggered by India's falling growth rates, a high rate of inflation and a sluggish market, a parallel concern voiced by civil society interpreted the 'paralysis' in terms of social sector reforms, the incomplete and stalled status of various developmental measures like Right to Education Act, NREGA, the much awaited reforms around universal health care, rights of tribals and dalits etc. Even some of the progressive measures taken in the last few months like Food Security Act, Manual Scavengers Act, Street Vendors Bill were passed hastily without any rules being framed around them so that they could be rolled out smoothly.

It is in this context that the big question needs to be asked: What should be the first 100 days' agenda for the new government. Should it be just about further opening of the markets, de-regulation of environmental and other regulatory mechanisms from the point of view of increasing FDIs or should it be looking at few quick wins combined with a measured roll out of policy initiatives to assure the common citizenry of this country? Moreover, many of the measures perhaps don't need to be posed as antithetical to one another. The growth needs to happen so that more and more poor could be part of it; it also needs to happen in a way that rights of communities are not violated and it needs to happen in a way that the future of the next generation is not lost.



Oxfam India, along with its partners and networks was a part of the process in the run up to elections in which it asked communities what they expected from the new government and to mobilize and collate what they said. While many of the recommendations that emerged are in the nature of long term policy measures, there are also a set of demands which can be met within a short term to roll out things which just need quick removal of bottlenecks. Below is a list of quick wins which this government can initiate, by no means exhaustive and complete but just an indicator of sorts:

PASS A PRO-POOR BUDGET

1. Increase spending on education and health—There is an urgent need to increase the budget in education and health sector. Both Right to Education Act (RTE Act) and the National Health Mission are languishing due to lack of adequate budgetary provision. While the 12th 5 year plan re-iterates its promise to spend 6% of GDP in education (from the current 3.2%) and 2% of GDP in health (from the current 1%), the first budget of the new government needs to show its willingness to move in that direction by allocating larger share of budgets as the first step.

2. Initiate a Review of the Tax System to Raise more Taxes—There is an immediate need to initiate tax reforms going beyond the proposed Goods and Services Tax. India, despite its Middle Income Country status has a low tax: GDP ratio of 15.5% comparable to low income countries. It needs to reach out to at least 20-25% comparable to other BRICS countries. It needs to initiate a time bound review of the entire tax regime to come out with radical proposals to increase taxes in a progressive manner. This should include, but not be limited to, increasing direct taxes through introduction of inheritance tax and an increase in wealth tax to curb the rising inequality.

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FINDING THE RIGHT GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL METHOD FOR RTE

If parents and children are an upset lot, they have reason to be. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 laid down a set of quality norms to which all schools had to adhere. Four years later, only 8 per cent schools comply with these minimum standards.

Today, while multiple mechanisms for addressing grievances exist they are extremely weak and tend to exist in isolation.

However, disenchantment does not lead to change until it is translated into action. What is needed is a grievance redress system to address the problem. Such a mechanism will not only help in addressing individual complaints, thereby helping individuals who are facing problems, but could also help in improving the situation as a whole by identifying and dealing with systemic issues like corruption and other irregularities.

All this and more was discussed at a consultation on the issue of Grievance Redress in Education held on 28 March in Delhi. Organized by Oxfam India and the National RTE Forum, the consultation had participants from nine states. The consultation looked at all the methods of redressal across the country. Ajay Sethia, Chairperson Uttarakhand SCPCR, Nikhil Dey, NCPRI, Noor Mohammad, Member Rajasthan SCPCR and NCPCR shared their experiences of redressal. Anjela Taneja, Oxfam India's education lead specialist and Aheli Chaudhury, JOSH, shared their report "Unknotting Redress".

Among the issues which need to be flagged are:

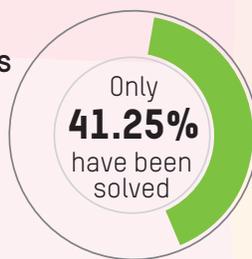
- Though the RTE Act provides for independent bodies, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and the State Commissions (SCPCRs) to look at violations of the act at the national and state levels, these are inadequately financed and staffed to reach out to villages and schools where complaints actually arise.



Education suffers due to lack of grievance redressal mechanisms

- NCPCR and SCPCRs cannot ensure that people whose rights are violated actually complain; they also cannot ensure that complaints filed are acted upon.

NCPCR* has received less than 4,000 complaints on RTE



Only 20 states have SCPCRs* of which many were formed after the Supreme Court of India intervened to demand their formation in 2013.

Even when formed, most SCPCRs are staffed by part time people.

POOR SALARIES: For example, the chairperson and members of the Maharashtra SCPCR draw honorariums of only Rs 5,000 and Rs 3,000 per month respectively.

There is also the question of the independence of the commissions whose members are frequently political appointees.

Though State Education Departments have mechanisms for redressing complaints, the government's

Only 14% response from dedicated complaint numbers for MIDDAY MEALS

37 state/UT/central numbers given

only 5 picked up and acknowledged their existence

GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL MECHANISMS:

- Many states rely on help lines for people to file their grievances. All states have dedicated complaint numbers for midday meals.
- Legal mechanisms for redressal too have been relied upon.

Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances rates the Education Ministry's grievance redress mechanism third from the bottom among all departments. Seventeen states have some government orders pertaining to redressal but these notifications offer few details for their operationalization. Only Dadar and Nagar Haveli, a Union Territory provides for a mechanism for tracking complaints once filed.

The plan now is to influence state guidelines for grievance redressal and pushing for better handling of complaints from the bottom up in the more populous and educationally lagging states.

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* NCPCR - National Commission for Protection of Child Rights SCPCRs - State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights

MU BHI CHASI – I AM A FARMER TOO

The scorching mid-day summer sun was strong enough to break fragile spirits. But the women I was with are no strangers to challenges. They raised slogans and marched on the streets of Bhubaneswar asserting their identity as farmers and not just as invisible hands that power India's agriculture.

Odisha's capital reverberated with slogans of "Mu Bhi Chasi" – I am a farmer too – as more than 400 women marched to the beat of drums and folk music on March 27. The event was a part of Oxfam India's broader campaign on women's land rights. It was organized by Oxfam India with support from its partner organizations the Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC), Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), ISD, Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and FARR.

The campaign for women farmers does not demand any temporary solution or any short term benefits such as subsidies for them. Instead, it challenges the deeply entrenched patriarchal system which disclaims women farmers' significant contribution to food production and accepts them as secondary in the agriculture sector.

During the walk I witnessed the women demanding a fundamental shift that needs to happen both at the societal and administrative levels. Their demand is simple yet so inspiring. Consider this: an analysis done by Oxfam India in 2013 in its working area suggests that **only 2 per cent of the women farmers** have access to agriculture training programmes. Lack of recognition as farmers also means that women farmers do not have access to the



Women demanding their right to be recognized as a farmer in Bhubaneswar

same resource and schemes that male farmers are entitled to.

According to the agriculture census 2010-11, 3.3 per cent of women in Odisha have operational land ownership which is way below the national average of 12.8 per cent. Land ownership statistics are unsettling. However, what is even more disturbing is the patriarchal attitude and mindset of the entire system towards women farmers.

The mindboggling narrative of the word "disability" in the Odisha Land Act 1969 represents that mindset as it suggests that a person with disability is 'a woman who is single, divorced or separated.'

Given this scenario, a lot needs to change. Women's ownership over land will determine their legal identities as farmers and enable them to access government schemes and

programmes such as Kisan Credit Cards. Surely, this is a beginning worth making.

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LAXMI NAIK

Laxmi Naik from Katiriguda village in Koraput district says, "I take every decision related to my farmland, but government and extension officials prefer to communicate and share information with my husband and not me."

A trend setter of sorts, Laxmi has already done the unthinkable. She decided against going to her husband's house, as he did not have a large enough tract of land for the two of them to make a living. Instead she decided to assert her identity as a women farmer and primary food producer. She convinced her husband to work in her paternal field.

LAXMI KHILA

Forty-six year old Laxmi Khila from Baipariguda block in Koraput district in Odisha is a single woman. She has been growing her crops and managing her field since the age of 22 after her husband ended their marriage. She is recognized by the local administration for her leadership in promoting organic agriculture. She believes changing the attitude of the administration towards women farmers is possible, but it will certainly need a herculean effort.

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IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES

3. Step up the Implementation of the Right to Education Act—As mentioned earlier, most of the milestones under RTE Act (rolled out in 2010) to be achieved within the first three years including physical infrastructure, pupil teacher ratio, formation of School Management Committees have been missed and employment of fully trained teachers is yet to happen. Just about 10% of the schools are reported to be complying to RTE norms. The government needs to immediately set about filling this huge gap quickly.

4. Announce a Scheme of Free Essential Drugs—The government needs to immediately announce Central Medicines Scheme (already a promise in the 12th Plan document) providing universal, free, generic essential life saving drugs to all. While the health costs are spiraling out of control, 70% of that could be contained by this measure alone and it requires merely an additional 6000 crore rupees to implement. The long term measure needs to be to revise the National Health Bill providing basic universal health care for all.

DELIVER ON YOUR PROMISE ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

5. Improve women's safety and security—Allocate funds for three components under umbrella scheme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development—rehabilitation of rape victims, assistance to states for the effective implementation of Domestic Violence Act and shelter homes for the survivors of violence. Also, bring in Nirbhaya Fund under the same ministry to bring in administrative coherence and push to this widely recognized public concern.

6. Pass the Women's Reservation Bill reserving 33% seats of Parliament and state legislative assemblies—Most of the political parties are one on this. It would be an opportune moment to pass this act to show our true resolve to give adequate voice to women. The outgoing Lok Sabha had just 11% as women parliamentarians, lower even compared to our neighbours like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

START FRAMING THE RULES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE THREE NEWLY PASSED ACTS

All three of the recently passed Acts need to undergo rule framing to enable

them to be rolled out giving relief to a majority of the population:

7. The big one among them is the Food Security Act (nearing its one year in the coming June) giving relief to two-third of our vulnerable population in times of high inflation.

8. Manual Scavengers Act banning manual scavenging completely (still a large phenomenon across country)

9. Street Vendors Act giving rights to the street vendors within designated spaces.

IMPROVE GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

10. Revive and initiate the passage of the Grievance Redressal Bill—The emerging common ground across political parties has been the issue of governance accountability. And one common ask for across the sectors has been a unified policy measure to set up Grievance Redressal system backed by an Act in place. This will be an extension of the Right to Public Services Act already enacted by several state governments and would create an umbrella for ensuring smooth and accountable delivery mechanisms for all the public services.

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