

THE CITIZENS' CHARTER : INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Basic Concept, Origin and Principles

It has been recognised world over that good governance is essential for sustainable development, both economic and social. The three essential aspects emphasised in good governance are transparency, accountability and responsiveness of the administration. "Citizens' Charters" initiative is a response to the quest for solving the problems which a citizen encounters, day in and day out, while dealing with the organisations providing public services.

The concept of Citizens' Charter enshrines the trust between the service provider and its users. The concept was first articulated and implemented in the United Kingdom by the Conservative Government of John Major in 1991 as a national programme with a simple aim: to continuously improve the quality of public services for the people of the country so that these services respond to the needs and wishes of the users. The programme was re-launched in 1998 by the Labour Government of Tony Blair which rechristened it "Services First".

The basic objective of the Citizens' Charter is to empower the citizen in relation to public service delivery. Six principles of the Citizens' Charter movement as originally framed, were: (i) Quality : Improving the quality of services; (ii) Choice : Wherever possible; (iii) Standards :Specify what to expect and how to act if standards are not met; (iv) Value: For the taxpayers' money; (v) Accountability : Individuals and Organisations; and (vi) Transparency : Rules/ Procedures/ Schemes/Grievances. These were later elaborated by the Labour Government as following nine principles of Service Delivery (1998) :-

- Set standards of service
- Be open and provide full information
- Consult and involve
- 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.

The International Scene

The UK's Citizens' Charter initiative aroused considerable interest around the world and several countries implemented similar programmes e.g. Australia (Service Charter, 1997), Belgium (Public Service Users' Charter 1992), Canada (Service Standards Initiative, 1995), France (Service Charter, 1992), India (Citizens' Charter, 1997), Jamaica (Citizens' Charter 1994), Malaysia (Client Charter,1993), Portugal (The Quality Charter in Public Services, 1993), and Spain(The Quality Observatory, 1992) (OECD, 1996).

Some of these initiatives are very similar to the UK model, while others chart new ground by leaning on the service quality paradigm of the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement. Other initiatives are pitched somewhere in between. Even in the UK, in the context of the Next Steps/Modernising Government Initiatives, Citizens' Charters have acquired a service quality face for delivery of public services. The quality tools adopted for improving public services include the Business Excellence Model, Investors in People, Charter Mark, ISO 9000 and Best Value (Government of UK, 1999).

The Government of Malaysia issued Guidelines on the Client's Charter in 1993 to assist government agencies to prepare and implement Client's Charter, which is "a written commitment by an agency to deliver outputs or services according to specified standards of quality" (Government of Malaysia, 1998). A Best Client's Charter Award was instituted in 1993. The Malaysian system of Client's Charter closely follows the UK Model. A distinction is made between agency-wide and unit charters. The concept of 'service recovery' enjoins taking steps to restore the trust and confidence of the client in a proactive manner when things go wrong.

The Commonwealth Government of Australia launched its Service Charter initiative in 1997 as part of its on-going commitment to improve the quality of service provided by agencies to the Australian community by moving the government organisation away from bureaucratic processes to customer-focused outcomes. Service Charters are considered a powerful tool for fostering change and require the organisation to focus on services delivered, to measure and assess performance, and to initiate performance improvement. By providing goals for agencies to strive towards, a Charter acts as a surrogate for competition where none exists (Department of Finance and Administration, 1999). Centrelink is a one-stop shop that provides access to Australian government services for over six million customers. Centrelink has adopted one-to-one service as an innovative and personalised approach to service delivery. One-to-one service treats customers with respect and consistency and takes the complexity out of dealing with government.

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat started a Service Standard Initiative in 1995 which took its cue from the Citizens' Charters of the United Kingdom, but enlarged the scope considerably. This Service Standard Initiative in Canada was started against the backdrop of citizen expectations relating to friendly, respectful and courteous service; faster response times; extended hours at government offices; and "one-stop-shopping". At the same time there was need to reduce the deficit and provide value for money through more efficient use of resources (Treasury Board of Canada, 1995).

A comparison of these four major Citizens' Charter initiatives shows that the service quality approach is embedded in them in different degrees. Once a decision is taken to make public services citizen-centric, the customer focus of the Total Quality Management (TQM) variety cannot be far behind. In fact, the Citizens' Charter approach has several things in common with TQM. Both begin by focusing on meeting customer/citizen requirements. Other key common elements are conformance to standards, stakeholder involvement and continuous improvement.

The Indian Scene

Over the years, in India, significant progress has been made in the field of economic development. This, along with a substantial increase in the literacy rate, (from 51.63% to 65.38% in the last decade) has made Indian citizens increasingly aware of their rights. Citizens have become more articulate and expect the administration not merely to respond to their demands but also to anticipate them. It was in this climate that since 1996 a consensus had evolved in the Government on effective and responsive administration. In a Conference of Chief Ministers of various States and Union Territories held on 24 May, 1997 in New Delhi, presided over by the Prime Minister of India, an "Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Government" at the Centre and State levels was adopted. One of the major decisions at that Conference was that the Central and State Governments would formulate Citizens' Charters, starting with those sectors that have a large public interface (e.g. Railways, Telecom, Posts, Public Distribution Systems). These Charters were required to include standards of service and time limits that the public can reasonably expect, avenues of grievance redress and a provision for independent scrutiny with the involvement of citizen and consumer groups.

Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances in Government of India (DARPG) initiated the task of coordinating, formulating and operationalising Citizens' Charters. Guidelines for formulating the Charters as well as a list of do's and don'ts were communicated to various government departments/organisations to enable them to bring out focused and effective charters. For the formulation of the Charters, the government agencies at the Centre and State levels were advised to constitute a task force with representation from users, senior management and the cutting edge staff. A Handbook on Citizen's Charter has been developed by the Department and sent to all the State Governments/UT Administrations.

The Charters are expected to incorporate the following elements :-(i) Vision and Mission Statement; (ii) Details of business transacted by the organisation; (iii) Details of clients; (iv) Details of services provided to each client group; (v) Details of grievance redress mechanism and how to access it; and (vi) Expectations from the clients.

Primarily an adaptation of the UK model, the Indian Citizens' Charter has an additional component of 'expectations from the clients' or in other words 'obligations of the users'. Involvement of consumer organisations, citizen groups, and other stakeholders in the formulation of the Citizens' Charter is emphasised to ensure that the Citizens' Charter meets the needs of the users. Regular monitoring, review and evaluation of the Charters, both internally and through external agencies, are enjoined. Till April, 2006, 111 Citizens' Charters had been formulated by the Central Government Ministries/ Departments/ Organisations and 668 Charters by various agencies of State Governments & Administrations of Union Territories. Most of the national Charters are posted on the government's websites and are open to public scrutiny. The organisations with Citizens' Charters are advised to give publicity to their Charters through such means as print/ electronic media and awareness campaigns.

Comprehensive Website on Citizens' Charters

A comprehensive website of Citizens' Charters in Government of India (www.goicharters.nic.in) has been developed and was launched by the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances on 31 May, 2002. This contains the Citizens' Charters issued by various Central Government Ministries/ Departments/ Organisations. The website provides useful information, data and links.

Exemplary implementation of the Citizens' Charter

While the overall efforts and initiatives of the government on Citizens' Charter were continuing, it was realised that exemplary implementation of the Charter in a major public interface area of government would not only establish the new concept in the inertia-prone bureaucracy but also act as a role model for replication in other sectors/areas. The banking sector was identified for this purpose keeping in view the second phase of economic reforms and the fact that this sector was fairly advanced in terms of customer service and was also taking advantage of information technology to speed up various processes. The primary objective of this exercise was to build the Banking Sector as a model of excellence in the implementation of the Citizens' Charter.

To begin with, three major National level Banks, namely, Punjab National Bank, Punjab and Sind Bank and Oriental Bank of Commerce, were selected for a Hand-Holding exercise by the DARPG in the year 2000. The following key issues were highlighted for exemplary implementation of the Citizens' Charter :- (i) stakeholder involvement in the formulation of Citizens' Charters; (ii) deployment of the Citizens' Charters in the Banks by full involvement of the staff, specially the employees at the cutting-edge level; (iii) creation of awareness about the Charter amongst the customers of the Banks; and (iv) special training for employees at all levels about the concept and implementation of Citizens' Charter.

After an evaluation of the current status of the Charters by the identified banks through independent agencies, Action Plans were chalked out to rectify shortcomings. The Charters were, accordingly, revised and standardised on the basis of the model/ mother Charter developed by the Indian Banks Association (IBA). Training for employees of selected branches through master trainers, trained by the National Institute of Bank Management using a module developed in consultation with Department of ARPG were organised. Several measures to give wide publicity to Citizens' Charter were also undertaken.

An external agency was engaged to once again assess and evaluate the implementation of Citizens' Charter of these banks at the end of this exercise and also to document the Hand-Holding Exercise. National Institute of Bank Management was assigned this task which had since been executed and a documentation was brought out in the Year 2003.

Evaluation of Citizens' Charters

An evaluation of the Citizens' Charters of various government agencies was carried out by DARPG and Consumer Coordination Council, New Delhi, an NGO, in October 1998. The results were quite encouraging given the nascent stage of this initiative in India. A brief questionnaire has been circulated to all Ministries/Departments and State Governments/Union Territories to enable them to undertake an in-house evaluation of their Citizens' Charters. Organisations have also been advised to undertake external evaluations, preferably through NGOs.

During the Year 2002-03, DARPG engaged a professional agency to develop a standardised model for internal and external evaluation of Citizens' Charters in a more effective, quantifiable and objective manner. This agency also carried out evaluation of implementation of Charters in 5 Central Government Organisations and 15 Departments/Organisations of States of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. This Agency was also required to suggest methods for increasing awareness, both within the organisation and among the users, and to suggest possible methods for orientation of management and the staff in the task of formulating and deploying Charters.

As per the report of evaluation carried out by the Agency, major findings were :-

- (i) In majority of cases Charters were not formulated through a consultative process;
- (ii) By and large service providers are not familiar with the philosophy, goals and main features of the Charter;
- (iii) Adequate publicity to the Charters had not been given in any of the Departments evaluated. In most Departments, the Charters are only in the initial or middle stage of implementation;
- (iv) No funds have been specifically earmarked for awareness generation of Citizens' Charter or for orientation of staff on various components of the Charter;

Key recommendations, inter alia, include :- (i) need for citizens and staff to be consulted at every stage of formulation of the Charter, (ii) orientation of staff about the salient features and goals/ objectives of the Charter; vision and mission statement of the department; and skills such as team building, problem solving, handling of grievances and communication skills, (iii) need for creation of database on consumer grievances and redress, (iv) need for wider publicity of the Charter through print media, posters, banners, leaflets, handbills, brochures, local newspapers etc. and also through electronic media, (v) earmarking of specific budgets for awareness generation and orientation of staff, and (vi) replication of best practices in this field.

Compendium on Citizens' Charters in Government of India

With the objective of generating awareness among the citizens as well as government functionaries of the commitments of various organisations enshrined in their

Citizens' Charter, the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances brought out a Compendium of abridged versions of all Citizens' Charters in Government of India in a book as well as in CD form on 14 May, 2003. The Compendium contains the operative standards and quality of services proposed to be provided as also the public grievance redress mechanism as committed in the Citizens' Charters. The Compendium also contains the name, address, telephone number, e-mail address etc. of nodal officers for Citizens' Charters in Central Government Ministries/ Departments/ Organisations and also the list of website addresses of concerned Ministry/ Department/ Organisation.

The Compendium shall not only be useful to the citizens for ready reference, but will also enable them to critically review the functioning of these organisations. This would also help the organisations to compare the standards set by them, vis-à-vis, those set by other organisations.

Regional Seminars

Four Regional Seminars on Citizens' Charters were organised during the year 2001-02, with a view to bring national and state level organisations alongwith other stakeholders including NGOs, intelligentsia, media etc. on the same platform and to share experiences in formulation and implementation of Citizens' Charter. These seminars were organised at Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, R.C.V.P. Noronha Academy of Administration, Bhopal and Assam Administrative Staff College, Guwahati. In all 24 State Governments/ UT Administrations and 15 Central Government Departments/ Organisations participated.

Capacity Building Workshops

On the basis of the feedback received and experience gained in these seminars, it was decided to organise separate Capacity Building Workshops with specific focus on (i) formulation of Charter (ii) effective implementation of Charter and (iii) enhancing the capacity of trainers available at State Administrative Training Institutes/ Central Civil Services Staff Colleges.

Evaluation of Delivery of Services

The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances has developed a model for conceptualizing and implementing a Scheme for recognizing excellence in service delivery by government organizations. The Scheme has been tailor-made for government organizations with specific focus on citizen interface and expectations and is slated for implementation in the Ministries in a phased manner. The model synthesizes the ground realities in India with International Best Practices and is based on proper implementation of citizen charters, effectiveness of public grievance redress mechanism and status of service delivery enablers from the citizen's perspective and efforts made by the departments in improving their own capability to deliver. The model had been tested among several organizations and was presented before Workshops of NGOs, citizen groups and government departments. These discussions have eventually culminated in implementation of the certification requirements. Using the tools provided by this model, government agencies can self-assess and improve quality

of their service delivery, and over a period of time graduate to a level where an objective evaluation can be done and excellence can be publicly recognized.

Information and Facilitation Counters (IFCs)

Information and Facilitation Counter (IFC) is a facility set up by selected Central Government organisations to provide information to citizens about their programmes/schemes, rules and procedures etc. as well as status of cases/applications. An IFC also acts as a nodal point for redress of public grievances. The IFC, therefore, is a physical manifestation of Citizens' Charter. Hence it has now been decided to set up IFCs in all government ministries/ departments having Citizens' Charters. 105 Information and Facilitation Counters/ May I Help You/ Inquiry Counters have been set up so far.

Evaluation of the functioning of the IFCs was carried out by the DARPG and the Consumer Coordination Council. The organisations concerned have taken action on deficiencies pointed out in these evaluations. This Department also regularly monitors the working of the IFCs through a half-yearly return prescribed for all the organisations that have set up IFCs.

Problems faced in Implementing the Charters

As pointed out, the Citizens' Charters initiative in India had started in 1997 and the Charters formulated are in a nascent stage of implementation. Introduction of a new concept is always difficult in any organisation. Introduction and implementation of the concept of Citizens' Charter in the Government of India was much more difficult due to the old bureaucratic set up/procedures and the rigid attitudes of the work force. The major obstacles encountered in this initiative were :-

1. The general perception of organisations which formulated Citizens' Charters was that the exercise was to be carried out because there was a direction from the top. The consultation process was minimal or largely absent. It thus became one of the routine activities of the organisation and had no focus.
2. For any Charter to succeed, the employees responsible for its implementation should have proper training and orientation, as commitments of the Charter cannot be expected to be delivered by a workforce that is unaware of the spirit and content of the Charter. However, in many cases, the concerned staff were not adequately trained and sensitised.
3. Sometimes, transfers and reshuffles of concerned officers at the crucial stages of formulation/implementation of a Citizens' Charter in an organisation severely undermined the strategic processes which were put in place and hampered the progress of the initiative.
4. Awareness campaigns to educate clients about the Charter were not conducted systematically.

5. In some cases, the standards/time norms of services mentioned in Citizens' Charter were either too lax or too tight and were, therefore, unrealistic and created an unfavourable impression on the clients of the Charter.

6. The concept behind the Citizens' Charter was not properly understood. Information brochures, publicity materials, pamphlets produced earlier by the organisations were mistaken for Citizens' Charters.

Lessons learnt

The following lessons have been learnt from the experience to date of implementing Citizens' Charter initiative:

1. As with any new effort, the Citizens' Charter initiative is bound to be looked at initially with skepticism by bureaucrats as well as citizens. An effective awareness campaign amongst all the stakeholders at the initial stage is essential to overcome this skepticism. These awareness campaigns should be designed and delivered innovatively and effectively.

2. The issuance of Citizens' Charter will not change overnight the mindset of the staff and the clients, developed over a period of time. Therefore, regular, untiring and persistent efforts are required to bring about the attitudinal changes.

3. A new initiative always encounters barriers and misgivings from the staff. There is a natural resistance to change, particularly among the cutting-edge staff. Involving and consulting them at all the levels of formulation and implementation of Citizens' Charter will go a long way in overcoming this resistance and will make them an equal partner in this exercise.

4. Instead of trying to reform all the processes at once and encounter massive resistance, it is advisable to break it into small components and tackle them one at a time.

5. The charter initiative should have an built-in mechanism for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the working of the Charters, preferably through an outside agency.

Future Vision : Development of Charter Mark

In 1992, the UK Government introduced Charter Mark, a scheme for recognising and encouraging excellence in public service. To win a Charter Mark the organisation has to demonstrate excellence against the following nine Charter Mark criteria which correspond to the principles of public service delivery, namely, (1) Performance Standards; (2) Information and openness; (3) Choice and Consultation; (4) Courtesy and helpfulness; (5) Putting things right; (6) Value for money; (7) Use satisfaction; (8) Improvements in service quality; and (9) Planned improvements and innovations. The Government of Malaysia also instituted a "Best Client's Charter Award" in 1993 based on the UK model.

In India, the DARPG has identified a professional agency to develop an appropriate Charter Mark scheme. This scheme will encourage and reward improvement in public service delivery with reference to the commitments and standards notified in the Charter. The 'Charter Mark' is proposed to be awarded after assessment by an independent panel of judges. This would not only give a sense of achievement to the organisation awarded the Charter Mark but also promote a spirit of competitiveness amongst various organisations that have issued Citizens' Charter and generating awareness among citizens. A prototype has been developed by the professional agency and is in the process of validation in identified Departments/ Organisations.

The implementation of Citizens' Charter is an on-going exercise because it has to reflect the extensive and continual changes taking place in the domain of public services. Indian Government continuously strives to serve the citizens in an effective and efficient way so as not only to meet but to exceed their expectations. The Citizens' Charter initiative is a major step in this direction.