**Review Text**

The movements which supported the emergence and implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in India under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments of 2004-15 have perhaps been overshadowed in public memory by more recent popular movements against corruption, and by the 2014 landslide election of the Bharatiya Janata Party. However, the existence of the law, only ten years old in 2015, has been hailed as a significant moment in the development of the relationship between Indian citizens and the state.

Prashant Sharma’s book provides the reader with a fresh perspective on the emergence of the RTI Act and on the different actors and locations involved in the process of drafting and enactment. Across 6 chapters, each with the useful addition of a bibliography and extensive endnotes, he reveals some of the history and social networks involved in the conception and enactment of the Right to Information. The main thrust of the book is to question what Sharma calls the ‘dominant narrative’ concerning the emergence of the Right to Information in India, and in doing so reflect upon the relationship between the RTI Act and discourses of democratic deepening in India.

For Sharma the dominant narrative of the RTI in India holds that the demand for transparency and accountability, for a fundamental change in the relationship between the citizens and the state, emanated from a grassroots struggle which blossomed into a national campaign and gained sufficient traction to pressure political parties to include the Right to Information in their agendas. That the RTI Act was a response to local, and therefore particularly Indian, social and political circumstances. And, that bureaucratic and political resistance from those who felt their position threatened by increased transparency and accountability was overcome because of the strength, persistence and simple justice of the demand from below. Locating the dominant narrative within a selection of academic, activist, policy and media sources which he argues both celebrate and overemphasise the role of grassroots political action Sharma proposes that if the narrative is correct then we would have evidence of a significant process of democratic deepening taking place in India.

However, Sharma problematizes the dominant narrative by identifying three significant ‘silences’. When these gaps in the narrative are filled in, Sharma argues, the emergence of the Right to Information in India might be understood to be more a product of elite interests and changes in the social and political character of the state under neo-liberalism than it was an example of deepening democracy.

These silences are addressed one by one through the three central chapters of the book. In the first of these, titled ‘Digging up the Grassroots’, Sharma traces the social histories of prominent movement activists. For Sharma a ‘small, intimate, dense network (p.84) of urban, upper caste, upper middle class activists possessed the social and cultural capital necessary to gain access to, and be comfortable operating within, high level political, policy and media forums. The political access of this ‘elite fraction’ of the middle class was crucial in promoting the idea of the RTI, and thus it could be argued that the RTI act was not a response to pressure from below. Building on this theme he goes on to argue that the RTI was acceptable to those in government precisely because it did not threaten the hegemony of the ruling elite, and thus was not as radical a law as the dominant narrative suggests.

The second silence is addressed in a chapter entitled ‘Opening up the Government’. Sharma argues that the account of bureaucratic resistance to the RTI in the dominant narrative is not borne out by his interviews with senior officials involved in the legislative process. He identifies the antecedents of the 2005 RTI in post-independence policy making, legal precedent and judicial activism and locates the law within wider processes of neo-liberal state reform. Sharma’s bureaucrat informants assert that rather than responding to demands from below for an information law the impetus came from within government itself. Ultimately it appears that the law emerged from a number of factors, both civil society activism and top down governance reform, which combined to produce a moment of possibility for the Right to Information.

The third silence is addressed in chapter 5, ‘The Foreign Hand’. Here Sharma outlines the ways in which the Indian RTI Act emerged within the context of the global good governance zeitgeist of the 1990s and early 2000s and partly in response to pressure from international institutions such as the World Bank and the WTO. This period saw a huge growth in freedom of information laws of which India’s was just one example. In turn the drafting process of the Indian RTI Act itself drew upon existing clauses in the FOI laws of a range of countries. Thus Sharma argues, the Indian RTI Act was not as much of a response to a specifically Indian set of circumstances as the dominant narrative would suggest.

Overall Sharma sets out the argument of the book very clearly. There is a lot of detail, particularly in the chapters on the role of the state and the international context, which adds to our understanding of the emergence of the RTI in India. It is important that we understand the social and political processes through which legislation such as the RTI is produced and the role of class and power as key factors. However, in the construction of an elegant argument designed to refute the dominant narrative Sharma swings too far in the other direction. Sharma’s dominant narrative is a straw man. The narrative’s privileging of the grassroots and change from below is replaced by an account of elite interest and foreign influence that effectively erases subaltern voices and agency from the story of the RTI in India. Inevitably the result of research such as this will be a partial truth and thus this is a book that should be read against existing and forthcoming accounts of the RTI process in India. As such it contributes to an ongoing debate, particularly in light of the implications of its critique of the potential of grassroots movement politics, rather than acting as the last word.