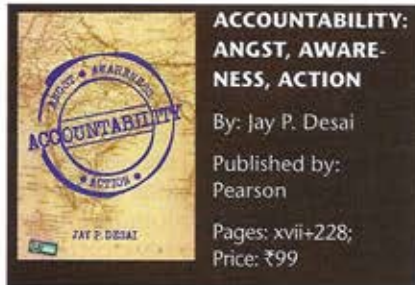


# Monitoring mechanism

The situation is difficult but not beyond redemption



**ACCOUNTABILITY:  
ANGST, AWARE-  
NESS, ACTION**

By: Jay P. Desai

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**A**ccountability is the heartbeat of good governance. Jay P. Desai, in this timely book, highlights the significance of accountability and good governance for economic growth, political stability and social reforms.

Desai defines accountability as the process that counterchecks policies, people and the institutions responsible for ensuring that their performance is legitimate, transparent and in the interest of citizens. Thus, accountability is the process of monitoring and assessing action plans and performance of public officials. The objects and the agents of accountability both have various accountability mechanisms at their disposal: laws, policies, independent analysts, public and the media to enhance accountability.

Public officials (objects), as well as others can use these to improve the quality of accountability and governance. Governance can broadly be defined as the manner in which political, economic and social power is exercised to manage a country's affairs.

Accountability should not be restricted to merely a reactive analysis of the past. True democracy flowers only when there is proactive participation in policy-making and execution by citizens, civil service organisations and the media to prevent misgovernance and incompetence. Desai's objective in writing this book was to increase the public understanding of the concept, which

has not yet percolated into the Indian psyche. There is collusion between the lawmakers, law-keepers and law-breakers.

The absence of accountability in India strikes at the heart of most of the tragedies. The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, unprecedented floods in 2005 that crippled the financial capital of India and the Commonwealth Games scam in 2010 are illustrations of absence of leadership and accountability.

Pinpointing social diversity as a formidable challenge, Desai recalls that Jawaharlal Nehru once said that

**THE OVERWHELMING  
THOUGHT IN MANY OF US IS A  
SENSE OF HELPLESSNESS ABOUT  
THE STATE OF OUR NATION.  
ALTHOUGH DISSATISFIED,  
DESAI IS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT  
THE FUTURE**

India's strength lies in its unity in diversity. India is a land of great social diversity with a high degree of racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious fragmentation. This social diversity provides a vibrant environment, where the multitude of divergence can converge to create the alchemy of growth and progress. Equally, diversity can also lead to a cacophony of views, a chaotic environment ripe for exploitation by those in power.

According to Desai, the latter situation is more representative of India. Identity-based politics is rampant as individuals attempt to promote their own groups. While representation of all sections of society is important, when performance and competence are ignored, voting as an

accountability mechanism is compromised. This breeds corruption and nepotism. Desai further says that social diversity, coupled with weak institutions, could foster an ethnically divided society, where misgovernance and violence are more likely. We have already witnessed this happening in pockets of the country. Somewhat hastily, Desai concludes that the situation is difficult but not beyond redemption.

He outlines four foundations on which accountability can be constructed. These are: appropriate representation to citizens; participative conduct; legitimate conduct and liability enforcement. This is followed by a detailed explanation of each of the foundations.

Desai has identified six areas of weakness, which are common to the four foundations. These are: inadequate information; inadequate impartiality; inadequate implementation; inadequate infrastructure; inadequate independence and inadequate involvement. These inadequacies must be overcome to bring about synergistic impact on accountability. These have been adequately explained by the author.

The overwhelming thought in many of us is a sense of helplessness for state of our nation. Although dissatisfied, Desai is optimistic about the future. He has great hopes for civil society organisations contributing to overcome the feeling of frustration. They will have to create more awareness among citizens, conduct regular assessments of the functioning of the object and constantly advocate accountability. Civil society organisations need to be given time, and provided with media access, strengthened with intellectual input, and provided with technology & infrastructure and with monetary support.

The subject has been dealt with by Desai in a comprehensive manner. It is a timely contribution to the debate that is engaging the attention of some of the best minds in the country. This is a good read for those concerned with Indian governance issues.

♦ JAYANT KHER