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**ACCOUNTABILITY** 21 Jul 2012


## Will We Ever Learn?

Jay P. Desai has written a fascinating book which analyses the subject of accountability in great detail and provides interesting suggestions and insights

R. Balakrishnan

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**Accountability: Angst, Awareness, Action**  
 by Jay P. Desai  
 Pearson  
 Pages: 554  
 Price: Rs 599

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Jay P. Desai has been a strategy consultant for over two decades in Mumbai. The terror strike of 26 November 2008 stirred him to think beyond the question of personal impact. Bothered by the total lack of governance as well as concern for the welfare and security of the people in the country, Desai set upon a journey to study the issue of accountability. And the outcome was *Accountability*, a fascinating book, which analyses and discusses the subject in great detail — drawing upon the author's consulting experience — and provides interesting suggestions and insights.

The writing style is typical of a consulting report, peppered with cross references, grids, linkages, statistics and inferences. This, however, should not detract from the merits of the book. It makes some interesting (perhaps disturbing) observations on the breaking down of Indian history into five time frames (Vedic Age, Mauryan/Gupta Age, Medieval to post-Medieval, Colonial India and the Democratic Era). The book makes an important discovery about governance: that it has been a matter of concern in India throughout the ages.

The book analyses the various components of governance — foundations, creating awareness, various institutions of accountability and so on. The author has done extensive surveys on various factors, and while the findings may not be conclusive, they serve as pointers to the co-relation between various factors such as income disparities, literacy, our interest in voting, how we choose lawmakers, etc. and the effectiveness of governance.

The author says that the struggle for survival leaves little time and energy to fight misgovernance and those in power that flout accountability. The book is a virtual documentation of the fact that even though we have mechanisms in place to ensure accountability, they are rendered ineffective and useless due to tardy implementation. Accountability is also viewed from a 'three-dimensional' perspective — mechanisms, foundations and institutions of the government. Each is further split into components and dissected in detail. As a democratic nation, India has all the tools to enforce accountability, but its failure is a deliberate fallout of the intentions of the powers that be, says Desai.

We see the government being filled with old fogies and ministries being manned by people who have absolutely no background relating to what they handle. In these circumstances, one would expect governance to be provided

by the bureaucracy. Alas, bureaucrats are the first casualty when it comes to continuity. The book notes that the average tenure of an Indian Administrative Service officer in any one place is 16 months.

The first two-thirds of the book is devoted to documenting the ineffectiveness of the supporting pillars of accountability, the relationship between factors such as population, literacy, the media, and the legislature and standards of accountability. The last part starts with a view that "there are limitations in the internal, horizontal and external mechanisms of accountability with the legislature, the executive and the judiciary".

The author focuses on improvements in a few key areas — information, objectivity and impartiality, implementation, infrastructure for accountability, independence along with authority for agencies monitoring accountability. In the end, he makes an exhortation to the citizens to shrug off their indifference, which can be a decisive factor in improving accountability.

The book is a rational and emotional journey. And the sheer effort of the author, who used his own resources to document and analyse the issues, is laudable. At the end of it, the reader is left with one thought: "Will India ever change for the better?" I would urge all those who are disturbed by the complete lack of accountability to get hold of a copy. It will help each one to change their attitude from indifference to affirmative action.

Balakrishnan is a Chennai-based writer. While the polling booth is surely one of the ways to make sure that the right person is chosen, the legislature has ensured there is no effective gate keeping. As a result, we see that of our total Members of Parliament, at least one third face some criminal charges.

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