Documentation of Best Practice

Jaankari

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Executive Summary

As outlined in the 2005 Act, the Right to Information (RTI) is the legally enforced entitlement of all Indian citizens to claim information from public authorities through a written application process.

While it is intended to bridge the communication gap between government authorities and the citizens of India, it has fallen short of expectations for a number of reasons. Currently, the process required for filing a request is cumbersome and unclear. As a result, citizens have inappropriate expectations from the system and hence, utilize its services incorrectly. In addition, the process is not accessible by certain segments of the population; for example, travel is required to the concerned government department, which is not only time-consuming and costly for all, it also prevents those who are poor, physically challenged, and those who live in remote locations from exercising this right. Lastly, records show that ill-tempered government officials are harassing citizens; simultaneously, the same officials are at risk of citizen complaints elevating to personalized threats.

The confluence of these setbacks has put the objective of RTI, empowerment of all citizens through the promotion of transparency, at risk of failure.

In order to tackle the problems preventing the Act from having a positive impact, the Government of Bihar (GoB) has implemented Jaankari – a call centre equipped with a telecom interface, RTI application software and voice recording hardware, designed for the provision of: a RTI helpline, a line for the direct filing of RTI applications, and a grievance redressal line for those who have been harassed while making a request in-person.

Seven telephone operators manage incoming calls, from which they formulate structured requests using Jaankari software. A unique reference number is given to the application and copies of a formal letter of request are sent to the citizen and to the Public Information Officer (PIO) required to respond. In absence of a response or dissatisfaction with the response received, the applicant can file an appeal through Jaankari, which will be then forwarded to the appellate authority. In absence of a response to the first appeal, a second appeal can be filed in a similar manner.

Since its inception in 2007, Jaankari has proven to be beneficial in a number of ways. For one, no physical movement is required by the applicant, thus saving time and money on travel. Two, due to eliminating direct communication with public officials, citizens are not at risk of being harassed. Moreover, it is directly addressing this problem through the implementation of a victim's helpline. Three, as a result of using ICT, information is accessible to a wider audience – citizens from remote and underdeveloped areas and those who are minorities and/or non-literate are accessing Jaankari services. Lastly, citizens are being educated on the Act and guided on how to exercise their entitlement in a more effective manner.

It is evident that upscaling of Jaankari is desirable and moreover feasible, due to its simplicity. To promote a deeper understanding of this innovative best practice, this report identifies the challenges that key stakeholders face and achievements that have been made in spite of them. It further suggests reasons for Jaankari's current success and enhancements for future iterations.

Through documentation and analysis of results from field and desk research, this report illustrates Jaankari's success in empowering the citizens of Bihar in the pursuit of their democratic right to request information of public concern.

Background

Right to Information Act

The Right to Information Act was implemented by the Government of India on 15 June 2005. It allows for the retrieval by citizenry of information held by all levels of government – centre, state and local. Furthermore, RTI encourages government departments to release information at their own will, as opposed to waiting for a citizen's request.

The subject of RTI requests varies from road construction to restoration of electricity to delivery of rationed food to the poor. The Act outlines a proper format for requests, as well as areas that are exempt from disclosure.

Jaankari

The Government of Bihar (GoB) launched Jaankaari in January 2007. Today, the project falls under the directive of the General Administration Department (GAD). It was originally conceived by the Bihar State Electronics Development Corporation Limited (BELTRON); however, at the outset of the project, BELTRON outsourced Jaankari operations to the private firm, Call2Connect (C2C). Henceforth, C2C has been in charge of recruiting operators, managing software, and

maintaining records, amongst the numerous other duties it holds as head of operations. Today, Jaankari services all citizens in the State of Bihar - 38 districts and 8.2 million people (2001 census).

Jaankari operates three telephone numbers: one is a helpline for RTI related queries; another is a grievance redressal line for those who have had a bad experience while filing a request in-person; and the third is dedicated to the filing of RTI applications. Citizens can dial RTI 155311 to file a request, dial 155310 to ask make queries, or dial 2219435 to file a harassment-related grievance to be sent to the Department of Home. The telecom service provider for this project is the government owned, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). Application fees for citizens are Rs. 10 of which Rs. 1.4 goes to BSNL and the reminder to BELTRON. There is no fee for the helpline which means that when callers are making queries, they are only charged regular phone call prices.

Operators manage all incoming calls, during which they guide citizens on how to identify and frame their questions. They then input questions and relevant demographic data pertaining to callers into the Jaankari software. A unique reference number is attached to the query received or application filed, and the result is pushed to a formal letter template. This is sent as an email and a hard copy to the PIO of the concerned department, who is responsible for the information reaching the citizen within 35 days. An additional copy is sent to the requester as a form of receipt.

Screenshots of Jaankari Software

In the case of no response received or requester dissatisfaction with the response, the applicant can file an appeal through Jaankari, which is then forwarded to the appellate authority. In case of no response to the first appeal, a second appeal can be filed in a similar manner and is sent to the State Information Commission.

One group leader and one team leader, supplemented occasionally by a retired government officer, are on-site to assist operators with any questions that may arise while taking calls from citizens.

Objective

Broadly, Jaankari aims to support the creation of an efficient and effective Right to Information Act through the use of information technology; by corollary, it seeks to help citizens act upon their right to obtain government (Centre, State and Panchayat) held information.

Jaankari supports the two main objectives of RTI: one, the promotion of transparency in public bodies; and two, the enhancement of public accountability mechanisms in an effort to contain corruption. Jaankari achieves this through the provision of an easily and widely accessible way of directly requesting information from the PIO deemed appropriate.

Salient Features
1. Hardware - 10 computers & 10 telephones equipped with headsets
2. Software –SQL, visual basic; proprietary; C2C designed and donated
3. Seven operators, one group leader, one team leader - employed by C2C
4. One government on-site monitor
5. Three phone lines – RTI helpline, harassment helpline, application line
6. BSNL (government telecom operator) - revenue sharing model with BELTRON (Rs. 1.40 per Rs. 10 application fee is given to BSNL)
7. Operations cost – government allocates Rs. 22,000 per operator seat

Potential Impact

Barriers to RTI success

Studies have identified a number of barriers to the successful functioning of the Right to Information Act. Barriers can be classified into those relating to requesters and those relating to administrators. Requester-based problems include lack of awareness about the Act, non-literacy, differences in language, lack of understanding on how to file requests, high fees for requests, inconvenience caused by required in-person filing (follow-up visits are common as well), difficulties in interacting with public officials, and preconceived beliefs that requests will not be fulfilled.

Administrative problems include the following: first, the job of PIO is demanding due to the large influx of requests, but also as a result of it being just one out of the many responsibilities that the officer's post demands. Additionally, there is often a lack of readily available information to fulfill requests. A possible result of this has been inappropriate PIO behavior towards citizen requesters.

Perceived Benefits of Jaankari

Jaankaari directly tackles a number of requester and administrative barriers to success. The following is a list of measurable and/or observable outcomes which Jaankaari would potentially impact:
1. Eliminates transportation time and cost by creating over-the-phone processes
2. Eliminates possibility of encountering hostile public officials from bypassing human interactions
3. Improves likelihood of properly formulated requests through the guidance of citizens by call centre operators
4. Allows for non-literates and physically challenged to file RTI requests through the outsourcing of application processing to call centre operators

Methodology

Based on its national award for excellence in e-governance, there is reason to believe that Jaankaari is positively impacting citizens and RTI processes. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that impact is measurable and/or observable. On the other hand, there is a clear lack of substantive documentation of the programme.

With the objective of observing positive impact and hence, verifying good practice, a team from OneWorld Foundation India (OWFI) studied existing documentation on the programme and traveled to the call centre in Patna, Bihar to examine ground realities.

Secondary Research

To understand the context and background of Jaankari, researchers found it necessary to study the Right to Information Act. Research on RTI was conducted for both a descriptive and analytical understanding of its purpose and current functioning. Government reports, including the Act document itself, were used for a broad based understanding, while academic papers and field evaluations conducted by various agencies, including from the NGO and private sector, were analysed to develop a deeper understanding of RTI in practice, especially including challenges faced.
Researchers examined a government case study and analytical papers that highlighted Jaankari as a possible way to improve RTI functioning, in order to determine Jaankari's background and intended operations.

After studying relevant secondary documents, a short paper was written to document a preliminary understanding of background and objectives. This understanding was used to determine primary research methodology, especially including the identification of key stakeholders and the formulation of interview questions designed for each set of them.

Primary Research

Quantitative data was gathered from call centre on-site managers. It is important to note that each Jaankari operator manually maintains daily records of their work. Together, the group and team leaders consolidate the data to determine overall penetration. Data that is not recorded manually but recorded in the RTI software (during the time of the call) can be retrieved, but access to this digital data has not been given to the call centre staff. The reasons for this are unknown and could vary from issues of sensitivity to delayed but intended software for a digital reporting system.

Qualitative data was gathered from 30 to 60 minute, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Interviewees included the Chief Technology Officer of BELTRON, the general manager of Call2Connect, two former Public Information Officers, the team leader of Jaankari, all seven Jaankari operators, and 10 randomly selected citizens[1] and users of Jaankari services. Interviews were conducted in person, except for with citizens which were completed over the phone.

Level of Operations

- *Number of requests/calls made through Jaankari 1) to date and 2) per month*

Two sets of data were gathered to fulfill this objective. The first set is an aggregation of application requests, first appeals, and second appeals, queries, and grievances over the lifespan of Jaankari (Jan 2007 – March 2010). The second set is a monthly breakdown of this data. This data was obtained through the Jaankaari management team.

Reach of Services – from where, from whom

- *Number of requests per district 1) to date 2) in most recent month*

Researchers collected two sets of data: one, a district breakdown of requests to date and two, requests by district in the most recent month. This data was obtained through the Jaankaari management team.

- *Demographic profile of callers (literacy, gender, physical condition, economic status)*

Certain demographic data, such as gender and physical condition, is collected by Jaankari operators during calls. However, this data is held in the server which is not accessible in an aggregated format after the call; manually records also do not include demographic data. As such, analysis relating to this outcome was based on anecdotal evidence along with any conclusions that could be made from interviews with citizens.

Positive Impact

Through interviews with key stakeholders, a qualitative assessment of impact was obtained. By speaking with various stakeholders from all involved organizations, researchers were able to gain a holistic understanding of impact.

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[1] Citizens were randomly selected in an attempt to obtain a varied sample of users that could be used to shed some light on the average user profile. A first round of interviews was conducted based on 100 items of data of which 50 were randomly chosen by call centre leaders and handed over to researchers. Researchers then chose 10 from the list; however, data collected from these callers was later thrown out when it was not clear from where the original 100 names came from i.e. how they were chosen and why. As such, a second round of interviews was conducted; this time, all callers from November 2009 were put into one list, from which researchers randomly selected 10.

Results

Key Stakeholders

The General Administration Department (GAD) of the Government of Bihar, BELTRON, C2C Public Information Officers, and call centre leaders and operators were identified as the key stakeholders who are together responsible for the effective implementation and upkeep of Jaankari. The GKC research team interviewed stakeholders on the functioning of the project since its inception. The following is a summary of findings.

BELTRON

The Bihar State Electronics Development Corporation Limited (BELTRON) was originally entrusted with the responsibility of operationalizing Jaankari. On January 29 2007, BELTRON outsourced Jaankari operations to the private firm, C2C. Today, BELTRON is the programme manager of Jaankari; specifically, it facilitates the transfer of funds from the GAD to C2C and provides technical expertise as needed. As it was an important player in the pioneering of the call centre, BELTRON holds a deep level of knowledge regarding the context in which Jaankari was conceptualized.

According to the Chief Technology Officer of BELTRON, Mr. P.C. Choudhury, Jaankari has managed to achieve two goals in particular: one, it has improved the procedure of filing a RTI request by making it easier for the applicant to access information without wasting time or money; and two, it has sensitized the government about RTI, making them accountable to the citizens. Overall, Mr. Choudhury said there has been an improvement in the public service delivery mechanism throughout the region. He identified the single greatest advantage to Jaankari as the knowledge given to citizens about the Act through over-the-phone guidance.

While Jaankari is clearly helping the Government of Bihar in RTI implementation, BELTRON is facing some challenges in optimizing the initiative. For one, BELTRON is looking to expand its telecom base to private service providers; however, according to Mr. Choudhury it is experiencing difficulties due to 'interoperability'. Secondly, it is difficult to educate the public of the call centre's mandate, as a provider of services to obtain information and not simply as a grievance redressal platform.

When asked whether Jaankari should be replicated, Mr. Choudhury enthusiastically replied in affirmation, saying that there is wisdom in all corners of the country and the opportunity to utilize it should be given. He added that it is equally important to empower PIOs through technologies as it is with citizens, and suggested that each PIO receive a computer with a dynamic template of answers to RTI requests.

When asked why Jaankari has not been replicated outside of Bihar to date, Mr. Choudhury responded with two answers. First and foremost, he pointed to the unique drive and commitment of the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, to the elimination of corruption. Secondly, Mr. Choudhury described an ongoing debate within the central government to implement the Jaankari model. He believes that others aware of this discussion are waiting to take up the effort once the centre implements it.

> *'The future of Jaankari in Bihar is promising', Mr. Choudhury said. 'Bihar boasts the fastest growing telecom industry in the nation and today, it is clear that telephone is the universal media.*
>
> *Perhaps, the current awareness level of RTI is somewhere in the 10 to 20 percent range, but Bihar has a long history of highly inquisitive people and this case will be no exception – awareness levels will continue to grow.'*

Call2Connect

Call2Connect (C2C) is the present controller of Jaankari operations. According to General Manager (East) C2C, Mr. Rajeev Kumar, private firms competing through a bidding process were given the opportunity to take over this role for two reasons. One, a private firm like C2C would be able to create efficiencies within the programme, stemming from previous experience with software and telecom companies. Secondly, as a third party, C2C would act in an unbiased manner, which was deemed important when dealing with RTI. A detailed list of C2C's current role is as follows:

a) Provide software and RTI training to call centre operators. New recruits are to receive 15 days of training held at the C2C office in Patna and the call centre.
b) Updation and management of Jaankari software (Original Jaankari software was designed and implemented by C2C)
c) Allocation of budget received from BELTRON (Rs. 22,000 rupees per phone operator seat is transferred from BELTRON to C2C)
d) Monitoring of Jaankari services (beyond retired government official who is an overseer and monitor of operations)

Mr. Kumar told researchers that updation of Jaankari software has been executed a number of times since rollout; a complete backup system was installed in case of any serious errors occurring. The monitoring workflow of Jaankari starts with the provision by the GAD of one retired official to frequent the call centre. Beyond that, Mr. Kumar noted that he himself makes regular trips to the site to examine operations. However, currently there are no measures for monitoring operations beyond these.

Despite the initiative's success, C2C faces a few challenges. For one, connectivity is low due to dependence on one service provider - BSNL; the result has been unsatisfied citizens who are unable to file their requests because their calls are dropped. In this regard, Mr. Kumar said, 'everyone should have access and currently, poor connectivity is restricting this.' Expansion to other providers is however also proving to be difficult. The second challenge is citizens are either unaware of Jaankari, or for those who *are* aware, they do not know the nature of the service it provides; as a result, the call centre is inundated with inappropriate requests. Lastly, Jaankari does not deal with the actual provision of information by PIO to citizen. As such, realising the ultimate goal of accountability through transparency is only indirectly promoted through Jaankari and hence, concrete outcomes are uncertain.

C2C is currently moving onto 'phase two' of Jaankari. It proposes two major enhancements to the programme: one, filing of an application through Jaankari's online website and payment of the application fee by credit card directly through the site. The second enhancement is RTI confirmation via sms and sent directly to the applicant's mobile. According to Mr. Kumar, the execution of the first has been completed and the second is in the works.

Call Centre Executives/Operators
The call centre team consists of a senior administrative officer (retired government official) who monitors operations, a team leader who is responsible for daily management, a group leader who assists operators and executes duties pertaining to programme management, and seven operators who answer citizen phone calls, send emails and hard copies by post/fax to PIOs and applicants, and maintain individual daily records of calls.

According to team leader, Mr. Ratish Kumar, all operators are recruited by Call2Connect and immediately trained on RTI guidelines and software management for a period of 15 days. It is important to note however that answers varied amongst operators when asked about training - some said informal training was given by call centre leaders, while others confirmed the C2C formal training sessions. A sufficient amount of information gathered through further discussions indicated that it may have taken some time before formalized training was in place and hence, only later hires went through this process.

When asked about typical calls received, nearly all operators mentioned that the maximum number of requests comes from Sitamarhi district, and that the most common topic of request relates to government schemes such as NREGA and Indira Awaas Yojana.

The two most commonly mentioned challenges faced by operators were call drops due to poor connectivity, and uncertainty or confusion about how/where to direct requests.

All operators expressed an interest in joining Jaankari and/or an ongoing job satisfaction because of the organization's altruistic objectives.

Public Information Officers (PIO)

The role of Public Information Officer is to provide citizens with information in response to their requests as permitted under the RTI Act. The Bihar Public Service Commission trains PIOs on how to fulfill their responsibilities. However, the task of PIO is just one of the many that the officer is responsible for; as a result, PIOs are often crunched for time and responses may exceed the required 35 days, which can often lead to appeals.

Jaankari digitizes applications and sends hard copies by post and soft copies (whenever possible) by email to PIOs. Forwarding a digital copy of the application helps to streamline the RTI application process. PIOs benefit from this service in terms of clarity of request and central depository (email inbox) for applications.

Two former PIOs were interviewed for the purpose of understanding their thoughts on Jaankari and RTI in general. Mr. Rajvansh Mani Singh became a PIO in 2005. He gave two examples of challenges PIOs face: one, a misutilization of RTI by the citizens and as a result, a need to deal with inappropriate requests; and two, a lack of readily available information at the PIOs disposal and as such, an inability to respond in time which results in appeals.

Mr. Ajay Choudhury was the PIO of the Finance Department from 2006 to 2009. During that period, he saw to approximately 500 RTI cases per month. Speaking from his experience, Mr. Choudhury noted that the large number of requests that PIOs receive with little time to fulfill them, has caused officers to sometimes lose their temper and hence, treat citizen requesters poorly. He lauded Jaankari on its ability to skip over the human interaction component of the RTI process and thus, eliminate the risk of foul temperaments hampering the process.

Mr. Choudhury told researchers that the PIO's role is crucial, and only those who are particularly interested in the goal set out by the Act should be given the responsibility.

Citizens

Interviews with citizens focused on their use of Jaankari, information they may or may not have received through requests, satisfaction with information received from PIOs, and overall satisfaction with Jaankari services.

Nine out of 10 interviewees were male, and one revealed a physical handicap. Six out of ten had filed more than ten requests with Jaankari, and three had filed more than 50. The range of number of requests made through Jaankari was wide, spreading from two to over 100. Four citizens were from the district of Sitamarhi, three from Rohtas, one from Saharsa, one from Samastipur, and one from Patna.

All interviewees claimed a failure to receive information for at least a portion of their requests. Many said some of their applications received responses; however, responses were often found to be unsatisfactory or deemed incorrect by the requester. In response to the requests that never received information or received false or unsatisfactory information, interviewees appealed to the first level and often the second as well.

Eight out of the ten interviewees said that they had filed a RTI request in person. Of these, all but one preferred Jaankari to the face-to-face process. The citizen who preferred to file requests in-person said he received responses when he traveled to the department to make them, but for those he filed through Jaankari, he did not receive information. The reason for this outcome is unknown, however based on results from the remaining interviews, it may be appropriate to see this result as coincidental and unrelated to Jaankari operations.

Data Analysis[2]

Jaankari receives an average of 1546 calls – applications, first and second appeals, queries, and grievance reports - per month and 560 of these are specifically RTI applications. Since the addition of the victim's hotline in November 2009, an average of 13 formal grievances have been filed through the call centre per month.

The graph below shows the number of Jaankari calls since its inception in January 2007. It indicates that number of calls have nearly tripled over a two year span.
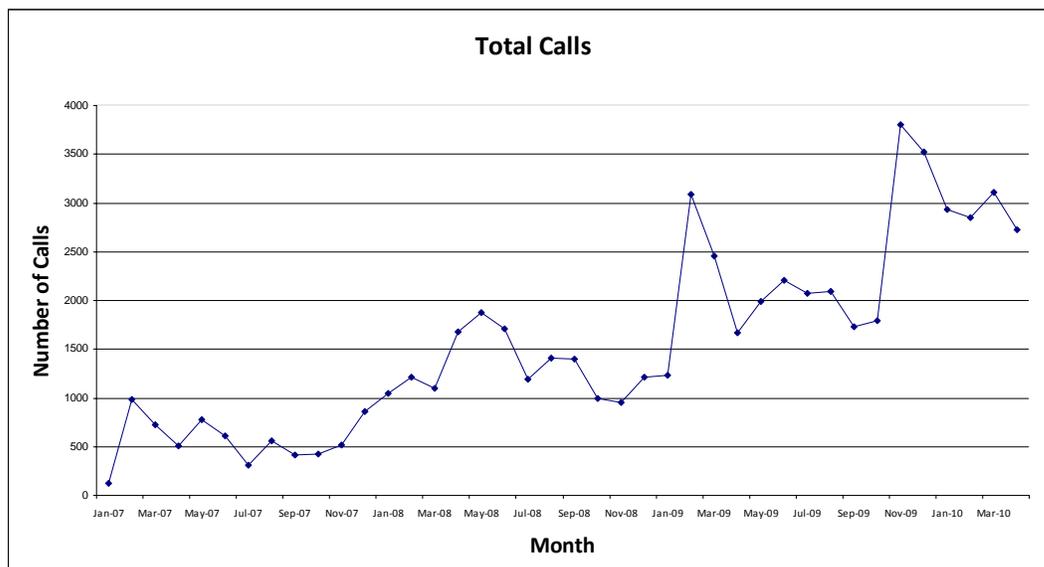

**FIGURE A: TOTAL CALLS RECEIVED BY JAANKARI FROM JANUARY 2007 THRU MARCH 2010**

Where are Jaankari calls coming from?

As illustrated in the graph[3] below, 100 percent of districts in Bihar have utilized Jaankari services. Furthermore, seven districts have filed over 1000 requests for either initial, first appeal or second appeal applications. Two districts, Patna and Sitamarhi, have filed over 5000 requests each. The average number of requests per district over approximately a two and a half

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[2] Demographic data of Bihar was taken from bihar.nic.in and is recorded as provisional 2001 census data. Jaankari data was obtained through call centre staff. It is important to note that all data is manually managed by call centre operators and leaders; there is currently no access to the raw data via the server at the call centre level. In light of this, data may contain inaccuracies that tend to be higher when manual data processing is required.

[3] Five areas have been removed from the dataset due to their location which lies outside of Bihar; it is unknown from where the caller was calling as the mobile numbers are from outside of the state.

year span is 559. Using the most recent full month of data, an average number of calls per month per district is 22.

Number of Jaankari facilitated RTI Requests (Jan 2007-April 2010)
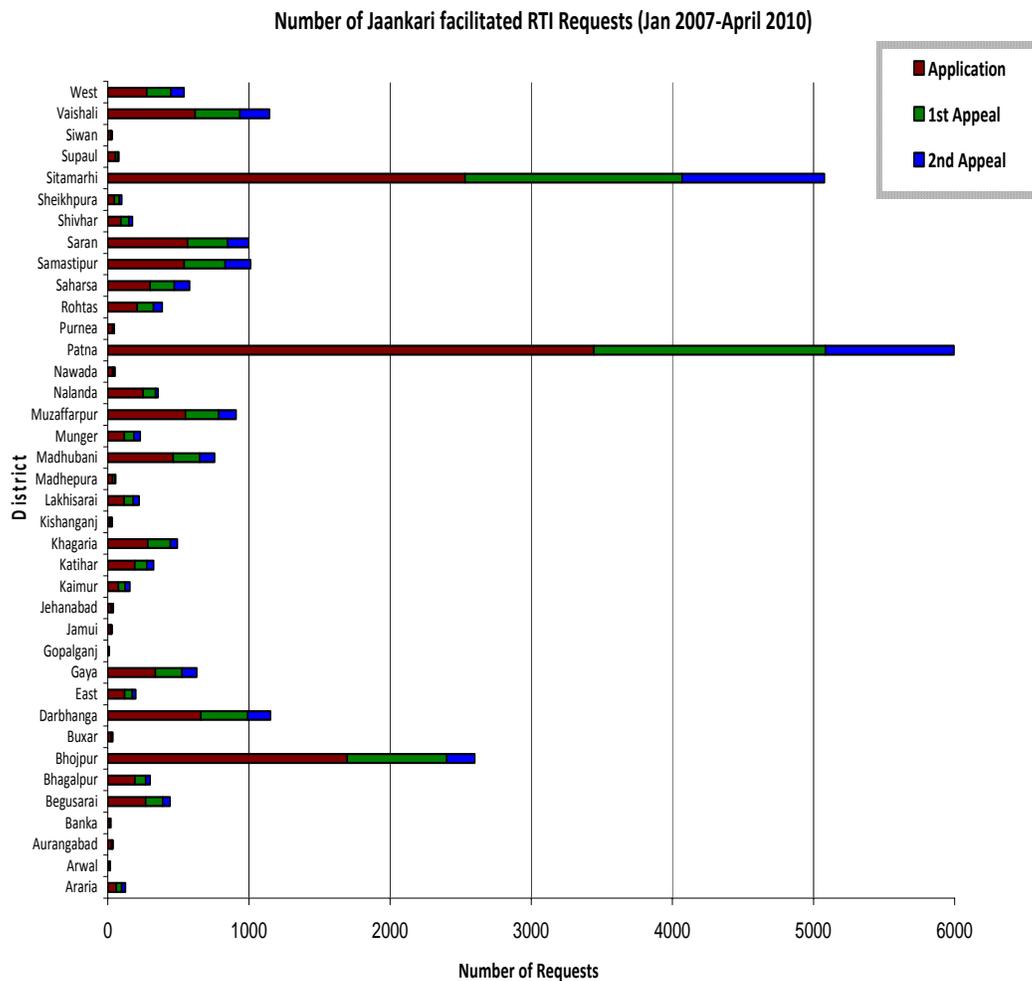
FIGURE B: TOTAL REQUESTS PROCESSED BY JAANKARI PER DISTRICT FROM JANUARY 2007 THRU MARCH 2010

Are remote areas accessing Jaankari services?

During visits to Patna and interactions with key stakeholders, anecdotal evidence revealed that many Jaankari users live in remote locations. The graph[4] below suggests that people in remote areas *are* accessing Jaankari services. Here, remoteness is measured by distance to the capital city of Patna (in kilometers). Currently, there are three districts that lie at or above the average distance to Patna, and simultaneously have made an average or above average number of calls to the call centre; these districts are Madhubani, Munger, and Saharsa.

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[4] In addition to the five districts removed because of their location outside of Bihar, three districts were removed from the analysis due to lack of data. Lastly, the district of Patna was removed as it is the point of measurement for remoteness.
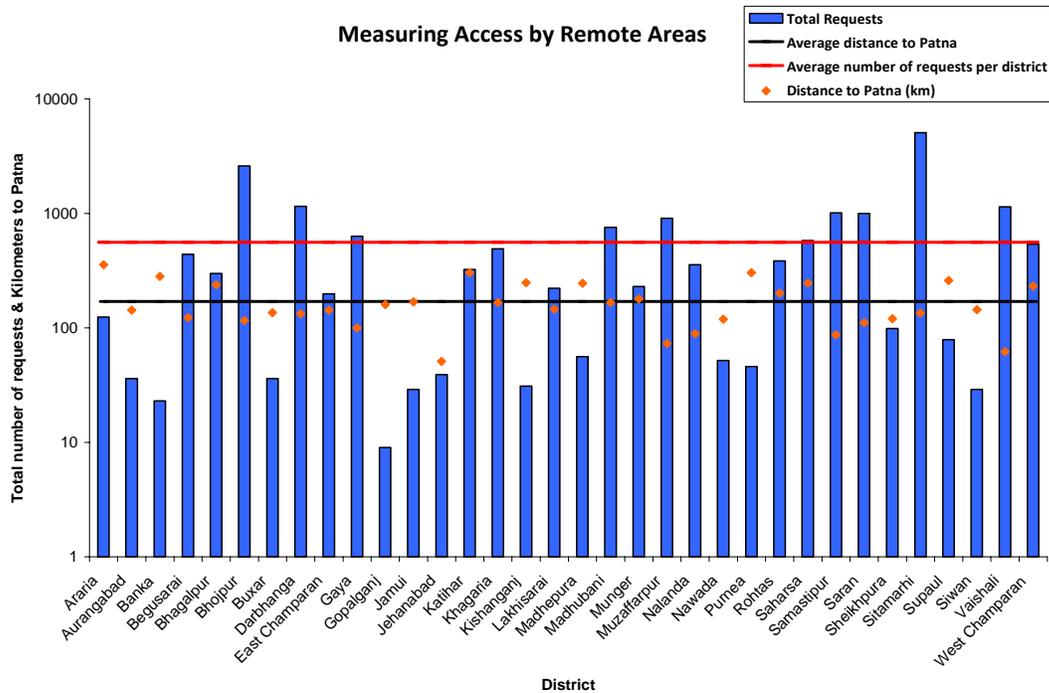
FIGURE C: TOTAL REQUESTS PROCESSED PER DISTRICT & DISCTRICT DISTANCE TO PATNA IN KILOMETERS

Are underdeveloped areas accessing Jaankari services?

Underdevelopment can be measured in a number of ways. Here, three measures are used to provide for a sound analysis. Literacy rate was chosen as an indicator of educational provision, density per square kilometer as an indicator of crowdedness, and level of rural area as an indicator of urbanization.

The data varies betweens districts in terms of literacy, however stays within 30 to 65 percent across the state. Out of the districts accessing Jaankari services the most, Sitamarhi and Dharbanga show a literacy rate of less than 45 percent

Frequent calls to Jaankari come from three districts that also boast high population densities - Sitmarhi, Bhojpur and Dharbanga. Depending on rural-urban mix, a high population density may suggest very different development outcomes; on the one hand, it may illustrate urbanization or progression towards a more advanced economy; on the other hand, it may suggest an overcrowding of a highly rural area, which could lead to falling human development indicators in terms of health and sanitation. In this case, rural levels remain high across districts of Bihar, above 70 percent in all but one. Although percent of rural area does not vary significantly from district to district, it is important to note that Sitamarhi and Dharbanga are over 90 percent rural.
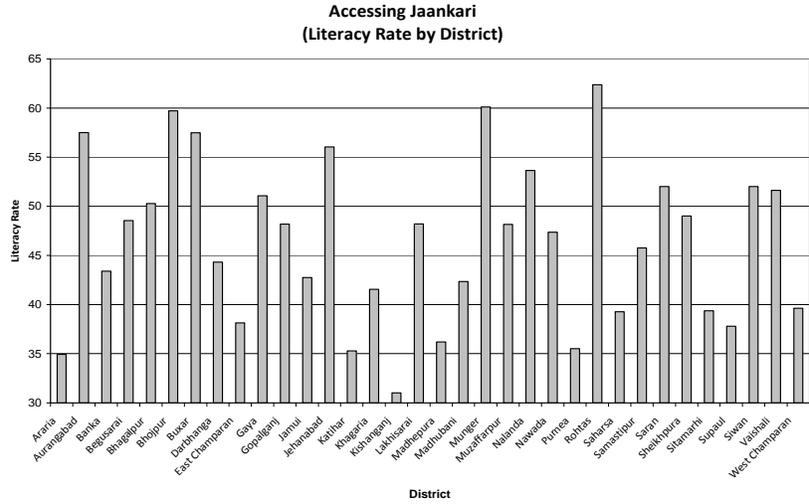
Accessing Jaankari
(Literacy Rate by District)

FIGURE D: LITERACY RATE BY DISTRICT
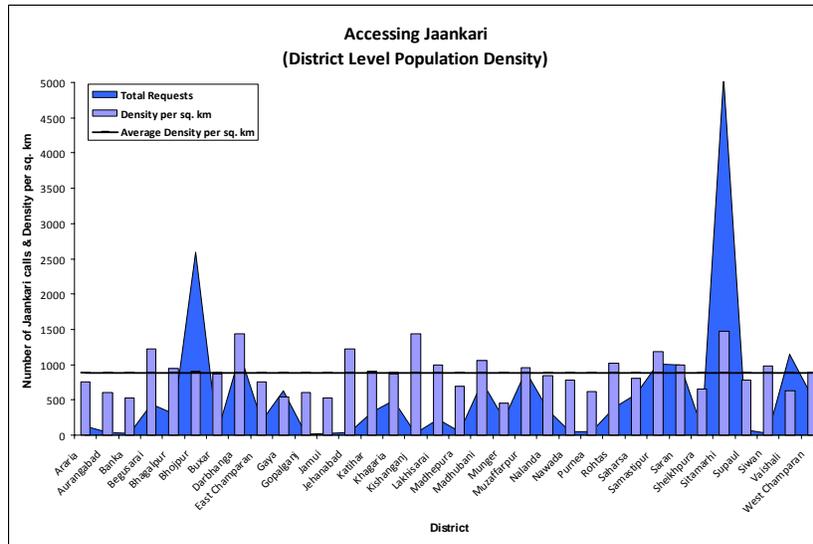
FIGURE E: POPULATION DENSITY BY DISTRICT & TOTAL REQUESTS PROCESSED BY JAANKARI PER DISTRICT
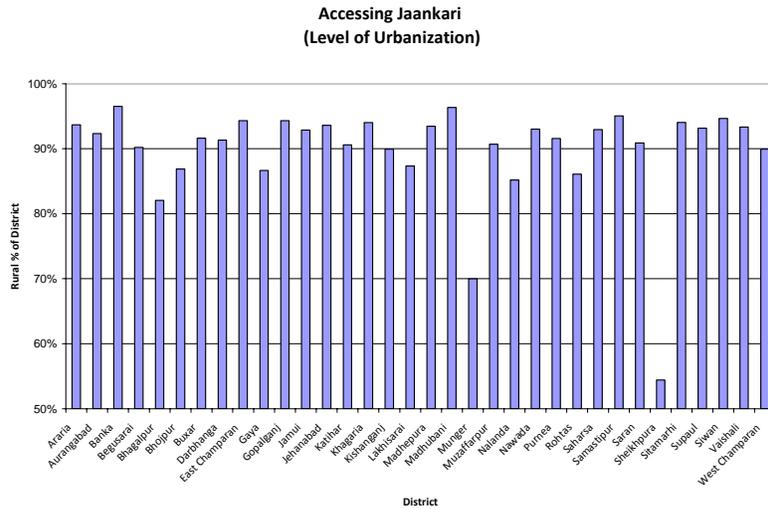
Accessing Jaankari
(Level of Urbanization)

FIGURE F: PERCENTAGE OF RURAL AREA BY DISTRICT

Who is accessing Jaankari services?

While conducting primary research, anecdotal evidence was collected regarding the significant use of Jaankari services by minorities, particularly women and physically challenged persons.

Jaankari software requires operators to collect callers' gender and allows for miscellaneous observations where 'physically challenged' can be noted. Unfortunately, this data, as it stands today, is inaccessible at the call centre level and therefore, could not be used for verification.

However, while phone interviews were conducted with 10 citizens that were randomly chosen from Jaankari's November 2009 records (totaling to 1162), one citizen divulged his physical handicap and one interview resulted in a woman user; although much too small of a sample size to deduce greater relevance, this is a step towards understanding who, outside of the ordinary citizen, may be utilizing Jaankari services.

Lessons Learned

Key Achievements

   1. *Provides guidance to citizens on formulation of requests and RTI in general*

Citizens often know the problems they face, however formulating related questions that will lead to resolutions is not an easy task. For example, a citizen may know that they desire a road that connects their house to their farm land, but stating the problem in an RTI application will not result in an explanation of why the road has not been built or if it is on the agenda to be built.

Jaankari operators are critical for this purpose; they are able to guide requesters to frame questions related to their problems. Furthermore, considering that the literacy rate in Bihar is 47.5 percent (Census of India, 2001), the written Act is not legible by over half the population and likely not comprehendible, due to language barriers or difficult to understand government jargon, to many more; the RTI helpline that Jaankari operates allows for this population to develop a real understanding of the Act.

   2. *Provides access to underdeveloped areas*

Data collected from Jaankari indicates that many citizens utilizing Jaankari services hail from what appears to be underdeveloped localities. Although the data may not show large variances in development indicators across districts in the state of Bihar, anecdotal evidence suggests a general consensus of underdeveloped areas in the state, thus it is reasonable to assume that differences are noticeable to a larger degree on the ground. It is also then reasonable to say that the correlation between low development indicators in certain districts, and high use of Jaankari services in the same localities, illustrates the ability of the call centre to attract citizens from the most disadvantaged areas.

   3. *Provides access to remote areas*

Data collected from call centre operators along with anecdotal evidence gathered from key stakeholders, suggest that remote areas are using Jaankari services. As a telephone-based initiative and hence an eliminator of travel, it is expected that remote localities would reap the largest benefits from Jaankari. The data confirms that those who are aware of the initiative[5] and

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[5] Call centre leaders indicated that there is a high level of social workers in certain remote/underdeveloped districts. Researchers were told that these social workers are gathering RTI requests from the locals and calling Jaankari to process the requests in bundles. Although the exact process that occurs on the ground, particularly the arrangement between social workers and locals requesting information, this interaction is important to note as it is likely having two major effects: one, awareness levels in these areas may be high and rising due to the social workers' presence; and two, requests from these areas may be due to a compounding effect from social worker activism and the availability of an ICT-based solution.

living in remote areas, *are* making RTI requests through the ICT mechanism made available to them.

> *4. Eliminates a need for travel*

When asked about reasons for liking Jaankari and/or preferring Jaankari to the in-person RTI application process, citizens first and foremost expressed a satisfaction in the convenience that stems from the telephonic process.

> 5. *Eliminates possibility of citizen harassment by public officials & provides outlet for harassment grievances*

Stakeholder interviews indicated harassment of citizens by public officials as a major problem in the RTI application process. Through the use of ICTs, Jaankari not only eliminates this possibility, but also provides a grievance redressal outlet for those who have used the face-to-face method and have had a poor experience. To date, 98 grievances have been filed through Jaankari.

> *6. Services the disadvantaged populations (Handicapped, Women, and Non-literate)[6]*

According to interviews with call centre operators and leaders, approximately 10 percent of Jaankari callers are handicapped in some way. Stakeholders also noted that there are women and non-literate users of Jaankari services. When using the randomized sample of 10 interviews as an indicator of approximate participation levels, we can confirm that 10 percent of users are handicapped and also say that 10 percent are females.

Challenges

Each group of Jaankari stakeholders has faced or continues to face a different set of challenges. Replicating the Jaankari model would require extra attention be paid to the issues highlighted below:

1. **Jaankari Operators**
   - Not able to attend to calls due to insufficient number of operators
   - Difficulty guiding callers – time-consuming to make callers understand RTI process (Currently, a 10 minute call limit acts as a guideline, but it is not an enforced reality)
   - Poor connectivity – not able to hear callers; interrupted calls
2. **PIOs**
   - High influx of requests; have more than PIO responsibilities so insufficient time for responses
   - Lack of readily available information
   - Not protected by law; possibility of receiving threats from citizens
3. **BELTRON & Call2Connect**
   - Not able to attract/pursue additional telecom providers

Next Steps

Evidence from the field suggests that Jaankari has improved RTI processes in the state of Bihar. From a citizen's perspective, through the use of telephone it has made the application process efficient. From a government perspective, through the use of computers – application software and email - it has made the production of requests and transfer of them from citizen to PIO more effective.

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[6] Gender is an existing field in Jaankari software, but disability and literacy are not. Operators told researchers that there is a place for additional notes in which if revealed by the caller, they denote any handicap. From this, we can assume that there is already rich data for gender and handicapped levels and thus, the analysis of this data could confirm anecdotal and interview sample findings. Accessing this data was not available from the call centre and therefore remains to be analysed.

The question that remains is if Jaankari is contributing to improved transparency and public accountability. This can only be evaluated if a mechanism exists to measure the final segment of the RTI cycle - in other words, what happens after the PIO receives the request? Is information sent to the citizen and if so, is there something specific to Jaankari that helps in the retrieval of satisfactory information? This question can be answered through a few simple enhancements to the Jaankari model. In many cases, recommendations deal with the implementation of a monitoring system which would directly allow for a better understanding of Jaankari impact on RTI objectives.

Enhancements
The following is a list of recommended enhancements and explanations for their inclusion.

1. **Requester registration/login ID** – Attaching a unique reference number to the individual requester would allow for the tracking of unique callers. This would help in tracking the use of Jaankari services over time. Furthermore, it allow for the tracking of requests made by individual requester, assisting in the monitoring of individual behavior, needs etc; this would give operators a consolidated background of the caller's requests, helping them to understand a caller's needs and hence, give guidance accordingly.

2. **Digitization of Reporting** – Field research revealed that call centre operators have access to the data they put into the software, however not in a consolidated format or one that can be manipulated. As a result, operators spend time everyday manually recording daily call information into a spreadsheet. A simple digitization of reporting – data push from the software into a spreadsheet over a period of time – would free up operator time to instead attend to calls. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, valuable data, such as gender and physical health status, is currently gathered but not accessible – a reporting system would allow for the analysis of these demographic aspects.

3. **Addition of demographic fields in software** – Currently, gender is the only demographic field required for collection. Additional demographic fields such as handicapped and literacy can be added to make data richer and used to further understand who is using Jaankari services.

4. **Standardization of call centre training** – Well-trained operators will contribute to the efficiency of request processing. Field research revealed that intended training processes are not being executed uniformly; in other words, some operators may have received formal training but others have not. Standardization of a proper training programme, both on RTI and technical aspects of the work, would result in quicker and more accurate processing of applications and answering of queries.

5. **Partner with civil society organizations** – Field research revealed that active civil society members/organizations are contributing to the promotion and utilization of Jaankari services. Future coordination with these local actors, or at minimum an understanding of their operations, will prove vital to the penetration of the programme to *all* citizens.

Keys to Success
When looking to replicate the Jaankari model, perhaps more important than considering enhancements, is determining key factors that have contributed to successes Jaankari has experienced to date.

1. **Political will** - The Chief Minister of Bihar led the charge in this effort which is both significant and necessary. Without motivation and direction from the top, it is difficult to make strides forward in the implementation of a highly sensitive policy like the Right to Information Act. Beyond the Chief Minister, a number of government officials in Bihar were advocates of Jaankari because of a shared desire to show the rest of the nation that the state could rise from its past setbacks.

2. **Partnerships** – The outsourcing of Jaankari to an unbiased third party has likely kept call centre operations clean and transparent.
3. **Citizen's interest** – In a democracy like India, citizens are not only entitled to information but also desire to have it. As such, active engagement by citizens with the call centre has made for the realization of efforts.
4. **Understanding users and proper assessment of their needs** – Jaankari has directly addressed barriers encountered by citizens trying to file RTI requests; some of these barriers include non-literacy, immobility, and an apprehensive nature due to socio-economic status.