

A STUDY ON PUBLIC SERVICES ACTS OF SELECT STATES IN INDIA

- SUMIT MAJUMDAR

ABSTRACT:

Public service delivery laws enacted by Indian states over the last decade(s) seek to convert administrative promises into justiciable entitlements by fixing timelines, defining responsibilities and introducing penalties for delay. This article examines the Right to Public Services (or equivalent) Acts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and West Bengal, with attention to their design, implementation experience, and implications for accountability. Using documentary analysis of statutes, rules, official portals and secondary evaluations, the article identifies common features such as time-bound service guarantees, multi-tier appeals and monetary penalties, alongside significant differences in scope, institutional architecture and enforcement strength. Studies and government reports indicate that these Acts have improved timeliness for millions of applications but continue to face challenges of citizen awareness, infrastructure gaps, limited attention to service quality and weak deterrence in some cases. The article concludes with suggestions for strengthening these frameworks and better integrating them into wider governance reforms.

KEYWORDS: Right to public services, administrative law, accountability, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra

INTRODUCTION:

Over the last fifteen years, several Indian states have adopted Right to Public Service or public service guarantee legislation to address long-standing deficits in timeliness, transparency and accountability in routine administrative services such as certificates, licenses and utility connections (Bose 8-13). These Acts transform

what were once discretionary concessions into time-bound legal entitlements backed by appeal mechanisms and, in most cases, monetary penalties on officials.

Madhya Pradesh pioneered this approach in 2010, followed by Bihar, Karnataka, West Bengal, Maharashtra and many others, largely through state-level political initiatives rather than a central mandate (Bose 16-18; “Right to Public Service Acts”). This article focuses on five states, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Maharashtra, to explore similarities and divergences in statutory design, assess emerging evidence on performance, and reflect on the merits and limitations of these Acts as tools for improving everyday governance.

Methodology:

The study employs qualitative document analysis of:

- Primary legal texts of the Bihar Right to Public Services Act, 2011; *Madhya Pradesh Lok Sewaon ke Pradan ki Guarantee Adhiniyam*, 2010; Karnataka Guarantee of Services to Citizens Act, 2011 (*Sakala*); West Bengal Right to Public Services Act, 2013 and Rules; and Maharashtra Right to Public Services Act, 2015.
- State government portals, notifications and explanatory materials detailing notified services, institutional structures and penalty provisions (Government of Maharashtra; Government of West Bengal; *Sakala* Mission).
- Secondary analyses including a 2016 article in the *Dehradun Law Review*, a 2021 review by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS), and practitioner commentary from Accountability Initiative.

The analysis is thematic and comparative, emphasising statutory provisions and documented implementation patterns rather than original fieldwork.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Bose's RGICS review of six state Acts notes that they share a common architecture: notified services, designated officers, strict timelines, a two-stage appeals framework and penalties recoverable from officials' salaries, but vary in scope, institutional ambition and enforcement (Bose 16-19, 28-40). The study also links these Acts to earlier experiments such as Citizens' Charters and the central but lapsed Right of Citizens for Time-bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011.

A Dehradun Law Review article comparing state Acts highlights that Karnataka initially notified 151 services across 11 departments, Rajasthan 124 services from 15 departments and Bihar around 50 services in 10 departments, suggesting different degrees of coverage and political ambition (Dehradun Law Review 9, 16). Accountability Initiative's commentary emphasises that the "triggered penalty" idea migrated from the Right to Information Act regime, but questions whether monetary penalties alone can correct deeper administrative pathologies without stronger grievance redress and systemic reforms ("Right to Public Service Acts").

OVERVIEW OF STATE PUBLIC SERVICES ACTS:

Bihar:

The Bihar Right to Public Services Act, 2011 guarantees citizens the right to obtain notified public services from designated public servants within stipulated time limits (Government of Bihar). The Act provides for a designated public servant, an appellate authority and a reviewing authority, with a second appeal permitted within sixty days against the first appellate order.

Section 7 authorises the appellate or reviewing authority to impose monetary penalties on officials for failure or delay, typically between ₹500 and ₹5,000 per case, with the burden of justifying delay resting on the official (Government of Bihar; RTPS Appeal Brochure). Bihar has notified dozens of services across multiple

departments, and comparative work notes roughly 50 services across 10 departments in early phases, with subsequent expansion (Dehradun Law Review 16).

Madhya Pradesh:

The Madhya Pradesh *Lok Sewaon ke Pradan ki Guarantee Adhiniyam*, 2010, often cited as the first such law in India, defines “right to service” as the right to obtain notified services within stipulated time limits and mandates the state government to notify services, designated officers and appeal authorities by order (Government of Madhya Pradesh). Key definitions include “designated officer”, “first appeal officer”, “second appellate authority”, and “stipulated time limit” which starts from the date a complete application is received.

Like Bihar, the Act provides for penalties on erring officials and empowers appellate authorities to order delivery of the service as well as impose lump-sum fines, which are to be recovered from salaries (Bose 34-36). Bose notes that Madhya Pradesh has processed very large volumes of applications with high disposal rates, but also faces challenges around awareness, documentation and uneven quality of service (Bose 28-33).

Karnataka:

The Karnataka Guarantee of Services to Citizens Act, 2011, popularly known as the *Sakala* Act, guarantees time-bound delivery of citizen-related services and is backed by a comprehensive information technology platform for tracking applications (Government of Karnataka; “Karnataka *Sakala* Services Act”). At launch in 2012, the programme covered 151 services across 11 departments, and the state signalled an intention to eventually include a much larger universe of services (Bose 34; Government of Karnataka).

The Act provides for compensatory costs payable to citizens when services are delayed, typically ₹20 per day of delay up to a

ceiling of ₹500 per application, recoverable from the responsible officer (Government of Karnataka; Deccan Herald). Evaluations and media reports highlight high disposal rates and strong use of ICT, but also point to low utilisation of compensation provisions and ongoing debates about whether the penalty ceiling is too modest to be a serious deterrent (Bose 34-36; Deccan Herald).

West Bengal:

The West Bengal Right to Public Services Act, 2013 extends to the whole state and aims to provide delivery of public services within stipulated time limits, supported by designated officers, appellate officers, a reviewing officer and a Commission (Government of West Bengal). The accompanying Rules of 2013 lay down procedures for receipt and acknowledgement of applications, clarify when timelines start, and specify the forms for appeals to appellate and reviewing officers (Government of West Bengal, *Right to Public Services Rules, 2013*).

State notifications list services and time limits, and sectoral departments have incorporated the Act into their workflows, for example, the Urban Development and Municipal Affairs Department has notified a range of land and municipal services with specified timelines and standard forms for appeals (Government of West Bengal, UD&MA Portal). Available official documents emphasise time-bound decisions and provision for penalties, though publicly accessible synthesis of penalty quantum is less prominent than in some other states.

Maharashtra:

The Maharashtra Right to Public Services Act, 2015 came into force on 28 April 2015 and seeks to ensure that notified services are provided in a “transparent, speedy and time-bound manner” by government departments and public authorities (Government of Maharashtra, RTS Portal). The Act establishes a State Commission for Right to Public Services, headed by a Chief Commissioner and

six Commissioners, with divisional offices across six regional headquarters to monitor implementation.

If a notified service is not provided within the stipulated time or is rejected without sufficient cause, citizens can file first and second appeals, and, if still dissatisfied, a further appeal to the Commission, which can impose penalties up to ₹5,000 on defaulting officers (Government of Maharashtra). Maharashtra's design thus adds a dedicated state-level commission on top of in-department appeal structures, signalling a stronger institutionalisation of oversight than in some earlier Acts.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION:

Across the five states, four common pillars can be identified: (a) specification of notified services and timelines; (b) designation of responsible officers; (c) multi-tier appeals; and (d) monetary penalties on officials for delay or wrongful denial (Bose 16-19; Agarwal). These mechanisms aim to rebalance power in routine interactions by giving citizens clear expectations and formal channels for redress.

Yet the Acts differ along key dimensions, summarised below:

Key statutory features across selected states: (Table-1)

State	Year / Name (short)	Coverage (early phase)	ICT backbone	Penalty design (illustrative)	Oversight body
Bihar	2011 RTPS Act	About 50 services in 10 departments (later expanded) (Dehradun Law Review 16)	Online RTPS portal	₹500-₹5000 per case on designated and even appellate authorities (Government of Bihar)	Reviewing Authority within govt

Madhya Pradesh	2010 Lok Sewaon Act	Large basket of services notified over time (Bose 28-33)	Online tracking systems	Lump-sum penalties recoverable from salaries; quantum varies by rules (Bose 34-36)	Departmental appellate authorities
Karnataka	2011 Sakala Act	151 services from 11 departments at launch (Bose 34; Government of Karnataka)	Comprehensive Sakala IT platform	₹20 per day, maximum ₹500 per application (Government of Karnataka; Deccan Herald)	Mission Directorate under state govt
West Bengal	2013 WBRTPS Act	Sector-wise notification of services with time limits (UD&MA etc.)	Departmental portals; online forms	Penalty and review provided in Act and Rules, detailed in official notifications	Commission plus appellate and reviewing officers
Maharashtra	2015 RTS Act	Wide set of services across many departments	Aaple Sarkar and related portals	Penalty up to ₹5,000 per case (Government of Maharashtra)	State Right to Public Service Commission

From a merits' perspective, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh stand out for relatively higher penalty ceilings and explicit allocation of the burden of justifying delay to the official, which can create sharper individual accountability (Government of Bihar; Bose 34-36). Karnataka's strength lies in deep integration with ICT, real-time tracking and public dashboards, which facilitate monitoring and management of large application volumes, though its penalty ceiling is modest and often viewed as insufficiently deterrent (Government of Karnataka; Deccan Herald).

Maharashtra and West Bengal add institutional heft through commissions and more formalised appellate hierarchies, potentially enabling systemic oversight, but they also risk duplication and procedural complexity if not adequately staffed and coordinated (Government of Maharashtra; Government of West Bengal). RGICS and other reviews caution that, in practice, these institutional

innovations have produced mixed results, with strong performance in some jurisdictions and persistent bottlenecks in others (Bose 28-40).

MERITS AND DEMERITS OF INDIVIDUAL ACTS:

Bihar:

Merits in Bihar include clear assignment of responsibility, a two-stage appeal process, and relatively stiff penalties that can be imposed even on appellate authorities who fail to decide appeals on time (Government of Bihar; RTPS Appeal Brochure). The law's breadth of services and integration into broader e-governance initiatives have helped institutionalise time-bound service norms.

However, studies highlight pressures on frontline staff, incomplete applications, limited physical infrastructure at service counters and uneven citizen awareness, which dilute the deterrent effect of penalties and create congestion at offices (Bose 28-33; Dehradun Law Review 16). The focus on timelines sometimes overshadows quality and follow-up, and weak capacity in rural blocks constrains the promise of universal access.

Madhya Pradesh:

Madhya Pradesh's pioneering role, large application volumes and documented imposition of penalties in several cases are frequently cited as evidence that such Acts can bite when backed by political commitment (Bose 28-36). The law's design, emphasising clear timelines, appeal rights and monetary sanctions, has helped normalise the idea that state services must be delivered as a matter of right.

Nonetheless, RGICS notes that low awareness, missing display boards, patchy record-keeping and continued bureaucratic discretion mean that many citizens still do not fully exercise their rights (Bose 28-33). There are also concerns that the emphasis on prompt disposal may incentivise mechanical rejection or minimal compliance rather than substantive resolution of underlying issues.

Karnataka:

Karnataka's *Sakala* is widely regarded as a technologically sophisticated model; it uses a unique acknowledgement number, SMS alerts and an online tracking system to monitor services, and has reportedly maintained high disposal rates (Government of Karnataka; "Karnataka *Sakala* Services Act"). Its design makes delays visible and creates managerial pressure to meet timelines, which is a significant merit from an administrative reform perspective (Bose 34-36).

Yet evidence suggests that relatively few citizens claim compensatory costs, partly because the amounts are small and awareness is low, and partly because procedures for claiming compensation have themselves been cumbersome (Deccan Herald; Bose 34-36). Critics argue that without stronger penalties or complementary disciplinary measures, some officials may treat the modest fines as a tolerable cost of delay.

West Bengal:

West Bengal's Act and Rules provide a detailed legal framework for acknowledgements, appeals and reviews, and they integrate the right to service approach into existing departmental procedures, which can make adoption smoother (Government of West Bengal; Right to Public Services Rules, 2013). The creation of a Commission and the specification of forms and notices are merits from the standpoint of legal clarity and procedural fairness.

On the other hand, the state has moved more cautiously in public communication of penalty data and performance statistics, and much of the available information is scattered across departmental sites rather than aggregated in a single public dashboard (Government of West Bengal, UD&MA Portal). This can make it harder for citizens and researchers to assess whether penalties are being used effectively or whether bottlenecks persist in particular sectors.

Maharashtra:

Maharashtra's Act is distinctive for its dedicated State Commission for Right to Public Services, which is tasked with monitoring, coordination and control, signalling a more institutionalised approach to oversight (Government of Maharashtra). Penalties up to ₹5,000 and the possibility of a third appeal to the Commission create a relatively strong enforcement ladder, and state portals show integration with broader e-governance platforms like *Aaple Sarkar*.

However, RGICS and other assessments note that technological and connectivity problems, especially in rural areas, and uneven registration of departments under the Act have limited its reach (Bose 34-36). Citizens may also face complexity in navigating multiple appeal levels, particularly where legal literacy is low and civil society support is thin.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS:

Taken together, the Public Services Acts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and Maharashtra illustrate a significant shift in Indian administrative law: from informal, discretionary service delivery to legally enforceable, time-bound entitlements backed by penalties. They share a common statutory grammar but reveal different emphases, on penalties (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh), on ICT-enabled tracking (Karnataka), on commission-based oversight (Maharashtra, West Bengal). (Bose 16-19, 28-40).

Available evidence suggests that these Acts have improved timeliness and transparency for many routine services, yet they have not fully resolved deeper governance challenges of capacity, corruption, poor infrastructure, and weak grievance redress, especially in rural and marginalised settings (Bose 28-40; Accountability Initiative). Without sustained investments in awareness campaigns, frontline staffing, quality standards and

data-driven oversight, there is a risk that these Acts function more as procedural checklists than as engines of democratic accountability.

States should invest systematically in citizen awareness through village-level campaigns, simplified guides in local languages and integration of service rights into school curricula and local government meetings, so that potential beneficiaries actually know how to file applications and appeals (Bose 28-33). Second, penalties must be paired with incentives and capacity building: regular training for designated officers, performance-linked recognition for departments with high compliance, and technical support for ICT usage can reduce resistance and improve service quality rather than simply encouraging box-ticking under time pressure (Accountability Initiative; Agarwal). Third, states should consolidate and publicly share real-time data on applications, disposals, delays, appeals and penalties at granular levels, using dashboards similar to those developed under *Sakala*, while adding indicators of service quality and user satisfaction, not just timeliness (Government of Karnataka; Government of Maharashtra). Finally, the Acts need stronger integration with broader grievance-redress architecture, ombuds institutions, vigilance mechanisms and social audits, so that recurring patterns of failure trigger systemic corrections rather than being treated as isolated delays (Bose 34-40; “Right to Public Service Acts”). Over time, harmonising core features across states, perhaps through a model national framework, could also facilitate learning and benchmarking while still allowing local flexibility.

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