



ARVIND KEJRIWAL

On his first day with the Indian Revenue Service, Arvind Kejriwal had a heart-to-heart talk with his boss. “In the first few years of your service, you should make sufficient money for yourself so that you can appear to be honest for the rest of your life,” the young man was advised. Kejriwal’s superior said he hated that period of bribery and corruption. “But now,” the man said, “I am honest because I have made sufficient money for myself, and I have made several investments.”

Kejriwal was taken aback. The officers of the revenue service, like those in other branches of the civil service, were supposed to be India’s best and brightest. Three hundred thousand people take the preliminary exams, but only five hundred to six hundred are chosen to undergo training and enter the senior levels of the various branches of the bureaucracy. “I had heard about corruption in government,” says Kejriwal. “But I was not sure of the quantum or extent of corruption and the number of people who would be involved in it. . . . Slowly and gradually, it started dawning on me that almost everyone was corrupt.”

He stayed on at the revenue service until early 2006, but all the while, Kejriwal was studying the anatomy of corruption and helping citizens, particularly the poor, deal with the issue in their daily dealings with the government. Parivartan, the movement he helped found in December 1999, focused on assisting citizens in navigating income tax, electricity and food ration matters in parts of Delhi. It also helped push policy makers to rethink a World Bank loan to privatize the capital’s water supply. Today, Parivartan is aiding other groups in educating citizens nationwide about India’s Right to Information Act, which has proved very effective in Delhi in settling people’s grievances with government departments.

Parivartan is expanding its reach. It is studying the institutionalization of local self-governance, taking the model in rural areas in which a general body decides how much money should be spent and on what projects, and holds government officials to account if these plans are not implemented correctly. “We plan to do research on all the anti-corruption laws in our country,” adds Kejriwal, to try to figure out what changes are required. “We also want to take a look at all the economic policies that [the government] is pursuing.”

FULLTIME involvement in this social movement is an unlikely calling for the thirty-eight-year-old Kejriwal, who graduated from the elite Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur. Born on August 16, 1968 to a clan belonging to the Vaishya, or business, caste in Siwani village in Haryana state, west of Delhi, the studious child was the eldest of three children. His father, Gobind Ran Kejriwal, was an electrical engineer who held a series of corporate jobs in various places. His mother, Gita Kejriwal, was a highly educated housewife who graduated at the top of her high school class, an extraordinary achievement for a small-town girl.

Arvind’s family was well-off. His paternal grandfather, Mangal Chand Bansal, was an enterprising businessman who acquired substantial landholdings and set up several businesses, including ventures in oil and cotton. Mangal Chand had ten children, but only Gobind Ran, Arvind’s father, did well in school. “He was the person who always excelled,” Arvind says of his father. “He was sent to the nearby town of Hisar for his tenth class [equivalent to first year in secondary school]. When he showed more promise and got good

marks, he was sent for his training in engineering to Ranchi, which is very far from Siwani.” Gobind Ran completed his electrical engineering studies at the Birla Institute of Technology.

On the maternal side, Arvind’s mother holds the distinction of graduating from secondary school at age sixteen, two years ahead of schedule, a feat made more remarkable by the fact that girls in her hometown of Hisar were not expected to be educated at all. “She would always top her class,” says Arvind. “Her father was very supportive and really wanted his daughter to study.” Gita came from a family that placed great store on education. Everyone, whether boy or girl, was encouraged to develop his or her full potential.

In this academically inclined household, Arvind Kejriwal developed a natural aptitude for book learning. “I always used to be top in my class right since childhood,” he recalls. “I remember I didn’t play, just studied.” His mother would make sure he did his lessons. “Up to about tenth class, she would do each and everything to get me to study. So far as my academics go, all credit goes to her.” Five years older than his sister, who in turn was two years older than their youngest brother, he was not especially close to his siblings. “I’m quite a loner,” says Kejriwal. “I didn’t have many friends, and I communicated less with my family. I was more of a thinking person; I really liked being alone.”

The family moved around as Gobind Ran changed jobs. Within a month of Arvind’s birth, the household moved to Sonapat, also in Haryana, where his father was already working. They stayed there until Arvind was in third class in elementary school. From 1974 to 1978, the family lived in Ghaziabad, in the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh. Later, they were supposed to move to Mathura in the same state, where Gobind Ran had found another job, but he was let go after a month. The family shifted back to Siwani for a year as Gobind Ran searched for another post. When Arvind was in ninth class, the family settled in Hisar in Haryana, where the elder Kejriwal became chief engineer at Jindal Strips, a leading producer of stainless steel.

Kejriwal has hazy memories of his childhood, but he remembers classes in moral studies and church visits. Although a Hindu, he was sent to English-medium missionary schools in Sonapat and Ghaziabad because they were considered the best schools. “Everyday, there used to be half an hour devoted to the value system and at the end of it, we would go to the church,” he recounts. “That does have an impact on a child’s growth.” His family did not see any conflict with Hinduism since “Hinduism is not a religion, there are so many diverse cults, there’s no one book, no one guide,” explains Kejriwal. At home, there were regular discourses on Hindu moral teachings and observance of daily rituals and festivals.

All these influences made Kejriwal a spiritual teenager. “Up to my tenth or twelfth class, I was extremely religious,” he recalls. “I used to spend a lot of time praying, while lying down in bed, in the morning when I got up, any time I get during the day.” Religion faded away for him in college, but he would go down the spiritual path again as an adult. Indeed, he regards his involvement with Parivartan as part of this process. “For me, slowly and gradually, this is becoming a spiritual kind of journey. I don’t know where it’s going to take me and I’m not sure how I can contribute to society. All I know is that I have gained a lot out of this and I have evolved personally and spiritually.”

He remembers few of his teachers, but one of them stood out. Mrs. Chopra was a biology teacher in Campus School, an English-medium high school that was part of Haryana Agricultural University. “She was very fond of me,” Kejriwal recalls. “Usually teachers confine their role to the class. But after class she would sit with me and discuss my career and all things with me.” Mrs. Chopra encouraged the introspective student to participate in debates and social and cultural activities, and cast him in a play in tenth class.

It was Mrs. Chopra who introduced Kejriwal to Arvind Pandey, who helped clarify Kejriwal’s career choices since he was vacillating between medicine and engineering. (Pandey was a student two years Kejriwal’s senior in school.) The teacher felt the young Kejriwal needed to know the pros and cons of both fields and so introduced him to other young people who had struggled with the same questions. In India at the time, brilliant students were expected to go into either medicine or engineering. “I always wanted to be a doctor,” says Kejriwal. His paternal grandfather had been very happy to learn of his choice.

The patriarch was not too happy when Kejriwal switched to engineering after discussions with Pandey, who had been accepted to one of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Pandey had pointed out that

there were only thirty-two seats available every year at the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Science, while the five IITs took in a combined 1,200 freshmen annually. Kejriwal took the IIT entrance exams, a decision his family opposed. “I was stubborn,” says Kejriwal. He would have taken the exams repeatedly until he passed, but he was accepted by IIT Kharagpur in West Bengal on his first try.

His score was high enough to qualify him for the mechanical engineering stream.

COLLEGE life was a revelation for the sheltered teenager. “We have twenty-eight states in the country,” says Kejriwal. “Every state was represented in the school.” English was the language inside and outside classes because of the diversity of languages. Hindi is spoken only in the north, with a variety of other regional languages used elsewhere. Kejriwal faced a period of adjustment in the first few months because he did not speak English as well as he read and wrote in it. But he managed to improve. “I thoroughly enjoyed it, both my studies and my stay,” he says. “I had so many activities there.”

Academically, it was a bit like being a big fish in a bigger pond. He did not top the class as he did in high school but he was not a laggard either. “My score was 8.2, I think, which is a reasonably good score. The toppers were in the nine category.” The young man also immersed himself in extracurricular activities, particularly in public speaking and in theater. He was cast in the freshman musical play but did not pass subsequent auditions because the established theater groups “felt that I was very bad at acting.” In his final year, he recruited incoming freshmen and formed his own theater group, which swept all the awards in the intra-college competition with a performance of the Hindi-language play *Baki Itihaas* (The Rest of History).

For the first time he drank beer—and had pangs of conscience (his conservative family did not touch alcohol). It was some time before he had another drink, but when he graduated he could drink with the best of them. A lifelong vegetarian, he tried eating meat for several months. “I was repelled by the taste and smell, so I just gave up,” he says. Kejriwal made lifelong friends. “We are in touch with each other, but most of them are abroad now.” Almost eight of ten people in his batch left India to study overseas.

He was one of the few who stayed home. It was not that no university abroad wanted him—even IIT graduates with a score of six or seven easily gained admission to the foreign school of their choice. “It was really expensive, the air tickets and the admission process,” he explains. “Secondly, I wanted to stay right in my country. I can’t tell you immediately where that feeling came from, but I thought I won’t go abroad.” He got job offers from two well-known government enterprises, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation and Gas Authority of India, but he settled on Tata Steel, a private-sector giant founded by the legendary Tata family.

Kejriwal had initially been turned down for the prestigious post at the campus interview. When he learned of the rejection, his stubborn nature kicked in. “I usually have this feeling that I’m quite good, so how can they reject me?” he recalls. “I called up the chairman of Tata Steel, but of course he wouldn’t come on the line—I was just a student at IIT. So I told his staff that I was not happy with the selection process and wanted to be given another chance.” This was such a rare occurrence that Kejriwal got a second interview. “They called me again and they said, ‘Okay, you have the job,’” he recalls.

HE was placed in a training program at Tata Steel in 1989 along with other engineering recruits, and then assigned as assistant manager in the company’s Jamshedpur-based design department, which was tasked with developing plants and machinery for future steel projects. “I found it quite boring,” Kejriwal says. He took a leave of absence in 1990 to prepare for the civil service exams. “During the training, we [the recruits]

used to discuss all the options before us, because just being an engineering graduate was not treated as sufficient,” Kejriwal explains. “You had to do something more.” There were three options: to go abroad, take up higher management studies, or join the civil service.

He had already ruled out studying overseas. Kejriwal had taken the management entrance exam for a prestigious business school but did not make the cut. That left the civil services. In this, he was influenced by a close college friend, Sanjay Virsingh, who was two years ahead of him at IIT. Virsingh had also joined Tata Steel, and then took the civil service exams. He qualified to join the Indian police. “He used to come back [to Tata Steel] with all his glamour and he discussed the kind of powers he enjoyed,” Kejriwal recalls. “He also used to tell us: ‘If you want to do something for your country, this is the option. Because you start at such a senior level, you have a lot of power to do something for the country.’”

The examinations are held in three phases. In June, some three hundred thousand applicants take the preliminary tests, which consist of general knowledge and a subject of the applicant’s choosing. The multiple-choice questions are designed to whittle down the field to around ten thousand people, who then sit down to write six papers in November. Those who pass the main exams—typically 1,500 to 2,000 people—are interviewed in March the following year. “Five hundred or six hundred people are picked up finally,” says Kejriwal. He was one of the successful examinees.

But he opted to return to Tata Steel and retake the exams in 1991. His marks had placed him with the Revenue Service, but he really wanted to qualify for the Indian Administrative Services. “Traditionally, the Indian Administrative Services are treated as the best because those who qualify have the flexibility to go to any department and rise to the top,” he explains. “Second is foreign service, and then police and revenue together.” Under the rules, Kejriwal could take the exams again and move up if he got a better score, or he could retain his previous score if he equaled it or got lower marks.

Kejriwal sat for the main exams again in November and waited for the results while resuming his work with Tata Steel’s design department. But his dissatisfaction with the job had become unbearable. He asked to transfer to the company’s corporate social responsibility unit, which aids rural villages. Pointing out that he was hired as an engineer, not a social welfare officer, management told him he should decide whether he wanted to stay or go. “I quit,” says Kejriwal. In pursuit of social service, he traveled to nearby Calcutta to ask the late Mother Teresa, the Albanian nun who ministered to the poor and dying, how he could help.

She asked him to join Kalighat, a free hospice for the poor who were ill and dying. Kejriwal helped out for a month and then joined the Christian Brothers Association to spread education in the remote villages of the northeast. He worked with the group for two months before returning to Calcutta. “There were lots of people in these villages who had started turning to Christianity,” says Kejriwal. “Somehow I started feeling guilty. Is Hinduism doing sufficient things for its own people? What are we doing for them?”

He did village work with Ramakrishna Missions, but this was cut short when he was called for the third-stage interviews in the civil service exams in March 1992. At loose ends while waiting for the final results, Kejriwal signed up with a government organization called Nehru Yuva Kendra (Nehru Youth Center), which was doing outreach work in the rural areas. He spent much of the next few months in several villages in his home state of Haryana. Then he learned that he had passed the civil service exams for a second time but apparently did not get high enough marks to qualify him for the Indian Administrative Services. He joined the Indian Revenue Service (IRS) in August that year.

UNTIL today, Kejriwal cannot explain the impulse that made him give up a coveted job with Tata Steel for social work. “I don’t have easy answers,” he says, adding that it may have something to do with the Hindu notions of karma and rebirth. “In the theory of karma, whatever you do, you have to bear the results of that act. And why is it that you were born in a rich family and another person is born in a poor family? Is it

coincidence or design?” He was also trying to find himself. “Frankly, I was exploring my own life. I was not trying to find solutions to the problems of others; I was trying to find solutions for myself. Where do I stand?”

The experience reawakened the religiosity that had petered out during his university years. Out in the villages, “for some time, I had this feeling that I had to meet God,” Kejriwal recalls. He read books about Mother Teresa and other Christian missionaries, about the Ramakrishna Missions, and other religious subjects. The story of the nineteenth-century spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda held special resonance for him. Kejriwal says, “He became a hero for me because he also went out of his house in search of God. Whoever met him and told him that he can become his teacher—the first question he would ask is, ‘Have you seen God?’”

Before becoming a full-pledged civil servant, Kejriwal spent three months at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration in Mussoorie, in the foothills of the Himalayas, for a foundation course taught to new recruits of all the services. There were about 350 participants, including his future wife, Sunita. “She was there but I didn’t get to know her all that well,” he says. That changed when the eighty-four revenue officer-trainees moved to the National Academy for Direct Taxes, Nagpur, in Maharashtra state, for the sixty-two-week Internal Revenue Service (IRS) induction training program. “We admired each other,” says Kejriwal. “She’s a very shy kind of person, a very decent person. One fine day, I just knocked on her door and asked her: ‘Will you marry me?’ And that was it.” Married in 1994, they now have a son, Pulkit, and a daughter, Harshita.

That early, though, Kejriwal was already feeling disillusioned about the civil service. “I had very strong reservations about the kind of bureaucrats they were selecting,” he says. In the exams, applicants were asked to choose two subjects on which they would be tested. In his case, Kejriwal chose physics and geography. “I bought books from the market, sat in the house and mugged them up. I just vomited that out in the exam and I got through.” What does being good in physics and geography have to do with being a good civil servant? He adds: “The kind of people who reach the academy, they [tend to be] the people who have great cramming power. But they are not [necessarily] the best brains.”

Worse, he suspected them of being out of touch. “They are not the people who are sensitive,” says Kejriwal. “And if they are not sensitive, they have no idea about the country; they have no idea about the people. But they come with a great sense of arrogance because they are going to be senior bureaucrats.” Some of the things he saw at the academy disturbed him. “You are taught horse riding, you are taught all kinds of elitist things which you may never have done in your life. Suddenly you are asked to become part of this club. . . . You are made to believe that you are special. You are made to believe that you are not part of the people. . . . It’s the same legacy coming down from the British bureaucracy, when civil servants were not treated as part of this country.”

And yet when the officer-trainee finally takes his or her post, the wages are far too low. “Civil service is very badly paid,” says Kejriwal. “This is often cited as one reason for corruption. The kind of status in society and the kind of powers that you give a person are just not commensurate with the salary that you pay him.” The rot permeates down to the lowest levels. Kejriwal remembers the time when he, as an assistant commissioner, was working well into the morning weeding out old records. “One of the security guards asked me for *chai paani* (tea and snacks). I thought he wanted to have snacks and offered him some money.” He actually wanted a huge sum. “Chai paani” was a code word for a bribe.

KEJRIWAL’S first posting was as assistant commissioner of income tax in a district in Delhi. He had a staff of around ten people who received and processed the income statements and tax returns of the residents and businesses in the area. The office had the power to conduct raids on the premises of those suspected of tax evasion and other irregularities, and to choose a few statements at random for deeper scrutiny. There was

ample scope for corruption, and tax officers were expected to feed at the trough. Kejriwal would come to work on his scooter. Early in his tenure, his staff saw him at the parking lot and giggled: “It’s okay, sir, it will take only a few months before you will have a car.”

Typically, a taxpayer would approach a tax officer and ask, “How can I serve you?” At first, Kejriwal did not understand why he was being addressed thus, but he later learned that it was a hint about how much money Kejriwal wanted in exchange for the taxpayer’s file not to be opened, or if examined, to be given only a cursory investigation. “He doesn’t want you to get into the case,” explains Kejriwal, “because the moment you touch the file, more and more things will come out, and your price is going to increase.” A person at his level, he says, could earn a couple of million rupees in one year—that’s nearly US\$200,000 at the current exchange rate.

Kejriwal often discussed the issue of corruption with some colleagues. “There was a sense of disgruntlement among the honest officers,” he says. “If you’re corrupt, you’re in the mainstream. If you’re honest, you’re sidelined.” But he says he did not suffer because of his honesty. Many in his staff were making a lot of money on under-the-table activities, but the responsibility for taking disciplinary action did not lie with him. “It was at a much higher level,” he explains. It would have been “extremely difficult for me if I started chasing them, because then I would just be chasing them and not be doing my own work.”

The IRS does have a Vigilance Wing tasked with uprooting internal malfeasance. However, Kejriwal thinks the structure is faulty because it is manned by insiders pulled from other offices—and who are later reassigned back to their original posts. These people are expected to take action against former bosses, colleagues, batch mates, and subordinates with whom they might be working again in the near future. One of them might even become their boss. “If I do something against them and I come back to the same department, the same place, do you think I can work there?” Kejriwal asks. “Impossible!”

Despite his misgivings about corruption, however, Kejriwal found tax matters “highly intellectually stimulating because a person will present a tax statement to you and you have to make out from that tax statement and your own investigative skills what his actual income is. I did some very good cases, so I also kind of made a name for myself in the department.” He was promoted to deputy commissioner in 2000 and was an additional commissioner when he resigned in 2006, a designation just below the top titles of chief commissioner and commissioner.

His departure came about because the job, intellectually fascinating as it was, could not prevail over Kejriwal’s spiritual side. In 1997, Kejriwal discovered a Buddhist meditation technique called Vipassana, which does not require its followers to have faith. “They don’t ask you to believe in anything,” he says. “They say, ‘try this out, and if you don’t get any results, you can leave’ . . . I was very impressed by their logic. [I] being a science student, science impresses me.” He has been attending a ten-day Vipassana retreat every year for the past ten years. Followers start meditating at 4:00 in the morning and end at 9:00 in the evening, all the while keeping “noble silence” of body, speech, and mind.

Vipassana helped clarify Kejriwal’s priorities. In 1998, he tried to persuade several associations in Delhi to stop paying their electricity bills so as to bring attention to corruption in the electricity department. The platform was to be KABIR (Karmayogis Association for Bringing Indian Regeneration), which Kejriwal registered as a society in 1998. The effort did not take off, apparently because it attempted to do too much in too short a time. The second attempt was Parivartan (the word means “change” or “transformation”), which was started in December 1999. This time, he met with more success.

THE idea for the Delhi-based people’s movement called Parivartan evolved from conversations Kejriwal had with Kailash Goduka, a chartered accountant who had a tax practice, and Colonel J. N. Pandey, a retired army officer whom Kejriwal met when he was trying to organize KABIR. The observation was made

that even an honest person had to pay bribes to get paperwork done in any government department. Goduka could cite many first-hand experiences involving the income tax office. “He was a very honest chartered accountant who would give up a case rather than pay a bribe,” says Kejriwal. “A lot of taxpayers would not even approach him to have him as a consultant.”

Basically, there are two types of corruption. “Mutual corruption is where the taxpayer and the tax officer get together,” says Kejriwal. “Extortion corruption is where you have to pay bribes to get legitimate work done. Suppose you paid excess taxes to the government and there’s a refund due on those taxes. The tax officer says: ‘Unless you give me 10 percent of the amount, I will not give you the refund.’ That’s extortionist [corruption]. It’s your right, but he’s not giving it to you.” Extortionist corruption, in Parivartan’s view, is more dangerous than mutual corruption because it affects every individual in the country and thus the psyche of the entire nation.

It was clear to Kejriwal and his friends that the traditional approach to anti-corruption campaigning was not working. You just cannot tell citizens not to pay bribes and officers not to accept them. “If I tell you, ‘Don’t pay bribes,’ how do you get an electrical connection? How do you get a water connection?” asks Kejriwal. “Most people will say, ‘Let’s stand up, let’s face harassment, let’s not give up.’ But how many people can really do that? At the end of the day, you’re doing a nine-to-five job, you’re raising a family. Is it possible to find a solution wherein we can tell ordinary people that you don’t have to pay bribes anymore?”

The path Kejriwal and his friends chose to explore was for Parivartan to help ordinary citizens negotiate the maze of bureaucracy. Instead of paying bribes themselves or going to a consultant who would pay bribes on their behalf, citizens were asked to go to Parivartan, which promised to do the work for free. And because both Kejriwal and Goduka knew its workings, the Delhi income tax office was the logical starting point. Goduka, Pandey, and another member, Dr. R.S. Gupta, went to see the chief commissioner of income tax in Delhi, who told them to bring any grievance to him. Kejriwal stayed in the background since he was working in the department.

Goduka let the group use his computer and his home as office. (The group later transferred to a room in a commercial complex owned by Dr. Gupta.) “I would do all the background work,” recalls Kejriwal. “Kailash Goduka and Colonel Pandey would go and meet the tax officers and also the media. They were the face of Parivartan.” The citizen’s group raised fifty thousand rupees from some friends and made banners that were put up all over Delhi. “Don’t pay bribes in income tax,” the banners read. “Come to us. We’ll get it done free of cost.”

But the chief commissioner got angry when the group placed banners outside the Delhi income tax office. He accused Parivartan of portraying his department as the most corrupt in the country. In an interview statement, he called Parivartan “an organization of touts,” recalls Kejriwal. “He said: ‘I warn the public to beware of these people. Don’t go to them. They are just a bunch of people who are seeking business.’” Undeterred, Parivartan set out tables and chairs in market places and invited people to tell them about their tax complaints. People were advised to continue pursuing their grievances with the tax department but to give Parivartan a photocopy of the documents so the group can help resolve the problem as well.

Some four hundred complaints were received, including one from a very old woman who had been waiting for a tax refund since 1978. “Most of the problems were with tax refunds,” says Kejriwal. “That is where extortionist bribery exists. They had paid excess taxes to the government or excess taxes had been deducted, and tax officers were asking for bribes to facilitate refunds.” The group compiled the grievances every month and sent the list by post to the chief commissioner, who declined to meet with Parivartan personally. “Then we would go to the media,” says Kejriwal. “We would go to members of parliament. We would go to senior vigilance people [the staff in the income tax department’s Vigilance Wing and the Chief Vigilance Commissioner of India] and complain that nothing is happening.”

Parivartan also recommended several courses of action for the chief commissioner to consider. One was to process all tax refunds according to acknowledgment numbers. No one should be allowed to jump the queue, which would help ensure that those who gave a bribe would not get preferential treatment at the

expense of those who did not. A second suggestion was to display the acknowledgment number of the latest tax refund that has been issued. This would promote transparency and make sure tax refund cases are indeed being attended to in sequence.

Third, Parivartan asked the income tax department to issue a Citizen's Charter that lays out the time limits within which various jobs would be completed. "We said that if the officer [did] not do his job in this much time, then a penalty should be imposed on that officer," says Kejriwal. Beyond the charter, the group wanted time limits on two or three particular items, including the issuance of tax numbers. This should be done, said Parivartan, within thirty days of the application being filed. If not, the officer should be sanctioned as well.

When nothing was done, Parivartan went to court. "We filed Public Interest Litigation [on behalf of India's taxpayers] and ultimately, in April 2001, the Income Tax Department filed an affidavit in the Delhi High Court saying that they had issued orders for implementation of all the suggestions made by Parivartan," recalls Kejriwal. "I was in the department. I knew there were no such orders and the department was filing a false affidavit before the court." The group informed the judges of this but met with little sympathy. The court, says Kejriwal, believed that the department was making an honest effort and closed the case.

Parivartan asked the department for copies of the orders but was rebuffed. The group then staged a sit-in outside the chief commissioner's office. About thirty volunteers led by Goduka and Pandey told the chief commissioner that they were there to get a copy of the orders. "We will not disturb you and we will not harass you in any way," they promised. "But we will not move from here until you give us a copy of those orders." They also said that they disagreed that these were secret orders because these affected the way the department dealt with the public.

Several commissioners held an emergency meeting on the issue. Afterwards, the chief commissioner asked Parivartan to give him two or three weeks and he will furnish the group with a copy of the orders. Kejriwal had taken a leave of absence from the tax department at the time but was in constant touch with the leaders and volunteers. "Suppose there was no order, but suppose the chief commissioner now wants to make an honest attempt?" he recalls telling the group. "Suppose he wants two weeks' time to issue fresh orders? Let him do it." The group dispersed.

Ten days later, Goduka, Pandey, and Manish Sisodia, who was the first- ever Parivartan volunteer, paid the chief commissioner another visit to follow up on the copy of the orders that was promised them. But the chief commissioner was not forthcoming. According to Kejriwal, he denied making a promise and said he did not intend to meet any of them in the future. That prompted Sisodia to write him a letter in which he said he would sit and fast unto death outside the chief commissioner's office in ten days' time if Parivartan's request for a copy of the orders was not met.

The case got the attention of N. Vittal, then India's chief vigilance commissioner, who spoke with Sisodia. According to Kejriwal, Vittal told the chief commissioner that Parivartan's suggestions were genuine and that the antipathy the chief commissioner may feel for them should not get in the way of the income tax department's implementing sensible procedures. The advice produced results. A few days before Sisodia's fast was to begin, the chief tax commissioner issued the orders. No copies were given to Parivartan, but the group decided to let the matter go. This ended the campaign—and brought home the point that the Income Tax Department could not but respond to a section of society resolved to claim what is its due.

ALL this time Kejriwal had been in the background. He took on a more prominent role after taking a sabbatical from the income tax department in November 2000, particularly in Parivartan's campaign at the Electricity Department. "But for a long time I did not acknowledge that this Parivartan was the same one that worked on

the income tax issue,” he says. Parivartan was a common name that many organizations use to refer to themselves. “There was such a huge amount of hostility in the income tax controversy,” Kejriwal adds. “All the bosses were very angry.” Some people railed against accepting Parivartan’s suggestions. If these were implemented, they asked, where would we get our money?

The electricity campaign was started almost at the same time as the one with the income tax, but the experience could not have been more different. The chairman of the Delhi Electricity Board was “very happy to learn that we planned to do this,” says Kejriwal. The chairman appointed an executive engineer to receive the complaints and help address the grievances. The problem, however, was the lower-level staff. When Parivartan set up a table and chair near the entrance of one electricity office, the security guard told them to move. Yet the touts waiting alongside them were not disturbed, reportedly because they were paying off guards. It took a call to the chairman’s office to solve the problem.

The electricity campaign was a solid success. The number of cases filed with the Electricity Court dropped to three or four cases a month from forty to fifty. Parivartan documented some twenty-four categories of problems, including deliberate mistakes in bills that would need a bribe to rectify, delays in fixing faulty electrical meters, and long waits for new electrical connections. Those who were helped would gratefully ask what they could do. The volunteers told them to stay for an hour and distribute Parivartan pamphlets. “That’s why you will find, on any day, several people standing there and telling others, ‘Don’t pay bribes inside,’” recounts Kejriwal. The fixers were unhappy and some threatened the volunteers, but nothing came out of it.

But two years after it was founded and with two anticorruption campaigns under its belt, Parivartan was beginning to question itself. The feeling was growing that they were becoming fixers themselves, albeit unpaid ones. Can Parivartan cover the entire country with this operational model? Is this model even replicable? What would happen if the group were to disband tomorrow? Would people go back to square one because they have not been empowered to fight corruption on their own? How can Parivartan ensure the sustainability of its anticorruption effort?

One answer came in December 2001 when the state government of Delhi enacted the Right to Information Act. The new law granted five rights to the union territory’s citizens: the right to ask for any information from Delhi government departments, the right to inspect any government document, the right to ask for a photocopy of any government document, the right to ask for an inspection of any government work, and the right to ask for a sample of materials to be used for any government work. After reading the act’s provisions, Kejriwal and others in Parivartan thought that the law could be used to fight corruption in a sustainable way across Delhi.

The opportunity to test the law came in February 2002 when a Delhi householder, Ashok Gupta, came to the Parivartan office to complain about his application for a new electricity connection. It had been lodged two years back. He said the staff was asking for a bribe of five thousand rupees. “Ordinarily, we would have accepted his grievance and sent it to the chairman’s office,” Kejriwal recalls. “This time, we made a Right to Information application for him.” Gupta filed the application with the Electricity Department and got his connection within ten days. Someone from the department came to his house to apologize for the delay and to request that he withdraw his Right to Information application.

Gupta had asked for information on four issues. The first was on the daily progress of his application for an electricity connection. What had been done since it was first lodged? The second was the names and designations of the officials who were required to act on electricity connection applications within thirty days. The third was an answer to the question of whether the said officials were guilty of violating the deadline, and what action would be taken against them. Finally, Gupta asked when his household would be connected to the electricity grid.

How to explain the quick resolution? “If they write that they had not acted on the application for the last two years [in answer to the first question], it’s an admission of guilt,” Kejriwal explains. “And the moment they write the names and designations of officials, the responsibility gets fixed, and any government

official is scared of fixing responsibility.” Ignoring the Right to Information request was not an option because the law requires answers within thirty days or else a fine of fifty rupees per day of delay would be deducted from the salary of the officials designated as public information officers or as the competent authority in the agency.

Parivartan stopped using the chairman’s route. In the next three months, it helped nearly two hundred people file Right to Information applications with the Electricity Department. “Everyone’s job was done in ten to fifteen days’ time for people who had been running around for the last several months or years,” says Kejriwal. There were initial holdouts. When the state law was enacted, Parivartan went to three government departments to test its implementation. None of them knew anything about the law. The group and others in Delhi wrote letters of complaint to Delhi’s chief minister, who called a meeting of department heads to resolve the issue.

One unit was intransigent. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi, which is responsible for most civic services in the capital, insisted that it was too big to put the systems needed to implement the Right to Information Act at such short notice. “We started getting the feeling that they were basically giving excuses and that they had no intention to implement [the law],” says Kejriwal. In March 2002, five months after the law was enacted, he and some forty other people visited the corporation’s office of the additional commissioner and tried to file applications under the Right to Information Act.

The Parivartan members were told that the department’s systems were not yet in place. “So we said, ‘We are not in a hurry. We will sit outside your office. We will not disturb you. We will not harass you. We will sit here outside your office, in a corner, and when you implement your system, we will deposit these applications and go back home.’” The assistant commissioner said it could take two months. The volunteers answered that they were prepared to wait. The commissioner said there was a deficiency in the law that, unless amended by the Delhi Assembly, made it impossible for the corporation to implement. The volunteers were unmoved.

At 4 p.m., the additional commissioner informed the group that the commissioner had gone home. He suggested that Parivartan disperse and return the next day. Kejriwal and the other volunteers told him they would continue to wait. “We will sit here,” they said. “We’ll meet you here tomorrow.” The defeated official went to the commissioner’s house and had the necessary papers signed. At 6 p.m., he told the Parivartan members that the Right to Information Act had been implemented at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and accepted their applications.

All this time, Parivartan’s focus on the concerns of the poor (rather than on the needs of everyone regardless of economic condition) was becoming stronger. This was evident in the decision to stop the campaign in the Income Tax Department, whose clients after all earn enough money to fend for themselves when faced with corruption. At the Electricity Department, Kejriwal remembers a temple priest who had problems with his bill. “He was a very poor person and he started weeping in front of us,” he recalls. “He said he lives in the slums and hardly had any income, yet he got a bill for four hundred thousand rupees.” The priest had wanted to return to his village but could not leave because of the obligation, which had been outstanding for several years.

“Obviously, four hundred thousand rupees (US\$8,855) was wrong because a person living in a slum could not have consumed so much electricity,” Kejriwal continues. “So we pursued his case and I think in ten or fifteen days’ time, we were able to bring the bill down from four hundred thousand rupees to 1,500 rupees (US\$33.20).” Encountering similar cases, Parivartan contacted several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that were working in the slums to offer its services in their areas. One of those that responded was Action India, which was based in Sundernagari, a resettlement colony in Delhi. The government had sold plots of land there to the city’s poor, who eked out a living as housemaids, rickshaw drivers, and vegetable vendors—or had no job at all. “There’s huge unemployment there,” says Kejriwal of Sundernagari’s one hundred thousand residents.

AT Sundernagari, Parivartan went beyond electricity matters. Kejriwal had read an article about Aruna Roy, a social activist in Rajasthan who organized public audits of government projects in the poor villages of the state. “I was impressed by their public hearings and how they [made those records public],” he recalls. Parivartan thought that the same thing should be done in Delhi, a task that had potentially been made easier by the Right to Information Act. In April 2002, Parivartan filed Right to Information applications on projects done by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in Sundernagari and neighboring Seemapuri, another resettlement colony, in the last two fiscal years. Sundernagari and Seemapuri form one constituency, which elects a member of the Legislative Assembly who exercises provisioning and monitoring functions over the ward’s roads, schools, sanitation, electricity, water, community policing, and other local matters.

It took about six months before Parivartan got the information it requested. The group got copies of 182 contracts but most of these were too technical to be understood by laymen. But one engineer who had retired from the municipal corporation had become a Parivartan volunteer, so he taught the group how to read street and hand-pump contracts. “We short-listed all [contracts for] roads, streets, hand pumps, and electric motors, but not those for public toilets, which were too complicated for us,” says Kejriwal. “These sixty-eight contracts were worth thirteen million rupees [US\$287,801].” Parivartan verified whether the projects were actually implemented and discovered that some seven million rupees worth of projects were paid for but not delivered.

The group involved the community in monitoring the projects, even though the English-language contracts were unintelligible to most residents. “We used to go and start beating drums on a street corner,” says Kejriwal. “People would gather, and then we would say that the government had spent, say, a hundred thousand rupees on L-block of Sundernagari in the last two years. This street we’re standing on was supposed to have been constructed last September for this many rupees. Was it constructed? They would say, ‘No it wasn’t done.’ This hand pump that you see, it’s shown [in this contract] that it was repaired last year. Was it done? They would say, ‘No, it was not.’”

After holding thirty to forty street meetings, Parivartan concluded that some seven million rupees’ (US\$154,970) worth of work had not been done. For example, one contract called for the installation of twenty-nine hand pumps but only fourteen were installed. Another was for the installation of twenty-nine electric motors but not one could be found. Some streets existed only on paper. On December 14, 2002, a public hearing (*jansunwai*) was organized in Sundernagari by Parivartan, along with the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI) and Aruna Roy’s Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) of Rajasthan, to discuss publicly the works audited. The public hearing was attended by almost a thousand people, including residents of the area, journalists, and eminent personalities such as Justice P. B. Sawant (former justice of the Supreme Court of India), Aruna Roy, Prabhash Joshi (a senior journalist), Vinod Mehta (editor of a national English newsmagazine), Bharat Dogra (a senior journalist), and Arundhati Roy (an internationally-acclaimed author). In the public hearing, the contracts were read out and local residents testified as to whether or not the work was undertaken, and if it was undertaken whether it was done fully or was left incomplete. The conclusions were documented. Parivartan wrote to the chief minister and the municipal commissioner of Delhi detailing its findings and requesting for action against the officials responsible for the shortcomings. It also made suggestions for systemic changes, such as putting up a copy of the contract on a local bulletin board before work starts on a project. “Some of the suggestions were immediately implemented,” says Kejriwal.

SOON, new demands were thrust on the newly prominent group. “People started flocking to our office saying that roads and things are fine but they were not getting their food, and food is more important.” They were referring to Delhi’s public distribution system, which grants anyone with a family income of less than two thousand rupees (US\$44.28) a month access to ration shops. These outlets sell basic items such as rice,

sugar, wheat, and kerosene at highly subsidized prices. Triveni, a Sundernagari resident, told Parivartan that she had not received any ration for the past several months. The shop was either closed or manned by a shopkeeper who claimed that the store was out of supplies.

Parivartan helped Triveni draft a Right to Information application in which she asked how much food had been issued in her name in the last three months. She also requested copies of the cash memos that shoppers are supposed to sign every time they buy rations. After one month, Triveni got her answer: twenty-five kilograms of wheat and ten kilograms of rice had been issued under her name every month for the last so many months. The cash memos had thumb impressions but these were evidently faked because Triveni is literate and is able to sign her name. Before Triveni could take action, however, the shopkeeper came running to her and fell at her feet, asking for forgiveness. He promised to give her full rations from then on.

The group suspected that the corruption was widespread. The total subsidy for this program nationwide comes to 260 billion rupees (US\$5.75 billion) a year, a rich prize for the unscrupulous. “We don’t have any evidence but we think a huge amount of this money finds its way into political elections,” says Kejriwal. “And a number of ration shops are actually owned by politicians, not directly but in the names of some other people.” This may explain the intense problems that Parivartan encountered when it filed a Right to Information application with the Food Department for the distribution records of Sundernagari’s seventeen ration shops. The department declined, saying the records were not the direct property of the government but of the shopkeepers. The group won on appeal and the Food Department was ordered to make the records available to Parivartan within fifteen days.

What followed were weeks of prevarication, legal suits—and violence. Parivartan was told that the records had been sent to the Deputy Commissioner’s Office, which said it had not received them. Ten days later, the deputy commissioner went on leave. When he returned to work, he said the Delhi High Court had granted a stay order against Parivartan in response to a petition by the Sundernagari shopkeepers. “Interestingly, those shopkeepers did not make Parivartan a party in the case,” says Kejriwal. “They made the government of Delhi the sole party. The Delhi government advocate did not appear on the date of the hearing, so it became an ex-parte case. And that’s how they got a stay against us.”

Parivartan wrote to the chief minister of Delhi informing her that in ten days’ time, citizens across Delhi will walk to the Food Commissioner’s Office to ask for their ration records. The chief minister replied that the records will not be shown because the principles under which the stay order was granted would apply to these cases as well. On August 29, 2003, four hundred people walked up to the office of the food commissioner and 168 people asked to see their ration records. The Delhi government relented and agreed to release the records of applicants outside of Sundernagari.

On September 23, 2003, the first day the records were to be released, two women came to the group’s headquarters seeking help. They had received a notice asking them to come and inspect their records, but they were illiterate. Two volunteers accompanied them to the assistant commissioner’s office in a district adjoining Sundernagari, where they were met by about forty shopkeepers who proceeded to beat up the Parivartan members. The volunteers managed to escape and went to the local police station but were surrounded by a mob of some 300 people shouting: “Hand over the Parivartan workers and we’ll burn them alive!” The volunteers were eventually rescued.

The intimidation extended to the 168 Delhi residents who asked to see their records. “Their houses were visited by the police, ration officials, food officials, and ration shopkeepers to force them to sign on blank paper and take back their Right to Information applications,” says Kejriwal. Many withdrew their applications, but about forty people stood firm. The issue took on political color because it was election time. When Parivartan met with the chief minister of Delhi, she accused them of playing into the hands of her political opponents. But the day after the meeting, the food commissioner of Delhi was transferred to another post. The new commissioner gave Parivartan access to the distribution records.

To avoid further politicization of the issue, Parivartan waited until the elections were over before conducting a survey based on the records. It went around Welcome Colony, another resettlement colony,

asking some 180 households whether they indeed bought the goods that the food department records said were sold to them. “Almost 93 percent of wheat and 97 percent of rice had been siphoned off by making false thumb impressions,” says Kejriwal. Ten days into the survey, Parivartan workers were attacked again. “This time the girls were beaten up badly and all our survey records were burned in the market.” In two separate incidents in 2004, Parivartan volunteer Santosh had her face and throat slashed with a knife. All the volunteers recovered, and the result of the campaign was that many Sundernagari ration shops no longer claimed they had no stocks to sell. The shops in all the areas which participated in the campaign have started opening up. The government of Delhi finally announced a series of systemic changes. When Parivartan’s findings were presented before the Supreme Court of India, it set up an independent commission to suggest measures to revamp the public distribution system in Delhi.

PARIVARTAN also got involved with the proposed privatization of Delhi’s water supply, which was to be funded by the World Bank. A former ambassador to Portugal, Madhu Bhaduri had become a volunteer and she got interested in the project. “We had no ideological issues,” says Kejriwal. “But we wanted to look at what was there in water privatization because we had suffered a lot from electricity privatization in Delhi.”

It took Madhu Bhaduri some five months of dogged pursuit before she obtained the records under the Right to Information Act. Applying his legal and technical knowledge, Kejriwal concluded from these records that India did not need to go to the World Bank. “The loan was very expensive for the government and there was too much World Bank interference, which was not in the best interests of the country. The proposed project was so bizarre that it would have completely ruined Delhi’s water supplies. Alumni and professors from the best engineering and management institutes of India supported our findings,” he explains. By coincidence, he had been in contact with someone at the World Bank on another issue. “I agree that your country does not need a loan from us,” this person told Kejriwal. “But your government is borrowing from us and therefore we are giving a loan. We are a bank. Anyone who is interested in us, we will consider giving a loan.” As a result of the controversy, the government has withdrawn the project and indicated that any reform of the water sector will not involve the World Bank.

Parivartan encountered internal problems in 2002 when it tried to formalize its membership as a society under the Societies Act. It had registered as an entity called Sampoorn Parivartan to gain standing in a court case related to the anti-corruption campaign at the Income Tax Department. In practice, the group functioned as an informal association with only seven formal members, although the number of volunteers had increased to around one hundred. The suggestion was made for elections to be held and for volunteers to be made formal members. But the idea met resistance, and five key people, including Colonel Pandey and Kailash Goduka, left. In the end, however, Sampoorn Parivartan was disbanded and the group remained an informal organization, a citizens’ movement with no president or secretary. Pandey and Goduka are now back.

The reinvigorated group is expanding its work. “The next direction for Parivartan is how to [develop] local self-governance,” says Kejriwal. “We started against extortionist corruption. Now we are talking about just, participatory and transparent governance.”

Kejriwal says there is little democracy in his country because the role of citizens is limited to voting once every five years in elections that can be rigged. Parivartan is studying the institution of *gram sabha* (general body) in rural India, which involves citizens of a locality meeting every two months to decide how much money will be spent and on what projects. Real democracy may flourish if local officials are made accountable to the *gram sabha* in their area, which will have the power to penalize underperformance. Parivartan also plans to study India’s anti-corruption laws and the agencies tasked with enforcing them, as well as examine the government’s economic policies.

THE biggest change is how Parivartan will now approach the day-to-day grievances of citizens. “We have decided that Parivartan is not important,” says Kejriwal. “Parivartan is not the cause. The cause is right to information and transparency.” The group does not want to take up the cudgels for every aggrieved citizen across the nation, which would require it to expand massively. Instead, it wants to empower each citizen to march to government offices and assert his or her rights. This means educating the people on the Right to Information Act, which has been expanded to cover not only Delhi but the rest of the country as well. Towards this end, Parivartan tied up with eight media houses, including NDTV (New Delhi Television), on an information campaign about how individuals can use the Right to Information Act to get redress from government agencies.

Over fifteen days in July 2006, Parivartan trained 1,500 volunteers from seven hundred non-government organizations in fifty-five cities on the Right to Information Act. “Help centers were set up by these 1,500 volunteers to help people in filing and drafting Right to Information applications,” reports Kejriwal. “Parivartan acted as facilitator, but [the campaign] was owned by these seven hundred organizations.” The work of an organization can be judged to be truly successful if the cause it espouses continues to go from strength to strength even after its founders and the group itself have faded from the scene. Parivartan, Kejriwal, and his fellow volunteers may be said to be on the right track.

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