

## ADR trains sights on money power in politics

Mayank Mishra | New Delhi November 15, 2014 Last Updated at 22:49 IST

The modest office in New Delhi's Green Park can barely accommodate 32 enthusiastic employees, colourful posters and a series of incisive reports. An annual budget of nearly Rs 3 crore keeps the organisation afloat, but the Association for Democratic Reforms' (ADR's) efforts at raising awareness about political candidates have been anything but modest.

Within 24 hours of the Union cabinet expansion on November 9, the ADR released a detailed report on the entire council of ministers. The ADR database now boasts of details of more than 100,000 politicians from various parties who have contested elections in the last 10 years. It has covered three Lok Sabha, 63 assembly and two municipal body elections.

The 11-year-old organisation founded by professors, mostly from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, is now readying for a shift in approach. Having started out with the goal of bringing about internal democracy and financial transparency among political parties, the organisation is preparing to challenge the growing influence of money in politics. A public interest litigation filed in the Delhi High Court in May aims to do that.

### ADR'S JOURNEY SO FAR

- Covered 3 Lok Sabha, 63 assembly and 2 municipal elections
- Processed more than 100,000 affidavits of candidates
- Mobile subscriber base of 2.3 million
- www.myneta.info had 2.1 million visitors in six months beginning April 1

The ADR's submission is there has to be a ceiling on expenditure by political parties during elections. It seeks changes the procedure for reporting election expenses. "Nowadays campaigning begins at least a year prior to elections. Political parties should be asked to declare their expenses at least a year before polls. And during elections, the frequency of declarations should increase," said Anil Verma, national coordinator of the ADR. Political parties are required to submit accounts to the Election Commission within 90 days of an election.

The ADR's other submissions include curbs on foreign funding of parties, ending paid news and expanding the right to information to cover political parties. The organisation is preparing a research paper on how political

parties raise funds in other countries.

The ADR's journey began in an informal meeting in 1999 of faculty members of IIM, Ahmedabad, in the office of professor Trilochan Sastry, to discuss the rising role of money and crime in politics and the need to do something about it. At the end of the meeting, while others had doubts, "Sastry decided he would do something to change the way elections were conducted in India.

The next day he visited Gandhinagar and managed to procure an election nomination form, which, to his astonishment, had just four columns on name, age, father's name and address to be filled in by candidates. The least that could be done, he thought, was to ensure candidates told more about themselves while seeking votes.

A public interest litigation in the Delhi High Court followed, asking for details on the educational and criminal backgrounds of contestants. The matter reached the Supreme Court, which made it mandatory for candidates to disclose their criminal, financial and educational background by filing an affidavit with the Election Commission before elections. From the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, candidates are required to make these declarations.

"Voters now know the kind of representatives they are electing. It may improve the quality of representatives in the long run. The worrying part is the influence of muscle and money power refuses to come down," said Sastry, now a professor at IIM, Bangalore.

"We have the most undemocratic political parties. Unless that changes, how can we expect real electoral reforms to take place," said Jagdeep Chhokar, a co-founder of the ADR.

"What we do is considered 'high risk'. Donations are hard to come by. Indian donors make it a point to ensure their names are not made public. We do not believe in hiding anything. But we respect the concerns of donors," said an ADR functionary seeking anonymity. The ADR, on average, receives Rs 4 crore in donations in a year.

"Since we cannot afford to pay salaries on a par with other organisations, only those wedded to our cause work here. There are several qualified people awaiting an opportunity to join us," the functionary said. The ADR has graduates from the Indian institutes of Technology, lawyers, and management and financial professionals working for it. The person in charge of national election watch, an arm looking after election-related reports, is an agriculture scientist.

The ADR has built a mobile subscriber base of more than 2.3 million. Its [www.nyneta.info](http://www.nyneta.info), a website containing details of all the candidates who have fought elections since 2003, had more than 2.1 million visitors between April and September.