

MAZDOOR KISAN SHAKTI SANGATHAN***I. Abstract**

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which means “the Organization for the Power of Laborers and Farmers” in Hindi, was founded in 1990 by three social activists in one of the most backward areas in the state of Rajasthan, India. MKSS is an organization that works to ensure the proper implementation of people’s rights, especially among the poor. The members of MKSS are mostly from the lower socioeconomic classes, such as small and marginal farmers and landless laborers. The organization has been involved in initiatives to ensure transparency and accountability in the local administration, such as ensuring the payment of government-approved wages for workers. It has also championed efforts to involve people at the community and village levels, such as demonstrations and *jansunvais*, which MKSS has been organizing over the years in rural Rajasthan.

A *jansunvai* is a participatory social audit in which government officials are brought face to face with citizens in a public gathering. Local people, such as laborers in government projects and applicants for the antipoverty plan, ask questions and give testimony, pointing out inconsistencies between official records and their own experiences. Such *jansunvais* often result in public exposure of the corrupt practices of relevant officials. Giving people a voice to raise locally relevant issues and demand transparency in administration leads to their empowerment.

The efforts of MKSS contributed significantly to the implementation of the Right to Information Act in Rajasthan. Its success has inspired people in other Indian states to demand the passage of a similar Right to Information Act in their states. MKSS continues to work toward exposing corruption and increasing public accountability among government functionaries, and its work in fighting corruption for more than a decade has earned MKSS global recognition and support.

II. Background

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan was founded in 1990 in the village of Devdungari, Rajasthan, where literacy levels were quite low among both women (14 percent) and men (26 percent). The region was environmentally degraded and chronically drought-prone. Land ownership was limited, and the rural poor had to look for alternatives for their livelihood, such as migration during summers. Intent on helping these people, the government began famine relief works, such as the construction of roads and water tanks. These projects provided jobs to the poor for daily wages, besides improving the rural infrastructure. However, in most cases, such initiatives failed to serve the poor, because of the reportedly high levels of corruption and instability in the system. In spite of the existence of the Right to Minimum Wages Act in Rajasthan, the wages paid to workers

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were often lower than what was shown in the official documents. Many times, workers were not paid on time. MKSS decided to confront these illegal and corrupt practices.

MKSS is a member organization without any formal hierarchy. There is a loose 20-member central committee, eight members of which work full-time. These members follow the local lifestyle, including living in small mud huts and bringing water from a distance for household needs. The conventional lifestyle of its leaders has helped to reduce the gap between the MKSS leadership and the local people. Funds are raised from community contributions and individual donations. To maintain its independence, MKSS does not accept any institutional or government funding.

MKSS initially functioned as a partner of the poor in important local struggles, relating mainly to land ownership and wages, market prices, protection from sectarian violence, and women's rights. It soon had a strong organization of people, mainly from lower socioeconomic groups, such as marginal farmers and landless workers. MKSS became popular in the state for offering uncompromising but nonviolent resistance to injustice. In one instance, MKSS staged a long *dharna* (strike) to ensure the payment of minimum wages to landless farm workers. MKSS soon realized that, in order to assert any of their basic rights, such as the Right for Minimum Wages, people needed access to information and facts about the workings of the government. Access to information was likely to result in higher transparency and accountability in the system.

In December 1994, MKSS organized the first jansunvai. By way of preparation, and as evidence, it demanded copies of the financial records of the expenditures incurred in the name of *panchayats* (local governments). People gave individual and collective testimony on the work done by their *panchayat* officials. This social auditing, carried out by the local people, enabled them to assert themselves and demand transparency and accountability. There was an immense public response, as hundreds of people participated in the jansunvai. At that time, there was no legal provision to obtain relevant information even in the panchayat. Relevant documents could be accessed only with the help of some sympathetic officials. The people from the relevant panchayats carried out a detailed analysis of those records before arranging the public hearings. The first jansunvai marked the beginning of the real struggle for the Right to Information in Rajasthan, spearheaded by MKSS. Several jansunvais were held from December 1994 to April 1995 in the same region.

The chief minister of Rajasthan passed into law the "Right to Information" in the State Assembly during 1995. According to this Right to Information, on payment of a prescribed processing fee, citizens could demand and receive details of expenditures on the work done in the last five years in their villages, and all the documents could be photocopied for possible use as evidence in the future. The object of the processing fee is to reduce the number of frivolous requests and to recover the photocopying costs. This was the first time in India that a state government had made such a bold public commitment, and the people in Rajasthan and across India appreciated the chief minister's courage and vision. This step also enhanced the demand for a Right to Information Act in other Indian states, such as Maharashtra.

However, after passage into law, the Office of the Director of Panchayats in Rajasthan did nothing until MKSS went on an indefinite strike in the town of Beawar in April 1996, demanding implementation of the Right to Information. As a result, the panchayats issued an order for implementation, but without mentioning the right to photocopy documents. The order just allowed the “inspection” and copying of details by hand, without any possibility of certification. Rajasthan has low literacy levels, and there was no possibility that the illiterate villagers could copy such voluminous documents. MKSS continued its strike and demanded that the Right to Information be implemented in the way the chief minister actually promised. Finally, panchayat rules were amended in 1997, and the government implemented the Right to Information with the provision to photocopy documents.

III. Impact/Results

After a sustained campaign, the Rajasthan State Right to Information Act was finally enacted in May 2000. Through jansunvais, ordinary rural people got a chance to stand united and confident against corrupt authorities and speak out fearlessly about their experiences of extensive corruption in the machinery of government, and public officials were invited to defend themselves. The people gained an unusual level of access to information. For instance, names of workers on the salary rolls, the amounts of money stated to have been paid to them as wages, and details of various materials claimed to have been used in construction became available. Hundreds of poor people came to see the response of the responsible authorities involved in usurping public funds. Innumerable instances of false practices by local officials and elected representatives came to light, such as the names of fake workers who were paid wages, and the claim that enough bags of cement to construct a new building had been used in the “repair” of a primary school building. It was not as though people were unaware of the existence of such corruption, but for the first time they could gather and use hard evidence through jansunvais.

As the names of relevant officials and details of expenditures were exposed, more and more cases of corruption started coming out in the open. In one instance, the collective anger of the people forced an engineer of the State Electricity Board to publicly return Rs 15,000 to a poor farmer. But this is the only documented instance of money ever being returned in Rajasthan because of public pressure and humiliation. In spite of polite invitations from MKSS, some of the village officials and politicians started avoiding these jansunvais, suggesting their possible complicity in corrupt practices.

Such group efforts have attracted government support, and now the state government has started organizing the jansunvais under the supervision of MKSS so as to ensure the proper handling and use of public money by its officials. The Rajasthan government has asked MKSS to conduct about six to eight social audits in village panchayats where the state government has spent a significant amount of money during previous years. The state government organizes these audits and provides information on expenditures and the names of relevant officials to MKSS. Usually, MKSS visits a village three or four days before an audit and tries to collect information on finances and the actual outlays for

public purposes from the money shown as having been spent during the last five years. All expenses are discussed during the audit, and the villagers decide whether or not the money was actually spent on them. The jansunvai helps in exposing the corrupt practices of the officials, which is expected to have a positive effect on the working of the government system. Aruna Roy, a former Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer and a leader of the MKSS, was given the Magsaysay award (regarded as the Asian Nobel Prize) for her work in community leadership and understanding through MKSS.

IV. Key Elements of Empowerment

Information

MKSS is spearheading the movement to have ongoing access to information on government expenditures meant to benefit poor villagers. By obtaining this information from government records, villagers come to know how much government money is shown to have been spent for their benefit, on which projects, and by which authority. This information empowers them to ask authorities inconvenient questions wherever discrepancies in actual and documented expenditures exist.

Information accessibility has brought about transparency in the system, so that corrupt officials will not be able to cheat the public easily. MKSS is playing an important role in training the villagers to demand, obtain, and use such information effectively.

Inclusion/Participation

The founding members of MKSS lived in a hut, just as the poor villagers do. This closeness helped a great deal in the inclusion of the villagers themselves in the fight against corruption. Presently, MKSS is not just involved in seeking the actual information to reduce the corruption in the region, it is also encouraging the villagers to participate actively in the process of fighting corruption for their own benefit. For instance, during the jansunvais, MKSS volunteers tell the villagers not to be afraid to talk about money-related issues, since it is “their” money. The volunteers initiate the questioning on behalf of the villagers, and then the villagers become encouraged and start questioning the authorities on their own. With a number of people asking questions about the status of development in their locality, the relevant authorities are often left speechless in cases of poor performance, and it becomes difficult for them to face the public.

Accountability

MKSS is focused on bringing accountability to the machinery of government in order to reduce widespread corruption. Through their right to information and the jansunvai process, the villagers can hold the relevant officials accountable and ask for an explanation. An official then has no option but to answer the questions of the people. On a few occasions, the relevant authority has had to leave the jansunvai, as he had no explanations for charges publicly alleging his involvement in corrupt practices.

MKSS does not accept any government funds, but raises money from the community and through other individual donations. It displays the accounts during all public activity so as to ensure organizational transparency.¹

Local Organizational Capacity

The people of Rajasthan, with the organizational and moral support of MKSS, have insisted on exercising their Right to Information. The relevant act was finally implemented in Rajasthan in the year 2000.

V. Issues and Lessons

Challenges

- After the passage of the Right to Information Act in Rajasthan, its actual implementation required considerable public pressure and took more than five years. Some government functionaries are still reluctant to share information.
- Attempts to manipulate jansunvais have been reported. In one instance, supporters of the relevant official were active participants in the jansunvai, and they tried to influence and subvert the proceedings unfairly. In another case, the Block Development Officer, providing the details on expenditures, read the list very quickly, without giving the audience a reasonable opportunity to voice doubts and ask questions.²
- A related challenge is how to use jansunvais for regular reporting of local activities and use of public funds while managing the inevitable conflict that arises in such public hearings. The anger and frustration of people against the corrupt officials' denial can sometimes lead to violence. The MKSS volunteers, along with the security guards, try to manage such situations.
- The initial enactment of the Right to Information Act, without mentioning the right of photocopying documents, was ineffective. Continual struggle by MKSS resulted in proper enactment of the Right.
- There is some change in the way things are now taking place, but the change is yet not far-reaching. For instance, officials are held accountable during jansunvais, but seldom is any punitive action taken against the guilty officials.
- After the chief minister's initial commitment in 1995, it took another five years to implement the Right to Information Act in earnest. The reluctance of officials to part with information and to let go of their power was the main reason behind this foot dragging. The same reluctance continues to this day.
- An activity such as this social audit was unimaginable in the past, but now villagers demand answers from the responsible authorities on how the money earmarked for development projects for them has been spent. It is, however, also evident that despite laws on paper and support from the top government authorities, many

¹ Rosie Goldsmith, "Empowerment India" (BBC Radio Four, Thursday, December 27, 2001 at 11:00). URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/1723539.stm>.

² URL: <<http://www.ashanet.org/nycnj/events/20020129-indiventre/projects/project5.htm>>.

officials at the district and block levels continue to obstruct transparency at the grassroots level in order to further their self-interests.

Key Factors for Success

- Constant efforts and unity among the people were driving forces in the implementation of the Right to Information Act.
- Other activists and media publicized the campaign for the Right to Information within and outside Rajasthan, which proved instrumental in earning the support of higher authorities and people in other states. Publicity helps a good idea or practice to spread to other regions.
- The presence of the official in question and the availability of information alone are not enough for the successful conduct of a jansunvai. It is equally important to ensure that the process of jansunvai will remain objective, and will be protected from attempts by vested interests to hijack it in order to protect themselves.

Outlook

The state government's support in organizing the *jansunvais* demonstrates its interest in bringing more transparency and accountability to the administrative system. This is a positive sign for the future. There are indications that social activists in other Indian states, such as Maharashtra, are also demanding implementation of the Right to Information. Such efforts at the state level are also strengthening the demand for the implementation of the Right to Information Act at the federal level.

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