

Social audits triggering transformation in public administration toward improvement in service delivery in India

A citizen movement for social audit started in India in 1990. An initial request for a minimum wage from poor manual workers was refused on the grounds that 'they did not work'. The workers protested, and were told that the record books for the works -filled in by junior engineers of Public Works Department- showed they had not worked. Their hard labour had not been recorded. The workers naturally demanded to see the records, a request that was denied by the Administrators, quoting the Official Secrets Act of 1923.

Rural workers decided to form a union, the MazdoorKisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), to struggle for ways and means of wresting their right to access information from the government. Underlying that claim was also the defense of their right to access public goods and services.

Communicative action characterized the movement for social audit and the right to information. When the initial phase of agitation began with a sit-in, the Government of Rajasthan passed an order whereby people were given the right to inspect records, and certified photocopies were later allowed. While inspecting the records of a panchayat, the MKSS found that irregularities and malpractices were evident. To share the documented evidence with illiterate rural workers, a public hearing was organized. Known as a jansunwai, this became an incredibly powerful step in rejuvenating community action.

Leading up to a jansunwai, the MKSS first obtained the records related to the public works carried out by the panchayat. Once the documents were accessed, the Sangathan took the records to each village where the works were supposed to have been executed and checked them by asking the village residents and the workers who had been employed on the site to authenticate the records. On the day of the public hearing in front of the village residents' general assembly, the details were read out and testimonies sought. A panel of 'men of letters' from different walks of life, like lawyers, writers, journalists, academics and government officials, were invited to the public hearings to act as a jury. In the presence of officials from the district administration, an effort was made to arrive at appropriate corrective measures and recoveries for the irregularities identified (over-billing in purchase of materials, fake muster rolls, under-payment of wages and, even "ghost works" -construction works that appear on the records but do not exist on the ground-). Workers denied payment after repeated visits to the sarpanch over years often ended up being paid overnight at the mere announcement of a jansunwai.

Jansunwais are now being arranged by many activists and NGOs in the country to probe information related to ration cards and registers, electoral rolls, accounts of municipal corporations and agencies for slum development. The MKSS triggered a movement joined by many people's organizations and NGOs which finally succeeded in wresting the Indian Right to Information Act from the legislature in 2005.

Social audit as a practice has been welcomed by citizens (especially the poor) as the appropriate means of securing the accountability of officials and politicians. It has demonstrated ability to gather people from all walks of life - through media platforms and local assemblies- and to engage them to collectively uncover irregularities and corruption in high-tech privatization projects or in simple social services delivery.

SAI India has strongly relied on this mechanism for social accountability since 2005, when Parliament offered new guarantees about different citizens' rights by passing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which mandates the provision of 100 days of guaranteed employment to any rural household in India. Most often, these programs are under suspicion of large scale misappropriations by contractor, local political bosses and officials.

In Andhra Pradesh the government initiated a systematic process of undertaking social audits for all NREGA across the state. More than 600 volunteers checked government compliance with the NREGA standards, including payment of proper wages. This process included discussions with beneficiaries, examination of payrolls, cash records, and other financial documents.

The Indian case provides strong evidence of how public disclosure of information and citizen engagement through social audits can expose corruption, empower citizens and contribute to improved development outcomes, and most importantly, how social accountability tools can be streamlined into the accountability system to meet these goals.

Taken from:

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