

COMMUNICATING WITH RURAL PEOPLE, IDENTIFYING THEIR PRIORITIES AND SEEKING SOLUTIONS

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INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A little over a thousand peasants and workers came together on 1 May 1990 in the small market town of Bhim, India to form the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). For the local population, this workers' organisation may have seemed a quixotic effort. It was critiqued as being out of sync with the times, when markets were opening up. The local bureaucracy, landlords and the traders of the area were uncomfortable.

For them, a workers' and peasants' organisation could only be seen as something aligned to Moscow and Beijing, both irrelevant. Communism was under attack and the Berlin Wall was coming down. With the winds of change from Europe came new terms such as 'civil society', to be overlaid on the much used but ill-defined term of 'non-governmental organisations' (NGOs). While NGOs were defined simply as organisations outside government, civil society was seen more as an antithesis to government. At this time, market fundamentalism implied that the state should shrink in role and responsibility. Even basic services needed to be delivered by the private sector. With the privatisation of government, civil society began to be pushed to fill in the gaps and oversee the privatisation of 'development'.

In this market-driven scenario the provider was out of state control. For the huge numbers of poor and marginalised people who had neither economic nor social clout, the state alone guaranteed basic needs. While the state was reducing its role, the poorest people of the country were looking for ways and means to ensure that the state did not abdicate its basic responsibility.

This popular sentiment was reflected in the growth of social movements and peoples' organisations which, unlike their counterparts in the west or in the former Communist countries, sought to use democracy and democratic modes to establish that the government must provide the basics - food, employment, education and health - and meet the livelihood needs of people. Movements set themselves up as a counter to corporate influence over the government, and sought to establish that the state must protect the interests of the people against the growing power of money and an unaccountable private sector.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND ‘THE PEOPLE’

Economic liberalisation did bring affluence to some people. Growth rates began to rise. However, the poor found themselves fighting for survival as much as before. The cycle of droughts in Rajasthan continued in the late 1980s and early 1990s of the last century. Oblivious to the reform process, the poor of the area, with their backs to the wall, continued to demand work and the basic necessities of health and food to survive. The market quite clearly failed to meet the basic needs of poor people. They had no purchasing power to use the private hospitals or schools that had begun to mushroom, providing a service for the more affluent. The poor kept doing the only thing they could: organise, mobilise, and demand more accountability.

The corporate sector was doing well. It began to dabble in development efforts, and we began to hear of corporate social responsibility. This was positioned as a more efficient form of charity for the destitute, and offered a platform for the private sector to appease its conscience. A new form of civil society intervention began to be advocated for, in the form of public private partnerships. Here the private sector could play the development role for government, and get paid for it. It was clear that an independent, or more politically conscious, civil society was not a part of this framework.

We realised that we need to classify civil society organisations (CSOs) the way we classify political parties: by their ideologies and their constituencies. At a time when strong political mobilisations are taking place around popular issues, and there are claims and counter claims about representing ‘the people’, it is extremely important to understand who the people are, and what conception there is of the future.

MKSS and its constituents, uncomfortable with the paradigm of these kinds of partnerships, continued to swim against the tide, albeit in a limited area in Rajasthan. The early and mid-1990s were in fact the years when the seeds were sown for the realisation of the right to information in India, and the battle taken forward for wage employment. The people of the area asked for work, fought for minimum wages and began to demand copies of the accounts and papers related to development expenditure. “Hamara Paisa, Hamara Hisaab” (our money, our accounts) was the slogan, which came from people themselves, that called for accountability, and demanded a greater role for the state, with greater transparency and accountability to the people. Such campaigns began to spread, and it became clear that there were large numbers of poor people who, far from gaining, were suffering the effects of the reform process.

MKSS emerged as a powerful movement looking for principled rights guaranteed by a constitutional democracy. It sought the right to information, and mobilised the democratic demand for a share in governance. MKSS realised that poor and marginalised people wanted a more accountable government. It was also clear that many viewed the burgeoning civil society sector with justified suspicion, as its own acts of corruption and arbitrariness were increasingly becoming obvious.

The strength of the ‘peoples movement’ is that it emerged as a distinct form from the unheard articulation of peoples’ demands.

PROGRESS IN RIGHTS-BASED LEGISLATION

In 2004, the newly elected United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, somewhat surprised at its victory, acknowledged the nature of the peoples' mandate by passing at least three landmark pieces of legislation, which had been sought by social movements: the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the Employment Guarantee Act and the Forest Rights Act. They were the first of a series of rights-based legislations that established the rights of the ordinary person to demand accountability from the state. These laws stemmed from the involvement and experience of ordinary people in rural India, manifested in groups such as MKSS. The impetus for MKSS came from living with and understanding the lives, concerns and needs of people in rural India.

The passage of the RTI Act was a great victory for the people of Rajasthan and for India as a whole. It transformed the relationship of the citizen with the state by allowing ordinary people to access information in a way that was previously unimaginable. Since the RTI Act was passed, MKSS has been involved in a number of other movements and projects related to transparency, accountability and basic rights. These include movements for the right to food, the right to education, the Grievance Redressal Act and the Whistleblower Protection Act.

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REACHING AND ENGAGING PEOPLE

Our understanding and work is based on engagement with a large community of people. The strength of the MKSS has been in its living with people in rural Rajasthan and understanding their experiences. Therefore people themselves were involved in all the MKSS struggles and there was no question of their voices being excluded. The most recent activity to emerge from the work of movements such as MKSS was the hundred-day accountability caravan, known locally as the Jawabdehi yatra (accountability journey), of the Suchna evum Rozgaar Adhikar Abhiyan (SR Abhiyan), a platform of organisations working on the right to information and guaranteed employment. This yatra or caravan began on 1 December 2015 and journeyed for 100 days across the 33 districts of the state of Rajasthan. The yatra travelled to communicate, listen and learn about people's problems in accessing their social sector entitlements. The yatra consisted of a bus and two accompanying vehicles, with around 60 volunteers from different CSOs. It travelled to small villages, towns and district headquarters. In each of these areas, public meetings were held, where people came and filed RTI applications, and other applications detailing their grievances. Street theatre, puppetry, singing and dancing were part of the vitality and strength of the yatra. By communicating with people through humour, and in their idiom, the yatra established the beginnings of a new collective campaign.

Over 10,000 grievances were recorded and collected during the yatra. From the texture, nature and facts of these grievances, the SR Abhiyan realised that a strong accountability law is required. On its 100th day, the yatra reached Jaipur, where over 6,000 people marched to the Legislative Assembly and demanded the passage of an accountability law, known as Jawabdehi Kanon. A draft law is currently being prepared, including through localised consultations with people and people's movements, along with public hearings. It includes four important sections that deal with the redress of grievances, social audits, a pre-legislative consultative policy and a citizen's charter that details the duties of public officials. The law is intended

to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive accountability framework. Through people's mobilisations and demands, the SR Abhiyan will continue to demonstrate and demand the passage of this important law.

The perception that we live mutually exclusive lives is a fallacy; people continue to live and understand their problems in multiple ways, and since the right to information movement, it has been clearly understood by many people that governance impacts on their lives daily. Governance is broken up into many parts, and although the most interactive is local bureaucracy, it is amply clear that policies are fashioned through elected representatives. When the links are clear, people can make an informed choice to demand particular policies and pieces of legislation.

Without continual understanding of the problems and grievances of people, policy cannot be relevant or implementable. This constant engagement helps us understand the nature of the relationship, or contract, between citizens and the state. From the first struggles for the right to information and the right to work, it is continuous engagement through public hearings, yatras and everyday living that keeps the work of MKSS relevant.

ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

In contemporary political discourse, there has been a concerted and deliberate attack on CSOs, often by using the smokescreen of categorising CSOs as foreign-funded or anti-national as justifications for policing and surveillance. The stated fear is the undermining of the sacrosanct objective of national security, but the real threat is the questioning of high economic growth rates, and anti-people policies. The government clearly understands that social movements representing people's interests are a major adversary to corporate access to resources. The spectre of investigations by the Home Ministry and witch-hunts against foreign-funded groups has led to the shrinking of space for organised civil society. Simultaneously, there has been a growth and assertion of indigenously supported citizens' groups, which are far more political in their response, and which have begun to form alliances to resist the advance of the corporate and fundamentalist state.

CONCLUSION: A MULTIPLE CIVIL SOCIETY, AN ENDURING DEMAND

In a country like India, civil society will never be a single conglomerate. Indian civil society will reflect the complexities inherent in its socio-political fabric, will always need nuanced comprehension, and will often present conflicting and contradictory positions. It would be a fallacy to see it as a single entity.

But as the nature of movements changes over the years and new people's movements are born in different parts of the country, the basic demand of people remains the same: dignity of life. The question of how the means to lead a dignified existence can be achieved is where the demand for structural change is most deeply felt, and where the most creative thinking comes. The RTI Act was one such change that almost for the first time in the history of independent India represented a shift

in the concentration of power into the hands of ordinary people who can use this as a tool to better their existence. This legislation came from the vulnerable, the marginalised and the excluded. It came to be passed after long protests before legislative assemblies that lasted for months on end. In thinking of our future, we require continual engagement with ordinary citizens, living and learning with them.