

# Freedom of Information Is Key to Anti-Corruption Campaign in Rural India

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Campaign in Rural India

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Lasani is a small village which is part of Rawatmaal panchayat (village council) in Rajasthan's Ajmer district. According to the panchayat records, Rs. 56,000 was recently spent to construct water channels linking the village talab (pond) with the fields. The water channels, however, exist only on paper.

This is one of many shocking revelations that emerged at a recent public hearing (jan sunwai) led by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a people's organisation working in the region since 1988. The public hearing is one of the means used by the MKSS in its struggle to ensure the people's right to information. One aim of the campaign is to root out corruption at the local level and demand accountability from the development establishment.

The public hearing, held on 19 January 1998 in Surajpura village, focused on development works in Surajpura. It began with a puppet show dealing with the abuse of development funds by village leaders, politicians and government functionaries. Hundreds of women and men participated in the hearing. Some of them had participated in development works as labourers or masons, and had seen corruption from close quarters or even been cheated themselves.

During the next few hours, 23 development works recently completed in these panchayats were examined. These works included the construction of anicuts, culverts and checkdams; latrines and bathrooms; schools and other types of community buildings. The examination began with MKSS activists disclosing detailed information on each item of development work. This information had been obtained earlier from the village

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panchayats and cross-checked through visits to work sites and enquiries in the villages. Predictably, panchayat leaders had shown some reluctance to part with information, but in the end they had no choice but to co-operate. The Government of Rajasthan recently recognised the people's right of access to official documents at the panchayat level: a gazette notification now entitles any member of the public to a certified photocopy of these documents at a nominal price. This landmark legislation is itself the result of a sustained campaign led by MKSS, which culminated in a 53-day long dharna (sit-in) in Jaipur in June-July 1997.

As the activists took out file after file and invited participants to present their testimonies, excitement built up. Soon a wide range of frauds were identified. To mason Dood Singh's surprise, his name was found on the muster rolls of two different works for the same period, while he had not even received his due wages for one. Bhanvri Singh, a labourer, stated that she had received only Rs. 300 as wages, as against Rs. 570 shown in the muster rolls against her name. The crowd was suitably amused when the name of Devi Singh, a man who had died 30 years ago, was found on the muster rolls.

The 23 development works examined over the day accounted for a total expenditure of Rs. 33 lakhs (1 lakh = 100,000 Rs./1£=64 Rs.). Of this, it was estimated that at least Rs. 5 lakhs had been siphoned off by various people in complicity with the sarpanch (head of the village council). Of this amount, one third was accounted for by fake bills for the purported purchase of cement.

A remarkable feature of the public hearing was its constructive and orderly tone. The participants though often angry, did not lose their temper. There was no hint of compromise with fraud, nor was the hearing confrontational. This constructive atmosphere had much to do with the effective way in which MKSS activists played their role of moderators.

The sarpanches (including two women) of the five panchayats were present. Since their signature is required for all items of development expenditure, they were considered to have an inescapable responsibility for the frauds identified. The fact that the sarpanches had joined the public hearing without coercion was itself significant. On earlier occasions they had often ignored invitations. One possible reason for this change is the success of another public hearing held a few weeks earlier where one sarpanch returned Rs. 50,000 in cash in front of the crowd and agreed to return another Rs. 50,000 in two instalments. This gesture made a tremendous impression in the area. The sarpanches who came on January 19 probably felt that there was no way out, and that co-operating with the process was in their own interest.

The reactions of the sarpanches were varied. Some of them attempted to challenge the accusations of fraud. In other cases, they agreed that fraud had taken place, but blamed others for it. In some cases they accepted that they had failed to ensure honest implementation of works,

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or even admitted personal involvement in frauds. At the end of the day, the sarpanches agreed to cooperate with the follow-up process of recovering misappropriated funds. Some of them even promised to return money themselves in cases where their personal responsibility had been established. For instance, the sarpanch of Rawatmaal volunteered to return Rs. 56,000 appropriated in the name of non-existent water channels.

These may seem like small victories but their symbolic significance is far-reaching. All over rural India, scores of small development works have been undertaken in the name of the poor. The main beneficiaries of these schemes, however, are not the poor but a network of contractors, bureaucrats and village leaders who are looting public funds for private gain. There is also a connection between this development scam and the corruption of the electoral system, whereby local leaders are allowed to misuse public funds in return for delivering votes. The casualty is not just development but also democracy.

Against this background, the right to information campaign is an opportunity for ordinary citizens to break out of the vicious circle of collective apathy and individual hopelessness. Aside from being a practical weapon to eradicate corruption at the village level, the public hearing is a creative exercise in government for the people by the people. It is a small but significant step towards the transition from representative to participatory democracy.

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