

Triumph of transparency

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A campaign in Rajasthan highlights how difficult it can be to get a social audit done on public projects.

Photo: RESAA



Demanding information: At a protest meeting in Banswara.

From Beawar 1996 to Banswara 2007, much history has been made by the people of the State of Rajasthan which has given the country two historic legislations — the national Right to Information and National Rural Employment Guarantee Acts (NREGA). But 11 long years, it seems, is not quite enough to change mentalities. The recent happenings at Banswara district, where the Rozgar Evum Suchna ka Adhikar Abhiyan (RESAA; a campaign of labourers, small farmers, activists, researchers, students and people from all walks of life committed to transparency) proposed to conduct a social audit of NREGA works, serve as a reminder that the forces that prefer to skim the cream will keep coming back. In the face of this, no matter how well the laws are drafted on paper, it is people's vigilance alone that holds the key to making democratic ideals like "transparency" and "accountability" a ground reality.

So, when 28-year-old Vaktaram Devasi was beaten up, dragged through the main market and left unconscious by 12 goons at the Kushalgarh bus stand in Banswara district on December 6, he had unwittingly won half the battle for the information that vested interests were desperately trying to hide. For, in the act of violence was exposed the deep insecurity of those who have reason to fear. Vaktaram, who had come to participate in the social audit in Banswara like 400 others, had showed up at the Kushalgarh block office that day to ask for what was rightfully his — the muster rolls and other records of how money received under NREGA was spent — a legal right given to him under both the RTI Act and NREGA. That the entire scene was enacted in front of the block office as its employees mutely watched this show of brutality confirmed that they were hand-in-glove with his assailants.

Rising resistance

Kuldeep and Debdulal were among the other volunteers like Vaktaram who were subjected to similar violent outbursts and verbal threats in the consenting presence of government employees. All this comes against a backdrop of rising opposition in Banswara ever since the intention of holding a social audit in the whole district was announced by the Abhiyan in late November. Not surprisingly, the resistance snowballed across otherwise divisive lines with sarpanches, field level functionaries and MLAs of the ruling and opposition parties in the State all closing ranks to pull out every trick in the book to counter what they feared most — an imminent revelation of their corrupt deeds.

The pradhan (elected head) of Panchayat Samiti Pipalkhant went so far as to issue an official order stating that "No information should be given to any NGO or any gram sabha allowed to be organised for any social audit without my permission" — in blatant violation of the RTI and NREG Acts! Public meetings and rallies ended with representations made to the District Collector from the Zilla Pramukh and the Sarpanch Sewak Sangh of the district, about how some NGOs "having made-up ideas against Panchayati Raj functionaries and elected representatives were spreading bad publicity about them through their theatre and songs," and hence shouldn't be allowed to conduct the social audit. They threatened to close down all NREGA works if their demands were not met. They maintained that social audits should be done by the local social audit forums and not by "people from outside" like the Abhiyan. A sarpanch of panchayat Jhikli filed a petition on this in the High Court. Across the district, not a

single sheet of information was forthcoming even 15 days after applying for it; whereas the NREGA operational guidelines specify a seven-day limit.

If the local politicians threw all legal and constitutional bounds to the winds and held the government to ransom, the administration was caught in a jam. Moreover, the situation was loaded with political overtones. The Abhiyan had announced that the next social audit would be in Jhalawar — the Chief Minister’s home district — in January 2008, the same year in which the State goes to the polls. On the other hand, the government had made many proclamations in the past about its commitment to the employment guarantee scheme and its transparent implementation, working in co-operation with the Abhiyan ever since its much-successful social audit in Dungarpur in 2005.

Refuge in technicalities

Bending under pressure, the State government issued an order on December 5 officially distancing itself from the social audit of the Abhiyan. Seeking refuge under technicalities, it could delay, but not deny the information being sought. “Not giving information was never a question. We were not sure whether to give it under the RTI Act or NREGA guidelines,” said District Collector Vikas Bhale over the phone. “We have now received a clarification that the information shall be given under the RTI Act, but within 7 days as per the NREGA guidelines, and at cost instead of Rs. Two per page of photocopying,” he added.

Four days after the Abhiyan conducted a dharna near the Collectorate, information from six of the eight blocks was provided on the night of December 14 with an assurance that the other half would soon follow. The next day, the Sarpanch Sangh organised a rally in opposition to “the NGO singing songs that called sarpanches ‘*chor*’ (thieves) without proving it.” “This rally is to oppose this particular NGO. We are willing to part with information but cannot tolerate it if our own people are told we are thieves without any basis,” said Kanhing Rawat, president of the Rajasthan Sarpanch Sangh, Banswara district in a feeble voice of protest.

In a strategic move, the Abhiyan decided to postpone the social audit and instead embark on a “samwad yatra” across the eight blocks of Banswara, to dialogue with people, clear up misconceptions regarding social audits and spread awareness of their entitlements.

“The NREGA is not about the government or elected representatives or *sachivs* or civil society groups. It is meant for the poorest and if this person is being denied his rightful employment, his wages, it is the collective responsibility of everyone to ensure that he gets it. Without public monitoring, this scheme is finished” said noted social activist Aruna Roy. It remains to be seen if the forces of resistance give up their petty pretexts and imbibe this true spirit behind the NREGA.