

People as auditors: on social audits

The breakdown of institutions has underlined the fact that democracy — and especially public funds — need eternal public vigilance. But in India, the elites close ranks to neutralise voices of dissent and alarm, thus preventing public vigilance.

Democratic governance needs the citizen to be legally empowered to ask questions, file complaints, and be a part of the corrective process. Social audits, as they have begun to evolve in India, can potentially become a powerful democratic method by which transparency can be combined with an institutionalised form of accountability to the people.

In the mid-1990s, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) experimented with, and began to conceptualise, village-based Jan Sunwais (public hearings) on development expenditure. These helped establish the Right to Information (RTI) as a potent, usable people's issue and, in parallel, the institutionalised form of social audits.

Information is empowering

In a Jan Sunwai campaign, organised in five different development blocks of central Rajasthan, people learnt by doing. They realised that information is at the core of their empowerment. The process of verification, inquiry and auditing of records was demystified. Public readings of informally accessed development records had dramatic outcomes. As the names were read out from government labour lists, the responses were immediate and galvanised the people. Information about payments made to dead people and non-workers propelled residents to testify in the Jan Sunwai. These included serving government and armed forces personnel and names randomly copied in serial order from electoral lists. Even animals absurdly enough found their way into the lists of workers. Unfinished buildings without doors, windows or a roof were shown as audited and 'complete'. Ghost names and ghost works were exposed. Fake development works paid for and 'completed' on paper enraged local residents.

The people made four sharply focussed demands and circulated them in a pamphlet: full and open access to records of development expenditure; the presence and accountability of officials who are responsible to answer people's questions; the immediate redress of grievances, including the return of defalcated money to its intended purpose; and mandatory 'social audits'.

Amitabh Mukhopadhyaya, then an officer of the IA&AS, who visited, watched and contributed to the architectural growth of the process till he passed away a year ago, remarked that this was "audit returning to its roots": the word audit comes from the Latin word *audiere*, which means "to hear". The Jan Sunwai facilitated the reading of information and recorded the people's response. The effective institutionalisation of this platform could be a fundamental breakthrough in the attempt to give people and communities real monitoring powers. One of the defining slogans of the RTI movement that emerged from these Jan Sunwais and people's agitations — "*hamaara paisa, hamaara hisab*" (our money, our accounts) — succinctly encapsulated the concept of a social audit.

The RTI Act brought into effect the first prerequisite for social audits — giving citizens access to government records. The last 13 years of its use have demonstrated its salutary effect, but also made it obvious that information itself is not enough. Contemporary discourse on the RTI reflects frustration when ordinary people are armed with information but are unable to obtain any redress. The social audit places accountability in the centre of its frame, and transfers the power of scrutiny and validation to the people: a citizen-centric mode of accountability.

The power of social audits

The social audit is conceptually simple. Information is to be proactively shared amongst people so that they can “performance audit” a service or programme, from planning, to implementation and evaluation. This is, however, easier said than done. An independent facilitation structure needs to be set up, fleshed out, legally empowered and mandated to ensure that social audits are conducted. The relationship between the powerful and the powerless has to shift from patronage to rights, and from inequality to equality, making the right to question sacrosanct. Specific methods of sharing information, recording comments and acting on findings have been worked out. They now need to be acted upon.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was the first law to mandate social audit as a statutory requirement. However, even within the MGNREGA, social audits made painfully slow progress. They faced their most trenchant opposition in Rajasthan, where the concept was born. Elected representatives and officials reacted with intimidation, violence and pressure on the political leadership to stall and neutralise the process. The notable exception was undivided Andhra Pradesh which institutionalised social audits and drew significant positive outcomes. There have been innovative efforts in States like Sikkim, Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand. Nationally, institutionalised social audits have begun to make real progress only recently, with the interest and support of the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), and the orders of the Supreme Court. In what was a social audit breakthrough in 2017, Meghalaya became the first State to pass and roll out a [social audit law](#) to cover all departments.

The Office of the CAG developed social audit rules for the MGNREGA in 2011, conducted a performance audit in 2015, and finally a year later formulated social audit standards in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development — the first time in the world. If these are followed, it can be ensured that the social audit process is viable, credible and true to first principles of social accountability.

The Supreme Court has recently passed a series of orders to give social audits the robust infrastructural framework they need. Citing the statutory requirements in the MGNREGA and the National Food Security Act, the court has ordered that the CAG-formulated Social Audit Standards be applied to set up truly independent state-supported State Social Audit units. It has also ordered that social audits be conducted of Building and other Construction Workers Cess, and the implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act. Social audits, if properly implemented, will help address the impunity of the system in delivery and implementation.

The current dispensation makes a cursory mention of social audits in its manifesto. But there has been no delivery on legal accountability frameworks such as the Lokpal Bill and the Whistle Blowers Protection Bill. The system of social audits needs synergetic endorsement and a push by multiple authorities to establish an institutionalised framework which cannot be undermined by any vested interests. It is now an opportune time for citizens groups to campaign to strengthen social audits, and make real progress in holding the political executive and implementing agencies to account.

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