Samajik Samikhya: a social audit process in a *panchayat* in Orissa

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Accountability and transparency are the buzz words of development today. However, in many developing countries, where pro-people development is still largely planned and implemented by the state and its bureaucracy, their realisation is a major challenge. One important development in this context has been the use of social audits.

A social audit is a process in which details of the resources, both financial and non-financial, used by public agencies for development initiatives are shared with the people, often through a public platform.

Social audits allow people to enforce accountability and transparency, providing the ultimate users of services and projects with an opportunity to scrutinise development initiatives. It is a form of citizen advocacy based on the power of knowledge and is grounded in the right to information.

The right to information movement in India, particularly the Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (MKSS) has lobbied the state for more than a decade to make social audit of all state-sponsored development a statutory requirement. In 1993, with the adoption of the 93rd Constitutional Amendment by the government, it has become mandatory. Village communities are now empowered to conduct social audits of all development work in their respective villages and the concerned authorities are duty bound to facilitate them. However, because of lack of clarity on how to conduct a social audit, most citizens in rural India are unable to effectively exercise their powers.

This article presents a unique initiative by the people and activists in one of India's village clusters to evolve a model social audit process. Locally called the *Samajik Samikhya,* it involved the active participation of nearly 100 social activists from across the country and more than 3000 local villagers.

The location

Jharnipalli is a *gram panchayat* (GP – a local self-government unit in India) consisting of nine villages, located in Bolangir district in the State of Orissa, Eastern India. Bolangir is infamous for its recurring drought and mass starvation, and high levels of distress migration are witnessed year after year.

Villagers in Jharnapalli say that they have been raising their voice against corruption in the GP for many years but officials have never acted. Two s*arpanchs* (head of the GP) have been dismissed/suspended in the past, but on the ground that they had more than two children rather than because of corruption.

In April 2001, ActionAid India held a Training of Trainers (TOT) in Balangir and the idea of a social audit was discussed. Thus started the process for the first pilot social audit in Jharnipalli.

The process

Preliminary rounds of discussion with local activists in Jharnipalli revealed that people wanted a social audit primarily because they wanted to know the exact reasons for the dismissal of the two s*arpanchs*. Local community-based organisations (CBO), particularly the Gayatri club and a CBO-NGO network, Collective Action for Drought Mitigation through Community Mobilisation (CADMB), were supportive, as was the administration at the district level, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and the MKSS.

As a first step, a street play (*geeti natya)* was enacted by some villagers and CBO members to inform people about the right to information through social audit and that such an audit was to be held in their villages. Songs were composed for this purpose and performances arranged in all the villages. The awareness-raising process started in the month of May and continued until the day before the audit. Two rounds of awareness programmes (street plays) were held in each of the nine villages to convince people of the importance of the audit. Periodic visits by teams from CADMB also helped to sensitise and mobilise the villagers.

Information collection

Soon after the decision to hold a social audit was taken, an introduction letter and request for information was circulated to all government offices and NGOs working in the nine villages. As expected, there was reluctance by many to cooperate. However, with the District Collector backing the process it was difficult for officials to withhold information. The team started collecting information related to various works in the villages completed during the past three years, namely 1998–99, 1999–2000, and 2000–01.

Information was collected relating to various development works and this continued until the very day of the audit. Access to information related to many development initiatives such as the public distribution system (PDS), non-timber forest produce (NTFP) such as Tendu leaves, Social Forestry and DPEP, was refused, and within the records made available, there were gaps. Measurement books were not available for engineering works, and utilisation certificates were missing for all the works, although two days before the social audit a few of these became available.

Once collected, all the information and records had to be sorted and filed village-wise. Each public work had a separate file created, with all papers related to the work put together, and the file cover containing a top sheet with all details. Documents inside usually included sanction letters, resolutions, recommendations of the GP, work orders to contractors, forms of undertaking by the contractor, and in some cases, muster rolls, running account bills and vouchers, and estimates of the works.

Information analysis

The next step in the process was to analyse the information available. For instance, muster rolls which come as records of a week's work, or a fortnight's work, had to be converted into worker-wise records so that verification with individual workers was feasible. Similarly, records were studied for violation of norms and guidelines for minimum and equal wages, execution of works by contractors (banned by a Ministry's Order), breaching of estimates, and so on. The team also converted technical data into information that could be easily triangulated with the villagers, for example, cubic meters of measurement of concrete were converted into equivalent number of tractor trips.

The next stage was to visit the villages. A team of volunteers from various organisations and villages stayed in each village for four days in order to:

- Assess the extent and instances of corruption, by sharing information with the villagers, by physically verifying whether works had taken place, and by cross-

Volunteers organising information from the government

Analysing the information received

checking muster rolls, bills and vouchers with villagers.
- Instil confidence in people to participate actively in the audit process, and to activate the village-level committees set up for the purpose.
- Focus on the poorest in the villages, and assess the support reaching them or not reaching them (social security, PDS, employment and livelihood security, etc.).

All the team members had attended a pilot exercise so that they were familiar with the process. A 'roving team' of three was formed to oversee and coordinate the village-level exercise.

Often, villagers asked questions such as, 'What if no action is taken after the social audit – after we gather enough courage and confidence to point out discrepancies in the social audit meeting. Wouldn't the culprits of corruption become stronger than ever?'. The villagers also wanted to know why there was no information or records from the NTFP Department, when it was such an important source of livelihood for the poor in these villages. They were vigilant about overseeing the process – when one of the team had not prepared a re-tabulated muster roll in the case of earth works in one village taken up by Gayatri Club, one of the partners in the social audit, some of the villagers pointed out that we were being 'partial' in our work.

During this period, a volunteer engineer checked the physical works that had been claimed in the past three years, and gave his own assessment of the expenditure incurred and of deviations from the plans. A chartered accountant studied the accounts of the GP to check the entries as well as to rearrange the data.

The last few days

Two days before the social audit, the District Collector visited the 'camp' where he was appraised about the preparations for the audit. The Collector assured all the village representatives who had gathered to hear from him, that action would definitely follow the audit, and anyone found guilty would be punished. This helped in instilling a good deal of confidence in all the sceptics.

After sitting with the people for a couple of hours the collector went to the *panchayat* office where he made available all relevant, available *panchayat* records (to the

social audit team) – information that was so far unavailable and inaccessible. After himself going through the *panchayat* records such as the cashbook, the collector found many irregularities on the basis of which he issued a warning to the *panchayat* secretary and sealed the GP office. This news spread to all the villages and gave further confidence to people who wanted to point out irregularities.

The last three days saw intense activity in the villages. A last round of publicity was carried out. A vehicle equipped with a public address system went into all the villages and invited people to take part in the audit process, and at the Jharnipalli weekly market a play was staged and pamphlets distributed. Finally, together with the local people's organisations representatives, an MKSS team went into the three most 'difficult' villages, from which most of the important GP officials came, and encouraged greater participation and involvement.

A day before the audit a preparatory meeting with all the teams was held to finalise the schedule for the social audit day. A sequence of presentations was agreed upon with the aim of breaking the ice as well as exposing trends of corruption in the GP. The day before the audit was also spent in preparing charts presenting the audit findings in the local language.

The day of the social audit

The audit formally began at around 10am on the 30 October 2001. Around 2500 people mostly belonging to the villages under Jharnipalli GP and other parts of Bolangir, gathered to participate in the first opportunity they had ever had of holding people in power accountable for their actions. It started with group songs by local people's organisation and MKSS members. People were then given time to read the visual presentations. Some asked for clarifications on information pertaining to their village, and the records were checked again.

The teams from each village and village presenter then made presentations about their findings, and this was followed by testimonies from other villagers. The panellists spoke and raised questions now and then and media

The village gathering for the social audit

representatives also posed questions. The areas covered included:

- road works
- Gayatri Club activities
- CARE Food For Work programme
- construction works, e.g. school buildings
- GP accounts for three years – presentation and clarifications

The questioning and the issues raised provided many insights into the ineffectual functioning of the GP. 'Does this *panchayat* have meetings at all?' people were left wondering. The opaque fashion of functioning was obvious. The Secretary of the GP was called to the microphone in some cases to elaborate on a particular issue. For instance, it was discovered that all the ghost works had something in common – they had all claimed to have used the same tractor (and its driver) for transporting materials into various villages… with the same vehicle number, the same village, the same driver who signed on receipts. One of the *gram sabha*[1] members informed everyone that this was the Secretary's own tractor! Subsequently, it was also revealed that the tractor had not been with the Secretary over the three years, though it appeared consistently on the records. There were many muster rolls read out where false names were recorded, including names of people who had migrated out of the village years back, and of elderly people who were incapable of working anymore. There were muster rolls where the wages recorded were higher than the amounts actually paid to the labourers!

The failure of the local bureaucracy to monitor and check the possibilities of corruption was also brought out. There were many instances when they were in collusion, for example, the junior engineer had certified 'ghost works' through his measurement books.

But what was really heartening was to see many from the *dalit* (untouchable) community coming forward to speak, and better yet, women willing to testify. In one instance, when an entire village kept quiet out of fear (of a GP member and a couple of powerful contractors in the village), it was two *dalit* women who boldly came out with the truth.

It has to be pointed out that women were not actively drawn out to participate during the first quarter of the audit. Until somebody pointed out that the facilitators needed to address the women too, they were ignored. Once they were encouraged to start speaking, they were bolder than the men in pointing out various problems. The culture of silence definitely got broken in Jharnapalli on that day.

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[1] The *gram sabha,* which is the assembly of all the adult residents of a village, is the ultimate repository of power over development decision making and local bureaucracy. The *gram sabha*, thus, is a political institution that seeks to place political power in the hands of the people, without the mediation of elected representatives. It is believed that the active functioning of g*ram sabhas* can ensure a vibrant democracy.

Village women testifying

The strengths of the social audit process

- **An empowered people's organisation.** The Cluster Level Committee (CLC) of the people, facilitated by Gayatri Club in the GP, was empowered enough to take up this audit. The members have put a lot of effort into making it successful.

- **The district administration**. Where it has taken years for information to be collected for a social audit in other places, thanks to a supportive district administration in Bolangir, information collection was easier. District- and block-level officials provided us with records and the District Collector stepped in at a crucial stage just before the audit to instil confidence in the people about the audit process.

- **MKSS experience**. Years of invaluable experience gained by MKSS in their struggle for the right to information proved to be very helpful in this social audit. MKSS volunteers spent nearly two weeks prior to the audit providing guidance.

- **The support of a large network.** The presence of the CADMB network of 19 NGOs/CBOs from all over the district of Bolangir lent a great deal of support to the villagers of Jharnipalli.

- **The ongoing fight against corruption.** Many villages of Jharnipalli had been raising issues of corruption in the GP for several years. They took part in this process very actively, and found it a good opportunity to raise issues that concerned them.

- **The location of the village.** By virtue of being located in one of the 'KBK'(Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput) districts of Orissa, this *panchayat* and its social audit also provided an opportunity to link up the process to wider advocacy agendas centred around food and livelihood security. The fact that there is inadequate resource allocation for development works in the area,

and that even the meagre sums that come in end up in the hands of contractors, was apparent to see after the social audit. Failure of the government on many fronts like employment generation, social security, and food security came to the fore.

- **A large team of volunteers** working in a camp mode within the GP limits, and being accessible at all points of time to the villagers was also an advantage. So was the presence of the volunteers' teams in the villages during the last five days of the process. The villagers were free to come and check the records anytime during this period, and would also drop by to inform us about the latest dynamics unfolding in the village.

- **Women's participation**. Large numbers of women from all villages participated actively in the audit despite pressure not to do so from many sides.

After the audit

The situation became slightly tense after the social audit in the villages. Threats were issued to the members of local people's organisations involved in the process. Members of CADMB and the field office staff of ActionAid kept visiting the villages after the social audit to assess the tension around and take pre-emptive actions if necessary. The District Collector instructed a special audit of the Jharnipalli *panchayat* by the district *panchayat* auditor. The Secretary of the *panchayat* has been issued with a suspension notice with a recovery from him of Rs. 68,000, and criminal proceedings are also planned.

The Jharnipalli case was a social audit 'on test', a pilot. Thus the primary objective was to learn from it. It is clear that social audit is indeed a powerful tool in the hands of the people, but the pilot also indicated the challenges in implementing the right to information processes. It has to be preceded by people's capacity building, both to carry forward this intensive process, and to protect the vulnerable from the wrath of the powerful. The relative lack of participation in the meeting of people from the poor and marginalised sections can only be speculated on. Lack of political awareness and marginalisation of specific groups are issues that need to be addressed to make such processes successful.

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Note

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