

Jan Sunvai: Right to Information now a reality
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“Ab aaye parivartan ki aandhi”-the slogan rightly captured the mood of the crowd in the Sundernagari area of north-east Delhi on the 14th of December 2002, where people came together for the first of its kind jan sunvai (public hearing) to be held on urban development expenditure. Never before had any urban area in India experienced such an exercise where government records of completed works were discussed between the people, the government functionaries and local politicians out in the open.

Jan Sunvai essentially involves getting official records about development /public works, verifying the actual work done vis-à-vis the work reflected in the records in the presence of members of the community and presenting these findings to the community in the presence of government officials, local politicians, eminent persons etc.

The jan sunvai was organised by Parivartan (a Delhi based NGO) together with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and the National Campaign for Peoples Right to Information (NCPRI), coming just days after the Lok Sabha passed the elusive Freedom of Information Bill 2002. The crowd was large, drawing from old Seemapuri, new Seemapuri, Nandnagari and Sundernagari, with women clearly taking the lead. Eminent persons like Justice P.B. Sawant, Aruna Roy, Prabhash Joshi, along with high-level government officials like Dr. K.B. Rai (Deputy Director, Administrative Reforms) attended the proceedings as panellists.

The issues under discussion were those of construction of lanes, drainage pipes, public toilets etc, seeing a clear clash of interests between the local residents and the public officials. Tempers rose high with lakhs of rupees being unaccounted for and the local congress MLA Veer Singh attempting to use this as an opportunity to win some political mileage. However he beat a hasty retreat when his attempts to break up the meeting failed. For the first time a section of the Delhi community experienced the actual exposure of corruption and bad governance by government personnel and politicians. Before this Jan sunvai, few people were aware of the public works, which were supposed to have been completed in their area. As an initial shock the public reacted and though at times the jan sunvai almost seemed to be destined for an abrupt end, it was brought back to life by the efforts of the panellists. The people stayed on, hungry for more information.

MKSS of Rajasthan in the early 90's was the first to take a lead on the process of jan sunvais by demanding access to muster rolls, vouchers and records of bill payments of development projects. Through the medium of public hearings, evidence of wrongdoings by panchayat and village authorities was presented to the community at large. As a result of these efforts Rajasthan today has a Right to Information Act in place and jan sunvais have been established as a process of social audit of government's performance. It was later attempted in certain areas in Orissa and more are being planned in other parts of the country. With the Jan sunvai being organised in Sundernagari, the first step was taken to bring this useful tool into the urban area. A lot of background work went into this, with Parivartan successfully obtaining photocopies of the records of works of the Engineering department of the MCD, executed from 1st April 2000 to 31st March 2002 using the Delhi RTI Act. This information was then disseminated amongst the residents of Sundernagari and New Seemapuri to begin

the process of verification of works in their area. There is no doubt about the practical use of this tool for keeping a constant check on the performance of the government and to provide information to the people.

However, while the Rajasthan experiment culminated in social audits being institutionalised in Rajasthan at the panchayat level, its immediate institutionalisation in the urban areas is not possible due to the complex dynamics involved. It can only come through similar efforts by organisations such as Parivartan who have a great sense of responsibility and commitment. Once the idea is ingrained within the bureaucracy, politicians and the public, it can be systemised in an institutional framework leading to a regular evaluation of government processes by the people themselves.

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