

Right to Information

In the context of Rural development with community participation

Information is significant tool for people's empowerment. Today, information has not restricted to a bundle of data or facts but it defines/governs our approaches. In India, state like Goa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu has their respective Laws for citizen's right to have information. Today **Right to Information Bill** has already been passed in the parliament, rules yet to be framed.

The lack of awareness about freedom of Information confines its applicability in daily life. Even in the states where the law is being existing for past many years, there hasn't seen much difference the life of a common man. The second factor that restrains its application is lack of access to information. Though this is more true in villages, even in urban areas, information is not still in 'ready to access' form.

Gujarat, being politically, geographically and economically diverse state, its developmental issues has always been closely related to kind, quality, access to correct information. Especially in disaster, both in man-made and natural, the information (truthful or incorrect) plays key role. During Earthquake, coordination centres, spreading information about various packages of relief and rehabilitation in the community, was of great help to the victims, on the other hand during communal violence, wrong information spread by the media and the political leaders destroyed the threads of faith among the communities in most parts of Gujarat.

Janpath, had played active role in co-ordination of relief phase during quake, through a forum called **Janpath Citizen's Initiative**'. Some of its partners, got together to engage themselves in running creative centres for children in disaster situation, mainly address their emotional needs, which also became the resource/information centres for the community. The feedbacks from the grass roots were given to the government, to

review and improve upon the gaps in the handling post-disaster situation. Adoption of orphan children through outside institutions could be immediately banned since of through timely feedback to the government about the issue, and spreading of information about policy level decisions on large scale.

We, as a Janpath look 'information', not only as a tool against corruption but also as live component of development; hence the 'Right to information' in the context common man's Right to participate in the development process.

Panchayat, a smallest but yet strongest component of democratic system is supposed to enjoy the supreme power in our constitution. But the ground picture is totally different. Out of 18,500 villages of Gujarat, 80% are still ruled by the dominant community in the village, where Gram Sabhas is unaware of the budget of the village for the year. People don't even know that they have right to make their own planning for the budget. Their basic issues of water, health, and education are unresolved for years, and common man doesn't even know where to complain? Whom to ask and where to go?

The idea of starting with a '**Budget Asha-Apeksha**' programme was conceived with the experience and insights of our partners active in rural areas. Where in, JANPATH in association with an organisation DISHA, is trying to strengthen and enhance community participation in the budget process, not only at implementation stage but in planning as well. Information flow shall be both the ways. The information shall reach the implementation level and the feedback shall be communicated back at planning level. We facilitate the dialogue between different stakeholders in this cycle to have linkages between them with collective understanding and collaborative approach on local issues.

We facilitate having linkages among community groups by having exposure tours to the areas where the community is acting as an information source and the user to other interior areas of the state. Such trips have found useful for inspiring new initiatives on the issue.

We also undertake campaign for voters Right to Know during Panchayat or assembly elections through awareness material, and regional consultations.

Being a state level network with over 450 organisations and individuals associated with it, Janpath play supportive role to the state during any kind of disaster (drought, earthquake, cyclone, Communal violence) in:

- ❖ Disseminating the information on government resolutions/policies in response to the particular situation on large scale.
- ❖ Getting feedback from the grass root level through member organizations and passing it to the government.
- ❖ Having dialogue with the government for suitable changes required in the policies.
- ❖ Having media advocacy over the issue through write-ups and press conferences.
- ❖ Constant and consistent follow-up over the matter.
- ❖ Coordination of information flow the work.

Future plans:

To initiate, support and strengthen grass root level efforts in context of the Right to information.

To build effectively linkages between different stakeholders for information to create positive attitude

To have advocacy with the state for identifying information as very essential component at crucial times and to set up a system for proper and speedy broadcasting of information that would activate and play its role during emergencies.