

A STATE GOVT TAKES INITIATIVE

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With one bold stroke the Madhya Pradesh Government has led the way in making the right to information a genuine entitlement for ordinary citizens. The opening move was made on October 2nd in the Bilaspur division, where as a first step the administration threw open records of the public distribution system in a move designed to control black marketing while providing people a means to obtain their quota of the essential commodities.

This attempt to make transparency a reality for the people of Bilaspur Division was received with a mixture of amazement and curiosity. On the 1st and 2nd of October around 3000 tribal people met under a canopy of trees in Kartala, Bilaspur District, to celebrate the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi with an appropriate decision to make information accessible to the people.

TWO DAY CONVENTION

The Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (the BGVS) organised the two day convention on the Peoples Right to Information and had invited people from all over Northern India. The vigorous debate highlighted the importance of transparency and access to information as a part of the essential process of real democratic education. In realizing the joint responsibility of the Government and the people to define individual and collective accountability the Right to Information becomes a vital prerequisite.

The Bilaspur Divisional Commissioner's office issued a notification on September 9 which defines the mechanism for obtaining information regarding the functioning of the fair price shops along with strict punitive measures for the defaulting functionaries. As part of this initiative a special system of maintaining records with in a stipulated time period has been designed for the purpose of efficient flow of information between the tehsildar, naib tehsildar, food inspector, manager cooperative consumer store and the salesman of the fair price shop. A consumer can obtain a certified photocopy of these records for a period not going back beyond three months on payment of Rs three per copy. For the purpose of making photocopies available a photocopier will be installed in each tehsil / subtehsil and its owner, a private individual will be recognized as a section writer.

The issuing of the order had immediate repercussions. The entire cooperative department which runs the PDS shops was up in arms. Local newspapers carried on a furious debate. A minister who had his constituency in that area forced a change in venue of the meeting protesting that he had not been consulted. The officers who had been ordered to provide the photocopies of the documents found every conceivable means of delay. Almost everyone seemed to realize what this order really meant.

DOCUMENTARY PROOF

The Public Hearing that had been planned in the afternoon of the 2nd was an experience which once more emphasized the fact the access to information would enable the people to look at the development of their village critically. Access to records revealed to the people for the first time documentary proof in the form of graft. People who had never spoken on the mike or dared to state the real state of affairs before the administration stood up to address the 3000 strong crowd. It stressed the fact that graft and mismanagement could not be controlled without the active involvement of the people.

What was initially planned as a Jan Sunwai was changed to a meeting where a few illustrations of the secrets hidden in records could be revealed and used by the people. In the PDS the people compared their ration card with the entries in the sales register, which recorded disbursement of larger amounts against their names, emphasizing the fact that the grain had been sold in the black market.

In the case of construction on a check dam in Kotmer village workers had been demanding their wages for over ten months. The authorities has told them that no money was due. As soon as they got copies of the muster rolls where forged signatures and thumb impressions had been made against their names, a very worried junior engineer arranged to make their payments in two hours on the morning of 27th itself. Twenty seven workers who had been paid an amount of Rs 6,800/- stood before the crowd at the hearing with the photocopies of the muster rolls which had their forged signature and vouchers.

In the road constructed under the Employment Assurance Scheme from Kartala to Police Thana, approx 200 kgs of wheat were shown against each of the four names in the records while only about 50 kgs were actually dispersed in the “food for work” component of the payments due. There were also corresponding discrepancies in the cash payments shown on record. In many cases payments which were long overdue were paid due to fear of the impending hearing.