

BOOK REVIEW

THE RTI STORY: POWER TO THE PEOPLE BY ARUNA ROY WITH MKSS COLLECTIVE, 2018, PUBLISHED BY ROLI BOOKS, NEW DELHI

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The book under review has thirty chapters. Each of these chapters narrates milestones in the journey of the Mazdoor Kisan Sakti Sangathan (MKSS) and National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) in advocating, struggling and achieving right to information for the people of India. This journey, as the book depicts, is full of resistance from local elites, petty officials, senior bureaucrats to politicians and the resolve of activists to overcome those resistance with support from champions in government, press, academia, civil society and the most important the common masses. Book under review has been written with inputs from various sources including activists, journalists, writers and of course MKSS and NCPRI official records.

The Chapter one 'Devdungri: The Begining' narrates the beginning of the journey in a stone and mud hut in hamlet of Chokkavadia in 1987, coming together of three ignited souls: Ms. Aruna Roy who had resigned from Indian Administrative Service, Mr. Shankar Singh, a local visionary, son of a Patwari, with excellent communication and social skills and Mr. Nikhil Dey from family of armed forces, who had recently returned from a college in United States of America. This is when it was first discussed that unless people have access to records, any of their claims such as non-payment or less payment of wages would continue to be rejected by authorities as untrue. It is here during the drought relief work in DadiRapat, it was noticed that those who worked more got less wages and those who worked less got more and the Junior Engineer refused to show measurement book.

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The Chapter two 'Sohangarh and the Struggle for Land' narrates the struggle of access to revenue records of Patwari to expose illegal control of land by local landlords beyond the limit prescribed under Land Ceiling Act and subsequent struggle to mobilise people to claim the access land with those landlords. As the chapter says, struggles of DadiRapat and Sohangarh led to public understanding that the power of information, concealed in public records and offices.

Third Chapter 'The Concept and Birth of MKSS' narrates the process of formation of MKSS as result of the realisation that worker and farmer's collective struggle would make them assert and successfully claim their rights. On 1st May, 1990 amidst a group of over 1000 people, the creation of MKSS was announced at Patia Ka Chowda. Street theatres, May Day celebrations, public education were initial activities. Formation of MKSS ignited a new hope and determination among workers.

Fourth Chapter 'The First Hunger Strike, 1990' narrates the beginning of struggle for ensuring minimum wages. When works under Jawahar Rojgar Yojana and Famine Relief started in May 1990, workers asked the supervisors that they will not accept anything less than the minimum wage. Disappointed by the response of administration 300 workers sat on a day-long dharna to demand minimum wage for full attendance and work completed a their respective work sites. Dharna was lifted after Collector's promise to ensure minimum wages, but the Collector did not fulfil his promise leading to next phase of struggle including policy advocacy through academic discourse. Constant contradictions between records and reality coming to the fore during these struggles re-emphasised the need for transparency and right to information.

The Chapter Five 'The Bhim Minimum Wages Sammelan' narrates the story of MKSS organised state-level convention of peasants and workers on 24th and 25th October 1990 and The Convention on Minimum Wages at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Jaipur in November 1990. The demands from the worker's assembly dealt

with both the right to information and right to work. These dialogues also emphasised the importance of engaging with government and different sectors of society.

The Sixth Chapter 'The Second Hunger Strike, 1991- A Watershed' shares with readers story of the second Dharna at Bhim in demand for minimum wages, the story of determination of strikers, sympathisers and of oppression by local administration. This dharna taught the MKSS how critical it was to access official documents for justice in wage payments and consequently the right to food and life.

The Chapter Seven 'Exposing the Myth of the Free and Open Market' is about the market and the worker, the new face of the market and the controls within it, explaining how no market is really free and , like all other system, has its share of corrupt practices and oppressive structures. The chapter poses question 'how can this system, built on individual profit, replace the structures made for distributive justice in a society riddled with inequality and injustice?' While private businesses thrived on opaqueness, the grocery stores set up by MKSS resolved to make the shop transactions transparent and educate the citizens of the area to use the RTI in the shops.

The Eighth Chapter 'Articulating the Demand for Transparency' deals with realisation in the MKSS to look for alternative method of asserting people's rights than hunger strike. Meanwhile some incidences of having seen official records and discrepancies between records and reality were established. Those information were used to file formal complaints which led to enquiry and unearthing of corrupt practices. This convinced people and MKSS that access to information is important means to challenge the corrupt administration.

The Chapter Nine 'MKSS and Public Hearing' narrates MKSS's tryst with public hearing as a form of public verification of official information/records. First set of public hearings (jansunwais) were held during 1994-95 at Kot Kirna in Pali district where all the records of panchayat were shared at a public hearing which unearthed many corrupt practices. Subsequently, public hearings were organised in

Bhim, Vijayapura, Jawaja, Thana. In reaction, union of Panchayat Secretaries or Gram Sewaks went on strike against public hearings. Administration also tried to create lot of resistance. These public hearings demonstrated the power of information in fighting corruption and ensuring accountability from public functionaries and exposed entrenched opposition to information-sharing by the latter.

Chapter ten on 'Political Promises and Accountability' deals with response of political leadership in Rajasthan to demand for transparency and public hearings. The matter of transparency of records became the dominant political discourse in the four districts of central Rajasthan. CM of Rajasthan made a statement in the State Assembly in April 1995 to make records of development works in rural areas available to people after paying photocopying charges. However that assurance was not acted upon. However, MKSS continued its effort including organising State-level meeting on right to information at Beawar.

Eleventh Chapter of the book 'Hamara Paisa HamaraHisab: Beawar and Jaipur Dharnas, 1996' deals with two protests, first in Beawar in April 1996 demanding implementation of assurance that CM gave one year back and second in Jaipur and Ajmer in collaboration with local organisations. Beawar dharna marked a significant shift from a local struggle to a state and national campaign. It also made clear three basic principles which defined the need for the right to know. The first was the right to transparency of accounts and records and the accountability of the government to it's people. The second was the recognition that the legal entitlement for the right should be drafted, framed and owned by the people after public debate. And the third was the realisation of democratic accountability of an elected government to its people. The movement of RTI began from these three dharnas and people from all over the country expressed their solidarity.

The Chapter Eleven 'The Formation of NCPRI and the Making of Law' narrates three events: (i) two-day consultation on RTI law at LBSNAA Mussoorie, (ii) Meeting at Press Council chaired by Justice P.B. Sawant

and (iii) Meeting at Gandhi Peace Foundation in which National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) was formed. The slim RTI draft bill was circulated by Justice Sawant to then Prime Minister and his cabinet and other political leaders. The Government responded by setting up a committee under HD Shourie. This was the beginning of legislative process of enacting RTI Act.

Chapter thirteen of the book 'The Process and the Campaign Travel: The Public Hearing' shares that while legislative process was going on, public hearings continued in various places in Rajasthan. Public hearing soon spread across to Madhya Pradesh where a Jan Sunwai was organised in Bilaspur.

Chapter Fourteen 'The Rajasthan Divisional Dharnas' describes the MKSS's efforts towards public education through truck yatra in all the divisions of Rajasthan which ended in Jaipur to begin the historic fifty-three day dharna. Yatra was a series of workshops, seminars, public meetings, protests and handing over memorandums to authorities.

Fifteenth Chapter of the book 'The Dharna in Jaipur: May-August, 1997' narrates the story of long dharna in Jaipur that started on 26th May, 1997. Despite assurances from the government, no orders allowing for public scrutiny of public records were issued. Ghotala Rathyathra was carried out by MKSS which took the debate to the common people. Relenting under public pressure, the State government finally issued an order from back date and also amended concerned rules. Meanwhile Govt. of Tamil Nadu and Govt. of Goa had already passed their RTI legislation by then. This was a major victory for RTI campaign.

Chapter Sixteen of the book 'NCPRI and the State Laws' shares that from 1996 onwards, RTI laws were enacted in the States of Tamil Nadu (1996), Goa (1997) and Madhya Pradesh (1998). New government in Rajasthan formed towards the end of 1998 requested the NCPRI to draft a bill. International Financial Institutions such as World Bank and International Monetary Fund also shaped the transparency agenda by making transparency and accountability mechanisms one

of their loan conditions.

Seventeenth chapter “The Second Set of Jan Sunwais’ narrates second round of public hearings which began early 1998, with the significant success of the amended Panchayati Raj rules. These hearings were held in Kukarkheda, Lotiyana, Surajpura etc. These hearings challenged the assumption that identity politics is the biggest constraint to ethics in public. These hearings were also attended by many politicians and bureaucrats.

The Chapter Eighteen ‘The Rajasthan State Act- An Intermediate Success’ is the description of how due to repeated pressure from NCPRI and public awareness, the Rajasthan Right to Information Act 2000 was passed on 1st May 2000 and came into force on 26th January 2001. Panchayati Raj Act was also amended to decentralise decision-making to the ward sabha as unit for public audit/social audit.

Next chapter Ninteen ‘The Challenge of Elections’ deals with MKSS’s engagement with panchayat elections in Rajasthan in 1995, 1999-2000 and 2005. Electoral campaign and RTI campaign were symbiotic- the possibilities and challenges of each fed into and shaped other.

The twentieth chapter of the book ‘The Public Hearings in Umarwas’ narrates story of a Sarpanch who was manipulated by local elites and panchayat officials to indulge in corrupt practices for the benefit of later and how on the request of Sarpanch MKSS organised a public hearing to unearth corruption in Indira Awas Yojana, Construction of Community Centre etc. MKSS made use of Rajasthan’s Right to Information Act to access official records, though in limited extent.

The twenty first chapter ‘Janawad Jan Sunwai’ shares how the information on public board outside Janawad GP office led to demand for a public hearing. Information received through State RTI Act was incomplete and the case emphasised the need for a law to have a penalty provision in case information was denied. Importance of proactive disclosure also got affirmed from this case.

As described in the chapter twenty two, subsequent government

enquiry endorsed Janawad public hearings. Government ordered a special audit. Janawad experience emphasised the necessity of social audit which later got institutionalised in MGNREGA.

The chapter twenty three of the book 'NCRPRI Convention, Beawar 2001' shares what transpired in the national convention of NCPRI and what emerged out of it in the form of declaration. Convention hoped to send a strong message to central government to table an effective legislation on RTI in the Lok Sabha.

Twenty fourth chapter 'Post-Janawad and the Response of the Government of Rajasthan' shares how the disclosure and proof of mismanagement, fraud and brazen corruption unearthed in the Janawad public hearing and subsequent enquiry forced State government to sit up and take stock. State government ordered conduct of public hearings which reflected that government had acceded to the concept of collaboration between citizens and government.

Twenty sixth chapter 'Freedom of Information Bill 2002' deals with the Freedom of Information Bill passed in December 2002 as a result of a legal petition filed by NCPRI in Supreme Court which was never notified. The Bill suffered from several limitations such as no independent Commission for appeal, no penalty for not furnishing information on time, very poor suo moto disclosure.

Chapter Twenty Seven of the book 'Friends and Collegues in Delhi' deals with MKSS's activities in Delhi for advocating a good and strong central law. The chapter mentions public hearing at Sundarnagari with Arvind Kejriwal and his group Parivartan, Anjali Bharadwaj of Satark Nagarik Sangathan, Nikhil Chakravarty, Prabhash Joshi, Ajit Bhataharya and Kuldip Nayyar and their support to MKSS to find its space in Delhi, campaign and negotiate for strong central RTI law.

Next chapter twenty eight 'Second NCPRI, 2004' narrates about the second convention of NCPRI organised in October 2004 in Delhi. The convention critiqued the Freedom of Information Bill passed in 2002

and demanded a strong RTI Act promised by the UPA I government stated in National Common Minimum Programme. The NCPRI convention as a platform was established and accepted by RTI community that attended it. The NCPRI functioned effectively as an anchor to collaborate and coordinate with other entities to bring in the national law in 2005.

Chapter twenty nine of the book 'RTI Law 2005 and the NAC' describes the role of National Advisory Council in formulating RTI Act 2005 as fulfilment of National Common Minimum Programme of UPA which came into power. Despite bureaucratic subterfuge, and resistance from different quarters, vigilance and advocacy by citizen's groups helped ensure that a strong RTI law was passed by the parliament in June 2005 which came into effect on 12th October 2005.

Subsequent chapter thirty of the book 'RTI Amendments, 2006' narrates the struggle to include file notings within the ambit of information. Chief Information Commissioner had ruled that file notings were covered by the definition of information and should be made available. In July 2006, the Union Cabinet approved a set of amendments barring disclosure of file notings and also cabinet papers. However, collective pressure, public anger and protest prevailed and the Government of India withdrew its proposed amendments bill. This attempt to amend the RTI has been a continual threat. There have been many martyrs in this journey of utilising RTI to enforce social accountability. Battle has been won the war to ensure free and equal India continues.

In the concluding chapter, writers Aruna Roy and MKSS Collective, emphasises that the passage of RTI Act in 2005 marked a new beginning of using RTI to strengthen governance and deepen democracy in India. Around 6 to 8 lakh people use RTI every year. The journey that began in 2005 is also full of struggles. Almost sixty information seekers have lost their lives as they questioned corruption and the arbitrary use of power.

Overall, the book covers the entire course of the MKSS and NCPRI's

journey in empowering citizens claim their right to information from the local to national level. The book gives first-hand account of the struggle, community mobilisation, multi-stakeholder's consultations, policy advocacy, promises and betrayals of the right to information movement. It is a good read for scholar of political science and public administration who are interested in knowing Indian story of transparency movement. It is also an important resource for civil society organisations to learn how a small committed group with modest beginning can steer a movement around a common cause and takes it to a logical conclusion. It is a must read for all the RTI activists and those involved in strengthening social accountability in India.
