

Social Audit - Public Accountability

What is the issue?

\n\n

Social audits can potentially become a powerful democratic tool to ensure a citizen-centric mode of accountability.

\n\n

What is social audit?

\n\n

\n

- Social audit is where information is to be proactively shared amongst people.

\n

- They can, in turn, “performance audit” a service or programme.

\n

- It involves people in planning, implementation and evaluation phases.

\n

- Sharing information, recording comments and acting on findings are the processes involved.

\n

\n\n

What is the current need?

\n\n

\n

- The breakdown of credibility in various public institutions in the recent past has become a concern.

\n

- This has highlighted that democracy and especially public funds need eternal public vigilance.

\n

- Democratic governance needs the citizen to be legally empowered.

\n

- The Citizen should be able to ask questions, file complaints, and be a part of the corrective process.

\n

- Social audit could be a solution towards this end.

\n

\n\n

How is Rajasthan's Jan Sunwai a model?

\n\n

\n

- It was conceptualised in the mid-1990s by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS).
- \n
- Jan Sunwais are village-based public hearings on development expenditure.
- \n
- The Jan Sunwai campaign was organised in 5 different development blocks of central Rajasthan.
- \n
- It helped establish the Right to Information (RTI) as a potent, usable people's issue.
- \n
- Public readings of informally accessed development records had dramatic outcomes.
- \n
- **Information** - The Jan Sunwai facilitated the reading of information and recorded the people's response.
- \n
- Information and facts inconsistent with reality were exposed.
- \n
- E.g. Information about payments made to dead people and non-workers
- \n
- Unfinished buildings without doors, windows or a roof were shown as audited and 'complete'.
- \n
- Local residents could immediately become aware of these and reacted to it sharply.

\n

\n\n

What was the outcome?

\n\n

\n

- The people made four sharply focussed demands and circulated them in a pamphlet:

\n

\n\n

\n

- i. full and open access to records of development expenditure
\n
- ii. presence and accountability of officials who are responsible to answer people's questions
\n
- iii. immediate redress of grievances, including the return of misused money to its intended purpose
\n
- iv. mandatory 'social audits'
\n

\n\n

\n

- The effective institutionalisation of this platform gave people and communities real monitoring powers.

\n

\n\n

What is the concern?

\n\n

\n

- The RTI Act brought into effect the first prerequisite for social audits.
\n
- Thus, information became the core of people's empowerment in Jan Sunwais.

\n

- However, it became obvious that information itself is not enough.
\n
- It gave access to government records and ordinary people were armed with information.
\n
- But it led to frustration when they were unable to obtain any redress.

\n

\n\n

How do social audits address this?

\n\n

\n

- Social audits facilitate acting upon the inconsistent facts.

\n

- It transfers the power of scrutiny and validation to the people.
\n
- It thus essentially facilitates a citizen-centric mode of accountability.
\n
- By this, transparency can be combined with an institutionalised form of accountability to the people.
\n
- It shifts the relationship between the powerful and the powerless from patronage to rights.
\n

\n\n

What are the legal backings to social audit?

\n\n

- Nationally, institutionalised social audits have begun to make real progress only recently.
\n
- MGNREGA was the first law to mandate social audit as a statutory requirement.
\n
- In 2017, Meghalaya became the first State to pass and roll out a social audit law to cover all departments.
\n
- **CAG** - The Office of the CAG developed social audit rules for the MGNREGA in 2011.
\n
- It conducted a performance audit in 2015.
\n
- A year later, it formulated **social audit standards** in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development.
\n
- The standards could ensure that the social audit process is viable, credible and true to first principles of social accountability.
\n
- **Supreme Court** - The SC has recently passed a series of orders, giving social audits the infrastructural framework they need.
\n
- It has ordered that the CAG-formulated Social Audit Standards be applied.
\n
- Accordingly, it ordered setting up truly independent state-supported State Social Audit units.
\n

- It has also ordered that social audits be conducted of Building and other Construction Workers Cess.
\n
- It is also required for the implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act.
\n

\n\n

What lies ahead?

\n\n

- \n
- Despite the above, there has been no delivery on legal accountability frameworks.
\n
- These include the Lokpal Bill and the Whistle Blowers Protection Bill.
\n
- The system of social audits needs an endorsement and a push by multiple authorities.
\n
- This is essential to establish an institutionalised framework which cannot be undermined by any vested interests.
\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n

