

# **Social Justice as Demonstration of Truth: An Oral History Analysis of People's Participation in the Struggle for the Right to Information in Rajasthan, India**

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## **Abstract**

The present study uses oral history to understand the nature of people's participation at the public hearings (*Jan Sunwai*) that played a catalytic role in the people's movement for the right to information in Rajasthan between 1994 and 2005. At these hearings, the people— marginalised by caste, class and gender- expressed their grievances openly before their elected representatives and the officers of the state. The public records were socially audited, revealing large scale corruption in panchayat expenditure. The oral history interviews of the people at the grassroots who had participated at the *Jan Sunwai* reflect the ways in which the *Jan Sunwai* conscientised people about their rights in a democracy and encouraged them to speak-up against corruption. This process of conscientisation was rooted in people's belief in social justice and uplifting fellow citizens out of poverty and deprivation.

## **Keywords**

social movements, oral history, right to information

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## **Introduction**

The present study employs oral history to examine the role of the public hearings (called the *Jan Sunwai*) in sensitising people about their rights in a democracy. The *Jan Sunwai* played an instrumental role in mobilising people in the struggle for the right to information between 1994 and 2005 in Rajasthan, India. It is a dialogical forum that facilitated the process of public consultation and verification of expenditure records.

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At these hearings the people – marginalised by caste, class, and gender – spoke freely before the community, expressed their grievances related to development plans, and sought responses to their queries from their elected representatives and programme officers. Organised in two phases – between 1994–1995 and 1998–2002, in the drought stricken village panchayats of central Rajasthan, the proceedings at a *Jan Sunwai* strengthened its role as a forum for information sharing, grievance redressal, and social auditing. These processes, informed by the people’s experiences of participating at a public hearing, have been institutionalised into significant legislations that foster transparency in governance, such as the Right to Information Act 2005, the Rajasthan Right to Hearing Act 2012, the Meghalaya Community Participation and the Public Services Social Audit Act, 2017, to name a few (Agrawal and Nair, 2018).

A deliberative platform such as a *Jan Sunwai* owes its success partly to the people who participated in it and spoke freely on the mic. The oral history interviews of the people who had participated at the *Jan Sunwai* reflect the process of conscientisation through dialogue that leads to empowerment. The suitability of the oral history method lies in its direct approach towards studying people’s perception of the nature and outcome of these hearings. The people’s narratives of motivation, hopes, fears, knowledge and understanding validate the strength of the forum of *Jan Sunwai*, which formed part of the larger struggle for the right to information in India. Thus, oral history becomes both a method as well as the result of the research process (Abrams, 2016). The discipline of oral history has emerged as an ‘aid to movements for social justice across the world. It is particularly significant in countries like India where literacy levels are low and where memories of the oppressed are routinely erased from public memory’ (Deshpande, 2017). The ‘oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.’ (Portelli 2015: 67).

This study is divided into three sections. Section one introduces the respondents to the study. The next section describes in brief the history and dynamics of *Jan Sunwai*, and its role in the struggle for the right to information. The subsequent section analyses the oral testimonies of the respondents to evince how the *Jan Sunwai* conscientised people to claim their rights and speak-up against corruption in welfare programmes. The testimonies reveal that the process of conscientisation through *Jan Sunwai* is linked to people’s sense of social justice and belief in *Sarvodaya*. The struggle for social justice is the struggle for upholding the truth.

## Findings

### Respondents' Profile

The respondents in the study are a part of an oral history project to examine the nature of people's participation at the public hearings (*Jan Sunwai*) in the village clusters of central Rajasthan. The respondents R1, R2, and R3 are currently in their late 60s and 70s. They were selected purposively, based on their association with the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) and the struggle for the right to information and work in Rajasthan. The details on how the author had met them and the interview settings are mentioned in the annexure.

R1, 73 years (approx.) is a resident of Vijayapura, Rajasthan. Belying his modest educational background, 'till the 2<sup>nd</sup> standard in those days,'<sup>1</sup> are years of socio-political wisdom gained while waging collective struggles against illegal occupation of village land, encroachment on forested areas in the name of urbanisation and non-payment of minimum wages on government works.

R2, 76 years, is a resident of Shakkargarh village Panchayat, Deogarh block, Rajasthan. One among eight siblings, she was married off at a very early age while her brother went to school and became a village accountant. Her years of struggle for social justice are underscored by her belief in universal well-being, *Sarvodaya*. Intrepid, and undeterred by the comments of her community members, she participated actively in the foot marches, *Jan Sunwai* and public sit-ins outside the government offices. 'Why should I be scared?' she questions, 'I did not steal the money. I have not flouted any laws. And I did not force anyone to attend the meeting. If they think, it is useful, they come.'<sup>2</sup> She is a member of the MKSS for 25 years now.

R3, age unknown, is a resident of a village in Tal Panchayat. He has known the members of MKSS for 30 years. A skilled mason by profession, he believes in equality and social justice, and has participated in the struggle for land and against corruption in development works. Describing the activities at a *Jan Sunwai*, he said, 'we catch those who lie and indulge in illegal corruption.'<sup>3</sup> It is a potent statement, indicating how the *Jan Sunwai* restored the agency of people in governing themselves.

### Connecting the dots in Oral History

Oral history research may not produce answers at once or answers to direct

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<sup>1</sup> R1 to Vidhi Agrawal, personal interview, April 26, 2017, Vijayapura, Rajasthan.

<sup>2</sup> R2 to Vidhi Agrawal, personal interview, May 03, 2017, Shakkargarh, Rajasthan.

<sup>3</sup> R3 to Vidhi Agrawal, personal interview, April 29, 2017, Devdungari, Rajasthan.

questions. The narrative has to be built patiently, bit-by-bit. For instance, at the beginning of the interview, the respondents could not recall what a *Jan Sunwai* is or what it is that the interviewer is talking about. As the conversation progressed, they described at length different activities, processes and nuances of people's participation at the hearing. At many points during the interview, they said that the incident had taken place a long time ago, 40–50 years back (although it was around 20–22 years ago). Sometimes they recalled the events consciously. However, most of the time, the details and descriptions surfaced organically over the course of the narration. The respondents could not recall the specific details and described things in relation to their surroundings or other events, such as where R2 said, 'my home is as old as the village.'

### **Eco-consciousness and Social Movements**

The set of mnemonics and methods the respondents used to describe events evokes interest, which may or may not be of historical importance to the research objectives. Their use as a mnemonic in a narrative from 25–30 years ago highlights that eco-consciousness is intrinsic to the lived-experience of the people in the region. Nature is directly related to the people's livelihood – the struggle to preserve it continues till date.<sup>4</sup> The oral history narratives are a manifestation of their life in the struggle for livelihood and social justice, which is elaborated in detail in the article. The next section discusses the history of *Jan Sunwai* in brief, and elaborates its role in conscientising people about their rights and motivating them to speak up.

## **Discussion**

### **Jan Sunwai: Necessity, History and Characteristics**

The idea of a *Jan Sunwai* (literally a public hearing) was devised and perfected over the years by the members of the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan*, beginning in 1993. In their demand for minimum wages on state-sponsored employment programmes, the local peasants and workers had discovered that the muster rolls generated in their names were marked with complete payments, when in reality the workers had received less than half. Similarly, the measurement books (on the basis of which payrolls were generated) were filled with misleading details. These everyday documents were hidden from public scrutiny. A few had been procured tacitly and a need arose to access the public documents and put them before the community. The

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<sup>4</sup> These hearings are derived from the environmental hearings, mandated under the Environmental Protection Act 1988, which were 'but seldom organised' (Roy, 2018).

*Jan Sunwai* emerged as a forum to facilitate the latter, first in December 1994 at village Kot Kirana in Pali, Rajasthan. For the first time the expenditure details on development programmes were shared with the people, who vehemently denied being paid the full amounts or the existence of a revenue office. A panel of neutral and independent observers comprising journalists, former jurists, academicians, lawyers, and activists was present to 'ensure that proceedings were fair, allowing everyone a hearing' (Roy 2018: 99). Three other *Jan Sunwai* followed in succession at Bhim, Jawaja, Vijayapura and the fifth one was held at Thana panchayat in April 1995.

Irregularities in development projects were reported at each of the hearings, to the people's shock and dismay. The people participated actively, corroborating official records with the evidence on the ground. Some of them were paid their dues just before a *Jan Sunwai*, and others were assured of complete payments. The forum had proved effective, but not completely. The perpetrators often went scot-free, after a mild rebuke from the authorities. Corruption was not such a big issue. However, for daily wage earners, it meant being denied their means of sustenance. For the larger village community, it meant infrastructural impoverishments - inadequate schools and health centres, irregular supply of essential commodities, illegal encroachment on village lands by powerful feudal lords, and the like. The interconnection between access to public information, corruption, and the impact on people's livelihoods were demystified at a *Jan Sunwai*, which then became integral to the people's movement for transparency in the region, contributing significantly to the legislation of the Right to Information Act 2005, institutionalisation of mechanisms for social audit and the need for grievance redressal at the points of origin.

More substantially, it led to a shift in the governance culture whereby the administration came to the people in their villages, rather than summoning them from miles away to block and district headquarters - a legacy from the British Raj. 'At a *Jan Sunwai*, the officers from all the departments sit together. So the people come there and tell everyone present that I have been facing this problem since a long time. They ask the administration and the administration responds that 'Okay, there was a delay. However, we will get your work done.' Grievances across different departments are expressed, such as those related to electricity, rations, land, health, and so on' (R1). This was as much an exercise in trust-building as it was a protest against corruption.

### The Nature of People's Participation

The *Jan Sunwai* caught the political imagination of the people at the grassroots. The respondents' perception of what a *Jan Sunwai* is or what happened at a *Jan Sunwai* also helps in defining its unique characteristics, as 'interviewees speak from their own points of view, and no two will tell a story exactly alike' (Ritchie, 2014: 17). The people in the region often referred to these gatherings as 'meetings,' perhaps a colonial legacy from when mobilisation attempts for the *Swadeshi* movement were underway. For some people, a *Jan Sunwai* was the only forum for grievance redressal available to them, where they protested against non-payment of wages, irregularities in the appropriation of village lands, delay in the distribution of essential supplies and the like.

It also emerged as a method to combat corruption, where people caught 'the thieves,' that is those who committed irregularities in the implementation of government programmes. R3 gives an example to highlight this, 'There are construction works, where the mate marks irregular attendance. He enters fake names and claims payments against those names and steals that money. We catch those thieves. This is our work. We catch the thieves, the corrupt.' He adds, 'for instance, I don't work but I have enrolled my name in the muster roll.<sup>5</sup> But I get paid. So we verify the names of the workers and catch the corrupt workers, mates, and the contractors.' The people, individually and collectively, perform the function of a watchdog and hold local public servants accountable for their actions.

The *Jan Sunwai* also functioned as a forum for deliberation where people enjoyed complete freedom of expression. Respondent R2 narrates her experiences as follows, 'I used to go every time. People would keep discussing and talking, the meeting would be underway and wherever required, I would keep responding. This is how it is done.' She explains the method of mobilisation used by the members of the MKSS and others to encourage the village residents to participate in the *Jan Sunwai*. For example, we used to tell people, talk to people, tell them what to do to solve their problem, tell them not to do wrong things' (R2). One can see that the hearings emerged as a mode of conscientising people about their rights and ways to sustain the struggle for information. The next section discusses conscientisation through the *Jan Sunwai* and the significance of livelihood and social justice in the people's movement for transparency. It can be observed that for the respondents, it was a question of preserving

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<sup>5</sup> Muster rolls are attendance registers used for recording the names, workdays, rate of payment, and the status of payment made to the people employed on public worksites.

their livelihood (land, wages, and food security), and upholding truth in the form of social justice that inspired them to participate at these public hearings and protest against the corrupt practises of those in power.

### **Conscientising through Dialogue**

At the *Jan Sunwai*, people and their representatives learnt through dialogue and participation. People were informed of their rights as a citizen and the application procedure to claim entitlements under different government programmes such as Indira Awaas Yojana, Famine Relief Works, the Integrated Rural Development Programme, the Integrated Child Development Scheme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and the like. Systemic faults in implementation as well as policy design were discovered, discussed and communicated to the government departments. The solutions came from people who brainstormed over possible options. Thus, it was a forum of political education for the marginalised sections of the society, where people reconstructed and re-constructed their social reality and acted upon it.

In the present study, the context differs from the oppressor-oppressed regime of a totalitarian state or class struggles characterised by Paulo Freire. Here, people struggled for claiming their livelihood and entitlements under the state-sponsored programmes. The slogan ‘we are not begging for alms, we are fighting for what is rightfully ours’ coined during the movement, embodies the people’s struggle for exercising their rights guaranteed to them under the constitution. Again, one must tread with caution and not construe these struggles as anti-state, because ‘what was challenged here was not the idea of the state, but its corruption by individuals who had “gone wrong”, or who failed to obey the tenets of natural justice’ (Corbridge et al., 2005: 222).

The *praxis* was the engagement with the other members of the community (including the powerful feudal lords), the elected representatives and the bureaucracy as equals. Earlier, the power balance was tilted away from the peasants and workers, who were denied a voice in the matters of development planning and plan implementation. The *Jan Sunwai* was transformative because it went a step ahead and gave the community a chance to review the panchayat expenditure, and hold their public servants accountable.

In that sense, the *Jan Sunwai* fostered the people’s direct participation in the village governance in a manner that realises Gandhi’s vision of *Gram Swaraj*, where ‘real *Swaraj* is not acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. (The) *Swaraj* is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority’ (Gandhi, 2000: 159).

### **Conscientisation to Overcome Fear and Resistance**

Speaking up on the mic before the entire community was an act of daring – it makes you visible. On the one hand, it inspired others to come forward and participate and, on the other hand, it made them vulnerable to attack from the powerful factions exposed at the *Jan Sunwai*. A simple innocuous statement, ‘I went to work, but I was not paid.’ Or ‘my name is there in the beneficiary list, but I was not sanctioned the house,’ garnered instant attention in an open forum. The people in charge of implementation were requested to respond, who could no more evade an answer in front of the entire community. The potency of the medium was exhilarating for many, and intimidating for others. The people were threatened against participating. However, they continued to attend the hearing and speak up on the mic.

Respondent R1 recounted the threats and opposition he faced from the powerful feudal lords. ‘Why did you complain against us? Now we’ll teach you a lesson.’ In other instances, people were denied public employment, trapped in bureaucratic hassles or/and socially ostracised for speaking-up against irregularities and corruption.

While this form of victimisation deterred some people from participation at the *Jan Sunwai*, others were unfettered in their determination. They derived strength from their collective participation and their belief in the truth.

‘Why should we be scared?’ resonated all the three respondents in their individual testimonies. ‘We work according to the law; we have not stolen money nor taken anyone’s due. We are struggling for our livelihoods.’ We encourage people to participate, we can’t force anyone. We tell them, come to *Jan Sunwai*, see what happens and if you think it is useful, then come again. At the *Jan Sunwai*, we tell people to stay united, it is a collective struggle, and we have to speak-up for ourselves’ (R2).

Respondent R1 explains that people have gradually learnt how to participate and ways of avoiding victimisation. They have also worked with the other members of MKSS and go from village to village, talking to people and urging them to speak up. They also hold demonstrations before the authorities to build a pressure-group and exercise their right to be heard. This also inspires others who understand that unless they speak up their problems won’t be solved. They have a right to express their problems/opinions. He explains it with an example, ‘If I don’t tell the doctor about my pain, how will it get cured? How will the other person know? So



gradually, many others started speaking-up fearlessly and would also encourage others.’

### **Coscientisation to Achieve Empowerment and Universal Well-being**

One may argue that this process of conscientisation is founded on appealing to people’s sense of social justice, or cultivating it. People in the village understand each other’s plight. They understand that ‘a person who speaks up is actually poor and her/his grievance is legitimate. They have a family but no home, so a house must be sanctioned to them. They don’t have food to eat, so they must get food security. This woman is a widow, she must get her widow’s pension. So people see and know the reality. They discern truth from lie’ (R1). These statements are reflective of Gandhi’s concept of *Sarvodaya* (rise of all, universal well-being), and represent the community’s perception of social justice in the implementation of development programmes as a demonstration of truth (Gandhi, 1954). The *Sarvodaya* movement espouses a self-dependent village community characterised by liberty and equality of all, where everyone has an equal opportunity to prosper. The belief in the concept of *Sarvodaya* was evident in the respondents narratives where they graduated from ‘I’ to ‘We,’ from redress of individual grievances to a collective struggle for the right to information.

The movement for transparency was equated with upholding truth against secrecy, fraud, and injustice. The people participated voluntarily at these hearings and their primary objective was to ‘exculpate the truth rather than affix guilt.’ As Vijay Nagaraj (2008: 325) writes, ‘public hearings merely provide evidence-based public verification of what is already known or widely suspected to be the truth...any resistance to uncover the truth is itself perceived as a sure sign of guilt and complicity.’ The simple idea is that people should get what they are entitled to, and everyone should have an equal opportunity to prosper. It is in this vein that the respondents recounted the slogan they had raised at a worker’s march in 1990s near Nimbahera, Madhya Pradesh: ‘The farmers who till the soil starve to death; the workers who construct houses remain homeless – is that justice?’

### **Conclusion**

The study presented an oral history analysis of the people’s struggle for the right to information in the villages of central Rajasthan. It establishes the role of *Jan Sunwai* (public hearings) as a medium for raising socio-

political consciousness among the marginalised people in rural Rajasthan, India. The respondents recounted their *Jan Sunwai* experiences, describing their motivation to participate at the hearings and the outcomes of such participation. Their narratives highlight how a simple demand for minimum wages on public works metamorphosed into a demand for transparency and accountability in governance that has deepened the Indian democracy substantially. The democratic deepening as a result of these processes are visible in the respondents accounts of how they conscientised people about their rights in the struggle for livelihood and social justice. Their memories are shaped by their lived experiences, which also demonstrates their belief in *Sarvodaya* and confidence in *Jan Sunwai* as a forum of transformative communication, mobilisation and political education for the people. The institutionalisation of *Jan Sunwai* as a method of social audit has further empowered people to claim their rights, participate freely in governance and hold public authorities accountable for their actions.

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