Chapter 3: Art forms of the jan sunwai

"Hamara Paisa, Hamara Hisaab"
(Our Money, Our Accounts)
(Slogan coined by the MKSS during the struggle for the RTI Act 2005)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines select art forms of the jan sunwai and the political economy of these art forms. The MKSS members used a combination of methods for disseminating information about their campaigns, public issues and for encouraging the people to participate at the jan sunwai. These methods were rooted in the cultural expressions and art forms of Rajasthan. True to their objective of achieving people's participation, the methods of mobilisation were participatory in nature with their content, form and performance managed by the people at the grassroots.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the campaign strategies, followed by a discussion on the necessity and advantages of employing the local art forms. It compares the art forms with the modern mass media using criteria such as the cost and ease of production, gatekeeping and degree of audience appeal. The second section profiles the *barefoot* artistes and actors, who mastered the craft of storytelling and performance for social and political commentary. It highlights the role of civil society in creating a space, where people from different castes and occupational backgrounds exhibited critical thinking and artistic skills using the means available to them. The third section explains the use of different art forms for mobilisation and describes the repertoire of cultural artefacts that emerged from the movement. The fourth section underscores the use of art forms as a method of protest against secrecy and corruption. The final section discusses briefly the measures adopted by the civil society for transforming singular campaigns and jan sunwais into a movement for transparency.

3.2   Characteristics of the art forms

The MKSS members planned multiple campaigns for spreading awareness about the jan sunwai. They used folk songs, street theatre and puppet show for spreading awareness about government schemes and programmes, encouraging people to participate at the jan sunwai and holding the errant panchayat authorities accountable. Local rituals and modes of entertainment, such as the pad-yatra and prabhat feri (morning procession), festivals, fairs and trade fairs were cast in a new way for political campaigning. These methods were adapted from the cultural practices of Mewar and Marwar in Rajasthan. These cultural practices were characterised by orality, visibility, frugality, community-participation and spontaneity.

The art forms of Rajasthan were, to borrow the phrase from Bruce A. Rosenberg, "orally composed, orally transmitted and orally performed" (Rosenberg 1987, 75). The oral compositions, in ordinary language, were performed as musicals, and were thus "easily committed to memory and reproduced for wider popularity." For instance, *Rukmani Mangal* was a form of epic poetry, which was "composed in 'spoken language' in the 15th century and its earliest manuscript known was dated 1612" (Maheshwari 1980, 8-12). Apart from poetry, other cultural forms were also performed orally (Maheshwari 1980, 220-239).

According to Jan Vansina, "poetry, songs, sayings, proverbs and tales [functioned as] *verbal art*. They expressed the experience of contemporary situations or events, morals to be drawn from such occurrences or situations, or intense emotions associated with them" (Vansina 1985, 11). A.K. Ramanujan categorised folklore and folk art as "symbolic language," which could be verbal (poetry, proverbs and tales), non-verbal (dance, wall and floor art, games and toys) and composite performing arts, such as street theatre, that combined verbal and non-verbal elements (Ramanujan 1990, 2–3). Together, these art forms functioned as carriers of culture, values and history.

In Rajasthan too, the cultural values have survived through the oral rendition and the performance of the tales of deities (Pabu ji, Goga ji, Ramdev ji), local heroes and princesses such as Dhola-Maru, Amar Singh Rathore, Nihal de Sultan (Kothari 1982, 7). Storytelling was a quotidian activity as well as a part of the oral performative tradition. Resolution of conflicts and moral dilemmas formed the subject matter of many stories in the region. These were also important pedagogical tools for the transmission of social and political knowledge.

The prevalence of oral culture in Rajasthan was also because of the low level of literacy, which was more pronounced among women in comparison to the men, more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas.[1] The participants at the jan sunwai belonged to the lower socio-economic strata, and thus found the orality of the medium and the traditional modes of communication encouraging. The local speech and dialect enhanced the reception and appeal of the messages. These messages were very effective in educating people about their rights and entitlements related to development programmes.

The art forms also accorded visibility to the activists as they walked from village to village, singing songs and performing in the *chaupal* (village square). The actors and the audience mingled seamlessly. The public portrayal of local issues prompted people to come forward and express their opinion:

> People gathered around us, saw our programme and soon became a part of it. Other people and organisations also did similar work, but in those cases, people remained silent. However, when we staged a street play, people gathered in the chaupal and spoke-up freely. First I said something, then you said something, the third person is watching and might add to what he had to say. He saw that two people spoke, then three people spoke, and that is how people came together and gathered courage.[2]

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[1] A.K. Ramanujan argued that orality was associated with both classical and folk art forms in India. He also argued that oral culture is not always a sign of illiteracy. He cited the example of Pundits (scholars) and Vedic experts, who "used an almost entirely oral medium, but were learned in grammar, syntax, logic and poetics" (Ramanujan 1990, 9). However, he also pointed out the because of low literacy rates in India, the "written traditions were surrounded by the oral ones and were even carried by the oral means" (Ramanujan 1990, 8).

[2] Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

The choice of art forms for spreading awareness reflected the movement's emphasis on participation, where people were active contributors rather than passive recipients of messages. Chunni Bai's description of the public dharna in 1996 illustrates the role of community participation:

> When we started the struggle for RTI, there was a fifty-three-day dharna at Chang-Gate in Beawar. Many people came there. We distributed pamphlets for the dharna, told them everything about it. Full day we sang songs, performed drama and shouted slogans. People came from different villages, and they got wheat or rice or pulses…anything as per their capacity. We started a small mess there. We cooked, ate, and slept there. A person stayed for 2-3 days, and then someone else replaced her/him. This way, people came from all over Rajasthan to participate in the dharna.[3]

The campaigns were funded through pooling labour and resources by the community and modest contribution by individuals. The campaigns were designed according to the physical and social conditions of rural Rajasthan – difficult terrain, harsh climate, resource constraints on the organisations and high level of illiteracy among the people. Traditional channels of communication were better suited for the weaker sections of the society, who did not own television or radio sets. The more affluent households owned televisions and were informed about government schemes through special awareness programmes. However, the poor households, for whom the programmes were developed, remained unaware. As Rodeji explained:

> The poor did not have a television. So, our campaigns and performances were the best media for communicating and spreading awareness. And what the government showed on television, only a few people or members of a family watched in a house and only they knew about it. Therefore, communication was limited. When we performed in the *chaupal*, people came to know things that everybody knows.[4]

The folk media, unlike modern mass media, had little gatekeeping and required minimal equipment for production. The democratising potential of the art forms enabled the activists in creating content according to the campaign themes such as migration, unemployment, corruption, transparency, and participation. They encouraged the people to discuss state policies and engage with the public

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[3] Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Bhilwara.
[4] Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

institutions and the officers. While the development communication strategies of the government were top-down in nature (Mudgal 2016, 144–52), communication through the art forms and the jan sunwai was bottom-up because it involved the people in the production and composition of the messages. The people were the artists, actors, performers as well as the target audience for the art forms of the jan sunwai.

3.3   Barefoot performers

An analysis of the art forms would be incomplete without an introduction to the "barefoot performers", songwriters and playwrights and the inspiration for their art. This section introduces select barefoot performers and gives an account of how they developed the interest and skill for working on social and political commentary. The section is based on conversations with four artists – Shankar Singh, Gajanan, Ramlal Bhat and Rodeji. The experiences of a fifth artist, Ram Niwas were obtained from the secondary sources. They had met each other through SWRC and MKSS and regularly collaborated during the movement for the right to information. Such collaboration shifted social boundaries between them. Those from upper castes found their calling in art forms that were traditionally performed by the lower castes. The upper caste persons were ridiculed by the members of their community for doing jobs that were associated with the lower castes. At the same time, the position of the people from so-called lower castes and traditional performing castes was elevated in society when they collaborated with civil society organisations on campaign communication.

Shankar Singh found his calling for puppetry, theatre and folk-forms while working with the communication department at SWRC. His sharp observational skills and ready wit came in handy during storytelling and script-writing sessions. Ram Niwas acquired the craft of puppetry at SWRC and created puppets based on kinds of people one encountered in a village. Gajanand, associated with the Sankalp NGO in Baran, had worked on a joint project with SWRC on universalisation of primary education. There, he learnt the art and technique of using puppets and folk

instruments for spreading awareness and motivating people. Later, he worked closely with the struggle for the right to information and the right to work in Rajasthan.

Ramlal Bhat belonged to a family of Bhat musicians and learnt the craft of puppetry and storytelling from his father. [5] While growing up, he witnessed his family's struggle for livelihood, and, therefore, looked for other modes of employment. During the early decade of the 1980s, Ramlal met Shankar Singh and his team from SWRC, where he was offered a job in the communication department. Ramlal recalled that:

> I started working at SWRC for Rs. 30 per month with meals. I learnt how puppetry was used for social and political commentary and not just traditional entertainment. SWRC helped me in understanding the social issues in-depth. We developed songs and skits against social evils and superstitions, child marriage, bonded labour, the need for gender equality, payment of minimum wages, and later, the right to information. [6]

Ram Niwas, Shiv Singh, Hameed, Bhodu, Rodeji and other members of the communication team at SWRC regularly collaborated with the MKSS. Shankar Singh was the common link. As Rodeji explained:

> The team from Tilonia worked with the MKSS team. The art of puppetry was started at both the places by Shankar Singh. He was our *guru* in that. In Devdungari and Bhim, we had circuited the entire area with drums and trumpets and presented street plays involving people from the village as actors. The main issues were around migration and corruption. [7]

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[5] Traditionally, Bhat, Nat and Manganiyar were the performing castes. People from these castes exceled in the folk art forms. They functioned under the patronage system and performed during festivals (*holi, teej, gangaur, diwali*) and celebrations such as marriage, birth and the naming ceremony in their patron's homes. Social, economic and technological changes over the years have led to a decline in their popularity. Barring a few artistes, who attained popularity at the national and international level, many others were forced to give up their traditional occupation and look for employment in other places, including the government services (Kothari 1994). Similarly, Bhand was another performing caste, whose members earned their livelihood through jesting. They were referred to by the name for their art – *behrupiya*, which meant a person who could acquire many faces and identities. Bhands were situated at the lower level in the caste hierarchy and were dependent on their upper caste patrons. They entertained the people with their jokes and taunts, which bordered on the crass sometimes. They were known for their incisive wit and keen understanding of social dynamics, which they employed readily for their sketches (Emigh and Emigh 1994).

[6] Interview with Ramlal Bhat, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

[7] Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

Local folk musicians also participated in the campaigns and shared their knowledge of musical instruments with the others. The *Thali* (metal plate played with sticks/tongs), *Madal* (a cylindrical hand drum), *Dhol* (drums) and *Manjira* (cymbals) were regular accompaniments at the street plays and puppet shows. Gokul Ba played *thali* and *madal*. He was regularly associated with the MKSS campaigns. He participated in the jawabdehi yatra that was conducted across 33 districts of Rajasthan between December 2015 to March 2016. During the yatra, he would be ready with his instruments at the time of the performance. Sometimes, the team would perform seven to eight times in a day during the yatra and foot-marches. The villages residents and civil society members also participated in the campaigning activities. Shankar Singh provided hands-on-learning and oral training to those who expressed interest and skill in the folk-forms. Thus, an ensemble of barefoot artistes was created that used folk media for spreading awareness and demanding transparency.

The mobilisation campaigns for the jan sunwai and other public events were planned and executed collectively by the members of the MKSS and other civil society organisations. There were no specialised roles, though some members developed expertise in campaign communication over the years. Community participation was important at every step. The performance teams or *tolis* were constituted from amongst all the members, including both women and men. The women's groups composed songs and performed in chorus. Women were encouraged for roles and activities that were earlier considered a preserve of the men – for instance, participating in protests, making public speeches, and conferring with the officials. The participation of women is examined in chapter four of this dissertation.

3.4   Art and other forms of communication

This section discusses the rationale, method and outcome of deploying pad-yatra, slogans, street plays, puppetry, protest songs, pamphlets and fair price shops for campaigning purposes. It also illustrates the repertoire of plays, songs, slogans and

other cultural artefacts that were created by the barefoot artistes during the movement.

Pad-yatra, songs, puppets and street plays were used for attracting people's attention for the public meetings that were convened in village squares and community foyers. Skits, plays and songs were also performed at public consultations and conventions. Transparency and openness were the key elements of these events, and the use of art forms suggested that everyone was welcome to participate. The performances enlivened the environment and provided respite from the monotony. Certain scholars have argued that dharna (sit-ins) and performances "dramatised the people's quest for accountability," and deconstructed the state in the eyes of the people (Corbridge *et al.* 2005, 224). It made the state appear more accessible. Hatzfeldt argued that these performances embodied the professed ideals of the MKSS – transparency, participation, collective decision-making and inclusion of the marginalised (Hatzfeldt 2015, 174-77). This study argues that transparency and inclusion were facilitated by the participatory and democratic nature of folk art forms. As mentioned earlier, they had little gatekeeping, used local dialects and were interactive and inexpensive.

3.4.1 Pad-yatra

The pad-yatra (foot-marches) had certain advantages for social mobilisation at the level of panchayats. A panchayat was a cluster of villages spread over a large area. People walked or used bicycles for commuting between villages. The MKSS members walked from one village to another, singing songs and shouting slogans. Shankar Singh explained that walking was inexpensive, ensured visibility and aroused the curiosity of the village residents. The people associated cars with government officers, who used those for touring the villages. Similarly, motorbikes and SUVs were associated with aggressive campaigning by the traditional elites during the elections. The people valued the efforts of civil society members when they

campaigned on foot. It also provided greater opportunity for developing personal connections.[8] Chunni Bai described the modus operandi:

> We went to different villages, walked on foot, carried out yatra and conducted meetings. In the evening we visited one village, met people there, conducted meetings, and then went to another village in the morning. Then again, another village. We would tell them the time of the meetings or the jan sunwai, that it is tomorrow or day after or after ten days.[9]

In addition to the pad-yatra, state-wide truck yatra and block-wide tractor yatras were carried out for large-scale campaigns. Yatra and religious fairs were a mode of socialisation in India and parts of South Asia. People congregated for yatras in large numbers. Yatra or pad-yatra signified pilgrimages on-foot that people undertook to pay homage at their deity's shrine. People in south-central Rajasthan, particularly, made pilgrimages to the temple of Ramdev pir, a local saint-deity. The annual Urs in Ajmer and Galiyakot, Dungarpur also witnessed people congregating from everywhere. Ann Gold described the devotional yet transactional nature of these journeys, which were most often made to "obtain some kind of concrete boon or assistance; they were motivated by responses to specific problems such as snakebite, infertility or domestic disharmony. They were also an expression of and opportunities for worship" (Gold 1994, 80–81). They underscored the idea that one has to put in efforts for the fulfilment of one's wishes.

In the yatras, people walked in groups with flags and banners. They chanted religious slogans that hailed the local deities. Such sloganeering, common amongst pilgrims, served as a source of motivation for reaching their destination. "Singing was an important part of almost every ritual and social event in rural Rajasthan, and journeys were no exception" (Gold 1994, 82). Devotionals hymns and songs in praise of the deities were sung by travelling groups. The entourage was provided hospitality by the residents on the way. Some of them also joined the yatra.

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[8] Interview with Shankar Singh, 29 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim.
[9] Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Bhilwara.

Gandhi incorporated foot-marches as part of his programme of non-violent satyagraha for promoting peace and justice. In Champaran, he travelled on foot from one village to another, meeting the peasants and understanding their conditions. He planned the Salt March from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi in 1930 for protesting against the oppressive salt tax of the British colonial rule. In the aftermath of partition in 1947, Gandhi walked among the riot-torn areas in Noakhali and Delhi, spreading the message of communal harmony (Sharp 1997).

Gandhi's Salt March or *Dandi Yatra* combined the ritualistic nature of yatra with strategic action. The eyewitness accounts have described it as a military expedition with Gandhi as the commander and compared it to a pilgrimage led by a saint - the *Mahatama*. The yatra spanned over 26 days, and the volunteers walked approximately 240 miles, passing through villages, big and small. Of the seventy-nine volunteers selected for the march, "three were between 41 and 45 years, four between 36 and 40, six between 31 and 35, and all the rest were, under 30" (Sharp 1997, 89). Many more persons joined the march on the way. On the eve of 11 March, "thousands of visitors had come to witness the beginning of the historic pilgrimage. Hundreds of thousands of people lined both sides of the route the marchers were to follow" (Sharp 1997, 90). People welcomed the marchers jubilantly and provided food and shelter. Gandhi and his men halted in the villages for meetings and "exhorted the people to wear Khadi, abjure alcohol and drugs, abandon child marriage, keep clean, live purely, and, when the signal comes, break the salt laws" (Sharp 1997, 94).

Gandhi planned the salt march meticulously. From logistical arrangements to publicity, and strategy in the event of his arrest, Gandhi had considered every aspect. He published columns and regularly interacted with the local and foreign correspondents. The Salt March spiked international curiosity and the news reports of British repression generated sympathy for the Indians and their cause (Sharp 1997, 139–46).

Webb Miller, the special correspondent for India with the United Press, covered the satyagraha at the Dharasana Salt Works on 21 May 1930. In his autobiography, Miller described the events as follows: around 2500 "Congress or Gandhi men" had assembled at Dharasana. With Gandhi in prison, Sarojini Naidu led the campaign. She reminded the people of Gandhi's message and urged them to restrain from violence under any circumstances. After that, the demonstration began:

> Slowly and in silence, the throng commenced the half-mile march to the salt deposits. A few carried ropes for lassoing the barbed-wire stockade around the salt pans. About a score who were assigned to act as stretcher-bearers wore crude, hand-painted red crosses pinned to their breasts; their stretchers consisted of blankets…As the throng drew near the salt pans, they commenced chanting the revolutionary slogan, "Inquilab Zindabad," intoning the two words over and over (Miller 1937, 183).

When the volunteers refused to disperse, the police rushed ahead and "rained blows on their heads with their steel-shod lathis." The marchers "went down like tenpins" (Miller 1937, 184). Miller's report of the police brutality against peaceful, non-violent protestors exposed the regressive and uncivilised face of British rule. Thus, a commonplace ritual such as the pad-yatra was transformed into a political tool for achieving self-determination.

During the struggle for RTI, pad-yatra and marches were organised for mobilising people and for protesting against oppressive practices of the State. Pad-yatra was a form of campaigning. The MKSS members constituted small teams of five to seven people, called *toli(s)*. Resembling the travelling theatre troupes of the region, the teams went about announcing their arrival, shouting slogans and singing songs. The songs and slogans conveyed their purpose and urged people to speak up against corruption and participate at the jan sunwai.

The *tolis* aroused the interest of the kids. The kids joined the troupes and shouted slogans with them. The curious women and men watched from outside their homes. The team walked through the village and announced the time and place for a small performance. The people assembled at a common spot. A short skit was

performed, interspersed with songs and followed by discussions, which urged them to organise themselves into a collective, participate at the jan sunwai and ask questions and seek information from their representatives. Every team had banners, puppets, cloth for the makeshift stage, a mobile public-address system and music instruments such as cymbals and drums. These were lightweight and easy to carry on foot, rather than projectors, screens and video players with big loudspeakers that required batteries to operate. Foot-marches were ideal for door-to-door verification of information before the jan sunwai and social audit. It also facilitated fundraisers and signature campaigns. After the performance, two persons from the group collected voluntary donations from the people. Another group collected signatures on a piece of cloth for a resolution or memorandum read out earlier during the discussions.

Mobilisation campaigns such as these were carried out before every public event. The mobilisation activities were scheduled as per the availability of the people. Village-level campaigns were conducted in the mid-mornings and late evenings, before the women left for work or after they returned from work. During the afternoon, the teams visited MNREGA worksites for interacting with the workers. They readily devoted a few minutes as these performances discussed their welfare and lasted for only 15-20 minutes. The performances also helped in breaking the general monotony of the work-sites.

Mid-morning or late-evening mobilisations were followed by request for meals. The people readily invited team members. The norm of one meal, one person, per household was followed, irrespective of the caste or class. In a feudal society such as Rajasthan, caste dictated the rules of commensality (and marriage). People dined only with their caste-peers and those from the superior caste did not accept food or water from those considered lower-caste by birth. The members of the MKSS protested against this and dined with the people from all sections. They encouraged collective cooking and dining for challenging the caste and class bias.

Inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage were organised by anti-caste movements in several parts of India (Jaffrelot 2003, 159–61). Inter-caste dining halls challenged caste-based inequality and the associated notions of "pollution" and "purity."[10] MKSS's strategy of collective dining, too, was aimed at bridging the social gaps and understanding the problems of the marginalised sections of the society. This inspired trust among the people and motivated them to share their stories. A few things that people did not share openly in the public fora, they talked about it over meals in their home. As Norti Bai explained, "before a jan sunwai, we carried out campaigns in villages. We went from village to village on foot and ate in people's homes. And when we went to a home for food, we got their entire story."[11] Thus, five to seven households in a village were covered. People's stories of hardships revealed a general pattern of oppression and the need for solutions. Some of these stories were woven into scripts, songs and slogans.

3.4.2 Slogans

The slogans that emerged out of the struggle for RTI in Rajasthan were coined by the people in the language of rights and reflected their understanding of the movement. These slogans were remarkable for their concision and rhyming quality. As rhetorical devices, they captured the essence and objectives of the movement. Most of the slogans asserted the people's right to information and accountability as citizens of the country. These included:

> *Desh ki janta mang rahi hai, paise-paise ka hisaab,*
>
> > The people want accountability for every penny spent
>
> *'Desh hamaare aap ka, nahi kisi ke baap ka,'*
>
> > The nation belongs to all of us, it is nobody's personal property
>
> *Hum apna adhikar maangte, nahi kisi se bheekh maangte*

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[10] Ambedkar, even though he endorsed inter-dining, considered it an "inadequate remedy." He argued that there were castes that allowed inter-dining. However, inter-dining "has not succeeded in killing the spirit of caste and consciousness of caste" (Ambedkar 2007, 19-20).

[11] Interview with Norti Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

We demand our rights, not alms

The slogan *Hum janenge, hum jiyengey* (Right to know, right to live) reflected the centrality of transparency to people's livelihood. The basic human rights to food and social justice were reflected in the slogans such as, *Nyay samanta ho adhikar, aisa rachenge hum sansaar* (We will create a universe with justice and social equality) and *Jab tak bhookha insaan rahega, dharti pe toofan rahega* (revolutions will storm the earth as long as people starve due to hunger).

The slogans were chanted during foot-marches and sit-ins and at the jan sunwai for galvanising people. Blunt and direct, the slogans "travelled quickly, working on the minds of the people, forcing them to think" (Roy and MKSS Collective 2018, 38).

3.4.3 Street-plays

The street-play or nukkad natak were short skits of five to ten minutes, which were divided into several scenes. These were performed in public places – the village square, under the banyan tree, school playground and NREGA worksites. Even the market squares turned into sites of performance. A make-shift stage was created by holding a black cloth horizontally. Puppet dancing to the tunes of the cymbals and drums greeted everyone while the people settled. The skit followed next.

The skits were performed by the local residents, sometimes in their own village. The people were ecstatic to see their neighbours and relatives perform on stage. The actors used minimal props and depicted activities with hand movements and dialogues. At some point during the play, a couple of actors emerged from the audience, thus blurring the boundaries between the performers and spectators. Someone from the audience was invited for an impromptu role amidst the cheering crowd. Interactive scripts enhanced audience engagement and facilitated relationship building. Sometimes, the performances had a cathartic effect on the audience, especially the women, who related their situation in life with that of the actors. The

script and dialogue struck a chord with the people, who often responded with laughter and 'ayes' during the performance.

The stories depicted the lives of the people, their struggle for livelihood, exploitation, corruption, and siphoning off money by the officials at every step. Some scripts were inspired from Vijaydan Detha's anthology of short stories of Rajasthan, *Baatan ri Phoolwari* (A posy of tales). These stories portrayed the village realities in a witty yet thoughtful manner. They ended with a problem, dilemma or a philosophical question, urging the readers, or the spectators, in this case, to solve them. The MKSS skits, on the other hand, ended with a call to action, urging the people to ask for information from the panchayat, participate at the jan sunwai and cast vote during elections.

Two famous plays created during the struggle for information were *khazana* and *jhamura*. *Khazana* staged the complicity among the elected representatives, bureaucrats and law enforcement agencies in usurping the public money. The *Jhamura* story depicted the inefficiency of the system, where the weak and the innocent were exploited, while the corrupt persons prospered.

The scripts for the plays were penned down during weeklong theatre workshops that were conducted before every campaign. Tripurari Sharma from National School of Drama and popular folk artist and scholar Komal Kothari from Rajasthan had also collaborated with the movement for creating scripts and dialogues for street plays. Aruna Roy described the first drama workshop conducted in 1990 with the help of Uma Shankar, who "helped establish the tradition of evolving a new play in a workshop, followed by a jatha/pad-yatra in April every year, before the May Day celebrations" (Roy and MKSS Collective 2018, 36).

Some sketches also incorporated elements from successful campaigns, where the citizens had organised themselves for political action such as protesting against low-wages, teacher absenteeism and other forms of corruption, seeking information from the panchayat, registering grievances and organising referendums for a ban on

the sale of liquor. Through these activities, people were motivated to exercise their citizenship rights and take an active part in transforming their conditions. The cases and snippets from the jan sunwai were also a part of the conversational repertoire of the activists. Several events were transformed into stories, which were narrated in different forms to a varied audience. Indeed, many respondents recounted many of these stories during oral interviews.

Civil society used "success stories" as rhetorical narratives about "active citizenship, transparency and accountability" (Martin 2010, 227). These stories constituted folklore of the movement that was used by the activists for describing their work. They also showcased the utility and success of, for instance, the RTI Act; or in this case, the efficacy of the jan sunwai and the power of collective action for resolving grievances. A 'case' or 'event' was adapted into different formats for different media – oral recounting, staging, newspaper and print media, television and internet websites. Recordings and visual productions of street plays and other activities were also uploaded on YouTube and other websites for wider dissemination. However, the stylised versions had lesser scope for interactive improvisations, which were carried out during live performances. For instance, female actors portrayed the role of sarpanch in the villages that had elected a woman sarpanch. Some characters were portrayed through the puppets. The use of puppetry in mobilising people for the jan sunwai is described in the next section.

3.4.4 Puppetry

Traditionally, the puppets were used for entertainment. They were fashioned after local heroes, equestrians and members of the royal families. These were used for retelling myths and folk tales. The most popular among these was the legend of Amar Singh Rathore, the Rajput warrior who fought the Mughals and was killed by deceit.[12] In the case of the jan sunwai, the puppets were used for social and political

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[12] Puppetry has declined because of social, economic and technological changes over the years. People prefer newer modes of entertainments such as radio, television and cinema to the traditional ones. Scholars

commentary.[13] They were modelled on the sarpanch, postman, district collector, school headmaster and wise women and men from the village. They were also cast as characters in street plays. In place of traditional string puppets, the activists used hand puppets that were built from recycled wooden frames and old clothes. The face of the puppet was built from clay and hand-painted by the puppeteers.

Zokhim Chacha, Dhanno Bua and Moohfat were some of the characters created by the puppeteers at the Barefoot College and the MKSS. Plenty of thought went into deciding the profile of the characters. Moreover, as was the custom in the villages, labels based on filial or maternal ties were used for referring to the puppets. To give an example, the character of Dhanno Bua was created while keeping in mind the relationship dynamics of Rajasthan, where the Bua (paternal aunt, father's sister) enjoyed greater public visibility in comparison to other female kin. Ram Niwas explained that a *bua* was not required to observe veil in the household and could speak with the children, women and men of all ages. The same was not true for *Bhabhi* (brother's wife) or *Masi* (mother's sister), who were required to observe veils. Similarly, the character of Zokhim *chacha* – the sagacious uncle, was created for spreading awareness about health and education in the region (Dogra 2012).

Mooh-fut (The Outspoken One) was the most memorable character created during the movement. Its name characterised its nature – *moohfut* said anything to anyone based on his observations. Shankar Singh, the master puppeteer, used the *mooh-fut* for social and political commentary. He regaled the people with his witty and humorous stories that took a shot at the corruption in public works. His narrations with the puppet parodied the local representatives, accountants,

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have examined the decline in the popularity of the puppetry and its current use in development communication. They have also examined the performative and ritualistic aspects of puppetry in Rajasthan.
[13] Puppets were used for political commentary before the jan sunwai as well. To give an example, the skit of *Sakuri Julahi* commented on the corruption in an erstwhile Rajput kingdom. Sakuri was a weaver from the julahi community. She was entrusted with ten kilos of wool for weaving a carpet for the emperor. However, the carpet weighed only five kilos when ready. When Sakuri was questioned, she revealed that several officers in the kingdom demanded their share of wool, leaving her with only five kilos of wool (Barucha 2003, 204).

moneylenders and suppliers and poked them for irregular conduct. Rodeji explained that humour by way of puppetry did not offend anyone because "these things were said by the puppet and not a real person."[14] The audience laughed aloud and endorsed what the puppet said, leaving little scope for a sarpanch or moneylender to take offence. Reacting to provocation was equal to conceding power to the other. Humour was thus, used as a mode of resistance and protest.[15] Satirising everyday life of the people caused them to meditate on the social realities. According to Sammy Basu, satire was a strategy available with the "victimised against their oppressors" (Basu 1999, 392).

3.4.5 Protest songs

The struggle for the right to information inspired an array of songs that expressed people's demand and professed direct action. Mohan Ram – a Kabir poet and singer and Chunni Bai's husband composed numerous songs for the campaign. His earlier songs critiqued the excessive bureaucratisation of local development that restricted people's ability to claim their livelihood. These songs were composed on the lines of religious and spiritual verses and were sung to the tune of cymbals. From a distance, it appeared like a regular *kirtan* – devotional singing popularised by the Bhakti Movement. Upon close observation, one understood the lyrics – "oh it's the reign of modern thieves. Earlier thieves used knives and guns and robbed at night. The thieves today use pen and paper for looting the people in broad daylight."[16] The song satirised the working of the modern State and raised a few eyebrows. Without directly naming the officers and representatives, it attacked them for the corruption in governance.

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[14] Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.
[15] Humour and satire were manifested in the art and literature of the region. The satirical poems delighted the readers, exposed social anomalies and evils and pushed for reform. *Janata ko Durbar* (People's Court) by Vishwanath 'Vimalesh' is a collection of satirical poems in Rajasthani, which were published in 1977. The poems commented on the constitutional Emergency in the country between 1975 and 1977. Other writers such as Nagraj Sarma and Satyanarayan 'Aman' also used humour and satire in their poetry (Maheshwari 1980, 226).
[16] MKSS, *Jan Geet* (a collection of movement songs).

These songs were sung at all times – between sessions of public discussions, during rallies, yatras, dharna (public sit-in) and at the jan sunwai. The songs energised the people, especially the women, who joined the chorus. Some of them also danced to the rhythm of the songs. They were familiar with the tunes as the songs were derived from Rajasthani folk songs.

The activists selected women's songs and popular hymns of the region for composing songs for the campaign. The women's songs celebrated the chores of everyday life and festive rituals (Barucha 2003, 156–7). The *bhajan mandali* (the hymn groups) sang paeans of Krishna and other deities, which inspired the songs for social awareness. These songs narrated the struggle of the people and the oppression faced by them. The women in the marketplace recognised the tunes and picked up the lyrics. The rhyme and meter of the verses and the chorus patterns of the compositions were similar to the original songs. Local vernacular words and metaphors were used for conveying the meaning and sentiments. The songs reflected the social conditions and hardships faced by the people and beckoned them to join the struggle for their rights and livelihood. The composition of a song often overlapped with its performance.

Anshi Bai, an activist and wife of Shankar Singh, recollected the days of struggle and the contribution of the women. She recalled that they "composed the songs while singing together. The women told their stories and appended it to the lyrics. The song was ready. We created so many songs this way" (Anshi Bai 2005, 50). [17] One such song was, *ye toh neta afsar mil gaya re, gaava ka vikas mei ghotala kar gaya re*, meaning "the officers and leaders have collectively looted the development funds." It was composed during the Beawar Dharna and later performed regularly at the jan sunwai.

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[17] Anshi Bai, "*Soochna ke adhikar ke sangharsh mei aurato ka yogdaan,*" *Diamond India*, Special Edition, June-July 2005, p. 50.

Koi toh munde bolo and *Mhe nahi maanga* were the two most popular songs of the movement. These songs with peppy tunes were performed in chorus. The chorus and the audience followed the lead singer, who also doubled up as the narrator. The songs entreated the people for protesting against corruption and asserting their rights.

Koi toh munde bolo implored the individuals and groups to break their silence and speak-up against corruption - "the number of corrupt persons has increased beyond control, at least someone speak-up and expose them." The gist of the song was that the nature of loot was common knowledge. At the same time, instances of loot had increased because of the passivity of the people. The narrator, Shankar Singh, related regular instances of loot by officials, lawyers and doctors. After every snippet, he appealed to the audience for ending corruption.

The song *Mhe nahi maanga* enumerated the objectives and demands of the movement – "what is it that the people want? Not fancy riches, expensive homes and gourmet food. They wanted employment, full wages, photocopies of employment registers and bill-books, and the right to information." The narrator, Shankar Singh, named the items associated with the wealthy classes, to which the chorus and the audience responded with '*mhe nahi manga*' (we don't want). Renditions of these kinds of songs were popular in the region. The people recognised which lines to repeat and followed the singer's lead. They picked up the rhythm and sang along. People also recognised the theme or pattern of the lyrics. They, then, guessed or anticipated the next lines. The people from other parts of India and the world, who attended the jan sunwai and participated in the protests or campaigns, also connected easily with the songs. They clapped to the rhythm and sang along wherever they could follow the lyrics.

In addition to the songs discussed above, compositions by Charul and Vinay from Loknaad also exhibited the significance of RTI for the people. Charul and Vinay were the founders of Loknaad – a progressive music band that conveyed people's issues of hunger, famine, displacement, and suffering during riots. Their

song "Janne ka Haq – Right to Know," composed at the peak of the national campaign, articulated the significance of the right to information in resolving everyday struggle of the farmers, labourers, children and elderly for work, food, education and healthcare.

3.4.6 Pamphlets

Pamphlets were bright and colourful, printed handbills that provided information about a dharna, campaign or the jan sunwai. The pamphlets outlined the objectives and the schedule of the event. The heading on the top of the pamphlet emphasised its subject matter and captured the attention of the reader. The body of the message explained the agenda in bullet points, ending with a specific call-to-action. For instance, the subjects of the initial jan sunwais were, "the panchayat secretary fooled and cheated us...," and "whose development is it anyway?"[18] The highlights of earlier jan sunwais were mentioned for encouraging people's participation in the hearings in their panchayat.

Pamphlets were an inexpensive and important source of information for the people. These were used for informational and promotional purposes. They were handed out during meetings and placed at public places for greater visibility. Unlike the people in urban areas, people in the villages read the pamphlets carefully for any useful information. Many people took the handbills home and requested someone to read it for them and others.

3.4.7 Fair price grocery stores

Mazdoor Kisan Kirana Stores provided visibility to the organisation in the main marketplace, informed people about the upcoming dharna and distributed pamphlets for the campaigns. According to Roop Singh, who worked as an accountant and storekeeper at an the MKKS grocery store:

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[18] "*Safar soochna ke adhikar ka*" in *Diamond India*, Special Edition, June-July 2005, p. 42.

People were connected to grocery stores because they received everyday articles at reasonable prices. We also shared information with people. The people were also eager to know about the activities of the MKSS. They came to the store asked about the forthcoming events. The store was also a mode of sharing information about the campaigns and events.[19]

The grocery stores were set up in the 1990s for enhancing the purchasing power of people by providing good quality consumer goods at fair and reasonable prices. They experimented with the principles of transparency in small-scale businesses, for instance, by announcing the prices on the loudspeaker. There were five such stores, which were located in Bhim, Jawaja, Surajpura, Todgarh and Vijaypura.

3.5   Deploying culture as a mode of protest

The information and communication activities that were undertaken by the civil society actors aimed at publicising the campaigns and encouraging people's participation in the movement. These campaigns, including the jan sunwai and the art forms, were also a mode of non-violent protest against secrecy and apathy of the public authorities. The people performed nataks (plays) that satirised the local democracy, chorused songs that detested the corrupt and created memorable puppets that poked the panchayat representatives about pending wages. The songs conscientised people to speak up against corruption, ask questions and assert their right to food, work, wages and information. Practices such as these demonstrated the use of culture as a mode of protest and social change.

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) also employed culture for protesting imperialism and raising national consciousness in the last decade of the British colonial rule in India. Formed in 1943, IPTA used popular theatre and music as modes of political resistance against colonialism, fascism and class-based oppression faced by the peasants (Damodaran 2014, 10–11). It employed folk-forms

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[19] Interview with Roop Singh, 26 December 2015, Bhim, Rajsamand.

for connecting with the people and building a mass-based movement. The songs and plays that were adopted from regional folk traditions portrayed the sufferings caused by the events of the day such as, the Bengal famine of 1943, the rise of fascism in different parts of the world, and the trauma of partition (Bhatia 2004, 79). These performances linked art with politics. The content and the form of compositions were arranged in a way that aroused patriotic sentiments and resistance against oppression (Damodaran 2014, 22–24). The jan sunwai and its art forms, too, were a form of cultural protest, which constituted an important component of people's movements and peasant resistance in India.

The success of the jan sunwai and mobilisation activities depended on a sense of solidarity and trust among the people. According to Norti Bai, "people must feel the compassion in your heart. If people believed you and developed faith in what you were doing, they would struggle along with you like the members of a family."[20] The village communities thrived on goodwill, trust and relationship. Civil society actors focused on building trust by minimising social inequalities and promoting egalitarian behaviour. A broad set of behavioural etiquettes were followed for a long term and sustainable engagement. These included sitting on the grounds with the people, not getting into argumentation and brawls, sharing food, however expensive or limited, and not distributing freebies during the campaigns.

The activists also refrained from accepting food, beverages and goodies from the families of the sarpanchs and affluent upper caste members, who rarely engaged with the issues raised at the jan sunwai. According to Shankar Singh, "when the people see you dining with them [the rich upper-caste members], they would consider you a part of their coterie. In such a scenario, people would be reluctant to confide in you or trust you completely."[21] This principle was later added to the social audit rules and standards 2016, which has been discussed in chapter six.

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[20] Interview with Norti Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.
[21] Interview with Shankar Singh, 29 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim.

The MKSS also built solidarity networks that helped in sustaining the movement and people's participation. Since the 'operational area' of MKSS remained limited in geographical terms, the movement was scaled with the help of civil society networks and coalition with other grassroots organisations. Members on all the sides participated in campaigns, often travelling to other districts and states. Regular collaboration helped in developing mutual solidarity, which deepened the demand for transparency and accountability. The strategy of civil society coalitions was also adopted for creating the NCPRI for advocating a strong transparency legislation.

3.6 Advocacy: From a national campaign towards a national legislation

A combination of strategies was devised to propel the struggle to the national level. These included regular public engagement, policy advocacy and partnerships with the civil society actors, voluntary organisations and people's movements at the state and national level. The jan sunwais, dharnas, yatras and conventions were held in quick succession for building a momentum that transformed singular campaigns and struggles into a movement. Nikhil Dey explained the strategy thus:

> In the first phase, the five jan sunwais were organised back to back in a series. It was a campaign plan that was carried out in different panchayat samitis one after another, which created pressure on the administration. The jan sunwais had an impact, and the government had to take action. These thefts were carried out on such a large scale that one could not ignore these.[22]

Symposiums and conventions were held for garnering public support for the right to information, deliberating on the form of legislation and the dynamics of its implementation. These were held periodically and interspersed in quick succession with the jan sunwai. For instance, the first state convention was held in September 1995 in Ajmer, soon after the Thana jan sunwai and the Rajasthan Chief Minister's announcement of the right to inspect panchayat records. The meeting called "for an

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[22] Interview with Nikhil Dey, 30 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim.

expansion of the campaign across the length and breadth of Rajasthan. Over a thousand people attended this public meeting," including representatives from CSOs such as Sankalp in Kota, Urmul Trust in Bikaner, Muktidhara in Alwar, Saathin Karmchari Sangh in Ajmer, Samagra Sewa Sangh Jaipur, Bisalpur Baandh Visthapit Samanvaya Samiti and SWRC, Tilonia among others. The group resolved to struggle for "a citizen's constitutional right to information" (Priya 1996, 83). The resolution stated that "development works in the country primarily affect the local populace, therefore the expenses incurred for developmental works are an issue of public concern, and cannot be reserved in the category of 'secret documents'" (Priya 1996, 84).

The second national RTI convention was organised in Beawar in April 2001, a day after the Janawad jan sunwai. The convention extended the scope of the right to information from development goods and services to other "key areas like health, food security, human rights, gender, education, environment and pollution, employment and national security" (Mishra 2003, 64). These conventions and symposiums coalesced state-level campaigns and support groups into a coherent national movement for right to information. *Soochna evum Rozgar Abhiyan* (S-R Abhiyan), a civil society coalition in Rajasthan for RTI and MNREGA emerged from these efforts. The National Campaign for People's Right to Information was formed for coordinating with the media and for government advocacy. The MKSS members aided in synergising the grassroots struggle based on the jan sunwai with the efforts of the NCPRI for demanding a national legislation.

Electoral advocacy at the time of local, state and general elections generated momentum for the RTI legislations at the level of the state and the union. Similar strategy was adopted for institutionalising social audits and the mechanisms for redressing citizen's grievances. Public Interest Litigations (PILs) were resorted to in case of bureaucratic and political deadlocks or inaction in the legislature. Demonstrably,

the MKSS, the NCPRI, along with the coalition of people's movement for transparency creatively manoeuvred the checks and balances amongst three arms of the State (legislative, executive, and judicial) for overcoming the resistance and successfully positing the people as the most important branch of the government. (Agrawal and Nair 2018, 288)

Networking at a personal, community, professional, political and bureaucratic level also played a significant role. Suchi Pande in her thesis has examined the multi-pronged activism strategy of the campaign. She has elaborated on the role of both grassroots struggle and the 'symbolic capital' pooled in by the NCPRI members (Pande 2014, 98-146).

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined the art forms of the jan sunwai and their efficacy in spreading awareness about the jan sunwai and encouraging people to participate at the jan sunwai. The art forms were an assortment of folk arts that were derived from the cultural practices of Rajasthan. These included street plays, puppetry, women's songs, pamphlets, and wall-paintings. Besides these traditional art forms, this chapter also examined the efficacy of other forms of communication like the pad-yatra, slogans and the kirana (grocery) stores.

The art forms were inclusive, transparent, community-owned and interactive, and thus, appealed to a broad base of citizens. They reflected the ethos of the people's movement for transparency that focused on dialogue, participation and collective action. The traditional art forms were more effective for mobilisation at the grassroots in contrast to the modern means of mass communication. The mass media limited the role of the people to receiving messages while the art forms collaborated with the people for co-creating the messages. This chapter also examined the repertoire of songs, slogans, skits, and puppet sketches created by the barefoot artists as part of the movement. These art forms spread the awareness about the jan sunwai as well as encouraged people to ask questions, seek information and assert their citizenship rights. The art forms thus emerged as a mode of non-violent protest against secrecy and corruption in governance.