

Chapter 4: Dialogue and inclusion: People’s participation at the jan sunwai

“Why should we keep quiet?
Only men can do justice, and women can’t?”

(Gyarasi Bai, activist, 12 February 2016)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the nature and dynamics of people’s participation at the jan sunwai. It highlights the principles and the practices of the jan sunwai from the narratives of the respondents. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part (section 4.2) locates the jan sunwai as part of the dialogic tradition in India. The second part (section 4.3) discusses the ability of the jan sunwai to foster dialogue by upholding the principles of freedom, equality, transparency and inclusion. The third part (sections 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7) describes in detail the participation of the marginalised people and the benefits of such participation for the people as well as the movement. It highlights their motivation for participation and the challenges they encountered. The fourth part (sections 4.8 and 4.9) describes the nature of the opposition, including physical threats, faced by the people for participating at the jan sunwai. The people countered the opposition and threats through dialogue and non-violent forms of protest and constructive action. The final part also analyses the jan sunwai and the struggle for the right to information as a people’s movement characterised by non-violent methods of protest and demands for human rights and social justice.

The jan sunwai emerged as a mode of direct deliberation between the citizens and the State. It assisted in countering the oppression and political alienation faced by the people. Through the jan sunwai, people exercised their freedom of expression for demanding transparency, redressal and accountability in governance and

asserting “their right to claim the benefits of development funds sanctioned in their name.”¹

Such participation was not without opposition and repercussions. Certain sections were opposed to the people’s demand for information and threatened them from participating at the jan sunwai. Those who spoke-up at the jan sunwai and aligned with the activists faced social discrimination, physical oppression, false criminal charges, and threats of social ostracisation. The people overcame these threats and challenges through solidarity and collective action. They asserted that their demands were legitimate, their actions were truthful, and their methods were legal.

4.2 Locating the jan sunwai within the dialogic tradition

Dialogue holds a central place in human society. It brings cultures together, generates shared meaning and builds coherence. Socrates, Plato, Buber, Bakhtin, Bohm and others have emphasised the virtues of dialogue (Bohm 2012; Morson 2009; Buber 1958). Socrates regarded conversations as the only serious communicative medium. The dialogue was the original method of philosophy in Ancient Greece and contributed to the development of European thought. Dialogue was also the method of doing politics. In Ancient Greece and Rome, men assembled in the agora to vote and discuss politics.

The significance of dialogue diminished due to the invention of the printing press. Written texts became one of the bases of modernity: “the Reformation, the nation-state, Enlightenment, industrialisation, mass education, and liberal politics are all unimaginable without the more or less unrestricted circulation of the written word” (Womack 2013, 17). Oral dialogue came to be seen as hierarchical and exclusionary, while the printed text was considered more egalitarian (Womack 2013, 18–27). The permanence of the written word was juxtaposed with the ephemerality

¹ Interview with Nortri Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

of orality. Writing became the mode of demonstrating scientific thought that was based on observation and reason. The written word came to resemble the truth.

At the same time, Enlightenment also established dialogue as a method of inquiry, characterised by reasoning and criticism in the domain of religion and morality. The dialogue was a method of arriving at the truth, “not by suppressing falsehood, but by encouraging its unrestrained expression so that it can be discredited in open discussion” (Womack 2013, 29). Concurrently, the public sphere constituted by salons and coffee shops reignited the art of conversation.² Discussions in the public sphere also revolved around politics. The citizens expressed their opinion and debated the affairs of the State (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974, 52). The public sphere became a carrier of the general will with the potential for regulating the powers of the State. Deliberation among citizens then emerged as the path to creating a just and legitimate State. Meanwhile, the practice of dialogue had transcended the limitations of the medium and evolved into a genre.

The loci of the origin of dialogue can be situated in the non-Western world as well. In the Indian context, scholars have investigated and described the realities through dialogue. Scholars have, through dialogue, undertaken systematic inquiries into philosophy and the practice of deliberation in India. They have examined the characteristics of the Indian theory of inference, reasoning and debate and the history of village councils that used deliberation for decision-making (Matilal 1998; Lloyd 2013; Nadkarni *et al.* 2018; Mukherjee 1923, 162–323; Altekar 1984). They have retraced the history of the indigenous public sphere(s) in India and have illustrated the tradition of public debate in Indian society (Rudolph and Rudolph 2003; Bayly 1996; Perkins 2013; Sen 2005; R. Bhargava 2005, 13–58). David Hardiman documented the use of dialogue as a method of resistance in India,

² Dorinda Outram has provided a detailed account of the coffee houses, salons, masonic lodges, spread of literacy and advancements in print media that contributed to the development of the public sphere in the eighteenth century (Outram 2013, 10–25). Also see (Habermas 1991, 57–79), where Habermas examines the role of public sphere as a regulator of State power.

including Rajasthan (Hardiman 2003, 39–65). These studies provide evidence that political dialogue and rhetoric were not germane to Ancient Greek republics alone.

The dialogic tradition in India dates back to Ancient times. The tradition comprises an assortment of speech cultures such as folklore, storytelling, allegories, recitals and analytical dialogues that reflect the oral culture of the society. Both literate and non-literate persons were a part of it. Dialogue was the chosen method for transmission of knowledge, exchange of ideas and argumentation. Public reasoning and debate were integral to Indian conduct. They were used for reaching consensus or accommodating a plurality of beliefs and resolving tensions among individuals, communities and religions. The Indian treatise on rhetoric, *Nyayasutra*, outlined the methodology for philosophical debate. It illustrated the rules of dialogue and the validity of arguments through case studies (Matilal 1998, 31–59).

The universities, the king's court and the religious councils were spaces of philosophical dialogues. Buddhist councils, or Sanghas, met periodically to deliberate on religious doctrines. Councils and assemblies have flourished in the context of governance as well. Village assemblies embodied the traditions of republican government in the Indian polity. Proceedings of village assemblies – Sabha, Samiti, Parishad, reflected the country's rich deliberative tradition. The decisions were taken by the village-chief in consultation with the people or the members of the council (Altekar 1984, 143–44). This form of village governance continues today in the form of panchayats, gram sabha and the ward sabha. However, these forums were not without flaws. Evidence suggests that in some places, the village assemblies tended to be hierarchical and exclusionary. The Council of Elders comprising only the wealthy, opulent and wise men deliberated on matters of general interest (Altekar 1984, 145–47).

Similarly, people's tribunals were a regular administrative feature whereby public disputes were resolved in an open hearing. The kings too held public hearings for redressing the grievances related to the administration and well-being of the people. The jan sunwai can be located within this oral, republican tradition of self-

government, dialogical resistance, and administration of justice. Besides, the jan sunwai was a more egalitarian, inclusive and just forum of deliberation in comparison to the village councils and people's tribunals of the past. These aspects of the jan sunwai are examined in the next section.

4.3 Jan sunwai and the pre-requisites for dialogue

Freedom of expression, equality of rights and status, transparency of information and inclusion of all the persons are considered the prerequisites of dialogue. These conditions determine the legitimacy of the outcomes. These ideals have been recognised as important to deliberation by recent scholarship on deliberative democracy that includes, but is not limited to, Jürgen Habermas (1994), John Rawls (1993, 1997), (Young 2000) and Benhabib (1996).

4.3.1 Equality

Successful dialogue is built on equality among the participants, where everyone has an opportunity to participate, and the opinion of the people carried equal weight. The Indian constitution in 1950 guaranteed the Right to Equality and the Right to Freedom of Expression. However, in his concluding speech in the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949, Ambedkar pointed out that the political equality guaranteed by the constitution was contradicted by social and economic inequality prevalent in the country. According to him, social and economic inequality could put India's political democracy in peril. Political democracy could only be sustained if it was built on social democracy. Social democracy could be achieved through equality, liberty and fraternity in all spheres of life.

According to Yadav, socio-economic inequality in India has been "accentuated by unequal access to the means of forming and disseminating public opinion" (Yadav 2010, 358). Women, dalit and other marginalised communities have had very little say in the matters of governance. Parthasarathy and Rao have argued that the dynamics for democratic deliberation in Indian society differed from those prevalent in Western political thought. Instead of treating equality as a pre-condition

for dialogue, “deliberation in India has taken equality and social inclusion as one of its objectives” (Parthasarathy and Rao 2018, 806–9). The people have used deliberation to “assert their dignity and demand their social equality” in the gram sabha. Many of these people have faced deprivation historically. Social and educational backwardness reduced their ability to participate in political decision-making. However, the process of deliberation in the gram sabha empowered them to voice their opinions.

In the case of the jan sunwai, civil society organisations took measures to ensure social equality at every step – during the campaigns, in group interactions or public spaces during the rallies and public hearings. This equality also reflected in the division of work in the collective/organisation, where everyone performed all kinds of tasks, however quotidian or domestic, or specialised. For instance, the men in the group participated in domestic chores such as cooking food or fetching water. The women were encouraged to perform the tasks that were traditionally performed by the men. There was a common kitchen and a dining area. Inter-dining challenged the notions of purity and pollution associated with the caste structure. Rajni Bakshi compared MKSS’s Devdungari residence to Gandhi’s ashrams that followed simple, equal and co-operative living (Bakshi 2000, 22–28). Such arrangements assisted the creation of a public sphere that “drew the educated and uneducated, urban and rural, working and farming people into the discussions on governance” (Rudolph and Rudolph 2003, 399).

4.3.2 Freedom of expression

A democratic society secures the right of the citizens to express themselves and ensure their accessibility to the arenas of public dialogue. The Right to Freedom of Expression is a Fundamental Right under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. It is the basis of journalistic activities, freedom of the press, social campaign and people’s movements. The jan sunwai, too, derived its sanctity from the Article 19.1(a), (b) and (c) that protect “the right of citizens to freedom of speech and expression, to assemble peaceably and without arms, and to form associations or unions.” It also

championed the citizen's right to expression to share information, air their grievances and demand accountability from public representatives. The civil society activists conscientised the people that, "the right to speech is given by the constitution, and we work for your rights, you must come to the jan sunwai."³

Other fora such as caste-assemblies were hierarchical in nature. They excluded the women from deliberation. The gram sabha too was a deliberative assembly. It enjoyed a constitutional status. However, in practice, the structural inequalities curtailed the people's right to expression at the gram sabha:

In gram sabha meetings, there were local leaders and politicians. They interrupted people and misled them and distracted them from what they want to say. The people, who sided with the sarpanch misled/interrupted the people, "come, sit, have tea. Sit, sit, an important man is coming. Sit, sit, he's about to say something." A person was asked to repeat his/her question one, two, four times – "what were you saying? Can you say it louder? Did you mean to say this? What did you say?"⁴

The jan sunwai tended to avoid disruptive tactics and provided equal opportunities to everyone for expressing their opinions. The civil society organisations also devised strategies for resisting violence and coercion by the dominant groups. Absence of coercion empowered the people to exercise their right to expression.

4.3.3 Transparency

Transparency in the form of equal access to information was a part of right to equality. Transparency was also vital to the realisation of the right to freedom of expression. According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the right to freedom of expression also includes the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations General Assembly 1948). Access to information enables citizens to engage in critical discussion, understand policy options and make informed decisions. Transparency of State actions is also emphasised by the Transcendental

³ Interview with Nortri Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

⁴ Interview with Nortri Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

Principle of the Publicity of Public Law formulated by Immanuel Kant (Kant 1991 [1795], 125–30). According to the principle, State laws and policies must be subjected to public discussion. Public debates and opinions can determine their legitimacy. Thus, the principle of publicity combined elements of transparency with reason and dialogue.

Among 20th century political theorists, Bernard Manin argued that citizens could never avail themselves of complete information beforehand, and some of it becomes evident during deliberation. According to him, “deliberation is a procedure for being informed” (Manin 1987, 349). Participation of people in the local government could lead to greater transparency and accountability of panchayat officials. Therefore, the local landlords and other influential people, including the sarpanch and the secretary, made efforts to minimise people’s participation in the gram sabha meetings, evaded people’s questions and curtailed their expression with threats.

Transparency and dialogue were difficult to achieve in an unequal society with stratified power relations. It required efforts by an active civil society to open up the government records for public scrutiny. The jan sunwai was, thus, a unique experience where the people expressed their opinions and were able to “see the state” (Corbridge *et al.* 2005, 222) – the public officers as well the public records. Moreover, the jan sunwai informed the “people about their rights and the claims under the government schemes that were started for them. Nobody in the village informed them about the schemes, and therefore, the money sanctioned for the people never reached them.”⁵

In addition to information, the process of deliberation too must be open and transparent (Habermas 2006, 412–13). Secrecy and deliberations behind closed doors would make the legislators immune to citizen scrutiny and exclude the citizens from the political process. The jan sunwai emphasised transparency and public

⁵ Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

participation in deliberation every step. Transparency of procedure inspired people's trust in the forum.

4.3.4 Inclusion

Inclusion implies that all members have the opportunity to influence the outcome of deliberation. Inclusion of diverse social groups improved the “political legitimacy of the outcomes” by making the forum and the process genuinely representatives of peoples voices (Young 2000, 51). However, power asymmetries caused by socio-economic inequalities restricted the ability of the people to participate in the deliberation and resulted in exclusion. Iris Marion Young defined two types of exclusion: external and internal. External exclusions took place, when some persons or groups were kept out of the fora of decision-making or when other groups dominate the deliberation. Internal exclusions took place when the disadvantaged persons and groups were only “nominally included” in the deliberation process. Their opinion was either not considered or was patronised by the dominant groups (Young 2000, 53–55).

Internal exclusions were less visible than the external ones. Young advocated the use of greeting, narrative and rhetoric in deliberation that allowed people to share their life stories, arguments and perspectives in an informal manner (Young 2000, 56–58). Benhabib, however, argued that arguments based on facts were crucial to public deliberation. People must justify their positions or the ground for disputing a norm (Benhabib 1996, 70). Therefore, inclusion would also entail developing people's skill for rational argumentation and their knowledge of bureaucratic language and procedures. She also argued that the people had a right to decide the agenda and debate the rules of discourse procedures. This helped in countering the power imbalances, for instance, by providing opportunities to the less partisan groups (Benhabib 1996, 70–72).

The jan sunwai was organised for and by the marginalised sections to air their grievances and demand information. Workers, peasants, women and the poor spoke

up openly against the acts of corruption in the panchayat. The civil society organisations facilitated people's participation, thus making the forum more inclusive. The orality of the medium, freedom of expression, equality and transparency encouraged people to participate. Such participation fostered the values of justice, recognition, solidarity and self-determination that were associated with the ideas of governance and inclusive citizenship (Kabeer 2005, 1–7).

The women attended the jan sunwai in large numbers because they regularly worked on development projects in the village. Their grievances were considered the most legitimate and their testimonies held the maximum weightage. The women spoke-up from behind-the-veil and provided details such as the name of the site-supervisor, name of the scheme, number of days worked, and the individuals who worked with them on the worksite. Dalit families also expressed their grievances. They demanded compensation as well as action against the corrupt officers. As Chunni Bai explained:

In a jan sunwai, dalit women like me can speak, who are poor, and face problems, have grievances related to ration or wages. Otherwise, normally the more powerful and corrupt people subdue them from speaking up, “you don't know anything, keep quiet.”⁶

More importantly, the jan sunwai helped the weaker sections in organising themselves into a pressure group to negotiate with the government and administration at the local, state and national levels. While the peasants and workers fought for their wages, the rural middle class was sensitised towards corruption in the social, economic, and infrastructural development of the village. They participated in the jan sunwai to ensure the progress of their village. The inclusive nature of the jan sunwai is further demonstrated in the following sections.

4.4 Participation of marginalised communities in the jan sunwai

The following sections examine the dynamics of participation of women and the communities categorised as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other

⁶ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

Backward Classes (OBC). They also examine how such participation benefitted the people and sustained the movement.

4.4.1 Women

Women participated in large numbers at the jan sunwai. They were the primary applicants under different government programmes. The non-payment of wages or payment of less than minimum wages affected their livelihood and the well-being of their households. The activists assisted the women with the bureaucratic procedures and helped them in understanding the technicalities of the governance processes and in engaging with the government officers. The women spoke-up readily at the jan sunwai against non-payment of wages, “because it was their right. The money had come in their name, and they were entitled to receive it.”⁷ They participated in the minimum wage struggles and demanded transparency in the delivery of public welfare services.

4.4.2 Policy impetus for the development of women

This section describes the shift in State policies towards improving the socio-economic and political status of the women. Despite provisions by the government, social hierarchies and secrecy prevented women from claiming their rights. In 1974, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, often described as *Towards Equality*, stressed the “adoption of a well-defined policy for the total involvement of women in national development” (CSWI 1974, 231). It noted that poverty and economic dependence inhibited women’s ability to exercise their constitutional rights. Illiteracy, lack of health and inequality of class, status and power prevented them from participating in the political process (CSWI 1974, 301). The committee recommended the economic development of women for correcting social inequalities and greater allocation of resources and efforts towards gender-focused development. This included the expansion of employment opportunities for women in the organised and unorganised sectors and the application of the

⁷ Interview with Kaluram, 24 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

Minimum Wages Act and equal pay norms (CSWI 1974, 365–75). Other key recommendation included reservation for women in local bodies for increasing their political participation.⁸

Following the recommendations of the report, the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980–1985) created a separate chapter on women and development. It described the strategies for women’s development, especially in the thrust areas of education, health, nutrition, employment and social welfare. The subsequent five-year plans and other policy measures continued to emphasise women and child development through resource investment and proactive action in all the thrust areas, especially in the rural regions. These programmes were either implemented by specialised agencies or with the assistance of the panchayats set up under the community development programme.

Funds were also earmarked for women in sectors such as rural development, employment generation, and development of backward classes, including the tribal population. Schemes introduced for rural development mandated that a fixed percentage of beneficiaries under different government programmes should be the women heads of the households. For instance, under the Integrated Rural Development Programme, women constituted 30% of the targeted beneficiaries. Similarly, the National Rural Employment Programme, Food for Work, Integrated Child Development Scheme, and later Indira Awaas Yojana focused on the economic advancement of the women to make them more self-reliant. The Sixth Plan categorically stated that “any set of programmes aimed at the transformation of rural societies, with their complex sets of social values and goals, would be meaningless and in fact self-defeating, if they do not involve effectively the rural women” (Planning Commission 1981). It noted that economic activities would add to the burden of women because they would continue to be held responsible for

⁸ For an analysis of the progressive efforts towards the advancement of women in India from 1975-2005 beginning with the recommendations of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, please see (Sharma 2011).

household chores and child-care activities. It emphasised, “the need for organising and informing the women as this will enable them to effect better home management and thereby reduce their own drudgery as well as promote family welfare” (Planning Commission 1981). One of the methods suggested for achieving this was through greater mobilisation of women through organisations such as *Mahila Mandals* (women’s groups).

However, the activities of the mahila-mandal were limited to spreading awareness about government schemes and assisting women in claiming services under them. For the latter, they were again dependent on the local functionaries and the members of the voluntary organisations, which were hierarchical and male-dominated. The members of the women’s groups worked within the boundaries of the State and the society and avoided questions that were considered political. Participating in public protests, rallies or sit-ins outside the panchayat or the block development office was considered inappropriate for them. The women did not speak publicly in the village assembly because of social limitations.⁹ The women managed the household, “took part in agricultural operations, animal husbandry, collection of fuel, and bringing potable water. They were engaged in economic activities and contributed to the family income. However, they did not take part in politics and “had no role in the process of social control” (Singh *et al.* 1998, 816).

The jan sunwai changed this gradually by mobilising the women to participate in the jan sunwais and to speak up openly before the community. Conditions for inclusive participation were created, beginning with equal rights and opportunities for women to participate in informal group discussions. The approach for enlisting women’s participation by apprising them of their rights and empowering them to assert these are described in the section below.

⁹ The silence of women and their significant absence from the public discourse can be understood from a regular village assembly scene: concentric rows of women in bright, colourful attire with their veiled heads, sitting on the ground in a corner. The men from the weaker sections sat on the ground too, facing the panchayat members or the caste leaders and men from other dominant sections, who sat on the dais.

4.4.3 Engaging women in the struggle for wages and information

In the 1970s and 1980s, Nortri Bai worked regularly on rural employment programmes. Hailing from the village of Harmada in Kishangarh block, Ajmer, she worked alongside other women and was paid rupees four or five per day. The men were paid a higher rate, she said. They were paid even if they did not work and just loitered around the worksite. Nortri Bai and other women in her village filed a writ in the Supreme Court in 1982 to protest against the discriminatory wages government work programmes. The court ruled that the wages for men and women should be brought at par and should conform to the Minimum Wages Act 1948.

These circumstances were not unique to Nortri Bai or women in her village. This was the shared reality of the poor landless women in different villages of Rajasthan. For instance, Chunni Bai, a resident of Talai village near Devdungari in Rajsamand also faced challenges in receiving employment under the famine relief works during the 1987 drought in Rajasthan – among the worst, in decades, since independence. Narrating her experience, she said:

Sometimes we did not get enough rotis (flatbread) for all three meals of the day. I collected money by selling dry sticks or cow-dung cakes. I also performed various chores for people in return for some grains. Then we would make rotis and eat. One day, someone told me that my name was included in the muster rolls. So, I went to work on the Dadi Rapat pond under the famine relief works. There I met Aruna *behen ji*, Nikhil bhai and Shankar bhai. They would talk and ask questions: How much money do you get? Do you get full wages? How much do you work? Do you finish the measured amount of work? I understood gradually. I thought since they are saying it, we must be a little cautious and aware. They visited four times in a fortnight. I went sometimes in the evening to Devdungari. Later, they visited my house also.¹⁰

These events preceded the formation of the MKSS. Aruna, Shankar and Nikhil interacted regularly with the workers on the worksites to learn out about their problems. Nortri Bai had worked with Aruna and Shankar at Barefoot College, Tilonia and so had Sushila from Jawaja, Ajmer. Later, Raji Bai and Bhuri-ya also

¹⁰ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

became associated with the Devdungari group.¹¹ The circumstances of their association with each other and their first encounter with the Devdungari trio might have been different and spaced over time. However, the uniformity of their conditions and the status of public services provided common grounds for generating solidarity and collective action. Therefore, when the workers on Dadi Rapat were paid less than even one-fourth of the minimum wages, there was anguish and despair among them. Nonetheless, most of them accepted the offered amount. However, Chunni Bai and Bhanwar Kushalpura, the mate on the worksite, refused to accept less than the complete amount.¹² Chunni Bai credited her association with the Devdungari trio for the courage in demanding the full amount, though she also said, “I was always active and good at speaking.” She recalled the entire episode very vividly:

Bhanwar wrote [four] applications. One, I submitted to the officer who made the payments. The second one, we gave to Shankar Singh in Devdungari; the third one, I kept with me, and the fourth one, I submitted to the SDM in Bhim. I walked back from Bhim to my home six kilometres in the evening. There was no vehicle, bus or taxi. It was already five-thirty in the evening and the sun had set. When I reached my village, people told me “your application will be lost, you won’t get the money. Your money will be pilfered.”¹³

The thumbprints of the workers on that parchment of protest expressed their grievances and the resolve to claim their rightful wages. This was also a training in the language of the State, which facilitated their critical engagement with public officers. Similar methods were followed in other cases too. These episodes were significant because they involved women in the struggle for wages and information according to the principle of equal rights and freedom of expression.

¹¹ Chunni Bai’s husband Mohan Ram also became associated with the group, and later, along with Narayan Singh, Chunni Singh, Lal Singh and others formed the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghathan in 1990.

¹² As per the rule, if the mate gets paid at the same rate as the workers and if the mate refuses to accept the payment, then the payments of all the workers on the muster roll is declared as unsettled.

¹³ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

4.4.4 Preparing women to speak up at the jan sunwai

Rajasthan was a feudal society with significant social and gender inequalities. Gender subordination was reflected in their restricted access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities. These crucial indicators of human development were denied to women. Financial dependence made them prone to various forms of exploitation such as drudgery, malnutrition and domestic violence. Child marriage was rampant in this region, and female education was not prioritised. The women were relegated to the private sphere of the home. Raji Bai's account explained the interplay of social and cultural factors that determined the life of women:

I am illiterate. My father had eight sons and daughters. We were four brothers and four sisters. Since there was no regular employment, only some of the kids were sent to school. One of my brothers who went to school became the village accountant. He was able to earn his livelihood well. I was married and sent to live with my in-laws here in the village.¹⁴

Illiteracy did not deter women like Raji Bai from participating at the jan sunwai. The orality of the medium facilitated their participation. The information was shared in a language and medium that were accessible to the people. Moreover, the lack of education was just one aspect. The women were bound by social customs that restricted their voice in public matters. Silence accompanied their presence in public life. Gender, caste and class hierarchies restricted the women from speaking publicly before the men or the caste superiors. Even the most vocal among them was prevented from speaking by the powerful persons, "you don't know anything, keep quiet."¹⁵

Sushila Bai described the social conditions that controlled women's participation:

It was very difficult to persuade women. Especially in the village of a state like Rajasthan. Because the veil is still a custom and it is a patriarchal society, where men want to dominate everything. The women should only be at home and make roti, be behind the veil and look after the kids. It was very difficult to persuade them, but we achieved it.¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview with Raji Bai, 03 May, 2017, Shakkargarh, Rajsamand.

¹⁵ Interview with Norty Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

¹⁶ Interview with Sushila Devi, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

The activists encouraged the women to share their grievances and testify against the rent-seeking behaviour of the panchayat members. The women spoke-up from behind the veil into the microphone about their pending wages. Their testimonies did not miss any detail. At the Bhim jan sunwai, a group of women from Udamana Kot came forward to testify on the microphone. They were paid Rs 8 per day, much below the minimum wage rate of Rs 40. At the jan sunwai, the women stood in a half-circle around the microphone and narrated their drudgery – “we had quarried the stone in the sun the entire day. Our hands were blistered. We carried it to the nearby site also. They paid us Rs 8 and said, ‘take it or leave it.’”¹⁷ The women were anxious about speaking in public. The MKSS members helped them with using the microphone. Shankar Singh asked them the name of the sarpanch and the mate. The woman in the front named them immediately, without any fear. She reiterated the details to emphasise their pain and problems in the hope of redress.

Speaking at a public assembly was a new experience for most of them. Almost eighteen years after the jan sunwai, these women explained their motivation for participating.¹⁸ Their narration still did not miss any detail. They were not paid their wages despite working hard. The corrupt persons stole their wages. Jamni, now 60 years old, told that she was not scared of speaking on the microphone:

My husband was bed-ridden. My younger daughter did not go to school for a year. She looked after him while I went to work. I had worked very hard. Still, I was paid less than half the wages, that too after a delay of eight months. The school headmaster had announced in the panchayat that they would pay only rupees eight. I confronted him and the sarpanch in front of everyone.¹⁹

Jamni’s maiden village (before marriage) was the same as Shankar Singh’s. He had visited her home in Bhim during the verification of employment registers. She said, “later the team came here, and there was a meeting in the Bhim ground also

¹⁷ Anurag Singh, “Bhim Jan Sunwai,” Folder 3-4-2000, Tape 2, (New Delhi: Rough Cut Productions, 2001), Video cassettes.

¹⁸ The women were located with the help of the jan sunwai videos. They readily recognised each other in the clips from 18 years ago, despite their faces covered with the veil. Please refer to Appendix VIII of this dissertation for their pictures.

¹⁹ Interview with Jamni Devi, 24 April, 2017, Bhim Rajsamand.

(May Fair). They (Shankar Singh and his team) were like family to me.”²⁰ Association with the MKSS inspired her to speak up. However, the other women present on the dais said that they did not speak into the microphone because of the fear of repercussions. They had gone there with the ward panchani (a female ward member) for their pending wages. They explained that one or two persons spoke on behalf of everyone. It can be recalled that the Bhim jan sunwai in the year 2000 was organised to demonstrate how to conduct social audit ward sabhas on the lines of the jan sunwai. Ward members had to attend compulsorily.

Premi Devi the ward panchani at the time and had worked on the public employment programme along with other women. She spoke somewhat hesitantly, yet very clearly, about the pending wages. However, she did not name the sarpanch or the mate to avoid any trouble in the future. She explained, “I sat in a corner in the meeting outside the tehsil. When my turn came, I told them what I knew. After that, I left.”²¹ She was shy of speaking before the village elders. Despite being a ward member, she said, she never sat on the chair:

I would always sit on the floor. They would tell me to sit on the chair, but my brother-in-law and others were present. I cannot do that. Panchayat membership is only for five years. Later, people would have told me, ‘you sat on a chair like men.’ I was always careful.²²

Village assemblies were dominated by upper-caste men and government officers. They were always on the dais – seated on the chairs or stone platforms under the banyan tree. The men from the lower castes sat on the ground on one side and the women sat on the other side with their faces covered by the edge of their scarfs. The upper-caste women sat away from them or stood in a corner, also wearing the veil.

In such a scenario, speaking on the microphone was a political act. It accorded visibility to the women as equal citizens and as members of the community. It

²⁰ Interview with Jamni Devi, 24 April, 2017, Bhim Rajsamand.

²¹ Interview with Premi Devi, 24 April, 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

²² Interview with Premi Devi, 24 April, 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

empowered them to assert their rights and demand redressal. Dedicated efforts were required to overcome the social conditioning of subordination, coupled with the fear of consequences. The Janawad jan sunwai in the semi-tribal Kumbhalgarh block witnessed women from the Bhil community come forward and testify. Gopi, a Bhil woman, could barely utter a word. The volunteers helped her with using the microphone. She stood there and narrated her grievances with the request that her wages be paid.²³ Men and women, like Gopi, lived on the edge of the community in a voiceless existence. The jan sunwai promoted their engagement in governance as equal stakeholders.

4.4.5 Benefits of women's participation

Kaluram Salvi, the MKSS member, explained that the jan sunwai was also about women's issues and welfare: "The grazing ground, cooperative society is about them only. Maximum women worked on famine-relief works. They spoke-up at the jan sunwai and came to dharna and rallies also."²⁴ Norti Bai explained that the women hoped to get timely work and wages so that their households would prosper: "They would be happy. They would not have to compromise on household expenses. Their kids would wear good clothes, and they would celebrate festivals without a dearth of anything."²⁵

The jan sunwai also refined their understanding of governance. It also incorporated their opinions and understanding of the practice of governance. Exposure to other women's groups and civil society organisations helped them overcome "social and spatial boundaries" that delimited their "mobility and connectivity" (Kruks-Wisner 2013, 10–12). This helped them become aware of their rights as well as the ways of negotiating with State officers. They also developed what can be broadly termed as 'political understanding,' where they understood and

²³ Anurag Singh, "Janawad Jan Sunwai," Folder 3-4-2001, Tape 3, (New Delhi: Rough Cut Productions, 2001), Video cassettes.

²⁴ Interview with Kaluram, 24 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

²⁵ Interview with Norti Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

critiqued policy procedures. The administrators were often nonplussed at their questions and responses. When the panchayat secretary refused to show her the registers, Narabada Devi had asked, “why won’t you show us the documents? Only men can do justice, and women can’t?”²⁶

Sushila Devi explained the significance of the right to information to a group of journalists at Beawar dharna in 1996. The journalists had asked why the poor rural women and men demanded transparency instead of food, employment, education, and so on. Sushila explained, “when I send my son to the market with Rs 10, I ask him for the *hisaab* (expenditure break-up). Similarly, I pay taxes to the government. These funds are then used for my development and sent to the panchayat. I am entitled to know how this money was spent.”²⁷ She coined the slogan, “*Hamara Paisa, Hamara Hisaab*,” which became the rallying cry of the struggle for RTI in Rajasthan. This episode is among the most widely recounted anecdotes of indigenous political wisdom attributed to the people’s movement for transparency. In another incident, a few lawyers ridiculed the women protestors. They said:

Aruna ji, you are educated, you speak English, wear saree. However, the women supporting you are ‘skirt brigade,’ (*Ghaghra Paltan*). You could never achieve the right to information with their support. There should be more women like Aruna Roy, wiser, better educated, IAS qualified.

We said, “even though we don’t speak English, we understand things. We understand that we are born as citizens of this country. We know what is good and bad for our society and the village. And if speaking English alone can mitigate corruption, then all of us will wear sarees and learn English.”²⁸

The movement also gained a lot of strength with the participation of the women. Nortti Bai recounted an incident from the land struggle in Sohargarh:

Lal Singh ji was attacked by Thakur’s goons at night at 10 pm. They had guns. He could not step out of the home. In that situation, we created a women’s group. Every woman took a bronze plate and a wooden rolling pin and marched forward, beating the pin against the plate. The first woman went ahead, then second, then third – till all the women of the

²⁶ Interview with Narabada Devi, 15 February 2016, Jhunjhunu.

²⁷ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

²⁸ Interview with Sushila Devi, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

village had gathered there. They surrounded Lal Singh ji's house. Seeing this, the Thakur's men fled away.²⁹

The women's grievances at the jan sunwai were considered genuine. Even the local representatives and administration would not doubt the intention of the women speaking-up publicly, though they tried to prevent them from participating:

The women spoke very honestly. They did not try to manipulate and mislead people. Nature made women in a way that they expressed what they felt. No artificial behaviour. They worked the maximum at home and were exploited the most. And it was not just about the women in poor households. It was about women everywhere.³⁰

The participation of women, it can be argued, provided a moral force to the movement. The women took to the streets and protested outside the panchayats to assert their right to livelihood. This helped in mobilising other women to participate. According to Shankar Singh, "men could be seen loitering around, but the women were always busy – with household chores, public employment, grazing cattle and so on. They did not waste time." Therefore, their participation in the jan sunwai was significant because it showed that it was useful and inspired others to join. The women derived compassion and solidarity from each other. Therefore, "when women activists and supporters helped other women, they were able to build trust. When women's groups participated in rallies, and yatras on the road, other women were also inspired to participate."³¹

4.5 Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes

The jan sunwai emphasised transparency and deliberation as keys for improving the delivery of development programmes. In addition to women, these programmes were also directed at the development of the scheduled caste (also called Dalit) and scheduled tribes.³² Therefore, they participated in large numbers at the jan sunwai.

²⁹ Interview with Nortri Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

³⁰ Interview with Nortri Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

³¹ Interview with Shankar Singh, 29 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

³² The Constitution of India 1950 has recognised caste identities through Article 341, which states that the President can notify any caste, sub-caste and race as scheduled caste in consultation with the Governor of that particular state. Similarly, Article 342 states that the President can notify specific tribes and tribal

Many of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes belonged to the below poverty line estimates formulated by the government. The BPL estimates were used for targeting the welfare programmes in India. The poverty line denotes the minimum income required in rural and urban areas for a person to secure “certain normative levels of adequate nourishment, clothing, house rent, conveyance and education, and a behaviourally determined level of other non-food expenses” (Rangarajan Expert Group 2014, 8). Earlier, the poverty line estimates only considered the minimum caloric requirements. The Rangarajan committee also included non-food requirements such as health and education.³³ According to the 2015 estimates, the poverty line was defined at Rs. 32 per day per person for rural areas and Rs. 47 in urban areas (Down to Earth 2015).

In 1993–94, 48.11% of persons belonging to the scheduled castes in rural areas were below the poverty line. Similarly, 51.94% of persons from scheduled tribes in rural areas were below the poverty line.³⁴ The scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have faced systemic social, economic and political exclusion. The government sought to reverse this through affirmative action based on socio-economic and political quotas. First, by providing state-sponsored programmes for their livelihood and economic advancement. Second, by including them in the development and planning process through reservation in the PRIs. Seats were also reserved for persons from SC & ST communities in educational institutes and matters of employment in public offices.³⁵

The Five-Year Plans since independence have focused on rural development and poverty alleviation. The initial plans stressed on improving the education and

communities as scheduled tribes in consultation with the Governor of the state. Subsequently, different states have issued orders and criteria for identifying castes and tribes as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes respectively.

³³ Please see (Rangarajan report on poverty 2014) for a summary of the methodology and recommendations of the committee.

³⁴ For 2004–05, the BPL estimates were 36.80% and 47.30% for SCs and STs in rural areas respectively.

³⁵ For an analysis of the debates around affirmative action in India and the measures taken by the government over the years, please see Deshpande (2013).

economic status of the SC & ST communities as part of the general development of an area. The Sixth Plan emphasised, “family and beneficiary-oriented development schemes that were specifically designed for the benefit of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes” (Planning Commission 1981). Further, “a definite target of assisting 50 per cent of the scheduled caste and/or scheduled tribe families to cross the poverty line was adopted for the first time” (Planning Commission 1981).

The Seventh Five-Year Plan stressed upon poverty alleviation through income-generating activities such as asset endowment and wage-employment. National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Programme (RLEP) were prioritised along with the other schemes that were introduced under the Integrated Rural Development Programme. It was observed that the implementation of these programmes suffered from resource-leakages and exploitation by the public intermediaries. To correct that, the Seventh Plan emphasised greater public participation in welfare planning through decentralisation:

The problem of ensuring maximum benefits to the target groups by minimising leakages is common for all the poverty alleviation programmes and indeed for the rural development programmes in general. Apart from the necessary restructuring of the administrative set-up, there is no alternative to raising the awareness of the rural poor and involving representative institutions from below in the formulation as well as the implementation of such programmes. (Planning Commission 1986)

It also emphasised the role of voluntary organisations and self-help groups in the management of public service delivery and capacity-building of the people, informing them about the development programmes and generating awareness about the importance of education and health-based interventions.

The panchayats were the primary structures for implementing the development programmes in rural areas. The three-tier panchayati raj was rolled out in phases across different states. These phases also witnessed a shift in the development-focus of the panchayat activities.³⁶ Initially, the focus was on the

³⁶ These phases include Community Development Plan, National Extension Services, Recommendations of the Balwant Ray Mehta Team on Decentralisation 1959 and Panchayati Raj Act 1993.

socially “weaker sections.” The focus then shifted to “target groups” and eventually to the development of the “poor”, guided by the poverty line considerations. The shift in approach was to ensure that the benefits of development spread evenly and achieved “growth with social justice.” The target groups included the SCs and STs, the landless peasants, small and marginal agricultural labourers, and the economically poor defined by the poverty line. The local government was responsible for identifying the individuals and households that were eligible for the development programmes and implementing the programmes (Bhargava 1983, 8–10).

Efforts were also made to ensure that the development funds reached the targeted groups. The 1978 Ashok Mehta Committee report (1978) on panchayati raj recommended social audits by the district collector to ascertain that the schemes and programmes for the SCs and the STs were implemented properly. Despite comprehensive measures by the state for their socio-economic advancement, they remained at the periphery of the development. Different factors affected their ability to claim the public goods, thus hindering their progress and achievement of state objectives. These factors included lack of awareness about the government schemes, low literacy rates, feudal structures, caste inequalities and exploitation by the intermediaries in the delivery of good and services. The dalits also faced economic and social backlash for asserting their rights and protesting against oppression.

Lakshman Singh, a former ward panch and sarpanch explained the effect of the lack of awareness about the government schemes:

The panchayat samiti was the headquarter and the panchayat functioned under it. The panchayat secretary was responsible for notifying all the government schemes to the people in the panchayat circle. She or he would inform the sarpanch, who was responsible for informing all the ward panch in panchayat meetings. Ward panch informed the people in their ward circle. Everyone in the panchayat circle was thus expected to be aware of the schemes and the related procedure. The problem was that half the things are not told to the people, who are just left to wait and wonder.³⁷

³⁷ Interview with Lakshman Singh, 24 April 2017, Kookarkheda, Bhim, Rajsamand.

The Sohargarh struggle (1987) highlighted the prevalence of feudal structures, despite the abolition of the *zamindari* system. A local feudal lord, Thakur Hari Singh asserted a claim over the village commons and exploited the village residents:

He controlled everything. If someone died, then getting wood for funeral pyre meant that one full trolley wood had to be first delivered at the Thakur's place. If you were building a house, you first delivered a trolley full of mud to the Thakur's house and then took mud for your house. He had terrified the entire village.³⁸

Heera Ram, a resident of the Tal village, explained:

There was forest land, where the plants grew. The Thakur said this is my land. When a person went to get some firewood and branches of the Ashok tree, some people caught hold of him and beat him up. That triggered a fight. Then we telephoned – no, there were no telephones then. We sent letters. So, we called an inspector from Deogarh police station and lodged a complaint against them that they beat us and abused us. Then the inspector arrested them.³⁹

The land struggle in Sohargarh also stressed the significance of collective action by the people. The struggle for minimum wages between 1987 and 1993 identified secrecy in the administrative procedures as detrimental to the development and empowerment of the marginalised communities. The *jan sunwais* revealed discrepancies in the implementation of the welfare programmes and highlighted the elite capture of panchayat seats reserved for the women and the people belonging to SC and ST communities. Chunni Bai summarised the plight of the marginalised communities thus:

I am poor. I am made to fill the form three or four times, and when the money comes in my name, am not informed about it. It is used by some relative of the sarpanch to build his own house. And I have no clue about it.⁴⁰

Prior to the panchayati raj act, the BPL list was not shared publicly. The gram sabha was not organised. The panchayat members prepared the list in a discretionary

³⁸ Interview with Nortti Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

³⁹ Interview with Heera Ram, 25 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁴⁰ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

manner and kept it a secret. Motaram, a resident of Vijayapura, described their struggle for accessing quotidian details that impacted their livelihood:

We told the administration that the name of the recipients should be made public through wall-paintings. In the case of public works, a notice board should also be put at the worksite with details such as the name of the project, the amount of money spent, and the number of workers employed. The village residents and visitors should be able to understand. In this way, we started with the wall-paintings in our village, then it spread to the district, and it became a nationwide practice.⁴¹

After the institutionalisation of panchayat raj, the BPL list was directed to be shared with the gram sabha. Every ward panch identified the eligible persons and households in their ward circle. The panchayat compiled the cumulative list. The list was read out in the gram sabha. However, several names were often omitted. Lakshman Singh explained the nepotism in the selection of BPL households:

In the gram sabha meeting, the BDO or Assistant Engineer announced that the names of BPL families would be read out, and if anybody had an objection, please stand and say, “this household was selected by mistake.” However, nobody would stand up and object. Why? Because nobody wanted grudges. Right now, I would say you have been chosen wrongly. Your name should be removed because you were very rich. However, after gram sabha, you would confront me and curse me. Therefore, even if a person was selected wrongfully, nobody objected.⁴²

These discrepancies were highlighted at the jan sunwai, and the people testified openly against the inclusion of affluent persons in the BPL list. Those who had been marked as “paid” also confirmed whether they had received the funds or not. The Bori jan sunwai in 1999 revealed 13 cases of irregular allotments. Nortti Bai described an incident, where the deputy sarpanch of higher caste (Gurjar) made his own house with the Indira Awaas funds allotted to another man from the scheduled caste. At the jan sunwai, the man said:

The money was sanctioned in my name, but I did not get it. How do I build a house now? They did not even tell me that my money has come. They did not pay me any instalment. Even if I started building with my own funds, how would I ever complete it, if I wouldn't get the sanctioned instalment? It would be a burden.⁴³

⁴¹ Interview with Motaram, 26 April 2017, Vijayapura, Deogarh, Rajsamand.

⁴² Interview with Lakshman Singh, 24 April 2017, Kookarkheda, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁴³ Interview with Nortti Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

How did the people testify openly at the jan sunwai, while they were scared to raise objections in the gram sabha? One possible explanation could be the strength of the collective and the presence of the ‘independent’ panel. Moreover, in this case, the civil society members read out the list of ineligible households and asked the people to verify. The people responded as a collective, which helped in dispelling the fear of repercussions.

Dalit communities were involved at every step in the movement – right from a discussion of goals and objectives, demanding access to information from the panchayat, mobilisation activities before the jan sunwai, conducting the jan sunwai and organising marches, rallies and protests. Many of them also participated in the official meetings with the block, district and state administration. In fact, one of the purposes of the jan sunwai was to enable direct interaction between the people and the administrators, who were, therefore, invited at the hearings.

The jan sunwai was also effective in generating solidarity across the caste lines. The inter-caste dynamics within a number of scheduled castes restricted the possibility of collective action. The focus on livelihood forced the people to look beyond the caste boundaries. This in-turn strengthened the movement where the people formed a cohesive force.

The next section examines the dynamics of inter-caste engagement at the jan sunwai. These castes were mentioned during the field-interviews and were cited in archives and hence taken up for study. The scheduled castes included Balai, Khatik, Meghwal (Meghwanshi), Regar and Salvi. Bhil is a scheduled tribe. Rawat and Gurjar belonged to the other backward classes. The upper castes, including the Thakur and Rajput, were often the antagonists blocking information and the people from participating. The business and trading communities, generally the “bania”, did not participate in the jan sunwai. However, a person from the Jain-Mahajan community responded to the questions to describe his perception of the jan sunwai and its effects in his panchayat.

4.5.1 Dynamics of the participation by select communities from the scheduled castes

Balai

Women, landless labourers and masons from the Balai community participated in large numbers at the jan sunwai in Umarwas, Janawad and other panchayats, where a sizeable amount of corruption was reported. Chunni Bai, her husband Mohan Ram, and others from Balai community were a part of the MKSS. They worked on public employment programmes for their livelihood. They were often underpaid or not paid at all. Most of them had no landed property. A few who owned small areas of land carried out agricultural work. During droughts and famines, they depended upon government employment programmes. The literacy rate was low among them, and “owing to their overall poor condition, they were unable to improve their social and cultural life” (Singh *et al.* 1998, 150–55). They were exploited by the caste superiors, moneylenders (who charged exorbitant rates of interest), the local officers and the elected representatives, who controlled the societal and state resources. Excessive dependence on state-sponsored programmes pushed them further down the political hierarchy. The jan sunwai put them at the centre, where they engaged as equals in the discussions around the development.

Khatik

The Khatik was a scheduled caste, though they claimed their descent from a Rajput clan. This explained why “they put themselves in the middle order above the other scheduled castes in the local social hierarchy” (Singh *et al.* 1998, 539–43). While some of them had small landholdings, many others were dependent on the government schemes for employment and livelihood. They were also exploited by the higher castes for political gains. Such a case was the focus of the Bori Jan Sunwai held in 1999.

Pyarchand Khatik was nominated as the sarpanch on the reserved seat by the upper caste Rajput and Brahman ward members, who wanted to assert their

dominance over the panchayat. They campaigned for Pyarchand and ensured that all the upper caste votes were cast in his favour. They later misused the panchayat funds for their own advancement. They ensured that the Meghwal candidate did not contest, even though the Meghwals “were a sizeable majority and would have won, and probably worked independently of the traditional power elite” (Roy and MKSS Collective 2018, 220–25).

The jan sunwai brought the truth before the people. The testimony of village residents proved that the ward members controlled the panchayat. The people of the Meghwal community too testified against the exploitative tactics of the upper castes ward members. During the preparatory phase of the jan sunwai, the support of local people and the Meghwals was sought because they too were affected adversely by the abuse of power.

In addition to such cases, the misuse of seats reserved for women and minorities was a regular practice in panchayats across the state. The jan sunwai not only highlighted the policy loopholes but also provided a remedy to safeguard the interests of dalits. For instance, in Janawad, the female dalit sarpanch Bhuri Bai was coerced into committing irregularities by the former sarpanch Ram Lal. Bhuri Bai was also forced to sign 42 blank papers by the secretary, who later used it to get a stay order from the high court against providing information. Later, she was a part of the jan sunwai panel and was encouraged to speak up against coercion and manipulation.

Meghwal (Meghwanshi)

Meghwal was a caste of weavers and leather tanners. They were a scheduled caste, placed lower down the social hierarchy. They were dependent on government programmes for education and employment. They were politically active and welcomed the panchayati raj norms for inclusive participation in the local government (Singh *et al.* 1998, 629–32). It was their key to achieving equitable resource sharing and reversing centuries of social and political exclusion. The

Meghwal community also participated in the jan sunwai. At the Bori jan sunwai, they testified against the misdeeds of upper caste ward members. Anshi Bai, a Meghwal woman, told everyone that the ward member Kamla Nath had pressurised her repeatedly to siphon-off cereals meant for the kids under the ICDS programmes. When she refused to do so, Kamla Nath troubled her through other means, even disallowing her to fetch water from the village well. Lacchu Ram was instrumental in organising the jan sunwai despite severe resistance from the village elites, most importantly the former sarpanch, secretary and the contractors. Bhanwar Meghwanshi, the dalit activist in Rajasthan and editor of *Diamond India*, regularly collaborated with the people's coalition for the right to information and work.

#Regar

Regar was a landless community and categorised as a scheduled caste. Their traditional occupation was leather tanning and dyeing. They were dependent on government programmes for their livelihood. Women of this caste often worked as labourers (Singh *et al.* 1998, 819–22). Nortti Bai was a regar. She had worked at the SWRC and with the MKSS. As part of the people's movement, she learnt the bureaucratic procedures and devised methods of resisting oppression. The Regar and Meghwal communities participated actively in politics as compared to the other communities, such as the Balai. They were also effective in mobilising others to participate and exhibited leadership qualities.

#Salvi

Kaluram and Motaram were Salvi, a scheduled caste. They were the residents of Vijaypura panchayat and worked actively towards organising the jan sunwai. Vijaypura, especially the village Narayan ji ka beeda was predominantly inhabited by the Salvi(s). Traditionally, they were weavers (Singh *et al.* 1998, 859–62). They were also dependent on agriculture and public employment programmes for their livelihood. Land issues were important to them. Despite their greater number, the Salvi and other dalit communities did not have a say in the management of their

village affairs. The jan sunwai was effective in channelising their voice in local governance.

The jan sunwai in Vijayapura was organised to protest against the illegal auction of the village commons by the secretary and the sarpanch, who belonged to the OBC. They had connived to “confiscate the high-value land in a dalit area, assuming that no one would come to know of it.”⁴⁴ However, as Kaluram explained, “the people of the village were also attached to the grazing ground, water bodies, land, forests – the entire village values them. So, we told people that these are our issues, our responsibility and they must attend the jan sunwai.”⁴⁵

Motaram emphasised the importance of land to people’s livelihood:

We told the people that the village would have to be united to show its strength. We are the residents of Narayan ji ka Beeda, which has grazing land measuring up to 200 beegha (approximately 78 acres). Out of which, residential land is approximately 5.50 acres. We are entirely dependent on the land for grazing animals and fuel. And if they take away our right to the land, where will we go?⁴⁶

A year earlier in 1993, the sub-divisional magistrate had ordered the cancellation of the land titles after an administrative enquiry. However, no action was taken. The jan sunwai was conducted to “take the issue to a wider public forum so that a strategy for public action could emerge.”⁴⁷ At the hearing, Dudha Ram Meghwal said that he had seen a copy of the allotment proceedings during the administrative enquiry. However, the panchayat extension officer “snatched the papers and filed them in the panchayat records.”⁴⁸

The people protested firmly against the secretary and the sarpanch. They denied ever being aware of the auction or taking part in it. The upper caste kins of

⁴⁴ MKSS Papers, “Vijayapura Jan Sunwai,” file 115, p. 5-10, Institutional Collection No. 44, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

⁴⁵ Interview with Kaluram, 24 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

⁴⁶ Interview with Motaram, 26 April 2017, Vijayapura, Deogarh, Rajsamand.

⁴⁷ MKSS Papers, “Vijayapura Jan Sunwai,” file 115, p. 5-10, Institutional Collection No. 44, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

⁴⁸ MKSS Papers, “Vijayapura Jan Sunwai,” file 115, p. 5-10, Institutional Collection No. 44, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

the sarpanch were allotted the land at meager prices. Some of them paid as low as Rs 600 for 2400 square feet. Publicly, in the presence of activists and the administration, the kin of the sarpanch denied any knowledge of the auction. However, later they sided with the sarpanch, who had bribed them with plots of land.⁴⁹

A few dalit persons were also allotted plots of land without their knowledge. They asserted that no public auction had taken place:

Many people had been allotted plots, though they were totally unaware of the auction. They said they did not have the pattas (land-titles). They were worried that *benami* (anonymous) transactions might have taken place in their name. On the other hand, Manaram Nanga and Kamparam stated that although they had been issued free plot, the sarpanch and the secretary had taken Rs. 400/- and Rs. 1200/- respectively from them as a bribe. Varda Ram, who was blind, and Surjaram stated that since the last twenty years, they had been asking for land for housing purpose, and were refused every time.⁵⁰

The jan sunwai thus restored the people's agency in administering their livelihood. Kaluram explained the effect of the jan sunwai:

Dalits have been almost always fighting for their rights, but this time they had the strength of the MKSS. They also started going to the gram sabha, and asking questions, seeking information in records. I was elected sarpanch from my village.⁵¹

The provisions for reservation of seats in the panchyati raj act also empowered the people in Vijayapura, and elsewhere in Rajasthan, to break the upper caste hegemony in the local government. The jan sunwai and the struggle for information as well as other people's movements such as those for MNREGA and the National Food Security Act have strengthened their participation in the matters of governance.

⁴⁹ Interview with Motaram, 26 April 2017, Vijayapura, Deogarh, Rajsamand.

⁵⁰ MKSS Papers, "Vijayapura Jan Sunwai," file 115, p. 5-10, Institutional Collection No. 44, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

⁵¹ Interview with Kaluram, 24 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

4.5.2 Dynamics of the participation by select communities from the scheduled tribes

Participation of the Bhil community at the jan sunwai was studied on the basis of the information from the text and visual archives. The Bhils were a landless community. They lived outside the village boundary. Some of them had settled houses. They worked as daily wage labourers. However, they were dependent on private contractors and government programmes for employment (Singh *et al.* 1998, 150–55). They faced double marginalisation because the private contractors hired them at low wages and did not follow the government norms for minimum wages or work conditions. The civil society individuals involved in organising the jan sunwai made concerted efforts to reach out to the Bhil communities, “the poorest of the poor” for whose advancement the government programmes were primarily designed.

The Bhil members participated at the jan sunwai in Umarwas (Bori), Janawad and some other panchayats of Bhilwara district, which have a considerable Bhil population. At the Bori public hearing, Shankar Singh pointed out the mockery of social justice, where the upper caste persons had cornered the subsidised housing funds while the Bhil households continued to live in abject poverty. None of the Bhil families had been allotted the Indira Awaas. At a few other jan sunwais, Bhil women spoke up fearlessly against the upper caste sarpanch to expose their corrupt practices. Muscle-power did not deter them from testifying at the jan sunwai. This encouraged other persons from the village to participate as well.

The case of Gopi (described in chapter one of this dissertation) reasserted the relationship between secrecy, corruption, deprivation, and the derailment of the development agenda. Gopi was ‘discovered’ during the verification process for the Janawad jan sunwai. She survived on a bare minimum. The team that visited her home noticed rows of charcoal dots on the mud walls. These were the number of days she and her husband had worked on the employment programme. Both of them were illiterate and used this method for keeping a record. Their wages were

pending for three years. Gopi's husband had died in the interim. The wages were marked as paid in the employment registers. Gopi spoke about her pending wages at the jan sunwai – undecipherable words in a feeble tone.

In panchayat circles with considerable scheduled tribe population, fake entries of Bhil women and men were marked because of the norm that 50% of the beneficiaries of government programmes must be from the SC and ST communities. These fake entries were exposed at the jan sunwai, and the representatives were held accountable. The jan sunwai thus proved to be a more inclusive and empowering realisation of the social audit process recommended by the Ashok Mehta committee.

4.6 Other Backward Classes

In addition to the SC and ST, a third group called the Other Backward Classes (OBC) has been formed based on the need for affirmative action in India. The OBCs were broadly a “heterogeneous collection of Hindu low castes, some non-Hindu communities and some tribes which are not included in the STs” (Deshpande 2013, 3). The OBCs ranked themselves higher than the SC and ST in the social-hierarchy and sometimes exploited the latter. Most of them owned land and engaged in agriculture (Singh *et al.* 1998, 815–18). Economically poor OBC households also applied for employment on government-sponsored programmes. They took an active interest in the local government, contested panchayat elections, and were employed in administrative and technical positions in the panchayat and block offices, for instance, as panchayat secretary, junior engineer, assistant engineer and so on. Persons belonging to the OBCs also participated regularly at the jan sunwai. Among the MKSS members, Lal Singh, Narayan Singh and Shankar Singh belonged to the *Rawat* community (OBC). Sushila Devi was a Rawat (OBC) by marriage.

Sushila Devi was a resident of Rawatmal panchayat, Ajmer. She has been active in social mobilisation activities for three decades. Women of the Rawat caste were subordinated by men and did not participate in public affairs. Sushila was an

exception. She “was always passionate about doing good work.”⁵² She studied till the fifth standard. Like Nortī Bai, she had worked at the Barefoot College, Tilonia. Working with women and the women’s groups, especially on the issues of health, helped her learn a lot. She explained her participation in the jan sunwai and the right to information as working in the national interest: “We have to think and struggle for the interest of our country. It is our country. So, how long could we continue to be scared and not do anything for the welfare of the country?”⁵³ She also gained motivation from her husband:

My husband supported me immensely. He died recently in an accident. He also worked at Tilonia. So, when you have your husband’s support, it does not matter what everyone else says. And if other people encourage you, but husband opposes, then there are problems. My husband never stopped me.⁵⁴

However, she also talked about women, who faced hardships and participated at the jan sunwai, despite the familial constraints. These have been discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Shankar Singh’s father was a patwari – an accountant in the local government. His mother worked on public employment programmes. Shankar finished his Bachelor of Arts with great difficulty. Similarly, Narayan Singh also finished his Master of Arts in Public Administration while braving financial difficulties. Both Shankar and Narayan were actively involved in organising the jan sunwai and the struggle for the right to information. They understood the power relations in the community and the role of caste in the distribution of power. Participation in the MKSS collective, and later the jan sunwai, sensitised them to the plight of the oppressed and motivated them to look for participation-based solutions for community empowerment.

Lal Singh had served as constable before returning to his village in Sohargarh. He protested against the feudal lord, Thakur Hari Singh, who controlled the village

⁵² Interview with Sushila Devi, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁵³ Interview with Sushila Devi, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁵⁴ Interview with Sushila Devi, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

commons. Lal Singh formed the MKSS along with the others. He was critical of the social evils in the village, such as child marriage, dowry system, *sati* (self-immolation of a woman on her husband's funeral pyre) and *mrityu-bhoj* (funeral feast)⁵⁵.

Ladu Singh and Balu Lal belonged to the same panchayat (Thana). Ladu Singh was a Rawat. Numerically, they were the dominant caste in the panchayat. Ladu Singh was elected the sarpanch in 1995. His association with the MKSS helped in creating awareness about the right to information in Thana and the nearby panchayats. Balu Lal belonged to the Gurjar community. Gurjars were a pastoral community and owned small landholdings. They benefitted from government programmes related to health, education, employment and resource development. The Gurjars were also politically active (Singh *et al.* 1998, 406–8). They focused on the opportunities for political participation and the development of community assets. Balu Lal joined the MKSS after the Thana jan sunwai, where he had testified openly against the corruption in the panchayat. Both Balu Lal and Ladu Singh took an interest in the affairs of the village. However, their method of engagement differed. Balu Lal, for instance, had struggled earlier for recovering the money that was owed to him:

I had struggled to claim my Rs. 700 during the 1980s. I had supplied milk to the cooperative dairy. I went there twice or thrice to ask for my money, and after much struggle, I won. I bore the fare, one-way travel to Bhilwara would cost Rs. five. Still, I did not give up.⁵⁶

Tension and contentious action among different castes, as well as members of the same castes, were witnessed at the jan sunwai. The SC/ST communities spoke up against the corruption by traditional elites and upper caste members. In some panchayats, the members of the same caste as that of the sarpanch organised the jan sunwai to expose their corrupt practices. For example, in Janawad, Kookarkheda, Jawaja, Surajpura, and Bhim, the sarpanch and the MKSS members often belonged

⁵⁵ Lavish feast and donations on the death of a family member. The poor households could not afford it, yet they were forced into observing these customs. Some of them were forced to mortgage their land and incur huge debts for organising the feasts.

⁵⁶ Interview with Balu Lal, 25 February 2016, Thana Panchayat, Bhilwara.

to the same caste. In these situations, caste assemblies were activated to derail the jan sunwai. A few members of the MKSS, who belonged to the OBC communities, faced resistance from their families or were presented before the caste assembly for associating with their caste-unequals.

The jan sunwai was also effective in countering identity politics, where the emphasis was on who was speaking rather than on what was being said. Shyam, a resident of Thana panchayat did not participate in the jan sunwai because he feared being left out. He explained that:

People of minority groups were scared of speaking up against someone from a majority caste. Assume that the sarpanch is a Gurjar, so the Gurjar clan will unite. If he is a Rawat, their clan will unite. If he is a Rajput, their clan will unite and so on. Whoever is in the minority would know that people from the same clan in a village would unite to form a group, leaving out the ‘other.’⁵⁷

Such fears were allayed at the jan sunwai. The dialogue was driven by truth and rational arguments. It facilitated the expression of diverse points of view in deciding the goals of development and in implementing and monitoring the development programmes. Just as, the “famine has been a great leveller in the hierarchical order [in Rajasthan] with Bhils, Rajput and Meghwal working together in relief works” (Singh *et al.* 1998, XXVIII). Similarly, the jan sunwai bridged the information-divide and provided a level-field and common interest for participation by different communities. The civil society collectives and campaigns, including the MKSS, facilitated interaction among men and women belonging to various communities (OBC, SC/ST and other general categories). These interactions helped them in understanding each other’s perspectives, social situations, led to a realignment of solidarities and thus paved the way for people’s movements.

⁵⁷ Interview with Shyam, 24 February 2016, Thana Panchayat, Bhilwara.

4.7 Participation by the middle-classes: Bania, Jain, Mahajan and others

The middle-income groups in the villages, especially the merchants, did not participate at the jan sunwai.⁵⁸ The issues of wages and welfare goods did not apply to them: “What have they got to do with it? They have enough money. The jan sunwai was for the poor so that they can discuss things openly, share their problems, and get them resolved.”⁵⁹

The SC & ST communities considered the merchants as the exploitative caste. They blamed the Bania and Mahajans partly for their miseries. When asked why the traders and merchants did not participate at the jan sunwai, Kaluram responded that “the business groups did not join us because they knew they have something to hide. They wanted to keep looting and exploiting us, charge us whatever they want to. They controlled the entire market.”⁶⁰ The Banias were the “bankers, businessmen, moneylenders, traders and shopkeepers.” The village moneylenders were referred to as Mahajans. The Banias were “classed as *vaisyas*, the third of the four great categories of Hindu society, and stood below Brahmans and Ksatriyas in caste ranking” (Lodrick 2007, 111–14). They were Hindu or Jain by religion.

The merchants sold goods and services at a premium and charged high rates of interest on the borrowed money. The moneylenders provided easy loans with little paperwork and collaterals such as land title and jewellery. However, the high rates of interest compounded the debt of the peasants, which they were unable to repay. The cultivators lost ownership of their land, the women lost the jewellery that they had pawned, and the landless were pushed into bonded labour.

The merchants and middle-income groups did not participate at the jan sunwai because their direct concerns were not on the agenda. However, they were

⁵⁸ The middle-class refers to the families with annual income in the median range, between the rich and the poor. It is included as a separate category, different from the feudal elites and the peasant, agricultural labourers and others engaged in caste-based occupations.

⁵⁹ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

⁶⁰ Interview with Kaluram, 24 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

indirectly involved in cases of overbilling of the materials or as contractors on public works with outstanding bills (as in the case of Janawad jan sunwai). Moreover, the rallies, sit-ins, and the public hearing were held in the open at the busy marketplace of Bhim. The traders observed the proceedings from a distance. The market was a public sphere too, and some shopkeepers talked and mingled with the MKSS members, especially Narayan and Shankar Singh.

During the field-study, a member of the Jain community in Thana panchayat responded to the questions on the jan sunwai. Sampat Lal Dalal was an insurance agent, and his wife managed the grocery store that was annexed to his house. She dressed differently from other women in the neighbourhood, the majority of whom were from the Gurjar community. Sampat Lal described the benefits of the Thana jan sunwai in April 1995:

The people became aware of the modes of corruption. They became cautious about paying bribes because it was illegal. They also started paying attention to public works. I also paid attention to a few projects, where I checked their quality. Once, I made sure that inferior quality material was replaced with better quality supplies.⁶¹

Sampat Lal, as was characteristic of his community, provided a pragmatic view of the situation in the villages and the outcomes of the jan sunwai:

The people's relationship with the members of panchayat was also determined by self-interest. On many occasions, the people paid money to get work done on a priority basis. The officers and elected representatives also took advantage of this and bribed the people. After the jan sunwai, people realised that even at the behavioural level, such actions were illegal and amounted to corruption. Earlier the people paid money out of courtesy but now they have stopped. However, corruption still exists.⁶²

4.8 Obstructions to participation: Resistance and backlash

This section examines the challenges faced by the people in organising and participating at the jan sunwai. It also examines the strategies used by the civil society actors for overcoming the challenges. The jan sunwai was caught up in multiple challenges, the most significant of which was of accessing information, mobilising

⁶¹ Interview with Sampat Lal Dalal, 24 February 2016, Mandal, Bhilwara.

⁶² Interview with Sampat Lal Dalal, 24 February 2016, Mandal, Bhilwara.

people and motivating them to speak up publicly. While everybody knew about the malpractices and frauds that were carried out in the village, no one wanted to speak up against the corrupt. On the one hand, people's participation was restricted due to the absence of a mechanism to engage them directly in development planning. On the other hand, their voice was curtailed due to social and political coercion by the upper caste members.

The women were deterred from the jan sunwai by their husband and in-laws, who told them not to malign the family name. Many people were paid their dues, wholly or partially, and sometimes even more than the original amount so that they kept quiet. Jati Panchayat meetings were organised to ex-communicate persons, who had supported and assisted in organising the public hearing in their panchayat. On other occasions, people were threatened against attending the jan sunwai.

Another backlash from speaking up was the potential loss of work because the mate could remove a person's name from the muster roll. Similarly, the ward panch could exclude households from the list for subsidised housing under Indira Awaas Yojana. The absence of an independent grievance redressal mechanism at the grassroots increased the scope for victimisation/discrimination by the panchayat officers and representatives. The fear of victimisation often deterred the people from attending the jan sunwai and speaking on the microphone in front of everyone. The members of the MKSS were aware of these challenges and helped the people in countering them. They too had resisted social and systemic oppression to come together and form the MKSS as a collective of peasants and workers, dalit and women.

4.8.1 Restricting information

The government information was protected under the Official Secrets Act, 1923. It also extended to the information contained in the panchayat records or even the attendance registers of government schools. The monopoly over public information granted the public officers power to exploit the people. Since the jan sunwai

protested against government secrecy and demanded the people's right to information, the first reaction of the sarpanch and the secretary in every panchayat was to block the access to information.

In the initial stages, the information was requested from the administrators at the block and district headquarters. A few of them perceived no harm in sharing the employment registers. The more experienced ones were cautious, and agreed reluctantly, upon repeated requests or refused straightaway. The situation did not improve much with the provision for the inspection of records and grant of copies as per the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Rules 1996. The people had a right to information, which the local sarpanch in many places refused to acknowledge.

In the village panchayats where the sarpanchs participated actively in the jan sunwai, the information was available easily – for instance, in Thana, Bhim and Bori. In these panchayats, the jan sunwai was organised for auditing the works executed during the term of the secretary or the former sarpanch. In some cases, the sarpanch cooperated despite risks such as opposition from their caste-brethren. This indicated the significance of political will in establishing transparency.

At other places, the former sarpanch dominated the panchayat and blocked the access to information for conducting the jan sunwai. The most prominent example of it was the Janawad jan sunwai, where it took a complete year, from February 2000 to February 2001 to access the panchayat records. The corruption was so deep-rooted that sarpanch, two secretaries, a junior engineer and many other officials were convicted. The people were forced to withdraw their application, and a false gram sabha resolution was passed to deny information. The secretary avoided sharing the records for six months and later, ran away with all the documents. He procured a stay order on providing information from the Rajasthan High Court. A legal battle ensued, and after three more months, the records were handed over to the people and the civil society members at the end of February 2001. The Janawad jan sunwai provided crucial lessons for the activists of the movement:

The first is that the right to information will encounter strong resistance from the bureaucracy. Only strict penalties for non-compliance will give the Act the teeth it requires. The second lesson is that the bureaucracy will use any excuse to deny information and therefore, the exemption clauses must be extremely restricted and must not give any room for misinterpretation. The third lesson is that if any information is denied by an official, it is quite likely that the official will get support from his superiors. The only safeguard is to allow at least one independent appeal (Roy and MKSS Collective 2018, 238).

4.8.2 The fear of speaking up

The process of the jan sunwai was underscored by the twin dilemmas between speaking up and being heard. On the one hand, the people wanted their grievances to be heard and addressed. On the other hand, there was fear of speaking up against powerful groups and individuals. Speaking up against one's community members often led to everlasting grudges:

People wanted to secure their interests because the person s/he was speaking against might not help them or create troubles for them in future. For instance, if you protested against the doctor, how would you go to him for the treatment? A sarpanch was there for five years, and you were dependent on him for many things. He would not refuse but would delay the applications. Therefore, people generally wanted to avoid such hassles and did not support even the ones who took the initiative.⁶³

The peasants and labourers were dependent on the panchayat for processing their application for employment. This was done in an informal manner, where the mate suggested names to the panchayat for enrolment on public works. Therefore, the people “feared that the mate and the sarpanch would not enrol their name in the muster roll, and they would lose work and wages.”⁶⁴

The groups organising the jan sunwai comprised the wage earners, the majority of whom were women and whose interests were directly affected by the corruption in public works. The women such as Nortti Bai, Chunni Bai, Raji Bai and others were the most vocal. Many of them were pressured against participating at the jan sunwai. Then “it would take five to ten days to motivate people to say what they thought was right. In the meantime, the panchayat members would start

⁶³ Interview with Dhanna Singh, 23 April 2017, Kookarkheda, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁶⁴ Interview with Ranjit Singh, 25 December 2015, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

returning people's money and reassuring them that they would rectify the flawed constructions.⁶⁵

There were instances where the sarpanch had threatened the entire village. Rodeji described one such incident at the jan sunwai in Kakku panchayat in Nokha panchayat samiti in Bikaner district on 20 July 2004, where the sarpanch had resorted to violence:

Sarpanch's henchmen did not allow anybody to enter. The tents were empty till noon. The podium was in a corner. The MKSS members were speaking on the microphone. The jan sunwai was in progress, and the records were being read, but nobody came forward to testify because the Sarpanch had a lot of influence. They even took people inside one by one to talk.

Gradually, one or two people spoke up, then we got others also, and told them that we have your video recordings, you had promised to speak, if you won't, how would these problems be solved? Then two people came, three more people came and started sitting on the boundary of the tent. Then the jan sunwai gained momentum. By evening, the sarpanch had started threatening and bribing people.⁶⁶

According to Narayan Singh, the people were able to rise above their fear because they were battling hunger, famine and unemployment. These were bigger concerns. Despite that, it was not easy to encourage them to participate:

There was a long history of fear in the region. However, the truth is that people speak up when they are in pain. If I was supposed to get this, why didn't I get it? Secondly, if this project was meant for collective welfare, then the entire village would speak up that this work was not done well. Some people would even think beyond their individual interests and think that maybe, the sarpanch would be convicted and jailed. In such situations, there would be social pressure.⁶⁷

The movement also benefitted from the support of educated persons and small landowners in the village. They did not seek employment on the government programmes and were, thus, immune to the fear of losing wages. For instance, Narayan Singh, Hemsingh, Ranjit Singh, Sushila Devi and Shankar Singh were not employed on famine works. Hemsingh explained that no one had intimidated him

⁶⁵ Interview with Narayan Singh, 19 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁶⁶ Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

⁶⁷ Interview with Narayan Singh, 19 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

because his family was small and “did not depend on wage labour or on government projects. They cultivated their land.”⁶⁸ Hemsingh also emphasised the significance of unity and solidarity through regular participation for sustaining a collective struggle.

4.8.3 Social hierarchies

The social pressure that Narayan Singh mentioned was channelled through family, members of the community and caste assemblies. The women were discouraged by their husbands and family members from speaking publicly, “why be bad in the eyes of the village members?” The women would, however, add, “I ask my husband to stop drinking, but does he listen to me?”⁶⁹ Sushila Devi described her experiences of mobilising women for participating in the social movements:

We told them that if a man does something wrong, nobody asks him at home or questions him. But, when a woman who is struggling for the welfare of her village, society and indeed the country, and is speaking up for her rights, why does everybody have to stop her?⁷⁰

This also constituted the rhetoric around the jan sunwai, which countered tradition and the bureaucratic logic that determined people’s conduct and welfare. The women and men faced resistance from their village members for conducting the jan sunwai, “why Kalu ji got MKSS members to our village? Why did he conduct a jan sunwai and create problems?”⁷¹ Sushila Devi and her husband also faced opposition in their village Rawatmal, the site of the fourth jan sunwai:

People told us, “why are you doing all this in our village. You found this panchayat only or what? Find some other panchayat.” I told them good work should begin at home. Why should we go to some other panchayat first, if there is corruption in our village?⁷²

Possibility of conflict and disharmony among the residents of the village was a common reason cited by the sarpanchs for preventing the jan sunwai in their panchayats. In some places, the sarpanch announced that they would not be

⁶⁸ Interview with Hemsingh, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

⁶⁹ Interview with Nortu Bai, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

⁷⁰ Interview with Sushila Devi, 1 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁷¹ Interview with Motaram, 26 April 2017, Vijayapura, Deogarh, Rajsamand.

⁷² Interview with Sushila Devi, 01 May 2017, Bhim, Rajsamand.

responsible for the chaos that may ensue due to the activities of the civil society actors. They perceived civil society as challenging their power in the panchayat.

Caste councils (jati panchayat) were also activated, especially in cases where the sarpanch belonged to the same community as the aggrieved members or as the activists. Caste councils deterred the people from supporting the jan sunwai. Kesar Singh and Narayan Singh were threatened to be ostracised from the community if they did not leave the MKSS. A meeting of the jati panchayat was also convened against Narayan Singh and Jait Singh for supporting the Kookarkheda jan sunwai. A pamphlet was disseminated among the people, which mentioned that the meeting was being convened for “eradicating social evils from the community.”⁷³ A handwritten note in pencil at the bottom of the pamphlet (accessed at the archives) mentioned that the meeting was convened for ex-communicating Narayan Singh from the community. Narayan Singh recollected the events of the day as follows:

People, who supported the jati panchayat were the ones, who thought their means of stealing public money would be exposed by the MKSS. They thought the MKSS should be stopped in the early stages. They targeted me and forced me to disassociate myself. They also targeted the house owner in Devdungari (Jait Singh) to get the house vacated. Therefore, they convened a jati panchayat, called me and said that “Basanta (sarpanch) is a daughter of the community, a sister to you, how can you send her to jail?” The village where the sarpanch stayed had 70% of people belonging to my community, the Aapawad community.

I said, “I agree she is like a daughter and sister; however, she has stolen public money, looted your money and my money and harmed our families. Those are also our people, whose money has been usurped. We would not agree that it is okay for her to steal the money, but it was wrong for us to conduct the jan sunwai. You do what you want [but we will not step-back].” At the jan sunwai, the people from Kaletara and other villages in the panchayat supported us. People’s support is very important to build trust in a jan sunwai, and they always support if you are honest and are doing the right thing.⁷⁴

This signified the power of collective action and popular support, which was crucial for compelling the administration to respond. The collective action, in this

⁷³ MKSS Papers, “Kookarkheda Jan Sunwai,” file 121, p. 63, Institutional Collection No. 44, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

⁷⁴ Interview with Narayan Singh, 19 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

case, was constitutional and non-violent and did not disrupt the peace and order of the region.

4.8.4 Violence and physical oppression

Exploitative and violent tactics were used by the panchayat members and others, whose corrupt activities were revealed at the jan sunwai. At the Janawad jan sunwai, the sarpanch had threatened everyone against providing space for hosting the jan sunwai. Bhanwar Singh, on whose grounds the jan sunwai was conducted, was threatened with the denial of water to his fields if he helped the activists. False charges of atrocities were levelled against those people in Umarwas who had provided accommodation to the MKSS members. Three MKSS members from the OBC – Dau Ba, Kesar Singh and Sohan Singh – were also charged with committing atrocities against the persons from SC and ST communities. A letter from the MKSS to the administration questioning and debunking the charge was accessed at the NMML.⁷⁵ A court case against Nortri Bai, Ramkaran, Nikhil Dey and others was also pending in the court as of 2018.

Such arm-twisting tactics were used to deter the people from organising and participating at the jan sunwai. The elected representatives were most affected by the jan sunwai because it undermined their vote base. The sarpanch in Kookarkheda, Rawatmal, Lotiyana, Janawad and other places did not win or contest the local elections after their corrupt activities were revealed at the jan sunwai. The Thakur in Sohargarh also lost the election to the panchayat seat, while the Janawad sarpanch was not even elected as a ward member. These instances also reinforced the faith in the jan sunwai:

We got four or five sarpanchs suspended. Why should we be scared of them? Didn't we need food? Weren't we human beings? Who elected the sarpanchs and made them

⁷⁵ MKSS Papers, "Jawaja Jan Sunwai," file 117-118, p. 35, Institutional Collection No. 44, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

powerful? We voted for the sarpanch, and we would not let her/him exploit us. They must do as we say.⁷⁶

The early campaigns for land rights and wages also witnessed some form of violence, for example in Sohargarh, Bhim and Jawaja, where the people were beaten-up and the equipment such as microphone, loudspeakers and *dhhol* (percussion instrument) were broken. Chunni Bai recalled one such episode distinctly:

Once we staged a hunger strike for non-payment of wages outside the Bhim tehsil. Sohan Kalal was the mate. Twelve labourers had not been paid their full wages. We, five to ten people, sat on a hunger strike. Moti ji of Bara was also there with us.

The entire day we would sing songs and shout slogans. At night, 200-250 people would congregate there. The sarpanch was very rich and powerful. He bribed the police, and at midnight the police came to arrest us. They broke our drums, microphones, lights, and cut off the power supply. We called up people in different villages through wireless and telephone. We got new mics from the shop, and we started crying into the microphone to raise the alarm for help. They broke our fasts by taking people to Udaipur and feeding them forcefully. However, immediately ten people sat on a fast to replace them.⁷⁷

4.8.5 Countering oppression through non-violence

Fear of exposure, loss of power and prestige drove many panchayat members to adopt violent tactics to prevent the jan sunwai and continue their dominance in the region. Violence was also rampant during the social audit carried out under the MNREG Act. Ranjit Singh described an anecdote from the social audit process of a panchayat in Bhilwara district dating back to 2010:

We were in a village in Arniya Rasa panchayat. The entire social audit team got into a problem. The sarpanch was very powerful. Some people, who supported us, told that us your team might get into danger today. Moti Ji from Bara was also a part of the team. So, we sat down and planned on how to save the team. I suggested that there was a cluster of ten to twelve houses belonging to Valmiki community, those who engaged in cleaning and scavenging. We decided to halt the team there and be friends with them. We stayed with the valmiki community for the night, ate with them and everything. Others were scared of valmiki community because the members of this community are not scared.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

⁷⁷ Interview with Chunni Bai, 25 December 2015, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

⁷⁸ Interview with Ranjit Singh, 25 December 2015, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

This was yet another instance of inter-caste and inter-class solidarity generated by the movement. The jan sunwai organisers, since their early days, practised non-violent methods rather than retaliatory violence. They sought the help of police in maintaining law and order around the jan sunwai venue. Rodeji explained, “we did not keep any tools or weapons with us. If someone would speak ill, accuse us falsely or became aggressive, even then, we would deal with her or him verbally through dialogue.”⁷⁹

The activists used non-violence as a strategy to overcome oppression as well as to inspire trust in the movement. Non-violent methods of protest were popularised by Gandhi during the national freedom struggle. The activists practised non-violence, even in the situations of extreme provocation and physical attack. Shankar Singh recalled that during the Sohargarh struggle, the Thakur’s henchmen had attacked him and his colleagues. They managed to save themselves and escape. He explained that violence could prove to be counter-productive in case of social struggles and people’s movements:

If you think in terms of strategy, the day you beat them or attack them, your story will be over. Because if we had hit those men in return, their home was nearby, they would have called more men and all of them would have beaten us to death or crippled us. We did beat him, but how? We carried out a rally, shouted slogans, led a full-fledged struggle.

Had we beaten them, there would have been two police cases, one against them and another against us because violence is violence. Then both of us would have been fighting court cases. So, if you want to fight with a strategy to win, fight this way. We faced a lot of resistance, but we persisted because the people supported us.⁸⁰

4.9 Jan Sunwai as a form of non-violent protest and constructive action

The jan sunwai was a non-violent method of countering oppression through transparency, dialogue and collective action. It was a form of organised protest against State secrecy. The people’s hearings derived their strength from the people’s collectives. The power of people’s collective supplemented the method of non-

⁷⁹ Interview with Rodeji, 15 December 2015, Abu Road.

⁸⁰ Interview with Shankar Singh, 29 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

violence. As Lal Singh and other respondents explained, “one cannot terrorise the entire village or everyone, who comes to the jan sunwai. How many people will you physically injure? And people would say, ‘why are you beating us, what we said is the truth?’”⁸¹ Lal Singh also explained, “not everyone in the village would be scared. There would always be one or two persons, who would not be scared to take a stand.” Shankar Singh added that

Individually, you could suppress and intimidate a person. However, that person won't be scared as a part of a collective. An attack on a non-violent group of people will attract the solidarity of others, who have been silent until now. So, the jan sunwai, collective participation and non-violence are a part of a process, and this process is very important.⁸²

The civil society organisations, in the case of the jan sunwai, functioned within the limits of the law and sought administrative intervention in matters of confrontations and disputes. Advocating the principle of non-violence, Shankar Singh explained that:

The story is not over when you are beaten. No, you get a chance. And instead of hitting back, you must pause and strategise. You think either about achieving your goal or just about your personal esteem and revenge. Accordingly, you change your strategy. The motive should not be to teach a lesson. You must think about achieving your mission.⁸³

Non-violence was also an important attribute of the New Social Movements in Europe that gained prominence since the early 1970s onwards. Prior to that, between 1950 and 1965, “the movements for civil rights and against nuclear arms perfected satyagraha as a form of mass politics for the West” (Scalmer 2011, 167). Such mass-protests were inspired by Gandhi's experiments with satyagraha and non-violence during India's national movement for independence. Wary of the violence and the wars of the first half of the 20th century, the social protest groups adopted and improvised non-violent methods of resistance for championing their cause. These social protests marked a break from violent methods of left-wing politics.

⁸¹ Interview with Lal Singh, 25 February 2016, School for Democracy, Badi ka Badiya, Bhilwara.

⁸² Interview with Shankar Singh, 29 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

⁸³ Interview with Shankar Singh, 29 April 2017, Devdungari, Bhim, Rajsamand.

Subsequently, “the sit-ins and boycotts, marches and campaigns of this time were all identified with the birth of a ‘New Left’” (Scalmer 2011, 204).

In India, the Maoist inspired Naxalite movement relied heavily on violence. According to George Woodcock, the Naxalites condemned Gandhi’s teachings on non-violence as “the crystallisation of revisionism.” They sought to “weaken the appeal of the only revolutionary tradition other than Communism that has made an impression on the minds of the Indian masses” (Woodcock 1971, 5). Meanwhile, some Indians veered away from communism to embrace Gandhi’s methods of action and protest. One such figure was Jaiprakash Narayan, who became the hero of non-violent anti-emergency protests in the mid-1970s. His ‘Total Revolution,’ appealed to the people, who participated in large numbers to reclaim their democratic rights from an obstinate government. The anti-corruption protests in Gujarat and protests against price-rise in Bihar were led by students. These protests were transformed into a Total Revolution. However, many incidents of violence were reported during those student movements (Shah 1977; Ganguly 2014).

Non-violence became an important characteristic of the people’s movements that arose in the early years of the 1970s. Focused on the environment, livelihood and social justice, these movements were led by women and farmers who protested against displacement, ecological destruction, inequality and exclusion (Omvedt 1994, 1–3). These included Chipko Andolan in Uttarakhand, Shoshit Jan Andolan and Stri Mukti Sangharsh in Maharashtra, Narmada Bachao Andolan in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, and the Right to Information Campaign in Rajasthan among others.⁸⁴ According to Sangvai, the people’s movements “asserted people’s rights over natural resources and decision-making processes” (Sangvai 2007, 111). Their subscription to non-violence was not only out of pragmatism but was based on the aspiration

⁸⁴ Studies on social movements in India have categorised them as women’s movement, dalit movement, peasant movement, tribal movement and environmental movement (Shah 2004; Baviskar 2011). Scholars have also classified language movements and movements for state autonomy (Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Telangana) within the category of New Social Movements. For a comprehensive history and analysis of social movements in India, please see (Oommen 2010a, 2010b).

that “the struggle would become democratic and political only if all the people including the weak, old, young, women and depressed sections are able to participate in.” For mobilising people’s participation, they used public advocacy measures through the “media, outside support groups, political lobbying, information gathering and research, international campaigning and the coordination between various movements” (Sangvai 2007, 111-15). The people’s movements sought to reform the state through dialogue, resistance and cooperation rather than supplant it through violence. The jan sunwai too focused on dialogue and non-violent modes of resistance against the opacity of the State and thus contributed to the people’s movement for transparency.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter examined the dynamics of people’s participation at the jan sunwai. It located the jan sunwai within the dialogic tradition, thereby providing evidence that the roots of political dialogue and rhetoric can be traced to the Indian contexts as well. It also demonstrated the ways in which the jan sunwai approximated equality, transparency, freedom of speech and inclusion of the marginalised persons in deliberations. The poor, illiterate women, landless peasants and persons from the scheduled castes and tribes aired their grievances and demanded their rights at the jan sunwai. The women spoke up from behind the veil before the members of the community. In doing so, they went beyond the social hierarchies and cultural restrictions imposed upon their political participation. The participation of women lent a moral force to the jan sunwai because their grievances and demand for food, work, wages and homes were considered just.

The persons from scheduled castes and tribes too demanded their right to welfare goods and services at the jan sunwai. They protested against exploitation by upper caste members, who denied them access to village resources and disenfranchised them by constraining their participation in local bodies. The jan sunwai thus translated the rights of the citizens from paper to practice.

This chapter also documented the stories of backlash faced by the people for organising and speaking up at the jan sunwai. The people were victimised by their caste peers and the traditional elites, who used violence for preventing people from testifying at the jan sunwai. The people resisted the backlash with the help of collective action that was generated by the jan sunwai. Collective action at the jan sunwai was generated with the help of transparency and dialogue that established the truth of the people's testimonies. In addition to facilitating transparency and inclusive dialogue, the jan sunwai provided a platform to the people for airing their grievances and assured them of a hearing. Thus, transparency, dialogue and opportunity of a hearing built the trust of the people and motivated them to participate in the jan sunwai.

The chapter also highlighted the non-violent nature of the jan sunwai. The people used non-violent methods for protesting against corruption as well as for resisting victimisation. The jan sunwai was thus a mode of non-violent collective action by the people for demanding transparency and for protesting against corruption and secrecy in governance. It emphasised dialogue and cooperation between members of the community and the government representatives for achieving transparency and accountability. The jan sunwai thus catalysed the people's movement for transparency.



This document was created with the Win2PDF "print to PDF" printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>