

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

As we all know, thinking is not dependent on literacy, and our mental vocabulary is not restricted by the ability to read or write. Collective thinking gives us the space to develop a knowledge system, which subsumes the ideas and concepts of illiterate persons who are intelligent and intellectually endowed. All writings- including articles, memorial lectures, convocation addresses and speeches - accredited to individuals working in the MKSS owe their ideas, ideology and theoretical assumptions to the MKSS Collective.

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)  
Village Devdungri,  
Post Barar  
District Rajsamand 313341  
Rajasthan  
INDIA  
Email: [mkssrajasthan@gmail.com](mailto:mkssrajasthan@gmail.com)

## **P. C. Joshi Memorial Lecture**

### **Participatory Democracy and the Future of Dissent**

#### **(Struggles for the Redistribution of Power)**

I must admit that I was honoured and surprised when I was invited to deliver the PC Joshi Memorial lecture. Surprised, because I have not seen myself in the league of those who can deliver memorial lectures. Honoured, because it gives me, and my colleagues in the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) an opportunity to pay tribute to the vision, creativity, and tenacity of the natural processes of struggle of the poor and the marginalised. These struggles have been rooted in a living local reality, but have not hesitated to trace the connections and take the challenge to the power centres from where the injustice emanates.

So, to begin with, “I” must make it clear, that the thoughts I bring here today are a part of a much larger “us” - , many of whom will never have sat inside a classroom, let alone the lecture halls of a hallowed institution such as this one. I did suggest that we make this a lecture of multiple voices, where my colleagues, friends, comrades, - Aruna and Shankar would have shared the time and strengthened the articulation of these thoughts, that are in any case based on the collective experiences and efforts (struggles) of a much larger group of people. But the best way to try and effectively acknowledge and reflect upon some of the streams of thought and action being mentioned today, is to draw heavily upon the “oral” contemporary history of our collective struggles. These include the songs, the theatre, the stories, the fables, the slogans, and even the bhajans that not only chronicle the struggles, campaigns and movements, but also help script them. P C Joshi, I am sure, would have approved. While standing in deep admiration and appreciation of those who created a legacy like the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA), we want to acknowledge, and build upon the role of culture and cultural expression in politics and in the oral

tradition as a record of history. Even now, I hope that Shankar (our most celebrated and gifted cultural communicator), Aruna (who has spent many years in trying to give a platform to political articulation through the cultural expression of people), and I along with some others from the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) will attempt to forge a working relationship with the students and staff of the P C Joshi Archives to chronicle the contemporary history of the processes talked about here. We will soon do an oral history workshop with the students, and will try and modify this draft paper, so that it reflects those discussions. Therefore, please do consider this paper to be a working draft subject to enrichment and change.

PC Joshi was not only a radical communist thinker, he was an organiser and practitioner who made sure that processes of creative struggle would themselves not get marginalised. He was a towering personality and leader at a time when history was being scripted at every step, and political leaders across the ideological spectrum knew they were a part of historic processes. And yet, the Communists were careful not to have any individuals become larger than the convictions and ideology of a movement.

We have understood from the left, the importance of not personalising a political movement. We have understood the value of collective struggle, and collective leadership. We have also confirmed through experience, the strength, resilience and natural propensity of the oppressed and marginalised “mainstream” to creatively struggle for a more just, egalitarian, and humane world. But it is not often we give ourselves the luxury of reflection, to understand that each one of these grass root struggles, individually and threaded together are a part of history in the making.

The P C Joshi Memorial Lecture, organised by “The Archives on Contemporary History”, gives us an opportunity to draw upon our collective struggles, and place the lessons in the lexicon of contemporary history. The Communist Manifesto had to have implied that “The History of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” ... *collectively defined and enacted*. It therefore gives us the space to embark upon a collective story that reflects upon certain

processes, and we see these processes as a part of the contemporary history of socio-political movements in India. We do not often make these assertions. Part of the reason is that we don't see ourselves as the architects of history, or as historians. We don't see ourselves as policy makers. Because we are a collective, we are not allowed to see ourselves as leaders. In fact, despite constituting the vast majority of the population, the oppressed and the marginalised call the very small minority of rich and influential people "the mainstream" and end up marginalising themselves even more!

In this spirit, I must clarify that the thoughts and issues in this lecture will be drawn from the MKSS, NCPRI, and other collectives, and the experiences are being used to reflect upon "Participatory Democracy and the Future of Dissent", but also upon power, its concentration, and its redistribution in the course of these struggles.

### **The MKSS**

The MKSS was born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1990. A little over 1000 of us had come together in the market 'kasba' called Bhim to form the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). The formation of an organisation of the poor was seen as a quixotic effort by many of our friends, and derided as being completely out of touch with the times by some of the ruling elite - the bureaucracy, the landlords and the traders of the area. For them, a workers and peasants organisation could only be seen as something aligned to Moscow and Beijing, and one that was born irrelevant. The MKSS was born with the slogan – "Nyaya, Samaantha ho aadhaar, aisa rachege, hum sansaar" (We will work to create a world based on justice and equality).

But these were for many people discredited or utopian concepts. Communist States were collapsing, the Berlin wall had been brought down, and the "market" was the new divine force. Any ode to equality, or even justice, was seen as a failed dream of the past. There was a deliberate de-politicisation of efforts for change. Even the language began to reflect this depoliticised classification, and over time it began to reflect the shrinking role of the State. With the winds of change from Europe came new terms like "civil society" to be overlaid on the much

used but ill defined “NGOs”. While non government organisations consisted of organisations outside government, “Civil Society” was a pleasantly coined antithesis to Government. Market fundamentalism implied that the state should shrink in role and responsibility. Even basic services needed to be delivered by the private sector, and with the privatisation of everything, ‘civil society’ began to be pushed to fill in the gaps and oversee the privatisation of “development”.

### **In Search of an Accountable Democratic State**

The MKSS was formed as the tidal wave of neo-liberal globalisation pushed India into an era of market liberalisation. In this market driven scenario it was obvious that only those with money could meet their needs. For the huge numbers of poor and marginalized people who had neither economic nor social clout the only place to ensure that they would get their basic needs was from the State. Therefore, while the State was ironically reducing its own role, the poorest people of the country were looking for ways and means to ensure that the State did not abdicate its basic responsibility. This popular sentiment was reflected in the growth of social movements and peoples’ organizations who, unlike their counterparts in the West or in the former Communist countries, sought to use democracy and democratic modes to establish that Government must provide for the basics of education and health and livelihood needs of people. Also, these social movements set themselves up as a counter to the private sector and corporate influence over the Government seeking to establish that the State must protect the interests of the people against the growing power of money and an unaccountable private sector.

The radical discourse of the left, was seemingly marginalised, but in fact was spreading and growing geographically on the back of rampant exploitation of mineral resources in tribal areas of the country. The Maoists continued to see the overthrow of the State as the only solution. The implication was that real change would only come about, after the capitalist state would be replaced by a Communist or more egalitarian State. Parliamentary Democracy was seen as a sham. The Maoists pointed out that any movement of the poor that grew strong enough to question the economic paradigm was ruthlessly suppressed. For people

living in Tribal India the armed force of the Maoists was often the only relief on the assault on their land and collective resources. As a result, the formative years of the MKSS have coincided with a phase where the major discourses on the right and the left have preferred a shrunken state. Ironically, the only role of the State that both the far right and far left have concentrated on is its security apparatus. This was obviously not fertile grounds for the growth of democratic ideals.

The MKSS commitment to non violent democratic struggle was seen as an impractical anachronism by many of our friends in the party and non party left. While they agreed with the early struggles on land, and minimum wages, they did not see much value in the connections the MKSS was making between the issues and the modes of democratic struggle. As a result, when in the early 1990's the Right to Information (RTI) began to emerge as a specific demand, many were convinced that the MKSS had got completely alienated from its worker and peasant constituency.

### **Questions and Answers – from Protest to participation**

Almost twenty years later the RTI is being acknowledged as a transformational right that allows the most marginalised person to question the ruling order. The fact is that the energetic and strategically focussed demand for the RTI originated from the poor workers and peasants of the area. If we do not properly record contemporary history, the ordinary Indian villagers seminal contribution towards what most people now acknowledge as a very radical entitlement – the Indian RTI law, might be lost.

### **The story of the MKSS in terms of participatory democracy, and dissent**

Even before the MKSS was formed, questions related to ideology, process, and objectives had begun to emerge. When Shankar, his wife Anshi, Aruna and I moved into a small mud hut in the village of Devdungri in what was then Udaipur District, we were for good reason a curiosity piece. However, as we began to identify with the poor and join them in their daily struggles, a far more critical appraisal began. Some saw in the mud hut we occupied, the cotton clothes we wore, the goat

we had, and even the hunger strike organized around minimum wages in 1989 as evidence of our Gandhian convictions. Others saw the issues of the poor, minimum wages, land, the mud hut, and even our Bengali surnames as evidence of our communist leanings. The desire to label and classify is legitimate and important. However, often the superficial externalities assume greater significance than an understanding of the complex set of principles that come together to define an organizational movement. In organisations like the MKSS, that do not begin with a stated or written ideology, often only time and the collective experience over years comes together to define the ideological commitments of an organization.

### **Democracy as a Defining Principle**

While the people who got together to form the MKSS did not have a stated ideology, some shared principles were accepted at the outset. Even in the days preceding the formation of the MKSS, it was clear to us that democratic space was one of the most important avenues for struggle. Protest was the only way to establish that the poor were being exploited – both in implementation and in the conception of “development” of rural India. The democratic right to collectively protest brought some relief, but more importantly, it provided an avenue for greater organization of the poor through which they could more effectively challenge the established centres of power.

It was clear that both the bureaucracy and the elected representatives had primary loyalties to their class and therefore would rarely if ever truly act on behalf of the people. Feudal social structures prevalent in society made the atmosphere even more hostile. We felt on our skin what Ambedkar so powerfully articulated at the time of the adoption of the Indian constitution:

*“On the 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long*

*shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of democracy which this Constituent Assembly has so laboriously built up.”*

We realised, that despite their intense suffering, and frustration with the feudal and colonial power structures, the people valued the conceptual equality democracy offered. In Rajasthan, the dramatic and revolutionary replacement of Rajas and Jagirdars with “one person, one vote” was part of the living memory of people. Despite its many limitations, people were eager to use the spaces democracy offered, and we began to realise that one of the most important components of a functioning democracy is the right to protest, and the space for dissent.

### **Majorities and Pluralities**

Democracy is a dialectic you can't afford to lose between the power of the vote and the sanctity of fundamental human values of equality and justice. In a country like ours, everything begins with plurality. And no matter how imperfect it is, and how much we struggle, democratic platforms are the only viable political modes that can help us resolve our inherent contradictions. Democracy became for us a platform through which we protested against the non payment of minimum wages, demanded the redistribution of land from a powerful feudal landlord, and demanded action against him when he responded violently to the redistribution of land illegally held by him.

For an organization born in independent India, modes of democratic protest came naturally – especially to people who were organizing the poor against entrenched power structures. It was democracy that gave us the right to question, to demand answers, to protest, to sit on hunger strike, and to raise issues related to the constant violation of basic, constitutional and democratic rights.

Mohanji, dalit, extremely poor, never been to school, composed and sang what could be considered the first song of the MKSS. The song



was titled 'Raaj Choron Ka'. It said, "Pehle vaale chor janglo mein rehte the, aaj kaal ke chor toh banglo mein rehte hain....pehle vaale chor bandooko se marte the, aaj kaal ke chor toh kalmo se marte hain... raaj choro ka."

In this many multiple versed song, even in the late 80s when it was composed, the people had begun to identify the power of paper, records, and the written medium in making or breaking their lives.

The RTI movement in India emerged from the concerns of the poor and their inability to procure basic entitlements from an insensitive and unresponsive system. In the effort to get the statutory minimum wage on public works, poor workers and peasants were continuously informed that the basis for sub minimum wage payments was the measurement of their work and those measurements were contained in documents that were not open to public access.

It was therefore not so surprising to us, to find people like Mohanji, Chunni Bai, Narayan and Devi Lal, Lal Singh and Sushila, Chunni Singh, and many others shine the light on hidden and secret records. They said that the muster rolls that marked their attendance on public works, but formed the basis for their sub minimum wage payments, had to be brought into the public domain. Ironically, the poor who do all the productive work in India have always been called "kaam chors". They pointed out that until the records come out, we will always be considered liars and thieves, and the real thieves will continue to occupy the high moral ground.

Was democracy a complete sham or could its structures be used to assert and support the claims for justice and equality that the constituents of the MKSS were fighting for? As we began to assert our democratic and constitutional rights, we began to understand specifically and functionally, how power was used and misused in a democracy. We began to identify the nerve centres of illegitimate state power. Exclusive control over records and information was soon understood to be one of the important bastions that needed to be stormed. We understood through the course of these struggles just how critical it was to dismantle the power that emanated from the control over information.

Transparency and the people's right to information could be used as a tool for the genuine empowerment of people, and the demand for the right to information, was eventually a demand for a share of governance.

### **From Questions to demanding Answers – From Accounts to Accountability**

The story of a local struggle growing into a campaign for legislation has been chronicled and recorded. What is often missed is the politics of it so succinctly defined in the language of the people. The progression of slogans related to the RTI that were articulated by the MKSS reflected the growing understanding of the kind of participation required to help take democratic functioning beyond the five yearly vote. Bringing development expenditure into the public domain not only helped people understand what was happening with public resources, but more importantly personalised the resources with people and infrastructure. The alienation and growing cynicism from the misuse of public resources changed to personal indignation when details revealed how money had been stolen (as it had to be) against individual names and particular works. Shankar popularised this with typical irony in a song that lists "Cement ka rupiya – Khagyo (swallowed up), Pathar ka Rupiya – Khagyo, Ration ka rupiya- khagyo,... bijli ka rupiya, sadak ka rupiya... Koi to Munde Bolo! (Someone has to open their mouth and speak out). As people began to speak out, "Mera Paisa" became "Hamara Paisa" and as the accounts began to be examined, a most succinct and deeply political slogan emerged- "Hamara Paisa- Hamara Hisaab". The assertion of democratic rights had begun to shift from a mode of struggle to the controls over power. Roughly a year after this slogan had been coined, Sushila used it to leave a group of intellectuals and journalists in awe of her understanding when she answered a question about why a fourth standard pass village woman like her wanted to fight for the people's right to information. She told them – when I send my ten year old child to the shop with ten rupees to buy groceries, when he returns home I ask him for accounts. The Government spends lakhs and crores of public money in my name, - should I not ask for accounts? It is- Our money, Our Accounts."

The democratic assertion of sovereignty becomes clearer in the progression of slogans that emerged– “Yeh Paise Hamare Aapke-Nahin Kisi Ke Baap Ke!”, “Yeh Panchayat Hamare Aapki, Nahin kisi ke...Yeh sarkar Hamare Aapki... and finally Yeh Desh hamare aap ka-Nahin kisi ke baap ka!!” This progression is very important to understand the growth of an ideology of justice and equality based on the redistribution of power. Eventually, the assertion that the Government is yours and mine, and the country is yours and mine, is a mental inversion, even overthrow, of those who have usurped this power for themselves. What had begun as demands (albeit in a very small way) for the redistribution of land and wages (income), had become a powerful growing demand for the redistribution of the power of the State itself.

### **Power and Corruption**

From the demand to get photocopies of muster rolls, bills, vouchers, distribution registers in the ration shop and hospital, emerged the understanding that information is power, and procuring this information helps dismantle illegitimate concentrations of power, and more importantly – empowers the citizen. This basic principle has helped the RTI take root and spread even in a hostile environment. It is a law that people have celebrated, defended, and used. It has shaken power structures at various levels to the extent that powerful vested interests have had to abandon years of illegitimate control. People have persevered in the face of hostility and even the alarming numbers of killings have not stopped ordinary people from using the RTI. Because it is one of the only means of procuring a response, many RTI applications are filed to redress a grievance- rather than just procure information. The reaction to the use of RTI to expose corruption has been to try and stall the challenge through a range of excuses or to physically threaten and attack the applicants. The campaign itself has responded by looking for modes of enforcing accountability, and demanding protection from the State. In one sense, the focus on accountability from the state and security of people demanding accountability was the common ground for the demand in September 2010 for a Lokpal and whistleblower protection law.

### **Powerful Law, or Powerful 'Lokpal'**

In the conception of the law, differences began to emerge. India against Corruption brought out a draft of a law that in our opinion created an extremely powerful Lokpal with wide jurisdiction over all branches of the State, with extensive powers related to corruption, misconduct, maladministration, and the redress of grievances. Apart from questions of practicality, the basic premise of building a peoples' movement to create another powerful institution of the State was something that we did not agree with. We felt the need to look for ways in which people could be empowered and encouraged to fight corruption and wrongdoing, and the State be made accountable to its people.

The citizen's assertion of the right to monitor acts of omission and commission is an important part of democratic governance. It is the understanding of equal rights of all citizens in a democracy that forms the basis for all subsequent assertions. In the hierarchy ridden Indian social scenario, no discourse on corruption can ignore the misuse of power and its systemic institutionalization within the Indian social hierarchy.

### **RTI – a remedy to the imbalance of power**

The MKSS has been fighting corruption for the last 25 years. While the RTI campaign has made a great difference in infusing transparency in a culture of secrecy, accountability remains a hollow term. The battle for accountability itself is a political struggle for justice, where it is clear that accountability of a public servant is only to a "senior" and therefore to the ruling elite. The RTI has empowered ordinary people with facts and enough reason to demand action. However, when the ordinary citizen, or group of citizens, have chosen to assert truth over power, they have faced the threat of dire consequences; the malevolence of the system; and even death.

This is the challenge that the National Campaign for the Peoples Right to Information (NCPRI) faced, when it met in September of 2010 to

examine legislation that might (in a limited way) help ensure accountability and basic protection of life and liberty, to those who are engaged in struggles against corruption and injustice. There was an understanding amongst some of us that the law can never be a magic wand, and that even a law like the Right to Information has only created the space for people to fight a more equal and democratic battle. That is why we believe that a Lokpal can at best be a “friend of the people” – and that there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator, it is in today’s context an oxymoron.

At the end of a landmark public hearing in 2000 which had revealed several ghost works in one Panchayat (Janawad), one of the villagers got up to tell this story:

*There was an “empowered” Sanyasi, the story goes, who lived alone in a cave. Despite being a Sanyasi, he was often lonely, and he befriended a mouse who lived in a small hole in the cave. One day, the mouse came rushing to the Sanyasi, trembling with fear, barely able to squeak. “What has happened?” asked the concerned Sanyasi. The mouse said that she was being chased by a cat. The Sanyasi used his powers, stroked the mouse, and turned her into a cat bigger than the one outside. She rushed to chase the intruder away. A few days later, the cat rushed in quivering, and hair standing on end. It turned out that there was a dog outside, growling and wanting to tear the cat apart. Once again, the Sanyasi was called upon to use his powers. This time, he decided to find a final solution, and turned the Cat into a big powerful tiger. The tiger looked around, and began to advance towards the Sanyasi. The Sanyasi had to use all his magical powers to turn the tiger back into a mouse, to save himself from being eaten up.*

This public hearing marked the exposure and downfall of a thrice elected, powerful and corrupt Sarpanch. The villager told his audience that this was a lesson never to create another tiger. It was learning in managing power and empowerment. Sometimes a folk tale or fable is a better political lesson than many tomes of political theory that can only be understood by leaders and intermediaries. Years earlier, during the 53 day dharna for the RTI held outside the State Secretariat in Jaipur,

seventy year old, never been to school, Galku Ma, used to tell a story a day to an audience of agitators and bystanders, who used to gather together, to hear her repeat the fables she knew- and the lessons she drew from them. They were all about power, and its misuse. Officers, Ministers, the police, and the judiciary, would become particular animals in her stories, and as one listened one was drawn into the need for political theory to draw its inspiration and true sophistication from the most basic lessons of life.

Eventually through sheer tenacity and perseverance, a rag-tag group of villagers (one of the people had called us “tatpunjas”- nincompoops) managed to extract a legal entitlement for the right to information from the powerful and hostile government. Democracy? Mohanji, chronicled it, outlining the various false assurances made by the Chief Minister of that time. “Pehla Jhoot Bhairon Singh Jawaja mein bola...” “...Teesra jhoot Bhairon Singh Mandir mein jaan bola.” The third false assurance was made in the temple of democracy- the State legislature. That was the statement we pursued the Government with, until after many many agitations we got the State RTI Act.

### **Dissent and Participation**

So, where does all this stand in the lexicon of Democracy, Dissent, and Participation? It is clear to us that every protest, every demand, every struggle, has been our asserted voice of dissent. Sometimes, as with the RTI or NREGA it converts into policy and /or legislation, and we begin to see what participation would mean.

However, we have also seen during the recent anti- corruption battle, what it means to disagree with the dominant dissenters. Anyone who exercises official or unofficial power – cannot afford to contribute to the silencing of voices of disagreement. To do so would fundamentally undermine democracy, and a culture of democracy, that has given the protesters a space to raise their demands in the first place. The politics around corruption is replete with these challenges of democracy and the misuse of power.

## **The Politics of Corruption, and Anti- Corruption**

To evaluate by numbers and money is to define corruption in its narrowest form. In fact, corruption can never be controlled if it is so defined. The definition must encompass the entire ambit of corrupt practices in and outside government, and then define the areas of high priority in that omnibus list. The formula that corruption is equal to government and government is equal to politicians, and therefore setting up a Lok Pal free of political interference will eradicate all corruption, is far too limited and simplistic.

## **Problems and Solutions**

Corruption, as a word may be simple and popularly used, but the definition would have us all arguing, and the solution offered might be very contentious. Financial corruption is obviously only one aspect of corruption. Communalism, 'majoritarianism', the unequal application of power and access to justice as happened in Gujarat and in many other situations of inequality in our country, are also important manifestations of corruption. There is very little space in the current campaign against corruption for the more detailed discussions of inequality of power – corporates, caste, and the tools of influence- including sections of the so called "apolitical" media and "civil society".

The minorities, dalits, women and the poor face much more than monetary corruption in every act of oppression that affects their lives. The arbitrary use of power for undemocratic, anti-people policies, legislations and providing support to corporate houses is the mindset of the people that rule India today. For the large majority of the middle class, corruption emanates from controls vested in the regulatory functions of a system that does not move without graft. The simplest solution is to muzzle its power, or even do away with those systems and "privatize" the obligations and the power. In that perception, the government is the prime, if not the only offender.

The support of the middle class saw in the recent campaign a quick fix solution to the kinds of corruption that plagues them. The general mood is to look for a magic wand - like a strong Lokpal in place, and all corruption will be taken care of. The overwhelming frustration of unemployment, the failure of the affluent dream, the consumer's paradise so advertised was directed as angst against a political system, which had not delivered. However, there is little understanding that it is a long struggle even to change the pervasive culture of corruption.

The anti-corruption movement needs to start being defined by its specifics. The need to reflect or articulate issues of injustice would sharpen the conflicts and contradictions, but it would also help us move into concrete areas of necessary change.

### **Making a law**

When the RTI was first drafted it went from the fledgling campaign in Rajasthan, to an informal group in the LBS Academy to the Press Council in 1996 itself. The initiators of the struggle and campaign were only a few members. The bulk of the group that sat to make the law was a cross section of concerned citizens under the chairmanship of Justice Savant, Chairperson of the Press Council of India in 1996. From the very beginning, the RTI campaign understood that its battle was against **arbitrary use of power** as much as it was against corruption.

The Right to Information Act took a decade to come to fruition after intensive debate and discussion and [after] being tested through State legislations. It is not merely the length of time spent but the perception of the process itself. The campaign for RTI was ideologically more cohesive, the vision of the right to know was related to justice and equality and a broad democratic constitutional agenda. The battle of means and ends, internal democracy and a consistent effort to enforce democratic decision-making within the campaign helped. The campaign was also careful about not sharing space with groups that did not accept equality and justice as core values, no matter how similar the demand for transparency was. The greatest guiding light for the campaign was its unified focus on the poor as those needing this entitlement the most.



The RTI Campaign had to sit with each group and evolve a political lexicon to draw ideologically cohesive support. Its implementation has rested on persistent struggle, where the citizen has acted, and persisted, regardless of apathy, or reaction from the power elite. Its greatest contribution is the empowerment of the common person to hold every wing of the state accountable. It is a highly decentralized battle, bringing information into the public domain to force change. That is why it is a people's law, and continues to grow as a people's movement.

### **The Politics of Civil Society, Media, and Democratic Debate**

Claims of one Civil Society, of 'India', and media's presentation of a unipolar civil society, have negated the space for dissent. The understanding that civil society should be one homogeneous group, the projection of all dissent as betrayal, the plea that all elected people and the government must be bypassed for integrity to be established through an independent technocracy, has dangerous implications. "Who is 'Civil Society'?" has become a repeated query. How can one group claim to represent India in a democracy so plural and diverse?

The nature of our democracy has changed over the last 25 years. Reform has led to a series of international treaties and trade agreements determining the economic policies of the country with a profound impact on peoples' lives. Government claimed to be decentralizing decision making, but there was little evidence of real intent or capacity to secure peoples' participation in governance. While civil society grew in a number of ways, its extremely diverse character is still to be acknowledged and understood. The failure to understand who stands for what could have very disastrous consequences, as "neutral" terms like civil society could camouflage ideologies and we could end up opting for something we did not really want. We now stand at a point where civil society is asserting itself vis-a-vis the political class. Strong ideological and political connections of civil society are not being examined.

We need to classify civil society organizations the way we classify political parties- by their ideologies and their constituencies. At a time when strong political mobilizations are taking place around popular

issues, and there are claims and counter claims on representing “the people”, it is extremely important to understand who the people are, and what conception there is of the future. In a country like India, civil society will never be what it is made out to be- the space outside the State. In India, the State, the people, and civil society have been, and will remain a deeply interlinked complex web that needs to be better understood for our greater common good.

### **Democratic Dialogue and Debate**

If public discussion on the Jan Lokpal Bill is reduced to its lowest common minimum and then everyone else is asked to take a position based on that, it makes a travesty of governance. How many people have really read either drafts or thought deeply about any alternative approaches to the same goal? If people are asked whether they want a strong curb on corruption or want to hold the powerful to book, the answer will naturally and rightly be yes, but the deeper questions and issues involved in lawmaking are much more difficult to solve.

The need for plurality and deliberation is of paramount importance for participative governance. The law making processes should be inclusive and plural. We hope that disagreement and dissent will get their rational place in public life. To doubt intention and ethics disallows dialogue.

Perhaps at the time of the passage of the Lokpal we need to remind ourselves that we continue to live in an unequal society where existing power structures know exactly how to twist and turn any institution to their advantage. As Dr Ambedkar has warned, if we don't address the basic issues of inequality, corruption will breed greater anger and injustice where an anti-corruption mechanism will look like superficial window dressing. Even through this architecture, we must focus our efforts on strengthening our political democracy by empowering the most disadvantaged, for it is their efforts that will bring about a society less burdened by rampant corruption in a real sense.

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Nikhil Dey, Social Activist, MKSS and NCPRI  
[nikhildey@gmail.com](mailto:nikhildey@gmail.com)