

The RTI and Corruption Movement in Maharashtra

The Right to Information and Corruption Movement in Maharashtra

If in Rajasthan an awareness of the people's right to information sprang out of a movement for minimum wages by a marginalised rural work force, in Maharashtra it is an offshoot of a movement against corruption. The increasing awareness among Maharashtra's anti corruption activists of the significance of right to information in combating corruption owes not a little to the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan experience in Rajasthan. The Right to Information movement in Rajasthan had even invited in the heat of its agitation key campaigners against corruption from Maharashtra like former Bombay municipal commissioner Khairnar and Marathi writer Pushpa Bhawe for support. They returned with a hands-on feel of what the struggle in Rajasthan was all about and how important right to information was for the people in their fight against corruption, among other things.

The significance of Rajasthan's right to information movement spearheaded by MKSS has now disseminated well in Maharashtra. So much so that a demand for people's right to information now forms an integral and vital part of the campaign against corruption in Maharashtra. This campaign has prepared a draft right to information bill and demanded that the Maharashtra government get it enacted by its legislature. The draft seeks to enable the citizen to obtain information, which includes obtaining copies of the document in which it is recorded, within a stipulated time period. It also lays down that a government official failing to provide information in time should be fined Rs.100 per day for delay. For appeal, it recommends setting up of special courts which should redress a complaint within two months. It recommends power to the Gram Sabha to effectively act against officials defaulting in giving information at the village level.

Symbol of Maharashtra's anti corruption movement Anna Hazare circulated copies of this draft bill in Marathi to district and taluka level activists gathered for a state conference at Ralegan Siddhi, Hazare's village in Ahmadnagar district, on April 4 this year. In the conference, Hazare dwelt at length on the MKSS led right to information movement in Rajasthan. He stressed the significance of right to information in effecting systemic change and combating corruption. He wanted the activists to increase their knowledge of this right and read up as much as they could on the various court orders, enactments and movements related to it. He was sorry that the people in Maharashtra in general, and also the anti corruption activists, did not yet attach significance to a sustained exercise of their fundamental right to information.

As it is, the fight against corruption at the district and taluka levels has been led by anti corruption committees. These committees and also the movement at the state level use information to fight corruption. But this information is obtained through informal channels and not by a formal request for information which would mean an exercise of one's right to information.

Hazare promised a big agitation in the latter half of this year against corruption and for demanding right to information. Asking the activists to be prepared for this, he said he intended to launch a padyatra of about 25-30 persons in October from Kasturba memorial in Pune to Rajghat in Delhi on the twin issues of corruption and right to information. He said money was needed for this purpose, but cautioned against accepting donations from dubious sources or in large sums.

For a real campaign, he said, the right to information must be exercised at the district, taluka and village level. He wanted a group of committed workers to tour the state before the Pune-Delhi pad yatra was undertaken. To educate grassroots activists on the right to information, he said, seminars and training camps should be organised all over the state.

Unfortunately, the Ralegan Siddhi meeting of April 4 also showed up some cracks in the movement in Maharashtra as Anna Hazare dissolved all the district and taluka level anti corruption committees. The

current phase of anti corruption agitation in Maharashtra began with Anna Hazare's fast at Anandi near Pune in 1996. And by 1998, the committees were in place in 16 out of 31 districts and in 259 out of 300 talukas in Maharashtra. The sudden dissolution of these committees came as a surprise to the activists gathered at Ralegan Shindi. Announcing the dissolution, Hazare said the members of the dissolved committees who, even though dispossessed of their posts, continued working with commitment to the cause would naturally form the leadership of the movement and the new committees that would subsequently evolve.

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Though Hazare refrained from assigning any explicit reason for the dissolution of the committees, he did mention, in response to a demand for identity cards for committee members, a couple of instances of blackmail by persons claiming to be movement activists and using committee I-cards and letterheads. A reason cited for the dissolution of these committees by Ashok Ramesh Sabbal, a key activist and convener of the Ahmednagar district committee, the most active unit of the movement, was that only around one third of the district and taluka committees were really active. Another activist said that the Ralegan meeting was supposed to be attended by around 30 people as only two office bearers from each district committee had been invited. But most of the invitees did not come and, instead, some 200 other activists arrived. This showed the passivity of many of those in the committees and enthusiasm of many others outside it – a fact which necessitated reorganisation of the committees.

There are some differences in the leadership at the apex level too. Even though the Bhrashtachar Virodhi Janandolan Nyas, the Trust leading the anti corruption movement, was not dissolved, its senior members like veteran trade union leader from Pune Baba Adhav, old time socialist G.P Pradhan and Marathi writer and reputed women's rights activist Pushpa Bhave confess to a cooling off of relationship between the Trust members. As the differences are not over the fundamental need to fight rampant corruption in politics and governance, and are only over approach, they do not come in the way of the movement despite the uncertainty about the future composition of the Trust and the dissolved committees. A member of the Trust, former IAS officer Avinash Dharmadhikari had resigned earlier as he fought the 1998 Lok Sabha elections as an independent candidate. The Trust constitution prohibits its members from contesting elections.

Whatever be their difference in approach, all the major personalities involved in the campaign against corruption in Maharashtra see the right to information as a priority in their future agendas. Citizen's Action Committee set up by Avinash Dharmadhikari has drawn up a 12 point citizen's manifesto which gives high priority to the right to information. He says the Action committee would like to work with the anti corruption movement on the issue of right to information and combating corruption. Baba Adhav and Pushpa Bhave are keen to work on the right to information and plan meetings in the state and, if possible, a Jan Sunwai or public hearing, which Bhave became particularly enamoured of in Rajasthan.

G.P Pradhan, along with Dharmadhikari, was closely associated with the campaign for the reinstatement of the Pune Municipal Commissioner Arun Bhatia. Right to information was at the centre of this campaign. The campaign had officially sought information on three counts regarding the encroachments which Bhatia had sought to remove and which became a cause for his removal. The three questions were: whether permission was sought by the owners of the buildings concerned before construction, was the completion certificate given to them, and was a notice served on them for encroachment? The three main demands of the Bhatia campaign were: bring back Bhatia, demolish the influential encroachments and grant right to information. Pradhan wants to continue the fight for right to information even beyond the immediacy of the Bhatia campaign. In fact, on assuming office as Pune's municipal commissioner, one of the first actions of Bhatia was to open up all files in his office.

As for Anna Hazare, when the new chief minister of Maharashtra sought his blessings, the anti corruption campaigner asked him to enact a state law on the right to information. Hazare has also written to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to enact a central legislation soon on the subject. He says people from Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh had got in touch with him for a right to

information campaign. He saw a possibility in this of a wider national network on the subject which could link up with the Rajasthan movement too. He points out that as part of his social work in Ralegan Siddhi, which transformed the village with the cooperation of the villagers, he had helped build up the Gram Sabha as forum for transparency and accountability. He said he was trying to replicate this in 50 other villages as part of his Adarsh Gaon scheme. He was sorry that cooperation with the Maharashtra government had come a cropper in this regard and that he had to disassociate with the government Adarsh Gaon scheme for 300 villages. (For a brief description of Ralegan Siddhi Gram Sabha as a forum for transparency and accountability, see the previous issue of Transparency). E.O.M