

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan: Rajasthan

Right to Information : Right to Livelihood

Contact: Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar Singh

Email: mkssrajasthan@yahoo.com

Address: Village Devdungari, Post Barar, Dist. Rajsamand 313341

MKSS is a people's movement whose goal is the empowerment of rural poor who also constitute bulk of its membership. During the past decade this group has developed considerable organization and outreach. They were instrumental in the passage of the RTI law in Rajasthan, one of the first of its kind. They also played a major role in the national governance reform movement that resulted in the passage of a number of important laws. However, even though some of their efforts are thus being expended at the national level, they remain engaged in extensive grassroots work in Rajasthan.

The rural poor in Rajasthan, as those all over India and perhaps through out the world, see political corruption as a major obstacle to improvement in their lives. MKSS has taken up the challenge of electoral reform as the first step in the goal of reforming governance. During the last elections they conducted statewide marches and rallies to motivate people against falling in to the trap of unscrupulous politicians. This is particularly relevant in rural areas where crooked politicians continue to win elections by providing petty enticements such as liquor, food and even just a ride on a jeep! MKSS sponsored Rajasthan Election Watch included arranging of political debates designed to give people an opportunity to know where their candidates stand. Another action item was a statewide Truck Yatra, a parody on the cynical ways of the political class to manipulate the public.



MKSS women listen to their fellow workers speak



MKSS workers march through villages campaigning against corruption in electioneering

In the last few years, MKSS has been also concentrating on the passage of a National Rural Employment Guarantee law. The proposal, a very modest attempt to stem rural destitution has met stiff resistance but the opposition has been predictable and not very substantive. Besides MKSS there are dozens of movements from across the nation that have come together to press for both a strong RTI law as well as for the declaration of this minimal “destitution insurance” as a right rather than a privilege. The bill proposes to assure one adult member of a rural household a minimum of 100 days work at the minimum wage barring which it guarantees a payment of 30% of the minimum wage for those 100 days. Many economists of repute such as Jean Dreeze who did lot of work alongside Amartya Sen, have looked at the bill and find it very feasible. The total cost of the bill at 4000 crores is not even half of the over 100,000 crore rupees that the government is owed in taxes and is not able to collect. Those who portray this as a handout, fail to realize that until the society comes up with a real plan to create rural employment, we have to find some way of sustaining our rural population with some measure of humanity.

The MKSS campaign for this law has included padyatras, rallies and a statewide petition writing campaign. Surekha and Prithvi participated in both the Truck Yatra and this petition drive. So far while many individuals in the government have responded in a positive way, the idea is far from becoming a reality. Nevertheless, the people have awakened and are totally committed to making this happen. It is only a matter of time. We at IFA are hoping to strengthen this movement by non monetary means as much as possible since this is one strong movement with great promise for the whole of India.



Women line up to sign petition for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Law



After a public meeting workers handing over the petitions to the authorities

IFA Fellowships:

Under the guidance of MKSS and Aruna Roy, IFA has developed a system of offering fellowships to selected individuals who are actively involved in various campaigns for the benefit of the poor particularly the rural poor. Presently we have provided these fellowships to two individuals based on their strong recommendations.

Media Fellowship:

Recipient: Sowmya Sivakumar (Jaipur)

Amount: \$3000 for one year

Work: Sowmya has been helping with media dissemination work in Delhi, on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill and the Right to Information Bill, which were tabled in Parliament in December 2004. The objective of this dissemination work by the right to work and right to information campaigns respectively was to help create awareness in the public domain and generate widespread debate in the mainstream and alternative media on the importance of a strong legal framework that guarantees employment and access to information. Earlier, Sowmya was involved in Rajasthan Election Watch (REW). As noted earlier this is a group of concerned citizens and citizens' groups in the state whose objective is to ensure free and fair elections and participate pro-actively in electoral reforms. REW disseminated and analyzed information provided in affidavits of candidates contesting the 2004 Lok Sabha elections from Rajasthan prior to the elections. The report was published as "Lok Sabha Elections 2004 – A Compilation of Background Information and Analysis Taken from the Affidavits of All 185 Candidates from the 25 Constituencies in Rajasthan". On an ongoing basis, REW plans to verify and closely monitor information provided by the candidates and work towards restoring accountability in public life, using the right to information law.



MKSS worker interacting with public, a typical role for those who want to bring about change

Right to Information Fellowship:

Recipient: Rakhi Sehgal (Delhi)

Amount: \$4400 for one year

Work: Secretary of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI)

Rakhi's main goal is to allow NCPRI to build a national network of RTI users, create a repository of RTI related materials (documents, films etc.) and to help establish a mechanism for monitoring the implementation of state and national level RTI laws. She is currently a PhD student in International Relations at American University, Washington D.C. and has been working in India for the last two years on her dissertation entitled (Re)Producing Labor at the Margins: Transformations in the Shadow of Globalization, for which she is doing her field research in the Gurgaon area. Prior to joining NCPRI, she worked at the Center for the Global South, Washington D.C., and at the Summer Academy for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law - Washington College of Law. As an undergraduate she had interned at the United Nations in the Socio-Economic Trends Section - Department of International Economic and Social Affairs.

In the coming years, we anticipate more and more of our support to consist of such fellowships. For any lasting change we need change makers and these young people are the ones who are in a position to bring change about. We must support them.