

Social Audits in Andhra Pradesh: A Process in Evolution

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Social audits have the potential to make delivery of public programmes more effective. While the process is evolving, the audits of the employment guarantee programme in Andhra Pradesh show us what is possible.

As the strapping young man strides across the stage to hand over a wad of notes to the presiding officer on the dais, a ripple of applause runs through the watching crowd. Then, quite inexplicably, he raises both his hands in acknowledgement. Less than a minute ago he had publicly admitted to having embezzled money from the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and having lost his job announced rather grandly, "I have made a mistake and will never repeat it again".

Though not half as dramatic, dotted across the 13 phase-1 EGS districts of Andhra Pradesh where the "social audits" are in progress, there have been several instances of voluntary return of money. In the list are field assistants, technical assistants, assistant engineers, branch post masters, sarpanches and a stray MLA's "right hand". These people have embezzled money fraudulently by creating fake muster rolls, inflated bills, exaggerated measurements, and non-existent works, all through bribes and cuts from wage seekers. In amounts ranging from Rs 25 to Rs 3 lakh, in the last five months alone approximately Rs 60 lakh has been returned to the system or to the wage seekers, from whom it has been siphoned off.

The return of money on public platforms and in large gatherings of wage labourers at the social audit public meetings lend legitimacy and credibility to the ongoing concurrent social audits in AP more than anything else probably would.

A year and 15,000 habitations later social audits have entered the second phase. The initial shock waves have quietened down and all concerned – the administrative machinery, the political class and the powers that be – have learnt to accept and deal with them. The iron doors to the administrative vaults are creaking open as officials hand over information less reluctantly. In the last one year since the social audits of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in AP began, more than 400 applications

under the Right to Information Act have been filed and approximately 40 lakh official records pertaining to the EGS have been scrutinised publicly.

The EGS functionaries and the civil society activists have grudgingly – complaints and all – learnt to share common space and public platforms. The political class participates actively, sometimes as mere spectators, many times as public speakers, and on and off as supporters or as spoilers of proceedings.

Of the 650 phase-1 mandals starting from July last year, till date in 400 mandals, trained literate youth from labourers' families and resource persons armed with official records have conducted social audits of about Rs 450 crore of EGS works at the doorstep of the labourers. Apart from verification of muster rolls and works, awareness-building regarding the rights and entitlements of the labourers through group discussions and holding of gram sabhas is an integral part of the process. And barring in five to six mandals, the findings of the social audits have been read out in public meetings attended by the labourers, official functionaries, political representatives and the media.

What the Social Audits Reveal

When microprocesses are studied with a magnifying glass at the last point of delivery of a mammoth public programme like the EGS, interesting results emerge. While corruption, that oft quoted word in the dictionary, remains the main villain (which in the AP context has been addressed effectively by an innovative design of the EGS), there are several other reasons which singly or in permutations and combinations serve to dilute or even kill the programme. Lack of knowledge, wrong perceptions, bad management, and absence of coordination plus unforgivably an apathy and indifference down the line towards the wage seekers contribute in varying measures and block achievement of the intended objectives. A common thread running through it all is the lack of any accountability towards the public.

Also, it emerges that the delivery mechanisms of the state have been designed for and preoccupied with scale and are ill-equipped for the most part to deal in any just manner with individual issues.

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Therefore, if 10 wage seekers have not been paid for six months or if there are 50 labourers who have not been issued job cards, or even 40 wage seekers who have demanded but have not been provided work, or two people who have been injured but have not been given medical reimbursement, it is not seen as an issue or a breakdown in implementation because there are a 100 others whose issues have been addressed. That is why only when there is the ubiquitous "good official" that there is effective implementation at the level that he/she operates.

Corruption too takes on many hues and paths, some short straightforward and direct ones, some longwinded meandering ones. Some times it is a complicated network of paths and players. It emerges that corruption is verily in the fabric of our society. To root it out would require untangling of the tangled webs and putting a flashlight on the microprocesses of public programmes like a social audit does and deal with each part. Placing details of the programme in the public domain, taking

the information down to the primary stakeholders, discussing the non-negotiables and implementation details with all stakeholders on a common platform and holding officials accountable for their work, bringing individual issues to the forefront and forcing the system to take cognisance – all of this constitutes a social audit process. If worked on diligently and sufficiently, social audits may yet be the solution to the many ills that plague the delivery of public programmes. In an ideal setting, social audits would in fact ensure transfer of power slowly but surely from the hands of those implementing the scheme to the beneficiaries of the scheme, ending a stranglehold not challenged before.

Question of Morality

Yet, a year into the social audits alternate truths coexist. The fragility of such an exercise is underlined when the MLA whose "right hand" has siphoned off a lakh of rupees after a rousing public speech about transparency whispers into the ear of the presiding officer "do you think if I didn't

want it, the public meeting would have gone on. There would have been only tables and chairs." And yet, it is the labourers who on several occasions and places have taken on the might of the powers that be from blocking the social audits in villages or public meetings from being held, insisting that the social audit process was for "them" and no one had a right to stop them.

In the social audits in AP it is the labourers who take centre stage – participating enthusiastically in the verification process, listening avidly in the gram sabhas, testifying in public meetings, generous in forgiving those who have harassed them, requesting re-induction of functionaries who have taken bribes from them, querying with passbooks in their hands what wages they actually got, physically protecting the social audit team members from being beaten or at the end of a bitter gruelling public meeting where nothing seems to have gone right and they have not got their wages in three months, race with another to wear the marigold garlands on the dais. They are the winners.

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