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**The Non-Party Political Process
Profile of a People's Organisation**

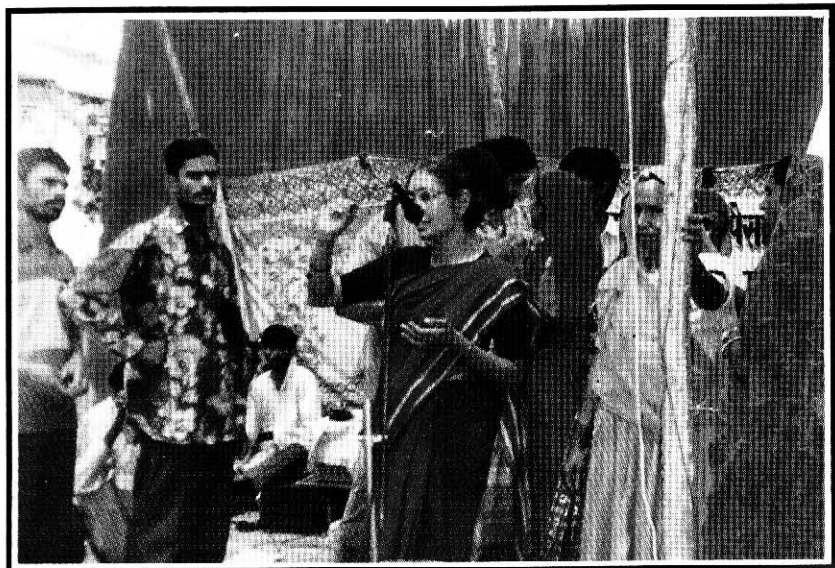
MKSS

MAZDOOR KISAN SHAKTI SANGATHNA
(RAJASTHAN)

□ Madhu and Bharat Dogra



At a time when the right to information campaign is spreading to many parts of the world, a special strength of the Indian experience is how - thanks largely to MKSS - it was closely linked up with the struggles of the weakest sections. MKSS was involved in the movement for minimum wages of workers at relief work sites in a drought-prone area, and it was in the course of this struggle that the importance of information right was realised. Poor peasants got the strength and the confidence to go to meet the highest officials (they even went to meet the President of India who received them most cordially) because they had realised the importance of this right while breaking stones in the parched land of their drought affected villages.





**The Non-Party Political Process
Profile of a People's Organisation**

MKSS

**Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathna
(Rajasthan)**

Madhu and Bharat Dogra



Non-Party Political Process

In India the political process is identified generally as the work and domain of political parties. However increasingly it is important to speak about those political organisations which are not political parties.

What is the function and aim of political organisations? They are supposed to have an understanding and vision of the type of society they want, they take these views to the people and mobilise them along these lines. This mobilisation is possible in several ways. One obvious way is to try to capture State power and form a government. This is the path chosen by political parties. However there can be - and there are - other political organisations which certainly mobilise people but not with the aim of capturing power. Their chosen path is to carefully identify the causes of distress and then mobilise people to fight these causes and reduce distress. Once this process is initiated, one effort leads to another effort, one struggle leads to another struggle, as the various problems of people and causes of distress are inter-linked.

While the power and reach of a political party which either controls or hopes to control one day, the massive state apparatus is immense, at the same time the lure of this power also creates some important problems and imposes some significant limitations on the mobilisational role of most political parties. In the case of most of the leading political parties in India, for instance, it can be seen clearly that the lure of this power attracts many self-centered people who cannot be expected to devote themselves to the real problems of people, most of whom are poor and exploited. Secondly the overconcern, sometimes the sole concern, of the political parties with capturing power and forming their government generally pushes them in the direction of maintaining good relations

with those who can provide them substantial funds. The same consideration motivates them not to disturb too much the existing balance of power.

This is where the special strength of a people's political organisation which is not a political party are revealed. As there is no lure of power - now or in the future - only those people are likely to join the organisation who are capable of raising themselves above the pursuit of self-interest.

Politics is essentially about the balance of power, and today in most countries including India, the power is concentrated in a relatively small number of people and it is denied to a large number of poor and/or the disadvantaged people. Hence one of the basic qualifications of political process has to be to change the balance of power in the favour of deprived sections. In terms of fulfilling this role, some non-party political organisations have a greater political relevance than most of the leading political parties.

But to live upto this potential a people's non-party political organisation should not be constrained by government funding, corporate funding, and particularly in Indian conditions, foreign funding. This is why a distinction needs to be drawn from the frequently used word NGOs (whatever that means). When not accepting such institutional funds, non-party people's political organisations will necessarily have to keep their expenses as low as possible. At the time of hectic activities such as dharnas and mass meetings, extra funds will be needed which will have to be collected in a highly transparent way from various supporters and sympathisers of the movement and/or the organisation.

An inspiring example of such a non-party people's political organisation is the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathna (MKSS). Firmly rooted in village communities in central Rajasthan, this organisation due to its exceptional

work has faced increasing demands for wider intervention. It is now in the process of adjusting this wider role, particularly in the context of a national campaign for right to information, with its strong community ties. In this context it is significant that recently, while this movement was in the thick of a struggle for right to information which demanded that its leading activists had to travel considerably for a long time, spontaneous social reform work particularly anti-liquor work continued undisturbed in the village communities.

MKSS - Social Change With A Difference

At a time of increasing scepticism about the possibilities of bringing broad-based social change, the experience of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), in and around Rajsamand and Ajmer districts of Rajasthan has come as a ray of hope and a cure for sceptics. Within a short span of just a decade, this effort has brought about remarkable change in the lives of thousands of people, particularly in their consciousness regarding resisting injustice and struggling for the creation of a better world. In many villages exposed to chronic distress conditions and consequent migration, the livelihood position of villagers has improved to some extent due to the better payment of wages at rural employment works, a new determination to resist corruption and a network of fair price shops set up by workers and peasants themselves. What is even more significant is the emergence of a strong feeling of solidarity, of a sharing of joys and sufferings, of a community determined to change their world for the better by standing up with courage and patience to secure justice. Within a very short time the pioneering work undertaken by the MKSS has attracted nation wide attention and impressive linkages have been formed to integrate the work started here with national level campaigns.

One of the most important aspects of any endeavour for social change is its replicability. It is possible to pump in a lot of money into an area to show some signs of progress. But this process (even if we assume that this excess of money doesn't bring undesirable side-effects, which is unlikely!) cannot be replicated in other areas because so much money cannot be found for all areas. On the other hand, MKSS offers an entirely different model where dependence on outside funds is almost entirely avoided and the emphasis is entirely on using the hidden potential of people themselves for initiating broad-based social change.

The MKSS experiment started very modestly in 1987-88 when four social activists came to live in a hut in Dev Dungi village of Rajsamand (then Udiapur) district, about 10 kms away from the town of Bhim. This hut belonged to a relative of two of these activists, the husband and wife team of Shankar and Anchi, for whom it was a home-coming after living with a leading voluntary organisation for some time. This group also had young Nikhil De, who had given up his studies in the USA to search for a life pattern which could be of some help to the weaker sections and in addition would strengthen the overall process of relevant social change. Somewhat similar yearnings had bought Aruna Roy, a former IAS officer, to give up her lucrative career and come to live in this hut of Dev Dungi village.

These activists decided that while striving to serve the poor, they will themselves live within the limits of a budget which is equivalent to the minimum wage paid by the state government (which was only Rs.15 per day at that time). In the rush of their idealism they sometimes carried this self imposed discipline to extreme limits - for two months they ate no vegetable other than 'ghiya' (bottle gourd) because during this period only this vegetable was cheap enough in the market to be affordable at the minimum wage levels.

Having reduced their personal needs to a minimum, these social activists could easily get a research project which while being useful in their social mobilisation work could also provide them the equivalent of minimum wages for six months or one year. While this simplicity of their life-style and very transparent methods of finding their subsistence won the MKSS many admirers, what firmly established their roots among the people of the area where they started working was their decision to evolve their ideology and programme of action in close cooperation and interaction with the people of the area. Some broad aspects of the ideology - a commitment to the poor and weaker sections, a strong resistance to communalism - were of course clear from the outset. But the precise way in which the problems of the poor should be taken up, the issues and struggles which will be prioritised - all these decisions came not from any preconceived notions of social change but from a process of remaining close to the ground reality as reflected in the views of the members and sympathisers of MKSS spread in many villages. It was because the programmes of action were rooted among the people themselves that even new innovative programmes could spread rapidly in the area. While some city-based observers found such programmes a bit awkward as these did not fit their set notions of social change, the new programmes could spread quite easily among illiterate villagers themselves because these had evolved in response to their own needs.

Another strength of MKSS has been to try to involve a wide cross-section in the process of social change. In MKSS movements, the strong grassroots efforts of peasants and workers are supported by city based campaigners, academicians and media - persons known to be sympathetic to the weaker sections. Senior government officials who are known to have the interests of the poor at heart are also contacted and informed about the aims of the

movement. MKSS has been involved in many movements of protests, but it also balances this path of struggle by undertaking many constructive activities (such as starting fair price shops and schools). MKSS protest movements even in times of tension and uncertainty have a lot of song and dance to celebrate the struggles of people. MKSS has always emphasised the mobilisation of women, who participate in its movements in large numbers. While MKSS believes firmly in the equality of women, it sees social reform as something that should involve the community deeply instead of imposing alien, urban, upper class views on villagers.

The very first struggle of this group involved a clash with a tyrant feudal lord of Sohargarh village who had, illegally encroached a lot of public land. The struggle to release 25 hectares of land from his encroachment for distribution among rural poor families involved some very tense moments, such as when the landlord unleashed armed gangsters on villagers and social activists, but finally the control of the land went to a committee of village women. Pursuing its policy of struggle with constructive work, the movement obtained a project from the Waste!and Development Board for further afforestation on this land. Today this project stands as a model of afforestation and water-conservation from where a large number of villagers meet their fuel and fodder needs.

Fighting Inflation

While many social activists only protest against inflation, MKSS has gone one step ahead to actually set up fair-price shops of its own which sell good quality goods of everyday use. The first such shop was opened in Bhim about nine years back and this has been followed since then by some other shops.

The effort concentrated on reduced retail margins and quality control to provide goods at lower prices. It was decided that since those who ran the shop were dedicated MKSS activists, they would take no more than the legal minimum wage. Incidentally, the senior-most member of MKSS also gets the same wage.

Other members of the MKSS also helped to ensure that high quality was maintained by personal supervision of the grinding and cleaning work. For example, while getting the coriander seeds and turmeric ground, they were asked how much haldi should be mixed in the dhaniya and how much salt mixed in the haldi. The activists, unlike other shopkeepers, insisted on absolute purity.

Predictably, the response of the consumers has been very favourable. The news of the good quality and low prices spread rapidly, first among MKSS sympathisers, and then among other people as well. A high turnover within a short time enabled the new venture to meet its target of being able to function at a margin of just one per cent.

The new shop not only sold products at a cheaper rate, it also announced its low prices over the microphone. Thus in a market where many buyers were illiterate, the shop's low rates were communicated to potential customers. This was greatly resented by other traders who then petitioned the collector to take action against the new shop. When they failed to evoke a satisfactory response from officialdom, they set up a loud music system near the shop, to drown out the announcements of the rate-list.

This, however, had the opposite effect. Several shoppers, attracted by the loud music came closer and eventually found out about the new shop next door as well.

The result was that the MKSS venture succeeded in bringing down the market rates to some extent as other retailers were forced to cut their high margins to compete

with them. This had a favourable impact on inflationary trends far beyond the items sold directly by the new shop. Later some other shops were opened on the same pattern.

Significant Victory on Minimum Wages

In 1990 the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) launched a movement against violation of minimum wage laws in rural employment works in the Bhim region culminating in a hunger strike-cum-dharna. Despite the administration's heavy handed methods, the movement succeeded in drawing attention to the issue of non-payment of minimum wage at rural employment works. This led to a two-day discussion on the question of minimum wages in government sponsored rural employment programmes which was organised at the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur. Senior officials, academicians and social workers who participated in this discussion resolved that minimum wages should be paid in all government sponsored employment works including famine relief works, and that too, within a week of completion of the muster-roll.

This meeting gave strength to the struggle of the MKSS and its activists were hopeful that the revised minimum wage of Rs.22 would be paid henceforth. However, when work on Jawahar Rozgar Yojana started at 13 places in Barar panchayat, it was seen that payment at much below the minimum wage rate was the general norm, and in fact no worker was being paid the legal minimum wage of Rs.22. Several workers made requests for proper measurements to be taken and when this was not done, they refused to accept the lower than minimum wage. However, several workers were ultimately forced to accept lower wage due to their precarious economic condition and the immediate need for cash. The final confrontation was confined to 12 workers who steadfastly refused to accept anything less than the legal minimum.

Meanwhile Udaipur district was divided into two parts and the Bhim region now came under a newly formed district called Rajsamand. This gave a pretext to officials to refer matters back to the old district, and thereby to delay all decisions.

Officials were quite willing to make an off-the record extra payment to the 12 workers who had refused to accept the low wage, and thereby to reduce the matter to one concerning only a dozen persons. For the MKSS, however, it was of crucial importance to get this extra payment on official record, so that this decision would prove helpful for similar struggles. It was in making the payment on record that the officials faltered, appearing to agree sometimes and then backing out. Finally the MKSS had to resort to another dharna-cum-fast unto death in Bhim in the first week of May.

By now the decision-making appears to have passed from the hands of the local officials to state level officials. Once again the state government adopted an arrogant and indifferent attitude. In a particularly glaring act of ruthlessness and insensitivity, the government sent a large number of policemen to forcibly lift the five hunger strikers and carry them to a hospital a long distance away. While the reason given was that their lives had to be saved, in reality some of them were denied even water for a long time.

Finally what appears to have changed the heartlessness of Rajasthan government was the firm stand taken by the department of rural development in Delhi. The state government was not only asked to pay minimum wages, but was further told that its grants for JRY would be held up if it failed to do so.

What is more important, of course, is the precedent that was established in this matter. This immediate fall-out could be seen in surrounding areas where workers employed at several employment works started getting the legal minimum wage.

This prolonged struggle against corruption led further to the idea of several *jan sunwais* or public hearings against corruption. These public hearings also provided a good example of how the participation (sometimes quite reluctant participation!) of various sections including officials, media-persons, social workers, elected representatives and other prominent citizens was obtained to expose the shocking levels of corruption in rural development works.

Public Hearings

The first public hearing took place at Kot Kirana village in Pali district on December 2, 1994. The hearings exposed how people shown to be employed in construction of anicuts were not even living in the area then. The wage money did not reach the villagers and the anicuts were so badly constructed that these were washed away by the rains. Payments had been made for material never purchased.

The second public hearing was held at Bhim block in Rajsamand district on December 7, taking up matters relating to Bhim and Kaladeo panchayats. Kaladeo panchayat has been publicised for its large number of development works constructed under a rural development scheme called *apna gaon, apna kaam* (our village, our work). However, the majority of the buildings constructed were found unusable. An anicut was found to be full of leaks. Although this scheme, as its name implies, is aimed at maximising people's participation and eliminating contractors, in effect only contractors and a few persons were involved.

In Bhim, payments amounting to over 3 million rupees had been made to a fraudulent company which existed only in the form of a bank account in the name of the wife of a block-level employee. Supplies of only about one-eighth of this amount had been made, while false bills and vouchers

were procured and payments made for material never supplied. These and other glaring irregularities were exposed at this public hearing.

The third public hearing was organised at Vijayapura village in Rajsamand district. In this village the grazing land has acquired high value due to the location of a government hotel. Without informing the local people several plots of land valued at about Rs.1,50,000 each were 'auctioned' to outsiders for a song. In some cases the names of local villagers were used as allottees, although they had not even heard of the deals till the scandal came to light. This scam amounting to Rs. 5 to Rs. 10 million took place at a time when the village school needed urgent repairs. This case was discussed at the meeting, including efforts being made by corrupt officials to hush it up.

Several development officials felt that they will be exposed if such hearings continue. In January in Jwaja block of Ajmer district, the gram sewaks of the district organised a protest and demanded that the district collector should not make available details relating to development expenditure. Thus, despite the earlier assurances of the collector, the fourth public hearing at Jwaja had to be held without the benefit of government records. But the people from eight panchayat areas who participated in it examined many development projects and prepared specific complaints.

In Alwar, a public hearing was held on the unfair means being used to grab highly fertile farmland for setting up industrial units, particularly hazardous units and units to produce liquor.

The jan sunwais were an eye-opener even for some experienced MKSS members

"The amount involved in a corruption scandal of a village or a cluster of villages may of course appear small when compared to a state level or a national level scandal, but we

must remember that there are over five hundred thousand villages in India. Multiply what you see in a single village by this number and you get what is easily the biggest corruption issue", says Aruna Roy (MKSS). Adds Shankar Singh, "The fact that this village-level corruption generally involves snatching resources from the poorest people makes it all the more important that such corruption should be fought and resisted."

The concern of MKSS did not end merely with exposing corruption. As Nikhil Dey, an activist of MKSS, says, "It is even more important to try to ensure that the money taken away from people living in poverty is restored so that it can be used for their actual welfare. After all our real concern is the welfare of people. "Towards this end, MKSS has given a lot of attention to follow up work on its public hearings.

Towards Right of Information

This entire difficult and prolonged process convinced the MKSS that one of the most effective methods of fighting village-level corruption is to provide people the right to obtain copies of official records (such as muster rolls, bills and vouchers) relating to rural development and anti-poverty programmes implemented in their areas. This soon became a central point in the demands being raised by MKSS. Several other organisations were also quick to appreciate the potential of obtaining this 'right to information' and it began to appear that this demand raised by MKSS will have state-level or perhaps even national-level impacts.

This feeling was strengthened in 1995 when in his budget speech made on April 5 the Chief Minister of Rajasthan Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat declared that he would allow photo copying of all records on development expenditure of the state, at the Panchayat level, for a fee. He further said that this right to information will cover development

expenditure going back to five years. If irregularities are indicated then, the CM promised, there will be a proper inquiry into this and illegally obtained money will be recovered from corrupt persons.

This was a major step forward in the efforts to obtain the right to information for checking village-level corruption, especially as nothing like this had been promised earlier by the Chief Minister of any other state in India. While waiting for the promise of the CM to take practical shape, the MKSS quietly continued the work to consolidate these gains, continuing the public hearings and the follow-up work on them. It also stepped up efforts to establish state level and national level linkages with other activist groups, lawyers, officials and media persons so that the struggle for the right to information could be broadened. This finally took the shape of state level and national campaigns for right to information in which MKSS activists played a significant role.

However, the state government continued to delay issuing orders on the promise made by CM, despite repeated demands made by MKSS. MKSS decided that if the relevant orders are not issued till one year, then it is time to initiate a movement on this demand. So it decided to start an indefinite dharna in Beawar town on April 6, exactly a year after the promise made by the CM. Fearing a political fallout of this dharna at election time, the state government quickly issued a half-hearted order on the right to information which fell far short of the original promise made by the Chief Minister.

MKSS members argued that while providing for inspection of records and noting down details, the orders do not include photocopying of relevant records. This not only creates problems for illiterate or near illiterate persons, in addition the legal validity of the information written down by hand is doubtful. The order is silent on the period within which records would be available, as also the number of

records that may be inspected for the fee specified in the order. It also does not specify how delaying tactics on the part of reluctant officials can be avoided, or how illegally diverted money will be recovered and refunded to villagers. On all these accounts this order fails to do justice to the original promise made by the CM. Therefore, after seeing the order the MKSS decided to continue the dharna which continued for nearly six weeks. From May 6 (a month after it started) it was also extended to Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan.

While it was only to be expected that this dharna will attract MKSS members from villages, what came as quite a surprise was that it also obtained very enthusiastic participation of the citizens of Beawar town, many of whom had earlier not even heard of MKSS. These supporters ranged from editors and political leaders to vegetable vendors and daily wage workers. Some workers donated a part of their daily earnings while some vegetable vendors donated regular supplies of potatoes and tomatoes. Some photographers provided their services free while the tent shop charged only one third of its normal rate. Several rival trade unions forgot their differences for the time being to extend joint support to the dharna. The honest image of the MKSS and the genuineness of the issues also contributed to this support.

The dharna was withdrawn in mid-August only after the state government constituted a high power committee to look into the practical aspects of implementing the Right to Information.

There was no rest for the MKSS activists, however, as the dharna was followed by a series of meetings on follow-up action and legislation on the Right to Information. As the Rajasthan government delayed implementing the Right to Information, jan sunwais and dharnas were started again to pressurise the government for implementing the Right to

Information in its proper spirit and also for taking suitable action, including recovery of funds in cases of corruption which had already been exposed in previous jan sunwais.

In 1997 MKSS organised a series of dharnas to urge the Rajasthan government to implement the right to information. Kavita Srivastava, who made a significant contribution to this effort says, "The dharnas and meetings evoked a good response in almost all parts of Rajasthan." These culminated in a 50-day protest dharna at Jaipur which attracted national attention. The state government issued significant orders in terms of making village panchayats transparent. To ensure that these do not merely remain on paper, MKSS activists and other social activists in various parts of Rajasthan tried to obtain various documents from panchayats. Meanwhile the struggle for the enactment of right to information legislation in Rajasthan continued which culminated in the enactment of this legislation in 2000. Side by side MKSS activists have continued to play a very important role in the national campaign for right to information and effective legislation on this right at the central level.

At a time when the right to information campaigns is spreading to many parts of the world, a special strength of the Indian experience is how - thanks largely to MKSS - it was closely linked up with the struggles of the weakest sections. MKSS was involved in the movement for minimum wages of workers at relief work sites in a drought-prone area, and it was in the course of this struggle that the importance of information right was realised. Poor peasants got the strength and the confidence to go to meet the highest officials (they even went to meet the President of India who received them most cordially) because they had realised the importance of this right while breaking stones in the parched land of their drought affected villages.

The moral force of MKSS campaign increased to such an extent that at jan-sunwais organised recently in some villages, the persons who faced charges of corruption from people agreed on the spot to return the money so that it could be used again for welfare of people. While there are many campaigns against corruption, such success is extremely rare. In Surajpura and Rawatmal villages of Ajmer district, for instance, the sarpanches agreed to return over Rs. one lakh cash.

It is not enough to expose corruption, on the constructive side we should present examples of how honest panchayat representatives can give better results. Therefore MKSS candidates

fought and won sarpanch elections in Tadgarh village of Ajmer district and Kushalpura village of Rajsamand district. Here one can see a working model of how honest and entirely transparent elected representatives work, leading to much better results than before and much closer involvement of people in development tasks. MKSS supports the sarpanch with the equivalent of minimum wages (at present this amounts to Rs. 1800 per month on the basis of the daily minimum wage of Rs. 60) Other full-time activists of MKSS also get the same monthly honorarium calculated on the basis of the prevailing legal minimum wage rate.

MKSS has about ten such full-time activists. A significant part of their honorarium comes from the fair price shops run by MKSS. At present three such shops are running in Bhim, Surajpura and Jawaja with combined annual gross sales of about Rs. one crore. As these shops function at only one percent profit margin, these yield annual earning of Rs. one lakh which is used substantially to support MKSS activists. MKSS has received several awards the interest earning from which also helps to support activists. Aruna Roy has donated her Magsaysay award money to Janhit Trust for helping other self-reliant efforts of social activists. MKSS is also known for its collective leadership.

Side by side several other struggles and constructive work have continued - teaching children who cannot go to formal schools, arrangements for creating honest public distribution in a village, anti-liquor struggle in Sangavaas and several other efforts. As a result of the sustained efforts of several organisations in which MKSS has played a leading role, it is now much more difficult to deny minimum wages at relief work sites. Although the full legal wage is still not given, the wage given now is much closer to the legal wage compared to the pre-MKSS days.

Despite this significant success of MKSS, the livelihood crises in Rajasthan villages where MKSS works is getting acute. This is particularly visible in the drought years such as 2000-2001. The pressure to migrate in search of work is more, while work opportunities are diminishing. Clearly MKSS still has to do a lot more to resolve the basic livelihood issues in its area of work.



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