Beyond Democratic Rights and Electoral Reform Campaigns:

Challenges facing Non Party Political Movements

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In India, people's movements and grass roots campaigns have traditionally participated in the political process by articulating the needs of the poor and socially marginalized and by advocating for changes in governance and policy making processes that will address these needs. These movements have generally insisted on integrity and ethical behavior in their own campaign – and have demanded improvements in the behavior of political parties and of politicians. At this time, however, the movements are confronting new political forces – including the impacts of economic globalization--where decisions on issues of public interest are increasingly being taken at corporate board rooms of supra national corporations and away from national governments--and the rise of the religious right in India as a powerful political movement. In confronting these new issues, many people's movements now find themselves tempted to move away from issue-based campaigns in order to take on more active roles in politics – even to the point of becoming political parties themselves.

This paper will examine this dilemma facing people's movements in India regarding their future role in the political framework of the country by chronicling the experiences of one such people's movement, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which has been active in the state of Rajasthan for 15 years. Specifically, the paper will examine the interaction that MKSS has had with the political system to date through its issue-oriented campaigns and, more recently, through its efforts to reform electoral processes. The paper will then discuss the trends and issues that are compelling the MKSS to consider

whether more direct political engagement would enable it to accomplish its objectives and bring greater benefits for the people it serves. The paper will also briefly examine the risks that would attend such a move, including the challenge that the compulsions of *real politic* (electoral politics) and the prevalence of corruption in mainstream political system could have on the effectiveness of the ideology and the ethics currently used by people's movements.

The paper is organized into three main sections. In Section I of this paper, I will examine the issue-oriented political campaigns previously undertaken by the MKSS. Two such campaigns viz, the "Right to Work" campaign and the *Jan Nithi Abhyan* ("People's Agenda Campaign"), which were launched in the last couple of years by the MKSS and a broad network of civil society groups, will be discussed. In discussing these campaigns, I will briefly trace the needs and issues that these campaigns sought to address, the external factors (political and economic environment) influencing the conduct of these campaigns, and how the campaigns faired.

Section 2 of the paper will examine the work undertaken by the MKSS as a part of ongoing efforts by civil society organizations to effect technical reforms in the electoral system. Specifically, I will focus on efforts to strengthen electoral processes prior to the state assembly elections held in Rajasthan in 2003. Three specific reforms were identified and sought by the campaign, including:

- Improvement of the voter registration process;

- Collection and dissemination of personal information on candidates for office; and

- Enforcement of the Code of Conduct promulgated by the Election Commission in an effort to prevent fraudulent conduct by candidates.

The paper will examine the situations that led the initiatives to target these three reforms. For each reform, the paper will also discuss the actions undertaken by the MKSS and other non governmental groups to effect change in the three election-related processes targeted for reform; in some cases, these actions were direct actions meant to supplement the activities of government organizations and thereby fill voids, while in other cases, the groups lobbied and eventually worked with the government bodies to implement the reforms.

The results of the campaigns and electoral reform efforts will be discussed in Section 3 and will lead into a consideration of the future political role of the MKSS.

Section 1

About the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)

The MKSS is a peasant-farmer's collective that questions governance and policy making processes as they exist and attempts to influence them by mobilizing public opinion among its main constituents—peasants and rural workers. The MKSS pioneered the Right to Information (RTI) campaign in India when it effectively demonstrated the link between the denial of entitlements and limitations of access to government records. Specifically, MKSS was able to show that the state government of Rajasthan was failing to pay minimum wages to workers in employment generation programs after it fought to gain access to wage (muster) rolls, and other accounting records maintained by the Government which had previously been declared "state secrets"[1] by government officers. From this first struggle, the RTI movement spearheaded by MKSS grew into a demand by citizens for a greater role and voice in all aspects of governance and policy making and for increased accountability of the state towards its people. Following this first campaign, the MKSS has subsequently been involved in struggles and campaigns with larger networks for the Right to Food and the Right to Work (which will be examined in more detail later).

The MKSS has heretofore defined itself as a *non party political movement* which seeks to articulate the needs of the rural poor. The MKSS places itself in the sphere outside political parties even though its work is largely political (*towards establishing an equitable and just society*) in nature. It seeks to accomplish its work through the twin

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[1] The Official Secrets Act 1923 was a law introduced by the British when they were ruling India to prevent access to government record. While such a law as understandable from the view point of a colonial government even after obtaining independence, successive Governments chose to retain the provisions of this law.

modes of struggle and constructive action. However, the MKSS recognizes the practical necessity of strong electoral systems in a democracy. Thus, the MKSS has long advocated the need to protect democratic spaces and the rights of citizens to vote freely. Towards this end, the MKSS has also participated in a series of campaigns for creating and nurturing democratic spaces for the poor.

Prior to the assembly elections of Rajasthan held in December 2003, the MKSS had generally engaged in campaigns and events either independently or as part of larger networks of citizen groups. These campaigns focused combating the twin issues of communalization of society along religious lines and unemployment.

The context of the work of MKSS in Rajasthan

The political climate

In the 1990s, Indian politics saw a rise of political parties along right wing religious-nationalist lines. India's population is largely Hindu (82%) but it also has a sizeable Muslim population of around 120 million (12%). When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a fundamentalist Hindu in 1947, the nationalist religious organization (the Rashtriya Swayemsevak Sangh--RSS) which promoted the assassination was banned by the Government of India. Despite this ban, over the next several decades, the RSS went underground and grew in strength – though it remained a fringe organization – fuelled by the increasing unemployment and a sense of desperation among the young. In 1992, a mosque[2] in the city of Ayodhya site where Ram was born was torn down by supporters of the Hindu nationalist party. Opinion regarding the destruction of this mosque divided

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[2] The Babri mosque is purported to have been built in the 16th century by the Mughal emperor Babar who ordered the temple of Lord Ram to be converted into the mosque. Legend has it that the temple stood on the exact spot where Lord Ram was supposed to have been born. Lord Ram is among the most popular of the gods in the Indian pantheon.

along religious lines. While many people were shocked by the incident, there were whispers justifying the act even among moderates. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) which is the political front of the RSS capitalized on this event by seeking to convert the increasing popularity of the Hindu cause into votes and the consolidation of the Hindu vote bank had begun.

Following the destruction of the Ayodhya temple and the increasing strength of the fundamentalist faction, elections in India have begun to change in character. Platforms based on religious discrimination have increased in number. These trends erupted into full scale electoral violence in the 2002 state assembly elections in Gujarat when a train traveling through the town of Godhra in Gujarat was stopped by Muslim miscreants and a compartment full of passengers (mainly Hindu) was set on fire, killing most of the occupants including a large number of women and children. The BJP fed on the frenzy and anger of the majority Hindu community following this incident and did nothing to stop the mass killing of Muslims that followed in Gujarat. In the assembly elections that followed the month-long killing spree, the BJP won by a landslide.

Gujarat neighbors the state of Rajasthan. A large number of migrant laborers from Rajasthan depend on employment in Gujarat, especially during the recurrent years of drought. The violence in Gujarat had severely affected the livelihood of many of these migrant workers who were forced to flee. For the MKSS, the horrors of Gujarat represented more than just the loss of livelihoods formerly available to migrant workers. The success of Hindu militancy led to a general apprehension that similar incidents would be encouraged in Rajasthan too, which was due for elections.

The economic climate

Rajasthan is a drought prone state that has experienced a severe drought from 1999 to 2002 when the annual monsoons failed to produce sufficient rain. The drought in 2002 was particularly hard and resulted in a large loss of cattle and even some instances of starvation deaths among the tribal populations. While starvation deaths immediately attracted media attention and provoked impromptu action on the part of the State government, it is the hidden effects of drought that have been particularly harsh on the people and that have been neglected by the State government.

As in previous years, the drought of 2002 also led to large scale migration of the able-bodied to cities or other states; as a result, the elderly and children were often left alone in villages to fend for themselves. Those who chose to stay behind have had to struggle against terrible hardships, including chronic malnutrition. Famine in Rajasthan as in other parts of India is still managed under a Famine Code created by the British when they ruled India. When famine is declared, the State government intervenes by initiating food for work programs through which large scale employment is provided to the affected people. However, the benefits of such programs have not always reached the most affected people. Due to poor planning, entire villages have been excluded from such programs and while in other villages, the amount of employment provided through these schemes has been grossly inadequate. Additionally, the dependence of the people on the government as an employer is not limited just to periods of drought. Small holdings of land coupled with poor development and the lack of industry in the State has meant that even in years of plentiful rainfall, people have sought employment from the government to supplement their farm incomes.

Against this background, the Right to Work Campaign and the Campaign for a People's Agenda will be introduced. In two sections below, the history and conduct of these campaigns will be discussed; however, discussion of the success or failure of each campaign to achieve its objectives will be presented in the third section of this paper as these critical assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the MKSS' campaigns set the stage for discussion of the factors influencing the choice confronting the group about becoming a political party.

The Right to Work Campaign

As a group that represents the rural labor force, the MKSS found itself having to seek solutions simultaneously to the twin issues of the religious pogrom in Gujarat and the resultant vitiated communal environment and the drought and the resultant desperation of the poor in Rajasthan. As in previous campaigns, this struggle too was immaculately captured in a slogan[3].

Trishul nahin Talwar nahin kaam ka adhikaar chahiye

(We don't want swords and tridents[4], we want employment.)

This slogan was widely used in the Right to Work campaign, which was launched in 2002 by a large network of groups in Rajasthan – including the MKSS -- which had previously participated in the Right to Food campaign[5]. The Right to Food campaign

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[3] Slogans are a historically and culturally popular method used by people's movements to energize and mobilize citizens. The slogans are intended to capture the mood of the people and communicate the goal of a campaign in simple language.

[4] The trident is a three pronged sharp instrument which Hindus believe was used by the Lord Shiva to kill evil. Nationalist Hindu organizations use the trident as a symbol of Hindu assertiveness. Many such tridents were distributed in Gujarat as elsewhere in India (including Rajasthan) and were even used in the pogrom to kill Muslims.

[5] The Right to Food campaign was launched in the form of a Public Interest Litigation filed by the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties-Rajasthan in the Supreme Court of India. This suit challenged the performance of

demanded that the Government utilize the huge stocks of grains it had on hand to prevent

hunger through welfare programs and by strengthening the performance of the Public

Distribution System through which essential commodities are rationed[6] to the people. The

Right to Work campaign was thus a logical extension of this Right to Food campaign.

There was a feeling among activists that to ensure sustainable food security, people

needed employment to be able to provide for their basic needs and to buy food. As the

Government in Rajasthan was the largest rural employer, legislation strengthening the

relationship between the rural workers and the Government and ensuring the rights of

rural workers was crucial to correct current planning practices, which have been plagued

with recurrent problems as described below.

In many cases, current planning practices have enabled relatively powerful and well-

connected families in a village to corner a large number of the employment opportunities

that were granted to the village. Second, even when the targeted workers got

employment, it was often insufficient[7] to their needs. Third, under usual planning

procedures, decisions regarding the projects that were to be undertaken as part of the

employment generation schemes were often centrally made, when went against the spirit

of self-governance and failed to engender a sense of ownership of assets created by these

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the state in administering the public food distribution system. In 2001, the Government of India through its centralized Food Distribution System was sitting on 60 million metric tones of grains even as people in different parts of the country were dying of starvation. The interim order issued by the Court demanded that a series of progressive measures be taken by the Government to streamline public food distribution.

[6] All citizens are classified into economic categories. Categories include "Above Poverty Line" (APL) families, "Below Poverty Line" (BPL) families, and "Antyodaya" (poorest of poor) families. All members of each category are issued identification cards that serve as ration cards; these cards allow families to claim entitlements from the government.

[7] Typically if a project was undertaken in a village, it would require 2-4 fortnights of labor. The next project (if at all) might be sanctioned only after several months. This gap created a situation in which government programs provided only unstable, irregular employment.

schemes among local communities. Fourth, the current employment generation schemes are not statutorily binding and therefore a change of Government (or even a change of mind among government officials) could result in funds for an extant program being summarily slashed. Fifth, in line with the food for work programs wages would include part payment in grains which has the dual function of utilizing the huge food stocks that India has in addition reducing costs of the program. Finally this would such an entitlement would lend a confidence in the rural work force from migrating.

The main demand of the Right to Work campaign was that the State government enact a legislation guaranteeing employment at minimum wages to all rural citizens for a maximum of 100 days in a year. Such legislation had been previously introduced[8] in the State of Maharashtra in western India in response to the terrible droughts it had suffered in the 1970s. In conducting the Right to Work campaign, MKSS and its partner organizations used the help of economists to produce a budget on the cost of such legislation and even identified revenue streams which could be used to fund[9] this venture. Large demonstrations around the State were organized by the campaign in support of its demands and villagers from all parts of Rajasthan were encouraged to make written representations to their elected representatives in support of this law. Seminars and conferences were organized to discuss the need for the law. Despite these efforts, the campaign has not been successful in getting an Employment Generation Act law passed; the reasons for this lack of success will be examined later in this paper.

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[9] The Employment Guarantee Act would require that certain sources of revenue be earmarked exclusively to fund implementation of this Act. This provision was in line with the experience in Maharashtra , where a revenue stream was dedicated to the Employment Guarantee Act.

Towards Peoples Planning—the Jan Nithi Abhyaan and Truck Yatras

In the 6 months preceding the assembly elections in Rajasthan, the MKSS started a four-phased campaign aimed at influencing the electorate. It was felt that the coming elections could bring with them a hate campaign along communal lines similar to the one that had occurred in Gujarat during the previous year. To prevent an outbreak of violence and to focus the attention of the electorate on critical issues, MKSS sought to counter political parties' efforts to dictate the agenda for the coming elections by raising issues of concern to MKSS' constituents.

People's movements have had a rich history of work in Rajasthan – as in other parts of India – and they have gained experience working on a diverse array of issues, including environmental preservation, tribal rights, women's rights, democratic rights, and human rights etc. To consolidate this knowledge into a broad people's manifesto, the Jan Nithi Abhyan ("Campaign for a People's Agenda") was launched by a collective of groups including the MKSS as an effort to launch a people's manifesto and publicize it in different parts of Rajasthan.

For a group like the MKSS, communication with people is the most important tool in all its campaigns. Over the years, the members of the MKSS have developed several different – sometimes even unorthodox – media for communicating its message. The group uses street plays (skits), folk songs with the lyrics modified to focus on the theme of the campaign, slogans that are shouted out as well as painted onto banners, pamphlets which bear descriptions of the campaigns and, most importantly, MKSS has gathered an articulate group of speakers capable of speaking on behalf of its campaigns. The

membership of the MKSS – including its full-time staff – is comprised almost exclusively of residents of local villages in Rajasthan. Thus, its members can truly identify with and claim to represent the MKSS' constituents—the rural poor.

The Jan Nithi Abhyan (JNA) was an effort to expand the MKSS' reach to an even broader section of society, including for the first time the urban middle class. The MKSS did have previous experience in dealing with the urban middle class. For example, during the Right to Information campaign, the MKSS had formed alliances with groups representing the middle class. However, the Jan Nithi Abhyan was a new attempt at stirring the political conscience of this class in a potentially sensitive period prior to state assembly elections.

During the JNA, MKSS members along with volunteers traveled on a truck to different districts of Rajasthan. In hundreds of villages, towns, and cities, the campaign carried the message of the people's agenda. In the cities, seminars and press conferences were organized. In the second phase of the campaign, the younger generation were targeted. Using the platform of *Spic Macay*[10] the campaign visited schools and colleges around Rajasthan. The campaign decided to involve students into various campaign activities. Students were enrolled as volunteers on a large scale. A variety of youth activities were planned out to cater to different interests. In the third phase the campaign organized a public *sit in* in front of the State legislature in Jaipur. The timing of the sit in was deliberately coincided with the last week of the legislative session. In the fourth phase the campaign the truck yatra was accompanied by the Ghotala Rath (the chariot of scam).

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[10] SPIC MACAY is a Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Among Youth. It is a non profit organization that invites artists including recently social activists to perform in schools and colleges across India.

The Ghotala rath is a vehicle which was first used by the MKSS during the Right to Information campaign. It is a parody and a satire on the state of politics in India. The chariot has an umbrella on top of it from which hang banners naming various major scams in India. A play act politician sits on top of the chariot and then he is taken around the city accompanied by chants glorifying corruption and the chariot of scam. The politician addresses peoples in various corners by enacting the mannerisms of the politicians as they solicit votes from people while justifying their corruption. This pantomime is very popular among voters as it connects with their sorry plight. As the 'real' politicians were also campaigning at the same time the ghotala rath took on special meaning this time around. It was hugely popular with people in some places halting official party campaigning to look at the ghotala rath. The Jan Nithi Abhyan was able to use the platform and the resultant crowds drawn by the ghotala rath to address a very large number of people.

The impact of Jan Nithi Abhyan is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

Section 2

Challenges to Indian democracy

In any country with a population greater than one billion people, democracy is faced with the challenge of providing for adequate institutional arrangements to enable justice and the rule of law to be upheld. India is a case study for such institutional challenges and has had to cope with a burgeoning population as well as the institutional challenges of sustaining democracy for the past six decades.

The Indian democracy is a developing nation in which a fourth of the population lives below the official poverty line and in which half of the non-literate population of the world reside. Given these statistics, one might guess that among the most pressing threats to democracy would be the potential for the Government to be overthrown by a military coup or by a dictatorship. The examples of other nascent economies bear witness to the danger of such threats. However, India is a thriving democracy that stands out among the developing countries of the world for the resilience of its democratic government. In India, the constitutional right to universal suffrage has been exercised by more than 4 generations of voters and its hold on India's citizens is now firmly entrenched.

In India, the major challenge to democracy comes not from the emergence of radical factions – though such factions are emerging – or from the threat of military coup but from the sheer challenge of conducting elections on a gigantic scale. It is estimated that there are about 670 million registered voters in India. To put this in perspective, there are approximately as many registered voters in India alone as there are in all the countries of the developed world combined, including the United States, the countries of Western Europe, Australia, Canada, and Japan.

In 2004, India will again hold elections for its national assembly (Lok Sabha). Five phases of polling will be completed in some 800,000 polling stations around the country at a cost of around $250 million (not including the campaign costs that are borne by individual contestants and parties) under the supervision of nearly 5 million bureaucrats. Through this effort, 543 people will be elected from an estimated 4,000 candidates to represent the country's billion strong population. These are heady statistics but they give a sense of the mini miracle that the conduct of an election in India constitutes!!

In spite of brief hiccups,[11] the Election Commission of India has conducted these elections without fail throughout the 50-year history of elections in India. While recognizing the impressive accomplishment that the conduct of these elections constitutes, urgent reforms are nonetheless needed to make elections fairer and more open, and to strengthen the ability of eligible voters to cast a ballot and, more importantly, to make an informed choice.

Electoral Reforms in India

The Election Commission of India is a constitutional body that oversees the electoral process in the country. The Commission enjoys enormous powers under the Constitution to ensure free and fair elections. Despite the existence of the Commission, however, corruption in politics has been an ugly feature of Indian politics from the early 1970s. The Election Commission (EC) has generally failed to check this growing criminalization of politics during the past 30 years. Only in the 1990s has the EC really became a

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[11] In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi faced general dissent and responded by imposing Emergency Rule on the country. During the next two years, the civil rights of citizens were suspended and the country faced the brutal excesses of a totalitarian leader. Under enormous pressure, Emergency Rule was lifted by Indira Gandhi and elections were held; she was (much to her own surprise…) trounced by an electorate that had suffered greatly during the Emergency Rule period.

countervailing force[12] which in the public's eye checked the blatant irregularities indulged in by most political parties. The model code of conduct prescribing the "do's" and "don't's" for political parties during electioneering was closely monitored by the EC. Several cases have been initiated by the EC regarding alleged violations of the code. The new proactive image of the EC has encouraged civil society groups to engage in dialogues with it on issues of common concern regarding the election system. I will discuss three major concerns raised during such dialogues and the efforts that have been taken by civil society groups – including the MKSS – to effect reforms in the electoral system.

Civil Society Initiatives at Electoral reform

1. The right to know:

The Issue: Prior to 1999, candidates were not required to disclose any information about themselves – including their financial condition or their criminal background. With the growth of criminal and corrupt politics, the number of candidates sponsored by political parties with such anti-social histories also increased. While voters might have been suspicious of the candidates' histories, there has not previously been enough evidence regarding canadidate's lives to support such suspicions. The recent success of activists in bringing about legislation on the people's Right to Information of public records has laid the ground for a similar demand for information on candidates for public office.

The Actions: The first effort at obtaining information about candidate profiles was undertaken by the Association for Democratic Reform (ADR)—a group comprising primarily of academicians who teach in the prestigious Indian Institute of Management.

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[12] T.N.Seshan a charismatic and head strong bureaucrat took over as Chief Election Commissioner in 1990. Under him the EC undertook major reforms. The EC came to be feared by political parties and errant officials alike for the strong and prompt action it took to ensure smooth and free conduct of elections.

ADR filed public interest litigation (PIL) with the Delhi high court in 1999 demanding *'right to know'* information about candidates standing for elections. After prolonged litigation in which the matter eventually reached the Supreme Court, the demands made by ADR were upheld. Thus, the court decreed that for citizens to be able to vote freely and elect the candidates they desire, it is absolutely vital that they be provided with information about the candidates. The political parties resisted this ruling and eventually succeeding in having an amendment added to the People Representation Act[13] that effectively nullified parts of the Supreme Court's judgment. Following continued litigation the political parties were forced to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling. Specifically, the court ordered that each candidate for office should submit affidavits along with the papers they submitted to declare their candidacy for office. Among other information, the affidavits require candidates to declare information pertaining to the following issues:

- Whether the candidate has been convicted/acquitted/discharged of any criminal offence in the past and, if so, whether he/she was sentenced to imprisonment or payment of a fine;

- Whether the candidate has been accused in the past six months in any pending criminal case or has been accused of any offence punishable by imprisonment for two or more years, and in which charge is framed or cognizance is taken by the Court of law;

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[13] The Peoples Representation Act 1951 is the law governing the election system in India. The Parliament made a hasty but unsuccessful attempt to amend the Act in 2002 to prevent some of the directions of the Court from taking effect. Later, an Ordinance was passed with the assent of the President bringing these proposed changes into effect. A fresh PIL by ADR was upheld by the Supreme Court and finally settled the issue by requiring all candidates to file affidavits.

- What assets (immovable, movable, bank balances etc.) are owned by the candidate and by his/her spouse and/or dependants;

- What liabilities are owed by the candidate – particularly whether the candidate owes money to any public financial institution or branch of government; and

- What educational qualifications have been achieved by the candidate.

The court order was a major victory for proponents of electoral reform. Following this victory, NGOs organized themselves to capitalize on this victory by forming the Election Watch groups in states across India. Election Watch became a platform for civil society groups to monitor elections. It was expected that members and volunteers would report violations of the code of conduct to the Election Commission to enable action against candidates to be initiated. Using the Supreme Court verdict, the Election Watch groups sought and generally obtained from the Election Commission the affidavits filed by the candidates. In some cases, the groups then analyzed and published the information while in other cases, the groups exerted pressure on political parties to prevent them from nominating candidates with criminal records. Yet other groups like the MKSS linked Election Watch efforts with their ongoing campaigns on improving Democracy and Electoral Systems.

Currently, there are Election Watch groups in 12 states in India and the network of the groups monitoring electoral processes involves hundreds of non-governmental organizations and a cross section of civil society groups.

In Rajasthan, a network of peoples organizations, non-governmental development organizations, lawyers' associations, retired bureaucrats & judges, academicians and student volunteers joined together to form Rajasthan Election Watch (REW).

Prior to the assembly elections in Rajasthan, REW decided to try to obtain affidavits from all candidates in all 200 constituencies of Rajasthan. Discussions were held on how the information could be made more 'user friendly' to the voters and on how the information could be used to generate increased awareness among the public on the candidate information disclosure process. Eventually, the Election Watch campaign set up teams in all six divisions[14] of Rajasthan. The group organized meetings with the Election Commission and agreed to formally request that government officials provide copies of candidates' affidavits to representatives of Election Watch at the district level rather than at the constituency level[15].

In order to make the information disclosed by candidates comprehensible to the widest possible audience, the data from candidate disclosure forms were publicized in:

1. Pamphlets[16]: For each constituency, a one-page summary was prepared by REW on each candidate that detailed the number of criminal cases against the candidate, as well as the candidate's financial assets, agricultural and non-agricultural landholdings, and the value of the jewelry owned by the candidate. Packets of summary sheets were then sent to the divisional Election Watch teams and were used by them to prepare the pamphlets which were in turn distributed in the relevant constituencies.

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[14] A division is a unit of administration. It is comprised of several districts, which in turn are comprised of blocks, panchayats, and wards (in that order).

[15] As previously pointed out there are 200 assembly constituencies in Rajasthan. The EC laws provided for free copies of candidate profiles to be provided if sought at the constituency level. As this would tremendously test the resources of any State level body REW requested the EC to provide these profiles at a more manageable 32 district level.

[16] In India, pamphlets are a popular way of reaching out to large number of people. There is a cultural background of people reading pamphlets and discussing them. Pamphlets are also relatively cheap methods of distributing information to a large number of people. The MKSS uses this media of communication in all its campaigns.

2. Advertisements: REW launched a massive press campaign to publicize its activities. In the fortnight prior to the elections, press briefings were organized at the campaign's head office on an almost daily basis to brief the press about the latest findings uncovered by the Election Watch team. Rankings of the candidates on the basis of wealth (value of land, cars, and jewelry owned etc.) and criminal histories were prepared for divisions and for the state as a whole on the basis of party as well as for the candidate field as a whole. Candidates found to have questionable disclosures (such as a candidate with two wives, or a candidate who owned 40 vehicles, or a candidate who had previously been the queen of a former kingdom but claimed no car etc.) received added publicity, which added "flavor" to the reports. The Election Watch's constant interaction with the press provided a lot of attention and publicity to its efforts and made it very popular[17] among people in the state.

3. Public Meetings: Some groups like the MKSS organized public meetings to discuss the candidate summary sheets in individual constituencies. The MKSS organized three *jan manches*[18] in Beawar, Bhim, and Rajsamand. Charts detailing the financial assets of each candidate were displayed at the site of the public meeting. All candidates were invited to address the meetings and to answer questions from the electorate regarding the information they provided in their affidavits. These public

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[17] The popularity of the Rajasthan Election Watch was widespread and even some bureaucrats in the Government of Rajasthan spent time with the campaign in an unofficial capacity. The police too asked for copies of the findings as they felt it could be of use to them. Even the normally reticent and cynical babus (the clerks in the departments) were not averse to praising the campaign's efforts. When this writer went to the State Election Commission office after the elections were over to enquire about its progress on a complaint filed by Election Watch campaign, a clerk in the office took him aside and promised to feed the campaign with reports on all the developments in the department.

[18] A jan manch is a public platform where candidates were invited to discuss issues arising from their disclosures with the general public. In events like 'meet the candidate' sessions, these jan manchs had been previously conducted. However, the concrete evidence given in the affidavits provided much-needed ammunition allowing the public to pose 'probing' questions to the candidates.

meetings were well-attended in all three localities; however, candidates from major political parties generally refused to attend the meetings.

The Rajasthan Election Watch team also assembled a database to organize the information collected on the candidates in that state. All available information – including information on candidates who lost elections or who withdrew their candidacy prior to the election – was included in the database; this information will therefore be available if these individuals stand in future elections. By saving this data, the Election Watch team will be able to compare information on incumbents who stand for re-election in the next election and thus to identify significant changes in the candidate's criminal or educational status as well as in the candidate's personal wealth. The team will also be able to identify false information submitted in future affidavits by comparing a candidate's current answers to those they have given in the past (the provision of false information can be a basis for disqualifying an incumbent candidate from standing for re-election). In short, the development of this database should ensure that candidates and political parties will face difficult questions in subsequent elections[19].

Challenges: REW faced many challenges in its campaign to obtain and disclose affidavit information on candidates. The first issue that the group had to confront was simply the need to analyze and publicize complex information in a very limited time frame. Candidate affidavits are filed along with the papers that express a person's intent to stand for election; these papers are normally submitted only three weeks before the date of an

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[19] Already, political parties are being questioned more and more by the media and political activists on the candidature of known criminals. Recently, a well-known criminal joined the ruling party but the resulting protests forced the party to cancel his membership. Efforts of Election Watch groups in different states have forced political parties to begin to address the issues posed by the nomination of criminals.

election. Thus, the Election Watch team had barely 21 days before the election to obtain affidavits from candidates in each of 32 districts, process them, and send their findings back to the districts to be used in public meetings and press briefings. Considering that almost 1,500 candidates stood for the assembly elections, the analysis of the affidavits and preparation of the media materials was no minor task. To meet this challenge, the Election Watch team mobilized more than 150 volunteers -- many of them students who designed and managed the candidate database. Innovative media[20] for delivery of affidavits from far flung locations of the State were used. Lawyers and retired law enforcement bureaucrats were engaged to interpret criminal disclosures, while professors and volunteers with backgrounds in finance and accounting helped to analyze financial disclosures. Volunteers from rural areas helped to interpret area measurements[21] and were also very useful in providing local knowledge about candidates.

Unexpected Challenges: As there were many wrongful disclosures in the affidavits,[22] the Election Watch campaign was forced to address this issue. It was decided that as the provision of false information on an affidavit was illegal, the Election Watch campaign would not correct the information provided by candidates. This decision was prompted

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[20] Rajasthan has an excellent public transport system that includes a network of buses operated by the state owned Road Transport Corporation. Local teams from the Election Watch campaign obtained affidavits from their own local areas and then couriered them to the central office through these buses. This method of collecting affidavits proved to be cheaper and faster than any regular courier service or postal network.

[21] Measurement of land is done using different standards in different parts of Rajasthan. As the Election Commission affidavit pro forma did not specify a particular measurement to be used by candidates, as many as 6 different measurements were used by candidates to specify the size of their property holdings. For the purposes of standardization, the Election Watch team had to convert all this data into one measurement system.

[22] Some candidates had undervalued the value of their property. The disclosed value of shops and houses in prime locations were shown to be much lower than the known market rates for such properties. Criminal records were not disclosed. Affidavits were filled up badly making the information provided illegible.

by time constraints though it is hoped that REW will be able to address the issue of wrongful disclosures more adequately during a future election.

We review the impact of the candidate disclosures in Section 3.

1. The right to vote:

The issue: Before an election can be held, voters must be registered. The registration of eligible voters is one of the biggest challenges to the conduct of free and fair elections in the India. When the right to vote is denied to an Indian citizen, it is frequently because the citizen arrives at the polling place to find his/her name missing from the electoral rolls. At the time of the election, however, it is too late for the voter to do anything to qualify to vote as Indian law specifies that citizens must register to vote prior to the election period.

Previously, the process of getting one's name added to or deleted from the voter registration list required the citizen to travel to the Sub-divisional Magistrate's[23] (SDM) office, which are frequently located long distances from rural villages. The nature of Indian bureaucracy – which has a not undeserved reputation of being unresponsive (or at best slow) in providing services – combined with the challenge of traveling a great distance can be daunting to villagers who want to add their names to the electoral rolls (and these challenges are particularly difficult in instances of deletion of names where the relevant person is dead).

Other challenges also prevent a person from exercising the right of the franchise. In particular, voter registration lists are frequently riddled with errors. While there is no exact information available on the extent of such errors in the electoral rolls, some

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[23] The SDM is a senior district level official operating from the district blocks. He enjoys wide administrative and sub judicial powers.

estimates have been attempted. Lok Satta, a grassroots movement in the state of Andhra Pradesh which has been at the forefront of Election Watch activities in that state, has conducted and published its surveys of electoral rolls in that state. Their survey has uncovered some startling facts about the error rate in electoral rolls. Lok Satta found that 28% of entries surveyed in Andhra Pradesh's electoral rolls had some type of error; the error rates for urban and rural polling booths were 44% and 15% respectively. Such errors frequently took one of two forms: either the names of voters who should have been in the rolls were not listed or the names of fictitious or dead citizens were included in the rolls.

The Actions: Lok Satta suggested that voter registration process be reformed by making the post office[24] the nodal office for maintaining electoral rolls and accepting applications for revision of these roles. The group argued persuasively that this would provide citizens with an easier method for revising entries in the electoral rolls.

To address the problem of errors in voter rolls in Rajasthan, MKSS suggested electoral rolls be read aloud at ward sabhas[25]. Residents could then know exactly what was on the rolls and revisions could be made to the rolls based on resolutions passed by the ward sabha.

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[24] India has one of the world's largest postal networks comprised of approximately 150,000 post offices located throughout the country. Traditionally, Indian villagers have had close ties with the postal department as the Government of India uses the postal network to offer a variety of services (including financial services) to citizens. Citizens are therefore comfortable with the concept of going to the post office to conduct a variety of types of business.

[25] The 72nd and the 73rd amendments to the Indian Constitution created a third tier (in addition to national and state level) in the Indian administrative and political system. In rural areas, this tier took the form of "panchayats", which are groupings of several villages administered by an elected head called a sarpanch. All adult citizens of the panchayat meet several times every year in a gram sabha (village meeting) to make decisions on the administration of their village. Even smaller unit of administration called wards were established under an amendment to the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act in the year 2000. The ward sabha constitutes a meeting of all the members of the households in a ward (generally 80- 100 homes).

The Election Commission reacted positively to both suggestions[26]. It agreed in principle on the need for a comprehensive revision of electoral rolls and for the creation of a system that would enable regular corrections to be made to the rolls. However, the Commission raised a point of caution regarding the need to ensure that adequate safeguard mechanisms were in place to prevent the misuse of the electoral roll revision process by political parties that would seek to inflate the rolls by adding bogus names and/or to eliminate the names of political opponents from the rolls[27].

A few months prior to the Assembly elections in Rajasthan, the Election Commission began to allow the revision of the electoral rolls through the actions of ward sabhas. However, the implementation of this process – like all activities involving such a large population – faced several significant challenges. There are approximately 100,000 wards in Rajasthan. The task of revising electoral rolls through the ward sabhas required that nearly 100,000 public meetings be organized, which in turn required the provision of adequate publicity regarding the proposed agenda of each ward sabha so that people could attend the meetings and collectively review the voting lists. Competent officials had to be authorized to conduct the ward sabha meetings and voter lists and alteration forms had to be made available to every ward across the state. Though this task was daunting, the Election Commission and the Government of Rajasthan carried through with this process and conducted electoral roll reviews throughout the State.

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[26] Lok Satta's suggestion on using post offices is still being reviewed by the Election Commission.

[27] The incumbent government lost around half of the previously held seats in the State Assembly following the elections of 2003. At a post-election party meeting, the deposed Chief Minister of Rajasthan is said to have blamed large scale revisions in electoral rolls as one of the reasons for his loss. He further claimed that his unpopularity with government staff led them to manipulate electoral rolls prior to the elections.

The Results: The results of the voter registration roll reform process were astonishing. Over 700,000 names were altered in electoral rolls across the state—a combination of names being added and deleted from the rolls. In Andhra Pradesh, where a similar exercise was undertaken, almost 10 million names (most of which were cases involving removal of names from the electoral list) have been revised[28].

Let us examine the reasons for the success of the ward sabha proposal and the institutional strengths that it has offered. The ward sabha is an assembly of all the residents of the ward and therefore it is the body best placed to record factual information pertaining to these residents. In addition, the ward sabha enjoys popular and legal legitimacy as it is not connected with any group or faction. Voters who participated in this process were able to check the correctness of their own entries in electoral rolls as well as those of their family members and acquaintances in the area.

Additionally, the proposal required that electoral lists be read aloud. In a state like Rajasthan, which has very poor literacy levels, such a process has special advantages. Rajasthan pioneered the use of ward sabhas and gram sabhas to conduct social audits[29] of development projects and programs. The ward sabhas therefore had proven their viability as forums where public information could be verified in a transparent and inclusive

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[28] In Andhra Pradesh, the electoral roll review led to the deletion of 9.4 million 'bogus' voters. The existence of such extensive errors in the voter registration rolls in that state was suggested by the fact that before the revision, almost 80% of the total population of the state was registered to vote. In a country like India, where almost 35% of the population is under the age of 18, it is difficult to believe that 80% of the population of a state like Andhra Pradesh would be above the age of 18 and thus eligible to register to vote.

[29] A social audit is an examination of the accounts of an area by residents. Much like a financial audit, during a social audit, a review is conducted of the 'true and fair' picture of the fund flows in the area. However, a social audit emphasizes the physical examination of the expenditures on development projects by residents of the area who are witness to the actual development work/program, which is a unique strength of the social audit process. In Rajasthan, in village meetings held in ward and gram sabhas, government expenditures on development projects are reviewed by the residents and they pass resolutions after the social audit approving the completion of a project.

manner; it logically flowed that the ward sabhas could be effective forums for verifying the electoral rolls.

Finally, the apprehension of the Election Commission regarding potential abuses of this process was satisfied by the very nature of the ward sabha process. By reading and verifying the electoral rolls in open public hearings, the process itself prevented the manipulation of the electoral rolls in secrecy. Existing procedural safe guards under the Representation of Peoples Act on verification of applications were not replaced by the new system and continued to act as an additional check to the names reviewed. Thus, following the ward sabhas, the relevant Government officials continue to scrutinize and process applications for changes to the electoral rolls – though these applications now originate with the ward sabha rather than with individuals.

We review the impact of the voter registration reforms in Section 3.

2. The right to free and fair elections:

The Issue: The third issue taken up by the Rajasthan Election Watch campaign was an effort to reduce the use of illegal electioneering activities on the part of candidates and parties during the elections. In India, the Election Commission has established a set of guidelines known as the Model Code of Conduct that must be obeyed by political parties and candidates in the run-up to an election. This code is intended to provide a level playing field for all political parties, to keep the campaign fair and healthy, to prevent clashes and conflicts between parties, and to ensure that social order is maintained. These guidelines are also intended to ensure that the ruling party – at both the national and state levels – does not misuse its official position to gain an unfair advantage in an

election. The Election Commission has the power to disqualify a candidate if she/he refuses to follow the Model Code of Conduct.

While the Code of Conduct has not been established by statute, the norms that it outlines have been agreed to and accepted by all major political parties. In practice, however, candidates and political parties frequently violate the Code with impunity. For example, in spite of the widespread use of corrupt election practices by candidates, no elected candidate has subsequently been disqualified from taking office due to the candidate's violation of the Code of Conduct during an election campaign. In responding to accusations that it has not done enough to enforce the Code of Conduct, the Election Commission complains that it does not receive adequate proof of alleged violations to enable it to act and that the cases it has taken up have become entangled in the judicial process.

Typically, abuses of the Code of Conduct fall within fairly predictable categories. First, there are violations of spending limits imposed on electioneering and campaign costs. Thus, the Election Commission has issued orders prohibiting candidates from spending more than the prescribed limit on electioneering efforts. However, candidates often use innovative means to violate these orders. Previously, candidates often claimed that some campaign-related costs were not incurred by them but instead were incurred by friends and supporters. The Election Commission subsequently revised the order prohibiting candidates from exceeding campaign expense limits by specifying that all expenses incurred by anyone on behalf of the candidate would count toward a candidate's total expenditures. However, candidates resorted to falsifying their accounts by simply failing

to account for all costs actually incurred by their campaigns or by conducting transactions on a cash-only basis.

Other violations consist of bribery or of a practice that might be termed "conspicuous spending". For example, candidates organize ostentatious displays of wealth. Candidates may also distribute alcohol to male voters and/or distribute jewelry, clothes[30] or household consumption items to women in an effort to buy their votes. In addition, ruling parties often misuse the official machinery[31] of Government available to them to promote their re-election efforts. Huge motorcades of vehicles accompany the candidates in the campaign trail.

The Actions: The Rajasthan Election Watch volunteers identified several such violations of the Code of Conduct and reported them to the authorities. However apart from a few notable successes REW could not make much impact on the conduct of elections with reports of poll irregularities emanating from all around the State. In Section 3 we shall take up a more detailed examination of the impact of the efforts at monitoring polls.

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[30] In the ongoing national elections in India in April 2004 during one such distribution of *sarees* by a prominent politician on his birthday to poor women in the city of Lucknow, poor planning led to a stampede in which 20 women and children were killed.

[31] Typically, the chief minister of the state would have his picture on boards and banners bought using public finds. In addition, government ministers frequently bring out full page advertisements in newspapers glorifying their accomplishments. They also use Government vehicles and rest houses during the election campaign. The EC orders requiring all these advertisements to be withdrawn had the unwitting effect of negatively impacting the Right to Information (RTI) campaign. The RTI campaign had lobbied hard with the State government to ensure that as a transparency measure all village panchayats paint boards giving details of expenses incurred by them for scrutiny by the public. Over enthusiastic bureaucrats used the new EC order to also treat such transparency disclosures as advertisements and got these boards to be painted over.

Section 3

Reviewing the impact of the political campaigns and electoral reform work of the MKSS:

The Right to Work Campaign:

The RTW campaign lobbied the Government of Rajasthan extensively on the need for an Employment Guarantee Act. However, despite the support of the head offices of the parties in Government, the State government of Rajasthan did not enact this legislation. The Government claimed that the State did not have the financial resources to enact such legislation and that it was up to the Central Government to make decisions regarding resource outlays. Even suggestions by the RTW campaign that the law be enacted in phases that would allow pilot programs to be initiated in some districts initially was not enacted by the Government. The RTW campaign then tried to obtain the consent of all major political parties in Rajasthan to the enactment of the Employment Guarantee Act and efforts were made to get this issue included in all the party election manifestoes. These efforts too failed with none of the dominant parties in the state including this law in the official party manifestoes. Rajasthan received much-needed rainfall from the monsoons of 2003, which ensured that in the time period leading up to the elections, farmers were able to cultivate their lands and obtain livelihoods without requiring the level of assistance from government that had been required during the drought years. This to some extent influenced the coolness with which the Employment Guarantee Act was received by all the political parties. However, the campaign for the Employment

Guarantee Act is encouraged by the popularity of the draft legislation that it has distributed and efforts are on-going to obtain passage of this law[32].

The Jan Nithi Abhyan:

Much like the Right to Work campaign, the Jan Nithi Abhyan too achieved mixed results. The campaign succeeded in receiving wide publicity from the media. In each of the four phases that it undertook, the campaign was able to achieve large scale interaction with the public. To a limited extent, the campaign brought into public discourse and debate a forgotten and much needed perspective towards electoral politics—one that is based on ethics and principles and genuinely reflects the concerns of the people. One of the aims of the campaign was to counter political parties' efforts to indulge in communal or religious politics. A combination of external political factors and efforts by civil society groups like the campaign did succeed in ensuring that the assembly elections in Rajasthan in 2003 were generally free from such communal divisive politics.

Importantly, the campaign also taught many lessons to the activists involved. It forced them to address new questions raised during their interaction with the voters. Though there was unquestionable support for the agenda of the campaign, the campaign was not able to provide viable political alternatives to the candidates who were standing for office. Thus, the campaign was successful in familiarizing people with important social issues but it was unable to provide voters with alternatives to the choices offered by the main stream political parties.

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[32] Updates on the Right to Work campaign and the Right to Food campaign can be obtained from the web site http://www.geocities.com/righttofood/events/rtw.html.

Election Watch:

1. Impact of candidate disclosures: Though there was a lot of enthusiasm among both the media and the citizenry regarding the candidate information forms provided by the REW campaign, in all fairness, it appears that voting patterns in the State assembly elections of 2003 were not measurably impacted by the provision of this information. Most groups involved in making affidavits public have also acknowledged that it is likely that not even one seat was affected by the publicity given to a candidate's background. However, far from being a cause for despair, this should be seen in a positive light. Voter behavior in a diverse country like India is affected by the interplay of a large number of factors, including regional, caste, class, and religious factors. The disclosure of information on candidates for public office can at best add just one more dimension to these existing factors and among such factors, local issues and voters' experiences of a candidate himself/herself are probably still the most vital factors in determining a candidate's 'electability'. As the information disclosure processes are new, their impact will not probably be felt for several election cycles. Still, the efforts by civil society groups to improve the electoral system coupled with other recent media and judicial efforts to effect electoral reforms are jointly expected to add impetus to the impact candidate disclosures will have on the electorate.

2. Impact and challenges to the voter registration reforms: Even though the revisions to the electoral rolls that resulted from the ward sabha verification process were widely welcomed by electoral reform activists, there was nonetheless some dissatisfaction with this process. MKSS members had participated actively in the electoral roll review process and most of them attended ward sabhas in their own home villages. They pointed

out the hastiness with which the process was undertaken. Thus, in many cases, adequate notice about the reason for the meetings was not provided to the public.   As a result, in many villages, the ward sabha was conducted when just 5-6 villagers were present. Further, in some villages, many names were added and deleted but these changes were not reflected in the final registration rolls compiled after the meetings because applicants seeking changes failed to sign their applications personally.   As many eligible voters were not present at the ward sabhas, changes pertaining to their status were not reflected in the final lists because they had not signed their applications. However, in spite of these concerns, the institutional strength of the ward sabha and its use for such processes was once again confirmed and its use to verify and update electoral rolls is expected to continue.

*3. Impact of monitoring Code of Conduct***:** REW achieved very moderate results in its efforts at monitoring the code of conduct by political parties due to a variety of reasons. In some cases, volunteers could not access candidates' election campaign accounts though they were submitted to the Election Commission. In other cases, when complaints were filed regarding possible Code violations, the Election Commission issued orders to initiate an investigation but did not take the kind of visible action that would have a deterrent impact on parties.   Thus, for example, although orders were issued prohibiting the distribution of alcohol, these orders did not appear to stop parties from distributing alcohol in villages. Regarding a violation reported by REW alleging that newspaper advertisements were being made against the ruling party without acknowledgement of the source of the person giving the advertisement, the Election Commission issued orders for investigation but did not taken any substantive action. Based on these experiences, it has

became apparent to the Election Watch campaign that a lot more effort will have to be expended to force the Election Commission to take aggressive action to punish candidates who violate the Code of Conduct. Such efforts will require a lot more resources to be employed not only in identifying violations but also in monitoring cases where investigations are ordered by the Election Commission.

The predicament of the Indian voter

The predicament of the Indian voter is best described by an old folk tale from Rajasthan. A very long time ago there was a king who was just and fair to all his subjects. One day, a thief was brought in front of him. After hearing the facts of the case, the man's guilt was proven beyond doubt. The king turned to the convicted man and pronounced his verdict and offered the thief a choice of two punishments: the thief could choose to eat a hundred raw onions or receive a hundred whiplashes. The only condition to this choice was that whatever the man chose he would have to take in full. The thief immediately chose the seemingly easier option of eating onions. He picked up one onion after another and started eating them. By the time he had finished five onions, tears were rolling down his eyes and his tongue was burning. He shouted to the king that he could not eat anymore and he would much rather receive the whiplashes. The king in all fairness agreed but once again reminded the thief that he would have to receive the whole package of a hundred whiplashes. After the thief received ten whiplashes his skin was inflamed; he could not bear this anymore. He told himself that his tongue had cooled down and maybe he was better off eating onions. So once again he started eating onions. Just like before, this time too he gave up after eating a few onions and went back to the

whiplashes. By the end of the day, the thief had received not only a hundred whiplashes but had also eaten a hundred raw onions.

In the last 55 years or so since India's independence, voters have swung from one political alternative to another. Prior to elections, each political party makes grandiose promises to the voter; the voter in turn elects most of them to power at some point or the other. But when the time comes for candidates to deliver on the promises they have made, not much changes regardless of who the people have elected. Much like the thief from the folktale, the Indian voter too has ended up facing the brunt of both evils.

Winning elections has become the sole concern of political parties. In their quest for power, ethics and principles have been relegated to the background. Electoral alliances and seat adjustments are now justified in the name of *real politic* even when they are at complete odds with party ideology. Given this state of politics, it is not surprising that issues of real concern to the people are also often relegated to the background.

The need for political alternatives

The efforts of the MKSS in the period leading into the assembly elections in Rajasthan were indeed remarkable. A relatively small group managed to bring into the mainstream debate the need for principles and ethics in public life. A combination of the political campaigns and electoral reform actions undertaken by MKSS and its partner organizations succeeded in raising the level of public discourse. It led to increased calls among ordinary voters for the discussion of substantive issues during election campaigns. Thus, in its role as a guardian of democratic spaces through the non-party political process, the MKSS was successful in articulating the call for reforms.

However, there is a growing demand among various constituents of people's movements in India – including the MKSS – for sustainable solutions to contain the malices that affect the country. Long-drawn issue-based campaigns and advocacy efforts at reform have yielded many positives but these positives can very easily be upturned by the political rulers at their whims and fancy.

We have already reviewed how external forces can adversely impact popular campaigns. Factors like the arrival of plentiful monsoons in 2003 ensured that the Right to Work legislation could be set aside by the state government. The change in government that resulted from the 2003 elections also means that the campaign will have to make new and sustained efforts at presenting its demands to a new set of actors. In spite of several critical and useful suggestions regarding citizens' concerns, the Jan Nithi Abhyan campaign had only a marginal impact on the platforms adopted by other political parties. The Rajasthan Election Watch group could not impact voter preferences despite wide publicity and support for the publication of information on candidates' backgrounds. Lack of resources and a relatively unresponsive bureaucracy reduced the impact of the Election Watch's efforts to monitor election campaigning and identify and prosecute unlawful behavior by candidates. Similarly, the voter registration reforms – in spite of their positive impact – did not achieve their full potential due to government inefficiency in implementing the reform process.

All these factors point toward the limitations that civil society movements face in influencing policy processes. While mobilizing numbers and maintaining sustained pressure on the government might result in some victories, there is no assurance that campaigns will have any impact on the government. The creation of platforms to raise

people's awareness and focus political discussion is also very important but will not have a tremendous impact unless the platforms are accompanied by political solutions, including the existence of candidates who, by supporting the platforms, offer clear alternatives to extant candidates.

The Challenges of engagement in party politics

There is a solution for these problems, though it is a potentially hazardous one. One solution involves a complete abandonment of the non-party political process. MKSS and other civil society organizations could organize themselves into viable and alternative political parties and seek a mandate for their positions from the electorate.

Before reinventing themselves to become mainstream political parties, however, groups like the MKSS would be required to address several issues. First, such groups must address the issue of credibility. Ever since it was formed in 1990, the MKSS has reached out to its constituents—the rural poor—with an ideological position that did not provide rewards for the support it received from constituents in its campaigns. Political office is popularly seen in India as a privileged position of power that allows office holders access to a world of comfort and riches. While most politicians seek to identify themselves as servants of the people—social workers—they are often seen by people as self-serving, corrupt rulers. For the MKSS, an association with such an image presents a great challenge which would require the group to be clearly positioned to avoid this association even before it became a party.

Second, while in certain sections of Rajasthan, the MKSS has wide appeal and has received recognition for its commitment to work towards the politico-socio-economic empowerment of its constituents, this image is limited to the geographical area of MKSS'

operation. Meaningful political organization requires that the MKSS reach out to a wider audience; such an audience must include members of different classes and must span the rural-urban divide.

Currently, this broader audience is often not familiar with the MKSS or, at most, the audience is aware that MKSS is a non-governmental organization that has worked on the Right to Information Campaign. Thus among the broader audience, MKSS is associated only with one single issue; to be a viable party, however, MKSS must show that it is capable of addressing all the issues currently discussed among political parties.

Third, to become a political party, the MKSS would be required to clearly articulate its policy thinking on economic issues like globalization and privatization. In an era when India has committed itself to global treaties like the World Trade Organization – to which the MKSS is ideologically opposed – the organization faces the challenge of articulating viable and pragmatic alternatives that would enable it to remain true to its core values but also enable it to engender support among the wider audience required to achieve elective office. Concomitantly, to become a political party, the MKSS must examine the rhetorical terms that it has always utilized, including such terms as *equality* and *justice*. MKSS would be forced to explain in plain language what this rhetoric would mean in terms of the policy objectives for which MKSS would work.

Fourth, to become a political party, the MKSS will have to think through the institutional infrastructural arrangements it would need to be a viable political force. Among other things, MKSS would require the ability to raise funds and recruit members. These issues once again present enormous difficulties for a group that has ideologically limited its sources of funding to friends and well-wishers. While it is to the credit of the MKSS that

it has managed to run several large campaigns on very frugal budgets without sacrificing it effectiveness, the new political framework within which it would operate as a political party would make a much greater demand on the organization's financial resources.

Fifth, while the success of some of MKSS' campaigns have demonstrated the existence of popular support for the issues on which it has worked, it is unclear if this support for these issues would translate into electoral support for the group. I have previously commented about the multiple factors that affect voting patterns in India including caste association, religion, and various local issues etc. Once MKSS entered the political milieu as a party, it would be forced to address this host of issues that influence the choices made by voters (rather than the choices made by citizens supporting an issue-oriented campaign).

Finally, as a political party, the MKSS would continue to be confronted with one of the primary reasons that it chose not to enter politics. The MKSS has traditionally believed that the state of current mainstream politics is so bad that compromises on ethical issues are necessarily required to survive in it. Maintaining the high standards of ethics and principles that it has set for itself and with which it has come to be identified will greatly challenge the MKSS or any such group that hopes to present be a viable political party.

Conclusion

Faced with the need to provide a political alternative on the one hand and confronted with the dangers that inhere in becoming a political party, the MKSS has decided to first examine how it would be feasible for the organization to assume a more overtly political posture without compromising its position. MKSS has decided to field several candidates in the village (panchayat) elections due in Rajasthan in 2005. To some extent this is

familiar territory. In the previous Panchayat elections in the state four years ago two of MKSS's workers stood as candidates and were elected as sarpanchs (village heads). They ran on a platform that promised transparent and accountable functioning of the panchayat government. Both the candidates spent a fraction of the amounts that their opponents spent on campaigning. Their victories against difficult odds provide hope to the MKSS that it can be effective to offer an alternative to politics as usual.

MKSS' leadership sees panchayat politics as a prudent way to enter the political fray without having to sacrifice all of the values around which it has been organized. Due to the size of the electorate participating in the panchayat elections, elections at that level are decided less on the basis of party affiliations and more on the nature of the candidates themselves and their positions. These elections offer a real opportunity for dialogue to occur between candidates and the electorate on issues and ideology. In addition, they present a voter constituency with which the MKSS is familiar.

The experience that will be gained from the panchayat elections in 2005 are expected to lay the groundwork for MKSS' entry into state level politics in Rajasthan. The interim period allows MKSS time and space in finding a balance in its twin roles as a new political front and an existing peoples' movement.

The period leading into the panchayat elections in Rajasthan in 2005 holds exciting prospects for the growth of the MKSS into a mainstream political party. We can only wait and watch this complex process of evolution which will involve difficult choices pertaining to candidates, mobilization of resources, composition of candidate platforms and other political organizational issues.