

Brief report on the National Youth Convention 11th and 12th of January, Beawar, Rajasthan

The first National Youth Convention on Right to Information and Democracy was held on the 11th and 12th of January, 2008 in Beawar, Rajasthan. The convention was attended by over 1,000 young participants from both rural and urban areas of 11 states across the country. The convention was organized by NCPRI , along with JOSH- the Delhi based group working with youth , and other organizations from Rajasthan like the MKSS, the Jaipur based RTI support group, and citizens groups in Beawar, including the daily local newspaper Nirantar.

The two day convention was held to discuss and focus on the crucial role the youth can play in strengthening Democracy through the use of Right to Information on issues of social importance. The convention was structured with sessions on role of youth in democracy and politics, along with workshops of various concerns like negative impact of globalization, gender, communal politics, agriculture, state of Dalits and Adivasis, budget analysis, Human Rights, Right to Information, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Education and Employment and others. The main objective of these workshops was to create a general understanding on these issues, the challenges and areas, the problems, the role youth can play in addressing these concerns, the role that Right to Information can play in facilitating these problems and finally draw out a plan for action. These workshops were facilitated by eminent resource persons like, Jean Dreze, the MKSS team (Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar Singh and others), Vrinda Grover, Aseem Srivastava, Amit Kanwar, Jogendra Bhagat and others.

Shri Sandeep Dikshit, Member of Parliament, was present in this occasion and shared his views on the state of affairs on present Indian politics and the spaces for youth to get involved. *In a lively and participative opening panel discussion on youth and political involvement, he said the political parties today are like houses with closed windows and doors which do not allow any fresh air and light to enter the house. Comparing the present recruitment policy of political parties vis a vis the youth, he said that the political parties are indulging in 'mind control' activities. As a result these parties today do not create the space for dissent or disagreement in political thought for the youth joining them. They are unable to differ from the party line. They are*

then only attracted to the positions and the possibility of getting an election ticket. Another important point emphasized was that the youth today can no longer ignore political spaces or political parties, thinking it is not worth the time and effort to enter a dirty, corrupt and dysfunctional system. Youth should create spaces within the system if we want to change it. *Other speakers in the session included Narayan Singh a young ex Sarpanch from Rajsamand District, Jaishankar Pandey an RTI activist from UP, womens rights activist ----, and Bhanwar Meghwanshi, a young journalist and dalit activist who also coordinated the session. In his closing remarks at the end of the second day Sandeep Dixit reiterated the importance of the youth of India to not get alienated from the political system, and even if youth do not directly get involved in "rajniti" as they know it, they must get involved in "raj ki niti" (issues of governance).*

The workshops held on different issues highlighted and opened up discussion on important areas. *Resolutions for future action were passed in the closing plenary on the right to information, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, and the Role of youth in Democracy.* The participants expressed the need for a national forum to take up issues related to the implementation of the Right to Information Act. The need for a website, a campaign to ensure that RTI becomes part of the curriculum in schools and colleges and the need to monitor the decisions/orders of the Central and State Information Commissions were the key issues identified. It was also felt that it was necessary to work out a strategy to challenge decisions of the Information Commission that violate the letter and spirit of the Act and if necessary even approach the Courts.

On the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act it was felt that the youth should mobilize and participate in the gram sabhas in large numbers to ensure that the provisions of the NREGA – preparation of list of works, payment of minimum wage, issuing of job cards and carrying out social audit to ensure transparency in NREGA works is implemented. The participants also suggested that an appeal should be made to the Government that RTI and NREGA be made an essential part of the school and college curriculum to maximize the opportunities provided by both the legislations in ensuring the real participation of all citizens in democracy and democratic decision making.

The participants also emphasized that the definition of politics should be changed. It should not be restricted to party politics alone. It should be expanded to also include people's politics which is running parallel to the mainstream political system. With specific reference to electoral politics the participants emphasized that value based politics should also be promoted so that poor people's voice find a place and are reflected in mainstream politics.

Issues related to Dalits, Adivasis and Nomadic tribes were also taken up. The discussion highlighted issues and challenges related to livelihood, atrocities and human rights violations that are faced by these communities. It was decided that a campaign be launched to address these challenges and ensure a life of dignity for these communities.

The second day of the convention started with remembering the contribution and message of Swami Vivekanand towards the youth and the larger society. After which the participants divided to get into workshops of a different nature. The workshops of the second day aimed in kindling the creative and expressive side of the youth, thus there were workshops on puppetry, theatre, yoga, films, songs, *media and journalism, (cartoons and) comics (poster making)* and other modes of expression and communication.

On this day, Mallika Sarabhai the well-known artist and her team presented a captivating performance . The two-hour performance titled "Unsune Awazein" drawn from the real stories written by Harsh Mander , an ex civil servant and one of the first RTI activists, put across a strong social message to the youth present through a sequence of short plays, interspersed with dance and music. The episodes addressed various social issues like leprosy, abuse of street children, drug addiction, politics of communal riots, manual scavenging, abuse of dalits and adivasis and so on. The emotive performance depicted the living conditions of these various communities using popular Bollywood tunes that appeal to the youth of today, with lyrics carrying poignant social messages. Mallika Sarabhai concluded the show imploring the youth present to "act now" by beginning with oneself. It is easy to say we will do something one day, but there are many actions like untouchability and discrimination we practice unthinkingly in our daily lives and we could start by changing this right away, she said.

The first day of the convention commenced with a candle light march, which

started from the historic Chang Gate, where the first dharna demanding for the Right to Information was held in the year 1996. The 1000 participants marched single file through the market areas of Beawar, where they were greeted with flowers by the members of the market association.

The people of Beawar who identify with the RTI and own the campaign, took complete responsibility for the logistical arrangements . Their financial and human contribution laid the foundation for a successful convention. This convention was also made possible by the benevolent support and contribution of other individuals and groups, *(whose contributions ranged from small individual donations of ten and twenty rupees, to free accommodation being provided at the dharamshalas in the town. The people of Beawar took responsibility for meeting the food costs of all the 1000 participants for two days.)*