Social Audit - Public Accountability

What is the issue?

Social audits can potentially become a powerful democratic tool to ensure a citizen-centric mode of accountability.

What is social audit?

- Social audit is where information is to be proactively shared amongst people.
- They can, in turn, "performance audit" a service or programme.
- It involves people in planning, implementation and evaluation phases.
- Sharing information, recording comments and acting on findings are the processes involved.

What is the current need?

- The breakdown of credibility in various public institutions in the recent past has become a concern.
- This has highlighted that democracy and especially public funds need eternal public vigilance.
- Democratic governance needs the citizen to be legally empowered.
- The Citizen should be able to ask questions, file complaints, and be a part of the corrective process.

- Social audit could be a solution towards this end.

How is Rajasthan's Jan Sunwai a model?

- It was conceptualised in the mid-1990s by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS).
- Jan Sunwais are village-based public hearings on development expenditure.
- The Jan Sunwai campaign was organised in 5 different development blocks of central Rajasthan.
- It helped establish the Right to Information (RTI) as a potent, usable people's issue.
- Public readings of informally accessed development records had dramatic outcomes.
- **Information** - The Jan Sunwai facilitated the reading of information and recorded the people's response.
- Information and facts inconsistent with reality were exposed.
- E.g. Information about payments made to dead people and non-workers
- Unfinished buildings without doors, windows or a roof were shown as audited and 'complete'.
- Local residents could immediately become aware of these and reacted to it sharply.

What was the outcome?

- The people made four sharply focussed demands and circulated them in a pamphlet:

i. full and open access to records of development expenditure

ii. presence and accountability of officials who are responsible to answer people's questions

iii. immediate redress of grievances, including the return of misused money to its intended purpose

iv. mandatory 'social audits'

- The effective institutionalisation of this platform gave people and communities real monitoring powers.

What is the concern?

- The RTI Act brought into effect the first prerequisite for social audits.
- Thus, information became the core of people's empowerment in Jan Sunwais.

- However, it became obvious that information itself is not enough.
- It gave access to government records and ordinary people were armed with information.
- But it led to frustration when they were unable to obtain any redress.

How do social audits address this?

- Social audits facilitate acting upon the inconsistent facts.

- It transfers the power of scrutiny and validation to the people.
- It thus essentially facilitates a citizen-centric mode of accountability.
- By this, transparency can be combined with an institutionalised form of accountability to the people.
- It shifts the relationship between the powerful and the powerless from patronage to rights.

What are the legal backings to social audit?

- Nationally, institutionalised social audits have begun to make real progress only recently.
- MGNREGA was the first law to mandate social audit as a statutory requirement.
- In 2017, Meghalaya became the first State to pass and roll out a social audit law to cover all departments.
- **CAG** - The Office of the CAG developed social audit rules for the MGNREGA in 2011.
- It conducted a performance audit in 2015.
- A year later, it formulated **social audit standards** in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development.
- The standards could ensure that the social audit process is viable, credible and true to first principles of social accountability.
- **Supreme Court** - The SC has recently passed a series of orders, giving social audits the infrastructural framework they need.
- It has ordered that the CAG-formulated Social Audit Standards be applied.
- Accordingly, it ordered setting up truly independent state-supported State Social Audit units.

- It has also ordered that social audits be conducted of Building and other Construction Workers Cess.
- It is also required for the implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act.

What lies ahead?

- Despite the above, there has been no delivery on legal accountability frameworks.
- These include the Lokpal Bill and the Whistle Blowers Protection Bill.
- The system of social audits needs an endorsement and a push by multiple authorities.
- This is essential to establish an institutionalised framework which cannot be undermined by any vested interests.

Source: The Hindu