Social Audit - Public Accountability

What is the issue?

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

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What is social audit?

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

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- The breakdown of credibility in various public institutions in the recent past has become a concern.
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- This has highlighted that democracy and especially public funds need eternal public vigilance.
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- Democratic governance needs the citizen to be legally empowered.
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- The Citizen should be able to ask questions, file complaints, and be a part of the corrective process.
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- Social audit could be a solution towards this end.
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How is Rajasthan's Jan Sunwai a model?

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

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- The people made four sharply focussed demands and circulated them in a pamphlet:
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i. full and open access to records of development expenditure
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ii. presence and accountability of officials who are responsible to answer people’s questions
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iii. immediate redress of grievances, including the return of misused money to its intended purpose
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iv. mandatory ‘social audits’
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- The effective institutionalisation of this platform gave people and communities real monitoring powers.
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What is the concern?

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

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

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- Social audits facilitate acting upon the inconsistent facts.
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- It transfers the power of scrutiny and validation to the people.
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- It thus essentially facilitates a citizen-centric mode of accountability.
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- By this, transparency can be combined with an institutionalised form of accountability to the people.
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- It shifts the relationship between the powerful and the powerless from patronage to rights.
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What are the legal backings to social audit?

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

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

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SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering