

JANVIKAS – CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, GUJARAT

The phones keep ringing. They are from anxious relatives of 35 Muslims in Vadodara, who were arrested by the police on charges of rioting, when they gave the names of those who burnt their homes. Yusufbhai from Vadodara is in the office armed with a detailed report on those injured in the police firing, the number of houses in JP Nagar that have been burnt and the number of people killed.

Even as she fields the calls, Nupur, the executive director of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) in Ahmedabad holds consultations with Rashida Manzure of the Kanoonvi Sahay Kendra, Khedbrahma (one of the district law centres) and scrutinizes monitoring sheets and evaluation forms brought in by Arshad Ghori, coordinator of the Nyaya Manch in Palanpur (another district law centre). Discussions take place on the number of cases handled and the volume of work

by each member and suggestions are made on how to curtail expenses.

It is an eye-opening introduction to the way that CSJ functions – its innovative approach and organizational structure of operating at two levels – one as a central resource centre and then providing inputs at the district and taluka level through the district law centres in Gujarat. It is a glimpse into the detailed program planning, strong systems of monitoring and evaluation and cost effectiveness and sustainability of the organization. Most importantly, it illustrates how effectively so many people have been brought together on one platform – a necessary corollary of social justice ‘lawyering’.

This distinguishing feature is amplified during the field trip the next day to the Nyaya Manch in Palanpur. A field team guides the tribals



Nyaya Manch meeting at Palanpur



Khapa tribals along with their land rights' forms at the Nyaya Manch meeting

of Khapa on how to fill up forms and access their land rights so that their dwellings on encroachments of forest land before 1980 can be regularized according to a Government Regulation (GR).

Prior to this trip the media van has made a visit and briefed the villagers as part of the legal awareness strategy. The field team comprising of minority member HU Sindhi (a retired mamlatdar), Kailash Gamar and Kailash Modi (tribal women functioning as paralegal workers) along with advocate Pankaj Modi, illustrates CSJ's strategy in involving the socially vulnerable groups (minorities, tribals, Dalits and women) in grassroots activities, thereby creating spaces for multiple leadership at the second level.

The wide gamut of issues taken up – from legal rights of minorities, interventions after the riots, environmental issues, tribal land rights, atrocities on Dalits and rights of undertrials – is indicative of how CSJ uses the law in



The CSJ team guides the tribals on accessing justice

development work. While several institutions use the law, CSJ is one of the first to have a rural-based approach and a network of autonomous teams at the field level.

The concept of such an institute was born after a national-level workshop in which Janvikas, a facilitating organization, was asked to take the initiative in designing certain interventions in the area of legal aid. In 1994, the Janvikas board mandated the setting up of the Centre for Social Justice. This socio-legal organization was a systematic and institutional attempt to empower the impoverished by focusing on social transformation through the use of the law. Over the next three years, the core strategy was formulated after several interventions.

It was realized that the movement could not succeed unless there were committed lawyers and paralegals at the district and taluka levels. Hence, the need for district law centres.

It was also found that the human rights

movement needed to be integrated with voluntary organizations working with the disadvantaged. This led to the effort in training paralegals and supporting systematic responses to human rights violations. Legal aid centres thereby morphed into 'law centres'.

It was also evident that the law could be a powerful tool for social reform if utilized and demystified. Therefore it was necessary for research to link to Public Interest Litigations with implications at the national, state and district levels. It also became clear that good laws and pro-poor judgments by the Supreme Court and High Courts were rendered ineffective in the absence of sensitive lawyers at the lower judiciary. It was therefore necessary to introduce innovative lawyering in the field of Dalit atrocities, women-related offences and undertrials at the district level. Since the key to good governance and survival of democracy was legal education for both the community and professionals, it was crucial to develop strategies for public level awareness and media advocacy.

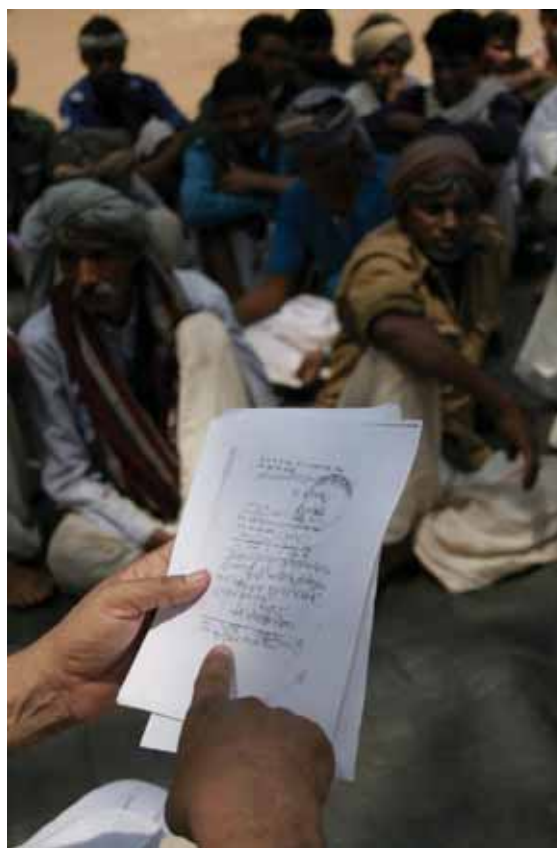
With this perspective, CSJ was reorganized in 1997 and the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust was approached specifically for their expansion activities and for core support to the district centres. An initial grant of Rs 4.76 million for three years was given in 1997. Recently, a grant of Rs 39.60 million was sanctioned in 2004 as a corpus grant to Janvikas and towards its CSJ programs.

Today CSJ operates in nine districts in Gujarat with a network of 11 district law centres. Not only has the decentralized system of lawyers and paralegals and cost-effective methods helped the disadvantaged, especially women, to access their rights as evident in the growing volume of cases handled, it has also worked in a qualitative manner in terms of advocacy. There is now a strong articulate voice that has the space to argue its own causes. As Nupur explains, the uniqueness of CSJ is the symbiotic relationship whereby its visible presence at the grassroots level gives it acceptance at the state government

level for advocacy issues.

The symbiotic nexus is also evident in CSJ's networking. For example, Suraksha Abhiyan, a public hearing on malpractices in ration shops, was provided the necessary inputs to apply the law through filing of corruption cases and accessing the Right to Food. Since social justice lawyering derives its strength from a multi-disciplinary approach with different people contributing their expertise, CSJ lays great emphasis on skilful training of paralegals who not only help in the pre-litigation work, but also help to bring about legal awareness and add a social perspective to court room lawyering. In recognition of this ability, CSJ was invited to set up the Indian Institute of Paralegal Studies (IIPLS).

Another novel initiative is the Asil Manch or litigants' forum in all the districts that CSJ has a presence. Its aim is to help clients who find court work bewildering and difficult. It has aided consumer redress, made interventions in



Nyaya Manch discussions in progress

labour courts and helped speed up justice delivery especially in women-related cases through fast-track courts.

In its capacity as a human rights organization, CSJ has initiated innovative programs that could be replicated across the nation. The Kaydaa Sahayak trains life convicts in prison as health workers and paralegals to improve prison conditions. For undertrials, CSJ has made attempts along with the lower judiciary to secure their release on personal bonds.

In an intervention through its Paryavaran Mitra unit, CSJ has ensured that there are environment public hearings on the impact of new industries with the public accessing the Right to Information act on knowing the kind of plants to be constructed and its impact on their lives.

Fighting for the rights of women, CSJ has taken up several advocacy issues from maintenance to violence. Recognizing the vital

need to build linkages with stakeholders it has conducted programs in gender sensitization for trainers of police training academies in Gujarat.

Efforts in gender sensitization are carried on at all levels. In one interesting case the Kutch unit held a nukkad natak in which some frank observations of police attitude were made. Thereafter there was a small but visible receptivity in the police's attitude towards the women's groups who are fighting against the illicit liquor lobby.

One can compare CSJ's efforts in the field of development to that of a stone thrown into the water with concentric waves going out from the microcosm to the macrocosm - from the village to the state. When we return from Khapa to the Ahmedabad office we get the heartening news that 31 of the 35 Muslims arrested have been given bail thanks to CSJ efforts. It is a small but nonetheless significant ripple in the long, long struggle for justice.



Awaiting justice at the district meeting