

## URMUL JYOTI SANSTHAN, RAJASTHAN

A group of people sat on the floor, huddled around a low desk in a room barely large enough to accommodate them. The place was Nokha, an administrative block, 65 kilometres from Bikaner town. The room serves as the resource centre for the Jagruk Nagrik Manch (forum of vigilant citizens), a platform facilitated by Urmul Jyoti Sansthan, Nokha. It was the last day for filing any objections that one might have to the names on the official list of people who fall below the poverty line (BPL). The objections had to be filed with the district collector. None of those who had gathered at the resource centre were vying for a place on the 'BPL list'. They were striving for the lists to be authentic, by including the needy and excluding those who were not below the poverty line. A micro-level, real-life instance of citizen's voice for good governance, in action!

Urmul Jyoti Sansthan started working in Nokha in 1997 through literacy camps for girls. The literacy camps are conducted for girls in the age group of 10 to 20 years, who have either never been to school or were pushed out of the schooling system early. The seven-month long camps take the participants through the state board curriculum of the first to the fifth standard. Some girls come back and are coached for the eighth standard board exams; some return for vocational training. The literacy camp incorporates awareness of rights, too. Through

the literacy camps, Urmul Jyoti Sansthan has created a base of nearly 3,000 girls with whom it can work.

To combat the high incidence of eye disorders in Nokha, due to malnutrition and blowing desert winds, Urmul Jyoti Sansthan runs an eye hospital since 2000, with facilities for surgery and an outpatient department. Check-up camps in schools and eye care awareness among the local population complement the services at the hospital.

But the core of Urmul Jyoti Sansthan's work is advocacy. The advocacy work began with 50 people who got together in 1998 and talked about issues of corruption and government liability. They were aware that there were large amounts of funds allocated for welfare schemes by the state. If these funds were utilized appropriately, there would be no need for civil society to take on the tasks of the government. Till 2000, this small group of people went from one government office to another asking questions about their functioning, jurisdiction and responsibilities. The officials' responses were all recorded, including their offer to address corruption among lower-level officials.

Gradually, the work of the Jagruk Nagrik Manch grew. It acquired an office, hired staff and today has recorded membership of 465 men



*Soochna Kendra in Nokha*



*Member of the Jagruk Nagrik Manch*

and women. It took up cases of corruption with the government officials, and pressured them into returning money taken as bribes in accordance with their commitments made and recorded earlier. The Manch has records of Rs 1.50 million worth of bribes being returned to the people, and estimates that a large amount of money is returned informally without being entered into the Manch's records.

At one level, the Jagruk Nagrik Manch, undertakes surveys of government programs (like the anganwadi program), identifies gaps in them and develops a campaign to pressure the government to fill the gaps and comply with budget provisions. At another level, the Manch runs an information resource centre at the block headquarter which stores detailed information of all government offices and procedures. The resource centre is open to all, including government officials who often use it to retrieve data about their own functioning! The centre also

operates as a meeting point for people to consult Manch members for advice and to plan for action, including filing complaints against corrupt officials. The Manch assists in following up on issues raised and complaints filed, often by organizing public hearings.

The Manch's activities at the village level include making available information of government schemes and circulars in comprehensible language. Members in every village are trained and informed periodically about utilizing the available schemes. A group which was undergoing refresher training unanimously declared that it had tasted the might of truth ever since it had been associated with the Manch. And now there's no stopping them.

A lot of work has been done in invoking and utilizing the Right to Information act, in the absence of which it would have been yet another well-meaning initiative, restricted to government



*Elderly member of the Manch listens pensively at the meeting*



*Receiving an identity card through the efforts of Urmul Jyoti Sansthan*



*At a community meeting in Nokha held by the Manch*

files. The poorer women of some of the villages of Nokha have been organized into self-help savings groups. Some of them have participated in the activities of the Jagruk Nagrik Manch too.

The Manch is geared towards being a single-point destination for enabling good governance. It has created a wave of honesty in the block, albeit with repercussions. Several positions in the block administration lie vacant because officials do not want to work in a corruption-free zone! What distinguishes Urmul Jyoti Sansthan's initiative is that it has been able to fearlessly stand up to the government machinery with the support of the marginalized. At a time when civil society ventures are coming under the microscope, the organization has, without hesitation, opened up its accounts for public viewing.

However, despite the secular nature of its work, caste differences run deep in the region and often form a hindrance. Given the nature of their work several efforts have been made to

break their organizational and individual strength. Maintaining the motivation levels of staff in the face of such adversity has sometimes been difficult.

Urmul Jyoti Sansthan has been particularly encouraged at the donor community's growing insistence on including a component of advocacy in budgets of development organizations and is particularly heartened by the grant of Rs 2.10 million made by the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust to it. It hopes to see more effective activity through such impetus.

The organization looks forward to more and more people joining the movement for vigilant action and good governance. It hopes that the movement will eventually be able to sustain itself without external support. The organization speaks of spreading their model of work to other agencies through training and dissemination. At the macro-level, the vision is for all states to be compelled to keep good governance at the top of their agenda.