

## **Mahiti Adhika Gujaret Pahel (MAGP) 17 - 19 March 2009**

Mahiti Adhika Gujaret Pahel (MAGP) is an organization based in Ahmadabad, Gujarat. MAGP focuses its work in the rural areas of Gujarat the state on the north-west coast of India with a population of approximately 55 million.

MAGP is involved with a number of campaigns including voters' awareness campaign where the number of people who vote increased significantly as the result of their campaign. The campaign focused particularly on the youth. This core demographic is now realising they can't just blame the system and politics if they don't participate in voting. MAGP also recently participated in the Youth Conference held in Rajasthan where over 3,000 young people from all over India met. NGO's funded the meeting, with contributions from MKSS, and most of the young participants also paid a registration fee.

MAGP are also involved in the Right to Information movement.

Two months ago MAGP visited a rural community to educate them about their right to access information using RTI. Two months after the training this community has now submitted over 83 RTI applications requesting access to information relating to immediate issues of service delivery and corruption. MAGP have also trained women's group who are extremely receptive to RTI.

RTI is used to assist a broad range of issues including alleged violations, corruption and criminal activity. MAGP has also been successful using RTI to access information concerning the credibility of politicians. For example, citizens can request a copy of an affidavit of political candidates, including details of their educational background, property details, criminal history. This right is also detailed in the Public Representative Act (PRA). According to the PRA such details must be disclosed by electoral candidates however they are not obliged to give detail concerning their personal relationships. Section 8 of RTI details third party confidentiality however due to the content of the PRA this does not apply for electoral candidates.



Figure 1 Harinesh Pandya, secretary of Janpath and MAGP activist.

Janpath is a forum established 18 years ago as a Network of 22 different organizations (approximately 212 people) working on Human Rights issues across Gujarat. Its members work on a voluntary basis and Janpath acts as a uniting forum providing advocacy support. Janpath is not able to provide funding or financial support to these organizations however it has purchased a building in central Ahmadabad where groups such as Mahiti Adhikar

Gujarat Pahal (MAGP) have their offices. MAGP is currently in the process of officialising its status as an independent organization: until then it remains an agency of Janpath.



Figure 2 Locals read leaflets handed out from the "RTI on Wheels" van, Civil Hospital district, Asia's biggest public hospital, Ahmadabad, Gujarat, India.

### 'RTI on wheels'

Small leaflets are distributed from the 'RTI on Wheels' van free of charge. These leaflets give people basic information about their rights and that a law exists that can enable them to access these rights.

A copy of the Act is also available for Rs20 and a small user's guide developed by MAGP is also available for sale. MAGP's view is that if you offer such resources to people for free they are not valued: people are far more likely to use a resource that they

have paid for, no matter how small the cost. However MAGP stress that the intention is strictly not to make a profit: all funds made from sales are immediately re-spent by MAGP projects aimed at improving the implementation of RTI, fighting corruption and improving openness and accountability in government. MAGP also holds a strong view that any resources developed for the purpose of promoting RTI should not be copyrighted.

"RTI on Wheels" has attracted a lot of media attention, particularly from government-run State and National channels. During our field trip to the Civil Hospital, ETV Gujarat heard that we would be in the area and sent a journalist to capture the moment. I was interviewed by ETV journalist Geeta Mehta about the purpose of my trip and my interest in "RTI on Wheels" and MAGP. Pankti spoke with Geeta about the work of "RTI on Wheels" and MAGP.



Figure 3 Pankti Jog of MAGP speaks with ETV Gujarat broadcast journalist Geeta Mehta about the work of "RTI on Wheels" and MAGP. Publications offered for sale from the "RTI on Wheels" van are visible in the foreground.

## RTI Helpline

Sadhana runs the RTI Helpline for MAGP. She has been associated with Janpath for many years and became interested in RTI as soon as it was enacted. Sadhana thus sought formal training through SPIPA (free of charge) including the Training for Trainers and training on how to deal with calls received through the RTI Helpline. Now Sadhana also provides assistance during SPIPA's training and is then paid by the government for her expertise.

The RTI Helpline offered by MAGP is not only used by citizens (applicants) but also by government officials (respondents) seeking advice about the legislation. Approximately 15% of calls received are from government officials asking for advice: MAGP is cooperative and sees this as an important use of the helpline. MAGP regularly faxes important resources to government officials in response to their enquiries. The Helpline is not toll-free: again, the view is that if people value a service they should be prepared to pay for it. Approximately 55 calls are received on average per day.

In many cases, Sadhana receives a call from people who are hearing about RTI for the first time and are very suspicious: either they don't believe that it exists and they can ask questions, or they are fearful of the potential impact of the Act on their work.

In their experience dealing directly with PIOs it is MAGP's impression that PIOs do not have sufficient resources to deal with their responsibilities in terms of RTI. Many PIOs understand the Act and implement it to the best of their capacity however there are many restrictions including a shortage of human resources and poor records management. Nonetheless, MAGP encourages applicants to be strict in



Figure 4 Sadhana Pandya provides advice and assistance on MAGP's mobile RTI Helpline.

terms of dealing with their RTI application. For example, if MAGP receives a call through the RTI Helpline from an applicant who has not received a response to their RTI application within 30 days MAGP advises them to go ahead with submitting an appeal immediately. MAGP then guides the applicant through the process of first appeal: there is no leniency offered to PIOs.

In the evening of 17 March 2009 we attended a political rally organized by the New Socialist Movement (NSM). I was advised by a female attendee that NSM is not a political party but a political movement set up in order to pressure mainstream parties to take on the main



issues affecting the lesser represented classes. I spoke with a number of individuals present at the political rally in order to determine the purpose of their participation and their views about current politics and development in India.

Farmers, tribes' people, minorities and other oppressed classes travelled from throughout the State in order to participate in today's political rally; many travelling for over 24 hours. Rally participants united under one banner fighting for their rights: many communities from lower castes have little or no food to eat and other basic necessities such as shelter and clothes are scarce. They view development as currently focused on benefitting the wealthy and more privileged classes, taking no notice of the 'oppressed'. This group is against globalization and work to stop the impact of globalization in their communities.

Banners held by protesters as they march through the streets of Ahmadabad read "This land is ours", "Down with imperialism", "Speak out" and "Down with globalization". As the crowd gathers in the central park outside the district level Municipal Building, a united chant of



Figure 5 17 March 2009: Approximately 10,000 people including representatives from more than 30 organizations gather in a park in Ahmedabad for a political rally. Farmers, tribes' people, minorities and other oppressed classes travelled from all over Gujarat in order to participate in the rally; many travelling for over 24 hours.

"We all are one" (in Gujarati, the local language) beams through loud speakers with each of the 10,000 people present joining in. A group of women lead a song that speaks of the need to fight corruption and improve the impact of development. This is not a gathering for any particular political party. The group sees its role as informing the mainstream political parties of what key issues need to be addressed. For this reason they are quick to point out that they have no political affiliation: that none of the main stream parties are currently addressing their needs. Today's rally is about publicizing these issues in order for the political parties to take note of what is important to the people.

There is a strong media presence and I am assured that media coverage will be aired on state and national television, radio and newspapers .

I spoke with Sardar Bag, leader of the New Socialist Movement, who advised that he is forming a new political party in order to take care of the minority classes. He believes politics has been completely polarized by the two mainstream parties, neither of which takes into account the needs of minority groups. Whilst some other individuals I spoke with did not identify today's rally as the first gathering of a new political party, the New Socialist Movement, it is clear that today's gathering will play an important role in pushing issues affecting minority groups onto the political agenda. The prospect of main stream parties

addressing these issues immediately seems unlikely. Nonetheless the message from this group is clear: the current development model being used is not working.

Sardar Bag spoke of his plan to put up a political candidate in local areas in order to offer an alternative to minority groups. When asked what will be included in his party's manifesto, Mr Singh responded:

1. Opposing the complete communalization of politics
2. Opposing the developmental model under the label "Vibrant Gujarat" which is completely eliminating and destroying the poor people
3. Demand equal rights for the minorities
4. Make all specific demands for marginalized classes

When asked about his views on the Right to Information Sardar Bag commented that he will certainly push for a complete democratic and open process.



Figure 6 Residents from the "slum" area known as "Potter's Place" by locals, on the outskirts of Ahmadabad gather around the "RTI on Wheels" van. Prajad Kantibhai, who was the first from his community to use RTI talks to the group about his experiences with RTI and its use in addressing issues affecting the community. The specks interfering with the photo are dust particles: the area is extremely dry and the air is filled with dust.

We returned to the MAGP office to meet up with other MAGP workers before heading off to Azadnagar, Sarkhez, a "slum" area in the outskirts of Ahmadabad, with the "RTI on Wheels" van. More than 5,000 families live in this area, the majority of whom are from families who for generations have depended on the pottery industry to survive. Today the area is poorly serviced and the skilled hand-making pottery industry has been badly affected by the impact of globalization. The road we take to access the area is muddy, windy, uneven with huge pot-holes, there are no street lights and the atmosphere is extremely dusty making it hard to breath.

People from "Potter's Place" have already used RTI and have invited MAGP to come to the a meeting with them and other residents from the area in order to discuss issues relating to the RTI applications they have already submitted. This will also be an opportunity for the group to gather and discuss and educate on RTI and what other issues they may choose to address. Not everyone in the area is aware of RTI and how to apply it so MAGP intends to organize a one day workshop in the area in order to teach as many locals as possible how to draft their own RTI application. MAGP is also looking at the possibility of working with youths from the area in order to promote RTI in the area. MAGP has only a small staff - they

hope to identify community leaders and youths who are enthusiastic. Sustainability can be assured through such an approach.

17 March 2008 - on the first day the "RTI on Wheels" van visited to the Civil Hospital area and the District Panjant (District Office) in Ahmadabad. They were followed by media representatives and were therefore conscious of the need to keep local so that media wouldn't have trouble following them on the poor quality rural roads. In the same week MAGP went to the tribal areas with 'RTI on Wheels', conscious of the need to spread awareness amongst those living in the most remote areas of the State. They took advantage of an annual gathering of tribes and were welcomed by tribes' people from throughout the state.

## Lessons Learnt

MAGP designed the original vehicle used for "RTI on Wheels" and have learnt many important lessons during its first year of operation. One of the greatest learnings for MAGP during its first year of "RTI on Wheels" relates to the compatibility of technology and poor infrastructure throughout the State. Initially, MAGP installed a high-tech in-built multimedia system in the van. They then face two major problems: firstly, the poor quality roads that the "RTI on Wheels" needs to travel on cause damage to this high-tech equipment (settings were fine-tuned but were knocked out after repeated travel on bumpy roads). Secondly, they recognized the risk of having equipment worth over Rs 100,000 on visual display when parked in a low-security venue. MAGP thus decided to alter the equipment so that they now carry a separate projector that can be installed once they arrive at a venue. There is also a TV screen linked up to a DVD player so that this can be used to display audio-visual material during smaller gatherings.

They also planned to have a solar panel on top of the vehicle so the cost of running the electricity for the data projector can be as low as possible. This is still planned however the implementation of such a change is dependent on adequate funding.

The positioning of the TV screen has also been an important lesson. At the moment, the screen is at the back of the boot of the vehicle which causes people to have to lean in and restricts the number of people who can view the images at once. MAGP plan to move the screen so that it sits on a stand nearer to the rear door of the vehicle so that it can be viewed by more people. This will require re-wiring and will thus take some time.

There has been interest from groups in other States in India to replicate the vehicle such as Public Concern for Governance Trust and Mumbai Chartered Accountant Association in Mumbai, is planning to have a similar vehicle from the financial assistance from a corporate body. MKSS in Rajasthan is also interested in having a similar vehicle, perhaps a larger vehicle than is used in MAGP, in order to have an exhibition panel inside the vehicle as well.



Prajad Kantibhai is a local resident from Azadnager, Sarkhez, "Potter's Place" who approached MAGP requesting assistance, mobilizes other people to use RTI, and is an active volunteer. I asked him a number of questions about his involvement with RTI. He first heard of RTI by reading a newspaper article which detailed the work done by MAGP and provided the helpline number. He contacted the RTI helpline, then visited the legal clinic held at the MAGP office on a Saturday, then submitted a number of RTI applications and encouraged others to use RTI. Issues he is trying to address through RTI include improving the quality of the main road and the quality of water. The villagers have been asking the government to build a road for years: it is only with RTI that they now feel empowered to hold government accountable and demand answers to their questions.

Their RTI application details that Prajad Kantibhai wants to know why the road has not been built by the government. They are hoping to find out the plans and funds allocated to building a road and who has been made responsible for the project. They had been advised orally by a government official that Rs100,000,000 has been allocated by the government to improve the road but they have not received anything in writing. When asked what it means to have RTI Prajad Kantibhai responded that earlier he was scared to even go to the village government secretary, let alone the chief commissioner. But once he knew about RTI and that he has a right to ask questions it means so much: he is no longer scared to ask questions to the collector or commissioner about his water and other services.

A number of DVDs are shown to the group, including a music video with a song written specifically as part of the RTI movement. Lyrics to the song include "my vote has a right to know, my big promises are made one day, why big promises are made one day, then no work for five years?", "Why we shed blood, are we not all human beings?", "my life has a right to live, now why live without this right? It's as good as not being alive". After the music video was shown, leaflets were handed out by Prajad Kantibhai and some volunteers. Their role as community leaders is respected and encouraged by MAGP in order to improve the sustainability of RTI in the community. A DVD is then shown demonstrating successful RTI applications relating to important issues affecting the community; in this case the important issues covered are water and roads. The projector broadcasts the image from behind a screen. MAGP selects the DVDs with case studies most relevant to the area they are visiting.

### **Case study: 24 mins 50**

#### **27 minutes: Uttar Pradesh: Villagers used RTI to get a bridge put in place in their community.**

Prajad Kantibhai spends time talking to approximately 200 people from the local area encouraging them to use their right. The key is to allow and encourage the community leader to speak to the group: for the group to see them as empowered through RTI. Prajad Kantibhai tells the group not to be scared and to use "RTI on Wheels" and MAGP to improve their awareness and understanding of RTI. Pankti also spoke with the group to advise them



of the practicalities: how simple the process of submitting an RTI application. During the meeting villagers brought up additional issues that need to be addressed: the community needs a permanent pipe-line for clean water and permanent street lights. What has happened so far is that individuals approach government officials (the commissioner) who then assure them verbally that the matter is being dealt with. But there is no proof and no commitment in writing. The official is then able to 'forget' about the need to address this issue and the community is left with no permanent safe supply of water and electricity. People don't have time to go every day to talk about these issues and demand results, so they see RTI as offering an opportunity to receive a commitment in writing and use the law to demand results. Immediately people identify what information they will ask for: road plans, budget allocation and expenditure. They also identify the need to unite and act on this issue, to ask the same questions in writing using RTI. People have lost their faith in the system: verbal requests and commitments have given no results. They identify In Gujarat the fee for submitting an RTI application is Rs20. This group has submitted the most RTI applications for one community in Gujarat (83 applications since they received training from MAGP only two months ago). One resident stood up during the meeting to tell the rest of the group "these people are here to wake us up".

Those who are BPL (Below Poverty Line) Cardholders are exempt from paying application fees. However there is an accusation that BPL Cards are not given through a thorough process: a survey was conducted to identify who is eligible. Yet many people who are eligible were not captured in this survey and therefore don't benefit. India wants to show that there are less poor people, so they are providing less BPL cards, and less people are receiving rations and other benefits provided to people living in poverty. This is one of the problems of the impact of globalization and the millennium development goals.

The community meeting lasts for approximately two hours; there is a lot of enthusiasm and people find it very easy to identify issues that could be assisted through the use of RTI. We are invited to share an evening meal with Prajad Kantibhai and his family. We are welcomed warmly and share a delicious meal. As we say goodbye it is pitch black and there is little street lighting. Without Pankti and her colleagues to escort me I would be completely lost. The 'road' is muddy and uneven. One hopes that, upon returning to this community in two years time, there will be cement roads, street lighting and a supply of electricity as a result of actions taken by community members through the use of RTI.

