

Saturday 14 March 2009

Field Trip: Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT)

Narayan Varma of the Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT) invited me to the opening of a Right to Information (RTI) Centre in Kalynyan Community. Kalynyan Community is approximately two hour's drive outside Mumbai and consists of six tribal villages with approximately 200 houses and six separate vardis where approximately 60 families provide services for the local villages¹. PCGT have worked in the area since August 2008. Sixteen volunteers were recruited at that time to participate in a programme to learn about the RTI Act and its potential to assist the community with the numerous issues of corruption, poor service delivery and other related problems. There are now thirty-five volunteers who have been trained up by PCGT and who are ready to assist their community. The volunteers are aged 14-21 years and are predominantly young women aged 17-19 years. There is only one male amongst the volunteers.

I spoke with Shabnam Siddiqui, the Programme Coordinator for PCGT and a recent recipient of the Daughter of India award², about PCGT's strategy for working with the community and how they have reached this point of success; opening an RTI Centre, serviced by volunteers from the community.



Figure 1 Kalynyan Community, two hours' drive from Mumbai

In 2008 PCGT partnered with Bahujan Hitay Trust (BHT) a local organization working for lower caste people (the Bahujan are one caste up from the Untouchables) who have been working in the community on education and health issues for many years. BHT has a great relationship with the local community and PCGT identified the need to partner with such an organization in order to build relationship with villagers.

PCGT entered the Kalynyan community initially by facilitating sessions in order to study what issues were affecting the village. These sessions generated interest in learning about a law that could better equip the community to deal with these issues. Volunteers came forward, mostly young teenagers and women who have finished their schooling and thus have better literacy levels than older people.

¹ Vardis are supporting communities of people from a lower caste who service the six villages.

² Shabnam Siddiqui was awarded the Daughter of India award for her remarkable community work, particularly with young women living in poor communities in Maharashtra.

PCGT then worked with volunteers to develop a street play which demonstrated the importance of the right to information. The play was used as a way to generate interest amongst villagers. The play would be shown on a Sunday, prompting villagers to ask "what is this RTI?"; the volunteers would then tell them if they want to hear more, come along to the public meeting on Monday. A public meeting/workshop was then held to and the basics of RTI were introduced.

Computer literacy were also provided for the local community as a result of PCGT collaborating with Starlite Foundation a metal company who, as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) placed 14 computers in the RTI centre. PCGT approached Starlite Foundation, identifying the potential value in tapping into CSR in order to support the effective implementation of RTI in the community in order to equip the villages with better means for accessing information. As well as providing computers for the RTI Centre, Starlite Foundation has also provided training.



Figure 2 Computers have been donated by Starlite Foundation, a local metal company, as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility. This is one of three rooms in the RTI Office: (i) reception, (ii) IT facilities and training, (iii) RTI advice and support.

PCGT believe in sustainable governance and therefore encourage locals to mobilize, train and advise one another in terms of RTI. Their view is that the approach to building capacity needs to be holistic in order to ensure sustainability. Great thought has been invested to construct the most effective means of empowering communities to help themselves rather than developing a dependency on an external individual or organization.

After the first street play performance and public meeting/workshop that was held in August 2008, 16 volunteers were selected (all young women aged 15 – 22 years, with most people aged 15-17 years) to continue learning about RTI. Two three-hour long workshops were conducted in Kalynyan community and then from these workshops, 35 volunteers were selected to come to further training held in a location near Mumbai. PCGT provided three days of training, covering the costs of volunteers' transport, accommodation and all other training related costs. PCGT secured funds for this project from a number of sources, including Rathana Thata from Sarathan Trust. Sarathan Trust has since made a lifelong commitment to ensure this project succeeds donating enough money for thirty RTI Centres to be set up across Maharashtra.

The training provided during these workshops includes communication skills, social skills and records management. As a result of this training there are now thirty volunteers from

Kalynyan working full-time for their community: these volunteers receive a stipend of the equivalent of approximately \$50-60 per month.

PCGT has been sensitive to cultural norms within the community, taking time to meet with elders and explain the purpose of providing training to the youths. The young people from the community are enthusiastic and literate, although most have to finish schooling at 14 years old, and have a keenness to continue learning. They respect their responsibility to assist their community and have a great respect for their elders. Their energy is a great asset to the work they do with concerning RTI however at times, Shabnam Siddiqui points out, they get too energetic and their inexperience can show.

PCGT identified key issues to address for Kalynyan community during the initial meeting/workshop held in August 2008. PCGT worked with villagers to identify how these issues may be assisted by accessing information through a number of RTI applications. PCGT was keen to get the villagers started and to 'start the ball rolling'; during this three-hour workshop they completed nine RTI applications together, and four were put together after the workshop. Thirteen RTI applications were then submitted.

PCGT took care to document the entire process in order to have solid and relevant examples to share with villagers; thus demonstrating the validity of engaging with RTI and generating interest. Fortunately, the government bodies that received the RTI applications were responsive. One issue that had been identified was the fact that there had been no water at a local water facility in 3 years; almost instantaneously the government authority responded – not by providing information – but by supplying water.

Another issue addressed by submitting an RTI application also related to the local water authority. Water authority employees are supposed to work full-time Monday to Thursday and a half day on a Friday. However, the villagers discovered that they were only working on a Friday for a half day (and not at all Monday to Thursday). An RTI application was submitted to ask questions concerning this issue; as a result employees now come to work.

A further problem that was identified concerns the local school. There were two rooms allocated for students. Children are supposed to attend the school from grade 1-4, receiving education in these two rooms. However, when PCGT visited the school in August 2008, they identified that one of the rooms had been turned into a warehouse. One teacher had been employed for 16 years but had not been seen at the school for a very long time (she was not attending school, let alone teaching). The teachers who were at the school were not teaching the children: they merely took registration and then gave them the government allocated food rations (a snack for each child). The villagers submitted an RTI application asking: How many students are attending this school? How many teachers are employed to teach at this school? What are the operations of the school? What money is allocated and spent at the school? As a result, there were dramatic changes at the school: the teacher who had not been present for many years started coming to work, the storage room was changed back to a classroom and children are now receiving an education.



In all these cases villagers were able to secure positive results as a result of being proactive and vigilant. PCGT stresses the need for villagers to take responsibility; no one else will pick up on cases of poor service delivery or corruption. RTI was demonstrated as being an effective tool for citizens who pay attention to identify when the government is not doing its job properly. Vigilance allows villagers to identify problems, which in turn prompts the submission of RTI applications which, in each of these thirteen cases, was demonstrated to bring positive results.

PCGT continued to engage with Kalynyan community between August 2008 and March 2009. Communication with villagers is done primarily via cell phone, with the exception that villagers submit their RTI applications by postal mail. PCGT communicated with the volunteers who then reported back to their community with updates concerning the RTI applications and the successful addressing of the issues identified in the August 2008 meeting that resulted. Their enthusiasm has continued and they have learnt so much about RTI that they are now far more involved with the process of educating and awareness raising.



Figure 3 People from the local community gather to watch the official opening of the RTI Centre (pictured) which included a street play performed by the young RTI volunteers.

The next RTI camp will be held on Monday 16 March 2009; it will be the first camp that is being facilitated by Kalynyans' young volunteers. Approximately fifteen of the thirty five volunteers (many of the other volunteers are currently busy with exams) will facilitate an RTI workshop for their community. It is expected that 260 families from the surrounding villages will be in attendance. This training signifies much of the success of PCGT's ability to empower the community to help itself. PCGT will organise the volunteers and make necessary arrangements for workshops to happen but the volunteers will facilitate the training sessions themselves. A PCGT representative will be at the camp to assist, and to check the accuracy of the details contained in the training workshop.

The venue for the workshop is flexible. They will determine where the workshop should be held during the first couple of hours: if the response is good and there are many villagers attending the workshop, then they will do the camp/workshop outside the RTI centre in an open space in the village. However if attendance is low, then they may choose to move the workshop/camp to the home of one of the volunteers.

If anyone is interested in further, more intensive training, they will then be able to contact PCGT and request such training. In April 2009 will then provide 3-4 days of further training. As well as focusing on RTI PCGT develops volunteers' personality in order to groom them to become social activists. It is expected that volunteers will once again be predominantly young and female (aged 15-17 years on average). Issues to be covered during training will include gender, environment and other issues, and how RTI can assist to address these issues.



Figure 4 Shabnam Siddiqui, Programme Coordinator for PCGT, celebrates her Daughter of India Award with Kalynyan Community Volunteers. She received the award on International Women's Day 2009.

In terms of the project's long-term outlook PCGT will ensure the continuous stream of trained volunteers. PCGT is aware that over the next two years many of the volunteers (95% women) will get married and move away from the village or move to the city for work. This is not seen as a loss: wherever they will go, they will take the information and activism with them and spread the word about RTI. However, PCGT acknowledges that it needs to continue to train and raise awareness and interest amongst other villagers in order to ensure that the villages in the Kalynyan continue to use RTI as a strategic advocacy tool.

PCGT put their heart and soul into the volunteers. Shabnam Siddiqui has an easy friendly relationship with the volunteers, all of whom seem incredibly happy to be part of this important project. I was invited to join PCGT's board members and local partners up on stage as part of the official opening of the RTI centre. More than two hundred villagers were in attendance, eager to find out about the purpose of the centre, and how they will benefit. The young volunteers performed their street play which was simple yet effective. They chant whilst walking around in a circle and then stop. Each performer takes their turn to move forward and speak:

"Do you know you have a right to housing?"

"Yes, I know"

"Do you know you have a right to water?"

"Yes, I know"

"Do you know there is a tap with no water?"

"We need to start asking questions. We have a right to know why."

India Field Trip Report 2009 by Charlotte Young, South African History Archive

The audience was asked if they cared about the quality of the roads, if they cared about the education of their children, if they cared about receiving rations and other government grant schemes; if they do then they must care about their right to information. I filmed parts of this street play and have included this in the short documentary report of this field trip.

When asked about the key to the success in terms of local villagers taking hold of RTI Shabnam Siddiqui is quick to comment that it has been the quick results from the RTI applications. Villagers experienced the benefits by local government authorities changing their behavior which provided improved service delivery. This dramatic response demonstrated the potential power that lies in RTI.

