

THE DATA EXHIBITION  
An Innovative Tool for Citizen Monitoring  
and Entitlements

Innovations towards  
Education for  
Empowerment

# Grassroots



# Women's Movement

*Edited by Sangeetha Purushothaman*



## THE DATA EXHIBITION

### An Innovative Tool for Citizen Monitoring and Entitlements

#### Introduction

*'The Data Exhibition was initiated with an objective to foster better understanding on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) within the community, to stress the importance of data for effective planning and implementation, and to ensure active participation of the community in PRIs. The expected output was that community would be equipped with data and prepare a Panchayat Development Report. Sanghas and panchayat federations took the leading role in data collection. On a particular day, as decided by the sanghas, federation and community, data were exhibited either in community halls and/or schools or any other public places. Representatives from various government/non-government organizations were invited to see the exhibition. Community members who were not involved in the process of data collection also came to see and forwarded their comments in a formal platform. One of the community representatives presented the Report in front of the government, NGO and community representatives. These reports from different federations have been sent to various government departments and PRIs for further action '.*

**Aide Memoire MSJRM09: Good Practices and Innovations, State Report, Assam, 2009.**

In Assam, Panchayat elections were only held in 2001-02, despite the radical changes in local self governance that swept the country by the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment of 1993.<sup>1</sup> The Amendments gave rise to the concept of participatory local governance, mandating the active involvement of communities in planning, implementing, and monitoring the process of development in their villages. Panchayat systems provide for each citizen to be able to voice his or her opinion as well as participate in local governance through the mechanism of the Gram Sabha.<sup>2</sup> After the elections, civil society now made efforts to strengthen the Panchayats and for citizens to effectively participate in all its activities. Thus while participatory decentralized governance gathered momentum,

simultaneously innovations in Participatory Rural Appraisal, social audits and other participatory monitoring techniques made it possible for citizens to intervene in the governance process to hold local bodies to account.

A significant development was the enactment of the Right to Information Act (RTI)<sup>3</sup> passed by parliament in 2005. This became an enabler for self governance as now communities across the country could use RTI as a means to access information. Authentic information on government programmes and services would help communities better negotiate for those who are rightfully eligible to them. Given that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Assam are relatively new and inexperienced, they are often not transparent, making it difficult for the community to both effectively intervene on the plans or to monitor their implementation. Furthermore, line departments have largely been uncooperative with PRIs on budget information for programmes to be executed in their jurisdiction. In light of these constraints, the non availability of authentic data emerged as a



serious impediment to decentralized planning and community engagement. The Data Exhibition innovation pioneered by Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) in 2007 came into being to directly address this issue. This study examines this unique initiative to ascertain its impact on participatory governance, citizen participation and enhanced entitlements. This is a

<sup>1</sup> On 24 April 1993, the Constitutional Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. The Act aims to provide a 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all states having a population exceeding two million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every five years, to provide reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women, to appoint the State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats, and to constitute a District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plans for the district. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchayati\\_Raj](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchayati_Raj)

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the definition of the Gram Sabha in the chapter entitled The Political Empowerment and Participation of Women.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the definition of the Right to Information Act (2005) in the chapter entitled The Political Empowerment and Participation of Women.

powerful tool for civil society to observe and monitor the gaps between officially published data and the real conditions that exist in the community. The Data Exhibition thus embodies a mechanism to make authentic information available to citizens so that they can meaningfully engage with local government bodies.

## Methodology

This study is based on findings gathered during three visits to Assam over a period of six to eight months using primarily a case study approach, and includes both quantitative and qualitative data from primary and secondary sources to enable an in-depth comprehensive understanding of the merits and challenges of the Data Exhibition initiative. The main sources of data included semi structured interviews with internal and external stakeholders, extended informal discussions with MS personnel at all levels, interaction with SRG members and internal documents made available. A detailed review of documents and films provided by AMSS as well secondary research on participatory governance informed this study. Respondents included 48 sangha and federation women who were involved in the Data Exhibition process, 27 Mahila Samakhya state and district staff and 8 external stakeholders associated with this initiative including the government and NGO representatives.

## Data Exhibition Initiative

The term 'Data Exhibition' refers to a display of information collected and exhibited in a public place such as a community hall or a school, for the benefit of the entire community. Data is compiled (through detailed household surveys, along with official data obtained through RTI) which then reveals gaps between the ground reality and information reported by the Gram Panchayat (GP) or line departments. This information is then presented at a community event to panchayats and government department representatives, who are invited to this exhibition.

## Objectives of Data Exhibition

The following are the explicit objectives of the Data Exhibition:

- To empower citizens through collective strength of the federation by:
  - Increasing the information base on citizen entitlements using data collected by federation women from various sources
  - Using the data to help the federations impact the GP plans

### The Data Exhibition Slogan

Information is knowledge, power leads to growth, without information, power and knowledge decreases.

- To impact panchayat functioning by:

- Using the data to ensure transparency in the PRIs
- Using the data as a community monitoring tool

## Genesis, Credibility and Legitimacy

The AMSS was registered in June 1996, and began forming sanghas (women's collectives) and federations which helped sangha women interface with the PRIs on local governance. MS felt that since the panchayat is the grassroots level structure that is now constitutionally empowered to plan, its work should be linked to the needs of the local community, especially to those of the sanghas. To help sanghas and federations plan for their communities, AMSS held a state-wide strategic planning workshop, where staff and federation members deliberated on the means by which pressing issues of the community could be addressed by local bodies. AMSS was initially concerned whether sangha women would be able to deal with a big event like the Data Exhibition on their own, as most sangha women were illiterate and possibly did not have the capacity to compile and exhibit data. If the sangha women could successfully stage a Data Exhibition in one panchayat, they would inspire other sanghas to hold similar exhibitions in other Panchayats. The sangha women in Manipur panchayat in Nagaon District collected the data using the format developed at the state level workshop, and modified this according to the local demography and district features. The format included aspects such as socio-economic characteristics, health, education, natural resources, amongst others. Additional information collected through the RTI included the list of beneficiaries for government programmes, type of benefits received, finances allocated, and those citizens listed in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) official registers.

Two major campaigns paved the way for the emergence of the Data exhibition innovation. The Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) launched by the Central Government in 1999 stressed the need for community involvement in decision making and implementation. In 2000 Mahila Samakhya decided to address the problems of sanitation and in 2001 and 2003 baseline surveys were conducted by trained surveyors, MS staff and sangha women. These extensive surveys were an eye opener that revealed the poor status of health, sanitation and literacy levels in the community. They were also a milestone since they built local capacities to collect and analyse data and visualise gaps in basic needs. Sangha women now saw the need for more community based information and felt that if they could prove to the community that the survey information collected by them was more accurate than official data, it would improve the status and recognition of the sangha. Additionally it was expected that women would be able to influence the Panchayat planning

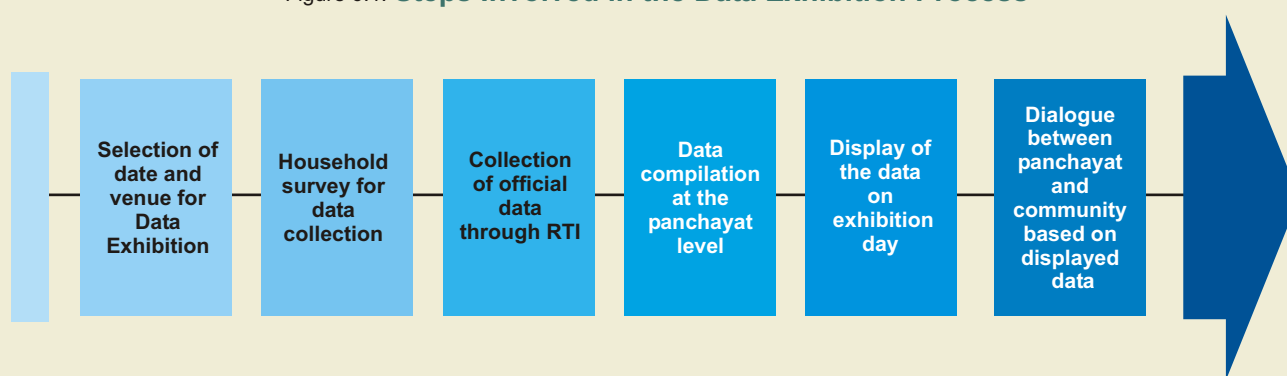
process with this information. Thus began the process of data collection which not only established the credibility of the sanghas but also increased their legitimacy.

## The Data Exhibition Process

The sequence of activities involved in conducting the Data Exhibition is shown in Figure 6.1.

Initially, sangha women took nine to ten months to collect and compile data at village and panchayat levels. However, data collection and compilation have been streamlined over time and the process is now completed in three months. Data is presented in a report called the Panchayat Development Report (PDR), earlier prepared by MS staff, but now some federations have been trained to prepare this report.

Figure 6.1: Steps Involved in the Data Exhibition Process



### Finalizing the Event

Once the date and the place of the event is fixed, the sangha works backwards to plan activities such that the information is ready in time for the exhibition. These include designing the survey according to the local context, estimating the numbers of volunteers required to complete the survey, then recruiting and training them. As the Data Exhibition initiative gained popularity over the years, regular networking by sanghas with the panchayat helped them obtain public space to hold the exhibitions.

### Collection of Household Data

One sangha women surveys ten households and in this manner a small village is surveyed in about a week. Two to three women covering ten households a day make up a sub-team of surveyors. Initially people were reluctant to spend time providing data unless it was clear as to how the household would benefit from the survey. It was only when people realised the benefits accruing to the individual and the community, that households began to cooperate

### Collection of official data through the RTI process

Sanghas are trained on how to file applications under the RTI Act. Once this data is obtained, it is matched against the findings of the household survey to surface discrepancies.

### Compilation of Data at the Panchayat Level

After collecting the data, five or six literate women consolidate it.



Sangha women collecting household data

### Displaying the Information on the Day of the Exhibition

The first Data Exhibition in Dhubri in 2007 was a big affair where the local administration were invited to attend, along with the District Collector and other government department officials. Information was displayed on the socio-economic and education status of the community in each panchayat, including on schemes such as Indira Awaaz Yojana (IAY), SGRY, SGSY. Also displayed was a simple drawing of the village map showing village institutions along with lists of those who are officially below the poverty line. As an example of the type of data exhibited, under MGNREGS detailed information is presented on the list of people

who have applied and received job cards under MGNREGS, those who have been rejected, the types of works and the amounts allocated for these works.

The government officials later provided suggestions on the type of data that should be collected. Because the whole community stood to benefit, men did not object to women playing such a lead role in the exhibition. In fact, many wished that women had done this previously, so that the benefits too would have reached them earlier.



Displaying the data at the exhibition, Dhubri

**Dialogue and Debates on Information Day**

Soon after the exhibition, a follow up meeting is planned called the Information Day. On this day discussions on the data previously displayed in Data Exhibition are held. Another strategy used is the dream map where women visually display their ideal 'dream' community and compare it with the present situation. This leads to dialogues on the major problems identified by the community. For instance, in Sahabganj panchayat, the Total Sanitation Campaign had been discontinued. However, after discussions on Information Day, women realised the poor state of sanitation in their panchayat and demanded sanitation facilities.

Figure 6.2 Current situation Puranavita Village



Figure 6.3 Dream Map Puranavita Village



A map showing the present situation is presented along with an ideal dream map. (Figures 6.2 and 6.3)

Ghulam Rabbany, President of the Sashetan Yuva Mancha suggested ways by which the exhibition could be improved and popularized further. *“The locality where the exhibition has to be held must be selected carefully keeping in mind the demographic profile and other factors that can cause maximum impact. The exhibition has so far been held at the panchayat in a semi-urban small town location. The exhibition should move to backward and rural areas reaching out to people with even less access to information. There are people who do not have the wherewithal to travel all the way to the panchayat to witness this exhibition. Besides the publicity for Data Exhibition is very important. More videos on the exhibition should be made. Advertisements should be given out in the form of graffiti and banners displaying sangha involvement.”* According to him more people would attend if they are aware that it is organized by the sanghas. He also recommends a guest entry book for visitors to write down their impressions and provide suggestions about the exhibition. That could help the sangha organize an exhibition that is tailored to local needs. He recommended that the Data Exhibition should be held at block and district levels at a later stage. Ways and means have to be looked into to provide adequate resources for these activities.

**Monitoring the Data Exhibition**

A variety of simple methods are used to assess the performance of the Data Exhibition. To begin with, its popularity is measured by the number of people attending the event and its relevance by the number actively discussing information displayed. For instance approximately 1,500 people attended an exhibition held in 2009 which was regarded as a huge success. By observing the difference in attendance between Data Exhibitions held across different Panchayats and over time, the popularity of these exhibitions can be assessed. A second indicator is the

participation of men and other stakeholders like youth groups and officials in the Data Exhibition. A third indicator used includes the extent to which sangha members, panchayat federation and block federation members interact with each other. AMSS is still in the process of refining monitoring indicators. Similarly, informal follow-up is carried out by the sangha to find out whether the exhibition was useful to the community. This follow-up process is an essential part of monitoring by the sanghas.

### Capacity Building to Hold the Exhibition

Sangha and federation members are given training for three days at the block level by MS staff. Usually, only literate and neo literate sangha women from the four core committees (health, education, legal and economic) are selected for the data collection process. While literate members were trained, illiterate women do accompany them to collect data. Training includes components that are both motivational and skills based (Box 6.1).

#### Box 6.1: Content of Training for the Data Exhibition

- Need for the Exhibition
- Type of data to be collected from households
- How to collect data, validate it, and test the instrument (done through preliminary field visits to learn along with MS staff)
- Methods to store data in the federation office
- Methods to compile data
- Methods to display data at the exhibition

Source: Interview with Nirjumoni Datta Bhayali, Assistant Program Director, Guwahati, 2010

The training begins by telling women that there is low credibility in verbal statements alone. Instead data has to be available in the form of a report, and claims need to be substantiated by quantitative information. Thus motivated, the sangha women take responsibility for the entire survey process. Women are trained to understand the format and contents of the survey, methods to conduct interviews, and to update survey formats with details.

### MS Philosophy, the Data Exhibition and Empowerment

*“Empowerment is an ongoing process making women aware of her rights, the laws and programmes available for their benefits. Knowledge and information itself is an empowering factor. The women make a plan of action based on all the information available to them. Their voices are heard by the community and other organizations. The data provides them courage to fight for*

*their rights. Earlier, when the women used to approach the government departments, they were driven away. At that time, they had no proof to back their claims. So they could not challenge the authorities or demand services. Information may not be of a large scale but a small piece of information can change the lives of women.”*

Source: Interview with Nirjumoni Datta Bhayali, Assistant Program Director, Guwahati, 2010

The Vision of the Eleventh Plan sees an empowering education process as one that enables women to question, conceptualize, seek answers, and collectively act to redress problems. The Data Exhibition provides women the vital information needed to identify issues, and then collectively analyse and act on them. Such knowledge makes women confident and better able to get their voices heard. Collective strength is a source of power emphasized by MS through building capacities of sanghas and federations. Unless armed with vital information, sanghas cannot achieve full autonomy nor is their empowerment complete.

### The Data Exhibition: Increasing Women's Voice

The first Data Exhibition held in 2007 at Sahabganj Panchayat, Dhubri district was a resounding success in terms of the sheer number of community members involved. Information displayed revealed not just the lack of access of the most eligible and needy to government services, but that services officially reported as having been delivered, in fact, were not. This clearly exposed the stark gaps in service delivery systems.

Because information is power, the status of women has grown in the eyes of the community, government, panchayats and their families.

Conducting Data Exhibitions has generated transparency in the governance process and also made the panchayats more vigilant. This has also resulted in more women joining the sanghas thereby widening the reach of the movement. Figure 6.4 shows the benefits of the Data Exhibition.

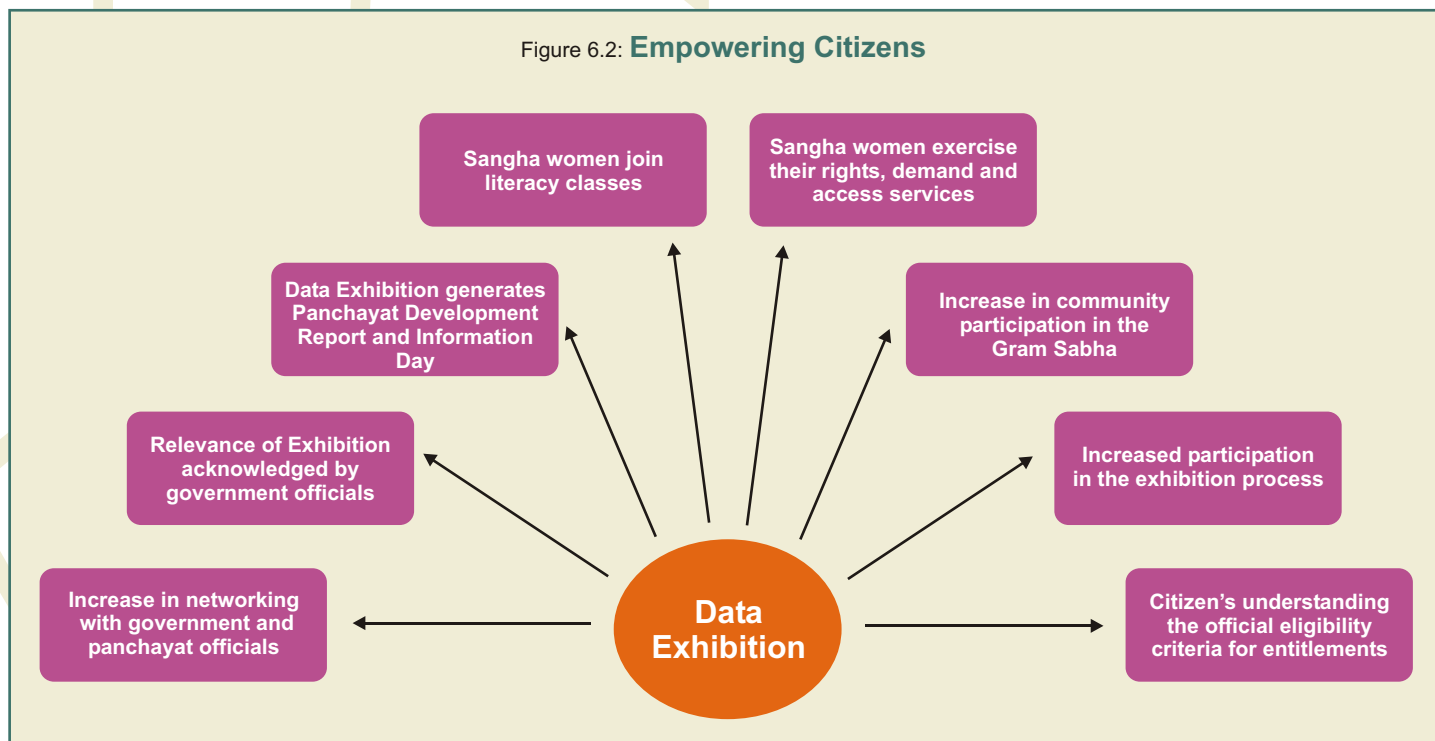
*“Information is the key source without which no one can challenge the authorities. To challenge them, you need to have statistics”.*

*Charu Verma, Block federation president, Mahamaya Matribhoomi Block, Dhubri District, April 2010*

### Understanding Eligibility Criteria to Access Public Resources

The main official criterion for most government programmes is that the economic status of households should be categorized as Below the Poverty Line (BPL) which gets them on the official BPL

Figure 6.2: Empowering Citizens



list. The Data Exhibition revealed that those on the official BPL lists were not necessarily poor while many of the real poor were left out, rendering them ineligible for those public programmes and services they were most in need of. The greater clarity on official criteria led to strict adherence to these norms by sanghas when formulating BPL lists, resulting in them being far more authentic than the official lists (Box 6.2). Once the mistakes in the official beneficiary lists were pointed out, sangha lists of BPL members were adopted by government departments as the basis for beneficiary selection.

### Increase in Community Ownership over the Data Exhibition

The Data Exhibition has become more popular as the community comprehends its importance and impact. The entire village is engaged in defending the reliability and validity of the results presented at the exhibition in front of officials. This inclusive process results in greater community ownership over the exhibition and the base of knowledge it has generated.

Box 6.3 illustrates some of the ways in which community based groups support and participate in the Exhibition.

Educated men of the community and government functionaries realized that the sangha women have gained detailed knowledge on the programmes, beneficiaries and amounts allocated for

### Box 6.2: Understanding Official Eligibility Criteria to Access Resources

Rekha is a block federation member and a Resource Person in the district counselling centre of Sunmoi panchayat. In Rekha's panchayat, out of the 10 ward members, three are women including the panchayat president. They conduct their Data Exhibition once a year where approximately 1,500 people participate and government officials are also invited. After the Data Exhibition Rekha found that her family was not listed as a BPL family despite fulfilling all the criteria. She filed an application for herself and 10 other families in the neighbourhood for inclusion in the BPL list at the block office. She was able to clearly articulate the BPL criteria. She said "to be eligible a person should have less than seven bighas (traditional unit of land), no family member should be employed, total family income should be less than 4,000 rupees annually and there should be a large number of dependents in the family." In panchayat meetings and in Gram Sabhas, Rekha has been invited to talk on issues like the RTI.

Source: Interview with Rekha Das, Block federation member, Dhubri district, 2010.

**Box 6.3: Community Organizations Legitimize the Data Exhibition**

Ghulam Rabbany, President of the Sashetan Yuva Mancha, has been associated with MS and its work for the past three years. As the president, he provided volunteers to MS to organize the Data Exhibition held at Nayahat panchayat in Mahamaya block in 2009. The Data Exhibition was attended by many political figures, social activists and the whole community. According to him, as a result of the exhibition, people have realized the kind of discrimination women had to face in their daily lives. The exhibition was a revelation to many men as they realized that the very women who they had restricted to the home, were capable of collecting information and staging an event on such a large scale. The community now provides women the space to work both within the sangha and outside their homes.

Talking about the range of information provided, he said, *“We have learnt so many things from the exhibition. The exhibition covered data related to education (rate of literacy in the community, number of literates vs. illiterates, and number of schools and colleges), health, sanitation (clean drinking water availability), lists of job card holders and ration card holders.”* As a direct result, girls were enrolled in schools as the community realized that literacy was one of the keys to information. Some have now sent their daughters to an English medium school, the Modern English school, which he runs. The dedication and determination of MS that he witnessed through the Data Exhibition made him want to collaborate further with them in the future.

*Source: Interview with Ghulam Rabbany, Dhubri District, April, 2010.*

schemes. They appreciate the fact that women know gaps between official data and the actual reality (as reflected in the households surveys).

**Increase in community participation in the Gram Sabha**

Ripple effects of the Data Exhibition can be felt long after the event. People have become far more engaged in the Gram Sabha process now that they expect the panchayat to be accountable for mishandling public resources. Panchayats have had to face their constituencies in Gram Sabhas and explain the irregularities displayed in the exhibition. Women are more vocal in their demands regarding their rightful entitlements in Gram Sabha meetings. Box 6.4 shows the impact of the exhibition on



*Community members at DE, Badahpur, Goalpara*

the Gram Sabha in different panchayats ranging from increased visibility and stature for the sangha to actual access to entitlements.

**Box 6.4: Addressing Issues in the Gram Sabha after the Data Exhibition**

In the panchayats of Jarabari, Manipoortup and Dighaliati, sangha women have been regularly attending the Gram Sabha meeting after the exhibition. The ward members of Jarabari Gram Panchayat invited sangha women to discuss government programmes. The president of the federation, Saru Barman, was made president of the Gram Sabha by the Gobardhanpara Gram Panchayat. She was given the responsibility to select beneficiaries for the widow pension scheme. The Panchayat President of Danduwa GP invited the federation members who had organized the Data Exhibition to participate in the Gram Sabha held in 2009. The federation women prepared a correct BPL list and submitted it to the Gram Panchayat, after which 397 families got BPL cards.

*Source: Focus group discussion with federation women, Dhubri district, April 2010*

**Sangha Women Exercise Their Rights**

Through the Data Exhibition, women became more aware of their rights to information and to resources (Box 6.5). The exhibition has helped sangha women access paid employment through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) that gives them the facility to get work in their villages.



**Box 6.5: The Data Exhibition Takes the Rights Based Approach Forward**

According to Sashi Prabha, a federation woman from Darrang district, discrimination faced by women under the Panchayat became visible when the lists of those having MGNREGS job cards were displayed. The Panchayat never allotted work to women who were perceived as weak and unable to do physical work compared to their male counterparts. The women met the District Collector and were assured of job cards. Soon job cards were issued but not given to the women, and kept in the panchayat office instead. It was through the exhibition that they came to know about their job cards. The sangha women complained to the BDO, and on his instruction job cards were delivered to the women personally the very next day.

*Source: Focus Group Discussion, MS field staff, Darrang District, April, 2010*

As access to information has become easy with the improved capacities of sangha women to file large numbers of applications under the RTI, their confidence has grown (Box 6.6.).

**Box 6.6: Sangha Women learn to File Applications under RTI**

*I was provided training at the Guwahati state office on the PRI system, on data collection and on the specificities of the RTI such as how to file a petition, when to expect the required information, and the accountability of the administration towards the petitioner. This was a five day training programme where I, along with other selected sangha members, learnt all the formalities. Following the exhibition, the Panchayat data is no longer a secret within the official files. The data is publicly hung outside the office as a list for the benefit of the community.*

*Source: Interview with Charulata Devi, Mahila Unnayan Samata Sangha, Darrang district, September, 2010*



Charulata Devi

Table 6.1 shows the number of applications filed by sangha women under the RTI in different districts in Assam and the results in terms of candidates who accessed services such as a BPL card or a ration card.

**Table 6.1: RTI applications filed in different districts and Results**

District	No. of applications filed			No. of Successful Applicants		
	IAY	BPL card	Ration card	IAY	BPL card	Ration card
Morigaon	2	4	3	2	2	2
Goalpara	1297	1178	2805	62	1183	1649
Darrang	29	165	9	19	41	4
Nagaon	150	10	171	90	nil	104
Sonitpur	125	203	160	70	40	50
Dhubri	39	25	1000	39	25	280

Sangha women are now able to ensure accountability of the public service delivery system. With the poor being able to legitimately establish their eligibility status by becoming an official BPL card owner they are in a better position to access programmes and services. By getting ration cards for the poor, the distribution of food through the Public Distribution System (PDS) is more equitable and can be monitored (Box 6.7). Whenever shops under the PDS did not provide food at the government stipulated subsidized rate, people were actually able to revoke the licenses of these shop keepers. The Data Exhibition process has also restored gender equity in the distribution of resources as evidenced by women getting shares and becoming part of the management committees of cooperative societies.

**Box 6.7: Demanding Accountability from Service Delivery Systems**

*Ensuring Equitable PDS:* According to Bulu Devi of Morigaon village, the Data Exhibition enabled her community to invite government officers to first discuss who got access to programmes and whether they were eligible. After the data exhibition women actively participate in village meetings to ensure that access to public services is extended to those who deserve it. Anomalies still exist in the PDS but due to the Data Exhibition, sangha women organised a meeting for PDS distributors and asked them to prepare a beneficiary list. This list will now be verified against their own data and disparities, if found, challenged.

*Engendering the Cooperative Society:* Kiranbala Rabha is

a sangha member and the only woman shareholder in a cooperative called Gram Panchayat Samvay Samiti (GPSS). She was informed that only widows were allowed to hold shares. So at a meeting with the secretary of the GPSS, women challenged the norms for shareholders, demanding women's rights to hold shares. The secretary then retracted saying that women too can hold shares and consequently 22 women acquired shares in the GPSS. The GPSS management committee earlier was all male. In a historic turn around, after 42 years, the first woman member, Kiranbala, was nominated as she was a neo-literate and won the election to this committee with the highest margin. She has retained her membership in the management committee for the last two years.

**Communities Regulating Licenses:** Himani Rabha, a sangha woman from Goalpara, said that the major benefit from the Data Exhibition was the awareness generated in the community. Earlier the community accepted whatever it was told but now they question the authorities. For instance, the community was unaware of the benefits of the Antodaya Anna Yojana scheme and so no one got subsidized food. The beneficiary list of the scheme was then presented in the exhibition. The irregularities found resulted in shop licences being cancelled.

*Source: Focus group discussion with federation women, Guwahati, April 2010*

In addition, sangha women have started seeking information proactively from the Health department. If the Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM) are not regularly attending to cases in the village then they have ensured her regularity. Earlier women would only approach the primary health centres for immunization of their children but now, based on information exhibited, other health needs are also attended to, with both men and women utilizing them. Box 6.8 provides ample evidence of how sanghas were able to change accountability norms and access entitlements.

**Box 6.8: Ensuring Accountability and Accessing Entitlements**

Manju Barua from Darrang District is a member of the economic planning unit of the block federation. An active member of the sangha, she is also secretary of the panchayat federation. After the exhibition the fact that deserving beneficiaries were not getting the benefits from government programs came to light. In the sangha meetings, women discussed the flaws of government programs as well as beneficiary selection process in the panchayat. They were able to pressurise the panchayats to

finalize the construction of houses under IAY which were earlier left unfinished.

It was found that some people even had two BPL cards which were challenged, and instead, deserving families were allotted the cards. Manju narrates the case of a 28 year old orphan girl who lived alone with no support. After the Exhibition sangha women were able to get her a BPL card (showing her single status) so that she could avail of subsidies she is entitled to. Manju says, "Now the sangha has a lot of social acceptance as after the Data Exhibition, many community organisations call the sangha women for discussions and involve them in their decision making processes."

*Source: Focus group discussion with federation women, Guwahati, April 2010*

**Adult Literacy Classes Gain Popularity**

The process of collecting and compiling data has brought home the dire need for functional literacy. Consequently, not just women, but even men are attending the Adult Literacy Programme. Women participate more in the Village Education Committee and the School Management Committee, as the importance of education has grown.

**The Panchayat Development Report Enables Better Negotiation**

Panchayat Development Reports, prepared by the sangha women based on data compiled for the Data Exhibition, has brought clarity to panchayats on the status of development of the



*Village head speaks at inauguration, Goalpara*

area under their jurisdiction. The PDR is accepted and acknowledged by the Panchayat, as an official document bearing the formal signature of an official and the seal of the panchayat. This by itself is an empowering process for the women. They can now utilize this document to make collective decisions and present it officially to departments to access entitlements.

### Relevance of Exhibition Established

The relevance of the Data Exhibition in getting concrete resources to the community has increased both the visibility and the legitimacy of the sangha. Panchayat presidents in many districts said that they now better understand schemes as well as their eligibility criteria. Planning, an important function of the panchayat has now become more inclusive as sangha members bring in a women's perspective into the annual panchayat plan (Box 6.9).

#### Box 6.9: Panchayat President Acknowledges Collective Women's Strength in Data Exhibition

The president of the Alochaka panchayat had data and figures of irregularities which he reported to government officials but no steps were taken. *"The sangha had collected and displayed authentic information in the Data Exhibition, to which major government officials and political figures were invited (Pradhan, principal of school). This changed everyone's perspective. This is their big achievement. Sangha women now participate in the Gram Sabhas and inform members on schemes and eligibility criteria for them. In the annual plan we have planned for roads, ponds, toilet construction, and so on, and many of these have been implemented with the support of sangha women."*

*Source: Lokendar Sharma, GP president, Alochaka panchayat, Pachim Mangal Doi block, Darrang district, September, 2010.*

### Increase in Networking with Government Officials

Sangha legitimacy has grown beyond the panchayat to the block and district levels through the high visibility of the Data Exhibition, which has attracted official attention at all levels. Now known for their honesty and commitment, sangha women's networks have expanded and many sanghas have been able to get contracts after the exhibition. The District Collector, impressed with their work in the Data Exhibition, convinced funders that the federation would effectively implement the work. According to him, while other organizations probably could provide a good report, the federation would actually deliver results. For similar reasons the federations of Balijana and Kochdhowa developments blocks were selected as Field NGO under National Rural Health Mission in 2008.

Access to information has also increased. Where earlier sangha women had to fight to get information, officials now part with information more readily because they know that the sangha can

exercise their right to information and get it anyway. According to Jarina Begum MS field organizer, *"After the exhibition, networking with government departments has increased and officials are far more helpful. Earlier the women could not get an easy response as officials were hesitant to give out information. Now if any information or data is to be collected from government departments or from panchayat offices, officials are ready to provide it. So women are now networking by themselves and have become more adept in availing government schemes."*



NABARD official inaugurating Data Exhibition, Goalpara

### A Catalyst for Sustainability

AMSS allocated funds within its budget to organize at least one exhibition in all districts. Initially, MS assisted sanghas in collecting data. Now, the sanghas have divided this responsibility among themselves and the role of financial management has shifted to the federations. Sangha members also leveraged free space from local institutions instead of renting it and many members contributed food and other resources in kind. Thus the role and financial contribution of MS has reduced considerably. Such methods of keeping costs low and building local contribution is one way of making this initiative sustainable. The federations in fact have the capacity to conduct the Data Exhibition themselves but require some financial augmentation. In fact, senior officials confirmed that the Data Exhibition can be institutionalized through the social audit processes of government programmes such as MGNREGS or those mandated by the Gram Panchayats themselves (Box 6.10).<sup>4</sup>

A form of sustainability is already seen in Dhubri, where federations consider the celebrations as part of their agenda. They celebrate the event annually with their own resources

<sup>4</sup> Social Audit is a mandatory requirement under MGNREGA; data so collected can be used also in micro-planning. This is as per guidelines of the Eleventh 5 year Plan.

**Box 6.10: Institutionalizing the Data Exhibition**

The Principal Secretary, while discussing linkages with the Data Exhibition and mainstreaming the process, stated that, *“We welcome the suggestion of linking with the government. But at the same time I feel a lot needs to be done. Corruption is widely prevalent. I was not aware of this Data Exhibition and its impact. It appears to be good and we can use it as a vehicle for development. The Data Exhibition cannot be used in the planning process. It can be integrated in social audit process.”*

*Source: Interview with Principal Secretary, Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Assam, April 2010*

without the support of MS. The networks generated by the exhibition and increased capacity of federations to negotiate with officials can facilitate this withdrawal process.



Data Exhibition at Dhubri

AMSS has allocated finances within its budget to organize at least one exhibition in the six districts where it operates, where block federations exist in order to improve the planning process in the Panchayats. Sanghas have the opportunity to use data effectively for their needs which can then help them in influencing panchayat plans. There are also plans to consolidate data at the block level for block level advocacy. Initially 20,000 rupees was allocated for the Data Exhibition in AMSS' budget, but with the increase in ownership by the community, this budgetary amount has progressively declined. In the initial stages, expenditure for infrastructure was required for hiring of tents, separators, and chairs, among other items. Data Exhibitions are now held in the community hall or at a public institution which has all of these items available within its premises.

## Lessons Learnt and Main Recommendations

One of the most critical problems faced by women in Assam is their inability to claim rights or public services in a conflict ridden situation. Despite this, studies have emphasized the role of AMSS in bringing women to the forefront and through collective action posing a radical challenge to local governance. Acknowledging this strength, Behal (2009) states, *“Several women's organizations have come up in Assam, which are starting to question gender inequalities and discrimination. Their policies and working styles may vary according to their organizational priorities. But the fact remains that change is taking place. AMSS has influenced hundreds of women in the districts of Assam state. Its strength lies in the formation of its women's collectives at village level. These sanghas are critically analyzing ground realities of unequal access and discrimination against women. This has led them to facilitate practical knowledge building processes with women and particularly with adolescent girls. In order to see that their work permeates through local governance systems, the AMSS has federated with different levels of village to Gram Panchayat, Community Development, Block levels and at Districts levels.”*<sup>5</sup> Federations through the Data Exhibition have evolved a powerful tool that can be used for planning, community monitoring, government accountability, and for the promotion of gender equality. Through the data that has proved more reliable than official sources, it can effectively combat patronage and corruption.

### Tool for Planning and Monitoring

The Data Exhibition can be instrumental to influence the official panchayat plans, which is its original objective. The PDR prepared from the contents of the exhibition can be made available to district administration, panchayat, anganwadi centres and other local institutions. It can be a useful tool for the planning by panchayats, Gram Sabhas and women's groups. However for the data exhibition to be accepted as legitimate, the data exhibition as a mechanism to impact the planning process has to first be successfully piloted, followed by developing guidelines for replication, documented for evidence of success, and finally followed by advocacy.

*‘Data exhibition will help in constructive planning of Gram Sabha. Also it will enhance the awareness level of the community’.*

*Dr. Nurul Amin, Joint Director Health, Dhubri, 2010*

The Data Exhibition is a powerful planning instrument with the

<sup>5</sup> Monisha Behal (2009), Women's Activism and Challenges Faced in Contemporary Assam, <http://www.northeastnetwork.org>

potential to become far more effective if integrated with the recent Planning Commission of India Guidelines on Decentralized District Planning.<sup>6</sup> One of the crucial lacunae found in the process of working with panchayat planning was the lack of availability of official data disaggregated below district level. This gap can be closed using the Data Exhibition instrument. Innovative options are needed to actually integrate this process with the Planning Commission guidelines. In the stock taking process that the Guidelines recommend, there is scope to integrate the Data Exhibition which lends very well to communities being able to assess their needs. Furthermore the guidelines recommend a participatory rural planning process where the Gram Panchayats and Block Panchayats are mandated to accept the Gram Sabha recommendations (See Annexure 6.1 for a list of planning processes). Here too the Data Exhibition can serve as a vital tool to inform the Gram Sabha of ground level conditions, the schemes that can meet community needs, and how to access these programmes. The present programmes do not always benefit the community. The gap between objectives of a program, its implementation, and actual deliverables is often quite substantive. It is through the Data Exhibition that the community gets to know of these gaps and thereby monitors the implementation process.

### Promoting Gender Equality

Sanghas and federations who have conducted Data Exhibitions have developed the capacity to collect quantitative data and can now complete surveys within a few days. Federations also have the capacity to generate new data on emerging issues wherever these are required. Wherever Data Exhibitions have been held, this existing data can be used by sanghas, federations, NGOs or the government to design projects and proposals.

Critical thinking and innovation is required for combining the Data Exhibition with gender planning tools and the women's component plan to ensure that a gender perspective, complemented by adequate resources, enters the planning process.

### Developing Guidelines for Replication

Given the evidence showing multiple benefits of the Data Exhibition initiative both for women and their communities, there is a clear-cut need to systematize this model. Towards this goal, AMSS has developed a model panchayat for the Data Exhibition initiative and consequently sanghas have used this model for replication (Box 6.11).

To further systematize this initiative, guidelines for replication are

#### Box 6.11: Building a Model Panchayat for the Data Exhibition

Dahi GP was adopted as a model panchayat for the data exhibition and to retain that status, involvement from all sections of the community was sought. To ensure participation by men in data collection, groups of three to four members each, were formed at village level, with both women and men. The president of Dahi GP in Darrang district, Paschim Mangal Doi accepted the panchayat development report prepared by sangha women as authentic. This report included the list of eligible BPL families in his jurisdiction and the president stated that from here on selection of beneficiaries for various programs in his panchayat would be based on this list. This built the legitimacy of this panchayat as the model for replication. The sanghas of Dahi panchayat have since helped organise Data Exhibitions in six other Gram Panchayats.

*Source: Focus group discussion with federation women, Dhubri district, April 2010.*

needed in the form of a toolkit. These guidelines would contain the important components necessary for trainers that are vital for replication in other districts of Assam as well as in other states, including a clear definition of the Data Exhibition its objectives, the processes together with steps for its implementation, the principles and conceptual framework guiding the process, expected outcomes, enabling factors, roles and responsibilities, and also a roll out plan. The toolkit should be simple and easy to use such that these can be put into effective use to train federation members.

In terms of collectivization efforts, sanghas and federations that are recently formed need to be strengthened. As is true of Mahila Samakhyas work, the first step of any activity is the strengthening process of the sangha and federations that acts as a building block for any new intervention to be a success. This is the area, then, that MS plans to work for strengthening these newly formed sanghas and federations for greater success of the Data Exhibition.

'This is the age of information and the present situation demands the availability of an information base. If there is no information there is no empowerment. That is why we want the sangha and federation women to be empowered through information'.<sup>7</sup> The Data Exhibition can help women gain knowledge, negotiate and build their collective voice to engender governance.

6 Manual for Integrated District Planning, Planning Commission of India, New Delhi, 2008.

7 Source: Interview with Nirjumoni Datta Bhayali, Assistant Program Director, Guwahati, 2010.

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