

IDR Interviews | Shankar Singh (Part I)

Co-founder of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and a key figure in the agitation for the right to information, Shankar Singh tells us about his early influences and building and sustaining movements.

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(This document is a transcript of IDR's interview with Shankar Singh. Watch the full video [here](#).)

My name is Shankar Singh, and I am from the same area where we are sitting. The situation [for everyone] here is more or less the same. If I start talking about my life—how all this happened—many people's stories are connected.

00:22

How was the initial phase of your life? And how did you get into the social sector?

I can talk about myself, but there are millions like me in this area—people who complete school and then set out into the world. But school did not give us anything. Going to school didn't provide any real understanding. Even today, teaching is done by rote, and what you learn by rote is easy to forget.

After finishing school, parents insist that their kids take up some or the other job. I don't have any brothers or sisters. My father died early on, so my mother became a widow at a very young age. She told me to think about getting a job since she wouldn't be able to educate me any further. So, I moved to the city, and since then I have had a lot of experiences related to my work. At first, I didn't understand that there is terrible suffering and exploitation everywhere. I remember going to find work at a poultry farm in Ajmer. I told the owner that I wanted work at his place. He asked me, "What are you doing these days?" I said, "I am not doing anything right now." I told him that I had completed my senior secondary school studies and was looking for a job. He told me that there was no opening there. But as I was leaving the premises, I saw someone else going in. So I asked him, "Do you work here?" He said, "I don't, but I have come in search of work." I told him that there were no openings, but he said, "No, there is space here. I know they need someone." But they had just denied me work. However, he went in and did not return. I kept roaming around the whole day because there were many poultry farms there. I wondered why there was no work even at a poultry farm. But when I met the same man again, he said, "I got the job." I asked him, "How educated are you?" He said that he had no formal education at all—he had not gone to school. I thought about the kind of work at a poultry farm: giving feed and water to the chickens and collecting their eggs. Of what use is education in all of this? At the next poultry farm [I went to], I concealed my education. When the owner asked about it, I replied that I had gone to school for some time but had not studied, and that I had attended school up to the second or third grade. I was hired immediately.

Since I had told him I was not literate, I had to also prove to him that I was not educated. I used to gather the [egg] trays [to indicate how many eggs I had collected in a given day] and show them to the owner whenever he would come from the city. I would make lines on the wall [for each stack of trays] and tell him, “This is from yesterday, this is from the day before yesterday,” and so on. Finally he said, “Why are you spoiling it (the wall)? Use a notebook.” He got me a notebook from the market and I started making tally marks for the number of trays I collected.

I did all that. During that time, I felt that if I didn’t pursue further studies, I wouldn’t be able to secure a job. I’d have to go to college. But how could I manage that while working at a poultry farm? I did it in ‘private’ (distance education). I pursued it quietly on my own time. After completing college three years later, I informed the owner that I had a BA. He was surprised, and asked how I had done it. I told him that I had kept my education hidden from him and had continued studying while working at the poultry farm. He responded, “Friend, now you’ll be my manager.” I hesitated at first, but eventually accepted. What I noticed then was that one job led to another—first at a poultry farm, then in a namkeen factory, then at a slate factory, and eventually running a kerosene cart. So many types of jobs! I kept transitioning from one job to the next...starting anew, moving on...and there’s an incident related to that as well. These are some 17 jobs that I left one after the other.

When we came here [to Devdungri village] and started living here, Aruna (Roy) told me that someone had invited her to give a lecture at the IAS Academy, you also come. So I asked her, “What will I do? The entire conversation there will be in English.” She insisted, so Nikhil (Dey), Aruna, and I, all three of us, went. All the IAS trainees were sitting there. Some who had already been taken in the IAS were also there. On the stage, Aruna said that all three of us are key speakers and all three of us will speak. At that time, I had just come here and started working. Aruna spoke in English, Nikhil spoke in English.

I was sitting close by and Aruna told me to add some humour. “I wonder if they are even listening,” she said. At that moment, I thought of what I could mention. So I said that I felt very strange when I was being introduced [by the escort. Each key speaker had an escort—one was Aruna’s, one was mine, one was Nikhil’s.] When Aruna was introduced, [the escort] said that she was in the IAS and had left the IAS job. If she had still been in the IAS, she would have been this, she would have been that. He gave a very lengthy introduction. I did not understand [what he said]. When it was my turn, he just said, “This is Shankar Singh; he lives with them.” Aruna ji left one job, I left 17 jobs...and he did not mention even a single one. I said, “You are putting a big value on leaving one job, and I have left 17 jobs.” When I started counting the jobs, he laughed so much and then added, “What you said [put us in our place].” I told him that I had felt it [deeply].

While doing all these jobs, I ended up at a place where there was a nonprofit organisation nearby. Chance, it was all chance. I asked [the people there], “What is going on here?” and someone responded, “This is an organisation.” “What do they do?” I asked. “This is a nonprofit,” they said. I told them I had never understood what nonprofits do. “They talk about why the condition of the poor is what it is, why there is poverty, how to face it—they talk about that.” I asked about money (salary). They said that people are paid for their work.

“So you get paid for talking?” I asked. Then I said that for money, even I would talk.

As soon as I entered that nonprofit, I felt that there were many types of people there. Some had started working and then left their jobs, and some had MBBS degrees, some had done engineering, some had done a law course. And among them was Aruna, who had left the IAS. I thought, why do they come here, [what do they hope] to achieve by leaving everything? This curiosity gave me many opportunities. The nonprofit took away my fervour of being a teacher, and working there for a year changed my mindset.

I thought that if all these people...including Nikhil who had studied in America and whose father was an air marshal... I saw that he had also come here and started doing all this (social work). So I thought, what do I need? I will get food. I will do this work. And so I started working here. I had met Nikhil by chance while I was roaming around.

08:29

How did the formation of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) begin?

One approach is project-based: You introduce a project, plan it, and then work for the people. As long as your project is there, helping people will continue. But when the project ends, that help will also stop. Sometimes those giving [help to] the project impose conditions, sometimes not. Aruna and Nikhil were thinking about moving away from this world. They shared this with me as well.

I said the situation is similar in my area also. Why should I go anywhere else? Meaning why would I go far away and work? There was talk about [living in] Madhya Pradesh, in Jhabua, in the tribal areas. There was a group of activists, we were sitting and talking with them. I said, the situation in my village and my area is very similar, so I want to go there and work. I told Aruna that I was searching for a house. We looked for one together and found this house here. Then all three of us started living together. My wife started living here. I have three children—one son, two daughters; they all grew up here and started going to school here in Barar village.

One of my girls got selected for Navodaya, which is a government programme; she went there. But the people here had a lot of questions about us. They knew that I was a local from this area, and would call me Shankar mama because my sister-in-law's house is here. People started asking, “What do you want to do?” You know, when you set out to find out something about people, before that they want to know about you. “Who are you, why are you doing this, what do you get, how much money are you paid, and what's in it for you?”

Then they came to know that the woman (Aruna) used to be a collector and left the job. This boy (Nikhil), his father is a very big Air Force officer. Then they thought that we had come here to earn more. People started asking, what they will earn in this house? How? Will they plant mines or do something else? We started talking to them. I said that we want people to think about what they need and how we can help them.

The first person who came to us was [a local named] Lal Singh. Lal Singh ji had come to our place to work as a mason, to do some kitchen repairs. He also asked us what we wanted to do here. We told him that we will do this...even I was not very clear. He said, “We have a big issue

[in our village]. We have a *jagirdar* (feudal landlord)—a thakur—and he is very cruel. He beats whoever he wants and no one can file a complaint against him with the police because he is a *jagirdar*.”

When Independence came and the *jagirdari* system was abolished, the *jagirdar* did not hoist the tricolour flag, saying that, “Our [feudal masters’] rule is over”. The villagers kept trying to figure out how to confront that *jagirdar*, but were beaten up every time. We said that we will talk in your village, and so we got a chance. It took a year after going there. Often when you go to work with a community, they feel that we have come and that things will change immediately. It is when you get there that you realise no matter how hard you work, sometimes you are stuck, and sometimes even small things take a lot of time. In the case of the *jagirdar*, there were 25 people in the first meeting and only two in the second. As word of what we were doing reached the *jagirdar*, he was also making his preparations, [thinking] “Who are these people and how dare they come here?”

Many times, he would say to the people in the village that they (the villagers) didn’t understand who these people (referring to us) are. To this, some people said, “We know one of them, he’s from our area.” He then said, “They have just brought him along, but these others who are not from here are Naxalites. There will be a lot of trouble, don’t fall into their trap.” It took a year for the village to gradually unite, and that was because of Lal Singh ji. Some families were still in favour of the *jagirdar*. Some land was collectively allotted to the village—a *mahila samiti* (women’s committee) was formed, and the land was allotted in its name. We were shocked when we managed to take the land from the thakur. The organisation (MKSS) had not been formed till then.

When we went to measure the land, the thakur attacked us. He attacked the villagers as well. After that, Nikhil and I were coming back together from that village and in the evening, we were also attacked. When we were also beaten, we came home. We used to sleep in this very square during the summer—my wife and children, Aruna, Nikhil, and I, all of us together. Nikhil and I arrived late one night, and they asked us why we were delayed. I explained that we had gone to the police station to report an incident, as the thakur had assaulted us earlier that day. We were wondering how we would face this and couldn’t sleep the whole night. There aren’t even other people right now—it’s just us. So how would this happen? But the next day, the thakur himself spread word throughout the area that the woman who comes here (Aruna)...he had gotten two of her clerks beaten up severely, so she would flee from here. He said that there was no need to rely on us.

This news reached Sohangadh village and, the following day, at least 50–60 people from there arrived here on foot. The village is 8 km away. We heard some thud-thud-thud sounds as we were sitting here. Aruna suggested bringing the children inside, thinking it might be the thakur’s people. However, we found out they were our friends from Sohangadh village. We called them in and sat down to talk.

They said that they would go and fight [the *jagirdar*]. We said no and decided to go to the village and have a talk. The next day we held a meeting in the village. That was the first time we had a

choice [between violence and non-violence]. We could have taken the path of violence since we had been beaten up. Those villagers could have gone and beaten up the thakur, and there would have been no solution to what would have followed. Each party would be violent to the other and take turns. So we said no, we do not want to take that route. The entire village—children, women, everyone—walked 11 km to Bhim. At that time, just one village was involved in this. We walked through the village telling people about the thakur and ended up outside the office of the *tehsil* Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM). We sat there all day long. The thakur was arrested in the evening, and the news spread in the entire area. People started speculating about how much influence ‘these people from Devdungri’ (referring to Aruna, Nikhil, and me) wielded since they got that thakur arrested. “He is a *jagirdar*, but he was arrested. There is something very special about them.” After that we started working in this area. This incident is from 1987. In 1990, the organisation (MKSS) was set up.

17:02

How was the journey of the movement that was started to bring about the Right to Information (RTI) law?

When this movement started, what was the first question we asked? We did not say that you (the government) should improve our education system, that you do all these things for us, make our health systems equal. We had asked a question. The people in the villages where we went and held meetings had said that they (government works) do not pay us the full amount. They do not pay full wages. We said to them that this is the question we should be asking the government. I told them that we will not go, you all come along, and together we will ask why you aren’t paid the full amount you’re owed. So, when people gathered and the government...here [in Bhim] ‘government’ could refer to the BDO (Block Development Officer), development officer, or whoever comes forward. They (the people) do not see the government as an entity like in Delhi or Jaipur. For us, whatever is here is the government. If there is a patwari, then that is the government. If there is a master (teacher), then that is the government. So when I went to him and asked him why he does not pay people the full amount, he said that they do not do the full work. [Then the people said,] “But even when we did the full work, you didn’t give full wages.” He said that there must be some other reason for this. I asked, “What is that reason? Show us the documents. Show me that paper in which you noted down how much work someone has done and how much they were paid for it.” [The government official replied,] “How can I show you these documents? They are government documents.” I said, “You wrote down the name of the person in attendance in the muster roll. He has also become *sarkaari* [part of the government]. Now he has completed the work and is asking for proof.” When he refused to show us the papers, we contemplated what to do next. I suggested, “Hold a protest in front of their place, sit in front of the *tehsil*, sit in front of the BDO’s office.”

The next day news of the dharna, including the fact that workers were asking to see the muster roll, was published in the newspaper. The collector must have asked the SDM to show them the muster roll. “Why are you making trouble?” [the collector must have asked]. The following day the SDM invited a couple of representatives from the protest. “Those of you who are the main people, come here. I will show you the muster roll because collector sir said so,” he stated. I was very happy that this victory happened on the first day itself. As soon as I went inside, he

'showed' us the paper [by quickly opening and closing it]. We said, "Not like this, give us a photocopy of it." He replied, "How can I give you a photocopy? That is not possible." We declared that then we would continue to sit [in protest]. The next day's paper carried news of the strike continuing.

So the collector asked the SDM what had happened. The SDM responded that he had shown us the documents but that we now wanted photocopies. The collector said, "Tell them they won't be given photocopies. As if we can give just anybody photocopies! There is no law like this. Do one thing: Tell them to copy it by hand. Write it down. No photocopies." The next course of action involved copying the muster roll by hand, which we were happy about. We felt that all right, we got one victory. We manually took down the muster roll, and they insisted we use pencils instead of pens. "These are original documents. You might make marks in them." We agreed, and copied everything using pencils. With a government official present, we diligently transcribed the entire muster roll, continuing the task throughout the day. But we were happy that we copied all of it.

As soon as we reached the village, we began reading it aloud. The villagers inquired, "What are you reading?" I replied, "This *patwar ghar* (land records office) was constructed here. These individuals had been employed here." [The villagers replied,] "But how is his name on it? He died a while back." "She also had passed away before the construction of this." "She was not present at the time."

Surprised, they questioned, "How are you claiming all this?!" I replied that this is a government document, and we've brought it from there. Continuing to read, they said, "Oh, she never used to go to work. She is the wife of a soldier and stays at home or accompanies her husband wherever he is transferred."

We read the third name. "She is dead!" As we proceeded, we found out that some of them had passed away, some were absent, some didn't report to work, and some no longer resided there. We discovered that 40 percent of the names were incorrect. Interestingly, associates of government officials were present nearby.

One of them [government official] walked over to me, peered over my shoulder at the paper, and said, "Oh, this paper is fake." I asked, "Why?" [He replied,] "It is written in pencil, you will write anything and bring it, is this a government paper? Government paper is printed, not written in pencil. These people are lying!"

We also felt that this is true, people will say that you can write anything and bring it. We came to the conclusion that there is no other way. We will have to sit in protest again, so we mobilised people. Leave everything else, we should have the right to see these documents. The slogan was raised: *Leke rahenge hum iss baar, soochna ka adhikaar*. (This time we will win the right to information.)

Those who were roaming around in the city, in Beawar, asked, "What is going on, what is this law?" I said, "Look, friend, this law is such that the public should get to see the [official]

account of how much money is there in your locality, and how much was spent. That information you get on paper, attested. This is a struggle for that [right].” They agreed that this was good, and necessary. “What is the problem with this? It’s great.” they said. We continued the protest, and the government was stuck. If they gave in, they would lose. If they didn’t give in, they would lose. If you give in, then you lose because if you show [the official documentation], then anyone can see the fraud. And if you don’t give in, people will say that you are a thief.

That movement gave [us] a lot of strength. In a way, we, the people, were not stuck. In fact, it was the government who was trapped. No matter how long we [had to] go on, we would not give up. Many songs were composed there, and plays were performed as well. We persevered for as long as we could because we wanted to have that law. We did not get tired...it was the government that eventually relented, leading to the implementation of the Right to Information Act. Initially it was introduced in Rajasthan, and later extended to every state across the country. Subsequently, a central law was enacted.

Then our political friends raised the issue of what information cannot be given. What do we have that we cannot give to the public? N C Saxena, who was in the IAS Academy, summarised the matter in one line: Any information that an MLA and MP can get should be given to every citizen. It was just one line—what we can’t take, we can’t give to the public; if you can give it to them [MLAs and MPs], then everyone should be able to get it.

24:18

Keeping people connected with big movements is a challenge. How did you do this?

I understood that there isn’t some book where it’s written what you need to do to sustain a movement. When you go among people and actually work, that is when one gets to learn, and one’s own values are determined. Why are we coming here and talking about minimum wage? Why are we talking about equality? Now here [at MKSS] we take equal wages...everyone here gets minimum wages. Be it Aruna or Nikhil or me. This work is such that it is not possible to do it alone. Hundreds of people have contributed in this. No one can carry any movement alone. I am the one telling you all this, but it was a movement that depended a lot on what people believed, and the methodology was also determined. These political parties gather people by spending money unnecessarily. In the movement, people came from one place to another, paying their own fare to sit in the protest. In their minds, they realised how important this is. At that time perhaps people might not have thought how the Right to Information [Act] would help them, because at that time they were thinking about wages. Their wages were stuck. As soon as people demanded information, they didn’t receive the information but they received their wages due to the fear that if the information was released, it would lead to bigger revelations. Just give them what they are asking for. [But] people apply for information across many issues.

26:23

Despite RTI, governments seem to be trying to avoid giving correct information. What can you tell us about this? What should a grassroots worker do to get information?

Today at least 200 such people will be found in this country...there are cases in every state, there is no state left in which no RTI activist has died. What question did they ask that it felt necessary to kill them? You can take for granted that there will be corruption. But what was the level of corruption that you took a human being's life?

Today we are talking about electoral bonds. You tell us who gave it. They are saying that so much money came, so many thousand crores came, we will not disclose who gave it. Brother, why won't you tell me why? They say that the one who is giving is saying that no, my name should not come out, that I have given it to you. This is a secret donation. What secret work will this secret donation accomplish? RTI brings to light these big questions. Why would the government weaken it? Governments know at what level this information is going to bind them.

People feel powerful [because of RTI]. RTI has given courage to the people.

If you go to any office, they will make you sit and talk. They will keep postponing using other matters [as excuses]. As soon as they receive your RTI [application], they will delay you. "Have a seat. What do you do, where do you live? Ok, what is the problem? This application that you had submitted is here, but right now sir is not in the office. Your application has come, what happened?" The official sits to listen, thinking, "Why is this fellow asking about this?"

Today, let me tell you, corruption has reached a level where there is complete complicity in corruption. This includes [government] employees, leaders, and some common people too. There is severe corruption due to the nexus of all three. That corruption will come out only because of your RTI.

Today, the matter is an electronic one—the computer has arrived. Everything is here, but what are you (the government) trying to show? You are showing what you want to show. What you don't want to show, we all know that you won't. *Suo moto*, we say in the RTI Act's Section 4. Information has to be shown to citizens *suo moto*. If you look at the NREGA website today, it has everything. It is beautifully designed—we did it together with the government. We were fighting for the law, so both NREGA and RTI did not come because of the will of the government. These came from the people's movement. Participation in it (the movement), the important role in making the law, was played by the people of civil society. Look at NREGA today. You can look here [at the website] and tell how many labourers are working in which village, on which job. And whose payment went where, how much went to which village, whose is pending, what is pending, and if it is pending then why is it pending? You can see all this.

In Rajasthan, there is the Jan Soochna Portal. You can see all the information in that portal. Where is my pension stuck? What is the reason for it being stuck? It will also show you whether or not your Aadhaar is linked, whether there is a mistake in your Aadhaar, if your age is incorrect, if you have not got the KYC done. Whatever it is, you can see it all. In a way, this era of RTI will continue only if there is a movement today. In places where people are fighting and struggling together, they get the information they need and there is no murder. Those who are fighting alone are being murdered. We used it (the RTI) the most in the organisation (MKSS). [We] got public hearings done, got everything done, but they know that this is a group that is

fighting for a cause together. It is not that we have never been beaten up or assaulted, but when a group is formed, it has its own strength.

30:45

You have seen different governments for a long time. How was your experience of working with governments? What alternatives do you see in the case of governments that do not communicate properly?

Look, no matter who wins, it is a democracy; whoever wins, that government is ours. We cannot say that this government is not ours, and we will not talk to it. Because our dialogue will be with whoever is in power. There will be no dialogue with the one who loses. But we will have to have a dialogue with the one who won. This is democracy, if you are sitting on that chair then we will communicate with you. We also raise the same slogans: *Sarkaar humare aap ki, nahin kisi ke baap ki* (the government is ours, not one person's property) or *Yeh desh hamare aap ka, nahin kisi ke baap ka* (this country is ours, not someone's father's). We will talk. Why not? When Vasundhara [Raje] was the chief minister for five years, she did not meet us even once. Even once. Every time we tried, we did not get it [a meeting with her].

We have a dialogue with the government; whether they do it or not, we do it. We do it and, on the same lines, whatever work you have to do, you have to do it.