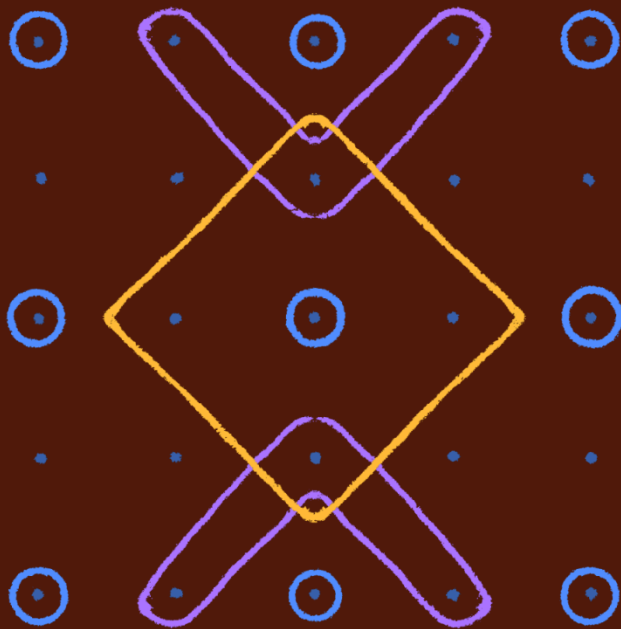# Accountability

Nikhil Dey

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AINOW   aapti institute   THE MAYBE

This piece is part of [Reframing Impact](#), a collaboration between AI Now Institute, Aapti Institute, and The Maybe. In this series we bring together a wide network of advocates, builders, and thinkers from around the world to draw attention to the limitations of the current discourse around AI, and to forge the conversations we want to have.

In the run-up to the 2026 India AI Impact Summit, each piece addresses a field-defining topic in AI and governance. Composed of interview excerpts, the pieces are organized around a frame (analysis and critique of dominant narratives) and a reframe (provocations toward alternative, people-centered futures).

Nikhil Dey is a social activist and a founding member of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), an organization whose mission is the empowerment of workers and peasants. He helped lead successful campaigns for the landmark Right to Information (RTI) Act and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005.

In this interview, Dey unpacks how people can demand accountability from power. Even as digital technologies are escalating impunity, those in power everywhere claim to value accountability. In this context, MKSS's grassroots practice demonstrates the importance of demanding, publicizing, and using information that power prefers to hide. Dey describes a social approach in which grassroots mobilization and public shaming go hand in hand with the careful design of laws and institutions, leading to major victories. The MKSS's fight for rural workers' wages against the opaque state apparatus has institutionalized India's robust Right to Information law. The organization has helped gig workers secure the opening of black-box platform data. Though ordinary people may be in positions of weakness, Dey says, information can enable them to turn the tables on power.

Following is a lightly edited transcript of the conversation.

FRAME: Accountability is often framed as a technocratic process of expanding technical capacity, institutional frameworks, and resources. In reality, there can be no accountability in AI until social relationships are respected.

Everyone claims they are accountable—even dictators.

This summit is run by people who control countries, control the world. And they love to say that they are accountable. Even the greatest dictator says they are accountable every day, all the time. But accountable to whom? Of course, in a democracy, everyone says they are accountable to the people, which is rubbish. The entire exercise of those who centralize and concentrate power is to carry on being unaccountable to people but pretending they are.

The conversations at the Summit will only pay lip service to accountability in the most shallow manner possible. It's very sad, it's almost laughable, but this is what has happened for years and years in summits of the rich and powerful, not just in this country but across the world.

The experience of digitalization in India has escalated impunity.

This summit is being hosted by the Indian government, the people who have thrust the Aadhaar digital ID upon all of us. They said this ID is not mandatory but without it nobody could get a single one of their welfare benefits that were essential for their survival. Aadhar is now being sold all across the world. These summits will talk about systems such as this as breakthrough examples of tech for good, and therefore something that should be taken on by other countries.

Today, in the state of Rajasthan, where I live, two million people's social security pensions have been stopped because they were unable to verify themselves. And this is just a few days ago. The pensioners were unable to verify themselves through their biometric system as being alive. We have seen hundreds of such examples where people have been marked dead or as having migrated, when in fact, these most vulnerable people have very much been alive and completely unable to understand why their pensions have been stopped.

Despite its failures, every glitch in technology has led to a promise that the next tech will make it better. This trajectory enables a few human beings to say, "It's done by our machines, we will sort it out somewhere. Meanwhile you don't even need to see or know how many lives have been lost because you will have been machine-learned in the process."

There is nothing better than a social relationship and there is nothing worse than someone being able to mark you dead because for them you're merely a digit and not a human being. That is a frightening thing, and we are seeing it play out. It would not have happened earlier when no matter how insensitive a bureaucrat may have been, they would not have marked you dead. But if you're just a digit, it's very easy to strike you off.
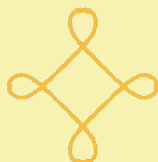
REFRAME: Real accountability comes from ordinary people demanding, publicizing, and using information.

Power operates through the way information is disseminated or hidden.

The MKSS is a peasant and workers' organization that has become very well known for the role it has played in the movement for the passage of two landmark national legislations for the right to information and the right to work. The movement redefined the discourse around the right to information, not just in India but around the world.

It originated from peasants and workers in small villages demanding information. The initial demand was asking for minimum wages when people worked on public works and with contractors. When they asked, "Well, why are we not being paid?" they were told, "Because you've not done enough work. And that's in the records and those are secret." That's what led people to start saying, "Well, show us those records. They can't be secret!"

As soon as those records became visible, the whole web of exploitation was exposed. When people got hold of the records, they realized that those who had not worked were being paid a lot more than those who had worked. That was all being hidden. People understood that the nerve centers of power operated through information and how information is either shared or disseminated or kept away and secluded. And as soon as that happened, the power relationship changed.

Publicizing critical information, and putting it through a deliberative process, is critical to accountability. It allows entrenched power structures to be upturned.

It was not just that people got the records. They got access to the records and put them in the public domain through public hearings, called "Jan Sunvai." They called everyone concerned and read them aloud on a mic with a video recorder. It was very dramatic because dead people were listed on those records as having worked. There were buildings that did not exist. As these 'ghosts' came tumbling out of the records, it was farcical, but it was tragic as well.

Sitting with me at home, information doesn't do anything. But as soon as I put it in the newspapers or put it somewhere else in the public domain, that's when it has a kind of chemical reaction. Here, people were doing it in a face-to-face way. That Jan Sunvai process gradually over two or three years started to be called "public audits" or "social audits" and became recognized in law.

Social audit was a return to the roots of audit. Audit comes from the Latin word audiere—to hear. We are getting people to hear. There were many people who had never been to school, but they heard what was in the records. They gave responses back. And instead of that audit process being a very technocratic process of adding two and two together and seeing how much corruption took place or how much inefficiency there was, it brought out the truth amongst the people thereby giving accountability to the people present, in a very real way.

People who were far more powerful than us, who could use violence against us, faced a new and powerful challenge: as soon as the records came out, they were unable to face us or the people. They were unable to face anyone in the public domain in that process of real democratization; in that dissemination of power, in that breaking of their power just by being exposed.

This disrupted so many power relationships. And it has emboldened the ordinary citizen to take on powerful vested interests. More than a hundred people in India have been killed pursuing freedom of information requests. Because the ordinary citizen could suddenly challenge the most powerful set of people in the country and they would not shut up, and they would not stop and they would carry on and they still do.

Real accountability must be institutionalized through laws and governance.

Making information public was the first step. And naming and shaming does a lot, but very powerful people learn how to become shameless very quickly. The next set of questions, which are questions of accountability, have been far more difficult.

The right to information allowed every Indian citizen to suddenly question anyone in power and get an answer. If they didn't get an answer, the law was designed to hold 'power' personally accountable. It was a unique feature of the law that from their pocket, the bureaucrat tasked with providing information would have to pay a fine for every day of delay.

This was a great accountability system not present in any freedom of information law anywhere around the world.

Similarly, if there is to be real and true accountability to the people, it means dismantling these centers of power, rather than making the police or investigating agencies or even so-called independent agencies even more powerful.

In algorithmic systems, access to data provides access to the dispensation of power.

We have had a new set of experiences in fighting for gig workers' rights. We started off in India by saying gig workers have no social security, they have no rights as workers, and they are not even defined as employees by those platforms who employ them.

We came to the realization that the obvious demands to get wages, social security, and occupational safety depended on the demand for the data itself. Although companies say they are working for the greater common good, as if they have some great altruistic purpose—but the entire gig economy is controlled through a series of algorithms that clearly are for profit maximization. If a worker's social security and their wages are based on each gig, the most important thing is the algorithm and the data of the gigs. It's only by looking at the data that you could measure people's wages and social security rights and assign responsibility to employers.

We were faced with a response from the industry saying, "No, this is personal data. We can't give it out." One of the union leaders, an Uber driver, responded, "I use my money, my car, my diesel and petrol, my insurance, my time, my risk—and yet my data is kept secret from me for my privacy!" Even with the excuse of India's draconian Digital Personal Data Protection law (DPDPA), they had no answer to that plain truth. For the MKSS, it was a return to the same conceptual slogan—"my money, my accounts" that had energised and defined the demand for labour lists in public works. Only the contest had shifted to the digital space.

The most powerful thing in this battle, is not the fact that you win a certain wage or you win a certain amount of social security, but that you are able to show what the algorithm is doing. Then you're able to not only get your wage and social security, but you can get much more. You can get access to how power is being dispensed. That's a very powerful example. And it's something that the gig workers laws in other countries haven't actually come to operationalize yet. Many people are fighting for the employer-employee relationship. But in India, the most

powerful thing that we've been able to get through the law, is the access to data and its potential use by the workers in a practical way.

We are all looking for these small wedges to get a foot in these new arrangements of power. Suddenly, you find you can turn the tables. You're not so expert at it. You did not ask for this method of management. You were a victim. But just by a small, meaningful entry which you define by shining a light on it, you let the cat amongst the pigeons. The group that had it all neatly tied up doesn't know how to deal with this new entrant.

Gig workers' data certainly is one wedge. But why only fight for employees against employers? Why not fight for any citizen vis-à-vis a corporate sector that affects us all just as much as employers do? Why should commercial secrets stay hidden in these black boxes? If we could take it one step further from what we've begun to do here through these laws, then you really have a chance. A chance to use collective human intelligence and values, to expose the "grand designs" of artificial intelligence.