

Social Audit of Samagra Shiksha: Experiences from the Field

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Abstract

The Samagra Shiksha scheme, launched by the Government of India in 2018 and later modified in line with the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), is an ambitious, integrated initiative covering the country's school education from pre-primary to Grade 12. To ensure its effective implementation and monitoring, the Government of India introduced guidelines for the social audit of Samagra Shiksha on 25 August 2022. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was entrusted with the task of capacity building for master trainers across States and Union Territories (UTs). Any initiative of this scale required signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with a third party, such as a social audit unit or an institute. Once the MoU was signed and the States and UTs informed NCERT, the training programme was conducted on the basis of modules developed and coordinated by the Department of Teacher Education, which were approved by the Ministry of Education (MoE), on the date and venue specified by the States and UTs. This paper presents narratives based on field experiences from training programmes conducted in 11 States and UTs. These narratives, supported by data and evidence, were analysed to draw meaningful inferences. The paper highlights key issues and challenges encountered in various States and UTs, including the signing of MoU, selection of master trainers, cultural sensitivity in training, resource management challenges, and difficulties in data collection and reporting. Additionally, it addresses important queries and concerns raised by the master trainers across various States and UTs. The paper also offers recommendations for addressing critical issues, such as finding a balance between standardisation and localisation, need of robust capacity building infrastructure and creation of self-sustainability models. Finally, it outlines the way forward, emphasising the need for individualised action plans by States and UTs to effectively address these challenges and ensure a transparent, democratic and equitable social audit process.

Keywords: Samagra Shiksha, National Education Policy 2020, Social Audit, Master Trainers

Introduction

As per the 42nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution (1976), education was placed in the Concurrent List, allowing both the Central and State/UT governments to legislate on the subject. To strengthen the country's educational ecosystem, the Central and State governments have continuously formulated policies, schemes and initiatives. Several centrally-sponsored schemes, funded jointly by the

Centre and States, are being implemented to enhance the quality of education in India.

One such centrally-sponsored scheme is Samagra Shiksha, an integrated initiative aimed at improving the quality of education in India. Launched in 2018, Samagra Shiksha merged three existing schemes—Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education

(TE). Covering preschool to Grade 12, Samagra Shiksha focuses on enhancing school effectiveness, ensuring equal opportunities for schooling and promoting equitable learning outcomes.

Additionally, in July 2020, the Ministry of Education (MoE), formerly the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD), launched the third National Education Policy. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) envisions providing sustainable, equitable, democratic and high-quality education to all, transforming India into a global superpower. The Samagra Shiksha scheme was revised in alignment of NEP 2020, ensuring it adheres to its foundational pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability.

For the effective implementation of any centrally-sponsored scheme, monitoring and assessment are crucial to identify the challenges and bottlenecks. Traditionally, this was done through third-party inspections and assessment. However, such assessments and inspections often lead to fear and confusion among stakeholders and beneficiaries. Along with inspections, audits play a significant role in monitoring programmes. Generally, audits are associated with the financial audits of a particular scheme or programme. Financial audits relate to the disbursement of entitlements to beneficiaries, expenditure of allocated resources in a programme within a given period, issues related to budgeting, etc. Additionally, impact measurement studies are conducted, usually in evaluative and summative formats, meaning they are done at the end of the financial year, five-year period or a decade. However, these are not ongoing assessments, limiting their ability to provide regular feedback and timely solutions. Moreover, such studies do not always provide a

holistic understanding of the effective implementation of the programme, as they may overlook the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders.

To gauge the efficacy of any reform or initiative, it is imperative to take into cognizance the views of stakeholders. Thus, social audits, conducted in a participatory manner, allow stakeholders and beneficiaries to express their concerns regarding problems and suggestions throughout the course of the scheme's implementation. This ensures their active and equitable participation in the implementation of the programme, fostering a bottom-up approach that highlights challenges at the grass-roots level and provides time-bound and immediate solutions. Unlike traditional audits, social audits should be seen as fact-finding rather than fault-finding exercises.

Therefore, for effective implementation and monitoring of several initiatives of Samagra Shiksha, it was considered imperative to conduct a social audit of the programme. The Government of India launched the guidelines for the Social Audit of Samagra Shiksha on 25 August 2022. Existing literature reviews suggest that social audits serve as an effective tool for the smooth and transparent implementation of programmes.

History of Social Audit in India

Researchers suggest that social auditing enhances stakeholders' understanding and awareness of the programme. Karmakar (2017) points out that the word 'social' in 'social audit' refers to human beings, essentially stakeholders and society, who play a crucial role in the auditing process. During social audits, people become more informed about their rights and entitlements (Kumar

and Madheswaran, 2019). Tambe, et al. (2016) highlights that social audit provides a transparent picture of the programme's workability, i.e., what is working and what is not, while also addressing corruption and bolstering accountability in the services delivered by the government [Aakella and Kidambi (2007); Afridi (2008); Vj (2011); Sumarbin (2014); Aiyar and Mehta (2015); Tambe, et al. (2016); Koner (2017); and Mir and Sharma (2024)].

In Public Service Delivery (PDS) across South Asia, social audits have contributed to improved accessibility and accuracy of services, enhanced transparency and public trust, fostering greater inclusivity, increased accountability and bridging gaps between community and government officials or authorities (UNDP, 2017).

A 2018, study conducted by the Centre for Good Governance on social audits in Andhra Pradesh PDS revealed similar results. In 2019, the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR) conducted a study on the social audit of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), concluding that social audits resolved discrepancies in the allocation of funds, identified and corrected delays in wages, and reduced absenteeism among officials. In 2020, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) analysed social audits in climate development programmes in Bangladesh, outlining that they enhanced monitoring, increased transparency in the distribution of resources, and strengthened community trust in governance by providing channels for feedback and improving climate-resilient initiatives.

A study conducted by Gopal and Singh (2022) reveals that social audits could improve transparency, accountability and

efficiency in the PM-POSHAN scheme. Similarly, Sinha (2022), in his paper, 'Expanding Social Audit to Development Programs beyond MGNREGA', described social auditing as an essential tool for enforcing social accountability. He pointed out that, given its success in raising people's awareness about MGNREGA, the Government of India has been focusing on the social audit of other development programmes.

Regular audits help establish early warning systems by uncovering issues like violations of rules, discrimination and poor working conditions, allowing timely intervention before minor issues escalate into major incidents. Audit findings may help devise better policies and procedures, as they often reveal opportunities for improving working conditions and community relations. Social audit recommendations provide a roadmap for bring about positive changes. The concept of social audit was introduced in India in 1979 by the Tata Group, through its subsidiary Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO). Following its success, social auditing was recommended for various public sector programmes and schemes, such as MGNREGA (2005), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (2014), National Food Security Act (2015), Juvenile Justice Act (2015), Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna—Grameen and National Social Assistance Programme (2019), among others.

Here is a brief timeline of the history of social audit in India. Since its inception, social audits have been integrated into multiple government programmes and schemes, strengthening accountability, transparency and efficiency in public service delivery across India.

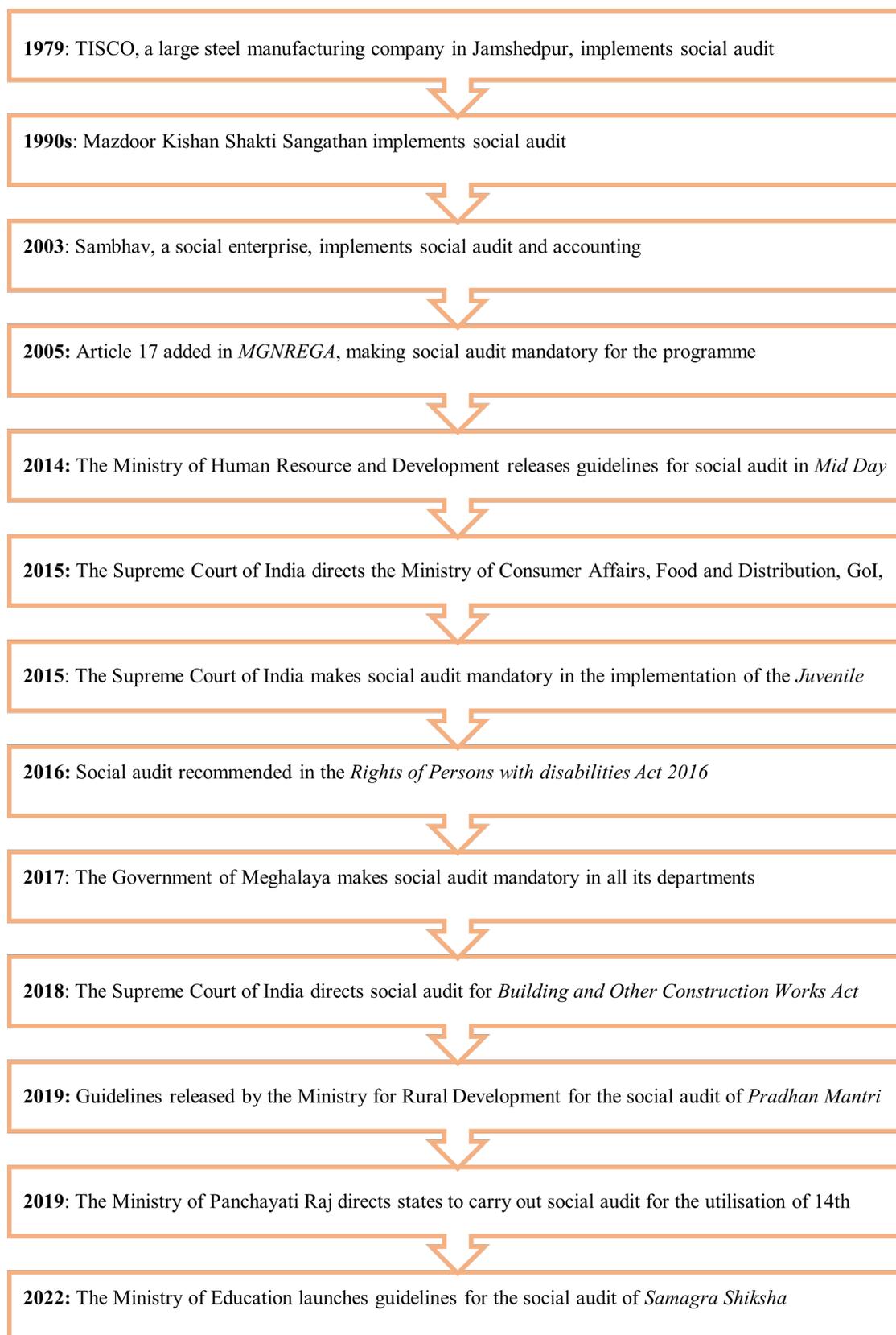


Fig 1: A timeline showing the implementation of social audit in government programmes in India

General Guidelines for Social Audit¹¹

Some important points that should be considered for conducting the social audit of a scheme or programme are discussed below.

1. The objectives and scope of the social audit of a particular scheme or programme should be clearly defined. This should be followed by identifying the key aspects to be audited, including the extent of implementation, fund utilisation, beneficiary satisfaction, and the upgradation or maintenance of infrastructure. It must be pre-determined whether the audit will cover all components of the scheme or focus on specific areas (e.g., educational outcomes in Samagra Shiksha). Additionally, while auditing a scheme or programme, it is important to examine and understand the existing legal and policy framework.
2. Clear and well-defined guidelines for the audit should be established, taking into account the existing frameworks and guidelines for social audits for other schemes and programmes. These guidelines should be specific to the scheme in question to ensure adherence to the rules governing the social audit of that particular scheme or programme.
3. Social audit teams must be well-prepared with knowledge of the scheme, maintenance and upkeep of financial records, and auditing techniques. Since independent and neutral auditors play a crucial role in conducting social audits, the process may involve training civil society members or local volunteers. In some cases, external evaluators or neutral agencies can be engaged for additional verification and validation of findings.
4. Mobilising the community and raising awareness among beneficiaries, civil society organisations and local governments for active and wholehearted participation is key to the successful social audit of a scheme or programme. It remains a participatory exercise only when the views, opinions and suggestions of community members are valued and considered for the effective implementation of the scheme. Beneficiaries and communities involved in this process must have a clear understanding of the scheme's administrative mechanisms, their rights and how the social audit empowers them to hold authorities accountable. Public access to documents related to the scheme, such as sanction orders, utilisation certificates, physical and financial targets and achievements, and State/UT-wise beneficiary lists, must be made available to every citizen. These documents should be presented in a format that is easily understandable for the general public, including those without technical expertise. If required, provisions under the Right to Information (RTI) Act and the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) may be utilised.
5. Essential tools like questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions should be designed and tested in advance before being administered to collect qualitative and quantitative data from beneficiaries. Ensuring the use of appropriate tools and methods for analysing the collected data is crucial for obtaining reliable and meaningful outcomes. The follow-up and reporting format should be well-defined and clearly reflect how the findings are mapped to the tools.
6. The process of social audit requires continuous support from government institutions and authorities at the local, state and central levels to ensure access to information at every stage.
7. A detailed plan for arranging venues, transportation and necessary materials for public hearings and meetings should be prepared well in advance. Adequate financial resources

should be allocated for training, data collection and conducting public discussions.

8. A well-structured social audit can enhance the effectiveness of centrally-sponsored schemes by ensuring that they meet their objectives and benefit the intended populations.

Social Audit of Samagra Shiksha

For conducting the social audit of Samagra Shiksha, the documents related to the scheme, along with NEP 2020, have been thoroughly reviewed and understood. Accordingly, it was proposed that the social audit of Samagra Shiksha be conducted in a comprehensive manner, covering all initiatives outlined in the scheme. These include universal access and retention, vocational education, gender and equity, inclusive education, guidance and counselling, digital initiatives, and strengthening of teacher education and training. Additionally, the audit should address issues related to infrastructure, teachers, students, safety and security in schools, finance, and administration from Grade 1 to 12. However, early childhood care education do not fall within the purview of social audit at this stage.

Social audit is a relatively new concept in the field of education. Therefore, raising awareness among the stakeholders of Samagra Shiksha was crucial. It was also essential for stakeholders to understand the mandate and rationale behind this social audit. To achieve this, a team comprising key resource persons and social auditors at various levels was proposed.

At the district level, master trainers were designated; at the block or cluster level, Cluster Social Auditors (CSA) were assigned; and at the school level, Social Audit Facilitation Team (SAFT) were proposed to conduct the social audit. These master trainers, CSA and SAFT

members were required to have a deep understanding of the dynamic educational ecosystem and the significance of social audits in the educational landscape. Therefore, it was imperative to ensure that a sufficient number of individuals thoroughly understood the execution of entire process.

For this purpose, NCERT initiated the capacity building of selected master trainers across States and UTs in India. This was undertaken immediately after the signing of the MoU with the state governments, following which arrangements were made for the training of master trainers. Subsequently, these master trainers were responsible for training CSAs and SAFT members at the dates and venues decided and notified by their respective state authorities. The master trainers, CSAs and SAFT members formed a team of independent auditors, whose primary responsibility was to ensure neutrality and transparency of the social auditing process.

To facilitate the training process, NCERT developed three comprehensive modules based on the scheme guidelines. These were as follows.

1. Initiatives for school education under Samagra Shiksha
2. Social audit of Samagra Shiksha
3. Tools and reporting format

Module 1 highlights and discusses the key initiatives for school education under Samagra Shiksha, including universal access and retention, early childhood care and education, vocational education, gender and equity, inclusive education, guidance and counselling, digital initiatives, strengthening teacher education and training, monitoring, etc. It also provides details on the financial allocations for various components of the scheme.

Module 2 explains the details and mechanisms of the Samagra Shiksha social audit process to ensure that stakeholders

and beneficiaries understand the mechanism of social audit and actively participate in making it a democratic, equitable, accountable and transparent exercise.

Module 3 comprises six tools for data collection, covering are both qualitative and quantitative aspects, viz., institutional questionnaire (Tool 1), interview schedule for head teacher or principal (Tool 2), Focus Group Discussion (FGD) schedule for teachers (Tool 3), FGD schedule for parents (Tool 4), FGD schedule for community members (Tool 5) and FGD schedule for students (Tool 6). Additionally, it includes four reporting formats—School Report Format (ScRF), Cluster or Block Report Format (C/BRF), District Report Format (DRF) and State Report Format (SRF). The items in these reporting formats were mapped to the tools to ensure accurate meaningful reporting of the collected data.

These tools and reporting formats were first piloted in schools of Odisha during September 2023. After piloting, the tools and reporting formats were revised based on the feedback received.

For the social audit of Samagra Shiksha, states were required to seek support from several institutions and bodies, such as the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRD), District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), etc. Additionally, cooperation was sought from government officials, such as state project officer, district education officer, district project officer, block education officer, etc.

Accordingly, the States and UTs were advised to prepare an ‘annual calendar’ for conducting each cycle of the social audit. This calendar would include details, such as the list and timeline for the training of CSAs and SAFT members; the venue of training; the list of schools

where social audit would be conducted; the tentative timeline for data collection from schools by SAFT; the timeline for SAFT’s submission of ScRF; details about date, time and venue for public hearings; the timeline for the submission of B/CRF by CSAs; etc.

The States and UTs were also advised to meticulously plan financial resource allocations and ensure sufficient funding for the smooth execution of the entire exercise.

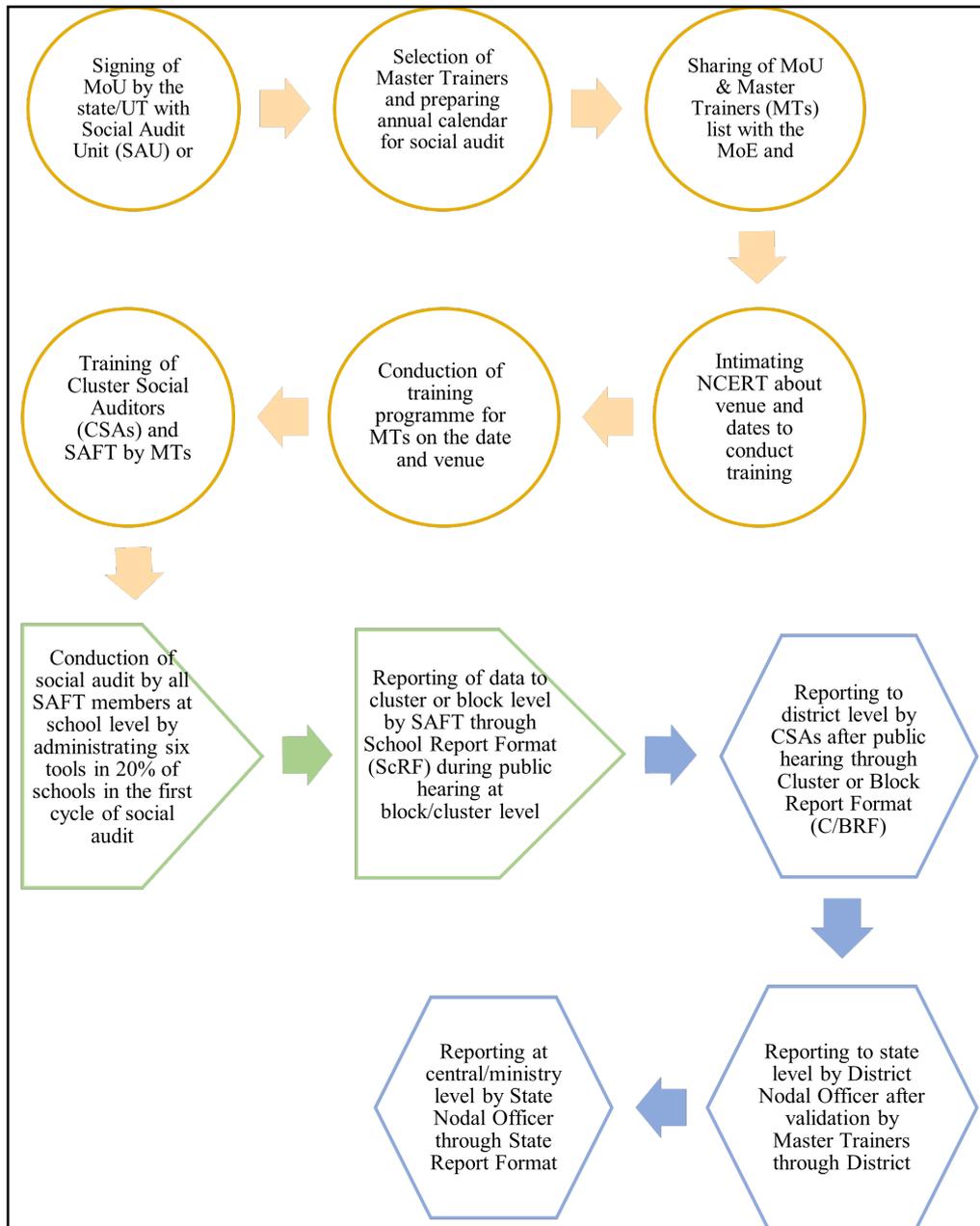
As this is an action-oriented exercise, its purpose is not limited to identifying problems but also includes providing solutions in a time-bound manner. Public hearings provide a platform for beneficiaries and authorities to come together, discuss issues and arrive at solutions in a democratic, equitable and transparent manner. It is expected that grievances raised during the audit are addressed promptly, with their resolution being documented through reporting formats by concerned authorities and team of social auditors.

The Process of Social Audit of Samagra Shiksha

The process of social audit, as outlined in the execution guidelines by the MoE, has been depicted stepwise in the following flowchart, covering all stages from the signing of the MoU between the State with the Social Audit Unit (SAU)/ institution to the reporting of data at the central or ministry level.

In the flowchart, the circular boxes (orange) denote the pre-audit phase, pentagonal boxes (green) represent the social audit phase, and hexagonal boxes (blue) indicate the post-audit phase. The pre-audit phase includes all steps from the signing of the MoU to the training of CSAs and SAFT team by master trainers. The audit phase involves data collection at the school level by the SAFT team and

conducting public hearings at the block or cluster level. The post-audit phase is the reporting phase of data at block/cluster, district and state level.



- Pre-audit phase: Signing of MoU to train master trainers, CSAs and SAFT members
- ◡ Social-audit phase: Conducting social audit in schools (data collection phase)
- ◡ Post-audit phase: Reporting data through various reporting formats

Figure 2: The Process of social audit of Samagra Shiksha

Social Audit of Samagra Shiksha: Capacity Building Experiences

After the MoE revised and finalised the guidelines for the social audit of Samagra Shiksha in September 2023, the Department of Teacher Education, NCERT, conducted training programmes for master trainers in 11 States and UTs, namely Odisha, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Goa, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Karnataka, Meghalaya, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Mizoram and Punjab between October 2023 and October 2024. Odisha was the first to undergo training in October 2023, while Punjab was the most recent, completing its training in October 2024.

Due to the diversity in demographics and geography across States and UTs,

various challenges arose in conducting the training programmes. During the sessions, participants raised several diverse questions and concerns. Two critical issues—the signing of the MoU and the selection of master trainers—are discussed in this paper. Additionally, the key narratives that emerged from training programmes in each State/UT are thoroughly examined.

Signing of the MoU

According to the MoE's approved guidelines, the training programme for social audits can commence only after the state and SAU/institute sign an MoU with an appropriate body to execute the social audit exercise. The list of States and UTs that have signed the MoU so far is as follows. This list highlights the diverse institutions involved in this process across different states.

Table 1: States/UTs and MoU Signing Agency

Name of the State/UT	MoU Signing Agency
Odisha	Odisha Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency
Jharkhand	Jharkhand State Livelihoods Promotion Society
Gujarat	Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute
Goa	Ponda Educational Society College of Arts and Science
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	Department of Rural Development, PRIs and Urban Local Bodies and Department of Tribal Welfare
Karnataka	The Social Audit Directorate of Karnataka
Meghalaya	Meghalaya Society for Social Audit and Transparency
Uttar Pradesh	Lucknow University, DDU Gorakhpur University, SVS University, Integral University, MMM University of Technology
Rajasthan	MoU not required*
Mizoram	Department of Education, Mizoram Central University
Punjab	Department of Education, Panjab University

The process of signing the MoU is time-consuming due to the need for budgetary allocations, identification of master trainers, and other procedural requirements, which impact the overall timeline. Once the MoU is signed, the states inform the MoE and NCERT, after which the dates for the training are finalised.

In some states and UTs, such as Uttarakhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Delhi and Telangana, the signing of the MoU is pending for various reasons. These include difficulties in identifying a suitable agency for signing the MoU, delays in framing the MoU for social

audit, transfer of concerned officials and delays in key appointments. Additionally, elections in Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana have contributed to further delays.

Some states, such as West Bengal and Kerala, expressed reluctance towards the training of master trainers by a national-level central body and preferred to engage a local body of their choice.

During the financial year 2023–24, which marked the first cycle of the social audit, training programmes were conducted only in seven states—Odisha, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Goa, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Karnataka and Meghalaya—due to constraints on the part of state governments. In the financial year 2024–25, four states—Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Mizoram and Punjab—completed training by October 2024.

To facilitate training and the social audit process, the MoE has introduced a Google tracker form, which has been shared with the States and UTs for updating the status of their MoUs. Additionally, periodic rigorous assessments of the MoU status, along with sensitisation programmes or meetings, would help States and UTs prioritise training programmes and the execution of the social audit process.

Selection of Master Trainers

The guidelines for the social audit of Samagra Shiksha grant autonomy to States and UTs in selecting master trainers. So, diverse batches of master trainers were selected across different States and UTs. Table 2 provides details on the number of master trainers in each State or UTs, along with their affiliations and backgrounds.

Table 2: States/UTs and the Number of Master Trainers along with Their Affiliations

Name of the States/UTs	No. of Master Trainers	Affiliation
Odisha	60	Members of the Odisha Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency
Jharkhand	47	Members of the Jharkhand State Livelihoods Promotion Society
Gujarat	74	Scholars and faculty members of the Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute
Goa	33	Scholars and faculty members of the Ponda Educational Society College of Arts and Science
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	33	Members of the Department of Rural Development, PRIs, Urban Local Bodies and the Department of Tribal Welfare
Karnataka	39	Members of the Social Audit Directorate of Karnataka
Meghalaya	71	Members of the Meghalaya Society for Social Audit and Transparency
Uttar Pradesh	150	Scholars and faculty members of Lucknow University; DDU Gorakhpur University; SVS University; Integral University; MMM University of Technology
Rajasthan	63	Members of the Social Audit Unit of Rajasthan
Mizoram	25	Scholars and faculty members from the Department of Education, Mizoram Central University
Punjab	37	Scholars and faculty members from the Department of Education, Panjab University

The transformative journey of training on the social audit of Samagra Shiksha began as the initiative moved across India's diverse landscapes, with training materials reviewed one last time. In August 2023, the recently launched social audit guidelines for Samagra Shiksha were securely in place. This initiative embarked on a significant journey across 10 states and UTs, each with its own unique educational ecosystem.

The First Training

The first training session was conducted in Odisha in November 2023, where the monsoon had left the landscape lush and vibrant. Odisha, a state with a coastline extending about 480 km covering six coastal districts, has 48,558 government schools spread across 314 blocks. The primary task was to provide first-hand training to master trainers from diverse subject areas, including education. This required a thorough understanding of the revised framework of Samagra Shiksha and its key provisions, which were to be examined during the social audit of schools. Given that the social audit exercise was to cover all schools under Samagra Shiksha in the state, the first phase aimed to audit 10,000 schools by the end of the financial year on 31 March 2024.

Odisha had signed an MoU with the Odisha Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency (OSSAT) to execute the social audit. The training took place at the auditorium of Krushi Bhawan, Bhubaneswar, with 60 master trainers from 30 districts. These trainers were associated with two organisations—OSSAT and OSEPA (Odisha School Education Programme Authority)—and had prior experience of conducting social audits of other schemes, such as MGNREGA, which are more quantitative in nature.

The crucial question raised by a senior principal, “How do we ensure objectivity in social audits?” became the central theme of discussion, not only in Odisha but in all subsequent training sessions in other states

too. This question underscored the need for a clear and well-structured orientation to ensure that master trainers fully understood the process. The challenge lay in maintaining a delicate balance between community participation and professional assessment.

The participants felt that massive data would be generated, suggesting that an online reporting system would enhance transparency and objectivity. Additionally, translating the training modules into the local language was considered beneficial for the further training of CSAs and SAFT members.

These 60 master trainers—equipped with training modules in English and Odia, an action plan and support from State authorities—felt empowered to take on this massive exercise. They were prepared to conduct training in their respective districts and effectively implement the social audit exercise across Odisha.

The Second Training

The second training session for Jharkhand was conducted in January 2024. Known as the mineral state of India, Jharkhand has 13,568 schools across 260 blocks. In the first cycle of social audit, covering the financial year 2023–24, a total of 1,064 schools were expected to undergo the process.

A total of 47 master trainers from 24 districts participated in the training. The trainers were members of the Jharkhand State Livelihoods Promotion Society (JSLPS) and had prior experience of conducting social audits for the PM-POSHAN scheme.

A key concern raised by the participants was whether negative responses to questions in the audit tools could lead to fund cuts. Additionally, they expressed apprehension that variations in the implementation of the programme might lead to data manipulation to present an artificially high standard of execution. These concerns stemmed from their past experiences auditing the PM-POSHAN scheme. Another major issue was whether providing audit tools in advance

to head teachers and principals might create opportunities for data manipulation. The participants also sought clarification on the formation of audit teams and other procedural details of the exercise.

The Third Training

The third training was conducted in Gujarat in February 2024. The state has 33,568 schools spread across 250 blocks. A total of 7,078 schools were selected for social audit in the first phase, i.e., for the financial year 2023–24. Seventy-four participants, including master trainers from 33 districts and other authorities from the Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute (MGLI), participated in the training.

Gujarat had made extensive preparations for the exercise, including developing modules in Gujarati. Posters were distributed during parent–teacher meetings to sensitise and encourage the cooperation of parents and community members in the social audit process.

A detailed action plan was prepared, outlining the social audit calendar, a list and a timeline of training CSAs and SAFT members, the number and type of schools to undergo auditing in the current financial year, as well as the steps and timeline for data collection and reporting. This action plan was designed to help the team stay on schedule, track activities and ensure the smooth execution of the social audit process.

The Fourth Training

The fourth training was conducted in Goa in February 2024. The state has 797 schools spread across 12 blocks. In the first phase of the social audit, i.e., for the 2023–24 financial year, a total of 160 schools were selected. Thirty-three master trainers, along with CSAs and SAFT members from two districts, participated in the training. While the action plan was easy to develop, there were concerns about organising public hearings.

The Fifth Training

The fifth training was organised in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in March 2024. The union territory's 30 inhabited islands have 306 schools spread across 60 blocks. In the first phase of the social audit exercise, i.e., for the financial year 2023–24, 160 schools were selected. Thirty-three participants, including master trainers, CSAs and SAFT members from three districts, attended the training at Port Blair.

During the training, a master trainer highlighted the challenges of travelling between islands, as they are located far apart. She said that ferry rides, the only mode of transport, are available only until 3.00 pm. This concern underscored a significant role of geographical attributes in determining the execution of a social audit. Besides, it has further implications in terms of time and increased expenditure for data collection.

The Sixth Training

The sixth training session was conducted in Karnataka in April 2024. Of the 46,750 schools spread across 237 blocks, 9,796 were selected for the social audit in the first phase, i.e., for the 2024–25 financial year.

Thirty-nine master trainers from 31 districts participated in the training. With prior experience in conducting social audits for MGNREGA, the master trainers were quick to raise questions regarding public hearing. They inquired whether the public hearing in the social audit of Samagra Shiksha is same as the Gram Sabha in MGNREGA and how the data would be collated after the public hearing. Similar to Odisha, master trainers in Karnataka also were keen to explore the possibility of online reporting of data.

The Seventh Training

The hilly state of Meghalaya was the seventh stop in the training itinerary in May 2024. It has 3,540 schools spread across 46 blocks. In the first phase of social audit, i.e., for the

financial year 2024–25, a total of 708 schools were proposed for assessment.

Seventy-one master trainers from 12 districts, including CSAs and SAFT members, participated in the training held in Shillong. They showed a keen interest in Lok Vidya and sought a detailed explanation of the tools.

The Eighth Training

The eighth training session was conducted in Uttar Pradesh, one of India's most populous states in terms of both area and population, in August 2024. The state presents a vast educational landscape, with approximately 50 million school-going children (in the age group of 5–18 years)—a number exceeding the total population of Spain. To put this into perspective, the number of school-going children in Uttar Pradesh alone is comparable to the entire population of South Korea (51 million) and greater than all of Australia (26 million).

The scale of educational infrastructure required to serve this population is immense, with the state needing more schools than many continents have in total. Providing quality education to such a vast number of young learners is equivalent to managing the entire school systems of medium-sized nations simultaneously.

Uttar Pradesh has a total of 133,601 schools spread across 886 blocks. In the first cycle of the social audit, i.e., for the financial year 2024–25, a total of 26,720 schools were proposed for assessment. A total of 150 master trainers from 75 districts were trained in two batches at the State Institute of Rural Development, Lucknow.

The master trainers came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and were unfamiliar with many educational terminologies. During the training, key discussions focussed on school counsellors, and what their roles are. the functions of a school management committee, What is meant by inclusion, and terms like CWSN (Children with Special Needs), etc.

The compact geography and high population density of Uttar Pradesh posed a unique challenge—the sheer density of schools and the complexity of urban education systems raised concerns about community engagement. In areas where parents work long hours, taking time off to participate on the social audit process was difficult and seen as a significant hurdle.

Another concern among master trainers was the challenge of convincing village elders about the importance of social audits. A common apprehension was that community members might perceive them as outsiders coming to evaluate and judge them.

The Ninth Training

The ninth training was conducted in Rajasthan, one of the largest states in India in terms of area, in August 2024. The state has 70,961 schools spread across 302 blocks. In the first cycle of the social audit, i.e., for the financial year 2024–25, 14,192 schools were proposed for assessment, accounting for 20% of the total schools.

The training took place in the auditorium of Dr Radha Krishnan Shiksha Sankul, Jaipur. Sixty-three master trainers from 50 districts attended the programme. These trainers had prior experience in conducting social audits under MGNREGA. The challenges in the state were as vast as its desert landscape. Due to the geographical spread of schools, some audit team members had to travel extensively, covering long distances to reach remote schools.

A local teacher remarked, “Madam ji, the distance between schools is measured not in kilometres but in the number of sand dunes one must cross.” This statement underlined how challenges in data collection vary across States and UTs, necessitating different levels of preparation and own flexible action plans tailored to local conditions.

The Tenth Training

Mizoram was the tenth state to receive training in August 2024. Reaching the destination

at the Mizoram Central University required navigating through heavy rains, crossing landslide-affected areas and dealing with traffic congestion.

The state has 2,580 schools spread across 13 districts and 26 blocks. A total of 841 schools were proposed for social audit in the first cycle, i.e., financial year 2024–25. Twenty-five scholars and faculty members of the Department of Education participated as master trainers.

During the programme, the participants raised concerns about the state's uneven population density. Some districts have significantly lower populations, with as few as 300 people in certain remote and isolated hill areas. This poses a challenge in forming SAFT at the school level. Additionally, it is tough for SAFT members to commute across districts, given the challenging geography, frequent landslides and incessant rains.

An official emphasised a critical issue, stating, "Policies or programmes usually fail in regions like ours, as they are designed keeping the mainstream regions in mind. Since one size does not fit all, it is essential to bring attention to the issues that states at the periphery like ours face to make social audit a democratic, equitable, transparent and inclusive process. Some changes are needed according to their requirements, keeping the basic structure of the social auditing process intact. In consonance with the guidelines for social audit, certain elements in the tools need to be customised and translated into Mizo language."

The Eleventh Training

The next state in the training programme was Punjab, marking the eleventh session. The state has 19,128 schools spread across 146 blocks. In the first cycle of the social audit, i.e., for the financial year 2024–25, 3,825 schools were proposed for assessment, accounting for 20% of the total schools. Twenty-seven master trainers were invited to participate in the training.

Along with the usual discussions on various terms used in the documents and

the classification of implementation steps, specific concerns were raised during the sessions. Key questions included how to ensure the implementation of safety and security guidelines by schools and how to validate the information in the institutional questionnaires filled by head teachers and principals.

A journey through 11 destinations has provided a wealth of experiences, revealing distinct narratives from training sessions across different States and UTs. Each State and UT presents unique challenges and concerns related to the social audit of the Samagra Shiksha scheme.

At the same time, multiple resources are available to address these challenges. One key takeaway is the need for flexible, individualised action plans to ensure the smooth execution of the social audit process. Several methodological insights derived from the narrative analysis of training experiences are outlined as follows.

Methodological Insights

Several key patterns emerged from these experiences, which may be useful in conducting the social audit exercise in other states and in the second phase for the States and UTs where it has already been conducted.

Cultural Sensitivity in Training

- Each state required a unique approach to training delivery. Master trainers should not hesitate to adopt flexible strategies while preparing action plan
- Local language and contexts played a crucial role in effectiveness and should be taken into account.

Resource Management Challenges

- Variable allocation of funds across states: Difficult terrains need more funds to facilitate the entire exercise.
- Different interpretations of CSAs and SAFT formation guidelines: Master trainers had varying understandings of

these guidelines during training, leading to information loss in the cascade model.

Data Collection Innovations

- Translating tools into regional languages before administering them
- Integrating traditional and digital methods as and when needed
- Considering geographical diversities while preparing action plans

The Transformation

As the journey progressed, a remarkable transformation was witnessed in the way master trainers approached their roles. What initially started as a government directive evolved into a movement for educational accountability. The social audit was no longer merely a monitoring tool. It became a bridge connecting communities and schools to enhance quality, identify loopholes and devise local solutions wherever possible.

Critical Analysis and Recommendations

The experiences highlighted several systemic challenges that need to be addressed, including the following.

Standardisation versus Localization

- Striking a balance between uniform standards and local needs requires deeper understanding and involvement.
- Developing flexible yet consistent assessment tools is essential, considering the diverse educational landscape, varying school environments and regional aspirations.
- Enhancing proficiency in data handling is crucial due to the large volume of data generated

Capacity-Building Infrastructure

- Establishing a continuous support system is necessary, with training scaled

up and repeated for teams in the next cycle too.

- Developing local resource persons is essential to provide guidance in addressing challenges related to training, data collection, submission and report preparation.
- Continuous mentoring and support must be ensured.

Sustainability Measures

- Creating self-sustaining training models
- Building long-term community engagement mechanisms
- Promoting community awareness and participation

The Way Forward: Individualised Action Plans

To address multiple challenges arising from the rich diversity of our country's educational landscape during the execution of social audit process, each State and UT has been advised to develop an individualised action plan. Several states, including Odisha, Gujarat and Goa, have formulated detailed action plans, consisting of a social audit calendar, a list of CSAs and SAFT, a training timeline for CSAs and SAFT members, the number and type of schools undergoing social audit in the current financial year, and the steps and timeline for data collection and reporting. These action plans would facilitate the States and UTs to keep a track of the time, activities and tasks to ensure the smooth execution of social audits. Best practices, such as awareness initiatives, sensitisation efforts, time-based task calendars and the prior translation of tools into local languages, can be time-saving and beneficial for others.

Conclusion

Research studies suggest that social audits have been effective tools for the smooth implementation of various programmes or schemes, as they help identify and understand the grass-roots problems,

as well as provide solutions [Kumar and Madheswaran (2019); Tambe, et al. (2016); Gopal and Singh (2021), and Sinha (2022)]. Social audits conducted in schools across Columbia, Guatemala, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania have played a crucial role in addressing discrepancies, improving school facilities, reducing teacher absenteeism, balancing student-teacher ratios, fostering parent and community engagement in school management, and empowering communities to meet their educational needs, ultimately enhancing the quality of educational services (UNICEF, 2016). Social audits serve as valuable tools for assessing an organisation's social impact and ethical practices, ensuring accountability and transparency, demonstrating commitment to social responsibility and providing documented evidence of social and ethical performance in various schemes.

To enhance the implementation and awareness of Samagra Shiksha, the Government of India launched a social audit of the scheme in 2021. To ensure an equitable, democratic, transparent and accountable social audit process, it is important that

stakeholders understand the nuances of Samagra Shiksha, social audits and the broader education system. To achieve this, it was imperative to form a robust team of master trainers and social auditors across State and UTs. As part of this initiative, NCERT developed three modules based on which capacity-building programmes for master trainers were organised in 11 States and UTs from October 2023 to October 2024. Experiences across India's educational landscape have demonstrated that the successful implementation of social audits requires more than just guidelines and training sessions. A deep understanding of local contexts, cultural sensitivities, community dynamics and resource management is essential. Additionally, audits should be scheduled to avoid coinciding with festivals, harvest or examination periods. To address these challenges and facilitate the smooth execution of social audits, states and union territories must prepare individualised action plans. Training programmes have shown that when these elements align, social audits can become powerful tools for educational transformation.

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