

RTI Campaign in U.P. and Bihar

Prior to RTI Act

- The efforts by Asha Parivar to obtain information from the government started in 2002. The information was obtained using a provision in the Panchayati Raj law.
- Asked for ration card list, expenditure details of gram sabha; nothing could be done if the information not given. Pressure on DM improved PDS and expenditure in Hardoi

First Year of RTI Act

- Lack of awareness of the people and also lack of mechanisms and infrastructure required on the part of the government to deal with acceptance of RTI applications.
- The act explicitly required that a board be put up within 120 days of being passed and a list of PIOs (Public Information Officer) be made available. However, this was not followed at most places.
- No proper procedure at most places to collect the fee of Rs. 10.

Current Activities: 2007 - 08

- Currently the focus of filing RTI applications with the aid of RTI activists is at the block level.
- Three stage approach encompassed all the departments and is very successful
- 1) Awareness camps through out the city to make public aware of their right to information
- 2) Mobile camps for appointment of PIOs in all departments
- 3) Regular camps at each government department since now public is coming to file applications regularly.

'Felt Need' of RTI Act

- 50% of applications social need, 50% individual
- Cities: Ration, insurance, government jobs, construction and use of public property, roads and cleaning, passport, driving license, voter cards
- Blocks, Dehat and villages: pensions and scholarships, NREGA muster rolls and job cards, employment, MLA/MP funds, infrastructure such as roads, PHC, government school; mid-day meal, BPL cards, PDS operation, schemes such as Indira Awas Yojna

RTI Volunteers in following districts were supported by AID in 2007 @3000/- including travel /telephone etc. Many of these 'RTI fellows' work closely with the ongoing Asha supported campaign coordinators in their district.

Hardoi:

- Sajeevan Lal , RamBharose , Jitendra Dixit, BhagwanDeen , Gaya Deen , Ashok Bharti, Yashwant Rao , Ganga Sagar Aasthi , Yashant Rao and Ganga Sagar

Kushinagar/Deoria:

- Janardan Singh
- Ramesh Kumar
- Mahendra Singh Yadav

Chandauli:

- Ram Awadh
- Jai Prakash
- Hausila Prasad

Muradabad:

- Raj Pal Singh
- Shabana

Varanasi

- Ajay Patel

Sitapur

- Surbala

Kanpur

- 1. William Paul
- Abdul Kalam

RTI Awareness and Applications Related Activities in 2007

- Camps are being held by volunteers regularly to increase awareness and train people in how to file RTI applications. These have been very successful and see very large attendance.
- RTI Office for regular RTI applications help
- Pamphlets with names and phone numbers of around 70 volunteers have been widely distributed. Around 200,000 pamphlets have been distributed to date.
- People call them in case they have questions about RTI applications. Each volunteer receives around 8 to 10 calls per day.

Approach

Three stage approach encompassed all the government departments and is very successful

- 1) Awareness camps through out the city/block to help public become aware of their right to information
- 2) Mobile camps for appointment of PIOs in all departments ; Pressure in departments by activists and by media
- 3) Regular camps at each government department since now public is coming to file applications regularly.

RTI Camps in Varanasi



- Regular camp at District court every Thursday since July 2006. Regular distribution of hundreds of thousands of flyers have resulted in heavy attendance at the regular camps.
- In Benaras, for last 48 weeks around 22 applications per week have been filed. Camps are being regularly held there. Typically at least 20 applications are filed on a day during a camp.
- 1670 RTI applications filed and first appeal filed in more than 1000 cases. Appeal to CIC in more than 600 cases
- 75 officials fined for not responding to RTI applications or for providing incomplete information. Even though the CIC has failed in collecting the financial penalty the PIOs are certainly feeling the pressure.
- Additional 2 - 5 day camps at all 8 block offices
- 15 training programs at various localities to train the associations and activists to run their own regular camps
- Many training camps on RTI held at Asha center at Kaithi

Success stories from RTI Campaign in Kanpur



- - Driving licenses used to cost Rs 400 at Kanpur Development Authority (KDA). Since Mahesh's team filed an RTI application, the cost now is Rs 60. Thousands of people took benefit with in days of this change
- The names of activists like Mahesh who can be contacted in case action has not been taken on the RTI application are also published regularly in newspapers (as news and not advertisement).
- Exposed corruption of crores of rupees in KDA, Electricity, transport and health departments.
- Centrally located office of the campaign is open everyday.

RTI Camps in Bihar

- Actively working on awareness of RTI act in 5 districts
- Regular camps in all five districts
- PIOs appointed after pressure from activists
- Some activists are being trapped in fraudulent court cases and others are badly mistreated
- 200 cases of corruption in Indira Awas Yojna
- Mahendra and other activists working full time

Impact of RTI Awareness Campaign and Camps

Primary results of the current campaign:

- Many departments have appointed PIO
- General public has become aware of the RTI act and its potential
- RTI applications are now accepted
- After immense pressure from the public, some departments now accept the RTI fee in cash
- With many cases of corruption becoming evident, the bureaucracy is now active and watchful
- Files previously announced as missing have emerged from the dusty cabinets
- Enforcement of the RTI act in almost all districts where these activists are working ending the corrupt practices of hundreds of years.
- Ongoing effort is to make the administration completely transparent.

Fake Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards issued by a Pradhan in conjunction with the owner of the PDS shop. An instance of the same road being built 13 times was uncovered! Now that people are aware of the bungling, they would be able to question the candidates on this during the next gram panchayat elections.

Challenges

- In different districts a group of colleagues are associated in this campaign full time but some of them are not getting any help and are facing problem of livelihood. This is reducing their confidence. Since regular help is not available for workshops, training, wall writing, discourses, etc. expected results are not available. Sufficient material like pamphlets, books etc are not available due to lack of resources which is naturally affecting the publicity.

Profile of Impact of Rights Campaign in one District:

The Right to Information Campaign in Hardoi District Serves a Major Blow to Corruption

by Anirban Hazra and Sirish Agarwal

The Right to Information (RTI) Act implemented in 2005 has ushered in fantastic new possibilities of ensuring transparency and accountability in governance in India. This act empowers citizens to ask administrators and government officials for accounts of allocations and expenditure, and thus bring any irregularities to the forefront. For the first time after independence, common citizens feel that they can play a part in government other than the once in five year ritual of casting ones vote.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), also implemented in 2005 guarantees hundred days of work at the minimum wage to one member of every rural family. Furthermore, to ensure transparency, there is a provision of social audit in this act, whereby citizens can examine accounts and audit them at a public meeting.

It is commendable that the government in consultation with several people's groups has taken an effort to make these Acts people-friendly. However the government has not done enough to create awareness about them and ensure their implementation. Public information officers who are responsible for providing information have sometimes not been appointed and defaulting officers have largely not been penalized. People applying for work under NREGA have often not received it. It is thus necessary for intervention of people's groups to create awareness and make sure that these acts are used by people and the menace of corruption be eradicated from society.

The RTI campaign in Hardoi district of Uttar Pradesh has produced some remarkable results in 2007. This article reports on some of these, focusing in particular on the results in Sandila block. The campaign was carried out by seven 'RTI fellows' supported by Association of India's Development Gayadeen, Bhagwandeem, Rambharose, Jiten Dikshit, Munnalal Shukla, Jagdish Verma and Ashok Bharti under the leadership of four senior RTI activists in the region supported by Asha for Education - Neelkamal, Ramsagar Verma, Rambabu and Srinivas. In addition, several local activists volunteered their time and provided cash or in-kind resources.

Social audit was conducted in 40 Gram Panchayats of Sandila block at the end of 2006. It was found that an abysmal 20% eligible people had job cards and received only 20 days of work per year. Since then efforts to ensure implementation of NREGA was carried out in 57 Gram Panchayats which involved about 5,000 eligible workers.

Throughout 2007, RTI activists obtained lists of people who were issued job cards from the block office and went with these to the villages and had meetings with the villagers. They informed villagers that it was their right to get these cards without any payment. Typically the village pradhan would hold these job cards and give them to the villagers for a bribe. The activists also obtained muster roll accounts from the block office which shows how much payment has been given to a worker and publicized this information in

the villages.

The results of the activists efforts have been unprecedented. The implementation of issuing job cards has been 100%. Anyone who applies for a job card is able to get one now without paying any bribe for it. 80% of people are getting at least 50 days of work. About 40% are getting close to 70 days of work in a year. The reason why these figures are not still higher is mainly due to the individual – some are not interested and others have not applied. Those who worked received the full payment which was Rs.100 per day in 2007. There was no reduction in payment because of excuses which had been used in the past. Moreover, as per the requirements in the NREGA, muster rolls, sheds, water and medicines were available at every work location.

A back of the envelope calculation with 80% of 5,000 workers each receiving Rs.100 a day for 50 days shows that Rs.2,00,00,000 (Rs 2 crores) were disbursed to the proper recipients because of this effort.

The NREGA work cannot be viewed in isolation. Immense public pressure has been created on the administration with simultaneous campaigns for civil rights, improvement of the PDS scheme, intervention in government schools for midday meals and teacher attendance, and better service delivery in public health clinics. Additionally, weekly RTI camps are held in three blocks of Hardoi district at the block offices. These efforts will hopefully make Hardoi totally corruption free in the near future and set an example for the rest of the state and the country.

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