

One India One People, 01 Jun 2008

“To get information is the fundamental right of every citizen”



A firebrand activist Shailesh Gandhi gave up his successful business to take up social cause. He has been very actively pursuing the cause of Right to Information (RTI) and trying to create awareness about the potential of the Act among the masses. He spoke to Manas Shrivastava about the status of the RTI Act in India and what it holds for the future.

Can you briefly tell us about yourself and also when and why did you decide to take up RTI as a cause?

I am an engineer from IIT. I was running a successful business of my own. About 10-15 years ago, I felt that I must do something socially relevant. I realised that there is so much corruption in the country and so many wrong things happening. We cannot blame anybody else except ourselves for all these wrongs. Therefore, we only have to correct it, nobody is going to do it for us. As it was difficult to pursue a social cause along with my profession, I sold my business. As I began utilising RTI, I realised its potential to bring changes in the system.

It has been nearly two and half years since the implementation of RTI Act. What has been its impact?

Though the impact is there, it will still take nearly four to five years for the Act to become widespread and its impact to be more visible. As of now, the awareness is more in educated and elite class and in urban areas. The effect of the Act is visible in villages also but it is comparatively much less than in cities. In Maharashtra alone, last year, 1.5 lakh applications were filed and now, about 12,000 applications are filed every month, which shows that awareness is building up. The figures are over one lakh RTI applications in 2006 and over three lakhs in 2007.

How are common people utilising the Act? Can you give a few recent examples where it has been successfully used?

People are using it in their everyday life. Suppose if they apply for ration card and do not get a reply in a

reasonable amount of time, they can file an RTI application demanding to know the progress on their application and they will definitely get a quick reply. One of my friends had applied to the Income Tax Department for refund but didn't get any reply for sometime. He filed an RTI application and got refund quickly. Similarly, a senior citizen was not getting the revised pension. On my suggestion he filed an RTI application and got his revised pension within four to five weeks. There are many such instances where common people have benefited by the Act.

There are many citizens who are still not aware about RTI. Can you share with them as to how and on what occasions can an RTI application be filed?

Since all the money that goes to the government belongs to the citizens, they own the government. Therefore, to get information is the fundamental right of every citizen. Nobody can question you as to why you need the information. If you ask for information they have to give it to you. Now the question is who will give information? The public authorities are supposed to give information. As per the RTI Act, all public authorities and administrative offices will have to appoint public information officers who are supposed to provide information to the citizens. The citizen just needs to identify the public authority from whom he needs information and write to the public information officers at any of the administrative offices. Within 30 days the public information officer has to give him the information. According to the Act, no forms are required. At the most there can be a format which can be followed to seek information. The

