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Right or not, info still hard to come by

Late And Incomplete Answers Discourage People: Activists

Avijit Ghosh | TNN

New Delhi: Last September, retired government employee H B Agarwal submitted an application in Lucknow's public works department seeking information under the RTI Act. Since then, he has been regularly visiting the State Information Commission (SIC) seeking details of the expenditure incurred in the construction of a 1-km road in the Bakshi Ka Talab area. After eight months, he filed a complaint, too, but to no avail.

In Bihar, social activist Shiv Prakash Rai was made to languish in jail for a month when he asked for the details of schemes being executed under the Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana in Buxar. He was released only after a representation was made to CM Nitish Kumar.

In Chennai, Samuel C Wilson, a central excise department superintendent, has been running from pillar to post for several years trying to expose a foreign exchange scam through RTI. The matter is now pending before the Madras HC.

Few, if any, would dispute that the RTI Act is one of the most people-friendly legisla-



Delhi babu fined Rs 25k for delay

The Central Information Commission (CIC) has imposed a penalty of Rs 25,000 on a Delhi government official who failed to furnish information to an RTI applicant on time.

The commission found no substance in the official's defence that the delay was caused due to excessive workload. "In this case, the delay is undisputed and the cause as shown for the same cannot be deemed reasonable," information commissioner Wajahat Habibullah said.

The order came on an appeal filed by Anil Sood who was denied information by a revenue department official. AGENCIES

tions ever. But it is true that more than three years after Parliament passed the act, the road to accessing information remains arduous. From huge delays to receiving incomplete answers to difficulties in filing appeals—the information-seeker is discouraged at every step. “Those who appeal face the additional hurdle of having to travel long distance, waiting for hours during hearings and putting up with rescheduled hearings,” says Raaj Mangal Prasad of Pratidhi, an NGO that deals with RTI cases. In states like UP, there are often 6-8 hearings before a case is decided.

According to Noida-based RTI activist Lokesh Batra, awareness about the act still remains low, especially among the disadvantaged sections. Besides, many public authorities are yet to designate public information officers (PIO). “The Centre has made Rs 10 as RTI application fee. But some states charge higher rates. For instance, Haryana charges Rs 50,” he says. A survey conducted by a group of activists in UP shows that at least 300 RTI pleas are filed every day and the average time to dispose of an application in 80% cases is around six months. The survey also says that the SIC functions more as a subordinate to the government rather than an independent body.

Senior RTI officials acknowledge the problems. Ben-

gal’s chief information commissioner Arun Bhattacharya admits that the state has not been able to create awareness about the act. “It is pathetic in the rural areas.” He also points out that often records are not kept properly in government offices, so some questions cannot be answered. The act “has become more of a grievance cell for IPS, IAS and WBCS officers” who inquire about “...things that benefit them professionally”, he said.

UP information commissioner Gyanendra Sharma said the SIC suffers from a severe staff crunch that delays work. In Assam, the state information commission does not have even five commissioners, the minimum stipulated by the law. Bihar SIC spokesperson Rambadan Baruah admitted some officials are hesitant in sharing information. “The situation has improved after PIOs were posted in each department.”

How to make things better? Bengal’s RTI chief Bhattacharya says he has asked the state government to conduct campaign in rural areas, through multimedia and kiosks. Noida activist Batra suggests that information on the RTI should be included in the school syllabi.

(Inputs from Swati Sengupta in Kolkata, Shailvee Sharda in Lucknow, Faizan Ahmad in Patna, Jayaraj Sivan in Chennai and Swakkhyar Deka in Guwahati)