

The Times of India, Mumbai, 10 Dec 2007

## Check the Babus

### RTI social audits expose misuse of public funds

It seems the babus can't keep their hands even off funds meant for victims of war and natural calamities. Documents obtained by a Ludhiana-based NGO under the Right to Information Act reveal that bureaucrats heading local branches of the Indian Red Cross Society diverted money collected for Kargil war relief and rehabilitation of tsunami and cyclone victims to pay hotel bills among other things. Such misuse of funds by senior public officials betrays the trust people have in charities. However, there is a lesson in this episode that holds hope for the future.

The expose was the result of a judicious application of the RTI Act by an NGO. As we have said in these columns, the RTI Act is an effective tool that is at the disposal of the civil society to bring accountability and transparency in the conduct of public affairs. If backed by public action, the RTI Act could help the civil society to plug the leaks in the system. But is that happening? Yes, even if they are few and far between.

Recently, a social audit in 13 villages in Andhra Pradesh forced contractors and panchayat leaders to return the money stolen from public funds. Similar audits of public works conducted under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in many states including Orissa and Jharkhand have exposed corruption by public officials and panchayat representatives. Such scrutiny has improved the working of the schemes and plugged leakages. People have also realised that they have the right and the means to get state officials to account for their work. The participation of citizens would naturally improve governance.

However, more needs to be done to make the RTI Act truly effective. A legal provision is only as good as the institution that implements it. The role of information commissioners, who preside over the implementation of the RTI Act, is crucial in this respect. The track record of information commissions in states is uneven. One reason for this could be the large presence of former bureaucrats in these bodies. The RTI Act was legislated to tide over red tape in administration. Provisions for penalising erring babus, including fines, were introduced in the Act with this intent. The provision is rarely applied. Judicious but strict application of the penalty provision is necessary if bureaucrats are to take the Act seriously. Perhaps, that will be possible only when the RTI commissions have fewer babus.