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From footpath to the corridors of power

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NEW DELHI, March 12: He lives on the footpath, sells fruits, and can only write his name. Yet, he has the unique distinction of filing hundreds of applications under the Right to Information Act making him a well-known name among senior officials of the Prime Minister's Office, President's house, CVC, home ministry, LG's office and MCD.

In his early thirties and identified only by his nickname 'Chavanni', he is a fruit vendor whose address is listed as a Tehbazari in Sewa Nagar, a slum located between the high profile Lodhi Colony and elite South Extension and CGO complex. In the last two years, he has filed more than 150 RTI applications seeking information on various public schemes. All the RTI replies have been sent

to 'Chavanni' to his footpath address, whether it is from the PMO or the President's house.

Chavanni's RTI mania has made him a mini celebrity among fellow vendors. Talking to **The Statesman**, he said, "RTI is intoxicating and has created in me a sense of worthiness. I have neither attended any workshop on RTI, nor trained by any NGO. It was only through some friends that I heard about RTI and used it."

Interestingly, he gives the credit to his RTI activities to the public authorities. He said, "Harassment of vendors like me is a daily affair and when I file RTI queries it irks public authorities. Whenever they deny me information I become more firm about getting it."

The barely literate Chavanni is helped by some vendors and a government employee who wants to remain anonymous in drafting

RTI IN ACTION



Chavanni

his RTI applications. It is not that his RTI activism has come without a downside; his questioning the

public authorities has landed him in police detention several times. He said, "I have become quite used to threats and police are always upset with me for seeking information under the Act. Officials of other departments ridicule me for my RTI queries. But I have never felt afraid and would continue to use the Act."

Chavanni said it all started when one of his vendor friends who had some knowledge about RTI talked about it. "Curious about the Act I decided to test it by filing an RTI query with MCD regarding rent of vendors to be collected from Sewa Nagar. The RTI reply revealed that every month Rs 5,000 extra was collected from the vendors as rent. The reply also revealed that the security deposit collected from us was in excess by over Rs 12,000," said Chavanni.