NHRC report highlights CHRI's contribution

In its latest annual report (2001-2002), the National Human Rights Commission, India's premier watchdog that takes note of human rights abuses all over the country has highlighted the contribution made by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in the examination of the Freedom of Information Bill, 2000.

The Commission while documenting the efforts made towards the enactment of the Freedom of Information Bill mentions in chapter 5, page 55, that the rights body took suggestions from CHRI and Dr Rajeev Dhawan, Senior Advocate Supreme Court and proposed changes to the title of the Bill from 'The Freedom of Information Bill" to "The Right to Information Bill in order to make the proposed Bill conform to articles 19 (1) (a) and 19 (2) of the constitution. CHRI on its own has been campaigning for a central legislation and has made submissions and power point presentations to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs in 2000.

The report also mentions that the Commission proposed changes to the Preamble of the **B**ill which it felt should have conveyed that the Bill provide a system for access to a right which already exists and that the Bill be examined in the light of Article 19 (1) (a) that which guarantees to every citizen under the right to freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right.

Although the Commission gave its opinion only on the salient features of the **B**ill stating that the consideration of details should be undertaken in the light premises, the rights body also pointed out some notable cases like the SP Gupta vs Union of India and Reliance vs Indian Express that ruled that the right to know is implicit in the freedom of speech and expression as guaranteed in Article (19) (1) (a) of the constitution and that right to know is a basic right which citizens of the free country aspire under Article 21 of the constitution.

The efforts of NHRC and campaign led by other civil rights organizations finally bore fruit when India enacted the Freedom of Information Act in 2002 that is still to be operationalized and nine states (Goa, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Assam, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi) acceded to people's demand for right to information.

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