

For Ration Cards - Everyday is a Saturday

Kalol taluka in Panchmahals district belongs to one of the less developed parts of vibrant Gujarat. Panchmahals is home to fairly large sized communities of adivasis who have not benefitted from the economic development that has made the Patels and the Shahs well known across American and European business houses. Additionally, several hundred of families belonging to the minority community live below the poverty line (BPL). The public distribution system set up by the government is an indispensable means of securing food grains at subsidised prices for these families. However securing a ration card is a herculean task for them unless they are willing to bribe officials or middlemen or both.

The Deputy Mamlatdar at the taluka level is responsible for issuing ration cards of all kinds in rural areas. Printed application forms are available free of charge which people can use to apply for a new ration card, get a duplicate made, have the names of new family members added or that of the deceased deleted or get a card divided if a joint family wishes to have separate cards for its members. One would expect that any citizen would be able to walk into the Deputy Mamlatdar's office and submit an application any time of the day provided he/she has put together copies of all necessary supporting documents.

In Kalol, however, a large computer printed sign pasted prominently on the walls of the Mamlatdar's office warned people to visit the office only on Saturdays for ration card related work. State government offices in Gujarat work on the first and third Saturday every month. The other two Saturdays are holidays. In effect this meant that applicants from more than 60 villages of Kalol taluka had only a window of two days every month to put in their applications for ration cards every month. Even here those who cobbled up money to bribe touts got priority treatment. Those who could not simply had to wait their turn to arrive and if it did not come before closing time, they were simply chased away. They would come back the next working Saturday and go through the process of waiting for a darshan of the Dy. Mamlatdar all over again.

Fed up by this system, Aslambhai, a resident of Kalol decided to find out if the two Saturday limit had any legal basis. He had recently learnt about the Right to Information Act and knew that as a citizen he could ask almost any information from government offices and get it within a deadline for a small fee. Aslambhai drafted an information request asking for the Government Resolution (GR) that said that applications for ration card related matters would be received only on Saturdays. Besides he also requested for all GRs that listed the procedural requirements for ration card related work.

The Mamlatdar is the designated Public Information Officer at the taluka level in Gujarat. When Aslambhai visited his office to submit his RTI application in person, the Mamlatdar refused to even read it let alone accept it. He told Aslambhai that there were no orders for giving information to people at the taluka level. People would get whatever information they wanted from the district level. Aslambhai knew that the Mamlatdar was lying. He also knew that he could send the application by post. He sent his application to the Mamlatdar by Registered Post with Acknowledgement Due (RPAD). Needless to say the application was delivered to the Mamlatdar's office.

Fifteen days later Aslambhai was asked to visit the Dy. Mamlatdar to discuss his information request. Aslambhai refused to meet him as he saw no reason for doing the same. The Dy. Mamlatdar then pressurised Aslambhai's father to advise his son to withdraw that part of the application which inquired about the Saturday limit. He was assured access to all other GRs. He was told that there was no GR requiring them to do ration card related work only on Saturdays. It was only an informal arrangement they had adopted for administrative convenience. If this matter reached his superiors the Dy. Mamlatdar was afraid he might lose his job. Aslambhai stood his ground and refused to concede. He advised the Dy. Mamlatdar to issue a rejection letter if he did not want to give the information as he could then go on appeal or send a complaint to the State Information Commission.

Ultimately, the Dy. Mamlatdar was forced to issue a reply on his letterhead clarifying the matter. Aslambhai was told that there was no GR as such and that Saturdays were fixed for summoning applicants to collect their ration cards. This was done so that applicants would be free from work on Saturdays and would not have to forego a day's wages by visiting the office on a working day. Aslambhai was assured that henceforth they would receive applications for ration card related work on all working days at all working hours.

Believe it or not, Aslambhai and his friends swear that the working of the Dy. Mamlatdar's office has really improved since this little adventure of theirs. People are able to visit the office whenever they wish and submit their applications any time during working hours. Aslambhai believes, the RTI Act has finally changed the power equations for the underprivileged people. They have in their hands a tool for making government offices work according to the law.

{Aslambhai is one of 30 men and women in Panchmahals district, Gujarat trained by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative to use the RTI Act in 2005}