

Report on the Right to Information Campaign in Bihar

April 1999 to December 1999

CHRI's right to information programme was extended to Bihar in April 1999 with a State wide workshop in Patna. At this workshop various follow up activities were decided upon, including holding of small and big meetings and workshops in different parts of the state with different sections of people.

The right to information campaign was at three levels -

- *State - wide workshop held in Patna on the 23 - 24 April 1999*
- *Regional workshop held at Samastipur on 7 - 8 August 1999*
- *Workshops and public meetings at the grassroots on the eve of parliamentary elections from 19 to 23 September 1999*

Patna Workshop (23 - 24 April 1999)

The workshop in Patna was attended by activists from all over the state, media persons, bureaucrats, representatives of youth and women's groups . This workshop was conducted in association with Panchayat Bachao Abhiyan , advocating for panchayat elections which have not been held in the state for twenty years. It was felt by the participants that the problems facing Bihar were no different from the rest of the country, however they had become more complicated due to political and socio- economic conditions prevailing in the state. There was a link between the low development index in the state with the lack of access to information. The people have no rights to make the public servants accountable to them. Public servants, in what is a complete misnomer, only serve themselves and all development programmes for the poor serve as an excuse to siphon away funds.

The right to information would ensure that people would have a right to know about themselves. For example - most of the present ills of Bihar is attributed to land reforms, rather the lack of it. However, the records available on it are few and are unreliable. Therefore any person trying to get information about the functioning of this act in Bihar reaches a dead end.

The participants felt they should be allowed information about issues which directly concern their lives - water, land, forests, population, employment, produce, health and education related matters. Any law on the right to information should ensure the above. It should also be made available to them easily without having to run pillar and post.

This would go a long way in fighting corruption and Bihar would not remain a state of 'scams'. The dissemination of information would involve the panchayats and this would ensure devolution of power and the participation of people in the decision - making and development process.

The Patna workshop generated a lot of enthusiasm and participants from around the state wanted to hold similar workshops at the grass roots among different groups of people. The Samastipur workshop was a fall out of this. It was decided that the workshop in Samastipur would target the youth groups all over North Bihar.

Samastipur (7 - 8 August 1999)

The Samastipur workshop was held in the Rajendra Agriculture University, PUSA in association with Nehru Yuva Sansad. The workshop had active participation from the youth groups all over North and Central Bihar. The workshop was inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor of the University who stressed on the importance of the right to information to the farmers. He provided an insight into how farmers suffered losses because they were unaware of the great deal of research being carried out in agriculture. He reiterated that research which had no application in the fields and which was merely confined to the laboratories was useless. He also illustrated on how he and his team of scientists were doing their best to reach out to the farmers in that area. This was all because there is no culture of information dissemination. People have no access to information which concern their lives.

The participants discussed the importance of the right to information in a democracy and felt that it will be an important tool in the hands of the people to ensure accountability and transparency.

Information is of different levels - International, National and the Local level. However most remain ignorant about all three. This can also be attributed to illiteracy and poverty. Nevertheless, there are ways of giving information to people who cannot read or write. In this context, use of traditional modes of information dissemination was recommended.

It was important for the draft bill on the right to information to take all this into account so that it would become an important law empowering people. The right to information law had to be tailored to the needs of the people in order to be effective. There was a discussion on the role of the media and the right to information. The participants were of the view that media had the responsibility of providing information to people so it should play a proactive role in highlighting issues of public interest. The media was criticised for sensationalising news and often providing unreliable information.

It was important to understand the link between development and the right to information. People access all information from the government with a few exceptions and this process of obtaining information should not be tedious. It was felt by the participants that if people had easy access to information on the development activities being carried out in their area, they would be more vigilant and would keep a check on corruption. The activities of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan in carrying out social audits and '*jansunwais*' or public hearing was discussed.

Social Audit could be carried out if people were mobilized by the local leadership to demand information on the various government schemes in their area. These activities would create an upward pressure on the government to create a system which would ensure a regular flow of information to the public. The role of the youth in mobilising the people was stressed and all the participants promised to go back to their districts and create awareness on the right to information. CHRI received feedback from the participants on various activities which were carried out to raise awareness on the issue. These included several meetings and street plays.

Street Corner meetings with voters in North Bihar (19th to 23rd of September 1999)

The parliamentary elections in September 99 provided an excellent opportunity to make an intervention and to attract the public's attention to the issue of right to information.

Accordingly, CHRI, along with its local partners Panchayat Bachao Abhiyaan and Samudaya, held a series of meetings in North Bihar, tagging them on to election meetings by the candidates themselves in those areas. The issue of right to information was effectively pegged to the issues of decentralisation of power through holding of panchayat and municipal elections and the problem of floods which is a recurring phenomenon likewise recurrently ignored by the government. CHRI and Panchayat Bachao Abhiyaan circulated a handbill on the issues under discussion. (Annexure)

19th September 1999, Patna –

The first public meeting was in Patna at its busiest street corner. The well attended meeting included media persons (a television crew from Zee TV), government officers, civil society actors and an electoral candidate.

The meeting focused solely on the right to information and all the speakers ably linked local issues with the urgent need for the electorate to secure the right to information.

It was an open forum so people were free to express themselves within a time period.

The common theme among everybody who spoke there was the decreasing credibility of the politicians of all hues and the total apathy of the public servants towards the people.

This was compounded by the total unwillingness on the part of government officials to part with any information on any development work. The question raised was- what does the government have to hide in an open democratic polity. Everybody felt it was time we had some power to enforce accountability and transparency. The meeting was attended by the CPI (ML) candidate from Danapur constituency – Mrs .Saroj Choube. She spoke about her electoral agenda and emphasized the need to empower people with access to information. This was followed by a question-answer session with the people present.

20th September, Bettiah –

READ (Rural Education and Development), an organisation working with tribal women had organised this public meeting on the right to information and electoral awareness. They had been conducting awareness campaigns in 22 blocks in East Champaran. This meeting at Bettiah had over 200 tribal women converging from these blocks for the last meeting before elections. The 'lok darbar' began with Bhojpuri songs at 12:30 pm and continued till 4:30 pm. The gathering was dominated by women many of whom had walked as far as 20 kms to attend it. The meeting was chaired by Parmeshwar Bhagat who teaches Hindi in the local high school. One of the issues highlighted was - the decline of the representation of women in the legislative assembly in Bihar. The statistics quoted were – 32 women in 1947 and only 8 women in 1999.

Shipra Jha from CHRI spoke to the gathering about the right to information, raising the following questions –

- a) What did the right to information mean?
- b) What did it mean for them?
- c) What was CHRI doing?
- d) What was happening about RTI in other states and in the rest of Bihar?
- e) What was the importance of RTI on the eve of elections?

It was an interactive session and some women also participated. They shared their experiences with the rest of the gathering about how the women were actually heckling

politicians who never delivered. They insisted on written promises from the candidates so that they could be held accountable. They were not aware that there was a movement on the right to information. However, the subject was not alien to them at all as they all wanted to know what was going on with all the funds which were meant for their roads, schools, health centers etc. They all had been demanding information from their block development officers and also their representatives.

The other issues discussed were –

- a) Urgent need for Panchayat elections
- b) The power of Recall and Negative vote

21st September, Motihari

There was a meeting with local activists who expressed interest in CHRI's work on the right to information.

23rd September, Rosera, Samastipur

In the morning we had a meeting with people who are working towards increasing social consciousness. There were teachers, media people, local politicians and social activists. The discussion concentrated on linking the right to information with local issues especially with elections around the corner.

In the afternoon, we held a public meeting in a dalit village, Mirzapur. It was a good gathering and the attendance of women was high. The meeting was addressed by the local people with whom we had discussions earlier. The earlier discussion helped them link the right to information to local problems and this roused the interest of the people.

Most people are already aware of the need for a regular flow of information from the government and are also demanding it from the government. However, they are not aware of what is going on in other states or the debate at the national level.

Incidents from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh were eye openers for them. It was generally felt that even before a legislated right came into being, they could still come together and pressurise the government to give them information. The need is to make them a part of the larger movement so that there is a mutually beneficial interaction. This could be done by updating them about what was going on in other blocks, districts and states. Local people are to be entrusted with the responsibility of mobilising the public to take these initiatives and maintain links.

Shipra Jha