

## Inaccessible Government Offices – WHY?

*Sumit Kumar*

Running to get ones' job done and that too in a high profile government office is a task which would make the ordinary citizen think twice before wanting to access the system again. Even running for a marathon would be easy enough than to make an entry to a Governor's office and that too to file an application under the Right to Information Act 2005. No, I am not even being remotely sarcastic. During the last ten months that I have been living in Chhattisgarh<sup>1</sup>, which I now call home, I have witnessed that in government offices, regardless of what issue they handle, the people are made to go through a typical grind that would even put the Soup Nazi<sup>2</sup> protocol to shame.

Here is the account of what I had to go through to file a simple application under the Right To Information (RTI) at the Governor's office. All we wanted to know under the application was when did the President give his assent to the Chhattisgarh Special Security Act 2005? We first tried to enter the imposing gates, a task in itself. The guard first asked us to register our names, address and our father's name. After completing the formalities he enquired about the purpose of our visit. On hearing that we wanted to meet the 'Public Information Officer' at the Governor's office, he was completely mystified and said that there was no such officer there. However, we insisted he called up the office inside which informed him that the Under Secretary was the designated Public Information Officer (PIO). To add to the confusion, the guard was clueless about the PIO's extension number and when he got the right number no one picked up the phone for the next 20 minutes. We had already spent 40 minutes outside Raj Bhawan by that time. Finally, the personal assistant to the Under Secretary picked up the phone and after inquiring about the purpose of our visit informed the guard that he would get back to him soon. There was no call for another 20 minutes. At this point I actually wondered how the less fortunate people who did not have any educational support or belong to a powerful organization would get through?

Exactly an hour later we found ourselves facing the lush greenery of His Excellency's campus. We made our way to the office of the Under Secretary. But fate had it otherwise. We were seated to sit in one corner of a long narrow corridor that led to the grand kitchen of the Governor's office. We kept sitting there for another 15 minutes almost unable to bear the smell of ambrosial *Pakodas*<sup>3</sup> and sumptuous coffee and not a soul in sight. Finally, restlessness got the better of me. I walked up to locate the personal assistant to the Under Secretary but he was not at his seat. On enquiring about the whereabouts of the Under Secretary, one of the office clerks said that Sahib was not in his office and walked away. By now exhaustion had set in and the comment actually made me speechless. It had taken me one and a half hours to get inside the office and only to be told that the Under Secretary was not there. We made our way upstairs to locate the personal assistant to the Under Secretary only to find that he was busy writing some marriage invitation. We informed him that we wanted to file an application under the RTI. Without even looking up he asked us about the application. We mentioned that we represented an International Human Rights Organization. He stopped all tasks on hand and stared at us with all the concern and attention. He quickly got up taking our application in hand and asked us to take a seat. Within the next ten minutes he was back only to inform us that the Under Secretary was available to see

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<sup>1</sup> A state in Central India.

<sup>2</sup> Soup Nazi was a fictional character portrayed by Larry Thomas in the sitcom *Seinfeld*.

<sup>3</sup> An Indian Snack

us. I was in for another shock as only sometime back we were told that he was not in office. Finally, we met the Under Secretary. After listening to our concern he answered that the Governor's office was not the right place for the information that we wanted. The Under Secretary clarified that this issue was related to the Home Department. When we pitched in saying that under section 6 of the RTI Act, the PIO is authorized to forward the application to the concerned department he confronted us asking if we thought that the Governor's office was a post-office. He calmed down quickly and understood that we were quite confident of our knowledge of the law. He mellowed down and said that he was ready to take the application and forward it to the Home Department but the entire process would take a lot of time. So, rather than testing the government's efficiency on this issue we strategically decided to file the application with the Home Department as the information required was too important to be given for an empirical testing. After a bit of small talk with the Under Secretary we left the office. Tracing our way back to the main gate we met a cycle-rickshaw puller who was lamenting that once a person goes inside those formidable gates it takes them an hour and a half and all that time he has to wait in the heat to earn his fifteen rupees.

At this point after waiting for two hours several questions triggered my mind? Will progressive Acts like RTI facilitate transparency and accountability if PIO's and government offices at large remain an island? Are high profile government-offices averse to their citizens visiting them because they are inefficient and webbed up in bureaucratic processes? Or is it that people like me make even the most efficient staff irresponsive and that it was just an unlucky day when nothing worked? With these thoughts I left the Governor's premise.

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