

Update on RTI in Meghalaya – February 2006

Angela Rangad

The State government of Meghalaya has attempted to put in place mechanisms for implementation of the Right to Information Act 2005. All government departments. have appointed PIOs and APIOs. Lists of these are available on the state web site. With regard to suo moto declarations, most departments have provided substantial information that is also available on the web site, but the information provided is not complete. A one man state Information Commission has been supposedly set up last year, with Mr. G P Wahlang, IAS, currently serving as the Commissioner and Secretary Agriculture, as the Chief Information Commissioner.

With regard to rules, the state has decided to adopt the central rules. The Department of Information and Public Relations is the nodal agency in the state for RTI related matters, and they have also set up a help line number for RTI related queries. Our experience of filing questions has been that the PIOs and other officers are helpful and prompt. At the behest of the movement, departments are redirecting questions to the concerned departments on their own and the same is intimated to the person filing the question.

The Meghalaya Right to Information Movement filed two sets of questions on the day the act came into being. One was with regard to the implementation of the Mid Day Meal Scheme in the State and the other on the construction work related to the beautification of a part of the Police Baazar in Shillong city, the declared expenditure of which was a whopping 5 crores! (The movement celebrated the tabling of the amended RTI bill in December 2004 at the site – see pictures attached). Questions related to the Mid Day Meal Scheme, were filed in several departments simultaneously, to enable us to cross check information. The departments were Education, Food & Civil Supplies and C & RD. We found that this strategy is useful in detecting if the departments provide all the information or not. The experience with questioning about the Mid Day Meal was encouraging. We had a public hearing where the Commissioner & Secy. Education also attended together with all her officers. The Teachers union and other Civil Society groups were also present. Post the hearing, public assurances have been made that attention will be given for better implementation and additional resources have been earmarked for the same. We will however have to do a survey in March – April and subsequent months to see if these assurances have been honoured. For this hearing, local newspapers were also instrumental in ensuring its success by providing space to share the findings of the survey that we had conducted and also widely publicizing about the hearing.

We are yet to conduct a hearing about the construction related work of Police Baazar – the findings of which indicate a close nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and contractors who may have links to the underground. We are trying to work out a strategy for the hearing to be effective while also ensuring some level of safety to the persons who were involved in putting forward the questions and analysing the data that was made available. We would like suggestions for this and would be glad if members of the NCPRI can participate in this particular hearing.

Questions have also been filed to the Health Dept, and the response is awaited. People from villages have also filed questions from the very beginning. Some of the questions were with regard to the SSA scheme, Meghalaya AIDS Control Society etc As a movement we are using every platform possible to raise awareness about the Act. We have been doing several radio and TV progs and conducted programmes for NGOs such as North East Network,

Association of Catholic Elders etc. We have also compiled a FAQ about RTI that we have shared with friends across the North East. Together with a representative from the MKSS, a Meghalaya Right To Information Member took part in a meeting of the Bodo Students Union and Assam Students Union to discuss about RTI. Such sharing is also taking place today with Media persons in Guwahati. While the Meghalaya Right To Information Movement is happy that the government has been a little better than the neighbouring governments of Assam (where there has been no attempt to put in place PIOs etc) and Arunachal (where the prescribed fee for obtaining information related to tenders and contracts is Rs. 500!) and while realizing that much of the proactiveness has come as a result of the existence of an RTI movement in the state, there are several concerns.

1. Our greatest concern is the non-assumption of office of the Chief Information Commissioner. While the govt. declared the setting up of the commission, there doesn't seem to be an office and the information commissioner is now refusing to answer queries or talk to the press.
2. Apparently the person is waiting to retire, and earlier informed us that he was waiting for clearance from Delhi for his resignation so he can assume office.
3. We are also concerned of having a one man commission. We have expressed the need of having a minimum of three persons in the commission
4. With regard to Suo moto declaration, we are concerned that information is only available on the internet, which is inaccessible to many. Departments. are also not putting up information on notice boards etc. Moreover, understandably, the govt. is not publicizing the existence of the Act enough.
5. It is difficult to locate PIOs and APIOs – only one dept has clearly put up a sign board indicating where to find the PIO.

Source: Received via the NCPRI Mailing List, 22 February 2006.