

CHRI's Right to Information Workshop in Satna

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, debate on Right to Information and the need for a legislated framework has grown in India. The central law on Right to Information is yet to see the light of the day in the form of an Act. Meanwhile 6 states in the country have passed their own laws on the subject-Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Goa.and Delhi. Madhya Pradesh also attempted to do the same but the effort did not translate into a concrete law. However, executive orders have been passed to fill in the vacuum created by the lack of legislation in this area.

At this juncture there is a great need for a wider awareness and debate on the Right to Information. The RTI team of CHRI has been conducting workshops in various parts to generate more awareness and as part of this ongoing program a workshop was held in Satna on the 24th of June. Our prime focus in the course of this workshop has been to target the media. The media in MP and Chattisgarh has been a part of this movement and without doubt has been a good channel for building wider public awareness. Also, we realise that the media themselves have a great stake in the implementation of this right so that they can function effectively.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the Right to Information workshop at Satna were to:

- a) Discuss the meaning and importance of the Right to Information, its link with other issues like good governance, public participation etc.
- b) Analyse the pending Central legislation, various State laws on the subject, the relevant executive orders and administrative measures.
- c) Share relevant experiences of the civil society groups from within and outside the state.
- d) Facilitate the development process undertaken by other groups within the state and also to encourage formation of bodies to effectively work on the issue.

ISSUES DISCUSSED

Need And Importance

Around 80 participants from various backgrounds attended the workshop, most of them being from the media. After the initial round of introductions Sri Jayant Verma talked about the practical importance of the Right to Information. He said that the government authorities misuse the international funding meant for development with only about 14% of it being used purposefully. Therefore there is an urgent need for a good law on the Right to Information which would promote transparency in the government and help reduce corruption.

Sri Vishambarnath Pandey, ex-MLA (Madhya Pradesh) emphasised that the free flow of information is the lifeblood of democracy. He added that while many were skeptical about the entire system being simply geared to resist the implementation of the right to information, there were still some exceptions like Mr. Harsh Mander who attempted to inquire into the misuse of public funds. He also was of the opinion that the need of the hour was a thorough cleansing of the democratic setup in the country rather than working on an alternative to it.

Law and Right to Information

CHRI's presentation brought out the link between our Right to Information and the provisions in the Constitution which are at the core of this right. The practical importance of the right was further amplified by taking examples of cases like the Bhopal gas leak tragedy. The focus then shifted to the analysis of the Central Bill which is pending. Its strengths, weaknesses and the areas that it had left out were discussed. Lastly the presentation touched upon the issue of the deeply imbedded culture of secrecy in the public administration which needs to be changed.

Sri Jayant Varma talked about Right to Information with a special focus on MP. He gave a detailed background of the emergence of the movement in MP and also spoke of the strengths and weaknesses of the executive orders in MP and Chattisgarh.

The participants had various questions ranging from the working of the act and its implementation to how they could use it in their everyday life. Dr. Harshvardhan Srivastav suggested that the lack of penal provisions in the Act made it a paper tiger. He said it was imperative to introduce the same so as to make this Act truly effective.

CONCLUSION and STRATEGY

After the entire discussion the following important points emerged :

- a) That it is important to generate awareness on this issue and for this a body consisting about 10 people was formed.
- b) This body has also undertaken to print and make available to the people of Satna, the executive orders that have been passed to implement the right to information.
- c) That it would take time for the culture of secrecy to thin down and this could be only done by way of sustained movement only.
- d) That there was an urgent need for an enforceable and practical framework in MP to make the Right to Information a meaningful right.

In the course of the next few months we will follow up the developments in Satna and will be corresponding with the body that was formed so that we can purposefully extend support to the movement there.