

Project Jammu and Kashmir

RTI Fellowship (*Muzaffar Bhat*)

Site: Srinagar

Funding so far (jointly with AID): \$16,800

Years supported: 3

Scope: Empower citizens, prevent corruption with RTI

Email: budgam_social@rediffmail.com

In the summer of 2010, news and images emanating from Jammu and Kashmir told stories of stone-pelting teenagers taking on the police on the streets of Srinagar. One of their key demands was the redressing of human rights abuses including the large number of missing persons in Kashmir. At the same time, one young Kashmiri, Muzaffar Bhat, was battling the security forces administration with Right to Information as the projectile.

In 2005, Muzaffar quit his profession as a dentist to create a Right to Information movement in Jammu and Kashmir. To support his work as a full time RTI activist, IFA with Association of India's Development, began to fund his fellowship in 2008. After establishing the network and mobilizing public opinion to force the State government to enact a progressive Jammu and Kashmir Right to Information Act in 2009, his focus in 2010, has been using the act to address long standing grievances of the Kashmiri people including disappearance of civilians when in police custody. His dogged efforts resulted in the Central Information Commission in ordering the Border Security Forces to disclose information regarding missing persons. Following this success, the J&K RTI movement has been encouraging citizens to use RTI to hold the security forces' administration to account.



Though the State government passed the progressive Act in 2009, it failed to appoint the Information Commission for more than a year. Once again it was J&K RTI movement's relentless pressure that forced the government not only to appoint the Commissioners but also do so in a relatively transparent manner. As a result, unlike its counterparts in other Indian states, J&K's Information Commission has started off with action as well as promise. For one, a couple of government departments in Jammu have been indicted over hiding information against an RTI plea. Secondly the Chief Information Commissioner, G R Sufi has given out a strong message for bureaucrats who tend to hide their incompetence or complicity in scandals by refusing correct information to general public. This significant achievement of the J&K RTI movement bodes well not only for the quest for information but the hope for improved governance.



Not surprisingly, Muzaffar's activism has earned him enemies. Separatist politicians allege he is a stooge of the government, his talk of empowerment distracting attention from their goal of azadi. Powerful mainstream politicians, on the other hand, are out to fix him, he alleges, reeling off a list of FIRs filed against him and other RTI activists. As he puts it, **"We are not pelting stones. All we want is good governance, with transparency. For this we are being harassed by powerful people, cases are being fabricated against us. The question boils down to this: What kind of people do you finally want in the State? My kind of people who believe in democracy, or stone-pelters or militants?"** In the answer to this question lies the value and impact of IFA's intervention.



Whether with community leaders in Leh, general public in Kargil or college girls in Srinagar, Muzaffar's message is the same: "We must fight for good governance".

---Vishal Kudchadkar