

Project Right to Information: West Bengal

Malay Bhattacharya Fellowship

Site: Calcutta

Funding so far: \$8,000

Years supported: 2

Scope: Empower citizens, prevent corruption with RTI

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Malay was given Fellowship in 2009 on the recommendation of Arvind Kejriwal, who had noticed his pioneering work of popularizing the Right to Information Act in the cities and villages of West Bengal.

Malay had realized early on, the power and the potential of an Act like the RTI. The Act essentially made the Government accountable to the people for their actions and for the proper implementation of various schemes. This meant, for instance, if the construction of a highway was authorized, the people who lived in that area could ask the Government for an explanation if the road took an unreasonably long time to build. Or, if the Central funds were allocated for the construction of dams in a village under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the villagers could ask for an accounting of how those funds were spent. The villagers could also ask for complete disclosure of the progress made in the assignment of job cards.



West Bengal has the good fortune of having several community organizations, known as Community Based Organizations (“CBOs”) and Community Service Organizations (“CSOs”). They are made up of educated citizens who want to serve the rural poor. Malay decided to partner with these organizations to help him in his chosen mission of raising public awareness of the Right to Information Act.

Malay popularizes the RTI Act in three ways: -

1. Organizing Workshops: These workshops are attended by students, Government officials who wish to learn more about their obligations under the RTI Act, CBO/CSO volunteers and other volunteers called RTI “Bandhus” or Friends. These volunteers are given detailed training in the intent and purpose of the law, the provisions of the law, and procedural tips – how to apply for information from the Government, what to do if Government does not cooperate. The volunteers are also trained in publicity methods that would achieve greater awareness of the RTI Act among the people.

The RTI Training workshops have resulted in volunteers filling out applications and helping others to fill out RTI applications. They visit Governmental agencies and departments to ensure that these agencies follow the Act’s requirements for proactive disclosure of information by the Government. They also conduct their own training workshops to pass on to others what they have learnt about the RTI Act.

2. Organizing Rural RTI Camps: These camps are where Malay and his volunteers work directly with rural residents who are experiencing problems in their dealings with local government. Many people attend the camp to get information on their rights to access social security schemes – widow pension, old age pension, benefits under the Integrated Child Development Scheme, NREGA and other schemes that are targeted at the rural poor.



The rural residents explain their situation to RTI Bandhus and other volunteers, who file RTI applications on their behalf. The volunteers keep a copy of the application for their subsequent follow-up. The RTI camps try to make themselves a “one-stop shop” where the rural residents can get everything they need to file a valid RTI application – Court Fee stamps, Handbills, books.

Panchayat pradhans, community leaders and schoolteachers are also invited to join the RTI camps. For some days prior to the camp, handbills are distributed in the village, and microphones are used to announce the holding of a RTI camp, so that the maximum numbers of people are made aware.

3. Organizing Street Theatre: Known as “Nukkad Natak” or street theatre, Malay and his RTI volunteers present skits and dramas on the process of filing RTI applications and as to what happens when the process works successfully.

Malay’s Accomplishments for 2010

In the third quarter of 2010 alone, Malay organized 5 RTI training workshops in the villages of Sattore, Bahiri, Albandha, Sianmuluk and Ruppur. The average attendance at these workshops was 98; in total, 491 people were trained in the details and procedures of the RTI Act. An RTI camp would follow training workshop the very next day. The average attendance at these camps was 136; a total of 680 rural people were served. In the last quarter, one Workshop was conducted in Kankalita with 98 participants and one Camp, in Kasba, with 70 participants.



-- Jaidev Chandavarkar

Conserving Rivers and Culture

Fellowship: Diwan Singh

Site: Delhi

Funding so far: \$17,200

Years supported: 4

Scope: Protection and Conservation of natural resources, Promotion of RTI, rural local self-governance

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Protection and conservation of natural resources has become increasingly critical given the crisis in water supply and global warming. For several years, Diwan Singh has been engaged in important environmental battles such as preservation of the Delhi ridge and more recently of the Yamuna Flood Plains.

Yamuna Satyagraha: Diwan has been the main coordinator of this *satyagrah*, started to stop construction on the Yamuna flood plains. He also organized the scientific community to do research. A study on the value of Flood Plains, authored by Diwan and others, was published in ‘Current Science’. Eventually, the Delhi Lt. Governor declared a permanent moratorium on construction on the Yamuna Flood Plains. They also succeeded in having the state initiate a ‘Preserve and Use’ plan involving several agencies. Rs. 3.6 million was sanctioned. A consultant (WAPCO) has been appointed. Diwan and his colleagues are working closely with them and are monitoring its progress.



Water recharge in Bangalore and Pakistan: Diwan and his colleagues have worked with Pakistani groups to preserve the flood plains of the Ravi and Sutlej rivers. They are preparing a study-cum-proposal to rejuvenate Bangalore’s lakes and to recharge its ground water.

Working with DIAL (Delhi International Airports Ltd): A lot of rainwater goes waste at the Delhi airport. Diwan and other volunteers are working with DIAL to ensure proper harvesting of rainwater.

PIL on Delhi Jal Board (DJB): Extensive investigation revealed that DJB, while failing consistently to meet the existing demands, was approving water supply to various construction projects based on fictitious sources. Diwan is pursuing a PIL against them with Prashant Bhushan, the noted Supreme Court lawyer.

Honor Killings and Khap Panchayats: *Khap Panchayats* are a traditional form of self-governance. They are increasingly asserting their rights, sometime problematically. Diwan did a study and organized a meeting of their representatives with various NGOs led by Madhu Kishwar’s CSDS. Many misgivings were removed. The *Khap* leaders openly condemned the honor killings and promised to work on other issues such as female feticide, water security, Yamuna cleansing, etc. He also arranged a meeting of the Delhi Grameen Samaj with Arvind Kejriwal on the issue of Land acquisition. He conducted a survey of two villages (Pochan Pur and Dhul siras) in South West Delhi to raise the level of awareness among villagers for their rights, especially against land acquisition. Besides these activities, Diwan Singh has worked closely with Arvind Kejriwal on the Anti-corruption front and with Parmod Kumar in support of the homeless and rag pickers in Delhi.