



Report on State Level workshop on Right to Information Act



The successful implementation of any legislation primarily depends on the level of awareness among the common man. In the context of a proactive legislation like RTI Act, citizens need to be aware on how to file applications and utilize the redressal mechanisms provided in the Act. With this intention in mind, Centre for Public Policy Research in association with **Liberal Youth Forum India**, with the support of Friedrich Naumann Foundation organised a State Level workshop on Right to Information Act on November 15th, 2008 at Ashirbhavan, Cochin. There were more than 50 students from colleges across Kerala to take part in the one day workshop.



The workshop was inaugurated by Shri V V Giry, State Information Commissioner at 10 am. He shared his experiences and expertise with the students on Right to Information Act and elaborated on the nuances of the law by citing a number of case studies. He also spoke about the inefficiencies of the RTI training and awareness campaigns conducted by the public authorities because these are basically for the employees and not for the general public. He also pointed out the specific clauses and exemptions under the act. . Ms. Nupur Hasija from Friedrich Naumann Foundation who facilitated the workshop also shared her experience of working with CPPR and LYF India and commended them on the work done so far.

This was followed by a talk by Shri P Rajan, who is an eminent journalist and one of those personalities who take an active interest in this legislation. He shared his experience on filing RTIs to various departments. He hailed RTI as a weapon for better governance, accountability and to get due justice by the common man. He also hailed the Kerala State Information Commission for being very liberal and forward thinking in many of the decisions taken. He made certain observations on the act and its implementation. He said that even now there is no clarity on public information officers in various departments. He also opined that that there is a rigorous need of publicity in the middle class to use RTI. He stressed upon the importance of NGOs and organised movements to use RTI as a tool to fight corruption. He encouraged students to take an active part in the social issues and use RTI as potent tool to get information which is their right.

This session was followed a documentary screening on the RTI Campaign. The documentary DRIVE Against BRIBE by NDTV and NGO Kabir, drove home the point on how effectively RTI can be used to counter corruption and bring about transparency.

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The session after lunch was an introduction to the Liberal Youth Forum India, by Mr. D Dhanuraj. He explained the philosophy of the organisation and how any liberal is welcome to join this forum which acts as a common platform for common issues all over India.

RTI coordinator, Jithin P Varghese took the students through the basics of the Right to Information Act and also helped them to understand the practical applications of the act. This was followed by a 'Question and Answer' session in which the students clarified various doubts regarding the act and its applicability.

The session on RTI was followed by a presentation on Centre for Public Policy Research by Malathy M, Communications Associate, CPPR. She introduced the organisation and explained to the students the various activities undertaken by CPPR and how they could be a part of the organisation in the fields of their interests.

The next segment involved a talk by Advocate D B Binu, who is a well known RTI activist in the state. He shared his recommendations to make RTI more powerful and effective.

- There is no specific time limit for the second appeals, it should be looked into and addressed.
- Government officials should be given proper training on RTI
- Sufficient funds should be given to the lower government officials
- Receipts should be given regarding the applicants
- Revision of time frame
- Hearings at the regional and state level should be made transparent, there should be no secret sitting in the state info commission
- Updation of RTI website on a regular basis
- Accept copy of the ration card of the people of below poverty line as proof for exemption etc.
- Access to information should be made easier
- Section 20 says *may* impose the punishment, it should be changed to *shall*
- Clarify whether Government aided educational institutions come under the RTI act. This is still in dispute.
- Section 19(8) to be enforced much strongly

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- Chief minister office to be brought into the ambit of public information
- RTI Act should be taught as part of high school syllabus.
- RTI discussions in gram sabhas as special programmes
- Assistance to people seeking for information in all states

Advocate Binu also said that it was lamentable that the judiciary still did not appreciate the importance of the Right to Information Act. He shared many anecdotes and interesting experiences which he had encountered as an activist working for the cause of Right to information. After the interactive session, there was a screening of a short film on RTI by the MSW students of Vimala College, Trichur.

The highlight of the workshop was the launch of 'FRIENDS OF RTI', a network of RTI Volunteers across the state who would work for the cause of RTI. ***Friends of Right to Information***, an initiative of Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) will be a network of RTI volunteer's across the state. It would act as a platform for volunteer's interested in campaigning for the cause of RTI. The centre will provide necessary training for interested parties to campaign in their respective working areas and also in rural communities. CPPR intends to bring like minded individuals /organization working on RTI, under this umbrella of Friends of RTI.

