



Indian campaigners gain 'right to know'

India's Right to Information law is bringing about a complete change in relations between the authorities and their subjects. They hope the pursuit of transparency and access to information will prevent any more Bhopal disasters from happening

- Frédéric Bobin
 - [Guardian Weekly](#), Friday 11 December 2009 09.00 GMT
-



A disabled boy plays cricket in Bhopal. Photograph: Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images

He opens a bottle of Australian wine and sinks back into the sofa, just below a poster of Van Gogh's Sunflowers in a Vase. Shekhar Singh is a bearded philosopher with a deep voice and the physique of a wrestler. He receives us with courtesy in the sitting room of his small flat, on the ground floor of a building in a residential neighbourhood in the south of New Delhi.

Singh is something of an emblem and a great help in understanding the current upheaval in Indian society. A retired university teacher, he is a typical committed intellectual, campaigning for a wide range of causes, tirelessly attending forums. He is the kind of awareness-raiser Indian universities excel at producing, to the despair of political and business leaders, driven crazy by hordes of hair-splitters.

It is no exaggeration to say that Singh and his friends have started a historic change in [India](#). The struggle is summed up by a three-letter acronym, dreadful to anyone who still holds a scrap of authority: RTI, as in Right to Information.

A powerful RTI campaign has been sweeping India since 2005 when the eponymous law was passed. It may be a silent revolution, but it is bringing about a complete change in relations between the authorities and their subjects. Any citizen is entitled to access government records on disputed cases and to demand an account. India may fear comparisons with China's economy, but it has a dynamic civil society standing up for its rights, brandishing RTI and other democratic weapons.

The story starts in 1997. That year Singh, Aruna Roy and other like-minded people founded the National Campaign for People's Right to Information. They came from many different backgrounds. Singh himself had been campaigning for the environment for years, defending biodiversity, contesting the Narmada dam project and demanding justice for the victims of the [Bhopal](#) disaster in 1984, which claimed nearly 30,000 lives. "We wanted to prevent any more Bhopals from happening," he recalls. "So we needed access to information. The movement for transparency and the environmental struggle are very closely related." Roy was involved in a Gandhi-style combat, organising peaceful gatherings in the villages of Rajasthan to demand payment of a minimum wage for day-workers. She, too, was hampered by the obscure practices of predatory officials. It was quite an event when Singh and Roy met up, now marching together under the RTI banner. Back in power in 2004, after a long eclipse, Sonia Gandhi's Congress party realised the significance of their movement. In 2005 parliament passed the RTI act, which recognised the right to information – subject to certain reservations related to national security – going so far as to include financial penalties for officials refusing citizens' demands.

In three and a half years, 2m applications have been filed under the act, uncovering many cases of corruption or the embezzlement of public funds. It has recently emerged, for example, that B S Yeddyurappa, Karnataka's chief minister, allegedly spent the equivalent of \$360,000 in public money renovating his home. Bowing to this change in the climate of public opinion, the supreme court judges felt obliged to publish details of their assets. And this all started with a few petty officials.

Singh in person has reaped the benefits of change. "My internet connection wasn't working properly," he says. "I called the appropriate hotline, but they sent me back and forth like a ping-pong ball. So I started an RTI inquiry, asking: 'What steps have been taken to process my claim? Which agents are involved? Why have they not been punished for failing to fulfil their obligations?' Two days later the problem was solved." Surveys reveal a 60% success rate for information requests.

Singh is pleased to discover that RTI beneficiaries do not only belong to the intellectual, urban elite. Country people have accounted for one-fifth of applications and only half the applicants are graduates. Empowerment is on the move: witness a New Delhi peanut vendor who demanded access to the log book of a vehicle allocated to a senior official, suspected of using the car to transport his family.

But many loopholes remain in the law's enforcement. India is handicapped by extreme poverty, with widespread injustice and abuse of power. RTI is nevertheless a landmark achievement, so much so that the government, yielding to pressure from officialdom, is planning to amend the law to reduce its bite. Singh and his friends have found a new cause: fending off changes to RTI.

- *This article originally appeared in the French-language newspaper Le Monde and has been translated for Guardian Weekly.*