

Rti Findings Lead to Violent Threats in Assam



Comments 1



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Akhil Gogoi of Golaghat town in Assam has been a beleaguered man for more than a year now. His life under threat, he has been practically forced to go underground following multiple applications under the RTI Act that would bring to light massive corruption by local officials. He is not alone. Namita Subedi, Sanjit Tanti and many others in Assam have also faced violent threats after they questioned the implementation of various schemes through RTI.

As the Secretary of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), an activist group, Akhil Gogoi filed a number of RTI applications on March 2, 2006, seeking information on the implementation of schemes such as Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Individual Beneficiary Scheme (IBS) and Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) from the concerned departments in Golaghat district. Thereupon, he was targeted by the authorities as a "troublemaker" and beaten up on several occasions. On December 9, 2006, KMSS workers on a cycle rally against the corrupt practices of the local authorities were assaulted, allegedly by Congress goons. Rumours were spread that KMSS was an illegal group and police complaints were filed against Akhil Gogoi and other KMSS members, which led to the arrest of two KMSS members, Mr. Horen Payeng and Mr. Jiten Doley, who were kept in custody for about 3 months.

According to Akhil Gogoi, the concerned departments at first refused to divulge any information under various pretexts. It was only after he approached the state's Chief Information Commissioner in November 2006 that some action was taken, with the Golaghat DRDA divulging the requested information.

Akhil Gogoi's group had conducted a thorough survey to crosscheck the implementation of the schemes by the panchayats, and visited all households in the Gomariguri Block of Golaghat district listed as IAY, IBS and SGRY beneficiaries. Not surprisingly, several irregularities came to light, including forged names listed as beneficiaries of IAY, half completed houses for some, and so on. Beneficiaries under the IBS scheme had not received most of the commodities. In the case of SGRY, road repair, digging of ponds and construction of houses had been done only on paper. The Cheque Release Register (CRR) for IAY, which the DRDA had to release under RTI, revealed malpractices to the tune of Rs. 35 lakhs. On August 7, 2006, cheques worth this amount were released through 12 panchayats for the construction of 140 IAY houses, for which there was no beneficiary list whatsoever. Following local media coverage of a press meet by KMSS in the first week of May this year, a staff person of the DRDA, Tarun Bora was dismissed on May 15, and the construction of 140 houses was finally begun.

The CRR for SGRY also unveiled a Rs 25 lakh scam, whereby stationery material worth that amount was shown to have been bought on August 12, 2006, from a non-existent agency. According to the guidelines, stationery cannot be bought under SGRY. The purported stationery was also nowhere to be found in the SGRY storehouse.

A women's organization, North East Network, (NEN), inspired by RTI crusaders such as Aruna Roy (MKSS), and the CHRI has taken the lead in training people from different organizations in Assam to use the Act

since 2004. Based on information provided by NEN on the RTI process, Akhil Gogoi had appealed to the Information Commission of Assam. NEN has also compiled other instances of and has compiled many instances of such attempts.

Ms. Namita Subedi of Teliagaon Mahila Samiti of Sonitpur district of Assam, filed an application regarding the appalling condition of a road in her area. She discovered that an amount of Rs. 30 lakh had been sanctioned for its repair. She went to the PWD office to complain about the lack of repairs, taking some photographs of the road as proof. Namita's 'inquisitiveness' incensed the contractor responsible for the repair, as well the area's MLA who is responsible of road construction under the MLA Fund. Ms. Subedi now has to be constantly vigilant in case of any attacks.

In another instance, Sanjit Tanti of the Sodou Assam Adivashi Chatra Santha received information of massive misappropriation of funds under IAY in Udalguri district a few months back. The IAY officials offered Sanjit Tanti a bribe to not disclose the information. Two members of Sanjit Tanti's group, who went to the BDO on May 17, 2007 to follow up, were attacked by five men with kukris (machetes) while on their way back from the BDO's office, as reported in local papers of May 18, 2007.

A veritable Pandora's box of such corruption has come tumbling out in Assam with the use of the RTI Act. Threats and violence such as those perpetrated against Akhil Gogoi have followed in their wake, with the guilty scrambling for cover and using any means to stifle the RTI applicants. Such threats reveal the pervasiveness and depth of corruption in almost all the public offices, and the complete non-accountability of the officials with regard to public funds. These incidents should not deter the democratic right of the citizen to question government officials; in fact it should strengthen citizens in large

numbers to promote public monitoring, and signal that these corrupt practices are no longer acceptable.

Report by North East Network

J.N. Borooah Lane, Jorpukhuri

Guwahati 781001

Assam, INDIA

Telephone:(91-361) 2603833, Telefax:(91-361) 2631582

Website:www.northeastnetwork.org

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Rs 60 lakh scam in Golaghat DRDA

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