

## **1. Mr. Punchibanda – A farmer from Seenipura, uses RTI to benefit his community**

Seenipura is a quiet village located in the Kantale Divisional Secretariat Division, in the Trincomalee District, with a population of approximately 46,000.

Mr. Punchibanda, a farmer from the area, is also the Chairperson of a Village Committee set up by the NCDF (National Collaboration Development Foundation) to address community issues through the RTI law. He believed that a RTI request could potentially solve a persistent failure of service delivery in his area ; namely, the lack of postal service. For over one and a half years, around 30 families had not had their mail delivered. Mr. Punchibanda submitted a RTI request to the Postmaster of the Trincomalee post office. Although there was no response to his RTI application, within a few days of receiving the request, the postal service resumed, and the area continues to enjoy uninterrupted postal service to this day. As the matter appears to have been resolved, Mr. Punchibanda declined to further inquire as to why there was no official response to his request.

Perhaps inspired by the success of his first RTI request, Mr. Punchibanda went on to file another.

Although most would find it difficult to point out Seenipura on a map of Sri Lanka, the village is well known as the site of the Kantale Sugar Corporation. The previous Chairman of the Sugar Corporation had decided to allocate 12 acres of this property for public use, including 1.5 acres for a local cemetery. This was later confirmed by Cabinet approval.

For several years, around 200-250 people were left without facilities to perform the last rites of their friends and family members. Mr. Punchibanda as the Chairperson of the Village Committee on RTI issues ,submitted a RTI request to the Sugar

Corporation in Kantale requesting for records relating to the allocation of the property.

Within 20 days, he was able to obtain records including a survey plan of the area and a copy of the cabinet approval decision. Consequently, the Sugar Corporation handed over the relevant property, and a cemetery has been set up for the benefit of the 200-250 families in the area.

## **2. A women's rights activist requests information on a farming subsidy for widows**

Ms. Rita Solomons, is a long term women's rights activist residing in Morawewa, in a village inhabited by 8,000 people, located within the Trincomalee District.

Rita came to learn of a pressing issue in the community. It seemed that a government subsidy for widowed women was being allocated to those who were not entitled to its benefit, to the detriment of those who genuinely qualified for the facility. The subsidy was set up to aid small-scale female farmers in a village of about 70 families, and covered the costs of seeds such as mango and coconut.

Rita submitted a RTI request to the Pradeshiya Sabha on the matter. Within 14 days, she received a response, including records of details of the beneficiaries of the subsidy.

She is now a RTI trainer in the area.

### **3. An “old boy” of a prominent school seeks greater transparency from his alma mater**

Mr. D. Peiris\* of Colombo, is an alumnus of a prominent public school, and like any “old boy” remains loyal to and cherishes fond memories of his alma mater. His own children and grandchildren are also enrolled in the school.

However, he was troubled by the fact that the School’s Student Development Society had thus far refrained from publishing its financial records. The Society handles considerable sums of public funds. Mr. Peiris reasoned that the Society should therefore ideally make their financial records publicly available.

Seeking greater transparency and accountability from his alma mater, he sent a letter by registered post, addressed to the Student Development Society and the school principal. His request for copies of the monthly accounts of the Society went unanswered and unacknowledged.

Realizing that this approach would not garner a response, Mr. Peiris then submitted a RTI request, addressed to the Ministry of Education, in February 2016. Once again, there was no official acknowledgement of the request, and no response.

Mr. Peiris persisted in his efforts, and reached out to the RTI Commission to request an appeal. Once summons were issued by the Commission, the principal’s office contacted Mr. Peiris, purporting to have misplaced his initial letter and offering to immediately send the relevant accounts. Mr. Peiris however, wary that his initial letter went unacknowledged for over a year, opted to go through the formal RTI Commission process.

In August 2017, he was finally able to obtain all the relevant information, including a detailed breakdown of all the funds handled by the Student Development Society.

\* A pseudonym is used as the interviewee wished to remain anonymous

#### **4. Mr. S. Rupasinghe – Empowering the public, and himself, with the RTI law**

Mr. S. Rupasinghe from Trincomalee, is an activist who is involved in the activities of the NCDF (National Collaboration Development Foundation).

On behalf of the NCDF's work on transparency in governance, Mr. Rupasinghe wished to find out how funds allocated by the central Government by way of Government Grants (As Per Article 154R of the Constitution) have been utilized by the Provincial Councils.

Mr. Rupasinghe submitted RTI requests addressed to the Chief Secretaries' offices in 8 provinces, asking for records relating to expenditure of Government Grants in the period 2013-2017. In all 8 instances, he received a timely response, and was able to obtain the relevant information within 14 days. His organization utilizes the information for research purposes.

## **5. Mr. K. Nanayakkara\* of Matara,**

Mr. Nanayakkara, is a parent of a young child seeking admission to Grade 1 class in a public school in the area. Having gone through the interview process for admission, his child's name appeared in the list of shortlist of successful candidates, but was subsequently omitted from the final list. He had reason to believe that up to 10 candidates received preferential treatment by reason of their parents' influence, due to their proximity to Education authorities.

He submitted a RTI request to the Ministry of Education in February 2017, asking for the marks sheet, applications, records of permanent residence and the name list of the students concerned. Having received no response within the timeframe, Mr. Nanayakkara then appealed to the RTI Commission in May 2017.

The RTI Commission addressed the case in July 2017, following which the Principal of the School supplied all the relevant information in his possession. The mark sheets could not be provided as they were in the custody of the Ministry of Education's Investigative Division.

Having inspected the records, it appeared to Mr. Nanayakkara that his child was unfairly omitted from the final list. He has since filed a Fundamental Rights petition in the Supreme Court in September 2017, on the basis that his child's right to equality was infringed as per Article 12 of the Constitution. The case will be taken up for hearing in 2018.

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