

Success stories from the Asha-MCF RTI campaign.

Saral (Nainital)—When Meena Arya filed an RTI asking about computer education in their school, teachers scolded and threatened the kids and intimidated Saral workers. (The school had been collecting computer fees of Rs. 120 per child annually, but there are no computers in the school, even though computers had been sent in 2002.) Computers have been returned to the schools and the children are now attending computer classes. *An unplanned benefit of the RTI campaign: This situation occurred in the first place because the people were unwilling to confront the teachers who had misappropriated the computers (as well as funds from the state to maintain them and the computer fees paid by the children). In this case, our partner organization, parents and teachers finally had to talk and work things out.*

In another school, the teachers kept the school toilets locked so the children could not use them. Complaints of the children and their parents had long been ignored. But an RTI on the topic by Sapna Arya resulted in the locks on the toilet being permanently removed.

ARPAN (Pithoragarh)—In many mountain villages the electric voltage is so low that children have to light candles to study at night. Vimala Basera filed an application asking about the low voltage just before their exams. She did not get a response but the voltage got better. *RTI requests about low electricity voltage in at least four other communities around the state had a similar result.*

Alcoholism is also a severe problem in Pithoragarh and the children filed a request asking how many raids (and where) were conducted to crack down on illegal alcohol and how much illegal alcohol has been confiscated. The request resulted in a significant reduction in the presence of illegal liquor in their community.

Bal Panchayat Horrawalla (Dehradun)—In the main road leading into the village, giant cement water pipes had been lying in the roadway for more than year. Since the road was also dug-up for the laying of cables, it presented a significant hazard and had been the site of numerous accidents, but no one had tried to address the situation. Sixteen-year-old Devrat submitted an RTI request asking how long the pipes would remain and who would be responsible for any accidents caused by their presence. The pipes were promptly removed.

Adopt (Dehradun)—All the roads in their area were in very bad shape, streetlights had not been functioning for three years, and the toilet in the local college was never cleaned. After they submitted some RTIs for information on these issues, 6 roads (all the major ones) have been repaired, streetlights have been fixed, and the college toilet is now kept clean. They had also inquired about public garbage receptacles. They have not yet received a response to that query, but the garbage that had been lying around was removed

Vimarsh (Nainital)—After learning about the RTI Act, the children in Mangoli requested information on birth registration. They not only got an answer to their application but several births were registered by the Panchayat Secretary and 16 birth certificates were distributed in the district office. The block administration was impressed by the children's drive, and invited them to the monthly block meeting to talk about children's issues.

Himani, Ganesh, and Deepa from Phaguniakhet, Khurpatal applied for information under the RTI act on lack of electricity in their village, which had been dark for more than a month. They did not get an answer but the electricity department changed the transformer within a week and electricity was restored.

Sudha (Almora) —Jyoti, a young woman who works for MCF partner organization Sudha and belongs to one of the villages participating in the RTI campaign, submitted an RTI asking for information about the World Bank-funded *Swajal* project for water and sanitation as well as about the obligations for the water department to maintain and repair lines. Rather than providing the information, the water department tried to intimidate her by threatening to declare her line illegal and cutting off her water. But when she showed them her water bill and asked them to state in writing that they were removing her tap because it was illegal, they backed off and provided the information. They also fixed her water line and the linesman now stops by regularly to ensure that everything is functioning well. *In addition to its direct impact in getting the government to provide information or solve problems, which they do to avoid acknowledge in writing that the problem exists or work was neglected, the MCF's RTI campaign has given the people a new sense of authority. They believe in their rights and are willing to stand up to intimidation. In the past, people have remained passive because they did not expect to be heard.*

Jan Chetna Kendra (Pauri)—Dredging sand from rivers and selling it has become a profitable business in the mountains. Moneyed interests often bribe local officials to look the other way while they remove the sand, with little concern for the environmental impact or its affect on the fields of the people living there. Beena Bisht wrote an application requesting information on uncontrolled sand quarrying from the river near her village. Some members of her community threatened her but her family supported her, and now the Panchayat (village council) has passed a rule saying that only the villagers will mine for sand and permission will be taken from the village before quarrying the sand.

SBMA (Gairsain)—Poonam Kandari filed an RTI application for the birth registration of a young girl whose father was unknown. Her grandmother and SBMA had been trying to get this child's certificate for several years because the secondary school refused to admit her without a birth registration certificate, but the bureaucrats refused to budge. Following Poonam's RTI request, the village Pradhyaan (council leader) suddenly produced a birth certificate for the child. He had received an order from higher up to register the child's birth without any further delays.

SBMA (Uttarkashi)—The Indian government has an Auxillary Nurse Midwife (ANM) program designed to train women who can go into the villages and provide health care and immunization services to people in their homes. Jaideep Negi submitted an RTI asking how often the ANM was supposed to visit the village because she was staying at the ANM center in town and telling the villages to come to her. The Chief Medical Officer ordered the ANM to visit the village and she is doing so regularly. *Notably, the ANM initially tried to bully Jaideep and the SBMA facilitator into dropping the RTI, but the facilitator took the innovative step of getting several more people from other villages in the ANM's working area to submit similar requests. Once more, the RTI project helped sow the seeds of local activism.*

In another case, the project facilitator, Bhupender Singh Rawat, received a phone call from an education official saying "We know you are teaching the children about RTI and we have sent a principal to the school!" Bhupender was not actually involved with the RTI request that resulted in this declaration, but he later learned that this was a school with 76 students that had no principal. There were two teachers at the school, who used to take turns attending school for one week at a time! *The ripples of this campaign have spread far beyond the applications that were filed.*

SEAD (Kalsi, Dehradun)—Bhagat Singh inquired about when the school might receive a math teacher, which resulted in a teacher being immediately appointed to the school. Subash Chandra Bhosa enquired about classrooms for class 9 and 10 in the newly upgraded Pipaya School. Soon after he filed his application, work started on the construction of the new classrooms. Ritesh Tomar wrote an application about a single teacher in the Pipaya primary school that had 35 children and a second teacher was appointed. Divya Tomar wrote an application for information on the ANM for their villages. The ANM has been sent to visit those villages regularly