**Grantee Journalists at RTI Workshop**

- **Organised by IPSMF in association with CHRI**

The Right to Information Amendment Bill passed by the Parliament has stoked fears of undermining the independence of the RTI watchdog. However, the RTI legislation would still be a critical tool for Indian media to access information that leads to more transparent governance through fact-based and researched journalism. Even prior to the current controversy the Foundation in partnership with CHRI had planned a workshop for its grantees on the best possible ways to leverage RTI. This Workshop was held on 27th July in New Delhi to primarily cover Delhi-based grantees.

### Need for Skilling

Any Act, however enabling, is not a force by itself. It is for the media to master the skills of the RTI regime to calibrate and configure its inquiries in such a manner that it elicits the required information.

This needs training and honing of skills for leveraging the maximum that the RTI offers.

The training anchored by RTI Specialist Venkatesh Nayak was attended by 24 journalists belonging to 10 grantees organisations - Khabar Lahariya, Max Maharashtra, Media Vigil, Janjwara, Suno India, Satyagrah, Down To Earth, The Caravan, The Print and The Wire.

**Hands-on training** – The one-day workshop helped grantee journalists gain a deep insight on the various aspects of using the RTI as an effective tool in investigative reporting.

### Key highlights of the Workshop:

1. Do's and don'ts of filing RTI queries:

Venkatesh Nayak dilated on the do's and don'ts of filing a RTI application and focused on the potential of RTI for...
pursing issues of public interest critical to good governance and probity in government institutions. He gave out 'tips and tricks', which could well make the difference between a query being responded to or being rejected. For instance, it is a good practice to avoid addressing an officer to whom the application is addressed, by name and just stick to the designation – because, if the officer is transferred in the meantime, the query will be returned to the sender without a response.

2. RTI as a tool for investigative reporting:

Ritika Chopra of the Indian Express gave a presentation on how she used RTI as a tool for investigative reporting, samples of which she presented to the grantee-participants. For instance, she pointed to her story of how through information obtained from an RTI application, she scooped the story of the PMO writing directly to the EC on the need for nationwide, simultaneous, elections. (https://bit.ly/2ymRbrC)

3. ‘RTI application-drafting group exercise’:

This was one of the highlights of the Workshop. Participants were divided into groups and drafted detailed RTI queries following all the laid down procedures on a prescribed template.

The queries on RTI from participants ranged from the role of the EC during the recent Lok Sabha polls, especially on the selective application of the Code of Conduct; the controversy with Nepal after the demonetization exercise; the issue of minimum wages in Delhi, among others.

Based on the queries prepared by the participating groups, a lively panel discussion was held which was presided over by Mr Wajahat Habibullah, India’s first Chief Information Commissioner, Prof. Sridhar Acharyalu, former Central Information Commissioner and Sanjoy Hazarika, Director of CHRI.

4. Clearly delineate public interest:

Mr Habibullah emphasised that the government system needs to be goaded into a “culture of giving replies”. The RTI Act, he said, was an “important tool” for journalists to access information and hold “a mirror to India as a nation and strength then it”. He stressed that the applications should clearly delineate the “public interest” in the revealing of the information asked for. This would considerably increase the chances of the queries being responded to.

5. Elicit information that readers need to know. Not what the government wants to put out:

Prof Acharyalu said that RTI bolsters the investigative power of the media as the queries elicit information that “you (the journalist) want and not what the government wants to put out”. This by its very nature keeps the government on its toes and is a “fantastic tool for journalists” for evidence-based reporting.

A learning experience

The overwhelming feedback received from participants was that the workshop was extremely useful and helped them to understand the finer points of the RTI Act and its nuances; and more importantly the things to keep in mind to elicit the expected information. Participants concluded that the RTI system was an important tool in the hands of the media which by its very nature was designed to improve accountability and governance. They saw great benefits in the opportunity provided for skilling and training, to use and leverage this tool of democracy to the hilt.

6. Seek information from all other publicly available resources before filing RTI:

Prof Acharyalu also said that it was a good practice while filing RTI applications to ask for the “complete files” and inspection on an issue. It was also a good practice, he said, to first hunt for the information asked for from all other openly available sources like parliamentary questions, reports of the ministries, etc., as it would enable the applications to be productive.

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<tr>
<th>BOARD MEETINGS</th>
<th>New Grants</th>
<th>Grant renewals</th>
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<tr>
<td>FY 2015-16: 5 Meetings</td>
<td>CGNet Swara, IndiaSpend and The Wire (English).</td>
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Total Commitment – INR 50 Cr
IPSMEF grantees drive coverage on the environment

The World Environment Day that was marked recently, brought home to us that we live in a world of climate change, water scarcity and pollution. Climate change is disrupting people’s lives and inevitably the most impacted are those at the bottom of the pyramid. These challenges call for the equivalent of the ‘moon shot’ – optimum use of technology, resources and the upping of leadership on the environment in a ‘mission mode’. In this effort, the media has a critical role to play – to relentlessly focus on the issues, highlight the best practices and successes, and point to the gaps. The Foundation’s grantees, we are glad to report, have in their coverage, striven to be ahead of the curve. We bring you select highlights.

Down To Earth released its annual e-book “State of India’s Environment: In Figures, 2019”. It was released on World Environment Day (June 5) as a part of their data journalism efforts. The data from the book was quoted by more than 100 news reports, both in English and regional language newspapers and magazines. Magazines like Time and Newsweek also linked back their stories to the data.

India Spend published a data-driven 6-part series on drought highlighting issues such as drought-induced migration, irregular rainfall patterns and ineffective government schemes. (http://bit.ly/2NLFKEt)

The News Minute’s (TNM’s) coverage focused on water shortages plaguing homes and even hospitals in the South with well-produced videos and deep ground reportage. (http://bit.ly/2loseCo) TNM’s coverage centred around the strain placed on urban women and their responsibility to ensure that families have adequate water. (http://bit.ly/2oEITe) The website also threw light on how hospitals and their patients in the drought-prone district of Dharmapuri were coping amid pressing water shortage. (http://bit.ly/21Y2e3n)

The Lede was one of the first publications to focus on the water crisis in Chennai and the stories were picked up by the mainstream media. (https://bit.ly/2JPGwAV)

The Lede was also part of a path-breaking international collaboration, as part of the Green Blood project (https://bit.ly/2SBU8OJ), where 40 journalists from 15 media organisations across 15 countries worked together for 8 months to investigate and expose how reporting on mining has led to risk to journalists in three countries – Tanzania, Guatemala and India (https://bit.ly/2OhWIL7).

Suno India’s recent “Climate Emergency”, a show dedicated to climate change coverage, traced the origin of the water crisis faced by Chennai and the inaction of the state government. (http://bit.ly/2IodaVA). The show’s focus on newly-developed suburbs exposed how the impact of rampant construction, encroachment and neglect of traditional water conservation techniques, can leave residents reeling in desperate times.

Think Pragati’s Pavan Srinath hosted researcher Lingaraj Jayaprakash on an episode of the Pragati Podcast detailing academic efforts to highlight vanishing commons, or natural resources common to society. (http://bit.ly/2MIVNX4). The show focused on American economist Elinor Ostrom’s work on how communities come together informally to preserve commons without the need for regulation or state action.

The Better India detailed the revival of Bengaluru’s Kyalasanahalli lake in a mere 45 days by former techie Anand Malligavud as part of ‘The Lake Revivers Collective’. (http://bit.ly/2NTHqvw)
**Battling industrial pollution**

Industrial expansion is vital for developing economies like India. However, lack of enforcement and unchecked expansion could damage sensitive environments. Grantees have helped throw light on the impact of industrial actions and emerging technologies on the environment.


The website, which has recently started its Hindi edition, came out with a string of stories based on ground reports and NGT orders about the state of three rivers in North India.


*IndiaSpend* published a detailed ground report on the *Narmada Valley Project’s failure* to provide water to farmers in Gujarat’s rainfall-deficient Kutch region, even as industries in the region used more water than originally allocated to them. ([http://bit.ly/254oJib](http://bit.ly/254oJib))

*The Wire* reported on the impact of the industrial corridor along Gujarat’s coast on local fishing communities. The growth of petrochemical, chemical and other industrial units in the region have affected marine life and fishing activities. ([http://bit.ly/32gLTMs](http://bit.ly/32gLTMs)).

**Impact on health**

There is no escaping the cost of worsening environment on the citizen’s health, wellness and quality of life. The Foundation’s grantees have highlighted the impact of pollution and climate change on people’s health.

CSE’s study of *on-street democracy* done in May-end showed how a pedestrian only street in Delhi’s crowded Karol Bagh area had much lower PM2.5 concentration compared to the adjacent Arya Samaj Road that was choked with heavy traffic. The blog published on Down To Earth was picked up and reported in major national dailies as it proved why urban renewal is needed for clean air and sustainability. ([http://bit.ly/32TgwYk](http://bit.ly/32TgwYk))

*The News Minute* covered illnesses emerging in urban India due to rising pollution and issues related to waste disposal ([http://bit.ly/32iWK3](http://bit.ly/32iWK3)). The website also followed up with ground reports of families whose members were killed in green protests in Thoothukudi district in 2018. Locals protested the expansion of a copper plant in the region, alleging that its operations posed a health risk for residents. ([http://bit.ly/2NkrEs](http://bit.ly/2NkrEs))

*DataBaaz*, India’s first data & evidence-based video network, has a particular focus on deep-reporting on the environment, with a emphasis on issues of water. For instance, the story on the ‘Economic cost of water scarcity in India.’ ([https://bit.ly/2YslRp7](https://bit.ly/2YslRp7))