



**BIPLAB HALIM MEMORIAL LECTURE
AND FELICITATION 2021**

Commemorating
74th Birth Anniversary
of
Eminent Human Rights Activist & Social Worker
BIPLAB HALIM

PREFACE



This year Biplab Halim Memorial Committee & IMSE is commemorating the 74th Birth Anniversary of eminent human rights activist and social worker Biplab Halim.

Biplab Halim used to believe in people's democracy, where people will have the power to define and determine their development trajectory. He focused on strengthening grassroots democratic institutions like PRI and stressed on effective participation of people in that process. Meaningful participation in any process starts with access to information. Right to have information is guaranteed by our constitution and later on due to the longstanding demands of people, the Right to Information Act came into force finally in 2005.

Biplab Halim was a prominent advocate for RTI and coordinator of the RTI network in West Bengal for a long period of time. Through his work, he empowered people with the knowledge of Right to Information Act and helped them in using the same to access information, that advance various movements for strengthening rights and democracy.

Today in India, dialogue on strengthening democracy and human rights is more important than ever before. Our rapidly changing socio-political scenario is creating new challenges before human rights defenders, which is weakening our democracy. This is high time we refer to basic values & principles of equity and equality as enshrined in our constitution and defend all good legislations which uphold those values. Therefore it is appropriate to discuss

more about how RTI could be used as a tool to increase transparency in governance and in advancing social movements. In this backdrop, we are glad to organise Biplab Halim Memorial Lecture 2021 and the topic is **ROLE OF RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN STRENGTHENING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY**.

We are thankful to Shri Nikhil Dey, eminent Human Rights Activist for kindly accepting our invitation to deliver the key note address.

We extend our special thanks to Shri Chittotosh Mukherjee, former Chief Justice of Mumbai & Kolkata High Court, for remembering his association with Biplab Halim, in the context of their work on electoral reform and good governance.

This year we are humbled to felicitate Prof Manabendra Nath Mondal, eminent Human Rights Advocate, Shri Snehasis Sur eminent Media Person, Ms. Pankti Yog, well known RTI Activist, Ms. Umashashi Maity, social worker and Shri Mahananda Halder, social worker who are well known for their dedicated work to strengthen democracy and to support people's movements for securing the human rights.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all who have extended their support to us for organising this Memorial lecture, amidst pandemic.

I hope this lecture will motivate many social workers to come forward and use RTI as a tool to hold the state accountable. I further hope life of Biplab Halim, will keep inspiring many social activists, in their pursuit of seeking justice, equality, equity and to reinforce principles of human rights and democracy.

Ujjaini Halim
IMSE



Nikhil Dey is an Indian social activist. He works for the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Suchna Evum Rozgar Adhikar Abhiyan and NCPRI. He has been actively working for Right to Information, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Lokpal bill and Right to Food and other Human Rights organisations.

After working briefly with the Kheduth Mazdoor Chetna Sangathan in Madhya Pradesh, he joined Aruna Roy and Shankar Singh in 1987 to go to Devdungr, in Rajsamand District, Rajasthan where, along with many others, they helped form and establish the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). He has been involved in struggles of the poor for justice, including grass-root struggles for land and the payment of minimum wages. He has also been a part of the organisation's involvement in larger campaigns - most notably for the Peoples Right to Information, and the Right to Work, the Right to Food, and the protection of other human rights guaranteed under the Indian Constitution.

Democracy, Development, and Human Rights: Establishing Economic, Social, and Political Rights through the People's Right to Information In India

I am extremely honoured to have been invited to deliver the memorial lecture on the 75th Birth Anniversary of humanist Late Biplab Halim. When I began work 35 yrs ago in the sphere of socio political activism Biplab Da was a role model and inspirational figure. After I made contact, and began work with Aruna Roy one of the names she talked about was Biplab Da. Aruna Roy was 16 years older than me, and was almost the same age as Biplab Da. She turned 75 this year. My other close colleague Shankar Singh, was 8 years my senior. The three of us worked along with many others, to form an organisation that would on the 1st of May 1990 come to be called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS).

Although Biplab Da's work was on the other side of the country (we were in Rajasthan and he was in Bengal) - there were many parallels: In the moments of history; In the processes that were possible in the 1990s. There were also similarities in the approach that Biplab Da used, and the approach that we took. And there were many times we looked up to him and his work both for inspiration, a sense of solidarity, and for the feeling that "yes, the work that we are doing is right and there are others doing similar kinds of work".

Biplab Da himself came from a Left background and he formed organisations that looked after marginalised people, toiling people, working people and peasants and workers. To explain some of these parallels: On the first of May 1990 we formed an independent political organisation (but did not get involved in forming a party, or entering electoral politics) Biplab da formed the "Indian Federation of Toiling Peasants" along with IMSE. The initial work of MKSS was focussed, as expected on peasants and workers issues like land, and minimum wages. Biplab Da's own work in terms of land reforms like operation Barga - is extremely significant. The contexts of West Bengal and Rajasthan are quite different from one another. In Rajasthan we just took up one land struggle in one village called Sohagarh and the entire land lords across the state were up in arms against us. After a protracted struggle to get women ownership of land, which the feudal land lords were claiming as their own, we understood even better how important land was in terms of power relationships. At the same time, the hidden land records, also gave us an hint of the importance of information, and how it could transform struggles on many issues. But the nuances and the conceptual and practical clarity on the transformational power of information came later on.

Similarly, our second big struggle on minimum wages on public works, and contract works, provided clear connections with the birth of the Right to Information movement in our area. People facing drought, were mobilising and demanding work, so that their families could survive. Soon enough, these efforts connected with the Right to the Work movement. "The Right to Work", is yet to be achieved, but the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is a step in the direction of guaranteed work, and of self-reliance in employment. The

law recognises the working rights of the people. For instance the slogan for NREGA 'Har Hath Ko Kam Mile, Kam Ko Poora Dam Mile' basically encapsulated the idea of what working people want everywhere. They want work, and they want a just reward for their work.

Biplab Da's work was also among the fishers. Rajasthan does not have any coast line, but the issues of all working class people anywhere are similar. Later on, Biplab Da's work on transparency, participatory governance, on accountability, on policy and advocacy, and on the right to food, followed the same basic trajectory and process that we followed: to pick up an issue from the bottom, work on it, and connect it with national and state policy. Then come back to issues of implementation, thereby creating a continuous virtuous circle between policy, implementation and the people. It is the working class and the poor who struggle for advocating and getting progressive laws and policies enacted and implemented.

Whether it is an issue in Singur, Nandigram, as to who should decide what kind of development; or whether it is an issue of Panchayati Raj and the Panchayat deciding what kind of policy should be implemented - it is the affected people who are the best policy makers, if they are given a chance. So, bottom-up participatory development planning and decision making, are extremely important. The forces that threaten our democracy today are polarising society, and undermining communal harmony and national integration. The truth is that these issues remain as important as before. Even as our works are succeeding somewhere, we are facing issues of a basic attack on constitutional values.

In today's lecture I will make references of Biplab da and several others like him who may not be present physically but who are fellow travellers, our collective work. We are connected in a very powerful and political way. But the outside sees non party work as connected to each other in what is now called a "civil society". But many of us came into this field claiming we were political workers, and not as a part of this civil society. Civil society generally implies a very neutral set of objectives, and a professional kind of work culture. Terminology needs to be more specific. Nevertheless, social movements, peoples

movements, as well as social and political activism did, and does build a very strong sense of solidarity amongst causes, and activists in the different regions of the country, and across States taking up and focussing on the issues of marginalised people.

We are inspired by the ideals of so many political leaders - by Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar, and Bhagat Singh, amongst many others. But in my lecture today, I will speak more about Dr. Ambedkar and his idea of solidarity amongst one another. When we speak about fraternity in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution, it ensures the dignity of the individual as well as the unity and integrity of the country. So it is a conception where you just cannot have unity and integrity; and trample upon the rights of the individual or any community. Likewise, no individual can claim all the rights in a vacuum - they have to seek solidarity, fraternity and friendship and dignity amongst each other. Let us keep this idea in mind while I speak today about Right to Information and its Role in Strengthening our Rights and Democracy. I will read out from the speech given by Dr. Ambedkar while presenting a future related to the Constitution of the country. He spoke about the framework: "On the 26th of November we are going into a life of contradictions, in politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of 'one man one vote' and 'one vote one value'. In our social and economic life we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of 'one man one value'. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up".

It is in this context, that I will talk about the people's Right to Information. as something that has been able to transform our understanding of democracy; our engagement with democracy; - not just as a powerful tool for fighting corruption or the arbitrary use of power. Right to Information is a combination of economic, political

and social rights. What Dr. Ambedkar said at the eve of the birth of our Republic was that we cannot merely have political democracy in the feudal society and capitalist economy we are inheriting. People like Shankar Guha Niyogi, Baba Adhav, Biplob da, Aruna Roy, Medha Patkar and their organisations like CMM, Hamal Panchayat, IMSE, NBA, and MKSS, which struggled with both democracy, development, dignity and human liberty, actually understood economic, social and political rights together.

We are approaching the 16th anniversary of the Right to Information Act on 12th of October 2021. Prior to this we have had many struggles across the state, and innumerable attacks on Right to Information users, and the law itself. Despite this, the RTI is used by an estimated 80 lakh people per year. This is an estimate. Because there are so many offices that don't report on the number of RTIs filed. There is clearly a hunger for information. There is no social movement in the country that does not use the RTI Act. Today, there is no political party that does not have a RTI cell. They all train their cadres to use RTI in a powerful way. Today there is no newspaper that does not use the RTI to get richer information and better outreach. In the past, when we were struggling to get a strong RTI Act legislated, the media houses would belittle the utility of our struggle for them saying 'we have sources'. In fact, as they have now realised, and what Prabhash Joshi, Nikhil Chakravarthy, and Ajit Bhattacharjee told us when they came to the dharna in Beawar in 1996 this is a battle that the media should have fought long ago. It is the medias "bread and butter". For every check and balance to succeed, free access to information is essential. The basis of any struggle is truth and justice. The RTI is an extremely powerful concept and is a "theory in practice" that helps bring out the truth. It becomes the basis for justice, and to show and expose injustice. More than 100 people have been killed in the course of asking questions. The RTI has given birth to a large number of 'foot soldiers' for Democracy. We need to pay tribute to not only the 100 people that have died in the process of asking for information, but also to the ones who are using the RTI in such a powerful and nonviolent way. They are basically trying to take information out of the silos of secrecy where it has been secured, and place it in front of people. The current ruling party used RTI

extensively, and actively supported the law when it was in opposition (except for taking the CBI out of the realm of the RTI). However, in power it has done everything possible to weaken the law through acts of omission and commission. It is the only party that has been successful in weakening the RTI Act in Parliament, through amendments that undermined the independence and status of the information commissions at the state and central levels. In doing so it has tried to weaken the backbone of the RTI by making the RTI Commission more subservient under them and the central government. What is needed is to make them more accountable to the people and to their mandate of ensuring transparency and the Right to Information. The NDA government made electoral bonds confidential, undermining not just transparency but the fairness of an electoral process. The flow - in and out, of philanthropy and aid, is in a black box at the level of the highest office in the country, where the PM Cares Fund has been carefully and deliberately, (and ridiculously) taken out of the purview of the RTI and made opaque during a public health emergency like Covid.! But even this autocratic government, has not been successful in stemming the tide of the RTI. The government itself sees the importance of information for all kinds of reasons including blatantly political objectives using completely illegitimate surveillance methods such as Pegasus. Using the force of law, the government gathers enormous amounts of information through Aadhar, and hides that information from citizens under the guise of privacy. - As Gopal Gandhi the former Governor of West Bengal said very perceptively, at the time of the Aadhar debate raging through the country- "The RTI is the citizen watching every move of the government. We have to make sure Aadhar does not enable the opposite the government watching every move of every citizen.

In the early 90s, in Central Rajasthan, the MKSS had been formed, and had decided to take up issues related to land redistribution, and minimum wages. It was not funded by any government agency or any funder or foundation, and was resourced through what we know today as 'crowd funding'. During that time, the poor and working class of the area, were not getting their minimum wages. Their questions regarding under payment, or lack of services provided by the

government., remained unanswered. On repeatedly questioning the system they were either termed as lazy, or, unproductive workers' and informed that the measurements and details of their shortfalls lay in the records'. That is when they started asking for papers, the records. "Show us the bills, vouchers, and muster rolls", to which the response from the government was that 'these are bills and vouchers which are confidential government property'. The people started extracting that information informally, and in the assertions and counter assertions with the custodians of that information the first slogan of the RTI (Hamara Paisa, Hamara Hisaab) 'our money, our accounts' emerged as a very powerful assertion of social accountability. The shift from political democracy to social democracy, and from political accountability to social accountability, encompasses the social, political and economic aspects of change being demanded within a democratic framework. It also connects these local contemporary struggles of marginalised groups, with the kind of democracy Ambedkar felt was needed in post-independence India.

So when people said, 'Hamara Paisa, Hamara Hisaab', ('our money, our accounts') it encompassed the essence of RTI. With this slogan, I am asserting my sovereignty in a democracy. When I ask about a single Rupee, or crores of Rupees being spent by the government, - in the panchayat, or in the defence ministry, by the mining department, telecommunication or in the Prime Minister's office... I am asking for accountability as an individual, and as a collective; and thereby, defining citizenship. 'Hamara Paisa, Hamara Hisaab' became a very powerful way of defining citizenship. The slogan got translated in several languages across the country. These four words describe the RTI, democracy, and social accountability. Along with this came another slogan which was equally powerful, coined by people in the Beawar dharna, and noticed, written about, and popularised by a very important Hindi journalist Prabash Joshi. He was the editor of both the Indian Express and Jansatta at the same time. He came to Beawar, at the start of the 40 day dharna, and having heard the slogan, he went back, and wrote a long column titled "*Hum Janenge, Hum Jiyenge*" (the 'right to know, the right to live') : The slogan came from the dharna in Beawar, but the idea and concept and the 'right' came from the Indian

Constitution. The idea of the right to live is fundamental to all human rights. Connecting the right to information to fundamental rights is another illustration of how it connects economic, social, and political rights. On the eve of the passage of the national RTI law, there was a song composed by two activist singers that became like an anthem of the RTI movement... Charul and Vinay were two very powerful peoples movement singers and song writers from Gujarat. The song was called "*Janane Ka Haq*". The last stanza of that song was'

"Ab haq ke bina bhi kya jeena, Ye jeene ke samaan nahin". "What is life without my rights? This is no life at all..." That, is the essence of the indivisible nature of human rights.' And the Right to Information and helps you secure all your rights, and through that the right to live with dignity.

During the Covid waves, people were dying without knowing where beds, hospitals, and essential medicines are available. Without rights, there is no dignity, and without dignity there is no life. This is the core understanding of human rights. RTI strengthens democracy and human rights, and every citizen's basic dignity and economic rights. There was a very famous IAS officer named SR Sankaran known for his commitment to fulfilling the Constitutional mandate of equality and social justice. He was in the bureaucracy, and when he died, every segment of society came out on streets in a tribute to his life. He led an absolutely austere life, gave all his money in scholarships to poor dalit children, and had a powerful understanding of social change. When he heard about the RTI he made a very important observation about it. He said that it stands out as a transformational right. It is not just a right, -it transforms the nature and course of a struggle or a campaign or the discourse around an issue. On its own RTI means nothing, but connected with any other right, it helps define the rights and wrongs of the issue. The applied use of information is essential to advocacy, law or change. It brings the truth out. So, that is how we came to understand the nature of the RTI in the early 90s.

When we connected the RTI with the right to food for instance, it transformed the nature of the struggle. We understood that it is imperative to explore, expose, and question the billions of Rupees

worth of grain, or tons of food grain rotting in the go downs and to ask why is it not being used for food for work, or a midday meal programme. Today, statistics are being erased, masked and buried and even not being collected when we raise questions about unemployment, because people in power don't want the truth to be known. During the pandemic not everyone was suffering. According to the Oxfam Inequality Report India's top 100 billionaires made approximately 13 lakh crores of additional money - during the pandemic, which is enough to run MGNREGA for 10 years! MGNREGA gives employment to 12 crore families every year. The contrast between the numbers who lost their livelihood, and quantum of profits of those who gained during the pandemic speaks volumes about the nature of our economic policies, and its human costs. Information is at the heart of an honest understanding of rampant injustice and inequality.

Some theoreticians insist on having a "theory of change" to determine how things will change. I will talk about the theory of change and politics that the people brought about based on their own lives- which connects organically to Dr. Ambedkar's ideas on the need to build a social democracy. Both were perhaps built upon experience, and a lived reality. Dr. Ambedkar's quote on inequality from his speech on 26th November 1949 alluded to how much we are threatened by economic inequality, social inequality and political inequality. We have seen this in our economic and social life on an ongoing basis, but we also now see it during our voting processes, which are being misused to impose the will of a few in the name of a majority. But social democracy is a much richer concept. It mandates that the dignity of every individual must be protected, in order for it to be called or seen as a democracy. I go back to Dr. Ambedkar's speech when he starts suggesting a better way forward. He said :

"The third thing we must do is not to be content with mere political democracy. We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate

items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them."

Ambedkar gave us the idea that without liberty, you will have an autocracy. Without equality, you will have an oligarchy - just some people ruling over everyone else. Without true fraternity, you will not have dignity. Therefore, the trinity is essential. Similarly, the trinity of economic, social and political rights is also essential. That is why when the peasants and workers raise the issue of the RTI, they do not do it thinking of just the freedom of expression, which is extremely important under article 19 1(A). However, they go deeper to connect it to economic and social rights. The High Court of Delhi, recognised this in its judgement, ruling that Supreme Court judges must declare their assets. They recognised the conceptual clarity of the grassroots led Indian RTI movement, when they said that the peasants and workers of Rajasthan through their RTI demands had raised not only article 19 1(A) of the Indian Constitution, which is the right to freedom of expression (because you cannot express yourself unless you know), but also the right of live under article 21. If you do not know then you will not get your food or your medicine, or employment. You might lose your land under land acquisition to some project, and not be able to secure your rights, or you might not understand why and how a certain policy that affects you is being changed. You, as a citizen are the sovereign in a democracy, but without full access to information, you will not be able to become an equal participant in a democracy. And the judges -AP Shah, and Muralidharan, also said that it is linked to the right to equality under article 14 of the Indian Constitution: if you do not know, you may not be given equal treatment under the law, and you cannot even protest. You will not know who is getting preferential treatment, who are getting all the jobs, postings, how assets are used

up, monetization, or demonetisation. In every single major transaction there is a need for our Right to Information. So it is essential for us to know, as informed, participating citizens making informed choices. It is vital to not just be able to express ourselves but also be able to live and feel the sense of dignity and liberty.

RTI is commonly, and quite rightly seen in terms of being an effective anti corruption tool. But unfortunately its vast array of applications is far less explored. Even as an anti- corruption tool, it is proving to have limited effect, because often, the state does not act on the information gained out of RTI even with proof. Naming and shaming, got many things corrected. But this is not enough; there is a need for accountability. There also is a need to shift from a regime where information is extracted, to a regime where information has to be shared. All the information and data needs to be proactively placed in the public domain. There is a need to engage with the media and to force the government to put in a structure of public audit or social audit. 'Hamara Paisa Hamara Hisab' is not merely about Right to Information, it is also about accounts and accountability. We did not make a direct connection with Dr. Ambedkar's theory of social democracy at the time the theoretical constructs of social audits, and *jan sunwais* were being framed, but marginalised people feel oppression on their skin, and intrinsically understand where solutions lie. Dr Ambedkar came out with this theory after a lifetime of struggle including in his own life. He fought all along for Dalits, and joined many others to draft a Constitution that would give dignity to everyone. His first-hand experience of the struggles in the lives of the marginalised, possibly helped him understand better what policies needed to be made, rather than someone from the privileged class would have felt.

So I am presenting today, ideas that have come directly from common people and not the renowned ones. It is the ordinary citizen who most stoutly defends the real idea of democracy. There is a story I am going to tell: about the time when the idea of social accountability started making sense to us. There was a Jan Lokpal movement to try and end corruption. But there were different views on what type of Lokpal Bill there should be. Some of us felt very strongly that the RTI gave power to

question authority, and by demanding an answer from them, the common citizen could help dismantle the concentration of power. It gave power to the individual who asked the question. Whoever had to answer was accountable to the person asking the question. This was written into the law. If the officers concerned did not answer, they would have to pay a penalty. It was the first time, by law, that the officer was accountable to a common citizen who was asking the question, and the officer had to pay from his pocket if he did not answer.

In 2011, there was a group of Dalit youth, working with us to fight Dalit atrocities in Bhilwara District. They were students from local schools and colleges. There were social atrocities, social boycotts, and violence when the youth started raising these issues. These youth came to us and invited us for Ambedkar Jayanti. We agreed, but we asked them what should be in an "accountability to the people" law, and what was their idea of 'social accountability'. They came up with what is now described as the Bhilwara Principles of social accountability. Here are the six principles which have entered into the Institutions of accountability in India and outside.

- First of all they said '*Hume jankari chahiye*' or 'we want information', so that we know what rights are bestowed upon us. We want to get the information that will make a difference in our lives. They gave examples through the Atrocities Act.
- Secondly, they said, we want a hearing. This means I must be heard out fully. And my petition must get a dated acknowledgement receipt.
- Thirdly they said, even if you get a hearing, there is no guarantee of action. We need a speaking order
- Fourthly there is no participation of the complainant during the entire process of enquiry, which does not help in reaching the truth.
- Fifthly they said that attacks are often carried out on the people making the complaint so another big problem is safety. This can be ensured in part, through a whistle blower protection act. This is currently passed by Parliament, but not being implemented.

- Finally, we added that there is a need for Janta Ka Manch where everything can be discussed in the open. Where freedom of expression, the dignity of the individual, and dissent is protected. Where social accountability acquires real meaning.

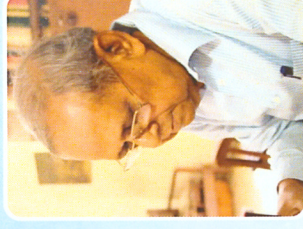
The "Bhilwara Principles of Social Accountability" have entered the auditing standards of Comptroller and Auditor General's office.. These are the first, social audit standards made anywhere in the world. The social accountability law that the government of Rajasthan has promised also has these principles explicitly mentioned in the report prepared by the government appointed committee to draft a law.

Each one of the Principles can be illustrated in more detailed practice. The first principle is there in the RTI law, and has been further illustrated through the Jansoochna website of the government of Rajasthan. A 100 day *Jawabdehi Yatra*, (an Accountability Yatra) in 2016, taken out through all 33 districts in the State, ended with a 22 day dharna at the state capital. At the dharna there was a demand that all digitised records hidden behind "admin logins" needed to be put in public domain through a Janta Information System (JIS), rather than just a Management information system (MIS) as is the practice. This (jansoochnaportal.rajasthan.gov.in) is now a reality through a participatory process of "digital dialogue" which takes place between the State, civil society, and the concerned departments every month. The vast scope and popularity of this site is evident from the numbers who have visited and used the site and its information. There have been almost 10 crore site visits, and just under 8 crore information downloads. This has now started spreading to other states. A similar approach was undertaken in Karnataka, where the state government has studied the process in Rajasthan, copied the formats and resolved to improve on what has been accomplished in Rajasthan.

Today, democracy is threatened in India. Our ideas of Constitutional values are threatened. But people are still fighting hard for "the idea of" India. On the occasion of Biplabda's 75th Birth Anniversary, I invite all of you to come forward in solidarity to protect, build, and strengthen inclusive democracy, A social democracy which is meaningful to the most marginalised person. To work for a democracy where the

economic, social and political rights come together. Where we can fight together for justice and equality and not allow our country to be usurped and taken over. I have described some of the methods, tools and theories that we, as common citizens have built ourselves. The priority today is to think of a way ahead; and that way is for us to get together and to use constitutional principles, truth and justice as the basis of protection and change. It is incredible that we have such a Constitution -a product of freedom struggles where the leadership understood the importance of inclusive values. Those Constitutional values and the Constitution itself is now being hollowed out from within, and attacked from outside. We need to support the Indian Constitution, which is the fundamental basis of what the Indian nation stands for.

Shri Manabendra Nath Mondal



Shri Manabendra Nath Mondal, advocate at the Supreme Court of India has been working relentlessly and selflessly for many decades in the field of Human Rights. He is associated with Department Of Human Rights, University of Calcutta as a guest lecturer. He has inspired many youths to engage and contribute in the field of social development and has encouraged them to instill in themselves the values of selfless

voluntarism. He is the Executive Director at Socio Legal Aid Research & Training Centre, Vice-Chairman at West Bengal Gandhi Peace Foundation, National Coordinator of Action Against Trafficking & Sexual Exploitation of Children, India (ATSEC India), Chairperson of ATSEC South Asia and Joint Secretary at Gandhi Memorial Committee, West Bengal. He is the life member at SAARC Law, Asiatic Society and Indian Law Institute. He has always been active in advocating for the citizen's rights and has received National Citizens Award from the hands of Mother Teresa. He was selected by a committee under the Chairmanship of Justice P N Bhagwati, Chief Justice, Supreme Court of India. He has also received Raj Kumari Amtri Kaur Gold Medal for Humanitarian services awarded by the Hon'ble President of India. Shri Manabendra Nath Mondal has organised protests in front of several consulates in Kolkata on behalf of Gandhi Peace Foundation not to support Pakistan. The team to hand over the memorandum included Maitreyee Devi, Prof. Gouri Ayub, Man Kumar Sen, Rabindra Mukhopadhyay, himself and others. He is known for his remarkable contribution to the society through his philanthropic activities. He has worked for rehabilitation of Andhra People

Cyclone and tidal wave victim where nearly 30 thousand people died on Behalf of Indian Red Cross Society. He has helped ONEGA operation team (Members were from U.K., America) and others to cross the Bangladesh Border at Bongaon. This was the first Foreigners team to enter Bangladesh to collect news. During his long association in the field he has become respectable member to many renowned organizations like National Action & Coordination Group, End Violence Against Children, India (SAIEVAC, SAARC), National Council Tarun Shanti Sena under the leadership of Narayan Desai / Jayprakash Narayan, Niwano Peace Foundation (Japan), Asia Committee, Friends of Bangladesh, South Asia Committee, Founded by Sri Jayprakash Narayan formed during Bangladesh freedom movement, Cyprus Resettlement Project supported by United Nations Secretary General for Peace Building in Cyprus and developing Communal Harmony in Cyprus representing Tarun Shanti Sena where he was welcomed by the Hon'ble President of Cyprus Arch Bishop Makarios. His lifelong struggle towards fighting for the rights of the deprived is worthy of appreciation.

Shri Snehasis Sur



Shri Snehasis Sur is a Sr. Journalist working in Doordarshan News at Kolkata. He is a Media Educator and associated with various Universities and National level Media Institutions. He is an empanelled Media Trainer with Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU), Kualalampur and conducted training programmes in different countries.

He had covered several important assignments in different parts of the country and accompanied many Prime Ministers in their foreign visits. He has authored several books and lectured in many international conferences. He was part of different journalists' delegations to travel abroad. He has received several awards for journalistic excellence. He is the President of Press Club, Kolkata. He is known for his valuable contribution in strengthening fourth pillar of democracy and for his selfless contribution and commitments towards citizen's rights.

Ms. Pankti Yog



Ms. Pankti Yog is the Executive Secretary at Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahel (MAGP). She is originally from Goa and did her Masters in Physics and post master Research in Physical Oceanography. She started working with National Institute of Oceanography, Goa. But on the other hand she wanted to join social development work since college days. Career and passion were different and thus she was in a

dilemma. After the massive Earthquake of 2001, in Kutch, she left her job and got associated with an org. JANPATH, a state level network of voluntary org in Gujarat. She handled the programme called Social Rehabilitation of Children and got introduced to Right Based Work in a real sense. Ms. Pankti is known for her rich contribution in advancing Right to Information for empowering poor. Huge corruption and unaccountability of the state of Gujarat in Earthquake and later during 2002 Riots got all like minded people to come together to form Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahel to demand RTI in Gujarat in 2002-2003.

Meanwhile NCPRI had already emerged and she joined NCPRI to demand for a central Act. She actively participated in conventions and consultations for the Act. Once the Act was in place, they decided to facilitate it's implementation so that common citizens, marginal communities can use it to get info and accountability. Her core activities include the introduction of and RTI helpline 9924085000 which since 12th may 2006 responds 50 to 60 calls per day and has answered queries from Gujarat, Maharashtra, HP, MP, Rajasthan, WB, Punjab, UP, Haryana, JK. Next is RTI on Wheels which is a Multimedia vehicle that acts like RTI ambulance and

creates awareness, info dissemination about proactive disclosures, and also helping citizen to draft RTI. RTI on wheels have conducted campaigns in Rajasthan, HP, Goa, Maharashtra, JK etc. in collaboration with local RTI activists or org. It has been listed as one of the "Best Practices" by GoI book on RTI published in 2015. Third is the Saturday Legal Clinic which is a Weekly guidance clinic that offers one to one guidance for citizens on "How to draft RTI application" or first appeal. So far it has handled over 10,000 cases. Both RTI helpline and Legal Clinics are used by PIO to seek guidance on RTI. MAGP conducts training programme on RTI to citizens, especially to marginalized communities. So far it has taken over 1500 training sessions. MAGP has developed useful material on RTI like user manuals, Formats for Proactive disclosures at village level, compilation of RTI related GRs, compilation of Success stories of RTI etc. MAGP has a blog which is also very popular and has over 23230 - posts and over 8 lakh visitors - www.mahitiadhikar.blogspot.com. This blogs collates all RTI news across india, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh (which are published in newspaper) every day and publishes it. It also has a search option, so that any person can get subject wise RTI stories on one platform. Through its wide and deep experience on applying RTI for grass root issues, it has developed some techniques like "Mass RTI application" where in large number of citizens file RTI application one particular issue, which gets system's attention, larger society also becomes aware, mobilization for that issue becomes easier, and gaps, misappropriation/ corruption around the issue gets highlighted. Many Ready to use RTI applications, which helps citizens to draft sharp, to the point RTI application on ration, pension, Panchayati Raj, Food Security, land matters etc. which are used widely. Ms. Pankti thereby encourages and inspires many in demanding the information they wish to know and thereby aids in the building of a transparent democracy and holding the government accountable.

Smt. Umashashi Maity



Smt. Umashashi Maity was born in a middle class family of five sisters and one younger brother. It was hard to make both ends meet. She lost her father at a young age and her studies stopped at 10th standard only as their financial conditions started to deteriorate. She got married at 1973 and gave birth to her first son in 1976 after the death of the child in 1979 she became mentally unstable. It was the turning point of her life. In 1983 she underwent for a house mother training at "Sarada Ramkrishna Sishu 'o' Mahila Sevashram" without any stipend. There she got help & assistance from Shri Jagadish Mondal, Br. Tararani Chakraborty, Br. Bina Das & Rina Das and others. At the time of staying in Ashram she was introduced to Mr. S. K. Chakraborty (Kakababu), RDC Sri Pannalal Dasgupta (Kakababu) & TSRD Sri Biplab Halim of IMSE. These great social activists, reformer and fighter against social evils gave their advice and blessings. There she was trained in Hobby Loom, Hand Loom, Fruit Preservation etc.

In the meantime her husband Mr. Nikhil Ranjan Maity started engaging in social work with various organization and on 5th may 1988 He joined IMSE. Mr. Maity also took Smt. Umashashi Maity to IMSE and was appointed by IMSE. Days went by and Smt. Umashashi Maity took more responsibility of the organization and got appointed as the superintendent of IMSE PITRIALAY Short Stay Home at Malancha in Singhi of Purba Burdwan district. Women of age group 15 to 35 were sent to the short stay home. Smt. Umashashi Maity with had the skills and looked after them. She is working till today for those helpless women. The PITRIALAY Short Stay Home

also has a handloom unit for producing Katha Stich sarees which was run by the inmates under her supervision. Some of the women also joined in Nursing training, some women were rehabilitated by marriage and some of them went back to their parents or husbands. She tried her best to help in these processes with the help of others staffs from local and Kolkata office. She is a mother figure to the inmates and they lovingly call her "Bardi". She is a woman of strong will power and practices the ethos of selfless voluntarism very seriously. She is a duty full administrator for organizational works and her uncompromised attitude against all evils are remarkable. As per her own version she availed these qualities from the heads of the organizations mostly from Late Biplab Halim, Ex-executive Director of IMSE and Lily Halim, Chairperson of IMSE. She considers IMSE as an extension of her own family. We respect her loyalty and dedication towards her work, the organization and service to mankind. These qualities will encourage voluntary work force.

Mr. Mahanada Halder



Mr. Mahanada Halder has been working for 28 years to help people understand the difference between manifestation and development. He believes that the concept of development is mostly related to the physical world. When people talk about development, they only mean the development of the roads, hospitals, houses, economical status etc.

Because in now days, the only meaning of the development is nothing but the infrastructural development. People never talk about their own life. Throughout his life journey, he has realized that the parameter of a good life or the human perspective for living a better life has been changed in these days. This realization drives him to reach out those people who are deviating from the ideal path of the life just to achieve some physical comfort. Without considering the age, gender, caste or religion, he started motivating people in various ways. But as much as he started involving himself in the various communities, he found that all the people are talking about the right that means that the people are quite aware of this concept but what people are not trying to adopt is the concept of "responsibility". Because if people only fight for their rights and do not consider their individual responsibilities, the society will become imbalanced in the near future. Being a social worker Mr. Mahanada Halder has dedicated his life to build a society where people will realize the true values of life and are responsible enough to help others to achieve the same.

“ Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights. ”

- Thomas Jefferson

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