

# India: The unchecked attacks on RTI activists reveal India's democracy's decline

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**A series of unchecked attacks on Right to Information (RTI) activists undermines the “liberty of thought and expression” and therefore constitutes an assault on the very Preamble of the Indian Constitution which guarantees this fundamental right to every Indian. Attacks on RTI activists are undermining the very constitutional rights of Indian citizens that the government is ought to protect.**

In the second week of November 2021, journalist and RTI activist Avinash Jha alias Buddhi Nath Jha was abducted in the Madhubani district of [Bihar](#). He had filed applications under the RTI Act and had written articles against illegal clinics in his area. Subsequently, [Jha was murdered](#) and his body was left in a nearby bush.

Jha, just 23 years old, was inspired by democratic values like many young journalists in India. Eight illegal private nursing homes were searched after his complaints, while four clinics were fined Rs 50,000 each. The government, whether of Bihar or the one at the Union, remains silent over the systemic attacks on RTI activists like Jha.

This raises a question mark over the functioning of democracy in India. Such attacks on RTI activists are not merely a long-term threat to democracy but are also a definitive indication that democracy in India is heading into a prolonged period of decline.

But first, let's look at the nature of the attacks on RTI activists. These attacks shed light on different sectors of Indian society. In Jha's case, the attack was carried out by a medical mafia. The term “mafia” is used generally for organised criminal syndicates. Its use in the context of attacks on RTI activists indicates that, in this case, those who are into the noble profession of running hospitals and nursing homes, are also involved in running organised criminal syndicates.

In 2017, it was due to the efforts of the lone RTI activist Mahender Kumar that government officials admitted that [224 illegal clinics and nursing homes](#) were running in Gurgaon, right next to the national capital. In the Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh, an RTI activist, [Tahir Khan](#), was killed for his campaign against quacks running illegal dental hospitals.

Similarly, the media has been reporting the existence of a sand mafia in different regions of India, known especially for killing RTI activists. In February 2020, a 40-year-old RTI activist, Ranjan Kumar Das, was killed in the Kendrapada district of Odisha. He was the convenor of the district unit of Suchana Adhikar Abhijan, a non-governmental organisation. [According to a media report](#), social workers noted that Das was killed because he had “raised his voice against illegal sand quarrying and brick kiln owners”.

In the Bikram area of Bihar's Patna, RTI activist Pankaj Kumar was killed in 2020 after he launched a campaign against illegal sand mining. Two senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officers, several Deputy Superintendents of Police (DSPs), police inspectors and other government officials were

suspended due to their alleged complicity in the [corruption involving sand mining](#) in Bhojpur, Aurangabad and Bikram. Kumar's murder shows that often those charged with running democracy in India are involved in the attacks on RTI activists.

Medical and sand mining are not the only sectors where RTI activists are unprotected. In Mumbai, [Bhupendra Vira](#), a 72-year-old RTI activist, was murdered after he spoke against several illegal constructions and exposed the local land mafia.

In Gujarat, [Babu Ram Chauhan](#), a school teacher and RTI activist, was attacked by the land mafia after he exposed them for land grabbing and depriving farmers of their land. In the East Champaran district of Bihar, [RTI activist Vipin Agrawal](#) was killed by the land mafia after he exposed encroachment of government land leading to the demolition of illegal constructions.

Similarly, RTI activists highlighting environmental causes or corruption in limestone mining too face threats to life. For example, in Madhya Pradesh, [Shehla Masood](#), an RTI activist and an environmentalist also associated with Anna Hazare's India against corruption was killed. In the Gir region of Gujarat 36-year-old RTI activist [Amit Jethava](#) was killed for his campaign against illegal limestone mining.

In the Shravasti district of Uttar Pradesh, an RTI activist [Zakir Siddique](#) was killed for seeking information regarding development works undertaken by panchayat officials. In the Mau district of [Uttar Pradesh](#), an RTI activist, [Bal Govind Singh](#), was killed for exposing corruption in village panchayat.

The above examples show that RTI activists belong to all age groups, are inspired by a democratic spirit to unearth hidden information, are active in all sectors of our society, and are doing it at considerable risk to their life. Commenting on the difficult situation faced by them, social scientists [Christophe Jaffrelot and Basim U Nissa](#) observe, "The RTI activists fight for their rights and/or those of others, but they are hardly protected by the police and judiciary."

In the current situation, it is the RTI activists who, more than mainstream journalists, perform the role of journalism at the grassroots. Regular attacks on RTI activists reveal that a new form of censorship has been taking roots in India, therefore weakening the functioning of the Indian democracy. Even the present government is routinely denying information sought by RTI activists and is blocking information. In 2020, three environmental groups found their websites blocked by the Indian government; these groups are [Fridays For Future India, Let India Breathe and There Is No Earth B](#).

The RTI Act came into force in 2005. Since 2010, at least [20 RTI activists were murdered in Bihar](#) alone as of November 2021. The correct and updated figure for the murder of RTI activists across India is not available. The government does not maintain a record of attacks on RTI activists. However, according to the data compiled on the [AttacksOnRTIusers.org website](#), which is maintained by an NGO called Commonwealth Human Rights Initiatives, there were at least [465 attacks on RTI activists](#) as of November 12, 2021.

The RTI activists are the backbone of democracy and a bulwark against all forms of censorship at the grassroots level. To check the decline of democracy in India, it's imperative to ensure that RTI activists are sufficiently protected. Some ideas must be discussed.

1. There is a need for a national body of RTI activists which should work for their protection.
2. The Union and States should be pressured to issue government passes, like the press ID cards given to journalists, to active RTI activists because they too function like journalists.

3. NGOs should bring the issues faced by RTI activists on the agenda of political parties, thereby creating a social movement for their rights.
4. The governments, both at the Union and in the States, should pass laws for the protection of RTI activists like the specialised laws on violence against women and ostracised Dalits and tribal people.
5. The academic departments, especially political science departments, in various universities should sponsor research on the issues involving RTI activists because attacks on them pose a long-term threat to the democracy in India.

By building a safe environment for them to function and by ending the attacks on RTI activists India can harness its democratic spirit and promote inquisitive minds that can enhance the scope of investigative journalism. Unless the RTI activists, like investigative journalists, are protected, legally and socially, the country's abysmal fall into a reign of tyranny aided by a strong censorship regime can't be stopped.

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People's Review

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