

Rural Community Empowerment Initiative

Educating Uttarakhand
on RTI and Government Schemes



Need for RTI



Fig.1 RTI Session

Problem & Objective

The project sought to address three interlinked challenges:

- **Low civic awareness about rights and entitlements.**
- **Administrative fear and dependency on middle-men.**
- **Digital illiteracy that prevent citizens from completing imperative processes like Aadhaar-linked KYC, DBT applications, or pension renewals.**

The main objective we had before starting this programme was to develop a replicable, student-led model of civic education that broke down complex government processes into micro-modules that everyone could understand. The aim of the initiative was to shift from awareness to action, on the way making sure that the right to information resulted in the right to opportunity.

Background & Rationale

The Right to Information Act (2005) is still India's most revolutionary act of legislation, guaranteeing citizens access to governance and accountability. Almost two decades later, however, a significant portion of India's rural population remains unaware of how to exercise this right.

In the semi-rural outskirts of Dehradun, villages such as Suddhowala, Jhajhra, and surrounding hamlets, during initial visits, revealed common narratives of bewilderment, misplaced documents, and quiet acceptance of bureaucracy. A great number of residents were qualified for welfare schemes like pensions, rations, subsidised gas connections etc... yet were short of procedural or digital literacy to access them.

While the urban populations increasingly interact with digital portals and grievance mechanisms, the same systems exclude those without access to smartphones, language skills, or digital confidence. The lack of direct civic instruction in rural schools or community centres expands this gap.

This Rural Community Empowerment Initiative, Chai pe Charcha, was thus conceived to translate the RTI Act into not just a statute, but into a way of life, something that is both accessible, teachable, and replicable in the community.

Designing the Intervention



Fig.1 View of Suddhowala from above

Volunteers

I organized and implemented workshops to train five new volunteers each month, which led to a pool of 25 trained student facilitators. Three students from Welham Girls' School were initially worked with, paving the way for cross-institutional collaboration as well as gender diversity.

Volunteers were taught how to take surveys, help with form filling, and make digital processes easier for seniors. Training went from being observed to self-facilitation over time: an adaptive mentorship model in which each volunteer went on to train others.

Expert Guidance

I approached a lawyer neighbour for mentorship, whose advice on the RTI Act technicalities imbued substance and credibility into our toolkits. Their advice to learn from the RTI Manual of Uttarakhand influenced the design of our toolkits. I also joined the RTI Club of Uttarakhand, which gave us access to live case studies and ensured our study materials aligned with actual procedural expectations.

Target Area and Approach

The pilot project was rolled out in several villages on the outskirts of Dehradun, such as Suddhowala, Jhajhra, and surrounding rural clusters, identified by survey results showing low RTI awareness and lack of access to local administrative buildings. The area's geographic proximity to Dehradun represented a good testing ground for replicable civic education models that could subsequently be expanded further into rural Uttarakhand.

The focal point of the program was a community engagement model called "Chai Par Charcha", Talks over Tea. The concept was straightforward: substantive conversations do not require podiums; they require familiarity. Little, informal groups within the courtyard or tea stalls turned into centres of learning wherein villagers were heard and the same as equals.

Every session focused on a single idea, like how to file an RTI, the government schemes applicable for agriculture, or correcting KYC information. The sessions were also supported by visual material, sample RTI forms, and simple Hindi hand-outs that did not include legal terminology.

Tools Used

- Micro-Modules: 20-30-minute visual lessons on RTI basics, steps to file, appeal processes, and real case studies.
- Toolkits: Each participant received a small folder containing RTI form templates, flowcharts of schemes, and contact details of local officers.
- Brochures in Hindi: Illustrated leaflets explaining common entitlements, ration cards, pension schemes, and health insurance.
- Community Logbooks: Maintained by volunteers to document issues raised, status of applications, and progress updates.

Findings and Observations

Baseline Insights

Initial surveys and informal interviews across 50 households revealed that:

- Only 1 in 10 villagers knew the term “RTI.”
- Many thought RTI applications were only meant for “severe issues” like scams.
- Around 80% of respondents had faced delays or denials in accessing welfare schemes due to missing paperwork or lack of knowledge.
- 1 in 6 pradhans reluctant to conduct sessions.



Post-Sessions Insights

After six months of structured engagement, the shift was visible:

- Over 70% of participants reported confidence in filling out welfare or RTI forms.
- Digital literacy improved significantly with villagers beginning to navigate online KYC and banking processes themselves.
- Panchayat offices noted an increase in direct citizen visits and RTI submissions, reflecting growing trust in self-advocacy.
- A significant attitude improvement in the neighbouring pradhans towards RTI sessions.

Common Challenges

- Digital Divide: Older citizens found online RTI portals intimidating. Solutions included volunteer sessions using shared devices.
- Gender Gap: Women initially hesitated to attend discussions. Conducting sessions at midday in open courtyards increased participation.
- Authority Anxiety: Many feared confrontation with officials. Role-playing exercises and success stories helped dispel this fear.
- Certain Pradhans feared villagers using RTI for unnecessary reasons to trouble them, citing as a reason for not allowing us to conduct our sessions there, this barred us from helping upto 10 villages

Stories

Case 1 – Dignity Restored: A Jhajhra widow successfully reopened her pension account after years of inactivity, facilitated by a student volunteer during a clinic session.

Case 2 – Inclusion through Finance: A farmer was given his delayed Kisan Samman Nidhi benefits after volunteers assisted him in completing his digital verification process.

Case 3 – Mobilisation of Youth: Local youth started helping the elderly read and write Hindi forms, taking the initiative to reach out organically.

These stories captured what statistics alone could not: the emotional reassurance of feeling seen and heard by one's own community.

Impact and Outcomes

Outcomes

Qualitative

- Behavioural Change: A change from passive acceptance to active questioning.
- Confidence in Governance: People started attending panchayat meetings, carrying papers and seeking clarifications.
- Sustainability: Trained students kept conducting "Chai Par Charcha" sessions autonomously monthly.
- Language Accessibility: Simple toolkits brought legal knowledge within reach, even for semi-literate villagers.

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Quantitative

- 25 trained volunteers (5 new each month).
- Over 300 villagers directly reached through workshops and field sessions.
- More than 50 successful RTI or welfare applications filed and tracked.
- 60% increase in participants able to operate basic digital platforms.
- Reduction in dependency on intermediaries for form-related assistance.

Implications

The project shows how, if young people are civic intermediaries, information gets in a way 'infrastructural'. By making awareness a habit, students are facilitated to make citizens co-participants in governance instead of mere recipients.

Additionally, the replicability of the project opens the door to institutional alliances since schools, NGOs, and local governments can incorporate similar micro-modules in community development programs.

Quotes

“Earlier, I would wait months and keep asking people to fix my ration card. But now, after learning to do it, I filled the RTI thing myself, and got my ration in only 2 weeks.”

-Kamla Devi, 52, Jhajhra Village

“My son used to do all the online stuff, but after these sessions, I can check my pension and use phone to track. Finally I do something on my own.”

-Shanti Devi, 60, Villager and Widow
Beneficiary

“When a villager said she'd filed her first RTI, it didn't feel like teaching, it felt like watching something helpful in democracy happen in real life.”

-Student Volunteer, Chai Par Charcha Initiative

The Road Ahead

Future Plans

Drawing on the groundwork of this project, I intend to scale up "Chai Par Charcha" into a systematic civic education model that can be replicated across rural and semi-urban India. The second step is to digitise the toolkit employed in the workshops, converting it into an interactive, bilingual portal through which students and villagers can access RTI templates, guides, and training modules. This will make the project available outside of physical sessions, enabling more individuals to learn to file applications and claim entitlements on their own.

In order to make it sustainable, I plan to partner with the RTI Club of Uttarakhand and local panchayats to set up student-run civic desks that continuously help villagers and monitor welfare scheme progress. Institutionalising youth engagement in governance from the ground level is capable of converting civic education into an ongoing community-driven process instead of a one-shot exercise.

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of a one-shot exercise. I also plan to perform a comparative analysis examining how online participation compared to face-to-face conversations influences awareness, self-assurance, and civic action. Knowing this dynamic may assist in the creation of more efficient models of policy outreach and citizen education.

Reflection

Those six months in Uttarakhand's villages taught me that governance is not a mere abstract, it is the daily struggle to make oneself heard. Sitting cross-legged on verandahs, drinking tea with villagers, I realised that democracy starts by talking.

Each unresolved query regarding a lost ration card or undelivered pension was a microcosm of India's larger administrative apparatus, complicated but human. Through these exchanges, I witnessed how laws develop beyond their words, influenced by interpretation, communication, and compassion.

Learning about RTI forms and bureaucratic timetables taught me history not as a dead, frozen past, but as something that breathes with policy. Every document submitted was a step towards writing new, localised chapters of civic engagement, a living record of empowerment.

Acknowledgments

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**THANK
YOU**

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