

How I became an Information Commissioner

Some friends wonder how I have the gall to be critical of the lack of process in selecting Information Commissioners, since they believe I must have resorted to influence and patronage for my selection.

Let me detail the story of how i got selected:

In the first week of August 2008 Arvind Kejriwal learnt that the government had decided on the names of four persons whom they would appoint as Central Information Commissioners. These were:

1. Satyananda Mishra
2. M.L.Sharma
3. Annapurna Dixit
4. R.B.Sreekumar

I believe there is a tacit understanding between the ruling party and the opposition on such matters and overall there is a certain give and take in matters of appointments. Arvind discussed with me that though we had been fighting for appointment of good Commissioners and transparency in the selection process we were not making any headway. He therefore suggested that we propose four names from civil society. We got together a list of credible persons and Arvind arranged to get letters sent to the PM, Advani and Prithviraj Chavan by some prominent civil society members recommending these.

On 20 August Prithviraj Chavan asked for a meeting of the Selection Committee to be called on 21 August at 6.00pm. I have heard that on 20 night the four names were shown to LK Advani. Advani strongly objected to the name of Sreekumar since he had been a senior police officer in Gujarat at the time of the Godhra riots and openly criticized Narendra Modi.

He said he would oppose Sreekumar's selection and said, 'Why not one of the names suggested by civil society?' The selection Committee meeting was not held on 21 August.

I did not know Prithviraj Chavan, nor did he know me. Whether he made any checks about the other three members of our panel I do not know. As for me, he called up a business person in Mumbai and asked him what kind of person I was. This person had never met me, but based on what he had read in the papers he said I would be a good choice. After this Prithviraj Chavan called me and asked me if I would accept if I was selected as a Central Information Commissioner, and I said yes.

On 27 August a meeting was called and my name was put in place of R.B. Sreekumar.

Some of this information is available at http://persmin.gov.in/DOPT/RTICorner/ImpFiles/6_4_2008_IR_Vol_I_Noting.pdf

I can assure all of you, that I did not use any influence or network. It was a random occurrence, but my selection was also without any process and a random occurrence.

The record also shows Asok K Mahaptra's name and I do not have any knowledge of how his name was dropped. I would urge RTI activists who have an understanding of the legal issues of the law to apply for the positions of Information Commissioners. Citizens should put forward names of persons with a background in transparency and build pressure

I would also like to point out two matters as a personal clarification:

I had informed the government that I was paying volunteers to work with me is mentioned on page 22. Whereas in 2007-2008 five Commissioners disposed 7722 cases I alone averaged about 5400 cases per year.

All my emails are in public domain