

When scribes face corruption charges & arrests



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It's shocking to report that a number of Guwahati-based scribes and RTI (right to information) activists have been facing interrogation and even arrest by Assam chief minister's special vigilance cell following the allegations of Sewali Devi Sharma, the prime accused in Rs 105 crore State council of educational research and training (SCERT) scam, as being blackmailers to her in different occasions. The arrestees include a female reporter (identified as Pujamoni Das alias Honey Kashyap, who reportedly took a large volume of money from Ms Sharma) along with a satellite news channel reporter named Bhaskarjoti Hazarika. RTI activists namely Rabijit Gogoi (who pretended to be a journalist) and Maina Saikia alias Anup Saikia were also arrested.

Ms Sharma, IAS (now suspended) revealed that a number of journalists and RTI activists used to blackmail her, and she even paid no less than Rs ten crores to them. She was picked up from the hide out (a hotel in Rajasthan) on 8 May last and brought back to Assam on transit remand. Currently, she is under judicial custody along with nine others, including her son-in-law Ajit Pal Singh, daughter Bijeta Sharma, Rahul Amin, etc. There is a possibility that many more scribes and RTI activists will face the music very soon.

On another front, some city-based television journalists are also alleged to have been involved in the NRC (national register of citizens) updation scam in the state. Though mainstream media has not reported about the scam adequately, the social media users have taken the lead. They made it loud and clear that those corrupt media persons have cheated the people of Assam on a mission to have a correct NRC (under monitoring of the Supreme Court of India).

The controversy began with two FIRs (first information reports), filed by a former state NRC coordinator against his predecessor alleging corruption and money laundering while updating the 1951 NRC in Assam. The then top NRC official Hitesh Devsarma lodged the FIRs against Prateek Hajela (who was appointed as the State NRC coordinator in 2013 following an order of the Supreme Court). Devsarma asserted that a huge financial mismanagement had taken place during Hajela's tenure as the NRC head. Though claimed by Hajela, the released NRC as the final one is yet to be notified by the Registrar General of India. Some Guwahati-based journalists shamelessly propagated (reasons best known to them only) it as the best one and Hajela a super hero bureaucrat.

Hajela is also facing a number of FIRs from different organizations, including Assam Public Works (APW), a key petitioner in the Supreme Court on Assam NRC. Besides Hajela, APW president Sarma also lodged police complaints against Wipro and sent a letter to Azim Premji, chairperson of Wipro Technologies, informing him about the company's unholy role in the NRC updation process. He also urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene on the matter so that guilty individuals are punished under the law. Pointing out that a large amount of money came from foreign countries to influence the system for incorporating thousands of foreigners' names in the list, Sarma insisted on the ED, CBI and NIA probes separately over the matter.

Meanwhile, a well-known Assamese entrepreneur also sued Hajela along with Wipro and Integrated System & Services (worked as the subcontractor and represented by proprietor Utpal Hazarika) for their roles in Rs 155 crores money laundering during the updation process. Luit Kumar Barman, the acclaimed film producer, personally lodged an FIR at Paltan Bazar police station in the city. As his complaint was not entertained by the police station, Barman approached the Kamrup (metropolitan) chief judicial magistrate's court with a plea to direct the police to register his complaint. But the CJM court dismissed the case, citing the reason that it lacks the jurisdiction to investigate the allegations.

In its order on 18 May, it stated that the court had "no jurisdiction to investigate the matter," "no jurisdiction to direct production of the accused' and 'no jurisdiction to punish the accused as per law." The complainant introduced himself as a vigilant Indian citizen against misappropriation of public funds and the court terms the allegation in the nature of public interest litigation which the specific court . has no jurisdiction to try." Hence the prayers of the complainant were rejected, but the court granted Barman the liberty to approach the appropriate forum with jurisdiction to redress' his grievance.

However, the matter was reported by a section of Assamese news channel as if the concerned court had closed the road for justice. The motivated content narrated that the matter would never be heard by any court in India, as the NRC updation process was done under monitoring of the Supreme Court. The complainant has now decided to approach a different court and he believes that the CAG (comptroller and auditor general) report for the year ending on 31 March 2020, where it recommended penal actions against Hajela and Wipro should be honoured. It emerges as a matter of serious concern for everyone in the media fraternity, as some media persons prefer to misreport a serious issue at a time when many others are already behind bars.

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