

## **Subhash Chandra Agrawal – The Change Maker**

The entire nation is buzzing with fight against corruption at high places and areas affecting the common man. There are many unsung heroes silently doing their bit to empower the society in this fight. The 63-year-old Right to Information activist Subhash Chandra Agrawal is one such crusader. He lives with his wife Madhu (61) in Chandni Chowk, Delhi.

Since the RTI Act, 2005, came into force, Agrawal has become the biggest champion of this ‘Transparency Act’ for its use in larger national and public interest by exposing corruption, irregularities and malpractices through his petitions filed with public-authorities, including the Supreme Court.

Whether it was misconduct in higher judiciary, or the 2G Spectrum allocation scam or the Commonwealth Games 2010 scandal, Agrawal’s ‘fingerprints’ exposing them can be found everywhere. His crusade has even made the Chief Justice of India and the apex court accountable.

Agrawal fights untiringly with courage till the final answer is available. So far, about 550 petitions have been filed by him and mostly decided by the Central Information Commission. Almost all the verdicts have gone in his favour.

He is a strategist. He utilizes the power of media to highlight significant exposures revealed through his artistically drafted RTI petitions. Indian newspapers and television channels have been continuously highlighting his single-hand battle against corruption and irregularities.

Interestingly, there are some persons who are doing Ph.D. research on Agrawal for he has become a role model RTI activist and daily contributor to the ‘Letters to the Editor’ column in newspapers since 1967. He holds the Guinness World Record for letter writing. He broke the record earlier held by a Pakistani. His wife Madhu also holds the Guinness World Record for the maximum number of letters to newspapers in a particular calendar year.

Not much is known in the public about this Agrawal husband-wife team. Agrawal runs his family’s old wholesale business of textiles and furnishing. Madhu helps him in attending to a large number of visitors who seek his help in RTI matters. In his words, “Doing business is my duty, while I take letter writing and RTI petitions as my religion of public service.”

There is an interesting tale behind Agrawal’s passion for writing letters to the newspapers. A mechanical engineer from Delhi University (1971), Agrawal is known in

the family for his sharp observations since childhood. This capability made him fire his first 'letter-missile' in a Hindi daily in 1967 after facing an unpleasant experience of 20 Paise ticket-money being pocketed by the conductor of a DTC bus from Mall Road to the Red Fort.

The publication of his first grievance letter to the newspaper led to the DTC authorities visit his college. Fearing that they had come to arrest him for making a complaint against a public servant, he ran away. His friends later told him that the DTC officials wanted the erring conductor to apologize. This made him realize the power of media.

So began his hobby of writing letters to the Editor column across the country daily. An incurable hardening of right hand thumb during adolescence could not snatch his passion for writing. He bought a portable typewriter for Rs. 1,500 to write letters, using single finger as he never learnt formal typing. "Perhaps," he wonders, "I may set a world record in single finger type-writing as well."

Soon after their marriage in 1975, the Agrawal couple took a bold decision of not to have a child. The cheating in family business by his uncle made him rise above the materialistic world and he started liking the philosophy of the Parsi way of life – work for the society, and not for yourself. His wife supported him wholeheartedly.

How powerful the RTI weapon has become in our democracy can be judged by one example: Agrawal was pleasantly surprised when he heard the news some months ago. The then President of India Pratibha Patil – following Agrawal's RTI petition - decided to declare her assets although there is no law to force the First Citizen to do so.

Agrawal has pursued many unusual issues. For example: No beef during October 2010 Commonwealth Games! The Commonwealth Games authorities were forced to announce this following his RTI query. "My application put the games authority on the right track!" he says, laughing.

His note-worthy RTI petitions include wealth declaration by ministers, irregularities in the Padma Shree awards, photo-publicity of political rulers, irregularities in issue of commemorative stamps, gifts received by VVIPs on foreign trips, India Gate canopy, contradictory information in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha on marriage of film actors Dharmendra and Hema Malini, changing bungalow number by retiring Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on his personal whim, terrorist Afzal Guru's name missing from the list of pending mercy petitions. The list is long. He wants the RTI knowledge to be included in school syllabus.

For his both mediums – the RTI applications and letters to the Editor – Agrawal says: "No subject is too trivial – small-small corrections in the society can make a big difference." Certainly, Agrawal can be described as: *The Change Maker*.

