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Title: Need to protect the lives of RTI activists in the country.

SHRI BHARTRUHARI MAHTAB (CUTTACK): Mr. Chairman, Sir, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to raise a very important matter.

I would like to draw the attention of the House, especially the attention of the hon. Minister for Parliamentary Affairs who is present in this House today relating to a very sad incident and a very important issue that is before our country today.

Shri Niyamat Ansari, an activist monitoring the use of NREGS funds in Jharkhand was murdered after he unearthed a massive embezzlement of funds. This is, probably, the fifth NREGS-related murder for the last four years. Most of the victims are whistleblowers. In India, whistle-blowing is becoming a risky proposition. Today, the right to information is guaranteed by law but, at least, 10 RTI activists have been killed in the last two years who were trying to exercise this right.

One may state that in a horrible, tragic way the RTI activists are working and starting to hurt the corrupt.

The Government of India had, on 26th of August last year, introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha to expand the definition of whistle blowers to cover anyone who makes a disclosure of public interest. Hitherto, it was only a public servant who could be a whistle blower. This Bill was introduced after the murder of the environmentalist Amit Jethava who had been campaigning to protect the Gujarat Gir Lion Reserve. In January, Vithal Geeta of Aurangabad was killed for exposing major irregularities in private schools in Maharashtra. In February last year, Arun Sawant was killed in Thane while Shashidhar Mishra was shot dead in Begusarai.

There is an urgent need to protect the whistle blowers and those exercising the RTI to unearth wrongdoing. That can only happen at a political level. Unless political parties put their organisational strength behind the activists, they cannot go about their task fearlessly. This may sound contradictory because locally vocal people and so-called elites are nearly always behind corrupt rackets. But since politics abhors a vacuum, there will always be a political force opposed to the corrupt one.

Let us not forget that political empowerment emancipates and mobilisation for RTI is a means to empowerment. It is high time the Government comes out urgently with a legislative mechanism to protect the whistle blowers. I would request the Parliamentary Affairs Minister to, at least, respond to this issue because this Bill is pending. Of course, there have been exigencies because this Bill could not be placed before the House in this Session. But I would like to get an assurance from the Minister if he can respond now. If it is not possible to bring this Bill in this Session, it should be brought in the ensuing Session at least because this Bill expands the definition of whistle blowers with the result more and more people can get protection from this measure.