Amidst socio-political and economic pulls and pressures there is a move towards institutional change in the welfare regime in India. This institutional change marks a departure from the earlier framework of targeted schemes and policies of welfare which can be withdrawn, towards a pattern of granting legal rights to the citizens under constitutional provisions. For example, right to livelihood under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, legal right to demand greater transparency and accountability in governance under Right to Information Act and legal right to education which is granted under Right to Education Act add weight to this view.

Interest based arguments though partially explain the presence or lack of welfare, fail to explain the dynamics or nature of institutional change. I wish to explore the interaction between new ideas and social processes that can offer an explanation for the gradual rise in citizen concern in India.

In this light the current study seeks to chart out the processes that produced institutional change and the nature of that change by examining the case of Right to Information Act (RTIA) in India. The study seeks to capture the why and how of institutional change by examining three central questions. First, what explains the institutional change? Second, how did institutional change come about? And third, what is the extent and reach of institutional change in terms of deepening democracy and development?

While capturing the socio-political processes of institutional change, study aims to verify the possibility of the role of ideas contributing towards institutional change. This would also entail examining the process of ‘norm diffusion’ at the local level by tracing the journey of ideas as norms, being adopted as rights and as concrete policies leading to institutional change. While tracing the journey of institutional change, this study proposes a nuanced perspective of exploring the role of interface between state and the social networks working in tandem as change agents. In addition to the national level narrative, two comparative states would be selected as units of analysis. This will widen the scope of the study with the inclusion of ‘post-policy’ implementation of the RTI Act.

About the Speaker
Himanshu Jha is a doctoral candidate in the South Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore. Jha’s current research interest is to explore the processes of institutional change by looking in-depth at the evolution of Right to Information Act in India. As a part of his doctoral work he wishes to trace the institutional journey of ideas taking shape of norms, being adopted as rights and finally as concrete policies.

Jha holds a Bachelor with Honors in History from University of Delhi, Masters in Political Science from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and an M. Phil in Public Policy from Australian National University (ANU), Canberra. Prior to his doctoral engagement he was working in developmental sector in India. Jha’s most recent work is a blend of academic and social research with active advocacy at various policy levels.