

Right to Information Act - An Imperative Need

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The public authorities have internalized corruption in their blood. It is inherited by the next generation. Question is how to seek a clean, honest and transparent governance in the present situation. Thanks to the sustained grassroots campaign and political will on the part of the Government that the long awaited Right to Information Act, 2005 got the ratification of both the Houses of Parliament on 12th May, and came into force from 12th October, 2005.

India is now one of the 55 countries that have comprehensive laws to protect the citizens' right to information. This Right is in line with the doctrine of democracy and also a suitable response to the relentless efforts and mass mobilization in favour of a comprehensive Central Act providing access to information.

It has been realized by most of the countries through experience that greater access of the citizens to information enhances the responsiveness of government to community needs. In turn, this facility speeds up the redressal of public grievances and thus improves feeling of goodwill towards the government. On the other hand, restrictions to the free flow of information results in feeling of 'powerlessness' and 'alienation' among the citizens. Concealing information makes the government machinery less accountable and therefore more prone to misuse of the power.

It has been noticed that poverty and ignorance makes the people powerless. People especially the ignorant villagers always live a life of fear of the government bureaucrats and politicians. Ignorant of their rights they pay bribes to get a job done in the public office. They do not know that even a beggar on the street pays tax when he buys anything like a matchbox or a piece of soap. The government spends so much money on various developmental works but they do not ask out of fear that how much is actually spent and on what it is spent. Actually a number of works exist only on papers. So government personnel and contractors are left scot free. They are not accountable for any thing.

At a personal level I tried to pull out the villagers from such fear psychosis and ignorance and to empower them to fight for ensuring their right. I applied for some information to the Public Information Officer, Nimapara Block, in the Puri District. The information was received and when I was just giving up all hope lo ! and behold ! the reply arrived on the 29th day regarding a certain amount of public money, which had never been reported. It was evident that it had been misappropriated. When I applied for the information I also wanted the name of the person in whose name the work order was issued. But deliberately the PIO did not give me that

information. I had then several ways open to expose the matter. I gave this news to the news papers, called a public meeting in the village and informed the people, public petitions were sent to appropriate authorities like District Magistrate and Collector, Puri, Superintendent of Police, Vigilance to investigate the matter, Chief Justice, Orissa High Court requesting him to consider the matter as a public interest litigation and examine the subject and a complaint case in the court of the Lokpal, Orissa. I await appropriate investigation and full information.

If this small attempt of mine to test the act and the system succeeds I can visualize what changes will take place in my village.

1. People will be encouraged to be conscious and discuss the Act.
2. They will attempt to access the information regarding the working of the system itself and already several applications have been filed.
3. Corrupt officials will become conscious of
 - (a) Grievances of the general public
 - (b) Preventing unnecessary delay in the movement of files.
 - (c) Taking bribes with impunity
 - (d) Being discouraged to attempt any illegal work e.g. distribution of Indira Awas Yojana houses in Nimapara block.

Many a time the people have pending work with the government departments. The bureaucrats really do not work on the file the way they are expected to act on it. Even if the grievances / petitions are filed to the higher authorities the matter is simply ignored. The Right to Information Act is then the most effective weapon to redress the issue. Simply demanding

to know the status of the work and name of the officials responsible for pending the work will force them to act. The officials have to give in writing the name of the person responsible to harass the people and the reason for the delay. Most of the time the files are held up without any reason. In that case they have to dig their own well to be drowned.

By compelling the state and central government to appoint Information Commissioners, empowering these Commissioners to act as appellate authorities and by vesting them with the powers of a civil court, these bodies have been given the teeth to discourage public authorities from refusing to part with information. The provisions of the Act require authorities to respond to queries within 30 days or in as less as 48 hours if it is a matter of life and liberty. However, real change can come only when the people of this country hold their government and public servants accountable, so that they are forced to respond to the poorest citizen of this land. And when that happen, no public servant or government would dare to be corrupt, inefficient or insensitive.

Transparency in the Indian system of governance has not been up to the desirable level till now. Several factors have contributed to this situation.

A) Traditionally, there has been a pervasive culture of secrecy in the system of government that is compounded by some provisions of the Officials Secret Act.

B) Moreover, low levels of literacy and lack of awareness amongst the general masses restrict information flow in India.

C) Absence of reliable and effective communication tools for storage and dissemination of information is also an encumbrance in the free

flow of information. In many government departments, the standard of record keeping is not up to the mark. Access to information is thus denied in many cases on the pretext that record is either irretrievable or 'misplaced'.

However this Act is defined as an "*Act of transparent governance*". I feel that it is actually an "*Act of the poor*". Despite all the shortcomings and lacunae in the Act and the state rules it can surely help to ensure the rights of the poor. Since the RTI has been put into force let it find its feet. Let us first see how it works and then modifications

like payments to access information, simpler application forms, acceptance of alternative modes of payment e.g. Indian Postal Order, government stamps etc. can be suggested. We are after all seeking transparent, responsible and accountable governance.

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NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON "AYURVEDA IN 21ST CENTURY" INAUGURATED BY GOVERNOR

Governor Rameshwar Thakur today inaugurated a symposium and seminar on "Ayurveda in 21st Century" on 22nd February at May Fair Lagoon Hotels, Bhubaneswar. The symposium has organised by Shree Vaidyanath Group, manufacturer of Ayurvedic medicines.

The Governor said that Ayurveda is a form of medicine that takes care of the body, mind and spirit. More research is required in this field to benefit the people. He said that Orissa is home to nearly 250 varieties of medicinal plants and many of them are available in the Gandhamardan range of mountains. Our ayurvedic doctors and researchers should go to that area and conduct extensive research. The tribal people of the locality should be involved, so that they can gain profit by cultivating these medicinal plants at a large scale.

Quoting BBC's panel discussion this morning that Ayurveda contains solution to the dreaded bird-flu disease, Shri Thakur said that our researchers should try to find solutions to cure dreaded diseases. Describing his own initiative in encouraging medicinal plant farming, he said that in Raj Bhawan there is a small ayurvedic garden in an area designed in the shape of a human body and relevant plants have been planted on each part, considering the possibility of diseases that could attach that particular part. Thakur invited ayurvedic doctors to come and see the garden. He also informed that President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had also planted a tree in that garden.

Quoting Charaka, Shri Thakur said that the duty of a doctor is to enter the patients room with a smile, diagnose properly, then prescribe medicine and advise the patient regarding which medicine to take at what time and what intervals, for how many days. In case the patient is suffering from any incurable disease, the doctor should politely disclose that and continue his treatment with the advice that the patient should pray the Almighty for mental peace.

Works & Housing Minister, Shri Ananga Uday Singh Deo said that Orissa government will extend all co-operation to Ayurvedic research in the state and spread of Ayurveda. Ayurveda is gaining popularity day by day.