

Research needed on RTI usage

by N. Bhaskara Rao

A QUICK look at the implementation of the Right to Information Act (RTI) so far conveys mixed messages. The disappointment has been particularly on three fronts. Firstly, the political leadership and the political parties by and large have done nothing so far to give a push to the Act, as if doing so would adversely affect them.

Both at the Centre and in most States, governments have done little to create much needed awareness among large sections of the people and to help open an important window of the Act – *suo motu* obligations, maintenance of records, and management. Thirdly, the Information Commission in the States have yet to demonstrate proactive initiatives.

The RTI Act is a means, not an end, for change, equity, activism, citizen participation and good governance. The better RTI is implemented, the better it is for everyone, including for those in the system – contrary to what they think. Their credibility and respect in the society will go up. This is even more so for the news media as an institution and for the journalists individually. They can play a more proactive and positive role – irrespective of seniority in the profession – and increase their viewership or circulation.

A comprehensive review of the performance is unfortunately not possible since hardly a couple of States have come up so far with their annual reports, which they are obligated to submit to their respective State Assemblies. Nevertheless, a quick analysis of applications filed under the RTI Act indicates that applications (over 75 percent) mostly have been (1) by men (Most Commissions have no women Commissioners), (2) by those in power or within the system, (3) by those in the metros (4) over 60 per cent are for personal or individual reasons or advantage, (5) pertain to service matters, and (6) most of the applications are by the same people (who have filed more than one application).

Equally disappointing is the lack of efforts by the Commissions to reach out. For example, in the case of one important State having multiple Information Commissioners and having a relatively better budget, about 40 per cent of the departments having PIOs have not received any application in the year. In the case of another with 50 percent of the departments under the RTI Act, the number of applications received during the year for the entire State was hardly 10 per cent. And the concentration was on just a couple of departments. This is despite claims that PIOs of all these departments were trained.

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All this brings out the urgency to take stock of the “who, what, where, when and how” aspects of usage of the RTI Act in different States. Only then would we be able to take quick corrective actions or interventions – by the Government, by the Commissions themselves and by civil society groups. That would also help achieve better performance in various programmes of the Government.

The writer is Chairman, Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi