



THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT, 2005: ASSESSING ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Right to Information Act, 2005 is a watershed legislation that has been enacted to bring in transparency, accountability, and good democratic governance to India's polity by institutionalizing the right of its citizens to access information with public authorities. Enacted to break from the legacy of administrative secrecy embodied in colonial governance, the Act promotes openness through both proactive and reactive disclosure of information, thereby reducing information asymmetry between the state and citizens. This paper critically evaluates the importance of the RTI Act as a tool to promote transparency in public administration, ensure accountability through rational decision-making, and ensure democratic governance through citizen empowerment. This paper will also critically analyze the contribution of the RTI Act to a democratic form of governance through participatory democracy, electoral accountability, and attainment of equality, freedom, and the right to know guaranteed under the Indian Constitution. Finally, it stresses the limitations encountered by the RTI Act to ensure the attainment of its objectives through bureaucratic opposition to the Act, institutional weakness, threats to RTI activists, and the problem posed by the digital divide, among others. This paper ends with a conclusion that despite the revolutionary changes brought about by the RTI Act to governance in India, it is necessary to ensure political will to continue to make the Act a bedrock for democratic governance.

Keywords: *Right to Information Act, Transparency, Accountability, Democratic Governance, Citizen Participation, Public Administration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Transparency and accountability are the basic tenets of democratic governance, which promote the exercise of public power in a manner that is transparent for public surveillance. In the case of the enormous democracy of India, where the governance framework has been set up at multiple administrative levels, the free exchange of information between the state and its citizens is the key factor that spreads the impression of public goodwill towards the administrative activities of the government. Information availability enables the citizens to get acquainted with the policies practiced by the government.



Figure 1: Democracy In India

Historically, the Indian administrative system was marked by a culture of secrecy inherited from colonial rule, particularly under legislations such as the Official Secrets Act, 1923. This secrecy-oriented framework limited public access to government records and discouraged transparency, often leading to bureaucratic arbitrariness, inefficiency, and corruption. The absence of a statutory right to information constrained citizens' ability to question authority and participate meaningfully in governance, weakening the accountability mechanisms essential to a democratic polity.

The enactment of the Right to Information Act, 2005 marked a significant departure from this tradition of secrecy. By legally recognizing the citizens' right to access information held by public authorities, the Act institutionalized transparency as a statutory obligation rather than a matter of administrative discretion. It redefined the relationship between the state and citizens by shifting the balance of power in favor of the public, enabling greater oversight of governmental functioning. The RTI Act thus emerged as a powerful instrument for promoting transparency, enhancing administrative accountability, and deepening democratic governance in India. This paper critically seeks to examine the role of the RTI Act in advancing these objectives and assess its contribution to strengthening India's democratic framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Benvenisti (2018) analyzed the implications of rapid technological change to democratic governance and the position of law in global governance structures. The research pointed out that although new technologies are making governance more efficient and interconnected, there was an associated rise in the potential for non-transparency, the accrual of power authority, and the weakening of democracy. The researcher postulated that new technologies require changes in law to ensure greater non-transparency, accountability, and safeguarding of democratic principles in governance through technologies. Provide access to information and law observance to ensure democratic accountability through a digitalized administration environment.

Beshi & Kaur (2020) examined the link between good governance practices and public trust in local government institutions. In the study, the researchers found that public trust in local government institutions was largely influenced by good governance practices in terms of transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and citizen participation. The study concluded that if the decision-making processes of the government are made public, the citizens feel more confident about public institutions. Therefore, it was established that public institutions require transparency and accountability in terms of governing the citizens at the local level.

Biswas, Jana, Arya, and Ramamritham (2019) advanced a comprehensive good-governance framework of urban management, incorporating elements like transparency and accountability. Efficiency and stakeholder participation were the focus of this paper. The study analyzed governance challenges in urban environments and showed that information sharing and decision making with data at the forefront really works. There was an enhanced administrative efficiency and service delivery. The authors concluded that transparent governance structures and accessible public information systems were necessarily Seen sustainable Urban development and democratic governance with efficacy.

Blair (2018) undertook an analysis of the relationship between citizen participation and political accountability in the context of public service delivery in the Indian scenario, taking into special note of development frameworks of governance promoted by international organizations. The analysis helped reveal the impact of the role of citizen participation in shaping the outcome of accountability at the grass roots level in public service delivery and found it vital in the monitoring of public services and holding the

concerned authorities accountable. But the researcher pointed out that mere citizen participation without institutional transparency and information availability was not adequate in making authorities accountable.

Chen and Ganapati (2023) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of whether The transparency mechanisms effectively reduced government corruption across different administrative and political contexts. This systematic review synthesizes empirical findings from several studies. The authors found that transparency initiatives and accountability mechanisms shared a statistically significant relationship. lower levels of corruption, especially where transparency was combined with enforcement mechanisms and citizen oversight. The study underlined that access to information laws and disclosure frameworks enhanced accountability through the rising probability of detection and sanction of corrupt practices. The authors concluded that transparency mechanisms, when When effectively implemented, it played a critical role in improving governance integrity, reducing Public Administration Corruption.

3. RTI AS AN INSTRUMENT OF TRANSPARENCY

The Right to Information (RTI) Act is a robust institutional tool that plays a significant role in ensuring that the concept of transparency is realized in public governance. The Right to Information Act provides a model of transparency that is both proactive and reactive. In the proactive model of transparency, the government is compelled to make public essential information voluntarily. In the proactive model of transparency, the government is compelled to provide citizens with information that they seek. In fact, the Right to Information Act is a model that makes it mandatory on the part of the government to provide certain types of information to the public. These types of information include details regarding the structure of the government, budgetary allocations, decisions on policies, rules and regulations, procurement, and persons who benefit from the government's social security schemes.

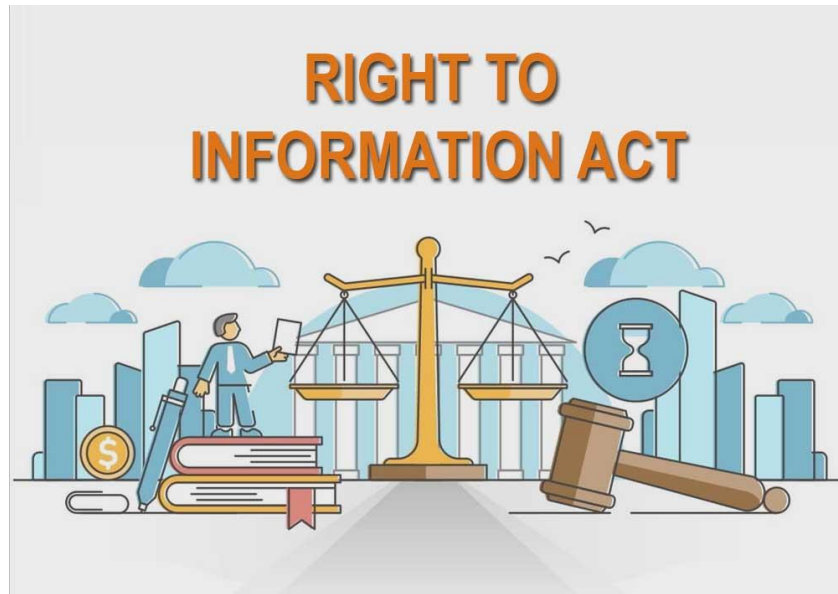


Figure 2: Right To Information (RTI) act

The RTI framework has indeed greatly reduced information asymmetry between the state and the citizens by merely providing access to official records. This has enabled citizens to question administrative actions and seek justification for decisions taken by the government. Applications filed under RTI have highlighted several instances of irregularities and inefficiencies related to public distribution systems, infrastructure development projects, implementation of welfare schemes, public appointments, and electoral processes. Disclosures made through RTI have spurred administrative reforms, disciplinary action against erring officials, and an improvement in service delivery in many instances.

In addition, the RTI Act has further empowered participatory democracy in that it has facilitated the work of journalists, researchers, and civil society organizations in systematically investigating government functioning. Such a fear of public exposure has promoted greater procedural compliance as well as record maintenance within public offices. Over time, the Act has helped to create a culture of openness, responsiveness, and ethical governance, reiterating transparency as a fundamental guiding principle of democratic administration rather than an exception to it, dependent on official discretion.

4. ROLE OF RTI IN STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY

The RTI mechanism plays a vital role in strengthening accountability by promoting reasoned decision-making and discouraging arbitrary administrative actions through the possibility of public scrutiny. It empowers citizens, journalists, and civil society to actively participate in governance, transforming them into effective watchdogs of public administration. The deterrent effect of disclosure reduces maladministration, negligence, and abuse of discretion, while increased transparency helps expose delays and inefficiencies, thereby improving service delivery. Information obtained under RTI also facilitates evidence-based grievance redressal, reinforcing both administrative and legal accountability within democratic governance.

- **Promotion of Reasoned Decision-Making:** RTI provides an opportunity for public authorities to maintain proper records of their decision-making processes. Since decisions are expected to withstand examination, public authorities are less likely to make arbitrary decisions in disregard of established procedures.
- **Empowerment of Citizens and Civil Society:** RTI has empowered the people, media, and civil society organizations to actively participate in the governance process by seeking information from the state. The result is the transformation of helpless recipients of governance into active surveillance agencies.
- **Deterrence Against Maladministration:** The threat of revelation has a preventive effect on carelessness, partiality, and arbitrary use of power. This is because government functionaries know that they may be held accountable for this by filing RTI applications.
- **Improved Service Delivery and Administrative Efficiency:** RTI was instrumental in bringing to the fore the delays, deficiencies, and deficiencies in the delivery of public services. The disclosure of information usually forces the administration to sort out pending issues, thereby making the administration responsive and efficient.
- **Strengthening Institutional Accountability Framework:** The working of the Central Information Commission and the State Information Commissions helps in ensuring the accountability of the citizens on the obligations related to providing information. The powers of the commissions related to penalties, disciplinary actions, or the issuance of directions related to the Right to Information Act of 2005 are more enforceable in Indian law.

- **Facilitating Evidence-Based Grievance Redressal:** RTI-obtained information can often act as documentary evidence for grievance redressal, such as filing complaints, appeals, or cases, which can further strengthen administrative as well as legal grievance handling mechanisms.

5. RTI AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

A democratic form of governance is anchored on transparency, accountability, and public participation with discrete information. This is where the Right to Information Act, 2005, enhances democracy because it provides citizens the opportunity to receive information necessary for comprehension on the policies, actions, and measures taken by the government. This means that information asymmetry between the government and citizens is eliminated through RTI by giving citizens the ability to fully participate in public discourse, hold the government to account, and make informed decisions during elections.

RTI has also contributed importantly to building participatory democracy by facilitating access and empowerment for marginalized communities, civil society groups, media personnel, and social activists. RTI has ensured citizen control over public institutions by pointing out governance lapses and has also helped improve the administration of social security programs. RTI has also ensured that citizens have access to information related to equality, freedom of speech, and information by building the relationship of citizens and the State on democratic lines. In this manner, RTI has also become an important instrument of democratic transformation in terms of building inclusiveness in governance.

5.1. RTI as a Tool for Citizen Participation and Electoral Accountability

RTI increases people's involvement in governance by giving them access to government spending, policy-making, as well as the execution of government policies. An informed population is able to question their representatives politically, assess their governance, and make their representatives accountable for their governance commitments. The knowledge that comes from RTI has been used to expose malpractices in government spending and policy-making, thus shaping public opinion as well as election results. This increases election accountability in governance as a whole.

5.2. RTI and the Strengthening of Constitutional Values

The RTI Act implements in practical terms many constitutional values such as transparency, equality in the face of law, and the right of speech and expression. While promoting egalitarianism in accessing information, an RTI actually eliminates arbitrary exercise of state power. While protecting the right of

citizens to know, an integral part of democratic systems of governance, an RTI actually ensures a transparent bureaucratic system. Hence, the RTI actually helps in bringing about a constitutional democracy in a manner consistent with the tenets of democracy itself.

6. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RTI ACT

Despite its transformative potential, this act's actual implementation faces challenges. Bureaucratic resistance, poor record management, and lack of training among public information officers hinder timely disclosure in many cases. Delayed appointment of information commissioners and the heavy backlog of appeals weaken mechanisms of enforcement.

Moreover, the apprehensions of misuse of RTI, frivolous applications, threats to whistleblowers, and dilution of transparency norms through legislative and administrative amendments are also serious risks. It remains a cosmically difficult legal and ethical challenge to balance transparency with privacy, national security, and efficient administration.

- **Low Awareness and Limited Accessibility:** A large part of the population, especially in rural and disadvantaged sections, is either uninformed about RTI provisions or bereft of requisite literacy and digital access for filing applications and pursuing appeals, as an everyday act of citizenship.
- **Inconsistent Compliance Across Public Authorities:** Most public bodies are not proactive enough to share information as proposed under Section 4 of the RTI Act. Such default increases the burden of applying for information using the RTI Act, contrary to the promotion of institutional transparency.
- **Weak Protection for RTI Activists and Applicants:** Lack of a whistleblower protection system makes applicants and activists vulnerable to harassment, intimidation, or in some instances, violence, thereby deterring others from using the Act as a tool to challenge powerful groups in society.
- **Overburdened Information Commissions:** Chronic shortages of manpower and infrastructure, and vacant positions in the Central and State Information Commissions lead to piling cases, backlog of justice, and weakened deterrent effect to ensure compliance among public functionaries.
- **Administrative Culture of Secrecy:** Deep-seated bureaucratic practices give more importance to confidentiality rather than openness; there are too many cases invoking exemptions under the Act.

Such cultural resistance results in limited meaningful disclosure and weakens the spirit of transparency genuinely expected of the legislation.

- **Impact of Digital Divide and Technological Constraints:** Although online RTI portals have increased accessibility, certain technological constraints like poor internet connectivity, lack of digital literacy, and language constraints hinder effective use, particularly within the disadvantaged sections.

These are some challenges that illustrate that although the RTI Act has a solid legal system in place for transparency, its implementation is dependent upon institutional capacity, political will, administrative culture, and people's participation in the legal system.

7. CONCLUSION

The Right to Information Act, 2005 has emerged as one of the most significant legislative reforms in India, reincarnating the relationship between the state and its citizens by enshrining transparency and accountability as fundamental features of democratic governance. By providing access to information, the Act has diminished administrative secrecy, amplified citizen vigilance, and deepened participatory democracy through better-informed civic participation. Its role in encouraging rational decision-making, better service delivery, strengthening civil society, and upholding constitutional values testifies to its transformative effects on public administration. However, continuous problems such as bureaucratic obstruction, fragile institutional capacity, risks to RTI users, and incomplete implementation have dragged down its complete potential. These are issues that can be resolved through continuous political will, strengthening of information commissions, protection of information seekers, capacity building in officials, and an increase in proactive disclosures. Only then can the RTI Act play its role as a powerful tool for open, accountable, and democratic governance in India.

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