

Impact of Right to Information on Development: A Perspective on India's Recent Experiences

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Opening Remarks

Respected Prof. A.W. Khan, ADG, UNESCO, and distinguished members of the staff of UNESCO, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to be associated with the Lecture series on Potential of Information and Communication Strategy for Development, organised by the Communication and Information Division of UNESCO. I am grateful to Prof. A.W. Khan for asking me to share our experiences with regard to the implementation of RTI and its impact on governance and development. My presence here today at UNESCO Headquarters is due entirely to your professional commitment to promote information and communication strategy as instrument to effect changes in the way we live today, particularly in the developing world.

It is almost six decades that all the member countries of United Nations resolved to promote freedom of information as a fundamental human right. Since then, the progress made by different countries in providing legal framework for effective implementation of freedom of information widely differs for different reasons, including lack of functional democracy. There are, therefore, pronounced differences in socio-economic benefits derived from freely available ideas, knowledge and information for exploring and exploiting opportunities for personal and professional development.

I propose to discuss and also try to answer as to where do we stand insofar as the setting out the information regime and reaping its benefits are concerned.

As a proponent of rights-based approach to development and also having the responsibility, as a Member of the CIC, to implement the law on right to know, I am sure I shall immensely benefit from your enlightened comments and suggestions.

The plan of my presentation is as follows:

At the outset, I propose to briefly make a mention of the factors that have led to the passage of the law on right to know in India. In the backdrop of salient features of the RTI Act, I shall subsequently present an assessment of the impact of RTI on the elements of good governance and development. This would enable us to ascertain whether or not the objectives of RTI are being realized. Finally, I shall discuss the ways and measures for democratisation of knowledge resources with a view to ensuring people's empowerment for development as well as to enhance their options for raising and maintaining a decent standard of living.

* An invited lecture delivered at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, on May 15, 2008.

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1. Introduction

Until 2005, an ordinary citizen had no access to information held by a public authority. Even in matters affecting legal entitlements for such subsidized services as food for work, wage employment, basic education and health care, it was not easy to seek the details of decision making process that affected or harmed him. Without access to relevant information, it was not possible for a common man to participate in a meaningful debate on political and economic options or choices available to him for realizing socio-economic aspirations.

The Constitution of India has guaranteed (u/s 19) the freedom of expression and speech. Even then a citizen had no legal right to know about the details of public policies and expenditures. And, therefore, it was not possible for a common man to observe and scrutinize the public actions with a view to providing feed back for rectifying the deficiencies in policy planning and the execution of programmes.

Under the Official Secret Act, 1923, the entire development process has thus been shrouded in secrecy. The people who voted for the formation of democratically elected governments and contributed to the huge costs of financing public activities, had no legal rights to know as to: what process has been followed in designing the policies affecting them, how the programmes have been implemented, who are the concerned officials associated with the decision making process and execution of the schemes and why the promises made for delivery of essential services to the poor have not been fulfilled?.

Not surprisingly, the culture of secrecy beginning from the colonial rule till the first six decades of Independence fuelled rampant corruption, in which large amount of public money was diverted from development projects and welfare schemes to private use through mis-use of power by the authorities. Lack of openness in the functioning of the Government, provided a fertile ground for breeding inefficiency and lack of accountability in the working of the public authorities, which, in turn, has perpetuated all forms of poverty, including nutritional, health and educational. In order to rectify the deficiencies in the mechanisms for ensuring the reach of entitlements, particularly the basic

human needs, the people in general and NGOs, in particular, demanded for a greater access to the information held by the public bodies, which was acceded to by the Government in 2005.

In this backdrop, the Right to Information Act 2005, the RTI hereinafter, was enacted by the National Parliament to dismantle the culture of secrecy and to change the mindset of the bureaucrats and political leaders and to create conditions for taking informed decisions. The major concern of the Act is to allow for greater probity in the functioning of the government departments so as to promote transparency and accountability in the working of the public bodies and contain the scourge of corruption, which are critical for ensuring good governance.

2. RTI: A Response to Paradigm Shift in Development Approach

Of the major forces which have, of late, led to a re-thinking on issues that affect economic development, at least three of them are most important. These are:

- (i) sharing of knowledge and communication strategies for dissemination of information;
- (ii) involvement of NGOs in designing of policies and implementation of schemes; and
- (iii) adoption of citizen centric approach to development.

We may briefly outline the significance of these factors, particularly in the context of the emerging development scenario.

2.1. Democratization of information and knowledge

Information and knowledge are critical for realizing all the human aspirations, such as, improvement in quality of life. In the knowledge society, in which we live today, acquisition of information and knowledge and its application have intense and pervasive impact on productivity gains. People who have access to information and who understand how to make use of the acquired information in the processes of exercising their political, economic and legal rights become empowered, which, in turn, enable them to build their strengths and assets.

In view of this, almost every society has made endeavours for democratising knowledge resources by way of putting in place the mechanisms for free flow of information and ideas so that people can access them without asking for it. They are thus empowered to make proper choices for participation in development process.

The efforts made thus far to disseminate information and knowledge through the use of communication technologies such as radio and television, have yielded positive results. Sharing of information, for instance, about the new techniques of farming, health care facilities, hazards of environmental degradation, opportunities for learning and earning, legal remedies for combating gender biases, etc., have, overtime, made significant contributions to the well being of poor people. Every individual or section of the society, whether working in farm, industrial or services sectors, requires a wide range of information to be able to effectively function in the knowledge and technology driven economy.

Democratisation of information and knowledge, by way of creating conditions for sharing among the people, who are partners in development, is critical to the task of equalising opportunities for development. In view of this, the RTI seeks to set up the facilitation process for free flow of information, which forms the basis for a healthy debate on issues of vital importance to every section of the society.

2.2. Increasing demand by NGOs for participation in development activities.

In the backdrop of inefficient implementation of development programmes, the NGOs/self-help groups have demanded at various fora, for creating conditions for democratic governance. It has been alleged, and that not without a basis, that the implementing agencies have frequently indulged in corrupt practices leading to diversion of resources from public use to private purposes. And, that the entitlements of the poor have not been assured, mainly in respects of food grains, jobs, health care facilities, basic education, etc. Poverty of all

forms has thus been perpetuated, which is a major drag on the overall development of the country.

There are umpteen numbers of cases which demonstrate that the role of NGOs in exposing corruption and in providing necessary feed back for designing policies and effective implementation of the programmes has been commendable. For instance, NGOs have exposed the inclusion of fictitious names in the list of beneficiaries, under the schemes like subsidised food grains, employment guarantee scheme for poor, domestic gas (LPG), medicines, reservation of seats in private schools for the children from the poor families, etc.

Prior to the implementation of RTI Act 2005, at least eight Indian States had enacted the laws on freedom of information since 1997. People, in these states took recourse to the various provisions of transparency norms to obtain information held by the public bodies. The NGOs also conducted social audits of the schemes, particularly the poverty alleviation programmes, the outcomes of which have resulted in appropriate reforms in governance of the projects. This forms the basis for replicating these experiences throughout the country.

In view of commendable contributions of NGOs in carrying out the programmes in partnership with the public bodies, the RTI Act has envisaged for providing a framework for promoting interface between the citizens and the Government, such that informed decisions could be taken at all levels by the functionaries of the governments. And, the projects should be executed under the sunshine to allow for reasonable scrutiny by the citizens.

2.3. Citizen-Centric Approach to Development

An equally important concern of the development planners has been to evolve Citizen Centric Approach to development, as people live in diverse socio-economic and geographic conditions. The approach to fit for all sizes, particularly in respect of poverty alleviation programmes, has failed. Without obtaining necessary feedback from the people about their socio-economic

aspirations and the manner in which the accepted goals are to be realized, it is not possible to design and implement schemes that may eradicate poverty and liquidate illiteracy. The RTI therefore empowers every citizen to take charge of his life and make proper choices, on the basis of freely available information and knowledge, for effective participation in political and economic processes or activities.

Briefly, RTI has been implemented in response to the major challenges of development, mainly the urgency for democratisation of information and knowledge which are vital for equalizing opportunity for development, increasing NGOs participation in decision making and democratic governance and for evolving citizen-centric approaches for addressing the concerns of every member of the society.

In the following paragraphs, an attempt is made to present the salient features of the Act and to examine the extent to which the stated objectives of the RTI Act are realized.

3. Salient Features of Right to Information Act, 2005:

Right to information (RTI) is inherent in democratic functioning and a pre-condition to good governance and realization of all other human rights, including education and health care that have intense and pervasive impact on all the human activities.

Specifically, the main objectives of the law on RTI are: to operationalise the fundamental right to information; to set up systems and mechanisms that facilitate people's easy access to information; to promote transparency and accountability in governance; to minimize corruption and inefficiency in public offices and to ensure people's participation in governance and decision making.

RTI is based on the key concepts: i) The right of the public to access the information and the corresponding duty of the Government to meet the request, unless specifically defined exemptions apply; (ii) The duty of the Government to proactively provide certain key information even in absence of a request.

The Act promises to make the right to information more progressive, participatory and meaningful, as it encourages the common citizen to enthusiastically participate in the whole process of governance.

The citizens are not only free to ask for information from the Government, but also have the right to get it. The scope of the Act extends to all authorities and bodies under the Constitution or any other law, and *inter alia* includes all authorities under the Central Government, State Governments and Local Bodies. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) substantially funded, directly or indirectly, by the public funds also fall within the ambit of this Act.

A duty has been cast, in section 4 of the Act, on every public authority to *suo motu* provide to the public with the information as prescribed therein, so that the public has to take minimum recourse to the use of this legislation for obtaining information.

The procedure of securing information as provided in section 6 of the Act, prescribes a procedure, which is very simple. A citizen has to merely make a request to the concerned Public Information Officer (PIO) specifying the information sought by him. The fee payable is reasonable and information is to be provided free of cost to citizens living below the poverty line.

To assure that the information sought is provided quickly, section 7 of the Act, makes it mandatory for the PIO to provide the information within 30

days. If the information requested concerns the life or liberty of a person, it has been made mandatory to provide it within 48 hours of the receipt of the request. The Act provides for penalties in case of failure to provide information in time, or for refusing to accept application for information, or for giving incorrect, incomplete or misleading information, or destroying information and so on. In addition, the Information Commission has also been empowered to recommend disciplinary action against the government servants.

The Act establishes a two-tier mechanism for appeal. The first appeal lies to an officer within the organization who is senior in rank to PIO. The second appeal lies in the Information Commission. The jurisdiction of the lower court is barred under section 20 of the Act. The categories of information exempted from disclosure in this Act are kept to a bare minimum. Even the exemptions are not absolute if disclosure of the information outweighs the harm to the public authorities.

Even in the case of security and intelligence agencies and organizations, which are exempted from the provisions of this Act, if there were cases of allegation of corruption and human rights violation, such exemption would not be available. In cases of allegations of violation of human rights, information would be made available after the approval of the Information Commission. This Act, thus, paves the way for an empowered citizen, as well as an alert, efficient, responsive, transparent and accountable government.

The Central/State Information Commission has a major role in enforcing the implementation of the provisions of the Act as well as for educating the parties, mainly information seekers and providers. The Commission is vested with the power of a Court. Under Section 20, the Commission may impose penalty on the concerned officials for denial of information and recommend disciplinary action against the errant officials, who do not comply with the requirements of the Act. Moreover, under Section 25(5) of

the Act, the Commission may also advise the appropriate Government in the matters of maintenance and preservation of records and the norms for disclosure of information with a view to enabling the people to observe and scrutinize the decision making process. The powers vested with the Information Commissioner, who are appointed by the President of India/Governor of a state, ensure effective implementation of the Act.

4. Assessing the Impact of RTI on the Elements of Good Governance

The RTI Act was implemented in October 2005. Though a period of less than three years is too a short period to assess the success of RTI, it may be worthwhile to analyze some evidences, for developing an understanding on how it works and what it does or does not do. We, therefore, propose to find an answer to the question: whether the objectives of the Act are being realized?

It must be admitted that the assessment of the RTI on good governance and development is indeed a daunting task, since data are lacking to permit methodological rigour of analysis. However, reliance is made on (i) the responses of the RTI requesters and the activists, particularly during the course of hearings conducted by the Author in the cases listed before the Commission to resolve the disputes between information seekers and providers; (ii) media reports on the issues pertaining to RTI matters; and (iii) preliminary research studies and publications of results, mainly those relating to corruption and accountability of public bodies. The assessment of impact is proposed to be made in terms of the stated objectives of the RTI Act, which are outlined in its preamble, as under:

An Act to provide for setting out the practical regime of right to information for citizens to secure access to information under the control of public authorities, in order to promote transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority.

It is stated further more that:

Democracy requires an informed citizenry and transparency of information which are vital to its functioning and also to contain corruption and to hold Governments and their instrumentalities accountable to the governed;

In addition to the above, the Prime Minister of India, while piloting the Bill for its passage by the National Parliament, stated, as under, on May 11, 2005:

I believe that the passage of this Bill will see the dawn of a new era in our processes of governance, an era of performance and efficiency, an era which will ensure that benefits of growth flow to all sections of our people, an era which will eliminate the scourge of corruption, an era which will bring the common man's concern to the heart of all processes of governance, an era which will truly fulfill the hopes of the founding fathers of our Republic.

Evidently, the major objectives of the Act are:

- i) Greater Transparency in functioning of public authorities.
- ii) Improvement in accountability and performance of the Government.
- iii) Promotion of partnership between citizens and the Government in decision making process; and
- iv) Reduction in corruption in the Government departments.

All these parameters are critical elements of good governance. An attempt is therefore made below to examine the extent to which the RTI has been successful in influencing the above factors in desirable direction.

4.1. Greater Transparency

With a view to ensuring maximum disclosure of information regarding government rules, regulations and decisions, every public authority is mandated to *'maintain all its records duly catalogued and indexed in a manner and the form which facilitates the right to information under the Act'*. The public authorities are therefore required to make pro-active disclosures through publication of relevant documents. Besides, the public authorities are

also required to '*provide as much information **suo motu** to the public at regular intervals through various means of communication, including internet, so that the public have minimum resort to the use of this Act to obtain information*'.

In compliance of the above provisions of the Act, all the levels of the Government – the Centre, States and Local Bodies, including Village level Panchayats – have put the records in public domain, through publications as well as internet in the regional languages. And, to facilitate the access to information, a citizen has the right to:

- (i) inspection of work, documents, records;
- (ii) taking notes, extracts or certified copies of the documents or records;
- (iii) taking certified sample of material; and
- iv) obtaining information in electronic form, if available.

Thus, all the public authorities have duly placed the information in public domain and that a citizen has the right to observe as to what is going on inside an organization. In the cases where the information sought for are not provided within the stipulated period of 30 days or the information furnished are incomplete, misleading or incorrect, a requester is free to file a complaint or appeal before the Information Commission (IC), for necessary directions to the parties as per the provisions of the Act.

The Commission has the mandate, *inter-alia*, to impose penalty and/or to recommend disciplinary action against the information providers, if held responsible for obstructing the free flow of information. Accordingly, information seekers and the NGOs have put pressure on the public authorities for promoting the culture of openness in functioning of the Government. A large number of PIOs have already been fined for violation of the provisions of the Act, which has, in effect, created conditions for providing information to a requester.

Due to perceived benefits of transparency and accountability, RTI applications have annually increased by 8 to 10 times. There is thus massive use of the

right to know. Of the millions of applications for information, less than 5 per cent have been denied information under various exemption categories.

In effect, thus, there is greater transparency than before in the working of the public bodies. In a large number of cases, the Commission has ordered for providing the details of the decision-making processes, which include 'file notings, cabinet papers, records of recruitment, selection and promotion of staff, documents pertaining to tender processes and procurement procedure, the lists of beneficiaries of the Government's subsidized schemes, such as, food grains supplied through ration shops, water and electricity, domestic gas, educational and health facilities, shelter for poor, muster rolls under employment guarantee schemes, etc. The disclosure of vital information, such as above, has thus resulted in checking corrupt practices in delivery of services and ensuring the reach of entitlements to the poor. The disclosure of information relating to use of funds allocated to rural employment guarantee scheme, MLA/MP local area funds, etc. have contributed to advocacy in favour or against the policies and/or political leaderships.

4.2. Greater Accountability

The RTI provides people with the mechanism to access information, which they can use to hold the government to account or to seek explanation as to why decisions have been taken, by whom and with what consequences or outcomes. In addition, every public authority is required '*to provide reasons for its administrative or quasi-judicial decisions to the affected persons*' u/s 4(1)(d) of the Act.

Until the implementation of the RTI Act, it was not possible for an ordinary persons to seek the details of a decision making process, which was found most often, as ineffective in terms of its outcome. It was, therefore, not possible to hold a free and frank discussion on issues of common concern of people or to fix the responsibility for any action. Such an era of darkness in policy planning is over.

The information regime has, in effect, created conducive conditions for every one to have a better understanding of how the government works or how a particular decision was reached. Such a chance given to people empowers them to make appropriate choice of leadership and the policies that affect them. This has begun to happen with salutary effects on delivery of socio-economic services, particularly for the poor.

For instance, being full aware that the records pertaining to the decision making process, including file notings, are required to be put in public domain, the concerned officials at all levels objectively record the reasons for the observations made by them. Attempts are also made to effectively implement the programmes as the relevant details are proactively disclosed. In effect, thus, the quality of decision making and delivery of services have duly improved.

Also, due to effective implementation of the flagship programmes for alleviation of wide-spread poverty, the mis-match between the planned targets and actual realization has been minimized. Specific mention may be made about the following schemes, which have been provided necessary financial wherewithal as well as administrative support by the Centre and the States for effective implementation of the programmes.

- National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Assured jobs),
- Sarwa Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for all)
- Mid-day Meal Scheme
- Drinking Water Mission
- Integrated Child Development Services
- National Rural Health Mission
- Bharat Nirman (Rural Infrastructure, mainly road, electricity, drinking water, sanitation etc.)
- Indira Avas Yogna (Shelter for poor)

All these programmes and several other similar schemes covered under the MP/MLA Local Area Development Fund aim at providing the basic human needs for maintaining a decent standard of living. These schemes, moreover,

enable them to build their strengths and abilities to realize their socio-economic objectives.

Even before the enactment of the right to information, similar programmes were implemented but the achievements were always below the general expectations. Reason? Lack of legal right to know and to scrutinize the public action and to question the authority. With empowered citizens and free flow of information, there is significant quantitative and qualitative improvement in the delivery of services and realization of benefits of the programmes designed and implemented for the poor.

For instance, disclosure of information relating to:

- i) attendance of staff in schools has helped in checking teachers' absenteeism and students' drop out;
- ii) attendance of doctors and nurses at primary health centres has led to improvement in health care facilities in rural areas;
- iii) the details of supplies and distribution of food grains through ration shops has assured the reach of entitlements to the beneficiaries;
- iv) the supply and demand for petroleum products, such as, domestic gas has reduced black marketing;
- v) muster rolls and beneficiary of employment guarantee schemes has exposed corruption and ensured effective delivery of services to the poor; and
- vi) allotment of retail outlets (petrol pumps) and agencies for distribution of LPG gas has ensured fair play and objective decisions, as reflected from substantial reduction in litigation cases in the matter.

As a result of increased Government's accountability in delivery of services, rural to urban migration has, of late, decelerated, as widely reported in the media. This is also corroborated by the findings of a national level survey (forthcoming), jointly conducted by the Transparency International and the Centre for Media Studies. The survey has revealed that in the opinions of 40 per cent of respondent (all below the poverty line), corruption and mal-practices in implementation of poverty alleviation programmes have declined

due to RTI induced accountability of the Government and its functionaries at various levels.

RTI route has generally been followed by a large number of people for resolving disputes between the parties on the issues pertaining to the decisions on administrative and commercial matters. Disclosure of information regarding the process of decision making or the grounds for action taken has helped resolve disputes on such issues as claim of refund of taxes paid by the individuals/companies, settlement of insurance claims, payment of dues of contractors, process of sanction and recovery of loans, etc.

Since a reply is to be given within thirty days, disputes have been resolved faster. A large number of grievances pertaining to service matters, mainly promotion and pension benefits have also been redressed due to openness and promptness in taking action on requests made under the RTI.

As a result, filing of appeals in the Courts has substantially declined, as reported, for instance, by the Oil Companies, which grant dealerships for distribution of petroleum products. The Courts have also advised the petitioners to obtain information under the RTI before filing the cases before the Courts. It thus shows a strong and positive impact of RTI on transparency and accountability of the Government.

4.3. Promotion of Citizen-Government Partnership

The RTI Act provides a framework for promotion of citizen-government partnership in carrying out the programmes for welfare of the people. The principle of partnership is derived from the fact that people are not only the ultimate beneficiaries of development, but also the agents of development. The stakeholders' participation leads to better projects and more dynamic development.

Under the RTI regime, citizens' participation has been promoted through (a) access to information and involvement of affected groups/communities in design and implementation of projects; and (b) empowerment of local

government bodies at village level through the involvement and cooperation with NGOs/self help groups.

The pro-active disclosure of information has enabled the beneficiaries, mainly through NGOs, to assume a central role in design and execution of projects. RTI has instilled a wider sense of ownership in the development activities. Besides, access to information has enabled the people to participate in economic and political processes through a dialogue between people and the government officials or public campaign on public policies.

For instance, information obtained under RTI, in respect of utilization of funds allocated under rural employment guarantee scheme, has been used by NGOs for campaign in favour or against the political leaders during recent elections in some States, with a desirable impact on political process. Almost all the welfare projects, particularly at Village and Panchayat levels, are being designed and developed in cooperation and support with the NGOs or affected persons, with a view to raising the satisfaction level of people.

4.4. Reduction in Corruption

Lack of transparency and accountability encourage the government officials to indulge in corrupt practices, which result in lower investments due to mis-use or diversion of funds for private purposes. As a result, the government's social spending yields no worthwhile benefits, because, for instance, the teachers do not teach, doctors and nurses do not attend health centres, ration card holders do not receive subsidized food grains and the promised jobs are not provided to the people. In the process, it perpetuates poverty and harms the poor. It creates an environment of distrust between the people and the government, which impinge upon the development and jeopardize democratic governance.

Under the RTI regime, there is unprecedented transparency in the working of public departments. As a result, there is better understanding of the decision making process and greater accountability of government. This has led to reduction in corruption in the country as evident from the following:

- i) The Transparency International (TI) has consecutively reported in the last two years that perceived corruption in India (a score of 3.5 out of 10) has declined at the rate of about 15-20 per cent per year, due mainly to the implementation of the RTI Act.
- ii) The Centre for Media Studies in collaboration with TI has recently accomplished an all India survey study (un-published) of the poor below the poverty line. The views of the poor have been elicited in respect of all the flagship programmes that have been implemented for alleviation of poverty. At least 40 per cent of the respondents have reported that corruption has declined.
- iii) It has also been observed that wherever NGOs are actively involved in the development activities, the perceived corruption is abysmally low.
(Please see Case Studies pertaining to RTI and its impact on reduction in corruption)

5. Future of RTI: Tasks Ahead

A major challenge is to develop capacities for access to information. The capacities of both the public authorities (i.e. the duty – bearers) and the citizens (i.e. the claim holders) may have to be enhanced, for which a two-pronged strategy would be needed.

First, a comprehensive information management system (IMS) should be developed by each public authority for storage and retrieval of data and information that may be shared with anyone who seeks to inspect and use the information for development purposes. Not only the institutional capacity but also the individuals associated with various public activities should also be trained and equipped with facilities to cope with the demand for sharing of information.

Second, in order to properly manage the demand for information from the NGOs, in general, and the citizens, in particular, a concerted effort would be needed to create mass awareness among the people to promote information literacy. A multimedia approach should be adopted to educate and train people as to how to decide and select what information should be sought for

and that from where and how? Besides, they should be educated as to how to make best use of information for effective participation in economic and political processes. This alone can ensure cost-effective use of the provisions of the RTI Act.

Right to Information Act provides a broad framework for Government and Citizens' interface to design and monitor relevant projects, contain corruption, ensure accountability and to mutually share the responsibility for development. Under the Act, the public authorities are required to adopt open and transparent procedures and methods of delivery of services. They ought to reveal what they do, how they do and what are the outcomes of the policies, programmes and public expenditures. In a democratic society, the citizen, NGOs and media have the right to know as to how they are governed and they also have right to exercise their options to indicate how they ought to be governed and served by the Government. It is important, therefore, to ensure the following:

5.1. *Proactive and Suo motu Disclosure of Information*

Under Section 4 of the Act, all the 'Public Authorities' are required to make proactive disclosure of information. Almost entire gamut of their activities and the manner in which they are executed are to be disclosed. The issue is how to present and capture the relevant information that can be of use to the stakeholders for realizing their rights. The computerization of records and use of IT resources to ensure transparency in functioning of different departments should be accorded high priority. The information should be disclosed on *suo motu* basis so that a citizen does not have to resort to the provisions of the RTI Act. Almost all the Ministries/ Departments have put up information on their websites, which needs to be examined to assess the adequacy of their details for analysis and use of information.

5.2. *Promote Information Literacy*

The Act empowers every citizen to seek information and to gain ideas and acquire new knowledge to improve quality of life as well as to participate in the effective governance of public authorities. The issue is how to promote

information literacy among people to enable them to decide what to ask for, how to ask and how to make good use of information, so that they can effectively participate in the process of development, including control of corruption.

The issue of promotion of information literacy among both educated and not so well educated citizens is critical, because the people and the government functionaries share the responsibility of expediting the process of development. Accordingly, under Section 26 of the Act, provisions have been made for advancement of understanding of the public through education and training programmes. A multimedia strategy for promotion of information literacy should be designed by all the public authorities, including educational institutions, in collaboration with media agencies so as to ensure greater interface between the stakeholders. The task is challenging, as less than 10 per cent of the poor have some awareness about the law on RTI and the manner in which it could be used by them to claim for their entitlements. The potential of IT resources and widespread educational institutions of all types and levels should be exploited to promote information literacy.

6. Concluding Remarks

RTI has significant bearing on good governance and development. India's economy in the last three years has grown at unprecedented high rate of 8 – 9 per cent per annum, which also co-incides with the RTI induced good governance, as discussed above.

The implementation of the law on right to know for setting up information regime therefore augurs well for strengthening the knowledge society as well as for increasing the accountability of public bodies.

The trend in improvement in delivery of services, due to the perceived good governance, provides sufficient indication for alleviation of poverty and liquidation of illiteracy in a much shorter duration than envisaged for the realization of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

RTI has enabled people to participate in the process of development, which has resulted in reduction of corruption. It has just begun to happen for the first time for establishing an open and participatory governance system that protects and promotes the socio-economic interests of every citizen, particularly the poor, who are receiving the benefits of development as per their entitlements.

As the functioning of public authorities becomes more transparent and ensure proactive disclosure of the policies, programmes and their outcomes, there would be greater participation by people in every sphere of development. It is important therefore to enhance the capacity of public authorities as well as the citizens to develop awareness and understanding of information, to make its effective use for the benefits of citizens. In effect, endeavours should be made to increase the effective demand for improvement in delivery of services.

Only about 10 per cent of over 300 million population of the poor are aware of the RTI, as a tool for reaping the benefits of assured entitlements. It, therefore, calls for making concerted efforts by the Government, NGOs and media for creating mass awareness among the people, particularly to educate them, as to how to seek information and how to make the best use of such acquisitions of wealth of knowledge in every day's life.

The role of NGOs is critical in respect of both to constantly exert pressure for maximum disclosure of information relating to public activities and to participate in designing and implementation of socio-economic programmes. The task is challenging but easy to cope with provided of course mass media like radio and TV channels are utilized to reach the target population.

In view of diversity of situations in which people live in different parts of the country, a multimedia approach should be adopted to promote information literacy and to democratize knowledge, which, in turn, are vital for people's empowerment, ensuring the reach of entitlements to the beneficiary groups and for equalizing opportunities for sharing the benefits of development.
