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**INFORMATION LITERACY AND RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT: AN  
REVIEW**

***Library subject***

**Dr. Garad Madhukar D.**

Librarian  
Matsyodari Mahavidyalaya,  
Jalna – 431203 (Maharashtra)

**ABSTRACT**

*This is an attempt to highlight the interdependence of Right to Information (RTI) and information literacy and the role of public libraries which acts as catalyst between the two. Public library is the only effective social repository which can collect and organize the above mentioned information and provide access to it to all the people free of cost in an equal and unbiased way.*

**Keywords:** *Information Literacy, Right to Information, Public Library, Information Service, Information Provider, Information & Communication Technology [ICT].*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Right to know is also closely linked with other basic rights such as freedom of speech and expression and right to education. It is an attribute of liberty. Viewed from this angle, information or knowledge becomes an important resource. An equitable access to this resource must be guaranteed. RTI has an important economic dimension, as it embraces not only political freedom but also the freedom to lead a life with dignity, unfettered by domination and discrimination. In this sense and as per the full interpretation of the definition of the word in the RTI



Act 2005, information as well as Right to Information has a wider and deep meaning than what we presently assign to it in the context of the Act. So the meaning of information, the importance of information, the relevant categories of information and the mechanisms that can ensure information access and the programmes required for capacity building in people to use information in the context needs to be discussed.

### **1.1 Information**

Information as a term has been derived from the Latin words *Formation* and *Forma* which means giving shape to something and forming a pattern, respectively. Information adds something new to our awareness and removes the vagueness of our ideas. The society has information on all knowledge divisions recorded in books, video, audio files, computers etc.

### **1.2 Importance of Information**

Progress in all walks of life depends on information generated in the concerned spheres, up to the present. Availability of efficient information systems and services and proper utilization of information by government and the people can improve the life and activities of the citizens and also the quality the country's development. The availability of information, expeditiously and pin pointedly, supports decision making processes at all levels.

### **1.3 Information Categories**

The information produced by and held by Government can be categorized into two; basic information and administrative information.

#### **1.3.1 Basic Information**

Government produces vast and varied types of information materials. Of this there is Information of permanent value produced or conserved by government for the public good. Examples of such holdings of government are archives, museum records, printed books and other publications like Gazetteers, Acts, Manuals, handbooks, compilations, and books on different subjects like history, agriculture, science and technology as well as documents on hundreds of areas acquired and kept by government departments or libraries. They are intended for providing information to the officials and the public to improve functioning of the departments



as well as meant for use by the people; books and other documents of relevance to the people published by government and commercial agencies.

### **1.3.2 Administrative Information**

The second category is documents or recorded information that comes into existence from the day today functioning of government machinery which becomes highly relevant to the immediate problems faced by the people. They are official records & documents, memos, official e-mails, opinions expressed by government officials, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, file noting, logbooks, contracts, reports, and official records if in traditional or electronic form . This is the only category of information that we consider as to be covered by RTI Act, even though in vague RTI covers both category of information.

The absence of authentic information on this second category related to matters of public interest will encourage wild rumors and speculations and avoidable allegations against individuals and institutions. Therefore, the RTI on the aspect becomes a constitutional right, being an aspect of the right to free speech and expression which includes the right to receive and collect information. This will also help the citizens perform their fundamental duties as set out in Article 51 A of the Constitution as well as protect themselves against any violation of their other constitutional rights.

The barrier to information on governments functioning is the single most cause responsible for corruption in society. It facilitates clandestine deals, arbitrary decisions, manipulations and embezzlements. Transparency in dealings, with their every detail exposed to the public view, should go a long way in curtailing corruption in public life."

Even if access is provided under RTI Act effective use of second category of information depends on concerned persons accessibility and capacity to absorb related information from the first category. So a Library and Information Services Act that ensures access to first category of information is a preliminary requirement for the effectiveness of RTI Act.

Information' of both the above categories belongs to the public, generated or collected using public money, served by public servants and paid out of public funds. Ensuring access to both these



types of information only can ensure good governance, transparency, accountability and participation. The fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression as well as the RTI is meaningless without the requisite basic information about issues and subjects as well as information on specific administrative actions related to that on which opinions are to be formed and expressed. The RTI of both categories is, implicit in the RTI and the first category of information to be provided by public libraries as much fundamental.

## **2. INFORMATION LITERACY**

Information literacy is a survival skill in the Information Age. Instead of drowning in the abundance of information that floods their lives, information literate people know how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision - whether the information they select comes from a computer, a book, library, a government agency, a film, a web site or any other possible resources.

Knowledge of resource types, evaluation of access tools etc, has given rise to the need for information literacy. Information literacy aims to develop *both* critical understanding *and* active participation. It enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and thereby to become more powerful participants in society. Information literacy is about developing people's critical *and* creative abilities.

The first category of information is contained in documents of different types and formats. There are Encyclopedias, handbooks, directories, manuals, Technical Reports, Compilations of Acts and Ordinances etc. Information may be contained in different formats also like, printed material, audio files, video files, digital files etc. Now for any information search computer have become highly important. Most information sources are available in digital form in computers, CD-ROMs or web sites. So the villager or the average citizen needs familiarization with these types and formats. So an information literacy and guidance programme to be offered to the whole population also becomes important to make RTI meaningful.

Information literacy encompasses computer literacy because in these days a computer-literate person can manipulate electronic information tools to gain access to most of the



information he requires. Information Literacy also encompasses the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand. It is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society and part of the basic human right of life long learning. Information Literacy, ICT awareness and computer knowledge have become a basic requirement if RTI is to become fruitful.

Information literacy is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, along with freedom of expression and the right to information. *Like Education for All* government should provide information literacy also to the whole population. It is instrumental in building up and sustaining democracy. It, therefore, is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth. It provides them with the ability to build their own arguments and to experience the excitement of the search for knowledge. It prepares them for lifelong learning and gives the power to be true citizens fulfilling their duties and responsibilities and enjoying their rights.

### **3. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES ACT**

Libraries, especially public libraries, as information and cultural centers have important responsibilities in safeguarding the public's right to information. Public information and transparency in its real sense fall within the scope of libraries' expertise. Lack of a national library and information policy and its implementation affects library services and the right to information negatively.

So there is an urgent need to develop a national policy on Public Library and Information System with specific classes on its organization at national, State, District, Panchayat / village levels, their networking, the standards on resources and services to be offered from village level service outlets, the distribution of information materials produced by government and other agencies on health, agriculture etc to the village libraries, the use of ICT up to village libraries, the role of village libraries in ensuring the utility of RTI to the villager, definite clause on imparting information literacy skills in villages to make RTI act a reality for the villege etc. Unless District / Panchayat / village libraries update their collection as per the requirements specified earlier and



strategically spread information literacy among the rural people and further orient them on how they can exploit their right to information the benefit of the act will remain with the economically and socially developed minority.

To ensure every man's right to information, public libraries should pool the total resources of the State and nation and should make it available to all the people in an unbiased and efficient way. These functions cannot be fulfilled by isolated libraries whose activities are limited within villages, localities or States. Village library should form part of a national library system and network established with the ultimate aim that any one living anywhere should have access to the whole document and information resources of the country at a time when he requires them and in a form which would best suit his needs. So legislation for national and state level public library systems extending their services up to the village is the preliminary requirement of the effectiveness of the RTI Act.

Public libraries are the only institutions which can provide information of first category. Library and information services of prescribed quality and quantity is to be ensured in each and every village by national and state level Public Library and information System Acts as a pre requisite for the successful operation of the RTI Act. For the second type of information ensured to people by RTI Act also public /village libraries should become the service points to make that accessible and cheap.

#### **4. RTI WORLDWIDE**

RTI of the first category has been ensured by UNESCO public Library manifesto and Library legislations in most countries from the beginning of twentieth century. As librarians we are aware of this aspect in the context of study of library systems and their legislation. So going further into that is not essential here. Legislations on the right to second category of information that is administrative information has been seriously thought off only from 1940s. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 had a catalytic effect on movements for 'open' government, worldwide.

Many democratic countries have taken legislative action to give its citizens a right of



access to information in the possession of the government and its agencies since UN declaration on that. Countries like USA, Canada, France, Scandinavian countries, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, Malaysia, Sweden etc also passed legislation in seventies and eighties. Even the Soviets, under Mikhail Gorbachev, have realized that "the State does not claim monopoly of truth any longer". Glasnost has cast away the cloud of secrecy and stresses the priority of human values.

In keeping with the spirit of the Universal Declaration of 1948 and its Article 19, the Preamble of the Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, in its Article 19(1) (a) provides exactly similar guarantees to the citizens. This includes the right to 'freedom of speech and expression' as one of the fundamental rights listed in Part III of the Constitution. Disclosure of Government Information in India was governed by a law enacted during the British rule, the Official Secrets Act of 1889 which was last amended in 1923. The intent of this law was to secure only information related to security of the State, sovereignty of the country and friendly relations with foreign states. But it contained provisions which could make it a crime to disclose even non-classified information. Civil Service conduct rules and the Indian Evidence Act put further restrictions on government officials' powers to disclose information to the public.

## **5. INDIA: LANDMARK JUDGMENTS**

But the need for RTI has been widely felt in all sectors of the country and this has also received judicial recognition through some landmark judgments. In an important case Justice Mathew remarked (1972) "that the right to free speech is inclusive of 'the right of the community to hear' and that right to free speech, includes the right of the community to read and be informed."

"In a government of responsibility like ours, where all the agents of the public must be responsible for their conduct, there can be but few secrets. The people of this country have a right to know every public act, everything that is done in a public way by their public functionaries. They are entitled to know the particulars of every public transaction in all its bearing. Their right to know, which is derived from the concept of freedom of speech, though not absolute, is a factor which should make one wary when secrecy is claimed for transactions which can at any rate have no





repercussion on public security".

### **5.1 People's Movements**

Simultaneously the demand for RTI has taken the form of mass movement at the grassroots level in many places in India. A mass based organization called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) took an initiative in establishing small village libraries which functioned as Community Information Centres, and based on those centers organized adult literacy programmes, health and environmental awareness programmes etc. The people became informed and capable of understanding the development issues related to their village. By this MKSS lead the people in a very backward region of Rajasthan to assert their right to information by asking for copies of bills and vouchers and names of persons who have been paid wages mentioned in muster rolls on the construction of schools, dispensaries, small dams and community centers of the village.

Encouraged by the success of the people in remote village of Rajasthan civil society groups and other organizations from many parts of the country have started to propose enacting legislation in this line. In 1996, Justice PB Sawant, the Chairman of the Press Council of India, submitted a draft bill on Freedom of Information to GOI keeping in view the need of the day and the observations made by eminent persons that in a democracy, it is the people who are the masters and those utilizing public resources and exercising public power are their agents. The clause which forms the core of the Bill says:

- ❖ Every citizen shall have the RTI from public body;
- ❖ It shall be the duty of the public body to maintain all records duly catalogued and indexed;
- ❖ The public body shall be under a duty to obtain and furnish and shall not withhold any information or limit its availability except that exempted as per law.
- ❖ All individuals whether citizens or not, shall have the right to such information that affects their life and liberty;

The Press Council draft was not accepted. But Inspired and encouraged by all these many



State Governments also yielded to popular pressure and have introduced the Bill on RTI, before the Freedom of Information Bill, 2000 was introduced in the Lok Sabha.

## **5.2 State-level Laws**

The movements for RTI achieved successes in many States. Tamil Nadu (1997), Goa (1997), Madhya Pradesh (1998) Rajasthan (2000), Karnataka (2000), Delhi (2001), Maharashtra (2002), Madhya Pradesh (2003), Assam (2002) and Jammu and Kashmir (2004) enacted legislation on RTI. Before a bill was introduced in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, however, in certain local authorities provided access to administrative information. Bilaspur in regard to Public Distribution System allowed the access to details of food- grains and commodities allotted to their areas and their distribution. The scheme was also extended to development programmes and pollution awareness. It was observed that the RTI has considerably reduced black- marketing and corruption in public distribution system. Moreover, in polluted areas like Korba, the sharing of information on pollution level has raised public consciousness. As a result, officials have become careful about monitoring and controlling pollution level.

## **5.3 Right to Information Act 2005 (Act No. 22/2005)**

In 2004 Government of India appointed a National Advisory Council to guide as a policy making body for the government. The Council took up the job of drafting an RTI bill at its very first meeting. They involved the NCPRI and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) in the task. The first draft of the RTI Bill was presented to Parliament on 22 December 2004. This draft, however, seems to have been watered down from what was recommended by NCPRI and CHRI, allegedly under pressure from the Civil Service. Under pressure from civil society groups, more than a hundred amendments were made when the act was finally passed on 12 October 2005.

## **6. INFORMATION TO BE PROVIDED UNDER RTI ACT**

Under the Act (section 2 (j), right to information includes the right to -

- ❖ Inspect works, documents, and records.
- ❖ Take notes, extracts or certified copies of documents or records.



- ❖ Take certified samples of material.
- ❖ Obtain information in form of printouts, diskettes, floppies, tapes, video cassettes or in any other electronic mode or through printouts.

Exemptions are there but are irrelevant to the average citizen. So they are not dealt here.

Also discussion of the details of the Act clause by clause is not our intention here.

## **7. INITIATIVES FOR INFORMATION LITERACY**

Information literacy of the masses is the very important requirement if people are to exercise their power under RTI. Even though the Act makes provision for that the responsibility is not assigned to any specific department. Actually this function is to be undertaken by libraries. But as our library systems especially those at the villages are not having the resources and facilities for providing this basic function many other government and non government agencies took up the function of Information literacy initiatives. Some examples are Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), National Literacy Mission, Information Kiosks, Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) Project by the Swaminathan Foundation, Tarahaat, SwiftJyoti, Infothela and Akshaya which started at Malppuram, Kerala

Right to information can be implemented effectively in rural areas only when there is a strong LIS and people are info-literate i.e. when information is locally available or accessible and they know the exact methods of extracting required information from the junk of information. Information literacy facilitates 'access to information' and has real impact on health, wealth and well being and thus information literacy is known to be human right issue. Libraries being the institutions having information resources and staff trained in handling information they should be assigned the responsibility information literacy programmes in connection with RTI Act.

Although there are chain of Information literacy initiatives made by Information kiosks of government and non government organizations the missing link is 'Public Library ' whose main aim is to contribute in lifelong learning process of an individual, providing information services required for the people in all contexts and creating Info literacy. Without active involvement of public libraries and providing them with the necessary infrastructures and



resources for conducting information services as well as literacy programmes the RTI cannot function effectively.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

All the facilities for repackaging information in times of need in a simple way so that the common people even if they are illiterate or semi-literate can find it convenient use should be there. Information literacy programmes and small workshops and training programmes on RTI should be done under the initiative of the village library and information system. There should be a very efficient library and information system, which forms part of state information infrastructure at every village, which can fulfil all the information needs of the people of the village.

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