

News on Right to Information

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Lacks political will'

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AJOY ASHIRWAD MAHAPRASHASTA

**Interview with Aruna Roy,
Magsaysay Award winner and social and political activist.**

C.V.SUBRAHMANYAM



Aruna Roy: "The government is not creating platforms for consultations with movements."

Aruna Roy, the prominent political and social activist who spearheaded the campaign to institute the Right to Information Act in the 1990s, is an ardent critic of the anti-people and exclusionary policies of the first and the second United Progressive Alliance governments.

A recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award for community leadership in 2000, she heads the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana (a trade union of workers and peasants) in Rajasamand, Rajasthan, and is also a member of the Central Employment Guarantee Council.

In an e-mail interview to Frontline, she talked about the decreasing social expenditure and lack of political will to implement properly inclusive policies and schemes. Excerpts:

How different is UPA-II from UPA-I as far as spending on social infrastructure goes?

UPA-I had the National Common Minimum Programme as a clearly mandated set of commitments to the people. It was in this context that the intent of the government could be monitored. It also gave space for focussed intervention by civil society so that its views could be incorporated into policy.

UPA-II has a haphazard, ad-hoc and incoherent policy framework for social infrastructure and, therefore, it is difficult to monitor both policy and expenditure.

Funding for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme saw only a marginal increase in Budget 2010. Has UPA-II got a free hand to revert to its policy of liberalisation in the absence of the Left parties' role in the government? Or is it the improvement in the global economy that makes economic logic for the government to spend less on social schemes?

The NREGS is demand-driven. The government will have to make available as much money as there is demand for work. But the government has not taken steps to institute processes that will enable rural workers, who are crippled by the obvious limitations of awareness, literacy, etc., to register their demand for work with the panchayat. This is, perhaps, one of its biggest failures.

In this context, the government has to be proactive and make the programme run effectively. A specific example is the fact that there was no attempt to energise the

NREGS when there were drought conditions in parts of the country last year. The passive role of the government needs to be questioned.

The problem with the NREGS now is the freezing of the wage at Rs.100. With inflation and spiralling prices of essential commodities, real wages are reduced drastically. There is no real voice of protest against the wage policy. The demand for linking the wage under the MGNREGS with the CPI [Consumer Price Index] should be a political agenda both in the context of the NREGS and others schemes.

Early this year, you and Jean Dreze backed out of the Central Employment Guarantee Council (CEGC) sammelan citing lack of political will in addressing the actual issues relating to the implementation of the employment guarantee scheme. Do you feel social schemes such as the NREGS and the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) are not working the way they were planned?

Neither Jean Drèze nor I left the CEGC. We continue to be members.

I had questions at that time, about the functioning of the council, including the issues raised and about its seriousness in addressing policy issues, for which it has been constituted. The nature of discussions and the time allocated for them were areas of special concern. The Ministry has failed in its responsibility to allow and facilitate the CEGC to perform its statutory mandate under the Act. For instance, so far even the CEGC's executive committee has not been constituted.

UPA-II came to power on the strength of the RTI Act and the employment guarantee schemes of its previous term. What are the dilutions proposed in the RTI Act? What do you think are the political reasons for this?

The RTI Act has been under attack since 2006. At that time support from civil society groups, the Congress' alliance partners and some top leaders of the Congress prevented its amendment. Since then there have been repeated efforts to cripple the Act. The DoPT [Department of Personnel and Training] seems to have persisted in pushing the same agenda forward in different forms.

The resistance to transparency and accountability comes from the colonial mindset of the top echelons of the bureaucracy and now the judiciary, which have pressured the system to protect secrecy and fight the logic of accountability. The political executive seems to be supporting the RTI by default. The most conservative parts of the state seem to find this new culture of transparency least acceptable.

Following are specific issues relating to the proposed amendments:

RANJEET KUMAR



Flood control and rural connectivity work is on under the NREGS at Nuruddinpur village in Khusrupur block of Patna district.

Introducing an exemption for so-called “vexatious and frivolous” applications.

We strongly believe that it is impossible to come up with definitions of ‘vexatious’ and ‘frivolous’ that are not completely subjective and consequently prone to rampant misuse by officials. We also feel that it is a hollow promise to have legislation for ensuring ‘transparency’ and encouraging ‘accountability’ in governance that excludes the basis on which a decision is taken. Would it be fair to judge a decision (or the decision-maker) without knowing why such a decision was taken, what facts and arguments were advanced in its favour, and what against? Can one hold a government (or an official) accountable, just on the basis of what they did (or did not do) without knowing the real reasons for their action or inaction? We, the people of

India, already directly or indirectly know the decisions of the government, for we are the ones who bear the consequences. What the RTI Act facilitated was a right to know why those decisions were taken, by whom, and based on what advice. This right is the bedrock of democracy and the right to information, and it cannot be separated or extinguished without denying this fundamental right.

Excluding from the purview of the RTI Act access to “file notings” and the decision-making process, this time by excluding “discussion/consultations that take place before arriving at a decision”.

Neither of the [two nationwide] studies [on the implementation of the RTI], despite interviewing thousands of PIOs [public information officers] and officials, has concluded that the occurrence of frivolous or vexatious applications is frequent enough to pose a threat either to the government or to the RTI regime in general. Certainly no evidence has been forthcoming in either of these studies that access to file notings or other elements of the deliberative process has posed a major problem for the nation. On the contrary, many of the officers interviewed have candidly stated that the opening up of the deliberative process has strengthened the hands of the honest and sincere official.

Do you see a lack of political will in addressing the problems concerning the implementation of the MGNREGA and the NRHM? Why?

UPA-I passed progressive and path-breaking legislation for the poor and the marginalised. But UPA-II has failed to focus and cope with the mammoth demands these progressive pieces of legislation have made on the executive. The reason primarily lies in not evolving systems for accountability and monitoring. The passive response to issues of massive corruption unearthed through the NREGS, even in a well-performing State like Rajasthan, is a failure of governments to introduce systems and take cognisance of proven examples of corruption. The governments (Andhra Pradesh notwithstanding) display their lack of intent in not addressing these issues.

You are a strong advocate of food security. What are the problems associated with the proposed Food Security Bill? UPA-II's Communal Violence Bill and Right to Education Bill have also been criticised as not having enough teeth.

The fact is that the government is not creating platforms for consultations and dialogue with campaigns on a sustained basis to reflect on these important and complex policy initiatives. The history of the last decade has brought in the possibility of a more participatory system of making policy. It is to be noted that the RTI at one level and the NREGS at another have widened the possibility of people's participation in evolving policy.

The vision documents that are now being drafted are supposed to spell out the objectives of achievement for each Ministry. But the government is well into its second year and by the time the agenda is debated and concretised it will be almost the end of its term.

The political will of UPA-I seems lacking in UPA-II.

The accountability infrastructure, which will include provisions for independent ombudsman, penalty, grievance redress and anti-corruption, which is important to meaningfully realise the rights guaranteed under the second-generation legislation, has been absent completely. It is apparent that this is an act of commission rather than omission. I am afraid that rights without remedies will only provide rhetorical value to the important claim to have addressed these basic issues.

Industrialisation is becoming one of the priorities of UPA-II. The past six months have witnessed increased displacement and protest movements, as in the case of Vedanta in Chhattishgarh [see story on page 37] and Posco in Orissa [see story on page 34].

The schizophrenic nature of India's development agenda has been obvious for all to see. On the one hand, we are addressing the concerns of the 60 per cent through the RTI, the NREGS, the Forest Act, the Right to Education, etc. Whereas, on the other side, there is the relentless pushing of the other agenda of development,

displacement, violence, silencing all voices of democratic questioning, rationality, pushing democratic rights out of the agenda and using state violence.

The government cannot exist in this dilemma forever. Unless the state re-establishes its basic commitment to the due process of law, respects democratic rights and affirms its accountability to its people, the questions emanating from the state's relationship with the protesting people (as in the case of Posco) and with political dissent will jeopardise its relationship with the poor and marginalised people and civil society groups. The government cannot abrogate its own commitment to constitutional responsibility.

For many of us, the NREGS and other entitlements empower the people to take stands and to make democratic institutions work for themselves and for the larger good. They are not one-off schemes, but play a very important role in strengthening and deepening democracy. It will be incorrect to say that the government is not addressing basic issues such as employment and education. They are, however, tardy in implementation and have no political strength to push them.

The RTI Act was slated to become the biggest watchdog of Indian democracy. With criticism against UPA-II growing, what role can the Act play in checking the government at a higher level? Do you propose a joint action or movement at this juncture?

The RTI has impacted a huge range of vital decision-making and policy – BT Brinjal, the attempt to amend the RTI Act, implementation of programmes such as the MGNREGA, health, public distribution and scores of others. It is probably the most owned and used Act in recent years. Even those of us who trace its trajectory cannot appreciate the entire canvas. From villages of rural Rajasthan to New Delhi, the RTI Act is recognised as a tool of democratic empowerment.

This is not to lessen the various problems with implementation. First among these is the very sluggish implementation of Section 4 of the RTI Act (proactive disclosure of information by the Ministries and departments), the problems relating to the

commissions, the lack of training of PIOs and the staff implementing the Act, and the persistent effort to amend it, among other things.

The reaction of the judiciary to the RTI Act is typical of a colonial and closed system of governance. While there is no quarrel with safeguarding space for the independent functioning of the judiciary in the realm of judicial decision-making in the courts, in relation to administrative matters – such as appointments, assets declaration and corruption – the judiciary is on a par with other agencies.

1st June, 2010

The future is in cities

The Indian Express

Greater urbanisation should be a specific objective of public policy. While more than half of India continues to live in the villages, there is nothing worth even romanticising about rural India any more. The establishment of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) will improve governance at the village level, although it is taking much longer than is desirable. It will bring in greater empowerment, accountability and deliverance of social services. But it cannot improve the economic conditions in the villages. It cannot, for example, raise employment opportunities. The PRIs and the Right to Information are the best pieces of legislation enacted in recent times. They will ensure better governance at all levels, but they are not sufficient interventions for growth.

The median urban income is two-thirds higher than the median rural income, according to CMIE's Consumer Pyramids, a survey of 1,40,000 households. The difference is high given that the estimates include remittances and imputed incomes, which accrue mostly to rural regions. Thus, it includes the monies that, say, a household in Kerala receives from Malayalis working in the Middle East or households in Bihar receive from migrants working in Punjab or Mumbai.

It is difficult to bridge this gap between rural and urban incomes in any reasonable time frame by investing greater amounts in rural India. Infrastructure development in rural India is a lot more difficult and a lot more costly than it is in the cities and towns. As a result, the rural folks will continue to inundate the cities. Strategically, therefore, it makes greater sense to accept urbanisation as inevitable and work on a development plan around such a reality.

What is important is to minimise the distance that labour needs to migrate to find fruitful employment. A Malayali need not go all the way to the Gulf and a Bihari need not go to Punjab or Mumbai to find employment. It should be possible for them to find employment within a few hundred kilometres.

Currently, an educated Bihari, an Oriya or even an educated Bengali has to travel nearly 2,000 kilometres to Mumbai or Delhi to find employment. This is extremely inefficient and it cannot be the solution for all the peoples of such lands. In fact, all Biharis need not travel to Patna either—like all Maharashtrians need not migrate to Mumbai. The development of a Thane or a Pune reduces the pressure on Mumbai. In Bihar, it would be much better to concentrate on the development of Dinapur Nizamat, Arrah and Jehanabad that are close to Patna than to thinly spread the effort of development across far flung cities such as Buxar, Sasaram or Aurangabad. And, make one more similar effort across the Ganga around Muzaffarpur.

There were over 5,000 towns in India in 2001. The number must have grown since then. It is not necessary (or even prudent) to develop all towns equally. Two factors need to be taken into account when picking cities for development.

First, we must appreciate that big towns often naturally create satellite towns, which in turn integrate well with neighbouring semi-urban areas. Prosperity in the large towns creates spillover effects. And this can lead to spots of isolation. It is best to ride this natural phenomenon and manage it rather than impede this concentration of development or try to even out the development process or try to enhance inclusiveness here. It is better to develop a Vashi in the shadow of Mumbai than to develop a Latur in isolation.

Second, in a large and generally densely populated country like India, it would not be possible to create just a few areas of concentration (such as in Brazil). We need to have many urban conglomerations, not just a handful. Each state capital could be one level at which conglomerates could be made. However, in many states this is seen to be quite insufficient. A Mumbai cannot make a difference that can go far beyond a radius of about 200 kilometres. Such a radius includes Thane and Pune. Bangalore and Hyderabad make a lesser difference in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Therefore, we do need to develop more large cities than just the state capital.

The next administrative level is that of the district, of which we have nearly 600. Instead of so many, it is much better to consider the development of about 100 cities in the 100 homogeneous regions in India. Homogeneous regions (a concept developed by CMIE) are neighbouring districts that have similar agro-climatic conditions, urbanisation levels and female literacy. (See FE, May 7, 2010 for the use of homogeneous regions in marketing strategies.) These 100 cities will effectively provide one large urban agglomeration per 1.2 million people.

The inevitability of urbanisation and a growth plan around such a premise implies that development will not be even across rural and urban areas. This reality is not too difficult to accept. However, it is sometimes difficult, but nonetheless important, to accept that development will necessarily be uneven across regions. The political acceptance of this and a developmental plan that keeps this in mind is the challenge. We must appreciate that Bihar cannot be developed uniformly from Champaran to Bhagalpur, like Maharashtra cannot be developed uniformly from Mumbai to Chandrapur. But, if we can make a better Chandrapur and make it the focal point for development in its region, we would be much better off.

—*The author heads Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy*

2nd June, 2010

New and improved

The Indian Express

When it was set up in 2004, composed of eminent academics and activists, the NAC was meant to steer the UPA and provide policy counsel, if with a clear “social sector” slant. A caucus of good people clustered around UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi, it was intended to ensure that the UPA kept “civil society” concerns in mind, to take the moral measure of the prime minister’s growth-focused agenda. It also worked as a branding tool — to firmly link the Congress’s open palm with large and benevolent welfare projects. Despite its significant achievements, from the Right to Information Act to the NREGA, the NAC has also been criticised, with some justification, as a way for non-elected counsellors to insert themselves into the policy-framing realm, unseemly in a representative democracy. They derived their authority from Sonia Gandhi’s political aura, and they faded away when that powerful endorsement was taken away, and Gandhi resigned over the office-of-profit controversy. Later, the Supreme Court upheld her role as constitutionally valid, but it has taken a year after the UPA’s re-election to reconstitute the think-tank.

This new NAC, with many of the same faces, has a formidable to-do list, from urban poverty schemes to food security, and pushing less economically palatable, but socially valuable, schemes. For instance, the food security bill is struggling with the government’s attempts at dilution, and it is evident that many of the more ambitious welfare plans will need someone to speak for them, and to re-examine them given the political pressure that’s being brought to bear.

However, the NAC must go beyond being a simple counterweight, a force that just thwarts the growth-focused approach of a section of the government, a way for the UPA to play it both ways. Instead, it must find a way to examine its own methods, make the reform agenda mesh with the need for expanding opportunities for the poor. The NAC, too, should put growth first, reminding itself that these schemes are ways to an end, not a self-evident good. The NREGA and other welfare projects should aim for a situation where they are rendered unnecessary. The perspective of

a “cross-section of society” might be sound and valuable, but the exaggerated power of this body means that it must truly represent a broad swathe of concerns.

2nd June, 2010

Vasant Kunj Fortis has no water supply

The Hindusthan

It is South Delhi's biggest private hospital with more than 200 beds and is also accredited by the Quality Council of India (QCI).

But Fortis Ft. Lt. Rajan Dhall Hospital in Vasant Kunj is 'parched'. The hospital needs about 100 kilolitres per day but it doesn't have a water permit from the Delhi Jal Board (DJB).

The hospital gets eight water tankers every day to meet its demand ever since the Fortis group took over the hospital from the Rajan Dhall Charitable Trust in July 2006.

The Delhi Development Authority had allotted land to the trust. The Delhi government claimed that it has no information whether they (the trust) sold the plot to Fortis.

A Right to Information (RTI) application to the QCI has revealed that the water supplied to the private hospital is by way of tankers, as the hospital does not have a water permit.

"It is ironic how the QCI, the healthcare quality regulation body, gave quality accreditation to the hospital that does not even have an approved building plan," said Dr B.N.P. Singh, retired air force doctor who is now chief executive officer of Medivision Consultancy, a consortium of ex-defence officers.

"Till the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) does not approve the building, the DJB cannot provide a fresh water supply," he said.

The hospital negated his claims.

“The building plans for Fortis, Vasant Kunj, are sanctioned and approved by the appropriate authorities,” said Ranjana Smetacek, director, marketing and corporate communication, Fortis. She, however, did not give HT the specific dates as to when the licences were procured.

“Our application with the Delhi Jal Board is pending. The water requirements of the hospital are being met by the daily procurement of water tankers. This water is then treated in the hospital’s state-of-the-art-water treatment plant before use,” she said.

Dr Singh has sent a copy of the RTI reply to Sujatha Rao, Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, highlighting the “selective compromise” of the QCI where they have given NABH accreditation to Fortis without verifying the basic building completion documents.

On March 19, Delhi Health Minister Kiran Walia had slapped the hospital with a show-cause notice for functioning without a completion certificate from the MCD.

3rd June 2010

Failure to provide info costs babus Rs 80 lakh

The Times of India

MUMBAI: Ever since the landmark Right To Information (RTI) Act came into force five years ago, nearly 750 babus have paid a fine of around Rs 80 lakh for their failure to provide documents as per the provisions of law.

The performance of information officers and the misuse of the Act prominently figured in a high-level meeting between chief minister Ashok Chavan and chief information commissioner Suresh Joshi. "No doubt, on occasions the RTI Act is misused.

However, the performance of our information commissioners is excellent. A total of 98% cases were disposed of and that too, in a time-bound period. We will consider an amendment of the RTI Act to stop its misuse," Chavan said.

Maharashtra was among the first states to enact the RTI Act after anti-corruption crusaders launched a statewide agitation for right to information. After the legislation was introduced in the state, the Centre enacted a new central legislation. Between 2005 and 2009, a total of 12.98lakh applications were filed before the competent authorities for securing information. "They were either original applications, first or second appeals before the competent authorities. Largest number of applications—4.4 lakh—were filed in 2009," a senior official said.

About the fine imposed on erring babus, the official said, "A total fine of nearly Rs 80 lakh was imposed on 750 babus during the last four years. The maximum fine was imposed by non-IAS commissioners—Vilas Patil (Nagpur), Vijay Kuvalekar (Pune) and T S Borge (Aurangabad). It was mainly for failure to provide information within the stipulated period or misleading the applicants. The fine has already been recovered from the salaries of the erring babus."

RTI activists alleged that even after five years of the enactment of the legislation,

several information officers still had an indifferent attitude. "Several of them refused to part with basic information and preferred to pay the fine," an RTI activist said.

The activist said the appointment of retired IAS officers was the main hurdle. "The commitment of the officers is towards the government, as a result, whenever appeals pertaining to sensitive information are filed, they are either sent back to the information officers or no order is passed on such appeals," he said.

3rd June, 2010

Maharashtra urged to scrap permits for grain-based distilleries

The Hindu

There is no law to scrap the licences, says Principal Secretary

There is a clutch of politicians and their family, among others, holding licences and enjoying subsidies under a now-defunct policy. Maharashtra's 'Grain-based distillery and integrated unit financial relief 2007' was discontinued last year, said Chief Minister Ashok Chavan recently, adding, "There is no policy."

Rolled out in June 2007, the grain-based liquor policy aimed to "encourage" production of liquor from food grain in the light of the rising demand for spirit – used for industrial purposes and potable liquor. For the purpose, the use of "poor quality jowar" was stipulated; the crop often gets spoilt due to the vagaries of nature. The argument being, farmers who often suffer losses when their jowar is ruined would get better prices for their produce.

The State stopped the policy on August 20, 2009. However, distilleries sanctioned before this date and starting production within two years of sanction were entitled for subsidies. It also stayed the issuing of new licences when faced with opposition. However, the Chavan government now is dragging its feet on cancelling the old licences, doled out during the government of his political rival Vilasrao Deshmukh, whose son is one of the factory owners.

"You can't just scrap the licences. Where is the law?" C.S. Sangeet Rao, Principal Secretary, Transport and Excise told *The Hindu*.

The issue flared up when Chetan Kamble, an activist, filed a petition before the Bombay High Court in December 2009 against the grant of huge subsidies to liquor manufacturers, many of whom are powerful politicians. During one hearing, the court asked the government to state what it considered essential – food grain or wine. What followed was a widespread moral outcry against the use of a staple grain for liquor and against the likely effects of the policy on food security.

Food-deficit State

“Maharashtra is a food-deficit State. The State produced 9.3 million tonnes of food grains in 2008-2009 while it annually needs 15 million tonnes. This year 20,000 villages in the State have been declared as scarcity-hit,” points out social worker Dr. Abhay Bang in a recent letter to Congress president Sonia Gandhi, signed by many activists.

Jowar is the staple in Vidarbha and Marathwada, backward regions where manufacturers enjoy greater subsidies. Activists have questioned the logic of diverting this grain to produce alcohol in a State where “36 per cent children are malnourished and farmers are committing suicide.” Rural India has already seen its food security destroyed by a policy-driven shift from food crops to cash crops.

Official estimates say that you need one tonne of jowar or grain (bajra/maize) to manufacture 650 bulk litre of spirit. “If 20 factories were to produce 20 crore litres of spirit, the quantity of jowar utilised would not be more than five lakh metric tonnes. The total yield of jowar in 2008 was 33.52 lakh metric tonnes,” a Home department note states.

Implications unforeseen

The amount of grain diverted is a small percentage of the output, but its implications on food security are unforeseen. It is this apprehension that led the government to pull back the scheme in August 2009, says Mr. Kamble.

The storm though has not passed. Mr. Kamble says around eight factories (sanctioned prior to August 2009) have already started production. Rejecting the government's claim of using only poor quality grain, Dr. Bang says there is no compulsion on the companies to pick up only spoilt grain.

Plus, the government's contention about the farmer benefiting from a hike in grain prices is not entirely sound. “Definitely no,” says Baban Ghadge, a farmer from Satara. “They say farmers will get good prices, but will the dealers give good prices? The farmer is always the one to be cheated. Will he know if the grain being

purchased is for manufacturing liquor or for other purposes? I have sold my jowar at Rs. 600 a quintal. Is that a rate?"

Some farmers' lobbies supported the scheme, says Kishor Tiwari of the Vidarbha Janandolan Samiti (VJAS). However, he asks, "Farmers will benefit, but at what cost? On one side they say alcoholism is a major reason for suicides and on the other hand they want to encourage liquor use."

The fate of jowar thus hangs in the balance. The court too in its final order did not intervene on the grounds of it being a policy matter.

Main beneficiaries

Meanwhile, the ones who made hay, "the main beneficiaries of this policy, introduced very quietly, [were] the 36 factories, most of which are owned by the close relatives of political leaders," Dr. Bang's letter says.

Information gathered by Mr. Kamble under the Right to Information Act, throws up many well-known names. Rajya Sabha MP Govindrao Adik is the chairperson of Belapur Industries Ltd, Ahmednagar. His son Avinash Adik is one of its directors.

Another licensed distillery is Dhaval Pratapsingh Mohite-Patil Agro Industries Ltd, Solapur. Dhaval Pratapsingh is the son of Pratapsingh Mohite Patil, nephew and brother of the former State Deputy CM Vijaysinh Mohite-Patil respectively. The family wields considerable clout in western Maharashtra.

Bharatiya Janata Party leader Gopinath Munde's daughter Pankaja Palwe and her husband Charudatta Palwe are both among directors of Radico N.V. Distilleries Maharashtra Limited, Aurangabad.

The directors of Vitthal Distilleries in Solapur are NCP MLA Babanrao Shinde's sons, Vikram Shinde and Ranjit Shinde.

The political connection runs way down to Hyderabad with the sons-in-law of P.V. Narasimha Rao owning Pioneer Distilleries in Nanded district.

Mr. Kamble's petition lists Union Minister Vilasrao Deshmuk's son Amit Deshmukh as one of the stakeholders. Deshmukh Sr. was the Chief Minister in 2007, when the policy came into being.

4th June, 2010

HC blow to Governor's office

The Indian Express

BANGALORE: The Karnataka High Court on Thursday directed the under secretary to the Governor to provide a city-based advocate information about the affidavits in which JD(S) MLAs had extended their unconditional support to the BJP to help it form the government.

Vijaykumar had filed an application under the Right to Information (RTI) Act in the Governor's office and sought copies of the affidavits. In January 2008, the Governor's office had rejected the application on the ground that the information was confidential.

Vijaykumar had then filed an appeal before the Information Commission and won a favourable order. The under secretary to the Governor filed a petition in the HC in May 2008, challenging the order.

On Thursday, the High Court ordered the Governor's office to furnish the information to the advocate. It also noted that the documents should not be misused. Advocate General Ashok Harnahalli stated that the Governor's office would provide the information to the applicant within four weeks.

The JD(S) MLAs had filed affidavits before the then Governor pledging their support to the BJP-led government for 20 months. They had then withdrawn support to the BS Yeddyurappa government.

Rs 1 lakh fine for delaying hearing

THE High Court imposed a fine of Rs 1 lakh on a petitioner for not pursuing the petition it had filed in 1999.

Justice DV Shylendra Kumar imposed the fine on Electronics Research Limited, which had challenged the custom duty of Rs 3.88 crore, citing that the Customs

department had levied additional customs duty on it. The second additional city civil court had rejected the application, after which the petitioner had moved the High Court.

When the judge called the petitioner's advocate for hearing, the junior advocate sought an adjournment.

The judge refused to give the adjournment and imposed the fine.

5th June, 2010

Appoint PIO within 15 days, GSIC tells GCZMA

The Times of India

PANAJI: Blaming the Goa Coastal Zone Management Authority (GCZMA) for showing "total disregard to the provisions of the RTI Act and depriving the citizen of his right to seek information", the Goa state information commission (GSIC) has once again directed the GCZMA to appoint a public information officer (PIO) within 15 days of its order issued on June 1, 2010.

The commission also ordered that, on his appointment, the public information officer of the GCZMA should dispose the application of V A Kamat, a Panaji-based member of the Goa Bachao Abhiyan. Kamat had filed the application on July 4, 2009. A copy of the commission's order has been sent to the chief secretary.

This is the second time the GSIC has directed the GCZMA to appoint a public information officer. In its June 1 order, the commission noted, "Right from the date the order of the commission was passed on July 16, 2009, directing the public authority of GCZMA to appoint a public information officer, to this date, the public authority has not yet appointed a public information officer thereby showing total disregard to the provisions of RTI Act and depriving the citizen of his right to seek information under the RTI Act."

Kamat had appealed to the information commission regarding information sought by him from the GCZMA on October 21, 2008. However, the public information officer did not provide the information nor did the first appellate authority decide the first appeal. But the member secretary (GCZMA) provided the information required by Kamat on May 6, 2009.

In its order dated July 16, 2009, the commission noted that no one has been appointed as public information officer by the GCZMA after the resignation of two public information officers and the first appellate authority cannot perform the duties of public information officer. It also directed the GCZMA to appoint a public

information officer to dispose the matters under RTI and the first appellate authority to dispose the first appeals.

The commission also noted, "It appears that the public authority of GCZMA failed to appoint a public information officer to deal with matters of disposing the applications for information under the RTI Act. Every citizen has a right to information and as per the mandate of section 4 of RTI Act every public authority shall designate a public information officer."

5th June, 2010

Nine terrorists have sought commutation of death sentence

The Hindu

Terrorism knows no religion, and as much emerges from a scrutiny of 29 mercy petitions filed by Indian death row prisoners. Of these, 26 are pending with the President's Secretariat, while the others, including the petition filed by Afzal Guru, who was convicted in the Parliament attack case, are "under examination" in the Home Ministry.

The details, which were accessed by Right to Information activist Subhash Chandra Agrawal, show that in all, nine convicted terrorists, including Afzal Guru, have sought commutation of the death sentence.

But, significantly, Afzal Guru is the only "Muslim" terrorist on the list. His petition is also the most recent. Rajiv Gandhi's assailants — Murugan, Santhan and Arivu — top the list with a mercy petition that dates back to 2000. The petition took five years to reach the President's Secretariat, where it has since been pending.

Next comes Devender Pal Singh, who was sentenced to death for a terrorist act by a Special TADA Court in August 2001. The sentence was confirmed by the Supreme Court in March 2003. The same year, Singh, who was convicted in a bomb blast case, filed a mercy petition. It reached the President's office in 2005.

The third terrorism case involves Simon, Gnanaprakash, Madaiah and Bilavendra, who were convicted of killing 22 Karnataka police personnel by blasting landmines. In September 2001, a trial court in Karnataka awarded all of them life imprisonment, which was enhanced by the Supreme Court to the death penalty. Their collective mercy petition, filed in 2004, has been pending with the President since 2005.

Afzal Guru was sentenced to death in December 2002. The trial court's sentence was confirmed by the Delhi High Court in November 2003 and by the Supreme Court in August 2005. His mercy petition, filed in 2006, has been going back and forth between the Home Ministry and the Delhi government.

Mercy petitions can be sent to either the President's office or the Home Ministry. However, the Constitution prescribes no time limit for their disposal, leading to indecision by successive Presidents, and in some cases, by governments.

President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam decided only two mercy petitions — in 2004 he rejected the plea of rape convict Dhananjay Chatterjee, who was later hanged, and in 2006, he commuted Kheraj Ram's death penalty to life imprisonment.

President K.R. Narayanan did not clear any mercy petition.

President Pratibha Patil, who inherited a backlog of 25-odd cases, the earliest dating back to 1997, has decided only one case so far. In November 2009, she commuted R. Govindasamy's death sentence to life imprisonment.

6th June, 2010

Depts stave off queries claiming immunity

The Times of India

HYDERABAD: The Right to Information Act is meant to make all government departments accountable but some have found a way to get around it claiming that the government stake in their outfit is far too less for them to field RTI queries. However, a close analysis of these organisations reveals that they actually enjoy a substantial funding from the government and yet prefer to call themselves RTI-proof.

Take for instance, GVK Emergency Medicine and Research Institute (EMRI), which enjoys 100 per cent government stake but has to date not appointed any information officer. “We do not know whether we come under the Act and we do not have a public information officer to deal with queries,” said Venkat Chengavalli, CEO, GVK EMRI. So, in February this year, when a citizen filed an application with GVK EMRI, seeking information on a patient who was taken to hospital in a ‘108’ ambulance, he was denied the same. He filed a second appeal at the A P Information Commission recently. However, the commission turned down the application on grounds of it being technically inadmissible.

Analysts say that since GVK EMRI technically falls under the family welfare department, the latter should then be responsible to field such queries.

In the EMRI league falls another notable firm — Deccan Infrastructure and Land Holdings Limited (DILL). Deccan Infrastructure, which has a series of SEZs dotting the state has 57.44 per cent equity share and a 42.56 per cent equity is held by the state government. But the firm refuses to be covered under the RTI Act, maintaining that it is a company established under the Companies Act with “limited public money” inflow.

Recently, an RTI query was filed at the Andhra Pradesh Housing Board seeking information on the extent of land allotted to DILL and the market price at which the land was sold to it. The housing board transferred the appeal to DILL which did not answer it claiming immunity from the Act.

“The very fact that the application was transferred to DILL means it is a public company,” said the appellant, expressing her determination to approach the appellate authority — APHB.

Activists claim such organisations enjoy substantial government funding and are also partially controlled by the state government. “A government stake of 42.5 per cent (in the case of DILL) cannot be considered insignificant,” said Rakesh Reddy Dubbuddu, co-convener of United Forum for RTI Campaign.

Similar is the story of the Andhra Pradesh Medical Council and the AP Pharmacy Council, which have not included any information related to its RTI wing on their website. A mandatory rule in the RTI Act is that all public authorities should declare the names of their PIO's concerned and the appellate authorities on their website to furnish information under the purview of the Act. So while the council has a PIO it does not update the contact information of the same on its website. “We do not know if information related to RTI Act should be put up on our website. An update of our website is done on a regular basis but the contents are decided by the senior officials,” said Satyanarayana Murty K, registrar and the PIO of the AP Medical Council.

The Indian Railways Welfare Organisation (IRWO) which too claimed immunity from the ACT despite having only former railway employees on its board of trustees was declared a public authority in a recent ruling by the Delhi High Court. The IRWO, set up under the patronage of the Ministry of Railways, Government of India, promotes social welfare schemes such as providing help to acquire accommodation to serving and retired railway employees.

After the Andhra Pradesh Information Commission ruled that IRWO was not answerable under RTI, the appellant challenged it in Delhi High Court, which ruled that the organisation was sufficiently funded directly or indirectly by the railway ministry and thus fell under the Act.

7th June, 2010

Ex-PP ordered to hand over all case files

The Times of India

PANAJI: The director of prosecution has written to former public prosecutor (PP) Winnie Coutinho asking her to hand over all the case files currently in her possession.

"You were directed to hand over all the case files with you along with the list to the undersigned. However, till date you have not handed over the case files with you nor the list of cases as directed. You are required to comply with the government directions immediately," wrote director of prosecution Shobha Dhumaskar in a letter on June 4.

Coutinho was forced to resign after social activist Aires Rodrigues, under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, had found that the then chief secretary J P Singh, justifying the need to terminate her services, had noted, "She claims incomparable success in her cases but there is no supporting data. On the contrary there is an overwhelming amount of evidence which shows that she has been claiming expenditure running into many thousands of rupees from many departments". He said "her continuance in office is not desirable".

A matter pointed out by the chief secretary was in reference to a criminal case at Canacona in which the accused was acquitted. Though the prosecution decided to go in appeal to the high court, the PP, Coutinho, in the high court "has without application of mind withdrawn the above appeal from the high court."

Though her services were terminated, another order was passed on the same day keeping the earlier order in abeyance until further order. More than two years later, though her termination order was never revoked, she continued to be the PP of the high court as the termination order was kept in abeyance.

Soon after the matter came to light, she submitted her resignation as public

prosecutor. The home department passed an order on Friday relieving her from service with effect from May 31, 2010.

7th June, 2010

Whistleblowers at receiving end after using RTI

The Hindu

While Maharashtra Chief Minister Ashok Chavan is proud that the State has an impressive 98.69 per cent disposal rate of requests under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the murder of two campaigners who used the law to good effect is a blot.

First, it was Satish Shetty at Talegaon, near Pune, who was killed on January 13, and more recently Dattatray Patil at Ichalkaranji, in Kolhapur district, on May 22. The two events triggered widespread condemnation and protests and instilled apprehension among RTI campaigners in the State. The Bombay High Court took suo motu notice of the Shetty case and the State government consented to a CBI investigation in April.

The land mafia and some prominent builders were Shetty's target. Shetty, as the High Court says, brought out "dubious transactions of sale of land." In each case, while some six people were arrested, relatives and supporters are dismayed at the police investigation. Shetty's brother Sandeep is upset that things are not moving after the government agreed to the CBI probe. In fact it was submitted in the High Court that Shetty had named in his application the persons from whom he received threats and sought protection. This has not at all been investigated by the police. The court on May 7 ordered the State government to immediately provide police protection to any person or organisation that complains of threat of use of force or has been attacked. It was asked to set up a special committee to identify social activists and whistleblowers. The court gave the State 90 days to set up provisions for speedy investigation of cases of threats or attacks against social activists, a monitoring system and a database of social activists.

While Shetty is a long time activist and is associated with the anti-corruption movement headed by social worker Anna Hazare, little is known about Patil, though his targets were the powers that be in Kolhapur. In Patil's case, his brother Prabhakar has filed a supplementary complaint on May 30 saying it was a case of murder for political reasons and has demanded an investigation on those lines. RTI activist Shivaji Raut, based in Satara, says now the police will have to investigate the

entire matter and not just the murder. A copy of some the RTI documents obtained by Patil as well as the public interest litigation (PIL) he filed in the Bombay High Court in March 2010 are revealing. Patil filed the PIL against Jaywantrao Awale, Congress MP from Latur, and his two sons who, along with Ramchandra Lokhande, are directors of the Ambai Backward Class Agri Produce Processing Cooperative Society, Ichalkaranji, and others. He alleged various malpractices and the siphoning off of public funds to the tune of Rs 7.80 crores from the government.

Before filing the petition, Patil met several senior government officials and brought to their notice large-scale misappropriation after which the director of the social welfare department promised an investigation and a complete report by February. Fed up with a lack of response despite giving concrete instances of malpractices and fraud, Patil filed the PIL. When Mr. Awale was Social Justice Minister he got the name of the Ambai Society changed to Ambai Backward Class Agri Produce Processing Cooperative Society to avail of the special facilities which are granted to such societies in the form of loans, financial assistance and land. At the end of the PIL, Patil said he feared Mr. Awale would try to harm him and he apprehended danger to his life. He asked for police protection.

He wrote in detail to the Chief Minister on December 15, 2009 highlighting the corruption in institutions meant to uplift the scheduled castes and the backward classes. Of the 220 scheduled caste (SC) cooperative societies in the State, at least 100 were in Kolhapur district.

He alleged Mr. Awale and another former Social Justice Minister, Chandrakant Handore, were involved in permitting these corrupt societies. Fake societies were set up with bogus members and false signatures to grab funds meant for the backward classes, he claimed.

Before that, in August 2009, Patil wrote to the police fearing for his life after filing a complaint of corruption against local councillors. He managed to get the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) to investigate corruption charges against 56 councillors from the Ichalkaranji Municipal Council for fraud and accepting favours for voting for a particular party during the elections to the president of the council. .

The murders of the RTI activists have assumed grave dimensions.

The state, by passing the RTI Act, is allowing citizens to use information as a weapon. But it is falling short in bringing the real culprits to book or giving protection, undermining its own commitment to truth.

8th June, 2010

CIC asks PMO to declare Ministers' assets

The Hindu

The Central Information Commission (CIC) on Monday directed the Prime Minister's Office to declare Union Ministers' assets after getting the nod from the Rajya Sabha Chairman and the Lok Sabha Speaker, and said the opinion of the heads of both Houses will be applicable to all future Right to Information queries seeking such information.

Chief Information Commissioner Wajahat Habibullah passed the order while hearing a petition from RTI activist Subhash Agarwal, who sought details of the assets, wealth and income of all Union Ministers from the Cabinet Secretariat.

As the matter was sensitive, the file on the issue was shuttling between the PMO and the Cabinet Secretariat to decide on who held the information. Finally it was decided that the PMO would provide the information.

Since the Ministers were basically MPs, the Commission discussed whether the nod of the respective Chair was needed for the PMO to disclose their assets.

The Lok Sabha Secretariat opined that as per rules, there was no need for the Speaker's permission to declare the assets of Ministers, information on which was held by the PMO.

8th June, 2010

Civil Service Rules Set For An Overhaul

The Times of India

Rules To Get Statutory Backing; Bill For Uniform Penalties For Poor Performance, Misconduct

New Delhi: In A Move Expected To Make The Bureaucracy More Resistant To Political Pressures And Stem The Rot Of Corruption, The Government Is Planning To Bring Forward A Bill That Will Give Statutory Form To Service Rules And Provide For Penal Clauses To Punish Wrongdoers.

Currently Labelled The Civil Services Performance And Accountability Bill, The Proposed Law Will Give Parliamentary Sanction To Civil Services (Conduct) Rules Under Article 309 Of The Constitution. The Power Of Central And State Governments To Frame Rules For Government Servants Flows From The Article First Enunciated In 1964.

The Bill Will Codify Existing Rules And Also Provide For Clearer And More Uniform Penalties For Misconduct In The Light Of Experience That The Process Is Dogged By Delays And Uneven Application Of Service Regulations. Differing Penalties Are Imposed For Similar Lapses By Disciplinary Authorities In Ministries And States.

Speaking To TOI, Cabinet Secretary K M Chandrasekhar Said The Bill Is Expected To Be Ready Soon For Consideration Of The Cabinet. "The Bill Will Be Piloted By The Department Of Personnel And It Will Contain Penalties For Poor Performance And An Act Of Parliament Will Give Service Rules Added Weight. It Should Work To Make The Civil Service More Accountable," He Said.

As Things Stand, There Are Various Penalties, Broadly Categorized As Major And Minor, That Can Be Imposed On Errant Bureaucrats. It Has Been Felt That Some Of These Lack Teeth And A Recent Report Of A Committee Set Up By Government Pointed Out That Even Compulsory Retirement Was Not A Significant Deterrent As The Official Still Retained Full Pension Benefits.

The Report Underlined The Need For Defining Certain Yardsticks For Awarding Penalties To Avoid Different Types Of Punishment For The Same Misconduct Or Offence. Stoppage Of Increments Is Prescribed For Charges Like Insubordination, Lack Of Devotion To Duty Or Failure To Maintain Integrity. Major Penalties Include Demotion And Dismissal From Service.

Chandrasekhar Said Progressive Implementation Of Right To Information (RTI) Made Government More Accountable As A Whole And The Clarification That File Notings Were Also Open To Scrutiny Was A Step In The Right Direction. "It Will Make Officers Think Carefully Before Arriving At Decisions. I Don't Think It Will Encourage Keeping Matters Off-Record. This Cannot Be Done Beyond A Point," He Said. Asked About A Recent Decision To Set Up A Committee To Vet Complaints Against Senior Officials, The Cabinet Secretary Said This Was Intended To Weed Out Frivolous Cases. A Representative Of The Central Vigilance Committee (CVC) Was Part Of The Committee And There Was No Bar On The Commission Referring Any Case It Wanted To For Investigation. While The Government Is Looking To Tighten The Rules For A Bureaucracy That Is Seen To Be Increasingly Prone To Corruptive Influences, The Controversial "Single Directive" Is Not Going To Be Reviewed. The Process Of Investigative Authorities Having To Approach The Administrative Ministry For Clearance To Probe An Official From The Rank Of Joint Secretary And Above Will Remain.

As Part Of Making The Bureaucracy More Responsive, A System Of Outside Assessment Is Now In Place. Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) Are Examined By Committees Of Ex-Officials Who Can Recommend A Change In Grading. Though The Committees' Powers Are Limited, The Move Is Aimed At Ensuring Assessment Is Not An Inhouse Affair.

The Cabinet Secretary Said The Government Was, Besides The Bill, Looking At Stricter Mid-Career Assessments. Non-Performers Or Those With Manifestly Dodgy Records Could Be "Strongly Encouraged" To Leave The Service, Making Way For More Efficient And Motivated Officers.

Change In Sight

The Proposed Law Will Give Parliamentary Sanction To Civil Services (Conduct) Rules Under Article 309 Of The Constitution

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Besides The Bill, Government Also Looking At Stricter Mid-Career Assessments

Non-Performers Or Those With Manifestly Dodgy Records Could Be “Strongly Encouraged” To Leave The Service, Making Way For More Efficient And Motivated Officers

10th June, 2010

I recommend, therefore I am

Express Buzz

BANGALORE: Politicians have been uneasy ever since the power to transfer police officers of the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police and below have been vested in the Police Establishment Board (PEB), a body set up on the directions of the Supreme Court.

The existence of the PEB, however, has not stopped our leaders from 'recommending' transfers. Information received under a Right to Information query by Express shows that the PEB has been flooded by 'minutes' from politicians demanding transfers.

Since its inception in September, 2009 the PEB has received 56 transfer recommendations from the Chief Minister's office and 231 minutes from Home Minister V S Acharya, according to information given by the DG&IGP's office. MLAs of the state have written as many as 321 transfer recommendations to the PEB; it has also received 88 minutes from other VIPs.

The Board, however, rejected all the recommendations by MLAs and VIPs, said a source who did not wish to be named. Only recommendations from the Chief Minister's office and the Home Minister were 'considered,' but transfers were effected on the basis of 'merit,' the source added. So far, the PEB, headed by DG&IGP Ajai Kumar Singh, has transferred one DySP and nine Sub-Inspectors on the basis of CM's minutes and 16 PSI's on Acharya's recommendations, said sources.

The PEB's disregard for the MLAs minutes is said to be the reason behind the government's stay on the transfer of 64 DySPs recently. The government's official reason for staying transfers was the upcoming MLCs (Graduates and Teachers constituencies) election.

The New Indian Express had reported on Tuesday that the chief minister had faced

pressure from BJP MLAs to divest the PEB of its powers to transfer DySPs at the party state executive meeting in Belgaum.

Since September last year, the PEB has met 10 times and effected 311 transfers of police officers up to the rank of DySPs. Barring a few transfers which were challenged by officers before the Karnataka Administrative Tribunal (KAT), all have been executed.

DGP (Rtd) S Mariswamy said, "The PEB was started to fulfill the recommendations of the Supreme Court. It was set up to prevent any political influence in transfers and to transfer an officer in a particular post clearly on his merit and efficiency. The government should allow it to function. So, the government or any politician should not recommend or suggest transfers.

Some people are trying to get the PEB abolished and I certainly oppose it.ottom of Form

10th June, 2010

Government moots amendments to RTI Act

The Hindu

The Right to Information (RTI) Act will be amended to avoid frivolous or vexatious requests and prevent the Centre from disclosing information relating to the Cabinet papers so as to ensure the smooth functioning of the government.

The Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions gave this information to RTI activist Subash Chandra Agrawal, who wanted to know whether there was a proposal to introduce amendments in the Act.

The government also said that the office of the Chief Justice of India would be protected in view of the sensitivity involved. It must be noted that the former CJI, K.G. Balakrishnan, wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that the Act might be amended so that certain personal information regarding judges need not be disclosed under the RTI application.

Proposals

The amendment proposals are: to Section 2 of the RTI Act so as to remove difficulty in ascertaining whether a particular NGO should be treated as a public authority or not; to Section 4 so as to enlarge the scope of suo motu disclosure; to Section 7 to avoid frivolous or vexatious requests; to Section 8 to slightly modify the provision about disclosure of Cabinet papers to ensure smooth functioning of the government and to take care of the sensitivity of the office of the CJI; to Sections 12 and 15 to make a provision about giving current change of the post of Chief Information Commissioner to any Commissioner; to Section 13 and 16 to bring the provisions on a par with similar provisions in other Acts; to Section 19 to incorporate a provision for constitution of Benches of the Commission; to Section 24 to incorporate a provision about partial exemption of organisations possessing sensitive information; and to incorporate a new Section 29A empowering the Commissions to make regulations.

The government, however, made it clear that these amendments would be introduced only after consultations with the stakeholders.

10th June, 2010

IC asks MCD not to reject RTI missive on flimsy grounds

The Economic Times

NEW DELHI: The Central Information Commission (CIC) has asked the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) not to reject right to information (RTI) applications on “flimsy” grounds.

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi has refused to accept an RTI application addressed to its central public information officer (CPIO) saying there was no such post in its office. Information commissioner Shailesh Gandhi said a citizen has no means of knowing as to which public information officer within the Municipal Corporation of Delhi or any other department should be addressed.

“It is for the department to ensure that any communication received in the capacity of an RTI application should be accepted and further forwarded to the concerned public information officer,” he said while hearing the plea of activist SC Agarwal.

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi has apparently been returning applications addressed to the central public information officer, MCD. Delhi businessman and right to information activist Subhash Chandra Agarwal’s application in April addressed to the CPIO was returned to him with the remark that there is “no such post at MCD Townhall”.

Under the government directives, RTI application can be sent to the CPIO. The RTI Act also states that the application should be transferred to the concerned PIO within five days and responded to within 35 days instead of 30.

Earlier this year, the CIC had criticised the MCD and the Delhi Police for not helping out an RTI applicant’s friends who were assaulted by a mob led by a municipal councillor.

The CIC said if police and the MCD did not do their duty and assist the information

commission, then it would be impossible for people to exercise their “fundamental right to information” and the commission will find it difficult to discharge its duties.

In February, the CIC had recommended disciplinary action against the First Appellate Authority (FAA) of MCD. The FAA failed to conduct a hearing and pass orders in spite of specific directions of the CIC, within the mandated time limit of 30 days or maximum 45 days.

11th June, 2010

Govt. mulls more teeth to RTI Act

The Times of India

LUCKNOW: RTI Act might be set for an amendment. GoI's department of personnel and training (DoPT) is examining a proposal regarding amendment to the Right to Information (RTI) Act in order to make it more effective.

CPIO and under secretary (RTI), DoPT, New Delhi, RK Girdhar, in response to an RTI query by Delhi-based activist Subhash Chandra Agrawal, has said that DoPT is considering making certain amendments to the Act. In future the Act might include a new section, 29A, which will empower the State Information Commissions (SICs) to make regulations.

Besides, there might be an amendment to section 2 so as to remove difficulty in ascertaining whether a particular NGO be treated as a public authority or not, and an amendment to section 4 so as to enlarge scope of suo motu disclosure.

Moreover, amendment to section 7 (to avoid frivolous and vexatious requests) and amendment to section 8 (to slightly modify provision about disclosure of cabinet papers in order to ensure smooth functioning of government and to take care of the sensitivity of the office of CJI), are also being considered.

However, the department will make the amendments only after consultation with the stakeholders, said the CPIO. On April 1, the department had uploaded on its website a questionnaire inviting suggestions from several quarters like civil organisations, information commissioners, public authorities, individuals, NGOs, etc, towards improving the implementation of the Act in the country.

The department said it received responses on the questionnaire from 138 respondents.

12th June, 2010

Anderson extradition not a high priority for India: U.S. document

The Hindu

Bhopal: "GOI [the Government of India] officials may feel that, for political reasons, they need to be perceived as being concerned about extraditing Mr. Anderson although this does not currently appear to be a high priority bilateral issue for the GOI," reads a document sent to the U.S. State Department from the U.S. consulate in Mumbai in July 2004.

Documents obtained by Bhopal activists from the State Department under the Freedom of Information Act, the American equivalent of the Indian Right to Information (RTI) Act, reveal that the extradition of Mr. Warren Anderson, the then CEO of Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), prime accused and absconder in the criminal case against him and 11 others, might be more complicated than it appears. Another letter by the consulate, dated July 6, 2004, cites the advice of the then Attorney-General of India, Soli Sorabjee, in 2001: "Efforts should not be made to extradite Mr. Anderson as there was inadequate evidence to link him directly to the cause of the gas leak."

However, according to H. Rajan Sharma, counsel for the plaintiffs in the U.S. against the UCC, there were several instances that prove the direct involvement of Mr. Anderson in decisions that eventually caused the leak.

For instance, Mr. Anderson's decision on cost-cutting — the plant's refrigeration had been non-operational for three months, and the strength of operating staff reduced from 12 to six members at the time of the gas leak — in response to letters from UCC, New York, expressing concern over dwindling profits.

The pressure exerted on the U.S. government by the U.S. business lobby, whose interests and concerns would be threatened by it, appears a significant factor in the unaccomplished extradition of Mr. Anderson.

A letter written by Joseph E. Geoghan, Union Carbide's chief international counsel, to State Department review authority Archie M. Bolster (dated July 24, 2003) reveals why the business community didn't want Mr. Anderson extradited. "The request [to extradite Mr. Anderson] should be rejected. No issue has greater potential to destroy U.S. business leaders' confidence in India than the handling of the Warren Anderson case." Mr. Geoghan goes on to call the extradition request "sheer hypocrisy" and that its "chilling effect on American investment abroad cannot be overstated."

Linda Jacobson, Assistant Legal Adviser of the U.S. Law Enforcement and Intelligence Department, then wrote to Thomas J. Donohue, president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, convincing him that the business community's concerns would be taken into account.

She writes: "We are aware of the importance of this issue to the U.S. business community... we have learned a great deal about the concerns of the Union Carbide and the U.S. business community... we have also received and reviewed written documentation from the private sector related to these concerns."

The then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, also assured Mr. Donohue that the State Department was aware of the concerns of the business community.

12th June, 2010

Ex-child laborers come together to sensitize 'other half'

The Times of India

VARANASI: Instead of verbally raising hell against child labour on the World Day Against Child Labour, a group of 25 former child labourers, including 13 girls, marked the beginning of a long-term awareness programme on Saturday.

This group of children would initially target areas known as hub of child labourers and later visit those schools where mainly children of upper and middle class families studies to "open the eyes of all sections of the society on the issue of child labour". According to Rajnikant of Human Welfare Association (HWA), with the support of two German organisations-- Terre Des Hommes and Dachser-- his organisation decided to hold a theatre workshop for children. The trainer -- Amarnath Ghosh-- was arranged from Delhi.

As the theatre workshop had to be organised on the theme of child labour, Ghosh asked to select only those children who had worked as child labourers in the past. The HWA activists moved in localities like Lohta, Rahimpur, Shivdasa, Amauti, Amba and Kukudha from where 25 children, including Dilshad, Gulafsha, Ruby, Neh, Sabina, Shanu, Radha and Vinay, were selected. All of them had worked as child labourers in the weaving, farming and other sectors until their parents were convinced to admit them to schools in order to bring them to the mainstream of the society.

The organisers decided to start their workshop on the occasion of the World Day against Child Labour at HWA's Sarnath centre. Rajnikant said during the week-long workshop, children would work on four plays based on the issues of children working at dhabas, hotels and homes, child trafficking, Right to Information Act and child sexual abuse. After the completion of the workshop, the plays would be staged in localities where problem of child labour still existed on a large scale.

With the opening of schools in July, the plays would be staged mainly at those schools where children from rich families were admitted. He said that basic objective

for the move was to make those school children aware of the exploitation that the poor children faced as domestic servants. He said school authorities would be sensitised on the compulsion of admitting 25 per cent poor children in their schools as per the norms prescribed by the government after the enforcement of the Right to Education Act.

13th June, 2010

Mumbai's rail fatalities tops Bhopal gas disaster

The Economic Times

An outpouring of anger and passion has greeted the conviction of seven former Union Carbide officials for negligence in the Bhopal gas disaster. This caused the immediate death of 3,787 people, and the ultimate death of 15,000 to 20,000 people whose lungs were corroded by the gas.

If this anger and passion results in greater safety and accountability, India will be a more humane and just country. The chances of this happening are zero. India remains basically callous and unaccountable. Tragedies greater than Bhopal are constantly ignored and dismissed as “chalta hai.”

Consider Mumbai's suburban rail services. Activist Chetan Kothari used the Right to Information Act to get data on people killed in Mumbai by the Central and Western Railway, which run through the city. Answer: 20,706 people have been killed in the last five years. This is six times as high as Bhopal's 3,787 immediate fatalities and higher than even the long-term fatalities estimated at 15,000-20,000.

On average, over 10 people die every day! If Maoists or Islamist terrorists kill 10 people, that is regarded as sensational news. But if the Mumbai rail system kills the same number every day, it is not even considered news. The information obtained by Kothari pertains to just five years, and to just one tiny part of the railways.

Fatalities across the railways for the last two decades could run into lakhs or the equivalent of five or six Bhopals. A similar RTI exercise is needed for people killed by state electricity boards through uninsulated, loose and dangling electric wires.

One estimate of accidental electrocution deaths in the 1980s was more than 3,000 per year. It is probably higher today. Again, this amounts to several Bhopals over the years. Here again we see no public outrage, only “chalta hai”.

The Times, the British newspaper, used the RTI to get a break-up of Mumbai

fatalities. In 2008, 3,443 out of 4,357 fatalities occurred when trains mowed down people crossing the tracks. As many as 853 fell off or were thrown off moving trains. Another 41 were hit by trackside poles while hanging out of doors, and 21 were electrocuted by overhead wires while travelling on the roof.

Cynics will say this is different from Bhopal: those crossing the tracks and riding on roofs were breaking safety regulations and exposing themselves to danger. But in Bhopal too, the Union Carbide plant was located outside the town, and illegal shanty-towns came up around it, violating safety and urban laws. Does that lessen criticism of the gas leak?

Union Carbide was lambasted for not using the best technology available to avert risks and deaths. But do we castigate the railways for not investing in the best safety technologies, and creating barriers to stop people from crossing the tracks? Union Carbide was slated for negligence in a shutdown plant. But the railways continue to be negligent year after year in a running organization that runs down people.

Many of us howled for justice after Bhopal. Many demanded the arrest of Union Carbide chief Anderson. Those convicted last week included Keshub Mahindra, the non-executive chairman with a largely ceremonial position. How many of us have demanded even the dismissal, let alone conviction, of the railway staff, Railway Board members or railway minister for the continuing holocaust in Mumbai? The non-executive head of the railways is, formally, the President of India. Has anybody demanded that Pratibha Patil be prosecuted for continuing railway deaths?

Alas no. The public displays and unsackable government cadres, who remain in their jobs and get promotions despite the most outrageous negligence.

Let me cite a recent PTI report.

“Negligence by railway staff caused nearly half of all train accidents in the country during the last five years, official data has revealed. Of the 1,034 train accidents that have happened during the period 2003-2008, 488 of them, which accounts for 47.2 per cent, have been attributed to negligence by the railway staff, joint director of the

safety directorate of the ministry of railways J S Bindra said in reply to an RTI application.”

There you have it, from the horse’s mouth. Yet none of those yelling for the blood of Union Carbide staff are yelling for the blood of railway officials. And so railway negligence and deaths continue unabated.

NGOs and the media suffer from a terrible double standard. They will pounce on negligence by a multinational, and rightly so. But they act as though the public sector has a licence to kill. That is disgraceful.

13th June, 2010

Rosaiah strikes deal with Naidu on APIC posts

The Times of India

HYDERABAD: It's most likely going to be a fixed match at the Andhra Pradesh Information Commission (APIC). With not only chairman C D Arha retiring but the other three members laying down office by November, a deal has been worked out by chief minister Rosaiah with leader of opposition Chandrababu Naidu, suggest highly placed sources. As part of this deal, Rosaiah's principal secretary Jannat Hussain will be the new chief but Naidu will be able to get 'men of his choice' as information commissioners.

Under the statute, the appointment of chief information commissioner (CIC) and other information commissioners (ICs) has to be approved by the leader of opposition. "While this provision was made to ensure that only candidates of high stature make it to the post, Rosaiah and Naidu are proving to be smarter and doing a deal," a senior bureaucrat said. TOI's attempts to contact Naidu for the last three weeks on this issue have proved futile. The rank of an information commissioner is equivalent to that of the chief secretary, while the chief is equal in status to that of an election commissioner.

That the law does not provide for any special qualifications for the post of the information commissioners makes the job of match fixing simpler. The qualifications of commissioner is that they should be men of eminence in their field. But it is not defined who can be qualified to be an eminent man.

"They become eminent only after being appointed to the commission," chuckles RTI activist C J Karira.

Under the law, Andhra Pradesh can have 10 information commissioners besides the CIC. However, there are presently only three members. Last time around, when they were appointed in 2005, then chief minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy had proved to be too wily for Naidu. The latter had at that time sent a list of ten candidates of his

choice but YSR managed to jettison them. In the event, at least two of the members appointed were of very modest stature. The claim of one of them - K Sudhakar Rao- was that he had been in engineering college in Gulbarga around the time that YSR was studying medicine there and that he was a pal of the advisor of the chief minister K V P Ramachandra Rao. Little wonder that on the web site of the information commission his credentials are presented as “participation in student activities in college and school days” and an “interest in management of industries.”

Analysts point out that the Right to Information Act (RTI) was brought on the book to deepen the traditions of democracy but the appointment of such nondescript persons is making a mockery of the institution. In most states, information commissions have been packed with retired bureaucrats, but when persons of no credentials like Sudhakar Rao are appointed, the retired officials look better, they say.

However, RTI and citizen activists contend that retired officials whose entire life has been spent in denying information to the public are poor choices for the post. They feel that officials in their new avatar can hardly rise up to the challenge of their new positions. Thus they prefer really distinguished civil society members to be members of the information commission.

“We are asking people to lobby that members of civil society become information commissioners in the next round of appointments,” said Krishnaraj Rao, RTI activist.

Activists have created websites wherein citizens are being asked to ‘apply’ for the posts across the state commissions. With the RTI kicked off in 2005, in most states vacancies have arisen in information commissions. “The idea is to create a pool of eligible persons,” Rao told TOI.

14th June, 2010

Applications reveal collectorates' apathy to RTI awareness

The Times of India

KHAMBHA (Amreli): Are district administrations across the state indifferent about creating awareness on Right to Information Act 2005? A look at the utilisation of funds allocated by the state government for this purpose certainly indicates so.

This major revelation came from series of RTI applications made by activists from Khambha taluka of Amreli district to know the status of funds which were meant to be used to create public awareness of the RTI Act under section 26.

It also issued a guideline about the utilisation of funds to create awareness about the Act. The communiqué asked the collectorates to form a committee headed by the respective collector. The deadline for utilisation of funds was March 31, 2010.

"Our RTIs revealed that in most of the districts the fund was either under utilised or not utilised at all. There are districts that have not used a single rupee till end of March," said Yusuf Juneja, a member of Mahiti Adhikar Nagrik Mandal in Khambha.

"We started filling RTI queries on February 10 this year at all district collectorates. Interestingly, in many districts, officials started convening meetings to discuss the allocated funds with their respective officials after our queries were filed," Juneja said. Among the worst cases were Valsad, Gandhinagar, Kutch, Kheda, Anand, Navsari and Surendrangar.

In Surendranagar district, on March 16, collectors started allocating funds to mamlatdars and other district officials. "The mamlatdars were given a deadline to utilise the funds, giving them just 15 days to spread awareness. In many cases, we did not get information from the first applications. So, RTI applications are pending with at appeal level and Gujarat Information Commission," he added.

"We have seen that funds are either being under utilised or misused. In fact, government agencies should encourage citizens for more participation in order to create greater transparency, which will serve the objective of the Act," said JP Shah, RTI crusader in Junagadh.

14th June, 2010

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15th June, 2010

Right to information key to democracy

The Economics Times

Instead of delivering on the promise contained in the President's inaugural address to the 15th Lok Sabha , to expand citizen's access to information on public affairs, the government now seeks to curtail such access by amending the Right To Information Act.

It plans to make a dozen or so amendments, to prevent disclosure of Cabinet papers, shield the office of the chief justice of India and to empower officials to classify any request for information as trivial or vexatious. This is wholly regressive.

It is, in fact, a move to curtail openness and transparency and to re-establish a culture of unaccountability and secrecy. The impact the RTI has had is to do with opening up the process of governance. The colonial idea of the state and its workings being opaque to the people informs the conduct of governance even today.

The RTI Act has been a significant blow against that culture. The sole possible reason to seek these amendments can only be that the bureaucracy and the political class want to restrict information so as to cover up their malaises and prevent any knowledge of wrongdoing.

Another indication of mala fide intentions has been the lack of movement on the government's promise that it would consult all the stakeholders before bringing in the changes. The proposed change to Sec 7 is the most dangerous one, as it would leave it entirely up to the state to determine what application can be deemed frivolous.

If anything, data contradict the notion that frivolous or vexatious requests are numerous enough to become a problem.

The government is, in effect, trying to change a progressive piece of legislation. Even the move to exempt the CJI would go against the January ruling of the Delhi

High Court that the office of the CJI comes within the purview of the RTI Act and that details of a judge's assets should be revealed under it.

In general, access to information is key for democratic governance, as it reveals the principles and reasons that inform policymaking, thereby making people participate and determine governance . Any move to curtail that must be resisted.

16th June, 2010

Tehsildar penalised for denying information

Indian Express

Anju Agnihotri Chaba Posted online: Wed Jun 16 2010, 23:08 hrs

Jalandhar : The state information commissioner has imposed a penalty of Rs 25,000 on a tehsildar for not providing information under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. The amount will be deducted from the salary of Tehsildar, Jalandhar-1, Rajiv Verma. Complainant Rabinder Singh had filed an application on February 10, 2009, seeking information on the tenure of Verma's predecessor Harminder Singh and the number of RTI applications receive and dispose of by him.

With no reply in over three months, the complainant appealed to the deputy commissioner of Jalandhar on May 18, 2009. But despite orders from the DC, he was not provided with the information.

In April this year, the complainant finally moved the State Information Commission, which issued a notice to the tehsildar on April 26.

With Verma, through his reader, presenting incomplete information before the commission, it asked him to personally appear on June 10. The tehsildar, however, did not comply and sent his reader, who again provided incomplete information and failed to justify the delay in providing information, which should have been supplied within 30 days.

Information Commissioner Kulbir Singh imposed a penalty of Rs 25,000 and mentioned in the order that the DC should ensure this amount was deducted from the salary of the respondent. The case was adjourned to July 15 for further proceedings.

17th June, 2010

'W&M dept fails to inspect railway station, bus stand'

Indian Express

Ludhiana: The Weights and Measures department of the Punjab government has not been doing its job well. The fact came into light when Vishnu Dev, Director of Anand Security and Detective Services, wanted to know through the Right To Information Act whether weights installed at different bus stands and railway stations are regularly checked or not.

Dev was surprised to know that these weights have not been checked for years. More so, the annual fee from the railways as well as the transport department has also not been collected.

Sources said weights measuring more than 3,000 kilograms are installed at a railway station which are used by the parcel booking department.

Dev said, "These weights are to be checked by the inspector of the weights and measures annually. But RTI revealed that no checking has ever been done at Ludhiana, Patiala, Jalandhar and Ferozepur railway stations.

Hence, the state government is losing revenue worth crores on account of annual fee while the public is harrassed when the weights don't give the correct measurement. The things are the same at the bus stands as well. He further alleged that, the department fines the shopkeepers for not getting the licenses renewed in time, but no checking is being done at the areas where public dealing is involved.

17th June, 2010

He fought to bring transparency in office

The Hindustan Times

For Dr Lalit Narayan Mishra (33), the Best PIO Awards 2009 winner, bringing transparency to his office in a Uttar Pradesh district was no mean task.

"Right from my student days, I always wanted to change the system. When Right to Information (RTI) came into existence, I found the required weapon for doing so," he says.

Mishra won the RTI Award because he provided complete and correct information to all applications he received during 2008. When feedback was collected from people, all of them expressed satisfaction.

In 2006, he launched a website to voluntarily disclose information related to the education department.

The journey was not easy for Mishra, who faced opposition from various quarters.

"My colleagues questioned as to why our department is taking special steps for RTI implementation and not others. They feared that their other source of income may be affected," he says.

Commissioned as Assistant Accounts Officer in the Lucknow Cane Commissioner's office in 2002, Mishra says he always thought there should be better transparency in government's working. He was posted as District Commandant of Home Guards in 2005 when the RTI Act came into force.

18th June, 2010

3 years on, GIC yet to give final order on RTI dispute

Indian Express

Ahmedabad : Nearly three years ago, an appeal was made before the Gujarat Information Commission (GIC) on an RTI application seeking details of tie-up between Dow Chemicals and the state-owned Gujarat Alkalies and Chemicals Limited. Now the final order is likely to be out within a month.

Appu Abraham, Administrative Consultant with GIC, said the reply has been delayed because there are many pending cases with the Commission. The last hearing in the case was held on June 23, 2009. Abraham added: "The final hearing is pending. It will be over in a month."

On July 2, 2007, GACL had notified the stock markets that it had signed an MoU with Dow Chemicals. A few days later, on July 13, 2007, Chennai-based environment activist Nityanand Jayaraman filed an RTI application with GACL, seeking details of the tie-up.

On August 6, 2007, V L Vyas, GACL's Company Secretary and General Manager (Legal), replied to Jayaraman saying, "we would like to inform you that the provisions of Right to Information Act, 2005 are not applicable to our Company". Ten days later, on August 16, Jayaraman appealed to the GIC.

On December 17, 2007, Jayaraman sent a reminder to the Commission, in which he wrote: "I have not received an acknowledgment of receipt of the appeal by the Commission. I request you to kindly update me regarding the status of my complaint to the Commission."

After 15 months, the Commission summoned Jayaraman and the PIO of GACL for a hearing. The first hearing was held on March 3, 2009, followed by two more hearings on June 4 and June 23.

Jayaraman said the June 23 hearing was the last hearing, which was confirmed by GIC Deputy Secretary K S Divan.

Incidentally, on June 11, 2010, senior GACL officials had told The Indian Express that work under the joint venture was in progress and production would start by the end of 2012. The plant proposes to produce chloromethane chemical, which is used as an intermediate in the production of fluorocarbons and fluoropolymers, and as a solvent in pharmaceutical manufacturing and other chemical processing applications.

18th June, 2010

CAG wants more teeth

Hindustan Times

The right to information empowers a common man to access information from any public office within 30 days, failing which the act provides for penalty. But Comptroller and Auditor General of India Vinod Rai cannot claim such luck when he calls for information while auditing a government office or programme involving public money.

While many may comply with his request, he can do nothing to those who hold it back as his office does not have statutory backing to ensure timely and unfettered access to records.

Not surprisingly, Rai is keen that the Bill that redefines its mandate by replacing the CAG Act 1971 is in place by the winter session of Parliament. The draft legislation states that information asked by CAG shall be provided within 30 days, as is done under RTI.

A comprehensive audit draft Bill was sent to the finance ministry last November. The CAG sent reminders for expediting the Bill for cabinet and parliamentary approval. "We sent another reminder a month back. My officers are in daily touch with them," Rai told HT.

The Bill is also expected to address three other major loopholes that have virtually turned a powerful accountability instrument into a toothless one.

First, in the absence of statutory provision of a time-frame for tabling CAG reports in legislatures and Parliament — the law just says it should be done "as soon as possible" — there are instances of state and central governments not doing so for a year. The proposed Bill suggests that if Parliament/legislature is in session, the report be tabled during the session otherwise within seven days of the session being convened.

Second, though CAG monitors government money, about 53 per cent of plan expenditure — or around Rs 83,223 crore for 2010-11 — is outside its purview and parliamentary oversight. The proposed Bill is likely to give CAG the authority to review such accounts.

Third, the government needs to take a conscious view on whether or not to allow CAG to oversee decisions of the 50-odd new regulators unless they have an appellate tribunal.

Is CAG asking for too much? “We are not asking for powers to probe, penalise or ensure implementation,” Rai said.

19th June, 2010

RTI plea returns undelivered

The Hindu

New Delhi: The office of the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister has no Public Information Officer (PIO) to receive applications filed under the Right to Information Act.

An RTI application seeking details on who assisted (the then chief of Union Carbide) Warren Anderson, the main accused in the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster, to leave the country with full VVIP protocol, was returned 'undelivered' to activist Subash Chandra Agrawal stating that "there was no post of PIO in CM's office, hence returned."

Mr. Agrawal has approached the Central Information Commission asserting that the return of the application was refusal to furnish information, for which proceedings under Section 18 of the RTI Act should be initiated against the persons concerned. He wanted a direction to the Chief Minister's Office to respond to the queries contained in the June 9 application.

It has sought complete information regarding Mr. Anderson's exit. Many senior officers including the then Chief Secretary, Collector, pilots of plane and others had openly blamed before TV cameras that Mr. Anderson was assisted to leave, at the instance of the then Chief Minister Arjun Singh.

He wanted to know whether it was true that Mr. Singh helped Mr. Anderson leave Bhopal on December 7, 1984. "If yes, action taken against Mr. Arjun Singh by the present Madhya Pradesh government; Was there any proposal to arrest Mr. Arjun Singh now in view of his role in making Mr. Warren Anderson run away from the country?; If yes, please provide file notings/correspondence/documents relating to any such proposal; Action taken against others guilty of letting Mr. Warren Anderson run away from Bhopal; If the answer is 'no' to the first question, action taken against those making media statements including the then Collector Shri Moti Singh, pilots of plane [Shri R.S. Sodhi and Shri Sayed Hasan Ali] flown from Bhopal to New Delhi on

December 7, 1984 and others for false presentation in media, if it is so; Any other related information and file notings on movement of this RTI petition.”

21st June, 2010

Desperately seeking a Green Right to Information

The Hindustan Times

Bhopal was the world's worst industrial disaster. The sudden public and political interest in Bhopal should push us to think of industrial production and the environmental and health damage it causes.

Bad enough, we don't know much about the process, but we can test and guess.

Much harder is the other end — the product. It's impossible to know if your red kurta was coloured using dyes manufactured in Gujarat's notorious Vapi-Ankaleshwar belt. I've been there. Apart from a rash that gave me company for the next two months, I also saw a red dog-coloured by his polluted environment. Many of us buy whatever we do because without information, we don't have adequate choices.

We need a new system of publically available information about industrial production. This must include data about the raw materials in a product, at least for manufacturers making above a certain quantity, to begin with. It should include the source of these raw materials, down to the factory.

Make it even easier initially-pick a sector. How about garments-did you know cotton uses 10% of the world's pesticides? Whatever we do, a key means of cleaning up industrial production is putting out life cycle information out there for everyone to know.

Let the Water Seep

Monsoon means an opportunity to harvest water. Most Indian cities fail miserably, because we don't create the capacity and destroy whatever we do have by cementing the ground. Take Delhi, whose facelift involves cementing great chunks. Even areas close to the Yamuna have now been concretised.

This won't help us combat climate change, flooding or even get water for our daily needs. But you can do something locally-take a walk and identify any area that doesn't need to be paved to serve its purpose. It could be a carpark, or a path across a real park. If it is paved over, join hands with neighbours and simply break the tiles, so you can see the mud beneath. It won't look beautiful, but it will be a good for the planet.

22nd June, 2010

Mass contact programmes launched in Bihar, UP: Sonia

The Hindu

With Congress determined to improve its performance in Bihar Assembly polls and return to power in Uttar Pradesh, party president Sonia Gandhi has said a mass contact programme has been launched in both the States.

“The Congress party has launched a mass contact programme in the country, with special attention being paid to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar,” Ms. Gandhi said in her ‘Letter to Congress persons’ in the latest issue of party mouthpiece ‘Congress Sandesh’

While Bihar goes to polls in October-November, Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh are scheduled for early 2012.

She said the workers of the party “must concentrate” on reaching out to the people, especially in rural and remote parts of the country so that Congress party’s focus on the common man genuinely addresses their needs.

“It is the duty of our party workers to ensure that all schemes promulgated by the UPA government at the Centre are fully implemented at the grassroots,” Ms. Gandhi said.

She said the Congress workers can become the “vehicles for the success of all our social developmental programmes”.

“They (party workers) must create awareness of the many rights under schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi NREGA, Right to Information and the Right to Education- that have become laws,” the Congress president said.

Calling upon party workers to monitor the implementation of these programmes at village and grassroots level, she said they should take the lead in exposing any loopholes that can mar the impact of these programmes.

Ms. Gandhi also echoed the sentiments of farmers who are keen for a good monsoon this year to overcome the deficit of last year.

“It is that time of the year again when all of us look forward to a good monsoon. The initial trend seems to be encouraging and we are all hoping that the rains would come not only in adequate quantity but will also come at the right time which is so much needed by our kisans (farmers),” she said in the article.

23rd June, 2010

Traditional chiefs, districts councils under RTI purview

The Hindustan times

Meghalaya's Chief Information Commissioner G P Wahlang has ruled that the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) and all traditional chiefs of the state fall under the purview of the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005.

The ruling came in the wake of a petition filed by the Federation of Khasi Jaiñtia and Garo People (FKJGP), an NGO, alleging non-compliance of the Syiem of Hima (chiefdom) Myllem to furnish information on revenue collection of the Hima (traditional Khasi state).

While examining the petition, Wahlang, observed that the Syiem (chieftain) was an administrative officer of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) as enshrined by Para 2(4) of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and as confirmed by the Supreme Court in a case between T Cajee and Jormanik Syiem.

The CIC, in its ruling last week, said all the traditional heads are public servants duly appointed by the respective ADCs and hence they automatically attract the provisions of Rule 2 (h) of the RTI Act.

Earlier in the month of January this year, FKJGP had filed a RTI application with the office of the Syiem of Myllem seeking information on the status of revenue collection and expenditure of the Syiem. Till date the Syiem has not responded claiming that his office was not within the purview of the RTI Act.

23rd June, 2010

RTI ensures transparency: VP

The Times of India

HYDERABAD: Vice President Hamid Ansari said here on Tuesday that the Right to Information Act and other mechanisms such as the Comptroller and Auditor General became effective institutions in bringing about transparency in the working of the government and, in the process, they would bring into public glare the defects in the system.

Addressing the University of Hyderabad's convocation at Shilpa Kala Vedika, the vice president said there was an evident 'need for correctives'. He asserted that public awareness alone was not enough for bringing about any change. A focused public action too was needed. A concerned citizen should be motivated by transparency, accountability and compassion.

Ansari in his speech advised the students that they had rights and duties as the country's citizens and that they should be committed to them. At the convocation, 942 students were awarded degrees and 78 students were honoured with medals.

Outlining the university's achievements, vice chancellor Seyed E Hasnain said the UoH had been ranked 81st among 200 Asian universities and had also received the Promotion of University Research and Scientific Excellence (PURSE) award from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

This year the university would offer three new courses in optometry and vision science, nursing sciences and health psychology.

Standing out in the sea of achievers at the convocation were some with stories of hardship coupled with determination to excel. Naheeda Sultana, 21, was one of them. A gold medalist, Sultana is a first generation learner and won the gold medal in MA (Urdu). Sultana said she went to a government school and later joined UoH

which was 50 km from her residence. Setting her sights on a PhD, she said she would come back to the university as a lecturer.

23rd June, 2010

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24th June, 2010

Official to pay fine for delayed service

The Times of india

MANGALORE: The Karnataka Information Commission has imposed a fine of Rs 2,000 on A H Bijapur, assistant registrar-cum-assistant administrative officer and public information officer, Dakshina Kannada District Consumer Disputes Redressal Forum. The Commission has levied the penalty under powers vested in it by section 20 (1) of Right to Information Act and directed that the penalty amount be paid out of the salary of the officer.

The action against Bijapur follows for what the state information commissioner K A Thippeswamy, who passed the order, observed was failure on part of the official to discharge his duties as PIO. The officer had unduly delayed in providing the information sought by B Prakash Bhat and furnished the required information only when the president of the forum conducted an inquiry and took strong objection to the delay.

The Commission directed the president of the forum to recover the penalty of Rs 2,000 levied on Bijapur in two equal monthly instalments of Rs 1,000 out of the salary of the respondent for the months of April and May 2010, payable during the months of months of May and June 2010. The Commission directed that the amount so deducted be paid to the head of account 0070-60-118-0-03 - penalties under the Act, a KIC order stated.

24th June, 2010

CIC slaps Rs 250 per day fine on info officer

The Times of India

LUCKNOW: The chief information commissioner (CIC) has slapped a penalty of Rs 250 per day on the information officer of the state home department starting from May 31, 2010, till the time he provides the information sought by an IPS officer under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

Prior to slapping the fine, the CIC sought personal appearance of the officer concerned to award him the opportunity to explain the reason behind the delay in providing the said information to the applicant but the officer in questioned not only failed to appear before the CIC but also did not find it important enough to inform the commission about the reason of his absence in advance.

The issue relates to an IPS officer, Amitabh Thakur, who is presently on a study leave for a management course at the Indian Institute of Management - Lucknow (IIM-L). Thakur had reportedly submitted an application to the public information officer (PIO) of the state home department, Madan Kishore Srivastava, on May 29 seeking copies of all the notings, comments, letters, orders and correspondences related to his study leave application that he had applied on April 3, 2008. After the PIO of the state home department failed to provide the information, the IPS officer took refuge of the CIC.

After the due course of hearings, CIC Ranjit Singh Pankaj on May 30 ordered the PIO to provide the applicant with the required information by June 22, 2010 - the next date of hearing the case. In case of failure to provide the information, the CIC in his order stated that the PIO must provide the reason behind it. However the PIO neither provided the applicant with the required information nor bothered to inform the CIC about the reasons for the same or the reason for his absence from the hearing.

Taking serious note of the PIO's conduct, the CIC on Tuesday ordered a fine of Rs 250 per day as per the provisions under Section 20 of the RTI Act, 2005, starting

May 31, 2010, till the date the required information is made available to the IPS officer. The CIC also cautioned the PIO to provide the applicant with the required information before the case comes up for the next hearing slated for August 3, 2010. In case of failure, the commission will recommend for departmental proceedings against the PIO, Madan Kishore Srivastava.

24th June, 2010

Suri civic body vice-chairman suspended

The Times of India

SURI/KOLKATA: Trinamool Congress has initiated an "investigation" into the Suri fiasco by seeking to know under the Right To Information Act which of its councillors voted against its official nominee to the post of chairmanship of Suri Municipality, even as the Pradesh Congress Committee initiated steps to expel councillor Ujjwal Chatterjee, who was appointed vice-chairman by new chairman Ujjwal Mukherjee, an independent candidate.

"We have issued a showcause notice to Ujjwal Chatterjee seeking explanation as to why he should not be expelled for violating the party whip on voting and accepting the post of vice-chairman without the consent of the party," PCC working president Pradip Bhattacharya said in Kolkata. Chatterjee was given a week's time to reply. The district Congress committee, meanwhile, issued showcause notices to five other Congress councillors who, too, did not vote for the Trinamool nominee. Bhattacharya said they would be suspended.

On Tuesday, independent candidate Ujjwal Mukherjee was elected the chairman, defeating the Trinamool candidate Pritikana Bhattacharya, who could not even secure the votes of all the Trinamool candidates. As the election was held under secret ballot, it was a mystery as to who, other than the Left Front councillors, had voted for Mukherjee. The Left councillors openly extended their support. Some Congress councillors, too, were believed to have voted for Mukherjee. After the election, Trinamool leaders admitted that one or more of their councillors had not voted for their candidate and supported Mukherjee, ignoring the party whip. The party would take action against those councillors after completion of the "investigation", said sources.

Trinamool has made an interesting use of the RTI Act. "What is/are the name/names of the Trinamool Congress councillor/councillors who has/have voted in favour of Ujjwal Mukherjee in chairman election held on 22.06.2010?" This was the information required by Trinamool leaders from the SDO Sadar, Suri, under the Act.

Leaders of other parties usually seek such information but now in Birbhum Trinamool leaders have to use the Act to seek information about their own people. The application signed by Manas Ghosh, leader of the elected councillors of Suri municipality, was submitted to Suri SDO Sudatta Chowdhury. Trinamool district chairman Ashis Banerjee and other party leaders met the SDO and other senior officers of the district administration in Suri on Wednesday.

Apart from the renegade Trinamool councillors, Mukherjee got the support of councillors of Left Front and some Congress councillors, too. The names of the Congress councillors, too, were unknown till Tuesday but on Wednesday, Congress councillor Ujjwal Chatterjee was nominated by the chairman as the vice-chairman of the board, which gave certain indications.

"We have issued showcause notices to some of our party councillors, including Chatterjee," Birbhum DCC president Susobhan Banerjee said.

Chatterjee, however, said: "I have received the showcause letter. We have not disobeyed the party whip. We have voted for the Trinamool nominee, Priti Bhattacharya. We don't know who voted for Ujjwal Mukherjee; the Trinamool councillors themselves might have voted for him. We will send our reply to the party leaders within seven days."

24th June, 2010

World Bank opens RTI door

Indian Express

New Delhi : From July 1, the World Bank will throw open its files under the Right to Information Act. "This has been approved," said a bank official, adding it potentially opens up the record of the Bank's involvement with successive Indian governments before and especially during the first few critical years after liberalisation. However, correspondence of the Bank with the government will not come under the purview of the RTI, as part of the small set of negative list, he said.

Meanwhile, the World Bank on Wednesday said it was discussing with India for another \$ 1 billion loan to help shore up capital of India's public sector banks. "Discussions are going on with the World Bank and the government of India to provide", World Bank country director for India Roberto Zagha said on Wednesday. India has become the largest recipient of the World Bank loans with over \$ 9 billion worth assistance this fiscal ending June 2010, up fourfold over the previous fiscal that includes about \$ 2 billion for the recap.

The Washington-based multilateral lender had extended only \$ 2.2 billion loan to the country for the year ended June 2009. India's share among the various recipients of the Bank is 15% in terms of loans, followed by Mexico with 11% and South Africa with 7% as of June 20, 2010.

As of June 20, the Bank has lent \$ 9.26 billion to India and is expected to provide another \$ 0.04 billion in the remaining period of June. The Bank follows a fiscal year from July to June.

The Bank's total lending to India will touch \$ 9.3 billion by the end of June and a similar amount is expected in the next financial year beginning July 2010. "We are working on a number of projects, which if you add them up, would roughly amount to the same amount of lending (in the next fiscal)," World Bank country director for India Roberto Zagha said after announcing the 2009-10 numbers in the Capital on Wednesday. The support would be for transformative projects, including the Kosi flood recovery project and cleaning up the Ganges. Besides, the Bank also expects

huge funding opportunity in the infrastructure sector, including the proposed dedicated freight corridor project.

During this fiscal, the Bank has given aid of about \$ 3 billion to the infrastructure sector, he added. The total expected lending this year includes \$ 2.6 billion as interest-free credits from the International Development Association and \$ 6.7 billion in the form of long-term, low interest loans from the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, he further said.

26th June, 2010

Rules to enter CMO

Deccan Chronicle

The recent practice of appointing an officer in the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) from the same community as the person who retires or leaves the CMO has raised some eyebrows. After Mr Subramanyam died in the chopper crash along with Dr YSR, Mr K. Raju was inducted into the CMO. Now that Mr Raju has left to join the National Advisory Council, the name of Mr B. Sambob has been almost finalised. There is much grumbling that merit is being sidelined and other considerations are determining appointments to important posts. While this may be agitating babus, we cynical members of the public can only say: so what else is new?

INEXPLICABLE TRANSFER OF IAS OFFICERS

The world of bureaucratic transfers is a strange one that we mere citizens cannot fathom. Here's the case of an officer who was given a new posting, and yet not given one. Mr Jayesh Ranjan, secretary, tourism department, was transferred and posted as commissioner, AYUSH, exactly a month ago, while Dr Vijaykumar, commissioner, AYUSH, was posted in his place in the tourism department. Nine other IAS officers were also transferred in May. All the transferred officers have taken up their new postings except Mr Jayesh Ranjan. Normally, if an officer is retained in the same position, a cancellation order is issued subsequently. Though a month has passed, Mr Jayesh Ranjan is still in his old position and no cancellation order has been issued.

The buzz in bureaucratic circles is that it's all due to the tourism minister, Ms J. Geeta Reddy, who had been kept in the dark about the transfer. She has reportedly prevailed upon the Chief Minister to retain Mr Ranjan as he was doing a good job. But fellow IAS officers are surprised at this new way of transferring officers on record and retaining them on oral instructions.

WEIRD REASONS TO BAG RTI CHIEF'S POST

A news item in these columns about babus taking up RTI jobs created quite a furore in the state administration. Some felt it was not right for retired bureaucrats to be appointed as RTI commissioners, but many senior officers defended it in the most ingenious way. They pointed out that it was IAS officers who had drafted the Act. The chief secretary, Mr S.V. Prasad, pointed out that it was the Chennai-based IAS officer, Ms Aruna Roy, who quit her job in 1974 and worked for the Right to Information in Rajasthan. Her fight finally won this country the landmark Act empowering people with information. Bureaucrat-turned-politician Jayaprakash Narayan's contribution to the RTI draft bill was hailed by Mrs Sonia Gandhi, and state officer Mr K. Raju also did his bit in preparing the bill. Though others argue that a bureaucrat who has tried his best to hide information from the public all through his 30-35 year career, can't change his mindset overnight and work to disseminate information, senior officers like Mr S.V. Prasad and Mr Jannat Hussain beg to differ. There may be something in the rumour that the latter is in the race for the top

27th June, 2010

NGO demands chemical emergency plan under RTI

The Times of India

VADODARA: Concerned over the recent fire in the backyard of Gujarat Refinery, a city-based environment activist Rohit Prajapati on Saturday filed a Right to Information (RTI) application demanding to know whether the Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority (GSDMA) has any emergency plans to fight chemical disasters in the state. Prajapati has asked the authorities to reply within 48 hours as it is an important issue and GSDMA's website doesn't have any information on it.

"I have demanded elaborate details from GSDMA as I feel that there is no effort from the government's side to prevent chemical disasters. Gujarat has large number of chemical industries, many of which deal with hazardous chemicals. I want to know whether the government is prepared to tackle any disaster, especially during monsoons," Prajapati told TOI.

"We shouldn't forget what happened in Bhopal. There are many risks associated with the use, storage, processing and handling of these chemicals. But, many times industries deny sharing such information. The eight solid waste sites and 25 common effluent treatment plants in Gujarat are open like cricket grounds," Prajapati added.

Under RTI, Prajapati has demanded a copy of chemical emergency plan for each industrial cluster of Gujarat particularly for rainy season, names of chemical industries in the state, their products, details of hazardous waste and effluent generated, its impact on environment, health of workers and communities around.

He had demanded similar information in 2007. The state government had then replied saying that it didn't have any chemical emergency plans and was in the process of making one. "If I don't get reply within 48 hours, I will approach Gujarat Information Commission (GIC). It is high time that the government shares its disaster management plans," Prajapati said.

"Lot of hazardous chemicals flow out along with rainwater during monsoons every year from the chemical industries in and around Vadodara. Same is the case with industries in other cities. The lake near Gujarat Refinery had also got polluted owing to the dumped oil products," Prajapati said.

27th June, 2010

RTI Forum to launch journal in October

Express buzz

KOCHI: To mark the efforts and activities of the RTI activists across the country, the National RTI Forum is bringing out a 'Journal for Right to Information.' The first issue of the publication, being planned as a regular half-yearly news journal, will be coming out in the second week of October.

The theme for the first issue will be the 'Five years of RTI Act.' A list of topics for articles, which can be included in the journal, has been circulated among the activists and others associated with the initiative. The topics include the RTI Act - legal analysis, challenges in the implementation of the Act; RTI activists - a new breed of activism; performance of the State and Central Information Commissions; challenges and handicaps of State and Central Information Commissions; impact of the Act in rural and urban India; future prospects of the Act; role of RTI in governance; success stories; RTI martyrs; major changes brought by the Act; the common man's perspective; and RTI across the world.

"We have chosen October 13 for bringing out the first issue because the RTI Act, which was passed by Parliament on June 15, 2005, came fully into force on October 12 and 13, 2005. Those interested in publishing articles in the journal can send them to nationalrtiforum@gmail.com before September 1. The forum had earlier collected details of the RTI activists who sacrificed their lives for the purpose. "We have decided to bring out the journal once every six month so that the RTI-related activities happening across the country can be brought to the notice of the public. Moreover, the activists can maintain a common network. The journal will cover all aspects of the RTI Act, its possible amendments and its general impact," associate editor of the journal and convener of the National RTI Forum Dr Nutan Thakur, of Lucknow, said.

28th June, 2010

Death sentence of eight convicts commuted

The Hindu

New Delhi: President Pratibha Patil has commuted the death sentence awarded to eight murder convicts in two separate cases to life imprisonment.

During the last three decades, Presidents have commuted the sentence in only 10 cases out of the 77 petitions on which decisions were taken.

Ms. Patil gave her order on June 15 on the mercy petitions submitted by Shyam Manohar and five others, who were on death row since October 1997 for killing five persons, including a 10-year-old boy, and Dharmendra Kumar and Narendra Yadav, who were convicted of murdering five members of a family.

More pleas pending

Twenty-one such pleas are still pending with the President's Secretariat and three more with the Home Ministry, according to information provided by the President's Secretariat to S.C. Agrawal on a Right to Information application.

So far, Ms. Patil has decided on three petitions and the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in all of them. — PTI.

29th June, 2010

Vet varsity says norms for selection decided during job interviews.

The Times of India

The university had in March called for applications from eligible teachers for elevation to higher pay in the grade of assistant professor and professor under the career advancement scheme (CAS). The interviews for selecting the candidates are will be held next month.

However, the university initially did not disclose its selection norms for the posts. This prompted C Selvaraj, an office-bearer of the Federation of Anti Corruption Teams (FACT) India, a non-governmental organisation, to file an application under the RTI Act asking the authorities to spell out the guidelines for recruitment.

Earlier this month, university public information officer D Kathiresan had responded to the query thus: "The guidelines for the selection of professor and associate professor will be decided by the selection committee with the approval of the vice-chancellor at the time of the interview."

Activists assailed the university's response arguing that if selection norms were to be drawn up at the eleventh hour it can be manipulated to suit vested interests and benefit favoured candidates. Besides, it would leave the process open to corruption. Armed with this response, Selvaraj shot off a representation to the office of the governor-chancellor pointing out that the career enhancement scheme was being implemented in TANUVAS in violation of the standards prescribed by the University Grants Commission. "It is clear that in TANUVAS, the selection norms are drawn up after all the applications are scrutinised and the credentials of the candidates are known. This is unheard of in any of the public-funded organisations," Selvaraj said.

He urged the governor-chancellor to direct the TANUVAS to device a transparent and credible selection process and publish it on its website.

FACT India activists said that on Monday the university had hurriedly unveiled the selection norms and also put it up on its website. Interestingly, the university has

reduced the marks to be allotted for interview of candidates to 20. Earlier the university had earmarked 30 marks for the interview component of selection, which was assailed since it was against the widely accepted practice of awarding 10 or 15 marks for interview.

29th June, 2010

SEBA plea hearing today

Calcutta Telegraph

Guwahati, June 29: Gauhati High Court will examine the admissibility of the petition filed by the Board of Secondary Education, Assam to scrap the State Information Commission's order that allows students to see their answer scripts under the Right to Information Act tomorrow.

The petition filed by SEBA on June 25 said it would be next to impossible for the board, which conducts examinations like HSLC and high madarsa annually, to disclose answer scripts to candidates without disturbing the existing examination set-up.

The board made it clear that if the system of allowing students to see their copies is continued, the examination system would be destabilised.

A single judge bench of the high court, comprising Justice Anima Hazarika, will take cognisance of the board's plea.

SEBA's legal counsellor T.C. Chutia told **The Telegraph** that in 2007, the Central Information Commission gave a verdict that answer scripts of school-leaving examinations of central and state boards would be out of reach for students relying on the RTI Act to clear any misgivings about their marks.

"Under such circumstances, the State Information Commission's order is considered as overstepping of the central commission ruling and the high court must intervene. Lakhs of students appear every year for the HSLC and high madarsa exams. Even if 10 per cent of the students apply to see their answer scripts, it will be a mammoth task, which SEBA cannot afford. Such practice has already disrupted the process of holding next year's examination smoothly," he said.

According to Chutia, SEBA has cited various grounds as how the State Information Commission's order would affect the board. He said the order could be applicable

only to internal examinations of educational institutions and government offices where the number of candidates is very limited.

State information commissioner B.K. Gohain issued an order on July 4 last year that said in any public examination, the candidates must be equipped with photocopies of the answer scripts if they apply under the RTI.

29th June, 2010

Senior citizen drags bank to consumer body

The Hindustan Times

A senior citizen has taken the State Bank of Patiala to the Maharashtra Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission alleging that the bank had siphoned Rs 70 lakh from his bank account.

Bandra-based businessman Sirish Kirtikar (63) had nine accounts (savings and current) and 10 fixed deposit accounts at the bank's Bandra branch.

"When I was going through a bank statement issued on April 23, 2009, it showed that amounts had been withdrawn from my accounts and deposited in accounts not known to me," Kirtikar said.

Kirtikar's complaint said he had not issued any instructions for withdrawal of the amount from his account.

He also alleged that when he went to his bank to get the original receipts of his 10 fixed deposit accounts—the value of which was more than Rs 1.12 crore—the bank gave him seven photocopies of the receipts.

"When I got the receipts I was shocked to see that somebody had forged my signature and withdrawn money from the account."

Officials of the State Bank of Patiala refused to comment. In a reply to an email sent by the Hindustan Times, M.K. Mohindroo, assistant general manager, Regional Office I (Mumbai) said, "Since the matter is subjudice, we are unable to give our comments."

Kirtikar has alleged that the "fraudulent acts on the part of bank" caused him a loss of Rs 70 lakh.

He also claimed that the bank did not give him details of the day-to-day transactions of his accounts despite his request.

Kirtikar's complaint said the bank had told him that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had permitted it to open accounts without consulting him.

"When I filed an application under the Right to Information Act, the Reserve Bank of India told me it has not authorised any bank to open unauthorised accounts," Kirtikar said. Kirtikar has also filed a case with the Economic Offences Wing of the Mumbai police. Kirtikar has sought Rs 5 lakh as compensation for the mental agony he has suffered.

29th June, 2010

Computerization of all state Government records

Express buzz

HYDERABAD: To promote good governance for the people's benefit, all records of the State Government should be computerized.

"This would create confidence among the citizens in the Right to Information Act (RTI) by providing required information swiftly," stressed Governor ESL Narasimhan. He was the chief guest at the one-day national conference on RTI which was held at Jubilee Hall here today.

Addressing the gathering Narasimhan, however, had a word of caution for bureaucrats: "Information released by the RTI should help society rather than individuals.

There is a need to guard it from misuse." He said the RTI officials should do a social audit on their work schedule and the information provided. Delivering the presidential address, Wajahat Habibullah, Central Chief Information Commissioner, RTI, said the act was aimed at promoting transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority.

"The RTI covers all public authorities and any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any law and also non-governmental organisations substantially financed, directly or indirectly by the government," he explained.

Regarding the working of the RTI in the State, CD Arha, chief information commissioner of Andhra Pradesh said there were 1,80,840 public information officers (PIOs) who received 1,65,175 applications in the State and who had disposed of 1,56,392 applications up to December 2009 and provided information to 1,46,266 applicants.

"At least 75,844 appellate authorities are functioning in the State. They received 7,400 appeals while disposing of 6,274 during 2009.

Over the last four years, the APIC has received 41,939 cases and disposed of 36,765,” he said.

Coastal Andhra accounted for 48.32 per cent of the queries, Rayalaseema 15.22 per cent and Telangana 36.46 per cent.

In terms of districts, Hyderabad topped with 2621 cases, and as regards departments, 3693 applications pertained to the revenue department.

Public information officers, appellate authorities of the Secretariat, heads of departments, regional, district, divisional and mandal officers participated in the conference.