

Prime Minister's Inaugural Address at the 7th Annual Convention of Central Information Commission

Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh addressed the 7th annual convention of Information Commissioners in New Delhi today. Following is the text of the Prime Minister's address on the occasion:

“The Right to Information act has been in force in our country for seven years now. By all accounts it has contributed in very large measure to our efforts for ensuring greater probity, greater transparency and greater accountability in the work of public authorities. The greater public scrutiny of government action that it has enabled has been, I believe, good for our country. I congratulate all those who have been associated with the implementation of this very important piece of legislation, the Right to Information act in the past seven years.

In the last year itself close to 10 lakh people, in all parts of our country sought information from the Central government authorities under this legislation. Today, citizens everywhere feel empowered because of the Right to Information Act. It is a simple and uncomplicated legislation, easy to understand and use. And this I think is one of its major strengths.

It is a pointer to the success of the Right to Information that only about 4.5 percent of the applications that are filed before Central government authorities reach the Information Commissions for adjudication. It is estimated that out of the 20,000 appeals and complaints disposed of by the Central Information Commission every year on the average, only a couple of hundred cases a year have been challenged in our courts.

Notwithstanding its successes, I believe that the Right to Information is still evolving in our country. The potential for good, constructive use of this Right is perhaps far greater than what its current status would indicate. But this potential cannot be realized automatically. It would require concerted efforts towards removing the impediments that at present reduce its efficacy.

There are some obvious areas of concerns about the way the Right to Information Act is being used presently, and I had flagged a few of them when I addressed this Convention last year. There are concerns about frivolous and vexatious use of the Act in demanding information the disclosure of which cannot possibly serve any public purpose. Sometimes information covering a long time-span or a large number of cases is sought in an omnibus manner with the objective of discovering an inconsistency or mistake which can be criticized. Such queries besides serving little productive social purpose are also a drain on the resources of the public authorities, diverting precious man-hours that could be put to better use. Such requests for information have in fact come in for adverse criticism by the Supreme Court as well as the Central Information Commission.

Concerns have also been raised regarding possible infringement of personal privacy while providing information under the Right to Information Act. There is a fine balance required to be maintained between the Right to information and the right to privacy, which stems out of the Fundamental Right to Life and liberty. The citizens' right to know should definitely be circumscribed if disclosure of information encroaches upon someone's personal privacy. But where to draw the line is a complicated question. I am happy that this Convention will

devote an exclusive session to "Privacy and Disclosure Issues", which I hope will result in useful, constructive recommendations. The issue of a separate legislation on privacy is under consideration of an expert group under Justice A. P. Shah.

There are other issues as well which need to be addressed. For example, how much information should entities set up in the Public Private Partnership be obliged to disclose under the Right to Information Act. Blanket extension of the Act to such bodies may discourage private enterprises to enter into partnerships with the public sector entity. A blanket exclusion on the other hand may harm the cause of accountability of public officials. I am sure that you will discuss such issues in this Convention with a view to finding a way forward.

I know that there has been some confusion about the implications of the recent Supreme Court order regarding the composition of the Central and State Information Commissions. As you might be aware, the government has decided to go in review before the Supreme Court in this matter.

The public authorities also have an important part to play in bringing about improvements in the implementation of the Right to Information Act. There are costs associated with providing access to information. It must be our endeavor to minimize these costs. Better training of employees, greater use of modern technology and proactive disclosure of the maximum possible amount of information are obvious solutions, not only for minimizing costs but also for making it easier for people to access information. In some places there may also be a need to change perceptions about the Right to Information- it should not be viewed as an irritant but something that is good for all of us collectively.

Rights, of course, cannot stand in isolation and must always be accompanied by reciprocal obligations. I had pointed out in my address to this Convention in 2008 that while asserting our rights we need to be equally conscious of our responsibilities and our commitments. I believe that all of us share a responsibility to promote more constructive and productive use of the Right to Information Act. This important legislation should not be only about criticizing, ridiculing, and running down public authorities. It should be more about promoting transparency and accountability, spreading information and awareness and empowering our citizen. I think that there is need for all of us to work towards building an environment where citizens see the government as a partner and not as an adversary.

The Right to Information Act is one of the many steps our government has taken for strengthening the institutional architecture for curbing corruption, enhancing transparency and accountability in public administration and improving delivery of services to the people. Other important legislations that are proposed include the Whistleblowers Protection Bill, the Time-bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of Grievances Bill and the Electronic Delivery of Services Bill, which are all currently under consideration of our Parliament. We have also put in place a National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy. Recently we have taken an initiative to facilitate direct cash transfer of government benefits to public accounts of beneficiaries. This would help in reducing leakages and wastage, and also make it easier for our citizens to avail of governmental assistance.

I believe that the Right to Information can be utilized for even better results to the benefit of

our country and our people. It needs to be remembered that the ultimate goal of the legislation is to induce more efficiency in the work of our government and help it serve our people better. I hope you will utilize this Convention to find ways and means to achieve this objective more effectively. I wish you success in your deliberation.”

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