

I stand here to welcome the President of India in our midst. All of us are very pleased and honoured that he agreed to accept our invitation to inaugurate the national convention. His presence here affirms his commitment to the cause of protecting the right to information and with the President of India standing behind, we can be reasonably sure that this right is safe and secure. As one of the senior most members of the government in 2005, he had played a major role in the enactment of this law. Not only this law, he has played a very significant role in the enactment of most of the rights-based laws in recent years which have deepened our democracy and created a durable stake for the citizens in the administration of the nation. Arguably, he is one of the most erudite and experienced scholars in governance today apart from being one of the most astute administrators and legislators. We are very fortunate to have him as our President at a time when there is a general sense of dismay about the health of both our economy and politics. His benign, benevolent and informed presence will give us the right direction to steer clear of the momentary distortions and distractions. On behalf of all of you and the Central Information Commission, I welcome him once again.

I also welcome the Minister of State. He has shown uncommon ownership of this law and has been always supportive. It is because of him that we have never felt any lack of resources for whatever we intend to do in the CIC. Between him and the Secretary, DoPT, they have initiated many new measures to strengthen RTI such as the RTI online and the extensive infrastructure for Section 4(1) (b) disclosure by the ministries and departments of the government. I welcome them both.

We will complete eight years of RTI in October this year. The RTI has made significant progress in these years. As I had said once earlier, it has become a part of our language and many use it as a verb. This is a measure of its success. Even then, it is sometimes lamented that it has not reached all the citizens of India. We should not forget that it has reached many more people in a period of eight years than most other rights conferred by the Constitution of India. The number of RTI applications received across the public authorities in India has registered constant increase, year after year, although increasing numbers of RTI applications from citizens is not necessarily a measure of its rightful use. Therefore, we need not be despondent about the future of RTI only on the ground that a larger number of citizens are not using it or the message has not reached to more and more people. What should engage us, however, is a more quality use of this right to bring about better governance and larger public good. That is not happening to the extent we would all expect and hope. The fact that the majority of RTI applications are for securing information for personal use both by common citizens and, to a considerable degree, by the serving and former government servants shows that the original purpose of enacting the law still remains to be fulfilled.

Some of the basic assumptions made at the time of enacting the law in 2005 also remain unfulfilled. Most of these assumptions, incorporated in the provisions of the law itself, are for the government. These are about better record-keeping, increasing computerisation of records, proactive and progressive disclosure of information, advocacy, training and awareness raising among the government servants. We must admit that in none of these areas, we have really made much of a progress although

some positive initiatives have been taken recently. The success of the right to information in bringing about greater transparency and accountability is directly dependent on the extent to which the above objectives are met.

The civil society engagement with the right to information is obviously not the same as it was before. The attention of the civil society keeps getting diverted to various other issues and rights of the citizens. But we should not forget that the right to information is the mother of all other rights of the citizens and any weakening of our ownership of this right will adversely impact our success in securing all those rights.

The RTI is not an instrument to beat up government servants or politicians; it must be exercised without any ill will or rancour. It should also not be used to harass or blackmail others. It is not uncommon to hear many stories of how the RTI is being used precisely for such purposes. If such tendencies are not curbed, it will weaken the right to information and make it less effective.

The RTI can be used as a barometer for evaluating the standards of governance in general and the delivery of services in particular. Wise and clever heads of departments can conclude from the tenor of the RTI applications what is right or wrong in their establishments and take corrective measures. It is not very clear if the government ministries and departments are using the RTI in this manner. Transparency is both an ideal and an ideology. Sharing information with the public about the decision-making process should be a continuous process. It would reduce the public demand for

information on the one hand and create a sense of trust between the citizen and the government on the other. In times of crises, having taken the citizens into confidence about any decision would come handy as a shield to the decision-makers. Therefore, this argument that the RTI has de-motivated public servants from expressing themselves freely in government files does not seem to be based on serious reflection and is more on account of fear of how the information will be used or misused.

Before I conclude, I would like to say a few words about the state of the Information Commissions in the centre and across the states. The Information Commissions play a very vital role in the dissemination of information, but more importantly, in stoutly protecting the citizens' right. Therefore, it is extremely important that these are adequately manned and serviced, both with quality manpower and resources. And, since the Information Commissions adjudicate matters against the government, they should be reasonably empowered to be independent without having to depend on the government every now and then. More importantly, the Information Commissioners should be appointed not as a means of distributing patronage but strictly on the basis of their competence, knowledge of the working of the government and deep commitment to and belief in the right to information. There is an increasing feeling among many that neither the Information Commissions are being adequately funded and manned nor are the appointments of many Information Commissioners based entirely on merit. This needs to engage all of us in future. But I must also say that, in spite of all these handicaps, all the Information Commissions have, by and large, performed admirably.

I complete my tenure the day after. I leave personally enriched and with a lot of satisfaction. I also feel extremely honoured that the President of India is inaugurating this convention, my last in the CIC.