

PM inaugurates third Annual Convention of Information Commissioners

November 3, 2008

New Delhi

I am very happy to be here in your midst for this third Annual Convention of Information Commissioners. I compliment the Central Information Commission for bringing all of you together and also for inviting participants from our neighbouring countries of South Asia to this Convention. Regional cooperation in South Asia can acquire a new meaning if we agree to share our experiences in processes of governance and learn from each other. I sincerely hope this Convention will promote greater mutual understanding of processes of governance in our region.

Our Government takes great pride in the implementation of the Right to Information Act. It is often said that in modern society information is power. By sharing that information with the people at large, we are therefore, proposing decentralisation and participatory governance. It is revolutionary enactment that has placed huge powers in the hands of the ordinary citizen of the country to demand a transparent and accountable administration. This transition from a tradition of secrecy in official matters has of course not been easy. It has involved not only the setting up of an appropriate institutional mechanism but also a change in the mindset of public servants.

I am happy that reports in the media show that the benefits of the Act are now reaching the common citizen. It is a matter of great satisfaction for us that the legislation has begun to facilitate a greater flow of information from public authorities to the common man. There are many heart-warming stories of problems faced by ordinary men and women, like getting a ration card or an electricity connection, being resolved through a simple procedure of filing an application for information under this Act. I see in all this a gradual but steady process of building a more accountable, transparent and citizen-friendly government.

I understand that there has been an exponential growth of requests for information by our citizens over the last three years the Act has been in force. Statistics show that the majority of Information Commissions are ordering disclosure of a vast range of information hitherto unavailable to the citizen. This is, in addition, to information that is being provided by Public Information Officers and the First Appellate Authorities. I am told that, in comparison to the first year, in the second year the number of requests that were rejected has come down by more than 4%. The measure of success in empowering citizens with information, however, should not be limited to the reduction in the number of rejection of requests by public authorities. There must be enhancement in the quality of voluntary disclosure so that information seekers are not required to join long queues.

Public authorities in our country have still to go a long distance in proactive disclosures. They must endeavour to voluntarily put out in the public domain information of use to our citizens. This will be a major challenge for public authorities in the arena of 'Information Housekeeping'. By improvement in data management practices and by computerization of records and work flows the time may not be far off when citizens may locate on their own the status of their requests in the work flow artery of public authorities. The Act itself in section 4 mandates as much. I am told that this has been integrated into Government plan of e-governance calling for the computerization of all Central Govt. Organizations.

There are also some difficulties in the implementation of the Act that we must remove. Applicants find it difficult sometimes to file applications because of procedural bottlenecks. The modes of payment of fees are also somewhat limited. At many places adequate attention has not been paid to training of personnel, and modernizing of records management systems. There is also a need for greater publicity of the provisions of the Act. I am sure that all these issues will be discussed upon in the Convention.

The Right to Information Act is a powerful instrument of citizens' empowerment. It is indicative of the process of nurturing of our democracy and the assertion of people's power at various levels of Government. However, our citizens must also constantly remember that democracy is not just about Rights. It is also about Responsibilities. Democracy is not just about asserting our own identity. It is also about respecting the identity of others. Democracy is not just about seeking benefits. It is also about contributing to the process of nation building. We are passing through a phase in our national life when each one of us is more conscious about our Rights, our entitlements, and about our identities. But we do not seem to be really equally conscious of our Responsibilities, our social obligations, and our national commitments as citizens of a free democratic country. Even as we celebrate our individual empowerment through legislations like the Right to Information Act, let us not forget our collective responsibilities and concern for our national goals.

I must also take this opportunity to caution that we need to strike a balance between the need for disclosure of information and the limited time and resources available with the public authorities. Also, vexatious demands should not be allowed to deprive genuine information seekers of their legitimate claims on limited public resources. I do hope your Convention will bring out certain suggestions to deal with this situation.

This annual convention provides an opportunity for introspection and an assessment of how far we have succeeded in realizing the objectives of democratic empowerment and participation in processes of governance. What future steps must we take? What course correction is if any required? Have we made mistakes? How can we correct them? I am sure that all these questions will be discussed in your Convention.

I hope that the Convention will give us a holistic assessment of our achievements and as well as our shortcomings in the implementation of the Right to Information Act. This will help us implement the Act better and, therefore, empower our citizens in a more effective manner. I also hope that those who are now venturing into the field would find the deliberations of the Convention useful. With this, I have great pleasure in inaugurating the Convention.

I wish the Convention all success.