

SPEECH OF THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SMT.PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL, AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE CENTRAL INFORMATION COMMISSION ON 12 OCTOBER, 2009 AT NEW DELHI.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to inaugurate the Annual Convention of the Central Information Commission. It was on this day in 2005 that the landmark legislation of the Right to Information Act came into effect giving to the people of India a powerful instrument for their empowerment.

In a democracy, it is the people who are supreme. They elect their Government and it is for them to judge the performance of their elected representatives. While the casting of the vote enables them to take the important decision on what Government they want, for assessing deliverability, they need information about how their Government is functioning. The RTI gives to each individual citizen the means to question and to get answers. The significance of this becomes evident when we recall that before 2004, it was largely the Members of Parliament and Members of State Legislatures who could question the performance and functioning of Government authorities through proceedings in their respective Legislatures. The Act has, in a manner of speaking, now created a virtual "Parliament of the People", where every citizen, through a simple method, can seek information from public authorities; and expect a response in 30 days. This has been the biggest fundamental difference that has been brought about by the RTI enactment – providing relatively easy access to information. There is no doubt that the flow of information to the citizens will help them make enlightened judgments.

Interaction between the citizens and the public authorities is important in making democracy participatory and to move forward towards the common national goals of progress and prosperity. India seeks to build an inclusive society and is committed to an inclusive growth process. Government has made available substantial amount of funds for numerous social and economic schemes. A major challenge is to ensure the effectiveness of the delivery mechanisms, so that the impact of these schemes is felt by the beneficiaries. It is of utmost important that these funds are spent in conformity with the cannons of efficiency and productivity, as well as their wastage and

pilferage avoided. The “RTI Route” can be instrumental in bringing about improvements in the public service delivery systems and mechanisms.

Public authorities are progressively becoming pro-active to the spirit behind the Act and are responding favourably. The best practices adopted by various States in response to the RTI Act should be codified and practiced. Various public authorities have simplified their procedures and transformed their citizen interface into the e-governance mode and the Commission itself is one of them. I am also told that since the Act came into being a large number of Government websites invariably have the “Right to Information button” on them. It is important that technology is used for better management of records and data, this in turn would make information sharing easier.

Institutions are increasingly coming under greater scrutiny. Information is no longer the preserve of a few and there is greater emphasis on transparency of work and accountability. However, there are many occasions where the bureaucracy, evokes an image of red-tapism and certain opaqueness. It is my hope that as the Right to Information gets further embedded into our civil society, there will be even more urgency felt to take action to negate this perception, which at times may be wrong. Good governance and corruption free systems are what people are rightfully expecting, and they can use the Act to get it in full measure.

The Right to Information Act has the potential to make Government and the people work together for the benefit of both. The occasionally noticed tendency to view public authorities as adversaries should go. There is a fine balance which needs to be maintained between applications under the Right to Information to public authorities and also ensuring that public authorities are not flooded with applications, some of them of frivolous nature, which could overwhelm their ability to respond in time. Therefore, there is a need for a sense of responsibility for more openness on the part of public authorities as also within civil society to ensure that applications which reach authorities are those that genuinely need immediate attention. It is here that the role of the Central Information Commission, as a regulator, balancer and educator, is critical.

Citizens exercising the right to information have substantially grown in numbers, complexion, and stature. There are many illustrative cases – physically handicapped persons getting their entitlement, women getting old age pension, students getting correct evaluation of exams and damaged roads being repaired. This speaks of the success of the RTI Act in creating conditions for free flow of information and thereby empowering the citizen. Applications that result in public benefits, in the timely implementation of schemes; that bring relief and welfare to people; help in citizens getting what is theirs rightfully, should receive the uppermost priority. Efforts must also be made to ensure that the RTI option is known and exercised in rural areas and by the disadvantaged sections of the society.

Rights given under this Act to our citizens are extensive and, therefore, it is important that there be a deep sense of responsibility while exercising them. The civil society can play an important role in creating awareness about the importance and spirit of the Act, so that collectively the people and their elected Governments can build the future of the country responsibly and constructively.

In the end, I would like to reiterate the importance of following sound principles of good governance for the welfare of our citizens, who are at the centre of all government functioning. This will further strengthen our democratic traditions and credentials. I am confident that during the Convention, the review of the functioning of the RTI and discussions under the sub-themes will identify issues that need attention whether in terms of factors that impede the flow of information, co-ordination between State Commissions, strengthening of government infrastructure for RTI and building a responsible culture of RTI. I conclude with good wishes for the Convention.

Thank you,

Jai Hind