

Prime Minister's Inaugural Address at the 6th Annual Convention of Central Information Commission

The Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, addressed the 6th Annual Convention of Information Commissioners in New Delhi today. The following is the text of the Prime Minister's address:

“Let me begin by saying that yours is a very important conference. The Right to Information is now about six years old. I am sure we are all agreed that empowering our citizens with this right was a huge step forward in the direction of curbing corruption and improving process of governance. There are issues which directly affect the life of every citizen of our country. Therefore, as you evaluate past experience in the implementation of the Right to Information Act and deliberate upon ways and means - how to make it more effective, you will be contributing to efforts for improving the quality of life of the common man in our country. Not only this, this convention is taking place at a time when there is a vigorous ongoing debate on the issues of corruption and governance. It is my fondest hope that your discussions will contribute meaningfully to this debate. Let me also say that I am very happy to be amidst you today on this very important occasion.

I had the opportunity to address the third annual convention of Information Commissioners in November 2008. I had then stated, that there were indications that the benefits of the Right to Information had, in fact, starting reaching the common citizens. I had also said that one could discern at that time a gradual but steady process of building a more accountable, more transparent and citizen-friendly government. Three more years have passed since I made those observations and I can say with confidence that the Right to Information Act is now being more extensively and effectively used to bring into public gaze many areas of the work of public authorities which would otherwise remain hidden from public gaze. I think in these three years we have travelled further down the path of ensuring transparency and accountability in our administration. The power and the usefulness of the Right to Information Act are being felt more fully today than ever before. And this is all to the good.

We wish to build upon these achievements. Our government stands committed to a comprehensive agenda of legal, executive and technology initiatives to curb corruption and improve governance and we consider the Right to Information to be a powerful tool to enable us to move in that direction. We wish to make the Right to Information an even more effective instrument for ensuring transparency and accountability in administration. I would like to mention here our initiative to enact a legislation for the protection of Whistleblowers which would further strengthen the Right to Information. We expect this law to be enacted in the next few months and it would, among other things, help in prevention of violence against those who seek to expose wrongdoings in our public administration.

Even as we recognize and celebrate the efficacy and the effectiveness of the Right to Information Act, we must take a critical look at it. There are concerns that need to be discussed and addressed honestly. I had mentioned last time the need to strike a balance between the need for disclosure of information and the limited time and resources available with the public authorities. A situation in which a public authority is flooded with requests for information having no bearing on public interest is something not desirable. We must,

therefore, pool all our wisdom, our knowledge, and our experience to come to a conclusion on how to deal with vexatious demands for information, without at the same time hindering the flow of information to those whose demands genuinely serve public interest. Another concern that has been raised is that the Right to Information could end up discouraging honest, well meaning public servants from giving full expression to their views. I think we need to remember here that a point of view brought under public scrutiny and discussion in an isolated manner may sometimes present a distorted or incomplete picture of what really happened in the processes of making the final decisions. The Right to Information should not adversely affect the deliberative processes in the government. We must also take a critical look at the exemption clauses in the Right to Information Act to determine whether they serve the larger good and whether a change is needed in them. I am happy that there is a special focus in your conference on the exemption clauses of the Act and I would urge all of you to come up with concrete suggestions in this area. There are also issues of privacy. The Act does have provisions to deal with privacy issues but there are certain grey areas that require further debate.

The Right to Information enables access to information even from a private party that comes under a regulatory framework. This assumes an added significance in the context of an increasing number of projects being taken up in the Public Private Partnership mode. I understand that your conference is being attended by experts from trade and industry bodies such as the FICCI, CII and the ASSOCHAM. I hope the discussions would also cover the commitment and the responsibility of the private sector companies for dissemination of certain basic information relating to their operations.

I understand that the demand for information under the Right to Information Act has grown significantly year after year in the last six years. It is a matter of considerable satisfaction for us that the rejection of the requested information has shown a consistently decreasing trend, from 7.2% in 2007-08 to 6.4% in 2009-10 and 5.2% in 2010-11. A decreasing trend is also evident in the percentage of requests in which appeals and complaints are filed with the Commission. The Commission, through its decisions from time to time, has laid down principles for disclosure of various classes of information which were not considered fit for disclosure thus far. All this indicates that public authorities today are more open and more sensitive to concerns voiced in the Act, and they are better prepared to respond to citizens` request for information. This is a matter of considerable satisfaction to all of us.

The number of appeals / complaints before the Commission, however, is still very large. This is indicative of the scope for further enhancement of the quantum as well as quality of voluntary disclosure. Public Authorities in our country have still a long way to go in making proactive disclosures of information that is not covered by the exemption provisions of the Right to Information Act. They must endeavor to voluntarily put information in the public domain without waiting for applications from information seekers. If this is done, a lot of time will be saved both for public authorities as well as for citizens. I am told that the Department of Personnel & Training will organize a series of workshops on the subject in the month of November 2011 for the Central Public Information Officers of all the Ministries and public authorities of the Government of India. These workshops will provide a forum for public authorities to learn from the experience of others. I am happy to know that the Central Information Commission has also offered to participate in these workshops.

A major challenge for public authorities in our country lies in the area of `Information Housekeeping`. With the improvement in data management practices through

computerization of records and work flows, the time may not be far when citizens may locate on their own, the status of their requests in the work flow artery of public authorities. The RTI Act itself mandates such Disclosure and Record Management. The National e-governance Plan, I hope, would go a long way in promoting the use of information and communication technologies in facilitating access to information.

I expect the 6th Convention of the Information Commissioners to give us a holistic assessment of the ground situation in regard to the implementation of the RTI Act. I look forward to your suggestions to deal with the difficulties in the effective implementation of the Act. The Chief Information Commissioner has raised certain issues, and I hope that my colleague Mr Narayanasamy has taken note of that. I sincerely hope that we can respond constructively to the various suggestions that have been voiced. Let me conclude that the assessment of our achievements and the suggestions for improvement would go a long way in empowering our citizens in a more real sense of the term. With these words, I wish your conference all success. I wish you very productive discussions over the next two days. I wish you all the very best in your efforts to improve upon the Right to Information Act and its application.”