

Respected Prime Minister, Minister of State for Personnel, Secretary, DoPT, my colleague Information Commissioners, Ladies & Gentlemen:

The RTI Act is now six years old. We are fortunate that the Prime Minister who piloted the bill in 2005 is here with us today. I welcome him to the convention on behalf of the Central Information Commission and all of you. On such occasions, it is natural to ask what this law has achieved in these six years. It has achieved a lot. In such a short period, it has found its way into the daily conversation of people. It is not uncommon to hear people say 'I will RTI if so-and-so is not done.' It has become a verb. It is often said that in many cases, an RTI-application alone is enough to motivate and compel the authorities to redress the grievances. This is the measure of its success as an instrument of constructive change. I will not be exaggerating if I claim that, after the Constitution of India, the Right to Information (RTI) Act is the second most important legal document we have given to ourselves.

The Right to Information (RTI) Act has unleashed a revolution of sorts by shaking up the establishment at all levels of governance in the most constructive and positive manner. It has also proved to be somewhat iconoclastic in its impact. It has whetted the appetite of the people for more such rights. The rights to employment guarantee, education, public service delivery, food security and a corruption free government are some of the rights we have given to ourselves or are in the process of giving only because the ground was prepared by the Right to Information (RTI) Act. It can justly claim to be the mother of all such rights.

Most importantly, of course, it has helped the governments at all levels-local to the central- the most. By taking away some of the mystique surrounding the government it has brought people closer to it. Besides, sharing of information is a form of co-option; it makes the seeker of the information a partner in the decision-making process, almost an insider. I think the way the Right to Information (RTI) Act has been helping in building transparency in the government at all levels is the only sustainable way to fight corruption. Other punitive and draconian measures, very strongly advocated in the recent months, can never have the same durable impact in containing corruption as the sharing of information can. This law helps the government in another way; it restores and reinforces the legitimacy of the governments at all levels. Right now, though, one gets an unsettling feeling as the law expands in its reach and depth.

But as the time goes by and the full impact of the Right to Information

(RTI) Act comes into play, the administration at all levels will become more open, system driven and accountable. On the other hand, the citizens will also no longer feel like outsiders to the system and will begin to feel possessive about their governments and not treat them as distant and suspect. For this to happen quickly, it is absolutely necessary that the citizens seek information without ill will against anyone and the government officials disclose information without treating the information seeker as a nuisance. Information seeking should not be motivated by a sense of vengeance and information giving should not be characterised by a sense of hostility.

Now that most government departments know what to disclose and what not to, more and more information should be placed in the public domain on a real-time basis leaving aside those which are exempt under the law. Budget permitting, government departments should begin experimenting with increasing levels of disclosure on their own without waiting for RTI applications. In fact, each ministry or department should draw up a negative list of information and place it in the public domain while simultaneously disclosing the remaining information.

The cost of processing and disclosing information is also an area of concern. I am talking not only about the financial cost; producing millions of copies of government documents and files has a great environmental cost too. The society would have to be conscious of this at some stage. More and more people seeking information, this cost is only going to go up. The only way to prevent the escalating cost of information delivery is to place more and more of available information in the website of the public authority in a proactive manner. Also there is a great need for training the information officers on the provisions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act so that they know what to disclose and what not to.

Concerns are being expressed in some quarters that the disclosure of information inhibits free and open expression of opinion by government officials during the decision-making process. Even if it is true sometimes, we have to live with this. The benefits of disclosure of information far outweigh the inconveniences experienced by the decision-makers in the government.

Of late, there have been a lot of reports of attack and assault on information seekers. This is rather disquieting. This needs to be taken seriously and prevented at all costs. Even if the number of such reported cases is small, this shows the vulnerability of information seekers. Police authorities in the States have to be sensitive to this

and take effective steps to prevent the occurrence of such incidents. Exemplary punishment of the perpetrators would send a strong message around. Those of us in the Information Commissions may also have to take steps to alert the police authorities about those few information seekers who seem vulnerable because of the nature and frequency of the information they seek about wrongdoing by vested interests. Of course, such information seekers themselves should promptly report to the authorities if they ever have any such fear.

Before I conclude, I would like to express our gratitude to the Prime Minister for his strong commitment to the right to information and continued support to the Commission. He had led the country in giving us this law and we will always be grateful to him for this. I also take this opportunity to place on record our gratitude to the MOS for his co-operation and understanding. The Secretary, DoPT, has been always with us and I am grateful to her. Taking advantage of the presence of the Prime Minister in our midst, I would like to draw his attention to some serious problems we have been facing. We do not have a regular office building with and operate in two separate locations. We need to have a building of our own befitting our role and responsibility. We request the government to provide one of the buildings vacated by the CBI in the CGO complex or any such building for our office. The State Information Commissions have similar problems. The DoPT had announced a Central scheme to support the State Commissions. The Planning Commission has shot it down. We appeal to the Prime Minister to revive it. Secondly, we have no financial autonomy and have to depend on the government for day to day expenditure, however big or small. It will strengthen the CIC greatly if the government would consider making our budget charged just like the budget of the CAG or the CEC. In fact, it is understood that the government has agreed in principle to make the budget of the proposed Lokpal also charged to give it full autonomy. It was reported the other day that the government might make the Lokpal even a constitutional authority like the Election Commission. As far as its role and responsibility go, the Information Commission is no different and needs as much autonomy from the government. In fact, the right to information is a direct off shoot of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. If the Lokpal can be a constitutional authority, the CIC/SIC has a greater right and justification to be made into a constitutional authority. We are hopeful that the government will take immediate steps to provide us with a building, make our budget charged and as and when the Lokpal is made into a constitutional authority, make the CIC/SIC into constitutional authorities. I welcome the Prime Minister and the MOS to our midst. I also welcome all of you and feel privileged that you have shown your solidarity with the right to information movement by your presence here. Thank you all.