

Good morning to you all.

On behalf of the Central and State Information Commissioners, I welcome the Prime Minister of India to this inaugural session of the 7<sup>th</sup> National Convention. By his presence, he has once again shown his deep commitment to RTI and all that it stands for. He himself embodies the twin values of RTI in his personality and leadership. Simplicity and transparency.

I also take this opportunity to welcome the Minister of State (Personnel and PMO). He has been very proactive in his support to the Central Information Commission at all times. We need him the most at this time when we have reached the fork under our feet and not sure which way the future lies. I consider the Secretary DoPT as one of our own. He is our bridge with the government.

On behalf of the CIC, I also welcome the members of the civil society groups, RTI activists from all over the country and the members of the media who have assembled here to help us discharge our duties better in the times to come and also to show their solidarity with the RTI movement. The country will be indebted to them always for they provide the bedrock on which the movement stands.

And finally, I welcome you all the past and present CICs and ICs of the Central and State Information Commissions. It is your Convention. With your continued assistance, we will be able to overcome all challenges.

Today, I will not recount what we have achieved although it is not small. I will also not speak about our problems although there are many. I only like to submit to the Prime Minister and the people of India that we in the various Information Commissions in the country have tried our best to be fair and just to the cause of right to information. The approach of the Commissions in all these years has been to act like an umpire standing right on the field along with the players and not sitting on a pedestal and pronounce oracles. Openness of approach, informality in style and simplicity of systems have characterised the

functioning of the Commissions. No robes, no lawyers, no liveried attendants because what the citizens seek does not go with so much of serious formality. Excessive judicialisation of the Information Commissions will rob these institutions of their flexibility. The Society must decide if this is the right path.

In the last 7 years since the RTI Act came into being, the civil society attention has moved to many new issues and areas of concern. Consequently, there is a palpable decline in their engagement with issues relating to right to information. Same is probably true of the media also. The right to information is the mother of all other rights of citizens. Intelligent and responsible use of this right has the potential to correct many infirmities in the government and make corruption difficult. Therefore, it is extremely important that the civil society and the media do not lose sight of the right to information, and keep supporting it steadfastly.

Getting information is as important as using it. Bulk of the information received from the government under the Right to Information (RTI) Act today is used for redressing personal grievances. Many times, information is also sought without any ostensible purpose. This is not a happy sign. Each time we seek any information from any public authority we deprive someone else of the opportunity to make use of the corresponding resources. One comes across several instances now and then of people making absolutely frivolous requests or seeking information as a hobby or just to harass or blackmail others. Such tendency should be avoided not only because it gives a bad name to the right to information but also because it increases wasteful expenditure of public resources. In fact, no one has really computed yet the actual cost of delivery of information under the Right to Information (RTI) Act and it is high time somebody undertakes this exercise. Making use of the information intelligently and purposefully to achieve larger social ends is something which needs to be acquired through experience and training. The civil society can play a vital role in imparting such training to the information seekers.

We have been exhorting government authorities both in the Centre and the States to appoint responsible Information Officers, train them regularly and,

most importantly, to modernize recordkeeping at all levels. We have hardly met with much success. Similarly, all our efforts to ensure proactive disclosure as mandated under the Right to Information (RTI) Act have been ineffective. Seven years after the enactment of the law, most public authorities, both in the Central and State governments have not made the complete disclosure which they should have done within 120 days. Poor record-keeping and failure to disclose the mandated information are the twin causes for the increase in the RTI demands and the dissatisfaction of the people at large.

There are many issues of concern to speak about. But for want of time, I will end here. The Convention will discuss about privacy disclosure and suggest where the balance lies. For the first time, we have 2 panels devoted exclusively to review the compliance issues. Compliance has become a major irritant for the information seekers as many public authorities fail to disclose information even after clear directives. I am sure the Convention will be eventful and educative for all.

Before I end, I would like to assure the Prime Minister on behalf of the entire community of Information Commissioners here that we will continue to work with utmost integrity and fairness in ensuring that the citizens get their information without any obstruction. I once again welcome the Prime Minister and all of you to the 7<sup>th</sup> National Convention.

Thank you.