

**3rd ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE CENTRAL
INFORMATION COMMISSION
SPEECH FOR HON'BLE MOS (PMO&PP)
(Draft as on Oct. 29, 2008)**

Hon'ble Prime Minister,
Chief Information Commissioner, and Information Commissioners of
the Central Information Commission,
Chief Information Commissioners and Information Commissioners of
various State Information Commissions,
Secretary, DOPT, and Senior Officials of the Governments,
Distinguished guests from other countries,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is my pleasure to be with you on this third Annual Convention on
'Right to Information'. I complement the Central Information
Commission for organizing this event today.

It has been more than three years now when the Right to Information
Act was enacted. This legislation is a recognition of the commitment
of our UPA Government to promote and implement the platform of
good governance. This Act aims at creating an empowered citizenry,
armed with access to information to maintain a vigil on the

instruments of governance and make the Government visibly accountable to the governed. Rightly, the Second Administrative Reforms Commission has termed 'Right to Information' as a 'Master Key to Good Governance'.

2. Our government has recognized that transparency is a prerequisite for good governance and democracy. The Right to Information Act has made it possible for people at large to have an access to the store house of information. An informed citizenry can ensure that the Government performs better and also makes them accountable.

3. Shri Amartya Sen, the famous Nobel Prize winning economist, once observed that there has never been a substantial famine in a country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. Inequality of access to information, he has argued, is a form of poverty. The Right to Information Act aims at removing this inequality of access to information, and empowering the citizen. All citizens have a right to information held under the control of public authorities.

4. The Right to Information Act has created a framework which enables the citizens to get information from the Government without any difficulty. The sanctity of the system is being maintained by the

autonomous Central Information Commission and the State Information Commissions. The Commissions have been given powers to ensure that the public authorities respect the right of the citizens to have an access to information. The Indian law is the only disclosure law in the World which has a penalty provision on defaulting Public Information Officers. The law thus ensures that the rights of the citizen are protected. In order to enforce this further, the Commissions may make appropriate recommendations to public authorities specifying the steps that ought to be taken for promoting such conformity with the spirit of the Act. Further the decisions of the Commissions are binding.

6. We recognize that a period of three years is not sufficient period to assess the success of a piece of legislation like the Right to Information Act. However, it is heartening to note that the media is full of success stories which point to its use, even if not, as extensively as we would like. We realize that people often do not seek information about the higher-level policy and management functions of the government. Instead, the most frequent users tend to be individuals seeking information relating to administrative activities

that immediately affect them. RTI is thus an enabling tool to improve our public service delivery.

7. We are also receiving grievances and complaints about problems faced by people in using the Act. Since the act is still in its infancy and awareness about it has yet not percolated down to the field levels, the government is making every effort to identify the areas that need to be strengthened. In fact, Government has already initiated a study on 'Understanding the issues and Constraints as regards implementation of the RTI Act', which will enable us to address the constraints and difficulties for its effective implementation. This study is already underway and is expected to be completed soon.

6. Recognising that the capacity building of various stakeholders dealing with the RTI Act is extremely essential, we have already undertaken a massive capacity building program since December 2005. In fact under this program, in addition to our efforts at the central level, about 85,000 stakeholders at State and district levels have been trained in the last three years under a program captioned "Capacity Building for Access to Information programme". Further,

our Government have already approved a centrally sponsored plan scheme on 'Strengthening, Capacity Building and Awareness Generation for the Effective Implementation of the RTI Act', which will focus on the Strengthening of the State Information Commissions, capacity building of various stakeholders and awareness generation among the masses.

7. As a part of the wider dissemination of the subject, I am glad to inform you that the Department of Personnel and Training has already published Guides for Information Seekers, Public Information Officers, the Appellate Authorities and the Public Authorities in simple language to facilitate the implementation of the Act in all quarters. There is also an RTI Portal that stores addresses of more than 3000 Public Information Officers to facilitate easy access to PIOs. The Government has agreed 'in principle' to set up on a pilot basis a "Call Centre" for RTI. The modalities for setting up this centre are being worked out. All these efforts, I hope, will improve the process of effective implementation of the RTI Act.

8. Our Government is also looking forward to mainstreaming the right to information concept into all government schemes, building the

capacity of public authorities, and making records at all levels RTI friendly.

9. For making the information RTI user friendly, there is also a need for appropriate maintaining, cataloguing, and indexing of records. It is for this purpose we have launched a scheme for computerization of records of the Central Government in association with the Department of Information Technology and NIC as a means of promoting the ultimate objective of e-governance. In this area, we need to concentrate more, although some of the public authorities have made progress in this direction.

10. There cannot be any doubt about the fact that the right to information given by the Act to the citizens, has converted the age old culture of secrecy in government functioning into a culture of openness and transparency. I can assure you that it will go a long way in strengthening our democratic institutions, empowering the public, removing corruption and greater involvement of citizens in the development of the nation. But as a word of caution, I would like to re-iterate what the Hon'ble Prime Minister stated in his valedictory

address at the National Convention on RTI on 15th October, 2006. I
quote:

“We must guard against the growth of professional middlemen in the use of this Act as seen in some other countries. And since it is an Act for our common benefit in relation to public authority, we are all stakeholders in the Act and must guard against allowing it to become a tool for promotion of an adversarial relationship between different stakeholders. This can only serve to weaken the Act.”

11. This Act is a matter of pride of our UPA Government. It was in fact a commitment that we have made to our citizens. I take this opportunity to again complement and congratulate the Central Information Commission for organizing this Convention. I hope that the recommendations of the Convention will help in developing future strategies on the subject.

Thank you, Jai Hind.