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# RTI changing power equations

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To make the decision-making process in India transparent, there have been quite a few campaigns and movements in recent years. Some noteworthy examples are:

- The peoples' planning campaign in Kerala
- The formation of budget analysis groups
- The detailed analysis of power sector policy and reforms by citizens groups in Karnataka and Maharashtra, etc.

Even more significant has been the creative use all such groups have made of democratic spaces outside the electoral process. Clearly, established political parties have failed, whereas small groups have succeeded in creating the nucleus of a genuine political alternative. This shows that ethical issues, raised by even a small group of committed people, can positively and fundamentally affect democratic discourse.

The right to information (RTI) movement has helped to democratise this process and to take it beyond the confines of long-established peoples' movements. There are individuals in every state like Shivaji Raut or Shailesh Gandhi in Maharashtra, who symbolise the RTI activist whose persevering enquiries on matters of public interest show how much a single individual can do to begin a process of questioning.

While the RTI Act helps many individuals sort out personal grievances, its larger potential lies in bringing about systemic change, which is only possible when a single question establishes its links with a collective and becomes part of a larger democratic process.

One example is that of water privatisation in Delhi. Madhu Bhaduri of Parivartan, applied for information related to water reforms being undertaken by the Delhi Jal Board. One initial question led to accessing copies of 4,000 pages of documents which exposed the role of the World Bank in blatantly pressurising the Delhi government to privatise the management of drinking water distribution. Eventually, under intense pressure from citizens groups, the Delhi government and the World Bank had to withdraw their plan.

Throughout India, the impact of the RTI campaign has gone far beyond its immediate context. The public hearings, the institutionalisation of RTI through social audit, exemplary action taken in certain cases, the fact that the right to information gives any citizen an opportunity to check the deeds and misdeeds of any authority by personally examining details - have had a dramatic effect on prevalent modes of brazen corruption.

The RTI has to link with an issue or a campaign. This recognition has been its strength and explains its integral relationship with

other campaigns and movements providing creativity and strength. The women's movement in Rajasthan, for instance, used it to track the progress on cases of atrocities against women. They demanded that the women concerned be informed of the progress on their cases and the contents of various important medico-legal and forensic reports.

Civil liberties and human rights groups are using the principles of RTI to ensure transparency and accountability. Though it has now become almost impossible to deny people the right to information, in most cases, the information is not being provided in the manner or time frame that it should be. As questions get sharper the establishment is forced to part with information. As collective questions are being placed in the public domain, more citizens are seeing the RTI as a means of building public opinion to influence decision-making, and thereby make democratic structures more accountable.

Today, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) coupled with the RTI provides a unique opportunity for mobilisation of vast numbers of the rural poor. It offers political parties and social movements a chance to build campaigns for people's empowerment and rural reconstruction based on a pos-

itive agenda.

To a large extent corruption in the employment guarantee scheme can be identified and isolated by using the RTI law. The potential this offers can be seen in some of the mass social audits that have taken place in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh with hundreds of people armed with copies of official records walking from one site to the next, to create an atmosphere where the entitlements of the NREGA reach those it was meant to.

An alliance of peoples' organisations, NGOs, political representatives, civil servants and workers can jointly perform audits to ensure that there is less corruption. This form of political mobilisation can force the administration to respond, awaken oppressed people to demand their rights, and strengthen democratic processes.

A large number of Indians face displacement because of several new economic policies and the infringement of many economic rights. We must use mandatory provisions of disclosure of the RTI Act for the people to be informed before undertaking policies which would displace or affect them. As part of the democratic battle for rights the challenge will be to use the right to employment guarantee as a part of the right to work and eventually force the government to rethink and change the nature of its anti-poor economic policies.

The campaign for transparent governance in India has consciously forced the structures of government to respond or react. By law now, records have to be shown. If they are not, reasons will have to be stated, and decisions will have to be explained. Even the intention to keep certain information confidential has to be stated. It has forced those involved to accept that information has to be shared.

But it has gone beyond that to state that the collective responsibility of the citizen and ruler alike does not stop with one act, even the vote. The role of public debate and the right to question cuts at the roots of bureaucratic and feudal power. Forcing information sharing begins the process of shared decision-making, and consequently the sharing of power on a perpetual basis.



Young people in Delhi protest against moves to weaken the right to information law

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