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# Two years on, RTI empowers lakhs

**Forty Per Cent In Queries Annually, Villagers Too Use Info To Ensure Accountability**

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Mumbai: In the last two years, the Right to Information Act (RTI) has triggered off a people's movement empowering lakhs of ordinary citizens in their quest for transparency in governance. On the eve of the second anniversary of the enactment of the RTI Act, figures compiled by the state information commission show that a whopping 2,17,182 RTI queries have been filed at government and semi-government departments across Maharashtra in the period between October 2005 and August 30 this year.

Till December last year, in a period of 15 months, 1,23,571 RTI queries were filed while in the last eight months since, 93,611 RTI queries were filed. This shows a more than 40% year-on-year increase in number of queries filed. On an average, 11,450 queries were filed every month this year as

against 8,025 last year.

Figures also reveal that the state revenue department received the maximum number of RTI queries. It got 17,629 RTI queries in the last year, while in the last eight months in 2007, 21,415 were filed.

"The revenue department also deals with land and forest records and we have got a lot of queries from the rural parts of Maharashtra. This shows that the RTI Act has made inroads into the backward parts of the state," Suresh Joshi, state chief information commissioner told TOI.

Officials say at the panchayat and taluka level, one of the major cause of disputes is land records which are often fudged in collusion with the gram panchayat official. "But villagers are now using the RTI act to know the title of their land deeds," Joshi said.

RTI figures relating to the agriculture department show

## GETTING INTO THE ACT

Major departments	No of queries (Oct 12-Dec 30 '06)	No of queries (Jan-Aug 30'07)
Revenue	17,629	21,415
Urban development (civic bodies)	23,552	13,613
Home	8,236	5,415
Rural development	11,921	10,190
Agriculture	4,323	3,103
Cooperative	6,692	6,084
Housing	8,801	3,721
Industry, energy and labour	7,501	4,505
Total queries	1,23,571	93,611

that the act is also helping speed up work and bringing accountability to irrigation and other agro projects. Last year, the agriculture department received 4,323 queries, and this year the department has already received 3,103 queries in the last eight months.

"The government has implemented projects like Indra Vikas Yojana and Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana where thousands of crores of rupees are earmarked for upliftment of poor villagers. The villagers are using the act to get information

about the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) where there is a lot of corruption," a senior official with the agriculture department said.

Similarly, the rural department received 11,921 queries last year, but in the last eight months it has got more than 10,000 queries. The RTI figures of the urban development department also corroborate the fact that RTI is finding greater use in rural settings. Last year, the urban department (which includes all civic corporations) topped in RTI queries with a figure of 23,552, but this year there has been a slight decrease (see table).

But Joshi admits that more needs to be done to propagate the act so that it can bring real change in the lives of disadvantaged sections of society. "In backward areas like Melghat, Gadchiroli, Jawhar (rural Thane), and Amravati, vil-

lagers are still deprived of basic necessities of life though the government claims to spend hundreds of crores of rupees for their betterment. We need to teach these people to use the act to their advantage," Joshi said.

Last week, Joshi had in fact held a discussion with the chief minister regarding implementing section (4) of the RTI Act which calls for voluntary disclosure of all government records.

"Basic information about who is eligible for employment under the EGS scheme and the number of people who have benefited from housing and credit policies can be displayed on the blackboard of every panchayat. This will increase the accountability of the implementing agency," Joshi said.

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