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RTI Act a potent tool in the hands of helpless individuals

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CHENNAI: Nannu, a daily-wage labourer from East Delhi, lost his ration card and applied for a duplicate. Despite repeated visits to the Food and Civil Supplies office for four months, the duplicate card was not issued.

Here is where the familiar story of the uncaring system and the helpless individual takes a turn.

Nannu filed a Right To Information (RTI) application. Within four days, the Food Inspector came to his house and told him that his card was ready.

The Food and Supplies Officer invited Nannu to his office and offered him a cup of tea and handed over his duplicate.

He also had a request to make to Nannu — withdraw the RTI application.

This is the power the RTI

Act vests in the hands of the individual, said Arvind Kejriwal, from Parivartan, a Delhi-based citizens' movement that works towards empowering people, speaking at a talk organised by Ellements, a women's collective, here on Monday.

(The reason the RTI Act is a potent tool is simple — if the information requested is not provided by the officials, they need to pay Rs.250 for every day of delay from their salary. There is no other act that directly links performance of government officials to their salary) said Mr. Kejriwal.

Talking about future steps, he said that the process of filing applications should be made simpler and that the information commissions need to be strengthened.

A call centre has been started in Bihar where people can call in. The caller's voice is recorded and that becomes

their petition. He said that this service would soon be available all over the country.

(The RTI Act has been effectively used to find status of ration card and passport applications. But, it can also be used to inspect any government work and ask for samples of any material used in government work) he said.

For example, if there is a road being laid near your house, you can ask for all files related to the construction. You can also ask to inspect the road, wherein the government will send engineers who will explain the work.

It is the possibility of inspection that does the trick many a time, said Mr. Kejriwal. When officials realise that someone could inspect their files, they clean up their act.

Even if you are confused about which government official to send your RTI petition

to, don't worry. Send it to any official and include this sentence — 'If you are not the concerned authority, please forward it to the official concerned under Section 6 (3) of the RTI act.'

This section makes it mandatory for the official to forward it to the right authority.

Private enterprises also can come under the RTI act's scrutiny if they have 'substantial funding' from the government. As the term 'substantial funding' is not defined, it is open to interpretation.

A private school where teachers were paid by the government was asked to disclose records under the RTI act because the salary was considered to be 'substantial funding'.

It is up to the people to define the boundaries of the act. The more they push it, more can be accomplished, he said.

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