RTI Act a potent tool in the hands of helpless individuals
Sruthi Krishnan

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 In-
formation (RTI) application.
Within four days, the Food
Inspector came to his house
and told him that his card was
ready.
The Food and Supplies Of-
ficer invited Nannu to his of-
fice 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 Kej-
riwal, from Parivartan, a Del-
hi-based citizens' movement
that works towards empo-
wering 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 di-
rectly links performance of
government officials to their
salary,said Mr. Kejriwal.
Talking about future steps,
he said that the process of fil-
ing applications should be
made simpler and that the in-
formation commissions need
to be strengthened.
A call centre has been start-
ed 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 effec-
tively used to find status of
ration card and passport ap-
plications. But, it can also be
used to inspect any govern-
ment work and ask for sam-
ples 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 govern-
ment will send engineers who
will explain the work.
It is the possibility of in-
spection that does the trick
many a time, said Mr. Kej-
riwal. When officials realise
that someone could inspect
their files, they clean up their
act.

Even if you are confused
about which government offi-
cial to send your RTI petition

to, don't worry. Send it to any
official and include this sen-
tence - 'If you are not the
concerned authority, please
forward it to the official con-
cerned under Section 6 (3) of
the RTI act.'
This section makes it man-
datory for the official to for-
ward it to the right authority.
Private enterprises also
can come under the RTI act's
scrutiny if they have 'sub-
stantial funding' from the go-
vernment. As the term
'substantial funding' is not
defined, it is open to interpre-
tation.
A private school where
teachers were paid by the go-
vernment was asked to dis-
close records under the RTI
act because the salary was
considered to be 'substantial
funding'.
It is up to the people to de-
fine the boundaries of the act.
The more they push it, more
can be accomplished, he said.

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