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Killing RTI, with silence

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The contrast is a stark one. While cricket fans are endlessly reminded through TV spots about the government's flagship Bharat Nirman programme, there is no attempt to publicize the provisions of the landmark Right to Information Act, 2005. Why? Because the former is a potential vote winner, while the latter is politically useless and a bureaucratic nightmare.

As reported in *Mint* on Thursday, the government's publicity wing, the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP), spent little money in 2007 on creating awareness about the Act. In the

same year, the government's publicists spent money on only two TV advertisements and one radio spot for the RTI Act. It spent no money in the print media. However, there appears to be enough money to tell the impoverished viewers of the BBC World Service how they could apply for the national rural employment guarantee scheme.

This defeats the very purpose of section 4(2) of the RTI Act. It asks government authorities to effectively communicate to citizens what they do. Other parts of section 4 require such authorities to publish all relevant facts while for-

mulating important policies or decisions affecting the public. The absence of communication through mass media adversely affects the rural populace more than urban residents. The latter have better access to RTI in any case due to locational advantages.

Politically, of course, RTI is a low-voltage area: Because its utility is too diffused to be electorally important, politicians prefer to leave it alone. The bureaucracy exhibits a sullen hostility towards the Act.

All this is in spite of international best practices being incorporated into the Indian RTI Act. Section 4 of our Act has borrowed provisions from the Mexican legislation on the subject. Similarly, the investigative and decision-making functions of our information commissions have adapted the Canadian, British and South African laws. The Hungarian law goes a long distance in demarcating information into public versus privileged sectors. While not incorporating the Hungarian norms, we have a negatively worded section 8 in our Act. This has multiple exceptions for not providing information by concerned officials. It acts as a shield for bureaucrats to hide facts and in-

formation. But where perverse incentives are at free play, it's too much to expect that a single legislation will remove cobwebs from a secretive establishment.

Is there adequate publicity for the RTI Act? Write to us at views@livemint.com