Killing RTI, with silence T

he 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 Pub-
licity (DAVP), spent little mon-
ey in 2007 on creating aware-
ness 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 view-
ers of the BBC World Service
how they could apply for the
national rural employment
guarantee scheme.
This defeats the very pur-
pose of section 4(2) of the RTI
Act. It asks government au-
thorities to effectively commu-
nicate to citizens what they
do. Other parts of section 4 re-
quire such authorities to pub-
lish all relevant facts while for-

mulating important policies or
decisions affecting the public.
The absence of communica-
tion through mass media ad-
versely affects the rural popu-
lace more than urban resi-
dents. 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, politi-
cians prefer to leave it alone.
The bureaucracy exhibits a
sullen hostility towards the
Act.

All this is in spite of interna-
tional best practices being in-
corporated into the Indian RTI
Act. Section 4 of our Act has
borrowed provisions from the
Mexican legislation on the
subject. Similarly, the investi-
gative 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 de-
marcating information into
public versus privileged sec-
tors. 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 offi-
cials. It acts as a shield for bu-
reaucrats to hide facts and in-
formation. But where perverse
incentives are at free play, it's
too much to expect that a sin-
gle legislation will remove
cobwebs from a secretive es-
tablishment.

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

<title>Killing RTI, with silence</title>
<keywords>LR1 Right to Information</keywords>
<publication>Mint</publication>
<pubDate>25/04/2008</pubDate>
<description>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.</description>
<classif>B82c</classif>
<entrydt>08/05/2008</entrydt>
<sd>VD</sd>