

Do you get tired of people complaining about how inefficient, unaccountable and corrupt our public authorities are, but do nothing about it?

Do you want to play your part in effecting a transparent and accountable government without having it disturb your daily life?

Can you spend two hours a week volunteering from home/work/beach/coffee-shop?

Yes? The initiative proposed here might interest you.

What is this?

This is a citizens' initiative (to be named) whose objective is to spread awareness among fellow citizens about effecting a transparent and accountable government.

Can you tell me more about this?

This initiative will

- Aim to encourage participatory democracy.
- Use legal and constitutional methods to achieve its objective.
- **Not** be an NGO or a political organization.
- Strive to be a people's movement.
- Be built on the effort of volunteers who will spend less than three hours a week on projects pertaining to this initiative.
- **Not** require solicitation of funds/donations from volunteers.

Interested? Read on...

The cornerstone of the initiative is the **Right to Information Act, 2005**.

What is the right to information?

The right to information has been recognized around the world as an important instrument for checking corruption and misuse of power. The Right to Information Act, 2005 (RTI Act) came into effect on Oct. 12, 2005. It is a significant milestone in the history of the right to information movement in India.

(a) *Information* means any material in any form. This includes records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advice, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material in any electronic form and information relating to any private body that can be accessed by a public authority under any other existing legislation.

(b) The bill defines public authority as any authority or body established or constituted

- i. By or under the constitution.
- ii. By any law made by central/state legislature.
- iii. Including any other body owned, controlled or substantially financed by funds provided directly or indirectly by the government.

(c) *Freedom of information* means the right to obtain information from any public authority by means of

- i. Extracts and notes.
- ii. Certified copies of any records of such public authority.
- iii. Diskettes, floppies or any other electronic mode or through print-outs when such information is stored in a computer or any other device.
- iv. Certified samples of materials.

A powerful legislation like the RTI Act has to be implemented with conviction to achieve transparency and accountability. By themselves, laws can only create a climate for transparency and provide help to determine responsibility. Progressive laws such as these, however, must be backed by a citizens' movement.

Why do we need a citizens' movement?

Right to Information laws have earlier been passed by nine state governments in the country, namely Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Assam and Jammu & Kashmir. (The RTI-Act supersedes these laws.) The principal objective of these enactments is to facilitate an accountable and transparent government. Information available on the Internet indicates that implementation of these laws have been far from effective. In Delhi, authorities in the administration have been found to be unaware of the existence of the Delhi Government's Act.

Clearly, mere legislation does not help in the achievement of the objective.

Experience has taught us that the effort of individuals and organizations, under the aegis of these laws (the aforementioned state laws), have achieved samples of success in making an accountable and transparent government possible. In Delhi, absent road cleaners turned up for duty when their attendance registers were sought. Incomplete work was completed and quality of work improved when copies of work contracts were sought by the public.

An MLA was forced to release money for a task demanded by the people, when they obtained details of expenditure from her MLA Development Fund. People could get their work done in many other departments without paying bribes. Ration cards were issued, faulty water bills were corrected, pensions were restored as soon as the people demanded to know the status of their applications and the names of the officials who were responsible.

Almost 200 people got their grievances resolved within a matter of days of filing applications under the RTI Act, claims Parivartan (<http://www.parivartan.com/home.asp>), a Delhi based people's movement that worked using the Delhi Government's Right to Information Law. Organizations like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangthan (MKSS) of Rajasthan, *Mahadhikar* in Maharashtra and *PROOF* in Bangalore have also been successful in their efforts to use the RTI-Act.

Thus, the right to information law can be made effective through active involvement of citizens. The movement proposed here will aim at getting the citizens of Chennai involved in enabling transparency and accountability of the government that they interact with in their daily lives. The RTI-Act, as mentioned earlier, will be the cornerstone of this initiative.

How will this citizen's movement achieve its objective?

Citizens' movements are typically built around a strong volunteer base. This initiative will strive to create awareness among educated citizens. At this early stage, college students and young working professionals are expected to be the target audience for this awareness campaign. We expect to build a core volunteer base from this section. The volunteers will be requested to spend about three hours a week on projects related to this initiative. The volunteers will **not** be expected to donate money/solicit donations. They will form groups of 2-4 members and work on small projects. This initiative will strive to build a network of citizens with administrative, legal, political, educational, media and social development backgrounds. This ensemble of like-minded people is expected to provide support to the movement.

The plan:

- The core volunteer base will have a basic understanding of the RTI-Act, the provisions and implementation, the State and the Central Information Commissions, appellate authorities and the procedure for requesting information.
- Legal, media, campaign and awareness and documentation cells will be formed within the volunteer base and will interact with the citizen network described above.
- Public grievances will be received through individual contacts, emails, mail and telephone.
- A group of 2-4 volunteers will be formed to interface with individuals/groups with the grievance.
- The group will understand the nature of the problem and determine what information can be obtained from the relevant public authority to help address the grievance within the scope of the RTI-Act.
- The group will recommend the course of action to the individual/group with the grievance to obtain the information.
- The group will **not** pursue the grievance with the public authority. The individual/group with the grievance is expected to do this.
- The group will coordinate with the cells mentioned above, to bring the grievance to the attention of the network of citizens with media, administration, education and political background. This network will help bring the grievance to the attention of the public, the media and the administration. Legal action if required can be initiated through the legal representatives in the network.
- The group will support the appeal of the aggrieved party by being available for consultation when required.
- The group will support the appeal by striving in all possible legal and constitutional ways to make resources available to address the grievance.
- The group will continuously learn and add to their basic understanding of the RTI-Act and its provisions.
- The group will document the grievance and the course of action employed to help build a knowledge base for future efforts.

Where can I find more information about this?

A meeting to discuss this initiative will be called within a week. For more information, contact Phone : 98407 65030(Guru) , 98410 54009(Lokesh)

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