

# Right to Information, Information Literacy and Libraries

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This is an attempt to highlight the interdependence of Right to Information (RTI) and information literacy and the role of public libraries which acts as catalyst between the two.

Right to know is also closely linked with other basic rights such as freedom of speech and expression and right to education. It is an attribute of liberty. Viewed from this angle, information or knowledge becomes an important resource. An equitable access to this resource must be guaranteed

RTI has an important economic dimension, as it embraces not only political freedom but also the freedom to lead a life with dignity, unfettered by domination and discrimination. In this sense and as per the full interpretation of the definition of the word in the RTI Act 2005, information as well as *Right to Information* has a wider and deep meaning than what we presently assign to it in the context of the Act. So the meaning of information, the importance of information, the relevant categories of information and the mechanisms that can ensure information access and the programmes required for capacity building in people to use information in the context needs to be discussed.

## **Definition of Information**

*Information* as a term has been derived from the Latin words *Formation* and *Forma* which means giving shape to something and forming a pattern, respectively. Information adds something new to our awareness and removes the vagueness of our ideas. The society has information on all knowledge divisions recorded in books, video, audio files, computers etc.

In terms of the section 2(f) of the RTI Act 2005, information has been defined as any material in any form including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force. The words like *records, documents, advices, press releases, reports, papers, data material held in any electronic form* etc are to be taken in their broad sense.

### **Importance of Information**

Progress in all walks of life depends on information generated in the concerned spheres, up to the present. Availability of efficient information systems and services and proper utilization of information by government and the people can improve the life and activities of the citizens and also the quality the country's development. The availability of information, expeditiously and pin pointedly, supports decision making processes at all levels. Democracy is impossible unless the citizens have free access to all information that can help them to acquire average knowledge about everything related to their society, government, trade, health etc as well as correct information on administrative actions affecting them. This information, knowledge gives them power understand thing in their correct perspective and to defend against wrong decisions affecting their life and activity.

So ready access to information generated by society and accumulated through time is a fundamental right of every citizen. It should be ensured by sound legislation.

### **Information Categories**

The information produced by and held by Government can be categorized into two; basic information and administrative information.

## **Basic Information**

Government produces vast and varied types of information materials. Of this there is Information of permanent value produced or conserved by government for the public good. Examples of such holdings of government are archives, museum records, printed books and other publications like Gazetteers, Acts, Manuals, handbooks, compilations, and books on different subjects like history, agriculture, science and technology as well as documents on hundreds of areas acquired and kept by government departments or libraries. They are intended for providing information to the officials and the public to improve functioning of the departments as well as meant for use by the people; which will contribute to the economic, educational and social development. Big public libraries purchase and house with public fund; books and other documents of relevance to the people published by government and commercial agencies.

Government also produces information of general reference nature. Government of India's Publications Division, Different Ministries and Departments, Departments of State Government like PRD, Farm Information bureau, Gazetteers Department, Encyclopedic Publications etc, National Book Trust, universities, and many autonomous research institutions under State and Centre, and many NGOs bring out numerous publications of great information value required for the people for their day today reference and knowledge/capacity improvement. They also publish thousands of brochures, pamphlets, magazines and journals of current relevance on areas of importance like agriculture, health, hygiene etc. now this is happening like a ritual. They are produced in lakhs and lakhs of copies, but are not reaching the institutions that provide information to the people. Transferred and dumped in government departments or institutions for their distribution they end as waste paper.

The information resulting from the above; produced/held by government is intended and can empower the citizen to have an average understanding of the political and social system of which he is a part, the meaning of what is happening around, and also to understand his rights and act in time to protect him from unjust invasions.

Public library is the only effective social repository which can collect and organize the above mentioned information and provide access to it to all the people free of cost in an equal and unbiased way.

### **Administrative Information**

The second category is documents or recorded information that comes into existence from the day today functioning of government machinery which becomes highly relevant to the immediate problems faced by the people. They are official records & documents, memos, official e-mails, opinions expressed by government officials, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, file noting, logbooks, contracts, reports, and official records if in traditional or electronic form . This is the only category of information that we consider as to be covered by RTI Act, even though in vague RTI covers both category of information.

The absence of authentic information on this second category related to matters of public interest will encourage wild rumors and speculations and avoidable allegations against individuals and institutions. Therefore, the RTI on the aspect becomes a constitutional right, being an aspect of the right to free speech and expression which includes the right to receive and collect information. This will also help the citizens perform their fundamental duties as set out in Article 51 A of the Constitution as well as protect themselves against any violation of their other constitutional rights.

According to Mr. P.B. Sawant, "the barrier to information on governments functioning is the singlemost cause responsible for corruption in society. It facilitates clandestine deals, arbitrary decisions, manipulations and embezzlements. Transparency in dealings, with their every detail exposed to the public view, should go a long way in curtailing corruption in public life."

Even if access is provided under RTI Act effective use of second category of information depends on concerned persons accessibility and capacity to absorb related information from the first category. So a Library and Information Services Act that ensures access to first category of information is a preliminary requirement for the effectiveness of RTI Act.

## **Access to Information Services**

Information services to the whole population is important because the access to government-controlled information held by national, State Central libraries has to help to bridge the knowledge gap between the rich and poor, rural and urban, rulers and the ruled, the managers and the beneficiaries and between the producers, distributors and the consumers. The inequality in knowledge is also responsible for social superiority and inferiority complexes reinforcing and perpetuating social and economic divides. These in turn create a political clout and leverage in favor of those for whom information services, libraries are within their reach as well as those who are the possessors of the exclusive information. A distinct class of secret operators of power, with a halo of unwarranted mystique and awe around them, emerges and behaves and operates as a superior race.

Provision for access to first category of information is not thought off by RTI Act. The accessibility to the first category of information is almost free to those living in urban areas as well as for those classes of people who are economically in the upper strata of society. But to the villager or an economically backward citizen that information is not available or accessible. The RTI legislation of advance countries have not touched this category of information because their governments have already ensured its availability to each and every citizen through public library legislations and by establishing information systems and networks extending to even remote locations of these countries. In china in every village there is a Community Information Centre which is freely and easily accessible to every one from the village for any information or guidance.

Availability of first category of information to the people is essential if they are to get the capacity to use second category of information. In India also the access to the first category was not restricted. But their access or acquisition is costly and difficult for the average citizen. Access to second category is restricted till recently. Even if any bit of that is accessible it was not affordable to the common man. The RTI Act even though it makes both accessible to the public, makes the second category which was till now restricted also accessible and affordable to the average citizen.

But Even if the law covers first category also it is not affordable to the average citizen. For Example take the Travancore State Manual or the Land Revenue Manual. If a citizen requires consulting the same in order to check the correctness of a Government Order or action getting that as per RTI Act will be costly. Government will also find it difficulty to trace out such records and give copies to the public in prescribed time limit. One from the village who can not scan the pages of the manual can not understand in which pages or parts of the land Revenue Manual his required piece of information is available. To get copies of the manual or even its pages is costly and unaffordable for an average citizen. Per page cost may be Rs. 10/-. One may require 50 or 100 pages costing Rs. 500 to Rs. 1000. If correct location of the information in the document is not known to full manual may be required and it is not at all affordable. Even if after long search, and expenses he gets access to a copy it will difficult for him to reach his required bit of information in the manual and understand the content.

Information' of both the above categories belongs to the public, generated or collected using public money, served by public servants and paid out of public funds. Public participation in the democratic and governmental process is at its meaningful best when citizens have adequate access to all information available under the control of government which includes all types of documents produced by government and acquired and maintained by government at libraries or other departments as well as administrative data/information generated by the process of day to day administrative operations.

Ensuring access to both these types of information only can ensure good governance, transparency, accountability and participation. The fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression as well as the RTI is meaningless without the requisite basic information about issues and subjects as well as information on specific administrative actions related to that on which opinions are to be formed and expressed. The RTI of both categories is, implicit in the RTI and the first category of information to be provided by libraries as much fundamental.

## **Information Literacy**

Information literacy is a survival skill in the Information Age. Instead of drowning in the abundance of information that floods their lives, information literate people know how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision - whether the information they select comes from a computer, a book, library, a government agency, a film, a web site or any other possible resources.

Knowledge of resource types, evaluation of access tools etc, has given rise to the need for information literacy. Information literacy aims to develop *both* critical understanding *and* active participation. It enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and thereby to become more powerful participants in society. Information literacy is about developing people's critical *and* creative abilities.

To effectively use both types of information mentioned above and apply it in the life and activities; the average citizen needs some skills. It includes the awareness of the sources of information services, the arrangement of information in various types of sources, methods of using computers and web sites to retrieve information and for being aware of the laws ensuring their rights to avail concerned information services.

The first category of information is contained in documents of different types and formats. There are Encyclopedias, handbooks, directories, manuals, Technical Reports, Compilations of Acts and Ordinances etc. Information may be contained in different formats also like, printed material, audio files, video files, digital files etc. Now for any information search computer have become highly important. Most information sources are available in digital form in computers, CDROMS or web sites. So the villager or the average citizen needs familiarization with these types and formats. So an information literacy and guidance programme to be offered to the whole population also becomes important to make RTI meaningful.

Digital forms necessitate new skills to operate the tools to search for, organize, manage and use information it to solve problems.

Information literacy encompasses computer literacy because in these days a computer-literate person can manipulate electronic information tools to gain access to most of the information he requires. Information Literacy also encompasses the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand. It is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society and part of the basic human right of life long learning. Information Literacy, ICT awareness and computer knowledge have become a basic requirement if RTI is to become fruitful.

Information literacy is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, along with freedom of expression and the right to information. *Like Education for All* government should provide information literacy also to the whole population. It is instrumental in building up and sustaining democracy. It, therefore, is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth. It provides them with the ability to build their own arguments and to experience the excitement of the search for knowledge. It prepares them for lifelong learning and gives the power to be true citizens fulfilling their duties and responsibilities and enjoying their rights.

Thus there is immediate need is to introduce and incorporate clear provisions for the conduct of Information literacy programmes in the newly formed RTI Act.

### **Information Provider**

As discussed above the first category of information is available for the use of public at the Government owned mechanisms like libraries. It is intended for the use of the people. It has been collected and organized with public money. Its free accessibility is a prerequisite for the RTI to become useful. The second category of information is also available with government. Earlier it was restricted. Now it is accessible according to the RTI Act. Usefulness of the second category depends on the availability of first category.



But still the average citizen is not aware of 'how to get these information', 'who will give the information', 'from where that information can be sought from '? The other questions are how its availability to the people can be ensured? Is it available in an equal way to all citizens? Is the effort and cost to be put by all equal? Or is it that for some it is cheaper and for some it is costlier?

Our country has a considerable stock of information resources in its libraries and other institutions located at different places. They are continuously acquiring more resources from inside and outside the country. Collection and organization of information in all forms and formats and the dissemination of it to the people are the primary function of libraries especially public libraries. Public library system undertakes this function to sustain the quality of life in all its aspects - educational, economic, industrial, scientific and cultural - and promotes the concept of a democratic society in which equal opportunity exists for all. Government should make appropriate legislation to ensure that public library service of the kind available in urban areas is available in villages also to provide easy and free access to information in villages.

So it is without doubt that ensuring information service is a necessity in a democracy. It is the public library which is recognized all over the world to be an impartial agency which is to provide information services to the people for the promotion of healthy political life. The library should be the heart from which every development in a community radiates and gets irradiated. It must be a social and intellectual centre of each locality. Its duty is to place before one and all truly balanced information on all points of view, all lines of approach and all schools of thought. This only can help the people to know, defend and enjoy their rights and realize and discharge their duties in a free society. Thomas Jefferson has rightly said that "the people of a country would never consent to the destruction of their liberties if they were informed, and nothing would do more good towards making them informed than the establishment of a small public library in every village". So an adequate system of public libraries is an absolute necessity in any country which is wedded to socialism and parliamentary democracy and which is aiming at development in the socio-economic, educational and cultural fields.

## **Library and Information Services Act**

Libraries, especially public libraries, as information and cultural centers have important responsibilities in safeguarding the public's right to information. Public information and transparency in its real sense fall within the scope of libraries' expertise. Lack of a national library and information policy and its implementation affects library services and the right to information negatively.

So there is an urgent need to develop a national policy on Public Library and Information System with specific clauses on its organization at national, State, District, Panchayat/village levels, their networking, the standards on resources and services to be offered from village level service outlets, the distribution of information materials produced by government and other agencies on health, agriculture etc to the village libraries, the use of ICT up to village libraries, the role of village libraries in ensuring the utility of RTI to the villager, definite clause on imparting information literacy skills in villages to make RTI Act a reality for the villager etc. Unless District/ Panchayat/village libraries update their collection as per the requirements specified earlier and strategically spread information literacy among the rural people and further orient them on how they can exploit their right to information the benefit of the act will remain with the economically and socially developed minority.

To ensure every man's right to information, public libraries should pool the total resources of the State and nation and should make it available to all the people in an unbiased and efficient way. These functions cannot be fulfilled by isolated libraries whose activities are limited within villages, localities or States. Village library should form part of a national library system and network established with the ultimate aim that any one living anywhere should have access to the whole document and information resources of the country at a time when he requires them and in a form which would best suit his needs. So legislation for national and state level public library systems extending their services up to the village is the preliminary requirement of the effectiveness of the RTI Act.

Public libraries are the only institutions which can provide information of first category. Library and information services of prescribed quality and quantity is to be ensured in each and every village by national and state level Public Library and information System Acts as a pre requisite for the successful operation of the RTI Act.

For the second type of information ensured to people by RTI Act also public /village libraries should become the service points to make that accessible and cheap.

### **RTI Worldwide**

RTI of the first category has been ensured by UNESCO public Library manifesto and Library legislations in most countries from the beginning of twentieth century. As librarians we are aware of this aspect in the context of study of library systems and their legislation. So going further into that is not essential here. Legislations on the right to second category of information that is administrative information has been seriously thought off only from 1940s. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 had a catalytic effect on movements for 'open' government, worldwide.

Many democratic countries have taken legislative action to give its citizens a right of access to information in the possession of the government and its agencies since UN declaration on that. Countries like USA, Canada, France, Scandinavian countries, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, Malaysia, Sweden etc also passed legislation in seventies and eighties. Even the Soviets, under Mikhail Gorbachev, have realized that "the State does not claim monopoly of truth any longer". Glasnost has cast away the cloud of secrecy and stresses the priority of human values. There is thus a global sweep of change towards openness and transparency.

In keeping with the spirit of the Universal Declaration of 1948 and its Article 19, the Preamble of the Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, in its Article 19(1) (a) provides exactly similar guarantees to the citizens. This includes the right to 'freedom of speech and expression' as one of the fundamental rights listed in Part III of the Constitution.

Disclosure of Government Information in India was governed by a law enacted during the British rule, the Official Secrets Act of 1889 which was last amended in 1923. The intent of this law was to secure only information related to security of the State, sovereignty of the country and friendly relations with foreign states. But it contained provisions which could make it a crime to disclose even non-classified information. Civil Service conduct rules and the Indian Evidence Act put further restrictions on government officials' powers to disclose information to the public.

### **India: Landmark Judgments**

But the need for RTI has been widely felt in all sectors of the country and this has also received judicial recognition through some landmark judgments.

In an important case Justice Mathew remarked (1972) "that the right to free speech is inclusive of 'the right of the community to hear' and that right to free speech, includes the right of the community to read and be informed." This covers right to library and information services and right to information on government's functioning.

Another significant Supreme Court judgment delivered by Mr. Justice Mathew in the State of UP vs. Raj Narain (1975) case, ruled:

"In a government of responsibility like ours, where all the agents of the public must be responsible for their conduct, there can be but few secrets. The people of this country have a right to know every public act, everything that is done in a public way by their public functionaries. They are entitled to know the particulars of every public transaction in all its bearing. Their right to know, which is derived from the concept of freedom of speech, though not absolute, is a factor which should make one wary when secrecy is claimed for transactions which can at any rate have no repercussion on public security".

It was in 1982 that the right to know matured to the status of a constitutional right in the celebrated case of S P Gupta vs. Union of India (AIR) 1982 SC (149). Here again the claim for privilege was laid before the court by the Government of India in respect of the disclosure of certain documents. The

Supreme Court by a generous interpretation of the guarantee of freedom of speech and expression elevated the right to know and the right to information to the status of a fundamental right, on the principle that certain unarticulated rights are immanent and implicit in the enumerated guarantees. The court declared – “The concept of an open government is the direct emanation from the right to know which seems to be implicit in the right of free speech and expression guaranteed under article 19 (1) (a)”.

The Supreme Court of India has emphasized in the SP Gupta case (1982) that *open Government is the new democratic culture of an open society towards which every liberal democracy is moving and our country should be no exception*. In a country like India which is committed to socialistic pattern of society, right to know becomes a necessity for the poor, ignorant and illiterate masses.

Like this right to access to information has been upheld by Indian judiciary. But the legislative wing of the State did not respond to it by enacting suitable legislation for protecting the right of the people.

### **People’s Movements**

Simultaneously the demand for RTI has taken the form of mass movement at the grassroots level in many places in India. A mass based organization called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) took an initiative in establishing small village libraries which functioned as Community Information Centres, and based on those centers organized adult literacy programmes, health and environmental awareness programmes etc. The people became informed and capable of understanding the development issues related to their village. By this MKSS lead the people in a very backward region of Rajasthan to assert their right to information by asking for copies of bills and vouchers and names of persons who have been paid wages mentioned in muster rolls on the construction of schools, dispensaries, small dams and community centers of the village. On paper such development projects were all recorded as completed, but it was common knowledge of the villagers that there was gross misappropriation of funds

with roofless school buildings, dispensaries without walls, dams left incomplete and community centres having no doors and windows.

After years of knocking at officials' doors, MKSS succeeded in getting photocopies of certain relevant documents. Misappropriation of funds was clearly obvious. In some cases, the muster rolls contained names of persons who either did not exist at all or died years before. This incident is more than sufficient to show the importance of the ability of information/transparency for eradicating mal-practices. With so many scandals emerging from time to time, transparency becomes vital for the management of public fund and survival of democracy.

MKSS organized a People's hearing, the first ever in the history of India. Politicians, administrators, landless laborers, private contractors were all invited to listen, respond and, if willing, to defend themselves. Popular response was phenomenal, but village officials and politicians stayed away and remained silent, and thereby weakened their position and darkened their image.

Between December 1994 and April 1995, several other public hearings were organized. People's anger made one engineer of the State Electricity Board to return in public an amount of Rs.15, 000 he had extracted from a poor farmer. This grassroots movement spread fast to other areas of Rajasthan and to other States establishing firmly that information is power and people should have the right to official information.

The Rajasthan movement revealed that libraries, information centers and literacy programmes in villages and an open system of governance is an essential prerequisite for the fullest flowering of democracy. Free flow of information from the Government to the people will not only create an enlightened and informed public opinion but also render those in authority accountable.

Encouraged by the success of the people in remote village of Rajasthan civil society groups and other organizations from many parts of the country have started to propose enacting legislation in this line.

In 1996, Justice PB Sawant, the Chairman of the Press Council of India, submitted a draft bill on Freedom of Information to GOI keeping in view the need of the day and the observations made by eminent persons that in a democracy, it is the people who are the masters and those utilizing public resources and exercising public power are their agents. The clause which forms the core of the Bill says:

- ? every citizen shall have the RTI from public body;
- ? it shall be the duty of the public body to maintain all records duly catalogued and indexed;
- ? The public body shall be under a duty to obtain and furnish and shall not withhold any information or limit its availability except that exempted as per law.
- ? All individuals whether citizens or not, shall have the right to such information that affects their life and liberty;

The Press Council draft was not accepted. But Inspired and encouraged by all these many State Governments also yielded to popular pressure and have introduced the Bill on RTI, before the Freedom of Information Bill, 2000 was introduced in the Lok Sabha.

### **State-level Laws**

The movements for RTI achieved successes in many States. Tamil Nadu (1997), Goa (1997), Madhya Pradesh (1998) Rajasthan (2000), Karnataka (2000), Delhi (2001), Maharashtra (2002), Madhya Pradesh (2003), Assam (2002) and Jammu and Kashmir (2004) enacted legislation on RTI. Before a bill was introduced in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, however, in certain local authorities provided access to administrative information. Bilaspur in regard to Public Distribution System allowed the access to details of food-grains and commodities allotted to their areas and their distribution. The scheme was also extended to development programmes and pollution awareness. It was observed that the RTI has considerably reduced black-marketing and corruption in public distribution system. Moreover, in polluted areas like Korba, the sharing of information on pollution level has raised

public consciousness. As a result, officials have become careful about monitoring and controlling pollution level.

### **Freedom of Information Act 2002**

It was the the H. D. Shourie 's Draft Bill which eventually got enacted under Freedom of Information Act, 2002. This Act was severely criticised for permitting too many exemptions. There were no penalties for not complying with a request for information. With many exemptions the Act failed to satisfy activists for open government.

### **Right to Information Act 2005 (Act No. 22/2005)**

In 2004 Government of India appointed a National Advisory Council to guide as a policy making body for the government. The Council took up the job of drafting an RTI bill at its very first meeting. They involved the NCPRI and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) in the task.

The first draft of the RTI Bill was presented to Parliament on 22 December 2004. This draft, however, seems to have been watered down from what was recommended by NCPRI and CHRI, allegedly under pressure from the Civil Service. Under pressure from civil society groups, more than a hundred amendments were made when the act was finally passed on n 12 October 2005.

Under the terms of the Act, any citizen of India may request a department of the Central Government, State Government or Public Sector company or bank for information on almost any question related to the department or company's functioning. The government body is expected to comply within thirty days, failing which the officials responsible for non-compliance faces financial penalties and, in persistent cases, jail terms. The Act also requires government bodies to publish certain specified information on its web site.

It is considered a major milestone in journey towards transparency in governance and an important tool in the fight against corruption.



Government officials continue to complain that the law goes too far and that by requiring them to disclose file noting, it leaves them open to blackmail and intimidation. Opponents have generally not been sympathetic to these claims, contending that such complaints are merely expressions of frustration at having to function under the glare of public scrutiny and not being able to indulge in corruption. In July and August 2006 Central Government, allegedly under pressure from bureaucrats, tried to bring in an amendment to the law that would substantially limit the scope of the information required to be disclosed. It was unsuccessful in this attempt and had to back down under public pressure.

### **Information to be Provided under RTI Act**

Under the Act (section 2 (j)), right to information includes the right to -

- ? inspect works, documents, and records.
- ? take notes, extracts or certified copies of documents or records.
- ? take certified samples of material.
- ? obtain information in form of printouts, diskettes, floppies, tapes, video cassettes or in any other electronic mode or through printouts.

Exemptions are there but are irrelevant to the average citizen. So they are not dealt here. Also discussion of the details of the Act clause by clause is not our intention here.

### **The Mandate**

According to the mandate of 'right to information ' it is said that Chief Information Commissioner (CIC), Information Commissioner (IC), and Public Information Officer (PIO) should be appointed in all central government, ministries and departments and these have to provide required information to the public within the stipulated time. Each state will also have its own Information Commissioner. Additionally, an officer at each sub-divisional level or other appropriate sub-district level shall be designated as PIO.

## **Initiatives for Information Literacy**

Information literacy of the masses is the very important requirement if people are to exercise their power under RTI. Even though the Act makes provision for that the responsibility is not assigned to any specific department. Actually this function is to be undertaken by libraries. But as our library systems especially those at the villages are not having the resources and facilities for providing this basic function many other government and non government agencies took up the function of Information literacy initiatives. Some examples are Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), National Literacy Mission, Information Kiosks, Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) Project by the Swaminathan Foundation, Tarahaat, SwiftJyoti, Infothela and Akshaya which started at Malppuram, Kerala

Right to information can be implemented effectively in rural areas only when there is a strong LIS and people are info-literate i.e. when information is locally available or accessible and they know the exact methods of extracting required information from the junk of information. Information literacy facilitates 'access to information' and has real impact on health, wealth and well being and thus information literacy is known to be human right issue. Libraries being the institutions having information resources and staff trained in handling information they should be assigned the responsibility information literacy programmes in connection with RTI Act.

Although there are chain of Information literacy initiatives made by Information kiosks of government and non government organizations the missing link is 'Public Library ' whose main aim is to contribute in life long learning process of an individual, providing information services required for the people in all contexts and creating Info literacy. Without active involvement of public libraries and providing them with the necessary infrastructures and resources for conducting information services as well as literacy programmes the RTI can not function effectively.

## **Public Library/Information infrastructure**

The information literacy programs taken up by the private and public sector organizations mentioned above should become the mandate of the public library system of the country.

Public libraries in India consist of State Central Libraries in every state, district libraries, urban public libraries at the cities and rural public libraries at the villages. Public libraries are mainly supported by state governments and local authorities, and some times by the central government. Our Public Library Acts decrees that libraries are for everybody and that the information service to the public shall be free of charge.

## **Content at Panchayat/Village Libraries**

If the majority of our people living in villages should be benefited by RTI Act the village should have the required basic information resources, the facility for providing information literacy and the mechanism for filing requests under RTI Act. Libraries only can fulfill these functions. All these are to be ensured by legislation. As the availability of basic information is a preliminary requirement for the functioning of RTI Act; Library Act specifying the standards for resources and services to be provided by public libraries including rural libraries also is a legislation that is to go along with the RTI Act.

Panchayat/Village libraries should build up resources and facilities to ensure the right to first category of information. It should also be the responsibility of the village libraries to make people info literate so that they become capable of acquiring and assimilating the basic information and knowledge which is to enable them to exercise their right to information.

Aspects on which information is to be collected organized and disseminated by local libraries at Panchayat/village level to satisfy the information needs of the people can be listed as follows:

General information on the region to be kept at the local library should include encyclopedias, dictionaries gazetteers, hand books, manuals, and

documents on the historical, cultural and political history of the region. Documents on the administrative structure of the district, panchayat, village needs to be collected. The details of area and population of the Panchayat/village should be available in the district and local libraries. Administrative maps of the Panchayat/village also should be kept prominently in the library. Documents and information on the geography of the Panchayat, which will enable the assessment of bio-physical resources of the region, should be available. Documents on the following aspects including appropriate maps on each aspect must be collected and organized.

Geography	general topography of the district -hills, slopes, valleys, coastal plains, marshy lands etc.
Climate	seasons, rainfall, atmospheric temperature, directions of wind etc.
Water resources:	rivers, canals, tanks, ground water potential, water logging etc Land and minor mineral resources –clay, river sand, glass sand and rocks
Soil types.	Composition, fertility, drainage, etc. land utilization: existing pattern
Bio wealth:	details of natural vegetation, flora and fauna and wild life
Agriculture:	technology, cropping systems and patterns, marketing facilities, prices, irrigation facilities,
Finance:	Banks, financial institutions, cooperative societies, credit schemes.
Health:	primary health and immunization facilities, addresses of hospitals, specialists, blood banks etc.
Education:	List of colleges/high schools, primary schools, polytechniques, vocational training institutes, scholarships, universities, admission requirements, timings.

The library can take initiative in organizing discussions on what are the causes for inadequate growth, low productivity, poor quality of services or the inadequate coverage of services? The discussions can be recorded in

audio, videotapes. This can form a collection of the information and knowledge of the local level experts and officials as well as the local wisdom.

Detailed information on the major environmental problems of the location should be collected and periodical exhibitions and discussions should be organized by the library on that aspect to educate the people so that they will take appropriate measures to prevent further environmental degradation resulting from defective plans or government decisions. Like this programmes on diseases, health, hygiene and similar aspects can be organized in relevant times.

ICT facilitates; extending the services of State Central library itself in its full to any remote village without any financial commitment than that is required for establishing and maintaining the present village library with poor collections and infrastructures.

RTI Act needs Public Library Acts with specific classes for standards and service at the village level also for the practical implementation of Right to information to make better informed society of the country.

### **RTI in the Village Context**

Majority of our people live in villages. So we will discuss a few aspects on the use of RTI Act to the villager in comparison with those living in cities as a conclusion. Villages lack sufficient library/information service systems. Economic status, lack of sufficient communication system, and the need for the villager to spend the day time in the village itself to look after the occupations and trade pursued by them make it difficult for them to go to the district headquarters or cities where facilities are available for seeking some information, guidance. For this they have to sacrifice the work, which fetch their daily bread. Also the libraries and other sources in the cities are not easily accessible to them even if they succeed in reaching there; due to their unfamiliarity with the systems and the psychological barriers. To some extent the same is the case for them to approach Public Information Officers also. The minority who live in district headquarters or cities are economically at higher levels than the village dwellers. More than that all information systems

like libraries and other offices as well as the office of the PIO itself are within a walk able distance to them. They need not make any sacrifice of their daily work to access them. Even if these facilities have existed at a distance all these facilities are economically affordable to them.

### **Information on Threat to Life of the Masses**

Let us take a live example in this regard. Consider the current issue of Mullapperiyar Dam. Against permitted and safe water level of 136 feet which is also dangerous when the present weak condition of the Dam is considered; today's news papers report that the water level has gone above 138 feet and there is visible leak in the Dam. It is threatening the life, wealth and resources that sustain their life of more than 45 lakhs people of Kerala living within area to be affected by the brake of the Dam. Of the affected population 99% are those living in rural and remote areas in the affinity of Mullapperiyar and its subsidiary dams and rivers. Of the affected population more than 75 percent is not aware of the dangers, the threat of the Dam like we are aware of that specific aspect. Their education is below average or zero.

How much participation they have in the decisions made on the issue since our democratic government came into existence? Will the life and properties of those who made the decisions be affected by a failure of the Dam? How much information about the DAM and its problems, technical, administrative is available in the villages that will be affected by the DAM or accessible to the people who will be affected by its failure?

What type of information the people living in the affinity of the possible regions that will be affected, will require having awareness and exact information about the DAM question for forcefully involving in decisions if they could and for taking precautionary measures to save their life at least. Is the type of information/ information required for that available in their village? If it is available is it in the language and form in which it can be used by them.

The majority of those who were involved in the decisions on the DAM never would have visited any village in the affinity of the DAM and the concerned

rivers. The life and properties of none of them will be affected by the failure of the DAM. They spend their life in the comforts of the capital city or other urban areas. Their decisions may affect millions of people. But not them. Consider the statement of the thousands of children who represented on the Dam to the President of India which was reported yesterday by the press. After reading the news about the continuing rise of the water level above safety limits during all these days and watching the heavy rains that goes on drumming in the roofs of their houses very much like announcing the approaching danger the innocent children could not sleep in their home peacefully. Consider the psychological damage that has been caused to the lakhs of children.

To understand/interpret the order or decision, the affected villager requires much basic information which is not accessible to him as for one in the city who has various sources for that. He requires the history of the DAM, geological observations on the DAM and related regions, the case histories on the issue, the technology used, the life expectations of the DAM, recommendations and arguments by environmentalists and experts on disaster management information on his rights for protecting his life and wealth from a disaster that can be predicted etc. He should also require and introductory literature like the book "Mullapperiyar Dam: Keralam Neridunna Duranda Bhishani by A.V George recently published by Current books before scanning the other documents/information which are a little bit difficult even for the educated persons to understand. Who can provide these information materials to the villager. Who can guide them to these materials on their use. Are they accessible under RTI. These services can be provided only by libraries. And in the village/say in village library there should be a person to guide and interpret these documents to the villager.

But in the village they are not accessible. There is no qualified person to guide the village also. Using RTI is not practical to get this type of information.

For those at the helm of administrative affairs who will not be affected by the decisions concerned information resources is also available and accessible. One in Trivandrum can get whole data from State Central Library, Archives,

CESS, CWRDM or the Secretariat Archives. That also without much effort, cost. Even the Government Decisions/orders on the matter are accessible to them in Trivandrum at the touch of a finger or maximum by spending less than an hour. But the affected village has to spend 100 times more effort, time and cost to get hold of such document. But even than the basic data which requires using such document is not accessible to the villager.

Any how with our present information/library facilities in the village a villager is never going to get this basic information data and even if he travels and spends time it will take months to have it. But one in the city will get that within hours. If he succeeds in getting this basic information based on so acquired knowledge a village should be able to request for current decisions/orders of relevance to him, at the village itself. While a wealthy person in Trivandrum or the district headquarters can file a request under RTI at an office in walkable distance do you think that it is fair to make the villager living in an affected area loose a day's work that wins his bread and travel to the city spending his hard earned money to file a request? No it is unfair, unjust and against the objectives of RTI Act.

So village library only can make all this basic information available to the villager. It only can successfully provide information literacy as well as RTI literacy to our rural masses. If village libraries are developed accordingly based on concerned legislation it is the apt place to have a Public Information Officer who receives requests under RTI. Government has empowered hundreds of officers for various activities at Panchayat/village level. Appointing a qualified information science professional to manage village library and information services will only improve the quality of activities of all the other hundred officials and teachers as well as can ensure the RTI of the villager.

So public library legislation which prescribes standards for resources and services to be organized/provided by the public libraries including the village libraries is a preliminary requirement for the effectiveness of RTI.

So if RTI Act is to achieve its objectives; in every village there should be a local level PIO from whom the people living in the villages can seek



information. The villagers most of whom have not gone beyond the school level education are not having the basic information/knowledge, the capacity which average citizens acquired from their to refer and understand. The villagers are not capable of using the acts, manuals, handbooks, and other source materials, which can give them basic knowledge of the problem or an awareness relevant to the context speedily and effectively. This is essential for them to seek the relevant information under RTI effectively to solve their problems or problems of their small village community.

For the average educated citizens and the urban people this basic information is available in their reach in academic, special and huge public libraries existing near their residence. These libraries or institutions have the facility to provide to the urban or city dwellers this information that is right information to the right person at the right time. The education has also given them the capacity to quickly assimilate the information as per requirements and context. Even if any guidance is essential that is available within their reach at the library or other organizations as well as through the contacts and familiarities or awareness their education and the society they are living in have given them. The rural population are not having the basic capacities and power mentioned above which they require to effectively use the RTI Act.

So in rural areas there should be information systems that collect and provide to the community any document, which they may require as background materials to understand any problem or situation, they face. In the village there should be a strong document collection that the people may require for their day-to-day use. All other documents or the information, which is accessible to the educated and the urban people from big public libraries or academic special libraries, should be accessible to the village dweller also.

More than all these; the villager should get effective professional support on how they can retrieve their required documents or information and how they can use them effectively. They should also get support for interpreting the documents of relevance and also providing translations to them if they require. The office or institution they have to access for all this support should be one, which they can approach without any psychological barriers. It is better that such an institution should be the village library. The Public

Information Officer for the village should be located at the village library. Government appointing a professional librarian with the duties and responsibilities of the Public Information Officer at the village can extend benefit of RTI to the majority of population which is presently out of its purview due to their own limitations. Strong Community Information System at the village only can enable the RTI to achieve its set objectives.

One of the present major impediments to the effectiveness of the RTI is the lack of local level library and information systems and the absence of a well defined plan for managing and disseminating information required for the people in villages. There should be a very efficient library and information system, which forms part of state information infrastructure at every village, which can fulfil all the information needs of the people of the village. All the facilities for repackaging information in times of need in a simple way so that the common people even if they are illiterate or semi-literate can find it convenient use should be there.

Information literacy programmes and small workshops and training programmes on RTI should be done under the initiative of the village library and information system.

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