

RTI: A Tool for Transparency – An Analytical Study of Its Pros, Cons, and Impact on Governance

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Abstract-- The Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, is widely acknowledged as a transformative instrument that reshaped the relationship between the government and its citizens by promoting transparency, accountability, and participatory governance. This paper provides an in-depth analytical study of the evolution, strengths, weaknesses, and governance impact of RTI in India. Drawing on legislative frameworks, institutional mechanisms, official statistics, and case studies, the study highlights the significant achievements of the Act while addressing systemic challenges such as misuse of RTI, bureaucratic resistance, delays in information disclosure, and increasing attacks on RTI activists. Further, the paper presents comparative global perspectives and policy recommendations to strengthen transparency mechanisms. The overall assessment concludes that while RTI remains a powerful democratic tool, its effectiveness depends on political will, institutional reforms, and societal awareness.

Keywords-- RTI, Transparency, Accountability, Good Governance, Public Policy, Information Commission, Democracy, Citizen Rights

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of transparency has long been considered a cornerstone of democratic governance. In India, the enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005 marked a historic shift in governance philosophy, bringing an end to the opaque administrative culture inherited from colonial rule. The Act granted ordinary citizens the legal right to request information from public authorities, enabling them to hold governments accountable. The RTI Act transformed the ethos of public administration by institutionalizing openness and creating mechanisms that ensure responsiveness from the state.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RTI

The roots of RTI can be traced back to grassroots movements in India, particularly the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) movement in Rajasthan during the 1990s, which demanded wage transparency for rural laborers. Public hearings (jansunwais) exposed corruption in local governance and established the foundation for the demand for a national information law.

Internationally, India drew inspiration from global experiences, as more than 50 countries had adopted similar laws before 2005. RTI represents a paradigm shift from an administration built on secrecy—embodied in the Official Secrets Act of 1923—to an open, citizen-centric model of governance.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE RTI ACT

The RTI Act was designed to:

1. Promote transparency in government functioning.
2. Strengthen public accountability.
3. Empower citizens to participate in governance.
4. Reduce corruption by exposing maladministration.
5. Enhance trust between the government and citizens.

IV. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The RTI Act mandates time-bound responses to information requests. Public Information Officers (PIOs) are required to provide information within 30 days. In cases affecting life and liberty, information must be provided within 48 hours. The Act created the Central Information Commission (CIC) and State Information Commissions (SICs) as appellate bodies. Penalties can be imposed on officials for delays, denial, or providing misleading information.

Pros of RTI

1. *Empowerment of Citizens:* RTI has democratized access to information, enabling marginalized communities to demand accountability.
2. *Reduction in Corruption:* Numerous scams—including irregularities in ration distribution, road construction, and public fund allocation—were exposed using RTI.
3. *Improved Governance:* RTI has compelled institutions to maintain proper records and update proactive disclosure mechanisms.
4. *Strengthening Democracy:* Citizens actively participate in decision-making, increasing transparency in public administration.

5. *Judicial Support:* Courts have consistently upheld RTI as a fundamental right under Article 19 (1)(a) of the Constitution.

V. CONS AND CHALLENGES

Despite its transformative potential, RTI faces significant challenges:

1. *Misuse by Vexatious Applicants:* Some individuals file frivolous RTI applications to harass officials.
2. *Bureaucratic Resistance:* Many departments resist disclosure fearing exposure of inefficiency.
3. *Delays in Information:* Backlogs in Information Commissions lead to delayed justice.
4. *Threats to Activists:* Over 100 RTI activists in India have been attacked, with several deaths recorded.
5. *Poor Record-Keeping:* Government departments often lack proper digital record systems.
6. *Amendments 2019:* Critics argue these amendments undermine the autonomy of the Information Commissions.

VI. IMPACT ON GOVERNANCE

RTI has had profound effects on governance in India:

- *Curbing Corruption:* The Act exposed widespread corruption in welfare schemes like MNREGA, PDS, and Mid-Day Meal programs.
- *Administrative Reforms:* Many departments adopted e-governance systems to ensure transparency.
- *Citizen Participation:* Increased participation in local governance, social audits, and monitoring of developmental works.
- *Media and Civil Society:* RTI has become a powerful tool for investigative journalism.
- *Judicial Scrutiny:* Courts increasingly relied on RTI data for judgments enhancing public accountability.

VII. STATISTICAL INSIGHTS

According to official reports, millions of RTI applications are filed annually. The average number of RTI requests filed per year exceeds 1.3 million at the central level alone. State-level RTI requests total between 5–6 million annually. Transparency has improved, yet pendency at Information Commissions often exceeds 2–3 years.

VIII. CASE STUDIES

1. *MNREGA Wage Payments:* RTI inquiries revealed ghost beneficiaries, exposing massive corruption.
2. *Adarsh Housing Scam:* RTI disclosures uncovered irregularities leading to high-level investigations.
3. *Delhi School Admissions:* parents used RTI to expose seat allocation discrepancies.
4. *PDS Ration Scam:* RTI exposed diversion of food grains meant for the poor.

IX. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

More than 120 countries now have freedom of information laws. Sweden enacted the first such law in 1766. Compared to global standards, India's RTI is considered strong due to its penalties and broad definition of public authority. However, India lags behind countries like Mexico or the UK in terms of digital transparency and institutional independence.

X. THREATS TO RTI ACTIVISTS

RTI activists face severe risks due to exposure of corruption. Many have been murdered for uncovering powerful interests. The absence of a whistleblower protection system is a major concern.

XI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Strengthen Information Commissions:* Fill vacancies promptly and enhance independence.
2. *Digital Governance:* Promote digital records and online proactive disclosure.
3. *Protect Activists:* Enact strong whistleblower protection laws.
4. *Reduce Frivolous RTIs:* Introduce guidelines without restricting genuine requests.
5. *Awareness Campaigns:* Educate citizens about the importance of RTI.
6. *Regular Training:* Train PIOs for efficient record management and service delivery.

XII. CONCLUSION

The RTI Act remains one of the most empowering pieces of legislation in India's democratic history. It has significantly contributed to transparency, public participation, and accountability.

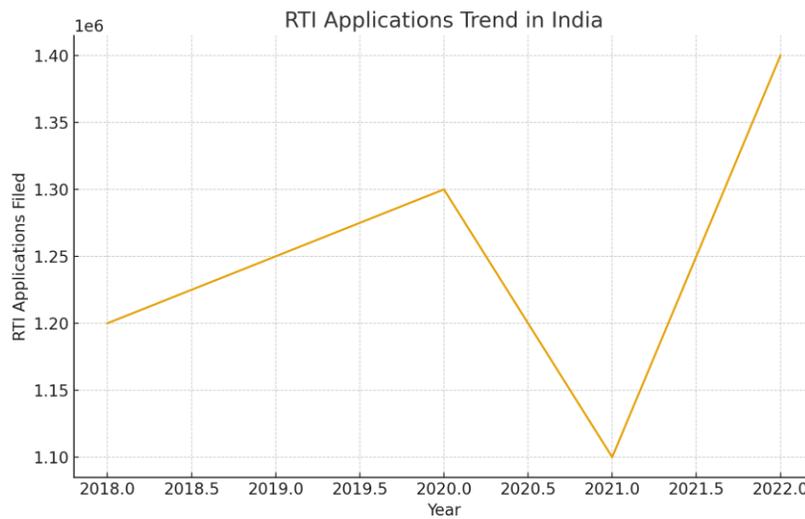


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However, the system faces several structural and implementation challenges. Strengthening RTI requires political will, administrative reforms, and an informed citizenry.

With proper reforms, RTI can continue to serve as a powerful instrument for building a transparent and responsible democracy.

Statistical Diagram



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