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TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: THE CONSTITUTIONAL UNDERPINNINGS OF INDIA'S RIGHT TO INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The Right to Information Act of 2005 is a milestone in India's democratic experience, revolutionizing the culture of administration from bureaucratic secrecy to one of open government and participatory democracy. Grounded in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, the Act roots the right of the citizen to know as a fundamental component of democratic accountability. The article critically examines the constitutional and jurisprudential foundations of the RTI in light of path-breaking judgments such as *State of U.P. v. Raj Narain*, *S.P. Gupta v. Union of India*, and *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, which collectively established the doctrinal pillars for an effective regime of information. It also critiques the key provisions of the Act, judicial interpretations, and institutional arrangements highlighting its potential to curb corruption, enhance public accountability, and empower citizens to actively participate in the process of governance. At the same time, the study also addresses challenges such as bureaucratic resistance, procedural barriers, and institutional failures that limit the full enforcement of the Act. It also traces the imperative role of civil society in supporting the RTI edifice against erosion and generating public awareness. Lastly, the paper evaluates whether the Act has realized its transformative potential and argues that its abiding vibrancy depends upon persistent legal, administrative, and civic commitment to norms of open government.

Key words: Right to Information, Transparency, Accountability, Article 19(1)(a), RTI Act, Participatory Governance, Indian Constitution, Civil Administration.

I. Introduction

Transparency is the bedrock of a democratic and responsible civil administration, enabling citizens to assess governmental decisions, prevent corruption, and build confidence in public institutions. The pursuit of such principles was epitomized by the Right to Information Act of 2005, a milestone in Indian legislative history¹⁰⁵². By entrenching the right of citizens to access information held by public authorities, the Act ushered in a change from a bureaucratic secrecy culture to an open and participatory culture of governance¹⁰⁵³. This legislative instrument signifies a profound shift from a culture of bureaucratic opacity to one of

transparency, openness, and participatory governance.

The RTI Act was enacted as a strategic initiative to address the chronic problems of lack of transparency, inefficiency, and corruption in the Indian administrative system¹⁰⁵⁴. It enables citizens to seek answers to the actions and decisions of public authorities and requires that information be furnished within a reasonable time limit, promoting institutional accountability. Its stipulations regarding penalties for unreasonable denial or delay in disclosure further emphasize its focus on openness in governance. The democratic ideal envisaged by the Constitution demands a well-informed citizenry. The exercise of civil liberties,

¹⁰⁵² The Right to Information Act, No. 22 of 2005, Statement of Objects and Reasons.

¹⁰⁵³ Ibid

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ibid

meaningful participation in public discourse, and holding public functionaries to account—all rest on the citizen's access to reliable and relevant information. Thus, the right to information emerges as a derivative yet indispensable component of the freedom of expression.

Still, close to two decades after it was passed into law, the efficacy of the RTI Act remains a contentious issue. Questions have been raised about its likely abuse, and some officials have complained of apprehension of being harassed or submitted to frivolous requests. The fears, though, are oftentimes viewed as manifestations of the deeper institutional pushback against the scrutiny of the public. On this, the intervention of civil society has proved pivotal in securing the integrity of the Act and hence cementing its role as an effective tool of democratic watch. Against this backdrop, a relevant question is: Has the RTI Act fulfilled its promise of bringing about administrative accountability? And to what degree has it transformed the citizen-state relationship? This article attempts to answer these questions by evaluating the impact, challenge, and changing relevance of the RTI Act in the field of civil administration.

II. Constitutional Foundation of the Right To Information (RTI)

A. Article 19(1)(a): The Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression

The bedrock of India's Right to Information (RTI) lies in the fundamental principles of the Indian Constitution, particularly Article 19(1)(a), which assures every citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression. Considered a cornerstone of democratic governance, this provision not only safeguards the expression of thoughts but inherently includes the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information¹⁰⁵⁵. A well-informed citizenry is vital for the democratic ideals envisioned by the Constitution. Access to relevant information is

essential for exercising civil liberties, engaging in meaningful public discourse, and holding public officials accountable, making the right to information an indispensable component of freedom of expression.

This interpretation has received strong judicial support. The Supreme Court, in *Bennett Coleman & Co. v. Union of India*¹⁰⁵⁶, explicitly stated that the freedom of the press and the right of citizens to receive information are integral to Article 19(1)(a). The Court observed that denying the public access to pertinent information would render freedom of speech illusory, as opinions are shaped by knowledge of governmental actions, public policies, and administrative decisions.

The global human rights framework also reinforces this broad understanding. Article 19 of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)**¹⁰⁵⁷ and **Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)**¹⁰⁵⁸, both ratified by India, guarantee not only freedom of expression but also the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information. India's constitutional jurisprudence aligns with these international obligations, further emphasizing the sanctity of the right to information.

The Right to Information Act, 2005, represents the culmination of this constitutional and jurisprudential development, providing statutory recognition to a right already inherent in the Constitution. The Act established a system of transparency, obligating public authorities to facilitate access to information and holding them accountable for non-disclosure. By doing so, the RTI Act has moved the citizen from the periphery to the center of governance, transforming transparency from a privilege to a democratic entitlement.

¹⁰⁵⁶ AIR 1973 SC 106.

¹⁰⁵⁷ art. 19, Dec. 10, 1948, U.N.G.A. Res. 217 A(III)

¹⁰⁵⁸ art. 19(2), Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171

¹⁰⁵⁵ People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, (2004) 2 SCC 476.

B. Judicial Recognition of RTI as a Fundamental Right

The Indian judiciary recognized the Right to Information (RTI) as a fundamental right long before it was codified in law, showcasing constitutional interpretation and foresight. Through landmark judgments, the judiciary established that the right to know is an essential aspect of Article 19(1)(a), embedding RTI within the framework of fundamental rights.

This recognition began with *S.P. Gupta v. Union of India*, where the Supreme Court declared open government as emanating from the right to know, implicit in freedom of speech and expression. The Court highlighted that secrecy opposes democratic values, advocating for information disclosure as the norm. This dismantled opacity, promoting transparency in public affairs.

The doctrine was reinforced in *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, reaffirming RTI as a constitutional right under Article 19(1)(a). The judgment emphasized that informed participation is crucial for exercising sovereignty in a democracy and that information is vital for accountability and transparency. These decisions established the doctrinal foundation for RTI as a fundamental right, ensuring that statutory frameworks would only operationalize a right already constitutionally recognized.

The judiciary's stance expanded constitutional rights and instilled openness within the Indian administrative framework. These pronouncements transformed citizens into active stakeholders, empowering them to question and demand accountability from public institutions. The constitutionalization of the right to information stands as a profound advancement in India's democratic jurisprudence.

C. Importance of Information Access in a Democratic Society

Access to information is the cornerstone of a participatory democracy. A well-informed

citizenry is essential for meaningful public debate, electoral accountability, and responsible governance. The right to know empowers individuals to question, critique, and evaluate the actions of those in public office, strengthening the democratic fabric. In a democracy governed by the rule of law, government legitimacy stems from transparency and openness. Without access to information, citizens cannot hold public authorities accountable or effectively exercise their rights. Information access also acts as a check on arbitrary and corrupt practices by subjecting decision-making processes to public scrutiny. Transparent governance promotes administrative efficiency, curtails abuse of power, and encourages ethical conduct among public officials.

Furthermore, the right to information enhances the quality of public participation. Informed citizens can contribute meaningfully to policy-making, public service delivery, and civic engagement. This ensures that democracy is substantive, reflecting the will and interests of the people, rather than merely procedural.

Thus, the constitutional foundation of the Right to Information extends freedom of expression and serves as a precondition for realizing democratic ideals, accountability, and responsive governance.

III. Preamble and Key Provisions of the Right To Information Act, 2005

The Right to Information Act, 2005 (RTI Act), stands as a keystone in India's legal architecture, fundamentally reshaping the landscape of transparency and accountability within the nation's public administration. Enacted with the vision of transitioning from a culture of bureaucratic secrecy to one of openness and participatory governance, the RTI Act empowers ordinary citizens, enabling them to engage actively in the processes of governance. Rooted in the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and expression, as enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, the Act recognizes the right

to information as an intrinsic and logical extension of this fundamental freedom.

The Preamble of the RTI Act serves as a *declaratory testament to its core objectives, articulating the legislative intent to foster transparency, promote accountability, and cultivate an informed citizenry*. By underscoring the necessity of transparency within public institutions, the Preamble reinforces the principle that access to information is vital for the effective functioning of a democratic society. Moreover, it explicitly acknowledges the critical role of an informed citizenry in combating corruption and holding governmental bodies accountable for their actions. This philosophical underpinning of the RTI Act has received judicial affirmation, notably in the landmark case of ***State of Uttar Pradesh v. Raj Narain (1975)***, wherein the Supreme Court articulated the principle that citizens possess the right to be informed about every public act and all actions undertaken by public functionaries. This judicial pronouncement, predating the formal codification of the RTI Act, underscored the judiciary's recognition of the right to information as an indispensable element of democratic governance.

Section 4 of the RTI Act emerges as a pivotal operational provision, mandating proactive disclosure of information by public authorities. This section imposes a statutory obligation on government departments to disseminate comprehensive information pertaining to their structure, functions, decision-making processes, rules, regulations, budgets, and other relevant aspects of their operations. By requiring proactive disclosure, Section 4 aims to minimize the necessity for individual information requests, fostering a culture of openness that is seamlessly integrated into administrative functioning. In the case of ***CBSE v. Aditya Bandopadhyay***¹⁰⁵⁹, the Supreme Court clarified that the RTI Act is designed to promote transparency and accountability, rather than serving as a mechanism for grievance

redressal. The Court further emphasized the importance of strengthening proactive disclosures under Section 4, with the objective of reducing the burden on the system and facilitating convenient access to public records.

Section 6 of the RTI Act establishes a citizen-centric procedure for requesting information, ensuring ease of access and promoting inclusivity. This provision empowers any citizen to submit an information request in writing or through electronic means, without the obligation to provide a justification for seeking the information. The sole requirement is that the requested information be specific and fall within the purview of the concerned public authority. This provision reflects the legislative intent to streamline access to information, thereby democratizing the flow of information and fostering greater citizen engagement. The principle that applicants are not required to furnish reasons for seeking information is further safeguarded under **Section 6(2)** of the Act. The Supreme Court, in ***Khanapuram Gandaiah v. Administrative Officer***¹⁰⁶⁰, upheld this liberal interpretation, clarifying that while citizens possess the right to information, the Act does not extend to eliciting opinions, reasons, or interpretations from the authorities. The judgment distinguished between "information," as defined in the Act, and "explanations" or "clarifications," which are not mandated to be provided under the statute.

It is essential to acknowledge that the right to information, while fundamental, is not absolute in its application. **Section 8** of the RTI Act enumerates a range of exemptions from disclosure, carefully balancing the public's right to know with other legitimate interests and concerns. These exemptions encompass information that could potentially affect national security, impede ongoing investigations, breach parliamentary privileges, infringe upon commercial confidence or fiduciary relationships, or violate the privacy of individuals. However, **Section 8(2)** incorporates

¹⁰⁵⁹ (2011) 8 SCC 497

¹⁰⁶⁰ (2010) 2 SCC 1

a crucial public interest override, stipulating that even exempted information must be disclosed if the public interest in disclosure outweighs the potential harm to the protected interest. This provision ensures a dynamic and balanced application of the exemptions, allowing for context-specific determinations that prioritize the greater public good. In ***Girish Ramchandra Deshpande v. CIC***¹⁰⁶¹, the Supreme Court held that personal information, such as service records and asset declarations of public servants, is generally exempt from disclosure unless the public interest in disclosure justifies the invasion of privacy. This decision underscored the importance of balancing the right to privacy with the public's right to know, particularly in the context of public functionaries. Conversely, in ***Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms***¹⁰⁶², the Supreme Court affirmed citizens' right to know the antecedents of electoral candidates, thereby expanding the interpretation of public interest and reinforcing the democratic rationale underlying the RTI framework.

IV. Judicial Expansion of RTI: Landmark Judgments

A. State of U.P. v. Raj Narain (1975)

The case of *State of U.P. v. Raj Narain*¹⁰⁶³ stands as a cornerstone in the jurisprudential evolution of the Right to Information within the Indian legal framework.

This matter arose from Mr. Raj Narain's pursuit of transparency concerning electoral expenditures incurred by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, during the 1971 Lok Sabha elections. The State of Uttar Pradesh initially demurred on grounds of confidentiality; however, the trajectory of this case would ultimately affirm the citizenry's entitlement to governmental transparency.

The esteemed Allahabad High Court initially directed the State to furnish the requested documents to Mr. Narain. This decree was

subsequently appealed before the Supreme Court of India, which upheld the High Court's decision, thereby affirming the inherent right of citizens to be apprised of the operations of governmental agencies.

In its deliberation, the Supreme Court elucidated that the Right to Information is intrinsically linked to the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression, as enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The Court affirmed that citizens are entitled to knowledge regarding the activities of public authorities, as this is indispensable for ensuring probity and accountability in governance.

In summation, the *State of U.P. v. Raj Narain* case occupies a position of profound significance in the annals of Indian legal history. It served as a catalyst for the eventual enactment of the Right to Information Act, 2005, and established the foundational principle that citizens possess an inalienable right to be informed about the functioning of their government.

B. S.P. Gupta v. Union of India (1981)

*S.P. Gupta v. Union of India*¹⁰⁶⁴, the Supreme Court of India significantly advanced the cause of transparency and accountability by recognizing the Right to Information (RTI) as a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution. This landmark case emerged from a dispute concerning the appointment of judges to the higher judiciary by the executive branch. The core contention was that such appointments compromised the independence of the judiciary, prompting petitioners to demand public access to information regarding the appointment process.

The Supreme Court, in its deliberation, anchored its decision on Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and expression. The court explicitly stated that the Right to Information is inherently linked to this fundamental right. It emphasized that citizens are entitled to understand the

¹⁰⁶¹ (2013) 1 SCC 212

¹⁰⁶² (2002) 5 SCC 294

¹⁰⁶³ *State of U.P. v. Raj Narain*, (1975) 4 SCC 428.

¹⁰⁶⁴ *S.P. Gupta v. Union of India*, 1981 Supp SCC 87

functioning of government agencies, as this knowledge is indispensable for ensuring transparency and accountability in governance. Furthermore, the court asserted that the government has a corresponding duty to proactively disclose information to the public, reinforcing transparency and accountability. The RTI was thus declared an integral facet of democracy, empowering citizens to actively participate in the governance of the country.

The court further clarified that any limitations imposed on the Right to Information must be reasonable and aligned with the public interest. Restrictions are justifiable only in instances where the information in question poses a threat to India's sovereignty and integrity, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign nations, public order, or pertains to offenses such as contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offense.

The *S.P. Gupta v. Union of India* case firmly established the RTI as a fundamental right, underscoring the critical importance of transparency and accountability in the fabric of Indian governance.

C. People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India (2004)

People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India (2004)¹⁰⁶⁵ stands as a pivotal case that paved the way for the enactment of the Right to Information Act, 2005. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCI) initiated the case, seeking details regarding alleged fake encounters by the police in Gujarat.

PUCI's application under the Right to Information Act, 2002, to access information about the encounters was denied by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), citing confidentiality. The Supreme Court, upon review, affirmed that the Right to Information is a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution, asserting citizens' entitlement to access information held by public authorities. The court underscored that transparency and

accountability are crucial for fostering democracy and upholding the rule of law.

The Supreme Court mandated the CBI to release the requested information to PUCI. It also found that the Right to Information Act, 2002, was insufficient to guarantee transparency and accountability in governance, thus emphasizing the need for comprehensive legislation to ensure the Right to Information and directed the government to enact such a law.

Subsequently, the Indian government enacted the Right to Information Act, 2005, establishing a framework for citizens to access information held by public authorities. This Act has significantly promoted transparency and accountability in governance, empowering citizens to engage in the government's decision-making processes.

The case underscored the importance of transparency and accountability in governance and highlighted the role of citizens in promoting democracy and upholding the rule of law.

D. Central Board of Secondary Education v. Aditya Bandopadhyay (2011)

In *Central Board of Secondary Education v. Aditya Bandopadhyay*¹⁰⁶⁶, the Supreme Court addressed whether answer sheets from board examinations conducted by the CBSE could be disclosed under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. The CBSE had denied a student's request for answer sheets, citing confidentiality and potential violation of students' privacy.

The Supreme Court ruled that students' answer sheets are not exempt from disclosure under the RTI Act. The court noted that disclosing answer sheets would not breach students' privacy rights. Furthermore, it observed that disclosing answer sheets would enhance transparency and accountability within the examination system. Students could access their evaluated answer sheets, enabling them to

¹⁰⁶⁵ *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, (2004) 2 SCC 476.

¹⁰⁶⁶ *Central Board of Secondary Education v. Aditya Bandopadhyay*, (2011) 8 SCC 497

understand their errors and improve future performance.

The court affirmed that examining bodies like the CBSE have a responsibility to ensure transparency and accountability in the examination system. It recognized the RTI Act as a powerful tool for promoting transparency and accountability in governance. Public authorities are obligated to provide information to citizens unless it falls under specific exemptions.

Ultimately, the *Central Board of Secondary Education v. Aditya Bandopadhyay* case established that answer sheets from CBSE board examinations are subject to disclosure under the RTI Act, 2005. The case emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability in the examination system and highlighted the role of citizens in ensuring these principles through the RTI Act.

E. Union of India v. Namit Sharma (2013)

In *Union of India v. Namit Sharma*¹⁰⁶⁷, the Supreme Court addressed the critical balance between transparency and the right to information, particularly concerning the appointment of judges to the higher judiciary. This case arose from a challenge to an order by the Central Information Commission (CIC), which had directed the Union of India to disclose information regarding the selection process for these judicial appointments.

The Union of India resisted, arguing that the requested information was confidential and protected from disclosure under the Right to Information Act, 2005. The CIC countered that the public's right to know about the selection process outweighed these confidentiality concerns. The Supreme Court, in its deliberation, acknowledged the RTI Act's provision for exemptions to information disclosure.

The Court clarified that these exemptions must be interpreted narrowly, placing the onus on the public authority to demonstrate that the information falls within an exempted category.

Significantly, the Court held that disclosing information about the selection process for judges would not compromise the independence of the judiciary. It affirmed the public's right to be informed about this process, emphasizing that transparency is essential for fostering public trust in the judiciary. The Court underscored the RTI Act, 2005, as progressive legislation designed to promote transparency and accountability in governance. Public authorities are obligated to disclose information unless it clearly falls under an exempted category.

Ultimately, *Union of India v. Namit Sharma* reaffirmed the RTI's importance in promoting transparency and accountability. The judgment reinforced that exemptions to disclosure must be construed narrowly, with the burden of proof resting on the public authority seeking to withhold information.

V. Impact of the Right To Information Act on Civil Administration

A. Transforming Administrative Culture

The Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005 has ushered in a significant shift in India's administrative culture, moving away from the colonial-era secrecy ingrained in the Official Secrets Act of 1923 towards a contemporary framework emphasizing transparency and participatory governance¹⁰⁶⁸. By legally obligating public authorities to disclose information, the RTI Act has challenged long-standing norms of bureaucratic opacity, fundamentally altering the relationship between the state and its citizens.

This transformation extends beyond mere procedural changes, representing a deep cultural reorientation. Public servants are now aware that their actions and decisions are subject to public scrutiny. This awareness has led to the "fishbowl effect," where administrators perform their duties with greater diligence and

¹⁰⁶⁷ *Union of India v. Namit Sharma*, (2013) 10 SCC 359.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Aruna Roy & Nikhil Dey, *Fighting for the Right to Know in India*, 1 *Global Dialogue* 29 (2006).

ethical standards due to the increased visibility and accountability of their conduct¹⁰⁶⁹.

B. Enhancing Accountability and Curbing Corruption

The RTI Act has become a vital tool in the national effort to combat corruption and improve accountability. By empowering citizens to question government decisions, financial transactions, and administrative actions, the Act has uncovered numerous instances of misappropriation, policy manipulation, and administrative overreach.

Documented cases reveal that information obtained through the RTI framework has led to the recovery of misused public funds, the initiation of departmental investigations, and significant improvements in institutional processes. The Act has broadened the scope of accountability beyond traditional audit mechanisms, enabling ordinary citizens to serve as watchdogs of public governance¹⁰⁷⁰.

C. Citizen Participation and Democratic Empowerment

Arguably, the most transformative impact of the RTI Act lies in its democratization of access to information. Before its enactment, access to government data was largely limited to elites and insiders. The RTI Act has broken down this barrier, allowing citizens from all socioeconomic backgrounds to access information vital to their rights and well-being.

By equipping citizens with the means to monitor public service delivery, challenge maladministration, and participate meaningfully in policy discussions, the Act has infused Indian democracy with a deeper and more substantive form of civic engagement. Civil society organizations have utilized the RTI to monitor environmental clearances, public health initiatives, and education spending,

thereby enhancing the accountability of development programs.

VI. Challenges and Limitations in Implementation

A. Bureaucratic Resistance and Procedural Obstacles

Despite its normative strength, the implementation of the RTI Act continues to face significant resistance within the bureaucratic apparatus. In many instances, officials resort to procedural evasions such as undue delays, provision of incomplete or evasive responses, and imposition of unreasonable fees, all of which serve to discourage genuine applicants¹⁰⁷¹.

These obstacles are often compounded by the intimidating complexity of the appeals process, which can be inaccessible to individuals with limited literacy or legal knowledge. The lack of user-friendly processes disproportionately affects marginalized communities, undermining the Act's inclusive potential.

B. Institutional Weaknesses in the Information Commissions

Information Commissions, as quasi-judicial bodies entrusted with adjudicating appeals and ensuring compliance, have themselves faced a crisis of capacity. With mounting backlogs, resource constraints, and delays in the appointment of Information Commissioners, these institutions struggle to deliver timely remedies.

Several commissions across states report pendency periods extending over multiple years, thereby frustrating the very objective of time-bound access to information¹⁰⁷². This institutional stagnation not only diminishes public trust but also weakens the deterrent value of the legislation.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Shekhar Singh, *Transforming Governance Through Right to Information*, 20 *EPIW* 38 (2007)

¹⁰⁷⁰ Rajeev Dhavan, *Transparency and the RTI: A Tool for the Empowered Citizen*, in *India's Public Institutions* 79–83 (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007)

¹⁰⁷¹ Venkatesh Nayak, *RTI and Bureaucratic Evasion: Patterns and Practices*, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (2013), available at <https://www.humanrightsinitiative.org>.

¹⁰⁷² Satark Nagrik Sangathan, *Report Card on the Performance of Information Commissions in India 2022–23* (Oct. 2023), <https://www.snsindia.org/report-card-information-commissions-2023>.

C. Erosion of the RTI Framework

In recent years, concerns have been raised regarding legislative and administrative attempts to dilute the autonomy and effectiveness of the RTI framework. Amendments altering the tenure and status of Information Commissioners have been criticized for undermining their independence. Similarly, the liberal interpretation of exemption clauses threatens to expand the scope of non-disclosure, contrary to the Act's guiding principle of maximum transparency.

If not carefully regulated, such trends could lead to the gradual erosion of the Act's transformative potential and return the administration to a culture of selective secrecy.

VII. Future Directions and Recommendations

A. Institutional Strengthening and Administrative Reform

To rejuvenate the RTI framework, a comprehensive strengthening of its institutional architecture is essential. This includes ensuring adequate staffing and financial autonomy of Information Commissions, implementing transparent appointment procedures, and insulating the commissions from executive interference. Moreover, public authorities should invest in the modernization of information management systems to facilitate seamless storage, retrieval, and dissemination of data. Public officials must be regularly trained in legal compliance, recordkeeping, and citizen-oriented communication.

B. Leveraging Technology for Deepening Transparency

Digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities to advance transparency objectives. The operationalization of e-portals such as RTI Online has already streamlined the application process. Future efforts must include the creation of machine-readable data repositories, open government data platforms, and AI-based tools to analyze patterns in RTI requests for proactive disclosure.

Technological integration can also address issues of delay and inefficiency, while promoting accessibility for citizens in remote and underserved areas through multilingual and mobile-friendly platforms.

C. Promoting Awareness and Capacity Building

A robust RTI regime depends on an informed citizenry. Large segments of the population remain unaware of their right to information or lack the confidence to assert it. Therefore, targeted awareness campaigns in regional languages, dissemination through local governance institutions, and public service broadcasts are essential to enhance outreach.

Educational curricula should include RTI literacy to cultivate a culture of civic inquiry among young citizens. NGOs and civil society organizations can further play a vital role in assisting citizens with filing applications, navigating appeal procedures, and using RTI as a tool for social justice¹⁰⁷³.

VIII. Conclusion

The Right to Information Act, 2005, represents a watershed moment in India's democratic evolution, institutionalizing transparency as a cornerstone of governance. By empowering citizens with the legal right to access information held by public authorities, the Act has redefined the citizen-state relationship, transforming subjects into stakeholders in the governance process.

The Act's journey over the past two decades reveals both remarkable achievements and persistent challenges. Through landmark judicial pronouncements, proactive citizen engagement, and institutional mechanisms like the Central Information Commission, the RTI regime has substantially advanced the cause of transparent and accountable governance. Countless instances of corruption exposed, policy decisions scrutinized, and welfare programs monitored stand testimony to the

¹⁰⁷³ Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), *Using RTI for Empowerment: A Training Manual for Grassroots NGOs*, 2d ed. (2018)

Act's transformative impact on civil administration.

Yet, the RTI journey remains incomplete. Bureaucratic resistance, implementation challenges, and threats to the Act's foundational principles continue to temper its full realization. Addressing these challenges requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders—government agencies, Information Commissions, civil society organizations, and citizens—to preserve and strengthen this vital pillar of democratic governance.

As India navigates the complexities of 21st-century governance, the RTI Act stands as both an achievement to be celebrated and a work in progress to be nurtured. The Act's continued vitality will depend not just on legal provisions and institutional mechanisms but on the collective commitment to the principle that transparency is not a concession from the state but a fundamental right of democratic citizenship—a right that must be jealously guarded and vigorously exercised for democracy to thrive.

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