

RTI - A weapon in the hands of media to ensure basic human rights to citizens a case study of its awareness and use by youth

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Abstract:-

Information to Democracy is what oxygen is for human. It has been almost a decade since the Right to information Act has altered the long followed paradigm of Government officials and institutions, of Confidentiality as the rule and Disclosure an exception into Transparency being the norm and secrecy an exception. Right to Information, as stated by the commonwealth human rights initiative, in India, is implicit in the constitutionally enshrined Right to freedom of speech and expression article 19 (1)(a) and Right to life and liberty (article 21). RTI has indeed proved itself as a weapon to help people get their basic human rights and take to task corrupt officials in the government machinery who deprive masses of their due rights. This paper throws light over the journey of RTI since its genesis, looks at it as an important tool in the hands of common men, journalists and mulls over its prospects in the times to come. The paper through a case study tries to find out the level of awareness regarding Right to Information act and its use by under graduate and post graduate students in Jaipur.

Introduction:-

What started as a campaign by an association for empowerment of workers and peasants (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan) in mid nineties, in the city of Pushkar, Rajasthan, transpired into National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI). The NCPRI along with the Press Council of India formulated a draft of the RTI law which after extensive debates, discussions and amendments by the National Advisory Committee (NAC) resulted in a bill that was brought before the parliament and was finally

passed on 15th of June 2005 and fully came into force on 13th October 2005. RTI has ensured that knowledge is not the private property of the privileged few. Given the endless list of scams, news of corruption and stories of nepotism on the front pages of newspapers, the inefficiency and lethargy of the government officials, RTI has brought new hopes of conscientious governance in India that would be perhaps transparent, inclusive and accountable in its functioning. The youth in India is undergoing drastic psychographic changes. Some of those transformations are indeed positive. For instance- they are getting more and more confident, less tolerant towards injustice, are more inquisitive etc; thereby demanding answers and are desperate to go beyond armchair criticism and mere tongue in cheek remarks, which is why a small sample of college students in Jaipur was selected and their awareness and use of RTI Act was measured.

Study method:-

A sample of 100 students from varied streams including art, commerce and Science of three universities in Jaipur like -The IIS University, Jaipur National University and University of Rajasthan, were chosen by the method of purposive sampling for the study. The tool used for data collection was a questionnaire consisting of close ended questions that were handed over personally by the researcher to the respondents.

Objectives of study:-

- To study the awareness level of university students regarding the RTI Act.

- To study the usage of RTI by the students of universities.

Demographic profile of Respondents:-

- The respondents comprised of 50 male and 50 female students.
- The age group of respondents was between 18 years and 25 years.
- 50 Students were from the under graduate and 50 students from post graduate classes.
- The students were from arts, science or commerce streams.

Findings:-

1. Out of 100 respondents, 93 students had heard about RTI Act and its use, 07 students did not have any knowledge of it.
2. 47 students came to know about RTI through RTI awareness programmes, seminars, conferences etc. 21 students came to know through the media (print and electronic), 13 students knew about RTI Act through their peer groups, 07 did not have any idea about the Act, while 12 others got to know of RTI from other sources.
3. Out of 100 students, 87 students said that RTI is an effective tool against corruption, 06 students replied in negative and 07 said that they are not sure about it.
4. 88 students out of 100 felt that the existing administrative system was not transparent and RTI can enhance its transparency.
5. Of the total 100 students, merely 16 students had thought at some point of time, to seek information through RTI and only 08 out of them have filed an RTI application.
6. Not a single student had used RTI act more than once.

7. 05 out of 08 information seekers were satisfied with the information they received. 02 were denied information but they did not appeal against the order, while 01 felt that the information was incomplete in nature.
8. 05 out of 100 students could name at least one RTI activist who was killed due to their activism in India.
9. 11 out of 100 students have visited the RTI website of Rajasthan, while others had not.
10. 09 out of 100 respondents were aware of the hierarchies of public information officers.
11. 83 Students said that they are interested to enhance their knowhow of RTI, while others were not interested.
12. 65 of 100 students said that they are willing to be part of activities of organizations working towards spreading awareness of RTI, while some said that they were too busy with their projects and assignments and studies to get involved and some simply said that they weren't interested.

Role of Media in promoting use of RTI:-

Media, often referred as the watchdog, the whistle blower of society, has an important role to play in promoting and thereby maximizing the effective use of RTI as a tool against corruption, nepotism and lethargy of government officials in the hands of the general public. It must be alert enough to check whether the rules framed by government are in conformation with the RTI'S spirit, Whether or not there exists a central monitoring mechanism, Whether Public information officers, Additional PIO's and appellate officers have been appointed and if efforts are made to sensitize and train government servants and various elected

representatives about the act. It should check whether a directory of PIO's, APIO's and Appellate officers has been compiled and put up in the public domain. The media should also find out if information seekers are answered within stipulated time and whether public authorities are sue motto releasing information under section 4 (1)(b) of the act. Besides seeking answers to the aforementioned questions, the journalists should highlight instances of erring PIOs and particulars of disciplinary action taken against them.

Media as we know renders voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless and hence for that matter it should itself possess a voice that is potent and credible enough. In the pre RTI era, journalists and media persons depended entirely on the sources that they would cultivate continually over a period of time in their career many a times by sycophancy and by playing yes men to officials, for seeking information. This kind of dependency rendered journalists vulnerable and transformed journalism from mission into a commission. The RTI has encouraged journalists to bid adieu to such traditional system of information access and as justice P B Sawant says, enabled them to procure accurate, authentic data with zero exaggeration or misappropriation. It is indeed RTI that helped journalists unravel huge scams in the recent years, hidden and shoved inside files and documents, like 2G, 3G, CWG, Coal gate, the fodder scam etc. Realising the significance of RTI as a tool, media over the last decade has taken up various initiatives. NDTV in collaboration with leading civil society organizations had launched a nationwide campaign on RTI convincing people to file RTI applications demanding information to solve their problems instead of paying bribes. Indian Express, a national newspaper, collaborated with the NGO "Parivartan" to guide people on filing RTI applications. Besides, it also reported success and failure stories of people who demanded information through the act. Similarly, Doordarshan, the state owned broadcast network that enjoys maximum

market penetration has also come up with a weekly thirty minutes programme on RTI, presenting exemplary instances of how the 'AAM Aadmi' has best used the information seeking tool.

Numerous instances are available when activists have broken the iron curtain of non cooperation of government officials using RTI. The government withdrew its decision to privatize the Delhi Jal Board after the team of NGO –Parivartan studied a 4000 pages' document procured through RTI and subsequently revealed how the then ruling government bent before the world bank to fulfil interest of the multinational company Price water house cooper which could have increased the cost of water supply by six times if implemented and water would have been available only to those areas where people voluntarily agreed to lay down pipelines at their own expense. At the same time a reporter, Shakti Pandey working for Prabhat Khabar, Jharkhand, unravelled the rampant corruption in promotion of employees and officials in Jharkhand Vidhan Sabha. RTI brought out hilarious facts like officials getting promotions twice a day, more than fifty employees of fourth grade being promoted as clerks within six months of appointment, sweeper promoted to cashier etc. Sunil Chaudhary, a reporter found out that ambulances were used to purchase vegetables from the market.

In yet another story from Jharkhand, the union minister of state for food processing, Subodh Kant Sahai, misused power to transfer a CCL (Central Coal fields Limited, a subsidiary of coal India) officer, Hitesh Verma. After an RTI application seeking answers to 22 different points relating to transfer, the illegality of the ministers' action was proved. The Jharkhand high court not only stayed the transfer, but also issued show cause notice to the minister and demanded explanation on his role in the matter. Many different activists have even audited governments' policies, schemes, and actions, examined works undertaken by governments by drawing

samples of materials used, verifying records, documents etc using RTI.

According to a report published in Hindustan Times, more than 150 RTI activists were victimised in the last nine years, of which 24 were killed, 52 assaulted, and 74 harassed. It is noteworthy to mention some of the activists who lost their lives in the struggle to bring the truth out in the open. Amit Jethwa, who brought out illegal mining in the Gir forest, had conducted numerous workshops explaining the process of filing RTI applications, had uncovered a large lion poaching gang and many such cases, was found murdered in which connection CBI arrested BJP MP Dinu Solanki indicting him of having ordered the murder. Again Satish Shetty was a social activist who had exposed several land scams in Maharashtra was killed on 13 January 2010 by unknown attackers. Similarly, Lalit Mehta, an RTI activist who brought out anomalies in NREGA was killed near Palamau on May 14, 2008.

Shela Masood, Arun Sawant, Vitthal Gite, Venkatesh, Kameshwar Yadav, Shashidhar Mishra, Premnath Jha, Ramesh Agarwal are only some of the many who sacrificed their lives for public good while trying to bring out information using RTI.

Conclusion:-

Every legislation or policy gets perfect with time, provided efforts are made in the right direction. Youth is often regarded as the backbone and the future of any nation. Keeping this very fact in mind a small scale study was conducted to find out the awareness level of undergraduate and post graduate students of Jaipur regarding RTI and its usage; the results of which were not at all encouraging. Though the students had heard of the RTI Act, very few students knew of its provisions and significant details related to the act viz. hierarchy of Public Information Officers, RTI website of Rajasthan etc. Besides very few students had filed an RTI application and some of them even after being denied information, did not pursue the matter

further or challenge the denial, while some even though received incomplete information, did not file a second RTI Act. It was indeed disheartening to note that the students had no clue about the RTI activists who lost their lives fighting to unravel the truth. An important clue emerging from the case study was that Workshops, seminars, conferences etc to encourage use of RTI has enhanced knowledge of the act amidst college goers, since maximum of the respondents had said that they came to know about the Act through RTI awareness workshops, conferences etc.

With increasing literacy rates in India, more and more Indians getting tech savvy, media getting stronger, it seems that RTI would be used more in the times to come, more PIOs and APIOs shall be appointed and more importantly, political parties will come under its ambit.

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