



A SURVEY-BASED STUDY ON PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION (RTI) ACT, 2005

Aishwarya R*

ABSTRACT

The RTI Act, 2005, which was enacted with the purpose of institutionalising accountability, transparency, and participatory governance, represents an essential component of the transparency regime in India. Through a conceptual and survey-based inquiry, this present study situates public awareness and accessibility with respect to the RTI regime within larger discourses on democratic governance and administrative responsiveness. The study assesses citizens' understanding of the Act's intentions, procedures, and legal entitlements, as well as the structural and systemic factors that determine their capacity to realise this right. The findings reveal that despite the RTI Act being generally perceived as an important tool for governance, its actual effectiveness remains bound by a lack of substantive appreciation for its procedural architecture. Exercising information rights, therefore, faces several barriers, including bureaucratic complexity, institutional deficiencies, limited digital literacy, and infrastructural disparities. The study emphasises the importance of multi-dimensional capacity-building programs, institutional reforms, and procedural interface simplification to improve citizen engagement. The paper, therefore, concludes that improvement in awareness and accessibility is crucial for realising the transformative potential of the RTI Act for accomplishing transparency and strengthening democratic accountability.

Keywords: RTI Act 2005, Transparency, Public Awareness, Accessibility, Good Governance.

INTRODUCTION

The RTI Act, 2005, aims to redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens, marking a critical turn in India's administrative and democratic journey. Under the Act passed with a view to promoting openness, accountability, and transparency in public administration, every

*BBA LLB, THIRD YEAR, CHRIST ACADEMY INSTITUTE OF LAW.

citizen has a legal right to information held by a public authority. RTI is a strong tool for combating corruption, strengthening participatory governance, and deepening institutional trust through checking governmental decisions, procedures, and expenditure. Notwithstanding its normative value, the success of RTI hinges on the awareness of citizens of their rights and procedural savvy with the Act's mechanisms. This contribution adds to the current debates on transparency and good governance in India through an analysis of general levels of public awareness, access to RTI mechanisms, and systemic barriers that impinge on performance under the Act. Current research and policy evaluations reflect that there are sustained disparities in awareness levels, procedural literacy, and accessibility across social, economic, and regional categories. Structural barriers include bureaucratic delays, limited digital access, unclear procedural guidance, and fear of institutional retaliation.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for this study is descriptive and empirical. This was done through the administration of a structured questionnaire to 40 respondents, comprising citizens and advocates from both urban and rural areas in Mysuru. The survey consisted of questions related to awareness, accessibility, frequency of usage, and challenges. Secondary data were sourced from books, journal articles, government reports, and online resources like RTI.gov.in and CIC.gov.in. The data analysis is done using simple descriptive statistical tools, namely, percentages and frequency charts.

FINDINGS

Overall Knowledge of RTI Act: The study finds that while the Right to Information Act, 2005, is widely recognised in general terms, substantive awareness remains substantially limited among large sections of the population. Many citizens recognise RTI as a legal mechanism that furthers the cause of transparency, but lack an understanding of what it encompasses, what its objectives are, or how it works. Most apparent is the gap between basic awareness and functional awareness: citizens may know something about RTI through media or educational institutions, but often do not have the knowledge to apply and pursue it effectively. Precisely how to identify the appropriate Public Information Officer, what the statutory timelines are, what appeal mechanisms are available, and what categories of information are exempted-all these, and more, remain incomprehensible to many. This gap between recognition and understanding would suggest that awareness campaigns have been

partially successful but grossly inadequate, particularly in reaching the socioeconomically deprived.

Understanding of the Purpose and Scope of RTI: The findings also highlight that the variations in understanding the deeper purpose of the RTI Act among citizens are immense. While some view RTI correctly as a tool to increase government accountability and reduce corruption, for others, it is no more than a means to obtain documents or administrative clarifications. A small minority sees RTI as a potent democratic right that can transform governance structures. There are misconceptions about what kind of information can be sought, what the Act allows or disallows, and how much RTI can influence public decision-making. Such partial understanding weakens the effectiveness of RTI as a participatory governance mechanism and limits citizens from using the Act to demand structural reforms, delivery of public services, or monitoring welfare schemes.

Accessibility Across Urban and Rural Contexts: A significant finding is the variation in accessibility between urban and rural areas. Urban citizens generally face fewer barriers due to increased digital literacy, access to government offices, and exposure to legal awareness programs. Rural citizens face challenges such as limited internet connectivity, inadequate knowledge of online filing systems, and fewer institutional support mechanisms. More often than not, rural applicants rely on intermediaries—such as local activists, social workers, or government personnel—to receive guidance in preparing RTI applications. Physical distance from administrative offices and a lack of local facilitation centres further restrict rural participation. In this way, despite the universal applicability of the RTI Act, its practical accessibility remains unequal, determined by geographical, digital, and structural disparities.

Procedural and Administrative Challenges: The study enumerates several procedural bottlenecks that hamper the effective utilisation of the RTI Act. Delays in responses, particularly non-adherence to the statutory timelines prescribed by the Act, are common. Incomplete or evasive replies indicate either inadequate training or a lack of accountability among the Public Information Officers. Identification of the correct office or authority that holds the information requested is also a major challenge. Applicants face serious problems in tracking departmental structures, which often result in misdirected applications or repeated transfers between offices. This administrative hurdle discourages citizens from filing RTI applications and erodes confidence in the system.

Digital and Technical Barriers: Digital platforms, though at first envisioned to facilitate access, have become a source of complication for users with limited technological knowledge. Inaccessibility related to the design of the RTI portals, non-availability of multiple languages, complicated processes of filing, and problems regarding the online mode of payments are the major concerns. Those unfamiliar with digital processes or who lack access to reliable internet services find it challenging to submit applications online. This is a fact, especially in rural and poorer sections of society, where digital literacy remains relatively low. Thus, online systems, while offering an efficient alternative to physical submission, fall short of their full potential due to unequal digital capacities.

Psychological and Social Barriers: The findings also bring out the presence of psychological deterrents, such as fear of retaliation, aversion to questioning authorities, and lack of confidence in relating to government systems. A section of citizens views filing an RTI application as an adversarial act rather than an established democratic right. Others have been discouraged by past negative experiences or the belief that applications will not serve any purpose. The usage of RTIs is influenced more by these social and psychological aspects, which create the gap between awareness and active participation.

Satisfaction with the RTI System: Overall, there seems to be a moderate to low satisfaction with the RTI mechanism. While many view RTI as an important and empowering tool, there is also a sense of dissatisfaction regarding administrative delays, unclear procedures, and inadequate responses. Lack of efficiency and accountability in the system reduces trust among citizens and limits the usage consistently. Despite these concerns, a significant share of citizens recognises the importance of RTI in bringing transparency into being and feels an improved system, through better training, stricter enforcement, and more awareness, will make it more effective.

8. Need for Enhanced Awareness and Institutional Support

A key theme that emerges from the findings is the widely felt need for better awareness generation, simplification of procedures, and more institutional support. Citizens emphasise the need for community-level training, dedicated RTI facilitation centres, user-friendly digital platforms, and stricter enforcement of penalties for delays. Deepening these components will be necessary to achieve the original intent of the RTI Act: enabling citizens, promoting transparency, and reinforcing democratic governance.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that while RTI is widely recognised, meaningful awareness remains moderate or low. The rural–urban divide is striking: urban respondents enjoy better digital skills, better knowledge of online portals, and easier access to legal resources. Rural respondents, by contrast, tend to rely on intermediaries to file applications, have connectivity problems, and are less clear about the procedural requirements.

The relatively low rate of actual RTI usage, at 20%, suggests that awareness may not necessarily lead to action. Apprehensions of delay, unhelpful PIOs, and vague responses are some of the structural barriers that deter citizens from approaching the system. Fear of retaliation or authority further deters citizens from seeking accountability. These findings resonate with earlier studies suggesting that unless adequate awareness creation, training for PIOs, and requisite institutional support are provided, the RTI Act cannot achieve its democratic mandate in totality.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while the RTI Act is recognised as a powerful democratic tool, its practical implementation faces significant challenges. Awareness is moderate but incomplete, accessibility varies between rural and urban regions, and usage remains low due to procedural hurdles, delays, and lack of guidance. Strengthening the mechanisms of RTI requires increased public education, ease in the process of filing, consequential imposition of penalties on delays by PIOs, and digital infrastructure. If these issues can be overcome, the RTI Act could do much more in terms of promoting transparency and citizen empowerment.

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