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IMPACT OF RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT ON EVERYONE

-JYOTIRMAYEE SAHOO

INTRODUCTION

The Right to Information (RTI) Act, enacted in the year 2005, marked a revolutionary step towards a transparent and accountable governance in India. This act empowers ordinary citizens to seek information from public authorities, and thereby fostering openness and eliminating secrecy in government functioning. With its roots embedded in democratic values, the Right to Information Act has been a critical tool in the hands of the people, enabling them to question the authorities, demand answers from them, and ensure justice in both administrative and developmental processes.¹ The legislation has not only empowered citizens but has also transformed the way the government operates.

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of the Right to Information Act (RTI) is to promote transparency and accountability in the functioning of public authorities. By granting citizens the legal right to access information held by or under the control of government bodies, the RTI Act aims to curb corruption, enhance public participation, and ensure good governance. It seeks to bridge the gap between the government and the governed by ensuring that information, which was once considered a privilege of the few, is now available to all under the government.

The Act is also intended to strengthen the democratic fabric of the nation by making the government answerable to its people. It encourages a more informed citizenry capable of

¹ Manupatra, <https://docs.manupatra.in/newsline/articles/Upload/AC9CD2C7-B8AD-4C5A-B910-3751BFE5CB28.pdf> (last visited Sept. 19, 2025)

participating effectively in decision-making processes and safeguarding the rights provided to them by the constitution of our country.

FEATURES

The Right to Information Act contains several important features that make it a powerful and citizen-friendly legislation when compared with others. Some of the key features include:

1. **Right to Access Information:** Every citizen has the right to request and obtain information from public authorities regarding their functioning, decisions, and policies.
2. **Applicability advantage:** The Act applies to all levels of government—central, state, and local—including public sector undertakings, constitutional bodies, and institutions that receive substantial funding from the government for their functioning.
3. **Time-bound Response:** Public Information Officers (PIOs) are required to respond to RTI applications within 30 days. In cases involving life or liberty, information must be provided within 48 hours. Failing in which, a officers can be penalized a maximum of 25,000 Rupees, at a rate of 250 Rupees per day of delay.²
4. **Nominal Fee:** The application fee is minimal, making it accessible to the common man. At present, the application fee is 10 Rupees. Additional fees may apply depending on the volume of information requested.
5. **Information Commission:** The Act provides for the establishment of Central and State Information Commissions to handle appeals and complaints, and to monitor the implementation of the Act.
6. **Exemptions:** Certain information, especially those related to national security, defence, relations with foreign countries, Intellectual Property Right (IPR), cabinet discussions and personal privacy, are exempt from disclosure under specific sections. Hence, this information is not provided to anyone under RTI Act.³

² Journalism.university, <https://journalism.university/media-ethics-and-laws/impact-rti-transparency-accountability-tool/> (last visited Sept. 19, 2025)

³ Journalism.university, <https://journalism.university/media-ethics-and-laws/impact-rti-transparency-accountability-tool/> (last visited Sept. 19, 2025)

7. **Proactive Disclosure:** Public authorities are obligated to disclose certain categories of information proactively, such as budgets, functioning, and decisions, through websites or notice boards.

LIMITATIONS

Despite its transformative potential, the Right to Information Act has several limitations that hinder its effective implementation in India:

1. **Delayed Responses:** Many RTI applications face delays, with public authorities failing to provide information within the stipulated time frame.
2. **Lack of Awareness:** A significant portion of the population remains unaware of their rights under the Right to Information Act, especially in rural and underprivileged areas of India.⁴
3. **Harassment of Activists:** RTI activists have faced threats, harassment, and even violence for exposing corruption and irregularities. The absence of strong whistleblower protection laws exacerbates this issue.⁵
4. **Poor Record Keeping:** Many governmental departments lack proper documentation and record management systems, making it difficult to retrieve requested information afterwards.
5. **Overburdened Commissions:** Information Commissions are often understaffed and overburdened with appeals and complaints, resulting in long pendency and delayed justice all together.⁶
6. **Misuse of the Act:** It is found that in some cases, the Act is misused for frivolous or vexatious purposes, which burdens the system and dilutes its effectiveness.

⁴ Dr.Prashant D. Satpute, Implementation and Impact of Right to Information Act in India: A Comprehensive Study, Volume 8, Issue 6 June 2023, IJNRD, 3-4, 2023, <https://www.ijnrd.org/papers/IJNRD2306646.pdf>

⁵ Journalism.university, <https://journalism.university/media-ethics-and-laws/impact-rti-transparency-accountability-tool/> (last visited Sept. 19, 2025)

⁶ Journalism.university, <https://journalism.university/media-ethics-and-laws/impact-rti-transparency-accountability-tool/> (last visited Sept. 19, 2025)

IMPACT ON EVERYONE

The Right to Information Act has left a profound mark on all layers of society—citizens, public servants, the media, civil society, and even the government itself. Its reach extends far beyond individual grievances or case-specific queries. It has gradually contributed to a culture of transparency, participation, and accountability across the country. Here is a detailed look at how the RTI Act has impacted different segments of society:

1. Ordinary Citizens and Marginalized Groups:

The Act has empowered citizens to become active participants in governance. Individuals can now question the functioning of public offices, inquire about fund allocations, seek details of public projects, and demand accountability from officials. This empowerment has led to a surge in public awareness and vigilance. For example:

- **Ration and Welfare Schemes:** People have used RTI to uncover irregularities in the distribution of ration cards, pensions, housing benefits, and employment schemes like MGNREGA. In many cases, it led to the identification of fake beneficiaries and the inclusion of genuine ones.
- **Access to Services:** RTI has helped citizens demand basic services such as electricity connections, road repairs, water supply, and healthcare, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas.
- **Education and Employment:** Many students and job applicants have used RTI to obtain answer sheets, recruitment procedures, cut-off marks, and evaluation criteria, ensuring fairness in competitive exams and recruitment.⁷

In essence, RTI has democratized access to information, giving the poor and illiterate a voice against systemic exploitation and negligence.

2. Civil Society and NGOs:

Civil society organizations and NGOs have been among the most active users of the RTI Act. They have used it to:

⁷ The carter center, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/documents/doc1860.html> (last visited Sept. 19, 2025)

- **Expose corruption:** From local-level frauds in panchayats to national-level scams, civil society actors have used RTI to investigate fund misuse and public project mismanagement.
- **Policy Monitoring:** NGOs monitor the implementation of government policies, welfare schemes, and budgets through RTI. This evidence-based approach has strengthened policy advocacy.
- **Litigation Support:** RTI responses often serve as critical documentation in public interest litigations (PILs) and legal actions filed in courts.

As a result, RTI has amplified the role of civil society in strengthening democratic accountability.

3. Journalists and the Media:

The media, especially investigative journalists, have leveraged RTI as a tool for responsible reporting. They use it to:

- Access authentic, verifiable data directly from government departments.
- Uncover discrepancies in government claims and actual implementation.
- Report on hidden or under-reported issues such as underutilization of funds, delayed infrastructure projects, or internal government reports.

Numerous award-winning investigations in India have been built on documents accessed through RTI applications.⁸ This has improved the quality of journalism and enhanced the media's role as the fourth pillar of democracy.

4. Public Servants and Government Officials:

The RTI Act has had a dual impact on public servants:

- **Increased Accountability:** Officials are now more cautious in maintaining records and making decisions, knowing that any file or note could be accessed by the public. This has encouraged transparency and discouraged arbitrary actions.

⁸ RTI and Media, Nagaland State Portal, <https://ati.nagaland.gov.in/Downloads/RTI%20and%20Media.pdf> , (last visited Sept 20, 2025)

- **Administrative Discipline:** Departments have become more systematic in documentation and adherence to procedures, improving the overall administrative culture.
- **Added Pressure:** On the downside, many officials view RTI as a burden, citing excessive queries and time spent responding. However, this only underscores the need for more efficient systems and trained staff.

Despite the resistance, RTI has undeniably shifted the power balance, placing the citizen at the centre of governance.

5. Political Class and Government Bodies:

The Act has created a watchdog effect on elected representatives and political parties:

- **Public Accountability:** Ministers, MPs, and MLAs are more cautious about how their constituencies are managed, knowing that citizens can seek information on fund usage, project status, and administrative decisions.
- **Internal Transparency:** Government departments are increasingly adopting proactive disclosure practices (mandated under Section 4 of the RTI Act), such as putting meeting minutes, expenditure details, and contracts online.⁹
- **Resistance from Political Parties:** Despite its benefits, many political parties have resisted being brought under the purview of the RTI Act. This ongoing debate shows that while RTI has made inroads into political accountability, there is still a long way to go.¹⁰

6. Students and Academicians:

Educational institutions funded by the government are also under the RTI Act. This has benefited students and researchers in multiple ways:

- **Access to Records:** Students can obtain copies of their answer sheets, admission criteria, or faculty recruitment details.

⁹ LexisNexis, <https://www.lexisnexis.in/blogs/right-to-information-act-2005/> (last visited Sept. 20, 2025)

¹⁰ Dr. Jeet Ram Sharma, The Impact of Right to Information (RTI) on Government Accountability, IJPSG, 2021, <https://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/5-2-49-647.pdf> (last visited Sept 20, 2025)

- **Research Tool:** RTI has become a valuable tool for academicians researching public policy, administration, law, and governance.

This transparency has contributed to a fairer, more merit-based academic ecosystem.

7. Judicial System:

Though the judiciary was initially reluctant, it has acknowledged that judicial bodies are public authorities under RTI:

- Citizens have used RTI to inquire about case status, appointment procedures, pendency data, and administrative decisions of courts.
- The debate around judicial accountability has intensified, and calls for greater transparency in judicial appointments (such as the collegium system) have gained momentum.
- By facilitating transparency and accountability, the RTI Act strengthens democratic principles. It promotes participatory governance where people are not just passive recipients of government services but are active contributors to policy implementation and monitoring.

Though information related to judicial decisions is public by nature, RTI has brought more transparency into non-judicial aspects of court functioning.

8. Curbing Corruption:

RTI has emerged as a potent weapon against corruption. Numerous scams and irregularities have come to light through RTI applications. Citizens have unearthed misuse of public funds, irregularities in recruitment, faulty public works, and more, forcing authorities to take corrective action.¹¹

SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

To make the RTI Act more effective and impactful, several steps need to be taken:

1. **Strengthen Information Commissions:** Provide adequate staffing, resources, and powers to Information Commissions to reduce pendency and ensure timely resolution of appeals.

¹¹ LexisNexis, <https://www.lexisnexis.in/blogs/right-to-information-act-2005/> (last visited Sept. 20, 2025)

2. **Enhance Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct mass awareness programs, especially in rural and marginalized communities, to educate people about their rights under the RTI Act.
3. **Digital Integration:** Promote online RTI filing, tracking, and responses to streamline the process and make it more accessible to tech-savvy citizens.¹²
4. **Protect RTI Activists:** Enact robust whistleblower protection laws to safeguard RTI users and activists from threats, harassment, and violence.
5. **Capacity Building:** Train public officials and PIOs regularly to handle RTI queries efficiently and maintain proper records.
6. **Avoid Misuse:** Introduce mechanisms to filter vexatious or frivolous applications without curbing genuine requests for information.

CONCLUSION

The Right to Information Act has undoubtedly been a landmark in the journey towards a more open, transparent, and accountable government in India. It has changed the power dynamics between citizens and the state, empowering ordinary people to hold the powerful accountable. Despite its challenges and limitations, the RTI Act remains a crucial instrument of democratic empowerment. Strengthening its implementation, protecting its users, and enhancing public awareness can ensure that this powerful tool continues to serve the spirit of democracy and justice for all. The Right to Information Act has not just impacted one group—it has created a systemic shift in governance by giving every individual the power to ask, question, and demand accountability. Whether it's a villager seeking the status of his ration card, a journalist exposing a scam, or a student checking exam evaluation—RTI has made the government answerable to its people. The true impact of RTI is not only seen in the answers received, but in the change of mindset it has brought: that governance is not an exclusive domain of the elite—it belongs to every citizen.

¹² Journalism.university, <https://journalism.university/media-ethics-and-laws/impact-rti-transparency-accountability-tool/> (last visited Sept. 21, 2025)