



INFORMATION REGIME: A PREREQUISITE TO DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE

Introduction

Information dissemination today has no substitute since it has been co-related with the people's right, especially when the human rights discourse is seen in conjunction with transparency and accountability and has placed the discourse on RTI in inescapable space. Lacking on implementation front, the institution needs to bring in practice- innovation. It is the responsibility of the state to setup the sound monitoring mechanism to optimise implementation. Functioning since 1993, the idea of decentralisation in India, could have proved revolutionary, had it been equipped with better monitoring mechanism, which is not possible without transmitting appropriate information to the next level.

Communication Lag in Decentralization

Decentralisation in itself is a reform process. But with the changing environment and behaviour of the systemic as well as functioning setups we need to add auxiliaries to motivate them to work accordingly. Several studies on the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions (local governance in India) have tried to gloss the problems and concerns in PRIs in different states. More or less in every sector like education, health, sanitary, infrastructure, public distribution system, there are problems of lack of information and communication gap in the whole process right from the input to the output stage. There are also intra-communications as well as inter- communication difficulties.

The Un-Unearthed Treasures

The government forms committees and these committees can prove to be treasures for the lay man. But the number of people who are aware and availing the facility is abysmally less. People at grass roots are unaware of the local institutions like the Village Education Committee (VEC) and are thus not able to participate in decision making through such committees. Therefore, there is lack of knowledge among people about the variations and layers in the knowledge of the status and quality of primary education at village level and people feel helpless being unknown to such local bodies like VEC.

The Trust Deficit

Preserving a split personality, decentralisation is facing trust deficit between government and the people, as people remain less informed. A small piece of information about any particular welfare scheme can prove to be a big harm to the people's orientation towards government. Linking government with people following a single path may cure this disease. Here we can keep transparency which can be achieved through asserting rights, compelling government and keep a check on its functioning through right to information. Freedom of information is a mechanism to keep massive government accountable. The concept of governance has certainly shifted the burden of government to private actors but that has added to the complexity to the government mechanism and therefore, accountability has become a more important concern of government. Each and every move of government demands records of information. Whether it is contract between two parties, involving people and government or regulation of wages and working hours. Right to information has tightened the screws of process of record keeping and information dissemination and hence minimizing the trust deficit between people and the government.

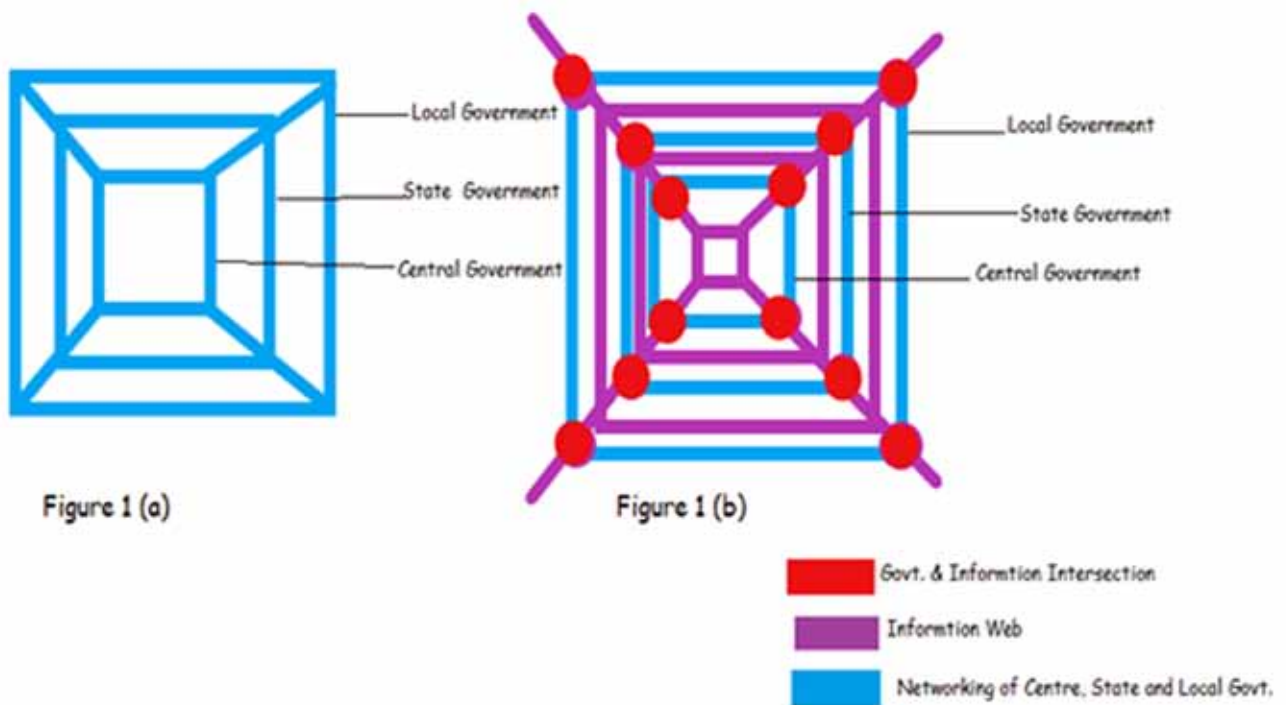




Social Terrain Impeding Inclusion

At local level, the problems have remained endemic due to social institutions and rigid customs. Therefore, it can be argued here that the purpose of decentralization has been hampered due to restrictions imposed on public information particularly for the marginalised due to the existence of shadow institutions preserved by domination based on social classifications like - caste, class, religion and gender. The design of decentralized governance in India is one of the ideals and is promising if implemented unhindered with proper management of officials and mechanisms, adhering to the rules. In this context as Peter Ronald D'Souza says, the 73rd constitutional amendment act of 1993 has introduced innovative institutions as a part of local democracy. Reservation of seats for Adivasis, Dalits and women who have remained out of the corridors of power and thus political empowerment. A state election commission to conduct elections, state finance commission to prepare a framework of state revenues and the most important the Gram Panchayat. Certainly, the autonomy has been devolved at the rural level and financial decentralization is the prime focus of upper bureaucracy; however, the rights of people have still not gathered sufficient attention. The situation of adivasis, dalits and women is still not represented at various instances, particularly violence against these marginalised groups in the form of verbal and physical abuse is unfortunately tolerated at grass roots with very limited mechanism for redressal.

The high tide of this paradigm shift has been evident in developing democracies with a revolutionary tad. But to elucidate what makes a government democratic, mere openness is not sufficient, where the shift from secrecy to openness appears the most challenging task before the people as well as the government.

Diagram Showing the government -Information intersection and the enhanced networking of people and government interaction.



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Informed Citizenry and Democratic Rule

Democratic rule is not possible without informed citizens. The high tide of this paradigm shift has been evident in developing democracies with a revolutionary tad. But to elucidate what makes a government democratic, mere openness is not sufficient, where the shift from secrecy to openness appears the most challenging task before the people as well as the government. The basic problem that compels this aspect to skip itself has been often looked upon as the communication-gap persisting between the people and the government. Reformation in governance on the lines of transparency and accountability has become the song of the reformation processes in the governance system of every nation, streaming high tide information regime, that has been acquiring wide spread prevalence throughout the world. Over a last decade or more, India's achievement in augmenting democratic institutions and thus supporting democratic governance has been widely recognised, globally.

Democratic Governance and Emerging Economy

India's emergence as an economic power being the largest democracy in the world and that too with a multicultural society has attracted widespread recognition. Therefore, it can be argued here that the experience and acknowledgement of the achievement of India being a non-western country inspires many countries to dream of both making strides in economic growth and adhering to the principles of democratic governance, being beyond the differences of a multicultural society. But the more pertinent question to such evaluation is to trace the trajectories of the pace of changes that can be noticed in the issues that have not been adequately addressed concerning education, health, sanitation, sustainable livelihood and development of non-agricultural sector. Linked with such issues are the government initiatives or legislations. The foundational issues of lack of informed and effective participation are the most overseen issue to be put on as a sustainable solution to the above-mentioned challenges. Where uninformed citizenry has been cherished for its unquestioning attitude. The local state has therefore remained more or less centralised in its exercise of local business and a denial to people's voices and participatory institutions is an output of such efforts.

Information Legislation and Grassroots

The RTI albeit has secured a legal status in 2005 as far as India is concerned but globally, it has a history of 243 years- World's first freedom of information act was issued in Stockholm on December 2, 1766. Certainly, India's right to information act 2005 has been called as one of the strongest in the world. However, as per the experiences of countries of the world, according to various studies the most challenging aspect of RTI in India, is implementation at the grass roots. Proper implementation of the RTI Act is a promising move towards an open and participatory governance system. The autonomy to get a piece of government work done lies in the consensus or sometimes referred as bargaining among the three institutions or organizations: the lower bureaucracy or the local babus, the elected representatives as Sarpanch or the Panches and the prominent social group as Customary Village Councils (CVC). Usually where government distributes the services free of cost in certain cases the middle -man fixes fees. Writing an application to a government official, getting a ration card, a BPL card and many such service charged at a fixed amount. Recently, these services have been handed to Jan Seva Kendras where they keep the sixty percent and forty percent they give to the government.



From the Dusk of Secrecy to the Dawn of Openness

Governance has always tried to justify itself and has always won the case but transparency and accountability have mostly remained unapplied concepts which are there in the theory but in practice these principles are dormant. The whole system is mired in old traditional culture of secrecy. People since long ago needed the reform process and change in terms of culture of secrecy and lack of answerability on the part of government. Appointment of Public Information Officers (PIOs) at the lowest rungs of the administration in this regard is appreciable. To discuss issues related to public needs has to be underscored in public domain with celebrated debate welcoming collaboration from government and assertiveness from people, where group activity can be used where rigid systems of government arbitrariness has unquestionably socialized. In this regard, right to information is an instrument of channelizing people to organise, participate and refurbish the malfunctions through people's own efforts. It gives power in the hands of the people. It is the purpose of freedom of information to vitalise discussion and debate on issues of public importance, basically the problems, which are the result of lack of information or unawareness. As Jean Dreze, has discussed the scenario at grass roots, there is tremendous disempowerment people have been experiencing being uninformed of the government records.

Conclusion

In India, the mindset of local state has been serving people through the lenses of parochialism. A colonial legacy that cherishes uninformed people. This continues with the miserable lack of knowledge and ideas among people about the government policies. A larger portion of rural population remains untouched by welfare schemes due to this culture of lack of awareness and remaining sullen unknown, without a strong etch in the mind to question the authority. Secondly, because of the presence of corruption the practice of democratic governance in India or any other part of the world has been put into question. It requires a case-by-case examination in the specific area of its operationalization. The right to information in this regard offers a vital tool for ensuring that Panchayati Raj Institutions more effectively meet their objective of encouraging participation and embedding accountable government. An informed population would be an active participant in government's efforts to bring changes at grass roots. The right to information will slowly but surely bring a transformational change at grass-roots and there will be triumph of impartiality and justice, crushing the institutions of malfunctioning, corruption and distrust. ■

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