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THE RTI AND GOOD GOVERNANCE AT GRASSROOTS

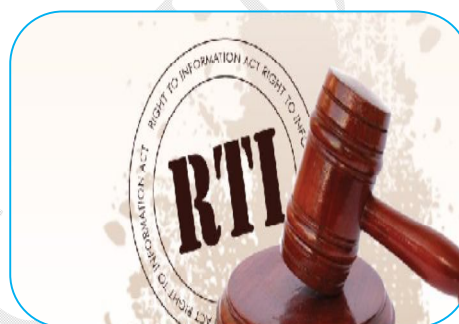
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ABSTRACT:

Accountability, openness and accessibility of information to people about the functioning of governments at the central, state and local levels are the vital components of good governance. The Right to Information Act, 2005 has certainly promoted these. It has enthused the public even during the short period in which it has been in force. The Act has, therefore, created a lot of hope about the emergence of good governance. It is expected to galvanise administrative processes and build a healthy relationship between the citizen and the government through necessary corrections, reformed and improvements. However, it would require a reasonable time for becoming effective.



KEYWORDS: *openness and accessibility of information , good governance.*

INTRODUCTION:-

The present paper discusses and examines as to how far the Right to Information can be helpful in the process of good governance at the grassroots level with special reference to Panchayat Raj. It also seeks to suggest suitable measures for this purpose.

The importance of the RTI for achieving good governance has rightly been emphasised by the second Administrative Reforms Commission as follows:

“Without good governance, no amount of developmental schemes can bring improvements in the quality of life of the citizens. Good governance has four elements-

transparency, accountability, predictability and participation. Transparency refers to availability of information to the general public and clarity about functioning of governmental institution. Right to Information opens up government’s records to public scrutiny, thereby arming citizens with a vital tool to inform them about what the government does and how effectively, thus making the government more accountable. Transparency in government organisations makes them function more objectively thereby enhancing predictability. Information about functioning of government also enables citizens to participate in

the governance process effectively. In a fundamental sense, right to information is basic necessity of good governance”.

The Right to Information, has indeed helped in empowering people to combat state corruption; to prevent administrative high handedness and arbitrariness; to bridge the gap between the providing and recipient of public services; to make the citizen a part of the decision-making process in the government; to provide responsive administration; to strength the foundations of grassroots democracy through people’s participation in local governance and development

activates; and to have access to other rights.

Active participation of both women and men in the governance is a must. In its absence, the basic goals of good governance cannot be achieved. That governance is good which provides opportunities to the people in deciding future courses of action, monitoring and evaluation. There are various delivery points where the incidence of corruption, delay, harassment and rude behaviour towards public has increased. As a result, public officials are viewed as unresponsive and lukewarm. This has happened as no worthwhile political leaders have been left to guide, advice, control and supervise them. It has been observed that quality of governance has gone down, particularly, at the grassroots or the cutting edge level where it comes in direct contact with the common man.

It has been aptly pointed out that the elected representatives at the local level are not accountable to the local communities because they receive their funds in the form of grants directly from the central government. According to a rough estimate, there are as many as 154 centrally sponsored schemes dealing with the subjects developed upon PRIs. A nexus has developed over the years between the block level officials and the elected representatives of the PRIs and the latter only undertaking such projects as involve constructions, contractors and commissions. It is a fact that central funding of state sector activities is problematic due to one or the other reasons. Thus, the central funding has led to an erosion of accountability.

A study conducted in the Village panchayats of bailhongal block of belagavi district of Karnataka has reached the broad conclusion that most of the respondents recognise the Gram Sabha as a basic unit in the framework of rural local self-government. However, the participation in its meetings is low as most of them believe that programmes are, by and large, confined only to the papers. These are not properly implemented. Whenever decision is taken, even those are not implemented. Participation in the Gram Sabha meetings is also low due to lack of faith in their representatives among the villagers. And, the politicians, bureaucrats and local level leaders show indifference in ensuring effective functioning of Gram Sabha fearing that this may threaten their power.

It has also been observed that secrecy and lack of openness in the transactions are among the root causes of corruption in the Gram Panchayats. Transparency is required because, in most of the cases, the meetings of Gram Sabha are not convened periodically despite the provision for it in the PR Act of the state. In some other cases, bogus signatures of the members are obtained to meet the requirement of quorum. The elected women representatives of Panchayats generally do not attend the meetings their relatives attend these on their part or their signatures/thumb impressions are obtained by sending the proceedings register to their houses.

It too has been observed that some of the chairman of gram panchayat even do not circulate the agenda of the meeting of the Gram Panchayats among all the members and important decisions are taken by them in secret meetings. Besides, neither the proceedings of the meetings are made available to all the members nor the documents relating to the financial transactions are kept open for the scrutiny by the members and the Gram Sabha members. As a result, the nexus between the rural bureaucracy and the heads of Panchayats is able to manipulate the funds.

Moreover, elections are expected, under the prescribed rules, to be fair and free from any type of corruption, but ignorance of the Election Code of Conduct results in vitiating the elect role atmosphere. The use of alcohol and violence is widespread. The candidates, infact, use all type of means to win election by hook or crock and money flows like water. After having won the election, they indulge in corrupt practices to recover the amount spent by them. They freely misuse and embezzle resources of Panchayats for this purpose.

One of the most important pre-requisites for good governance, it may be mentioned, is the rule of law. No progress or development can be achieved in a society, unless the people comply with the rules. Unfortunately, these are frequently violated to favour the supporters. As a result, the democratic values get ignored on the one pretext or the other. Our study on Karnataka has found that ineffective functioning of Gram Sabha is due to the lack of awareness among the rural masses about its role. Even most of the members of gram panchayat do not know as what decisions have been taken and how have these been implemented.

SUGGESTIONS

The concerned persons are also not aware of various aspects of RTI Act. Therefore, it is suggested that a general awareness programme should be launched to educate not only the elected representatives but also the masses on the Act so that good governance can be ensured in the working of Gram Panchayats.

Action to be taken

By the Government

- Formulating and implementing of a policy on RTI at local level.
- Providing sufficient funds.

By the NGOs/Civil Society / Training Institutes/Universities

- Developing easily understandable literature on RTI in local language.
- Organising the public meetings to disseminate awareness and knowledge among the masses.
- Motivating the locally available youth for this purpose.
- Organising the street plays, community-based workshops and role plays.
- Educating the rural masses about the procedure of seeking information and other requisite provisions of the RTI, Act.

By the Mass Media

- Bringing out regular features on the role of PRIs under RTI.
- Highlighting the role of Panchayats in providing the information on demand.
- Publishing reports on the status of accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness in the Panchayats
- Attracting the attention of government and people towards concealment of facts by them while giving information under RTI.

Capacity Building

As most of the elected representatives and the officials of the Gram Panchayats, as reported earlier, do not have adequate knowledge of various aspects of RTI, necessary training on the same should be imparted to them.

Action to be taken by the Government

- Providing sufficient funds to governmental and non-governmental institutions including training institutes and other educational institutions for imparting need-based training.
- Ensuring periodic monitoring and evaluation of the training imparted.
- Taking appropriate steps for regular feedback to make the training more effective and useful.

Action to be by NGOs/Civil Society/ Training Institutes/universities

- Identifying dedicated, sincere and enthusiastic trainers.
- Arranging suitable training of trainer's programmes covering the pertinent issues regarding RTI and good governance.
- Involving experts on the RTI in training and interactions.
- Developing training manuals, modules and guidelines.
- Using the latest methods and techniques of training to make it interesting.
- Ensuring that the trainers have been fully motivated.
- Dividing them into groups for sending them to impart further training to the elected representatives of PRIs.
- Imparting cluster-wise training at regular intervals as per the convenience of the participants.

Regular Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation of every programme is also needed to assess their impact on bringing improvement in RTI regime. This job should be assigned to an independent professional agency. The monitoring and evaluation of their impact on the masses in general and weaker sections in particular is particularly needed in this context.

Action to be taken by Government

- Preparing guidelines and instructions to be followed in the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of TRTI Act.
- Involving government agencies/ organisations, NGOs, Civil Society and other institution for the fair conduct of monitoring and evaluation.
- Providing sufficient time for the completion of monitoring and valuation of implementation of RTI Act.
- Taking prompt action to overcome the identified problems and weaknesses.

By NGOs/Civil Society /Institutes

- Preparing a team of independent functionaries for ensuring effective monitoring and evaluation.
- Developing most suitable and comprehensive schedules for this work.
- Getting the monitoring and evaluation work completed with a specified period.
- Disseminating the finding and results by sharing the same.
- Building pressure to get the required changes incorporated in the Training Module.

By Media

- Giving wide publicity to the weakness and the problems encountered.
- Pressurising the concerned agencies/institutions to take immediate action.
- Brining the deficiencies and improvement in the capacity-building to the notice of all the stakeholders.

CREATION OF NEEDY ATMOSPHERE

For effective implementation of RTI Act, there is dire need for providing conducive atmosphere so that every person gets the needed information on demand without any delay. Therefore, strict action-oriented approach should be adopted.

Action to be taken by the Government

- Ensuring that bureaucratic hurdles do not interrupt the smooth implementation of RTI Act.
- Instructing all officials to extend all possible support to the person seeking information under the Act.
- Arranging special lectures to motivate both the officials and non-officials to discharge their duties and responsibilities under the RTI in an honest, dedicated and sincere manner.
- Making it sure that their indifferent attitude is changed.

ACTION TO BE TAKEN BY NGOS/CIVIL SOCIETY

- Extending whole-hearted support in developing conducive atmosphere for the expeditious disposal of RTI cases.
- Interacting with the concerned officials/non-officials through informal interactions.
- Honouring the role of those who are really devoted to the RTI regime and perform their duties without delay and in an unbiased approach.

If the above suggestions are implemented sincerely, the RTI regime shall be strengthened in the Gram Panchayats. This in turn will lead to good governance by facilitating transparency, enhancing accountability and checking corruption and misuse of powers and funds.

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