

News on Right to Information

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29th September 2009

Four-fold increase in utilisation of RTI Act

The Hindu, Special Correspondent

Against 8,864 applications in 2005-06, the number shot up to 31,964 in 2007

HYDERABAD: The Andhra Pradesh Information Commission (APIC) on Saturday furnished statistics showing that the annual increase of people utilising the Right to Information Act was four-fold, with improved awareness and inspiration among the masses.

Against 8,864 applications received by the commission in 2005-06, its first year, the number in the year 2007 shot up to 31,964.

Of these 27,775 (91 per cent) were disposed at the Principal Information Officer (PIO) level itself by December 31, 2007. Information received from the 1.79 lakh PIO-level offices said information was furnished in over 90 per cent of the cases.

200 per cent

A press release stated that in the commission too, a 200 per cent increase in receipt of appeals and complaints was registered.

Of 10,102 received, the APIC disposed 7,912 (78 per cent), while the remaining were under process at various stages. Also, the APIC had undertaken 170 field tours at the district, revenue division and mandal levels and Commissioners attended over 500 review meetings, awareness seminars and workshops as part of its campaign.

Surprise inspections

Surprise inspections were conducted by Commissioners at the offices of over 3,000 public authorities and the APIC was focussing on creating integrated training and awareness programmes through agencies like the Centre for Good Governance and the Marri Channa Reddy Human Resources Development Institute, the release added.

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27th September 2009

JNNURM: Funds okayed Rs 273 cr, received Rs 128 cr

The Times of India

PUNE: Out of the Rs 273 crores of the state government's share towards the Pune Municipal Corporation's JNNURM projects, it has sent only Rs 128 crores, keeping the civic body waiting for the remaining instalments.

This information was sought by civic activist Vivek Velankar through the Right to Information Act (RTI). He stated that on the eve of the assembly election, it is essential to ask why are funds meant for Pune's development are being held up by the state government.

Circulating copies of the information sought from the PMC, Velankar pointed out that the PMC had sought Rs 644 crores from the Central government and Rs 273 crores from the state government for the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) projects.

"From April 2006 to September 15, 2009, the PMC has spent approximately Rs 1,000 crores for various projects in the city. According to the JNNURM formula, the projects are funded by the centre upto 50 per cent, upto 20 per cent by the state and the remaining has to be borne by the local body. Accordingly, the PMC sought the shares from the centre and state respectively. While the centre has diligently released its share of Rs 606 crores, the state has held up more than half the amount due," Velankar said.

He explained that although the state government has made provision for Pune's JNNURM share in its budget, the amount has not been released and no reason has been stated either.

"Now with assembly elections nearing, the citizens' questions must be answered; why are the funds being held up. All the political parties are answerable to us and we will raise these questions the citizens' vote on October 13. We want to ask the sitting MLAs, contesting once again, about what efforts have they taken or will take in future to ensure that Pune gets its due amount," Velankar said.

He added that Pune's pay at least Rs 3,500 per annum in the form of taxes to the state government, so the amount that they are suppose to disburse for Pune is measly as compared to that.

25th September 2009

Leader of Opposition comes under RTI, says CIC

The Times of India

NEW DELHI: After ruling that the office of Supreme Court of India comes under the ambit of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the Central Information Commission (CIC) on Thursday said the office of Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha was also covered under the Act and should provide information as per its provisions.

Chief information commissioner Wajahat Habibullah said "office of Leader of Opposition is a public authority" as it is created by a notification of the government but reserved his decision whether it was part of Lok Sabha secretariat or an independent office.

Habibullah was hearing the plea of RTI applicant Subhash Chandra Agrawal who sought detailed information from L K Advani on the letter written by him to PM Manmohan Singh on the issue of black money allegedly stashed away in Swiss banks and the finance minister's reply to it.

Initially, Advani's office did not reply to his queries but after the complaint notice was sent by CIC, his secretary Deepak Chopra provided the communication.

24th October 2009

AAI refuses answer to query on YSR chopper crash

The Times of India

HYDERABAD: The big question that everyone wants an answer to is: How did Y S Rajasekhara Reddy's helicopter crash on September 2? The Airports Authority of India's (AAI) cryptic reply is: Don't ask.

This is the sum and substance of a query posed by this newspaper under the Right to Information (RTI) Act to the AAI, Hyderabad.

In what is an obvious attempt, the AAI not to allow its omissions and commissions to come under public scrutiny in the entire episode in which former chief minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy and four others were killed, has refused to entertain any questions. This, when it is under an obligation to answer queries posed under the RTI Act.

To get out of the piquant situation, the Public Information Officer (PIO) Sultan Mohiuddin, AAI Hyderabad, replied saying that since the matter was under investigation, 'any information on the subject matter by the AAI at this juncture would impede the process of investigation'.

The plain fact is that the AAI does not want to part with the information that has been sought lest its actions become more debatable.

According to Section 10 (2) of the RTI Act, 2005, the AAI is obliged to provide all the other information that would not affect investigation.

The query under the RTI was posed on September 11 and its reply dated September 15 was received by the applicant on September 22. However, there were no answers in it.

What TOI sought was a complete copy of the transcript of the conversation between the pilot Gp Capt S K Bhatia and co-pilot Capt M S Reddy of the Bell-430 chopper with the Air Traffic Control (ATC) on September 2 before it crashed.

Since this is a record with the ATC which cannot be tampered and one that is being provided to all investigating agencies, one wonders how the PIO really believes that providing the information would 'impede the process of investigation'.

Even a question as simple as what time the helicopter was originally scheduled to take off and what time the ATC permitted it to take off was also brushed aside.

Another question: "Was the ATC aware of the weather conditions along the route that the helicopter was supposed to take on its way to Chittoor?". The AAI did not answer that either.

One of the most important questions that arose after the crash was why did the ATC give permission to the helicopter to fly in bad weather? But AAI authorities refused to answer even general questions pertaining to the episode.

"Should a pilot take off only after the ATC gives clearance in so far as the weather is concerned or is it the discretion of the pilot to take a decision?"
"Did the pilot seek information about the weather conditions from the ATC?" "Did the ATC Shamshabad have a responsibility to get in touch with the pilots after there was no contact from the helicopter?"

PIO Mohiuddin's reply to these was: "We are unable to provide the available information with the AAI." This amounts to a simple Refusal to Reply.

24th September 2009

All hogwash! Its not Rs 3000 cr for BBMP, only Rs 524 cr

The Times of India

BANGALORE: Statistics can deceive. If you don't read the fine print you'll have the wool pulled over your eyes. Only months ago, the state budget went gung-ho about setting aside a humongous Rs 3,000 crore from its kitty for developing bigger Bangalore. The reality is that it's only a piddling Rs 524 crore, the normal annual allocation.

So what's the big talk? Much of the Rs 3,000 crore mentioned in the budget comes under a broad umbrella of "urban development" which also includes the Bangalore Metro and BWSSB water works. The special grant announced by the government remains lip-service. Information obtained under the Right to Information Act about money promised by the government to the civic body this year is startling.

Here's what is actually coming (as per information obtained under RTI): no grants have been given to BBMP in 2009-10 budget. Only Rs 500 crore will be given for ongoing programme of works and Rs 24 crore under the State Finance Commission grants. "S N Krishnakumar, under secretary, urban development department.

For the record, SFC grants are sanctioned every year to local bodies towards salaries. "The SFC amount is the normal allocation. This apart, consecutive budgets have not allocated any big money for BBMP so far. Much of it is brought under the broad umbrella of urban development. Finally, it is not the government contribution or special grants but the cost of different projects put together and shown as one huge chunk of allocation," explained a former BBMP commissioner.

Refusing to comment on the exact budgetary allocation to BBMP this year, its commissioner Bharat Lal Meena said there were enough funds for the ongoing development works in the city.

23rd September 2009

BPP no to charity chief's demand of Rs 1.2-cr fee

The Times of India

MUMBAI: Charity Commissioner (CC) M K Choure, who invoked the Official Secrets Act to deny information to the Bombay Parsi Panchayat (BPP), on Tuesday agreed to give a hearing to the trustees on September 29.

The BPP, which looks after the welfare of Parsis and is the city's largest private landlord, had filed an application before the CC, challenging his earlier order to pay up Rs 1.2 crore for a special audit or face suspension. The trustees contended that Choure had issued them a show-cause notice even without hearing their application.

As reported by TOI in its Monday edition, Choure took cover under the Officials Secrets Act to deny a copy of his preliminary inquiry report against the BPP when the trustees asked for it. The CC had ordered this inquiry following a complaint lodged last year by a member of the Alert Zoroastrian Association, Percy Patel, who alleged malpractices in the punchayat.

Choure was expected to pass orders to suspend the seven trustees on Tuesday after they refused to pay this fee; the trustees contended that the BPP was a charitable organisation and such funds were largely meant for welfare of poor Parsis. The CC, however, stated that the BPP trustees were trying to obfuscate the special audit and were not cooperating with the demands made by his office.

During the hearing on Tuesday, BPP advocate Percy Gandhi submitted that the CC could not decide the case without hearing their side. The BPP submitted that Choure did not take cognisance of its application of August 17, challenging his order to immediately shell out Rs 1.2 crore as fee to M/s Nimesh Mehta & Associates for the special audit of the BPP's accounts between 1998 and 2008.

The trustees objected to this and pointed out that this worked out to Rs 11 lakh per annum, the audit fees charged by the BPP's own auditor, M/s Kalyaniwalla & Mistry, charged just Rs 90,000 a year including taxes and out-of-pocket expenses.

"If the CC has found any irregularities in his preliminary report, then he should show it to us before he orders a special audit and directs the BPP to pay Rs 1.2 crore as fees," Gandhi submitted. He argued that according to Supreme Court judgements, the trustees had every right to know

factually as to what the CC's preliminary investigations done in December 2008, had unearthed.

"All allegations could be satisfactorily dealt with and suitable explanations can be given to the CC, but he must give a report of the findings. The present trustees were elected just 10 months ago, and therefore did not even know about any of the alleged wrong doings of the previous board," argued Gandhi.

The BPP counsel also questioned the time-frame of the special audit ordered by the CC and protested that even under tax law, the investigations are for a seven year period. "So, on what basis had the CC ordered a special audit for 11 years?" he asked.

In its application to the CC on August 17, the BPP argued that in spite of the Right To Information Act, which paved the way for transparency and accountability in governance, the CC had made an attempt to rely upon the Official Secrets Act. "Once Right To Information Act is made applicable, there remains hardly any scope to say that the Official Secrets Act of 1923 will be applicable to the present case," said the application.

The punchayat is expected to move the Bombay high court soon.

22 September 2009

CM pares chopper use to the minimum

The Times of India

SHIMOGA/ BANGALORE: The austerity bug seems to have bitten CM B S Yeddyurappa too. For, in future he'll travel by helicopter only when necessary.

"I'm going by the suggestions of my seniors and well-wishers on choppers -- now, usage will be minimum. This is due to safety and austerity measures," Yeddyurappa told reporters in Shimoga on Monday.

Ever since the copter crash of Andhra Pradesh CM Y S Rajashekara Reddy earlier this month, Yeddyurappa opted to travel to Shimoga by train, the second time he's doing it.

The CM said he has directed officials to follow all precautions and have in place modern gadgets, including a satellite phone, on his chopper.

The austerity measure seems to be much-needed. Records show that Yeddyurappa has been heli-hopping every day since he took over as CM. Till December 2008, the total amount incurred by the government on Yeddyurappa heli-tours is nearly Rs 2.5 crore (Rs 2,53,39,252 to be exact). This is approximately 50% of the total amount incurred on choppers of his predecessors N Dharam Singh and H D Kumaraswamy put together during their tenures.

The helicopter tab of Yeddyurappa (beginning May 30, 2008, when he took over as CM till December 31, 2008) was accessed by TOI under the Right to Information Act. Documents showed that all his trips were made by private helicopters hired on an hourly basis as the government does not have its own chopper. On an average, the CM has been spending Rs 31,67,406 per month.

The information furnished under RTI said: "It is advantageous to hire helicopters on need basis rather owning one, since it entails huge costs such as maintenance, pilots, crew salary and other overheads. Besides, trained pilots are not easily available."

Hire charges of private helicopters vary from one aviation company to another and also on type of chopper.

Agency -- Hire charges per hour

- * Air Headquarters, IAF -- Rs 1.51 lakh
- * SS Aviation -- Rs 1 lakh
- * OSS Air Management -- Rs 1.6 lakh
- * Pawan Hans Helicopter -- Rs 1.39 lakh
- * Deccan Aviation -- Rs 1.10 lakh
- * VRL -- Rs 1.2 lakh

22nd September 2009

Peeing is Mumbai's No. 1 offence

The Times of India

Viju B , TNN, 03:14am IST

MUMBAI: The city's dirty little secret is out: urinating in public is the most 'popular' offence among citizens. Nearly two years after the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's (BMC) solid waste management department came up with the idea of deploying independent agencies with clean-up marshals to monitor public cleanliness and create awareness, records show that around 65% of the fines levied on citizens were for urinating in public places.

The second biggest offender is spitting - the red 'paan' stains that mark our pavements and streets are testament to this bad habit that we simply can't seem to kick. "Around 20% of the penalties levied came from booking people for spitting on roads and pavements," said Inder Kumar Julta, whose agency employs 125 clean-up marshals across 12 municipal wards in Mumbai. The rest of the offences like throwing garbage, dumping debris and bio-medical waste all add up to make the city one of the most unhygienic metros in the country, and the world.

In January 2008, under the aegis of the BMC, five private agencies were selected for the clean-up project, and as of July 31, 2009, they had collected a whopping Rs 5.94 crore in fines. A person caught relieving himself or spitting in public is fined Rs 200 by the marshals who patrol the wards that are assigned to them. Those who are unable to pay for their crime have to take up community service. To this effect, the BMC records show that 22,765 people did community service during this period after they failed to pay the penalty.

"Community service in these cases is usually cleaning up a particular stretch of road for around half an hour. For many citizens this is a humbling experience, but we find that there is more resistance among people from the lower middle class. The educated are usually open to such services," said Hitesh Desai, vice president of the G-7 Securitas group, which employs 30 clean-up marshals in the upmarket Colaba and Marine Drive stretch.

The clean-up project may look good on paper, but the city has a long way to go before achieving its targets. Lack of manpower combined with citizens who simply refuse to adhere to basic rules of hygiene and cleanliness are the main problems. While agencies, say that things have improved and the round-the-clock drive has made an impact, there are times when they feel that their efforts are just a small drop in the ocean.

"We have a huge migrant population that uses public places like open toilets. The authorities have not provided clean toilets and dustbins," said Dadar-based activist, Milind S Mulay.

Mulay had filed a Right to Information (RTI) query on this issue after it came to the fore that marshals had been assaulted by hawkers who were guilty of encroaching on the pavements in Dadar. It's little wonder, then, that there are many areas in Mumbai that simply go unpatrolled.

In terms of fines collected, the F north ward (from Matunga to Dadar TT) tops the list. Nearly 11% of the total fine collected is from this area. The L Ward (Kurla) comes a close second and accounts for 7.34%. Borivli west (R-central) and Colaba (A ward) rank third and fourth respectively.

"The fines collected from these wards should not be taken at face value. All it shows is that the marshals are active in some places, but are often too scared to patrol the more militant areas where residents tend to get violent," said Mulay.

21st Sep 2009

NGOs asked to declare assets under RTI

Indian Express

Express News Service Posted: Sep 21, 2009 at 0054 hrs

Ahmedabad In A move aimed at bringing accountability and transparency in the functioning of NGOs in Gujarat, Janpath – a network of 217 NGOs in the state – has decided to ask the trustees of all member NGOs to declare their assets, which will be put on a website.

This was declared by Harinesh Pandya, the secretary of Janpath, at their Annual General Meeting at Gujarat Vidyapith on Sunday.

He told Newslines: "Today, we passed the resolution at our meeting asking the trustees and managing trustees of all member NGOs to make their assets public. We will design a detailed form to declare the assets, which will be sent to all member NGOs across Gujarat. We expect the concerned trustees to send back the form filled with the details of their assets so that it can be put on the website."

He added: "We are inclined to bring in accountability in NGOs. Let us see how the NGO office bearers respond to the resolution."

Pankti Jog, another Janpath office bearer said: "All NGOs use the RTI (Right to Information) Act with a motive to bring transparency in the system. We felt that the same transparency, which we desire from the government system, is not available in the functioning of NGOs. Therefore, we have resolved to ask member NGO trustees to declare their assets as Pro Active Disclosures under the provisions of the RTI Act."

State Information Commissioner R N Das was one of the guests on the occasion.

In his speech, he asked all NGOs to reply to any RTI application demanding their details, as NGOs getting funds – either directly or indirectly from the government— fall within the purview of the RTI Act.

21 September 2009

Banks shy away from revealing big defaulters' names

The Times of India

C Unnikrishnan, TNN 21 September 2009, 03:43am IST

MUMBAI: Although a Union finance minister had once described the rising non-performing assets (NPA) of nationalised banks as a loot, public sector banks are unwilling to divulge the names of those who have defaulted on huge loans. None of the 25 public sector banks who were asked to name big defaulters under the Right to Information did so. Sixteen of these banks merely gave figures of the outstandings while nine refused to even reply. According to information provided under RTI, the banks have written off over Rs 15,000 crore in the period 2003-2008.

The banks reasoned that furnishing the names is not in public interest and is an invasion into the privacy of borrowers.

The RTI application was filed by Borivili resident Richie Shoaib Sequeira on the directions of the Bombay high court. On Thursday, chief justice Swatanter Kumar and Ajay Khanwilkar, while hearing his PIL, directed that notices be issued to Union of India, RBI and other banks. The court also directed Sequeira to make the state crime investigation department a party to the PIL. The matter will come up for hearing on October 15.

At the last hearing, the HC had asked Sequeira to invoke RTI or any other law to gather details from the banks. Sequeira had filed a PIL, saying there has been no strict vigil by the finance ministry and RBI while writing off loans by the banks and the Debts Recovery Tribunal (DRT) had failed to recover the debts. The RBI, finance ministry, law ministry and DRT have said that in their replies they have no records of the write-offs and one-time settlements between the borrowers and banks.

The PIL also said that no rules have been framed by the finance ministry while writing off loans by the banks, which smacks of corruption. Some of the banks in their replies have said that the write-off is done in accordance with the guidelines framed by the board of directors. During a debate in the Lok Sabha in 2002, the then finance minister Jaswant Singh had described the NPA menace as a loot.

The banks which refused to disclose details about the defaulters include SBI its associates, Union Bank, Bank of Baroda, Central Bank of India, Dena Bank, Andhra Bank, Oriental Bank of Commerce, Syndicate Bank and Indian Overseas Bank. Banks like Corporation Bank, UCO Bank, BoI and Allahabad Bank refused to reply to the RTI questions.

The banks mostly approach the DRT, attach assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act or go in for a one-time settlement to recover whatever dues they can. The DRT, set up for expeditious adjudication and recovery of debts owed to banks and financial institutions, recovered just 32% of the total outstanding amount in the period 2001-07.

In the case of State Bank of Travancore, in the period 2003-2008, of the Rs 10,162 crore claimed by the bank, it has recovered only 15%. Another 50% of the claims is yet to be decided. In the one-time settlement, the bank has forgone another Rs 800 crore.

Dena Bank has managed to recover only Rs 725 crore of the Rs 151,85 crore for the period 2003-2008. And the bank has foregone another Rs 950 crore as part of one-time settlement in the period 2006-2008. In the case of Oriental Bank of Commerce, the bank has foregone Rs 1353.5 crore in the last four years. Union Bank of India has recovered only Rs 3,261.5 crore of the Rs 7,623 crore in the period 2006-08.

19th September 2009

You can now get info from courts under RTI

The Times of India
TNN, 07:24am IST

PANAJI: Citizens will now be able to obtain information from courts in the state under the Right to Information Act, 2005, following a notification issued by the government on September 17, 2009.

The new rules published in the notification will be applicable mutatis mutandis , to the industrial and labour courts, administrative tribunal and all other subordinate courts and tribunals in Goa.

The rules to obtain information under the RTI Act from courts in the state have been framed by the Chief Justice of the High Court of Judicature at Bombay, exercising powers conferred by Section 28 of the RTI Act.

As per the rules, the public information officer (PIO) has to decide whether the information asked for by applicants can be provided or if the inspection of records can be carried out as per rules.

A person who desires to obtain information under the RTI Act will have to requisition in a signed application to the PIO. The application has to be accompanied by payment of Rs 10 and a self-addressed envelope bearing postal stamps. On producing proof of belonging to a BPL family, the information will be provided free of cost to the applicant. Applicants can also ask for information with respect to a third party and information in respect of judicial proceedings or records.

If the PIO decides that the information can be provided, then he has to inform the applicant about the fee prescribed for supplying such information and approximate postal charges. After receipt of the prescribed fee, a date not exceeding seven days has to be fixed for preparation and providing information to the applicant. If, for any reason the information cannot be provided by the prescribed date, next date has to be given to the applicant within seven days and such subsequent dates can be fixed. But, the total extended period should not exceed more than 30 days.

The PIO has to give the records to the applicant for inspection in his presence between 2pm and 5pm. During inspection of the records, if the applicant wishes to make notes, he is allowed to make them on a plain paper in pencil and the PIO has to inspect the notes and see that the records are not tampered with. No fee will be charged for the first hour of inspection of records and Rs 5 will be charged for inspection of records for

each subsequent hour. When the information is readily available, Rs 2 will be charged for each page photocopied and Rs 5 will be charged for typed and computer printed copies.

The information specified under Section 8 of the Act which shall not be disclosed includes, information which relates to judicial functions and duties of the courts and matters incidental; information which has been expressly forbidden to be published by the court or the disclosure whereof may constitute contempt of court; or information which includes commercial confidence, trade secrets or intellectual property; information which would impede the process of investigation, apprehension or prosecution of offenders; or information which relates to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of privacy of the individual; information which is contained in published material available to the public or which is available on the website.

In case of decisions which are taken administratively or quasi judicially, such information will be made available only to the affected persons. Applicants also have the right to appeal.

18th September 2009

RTI applicants sore over info commission's silence

The Times of India

Jeeva, TNN 18 September 2009, 05:54am IST

CHENNAI: V Santhanam, a social worker from Chromepet, is upset with the Tamil Nadu State Information Commission (TNSIC). And with good reason – the Commission, which passes orders everyday directing various public authorities to reply to queries raised under the Right To Information (RTI) Act, has failed to respond to Santhanam's RTI application even though seven months have passed since he filed it.

Santhanam had asked TNSIC to give him the number of appeals received and disposed of in the last three years, the number of public information officers penalised by it for refusing to provide information within the stipulated time of 30 days, their names and details and whether they paid the fine amount.

As there was no reply for his application dated February 13, 2009, Santhanam chose to file a fresh application last month. This too evinced no reply.

Santhanam is not the only applicant unhappy with TNSIC's silence.

17th Sep 2009

CIC pulls up IIM-A for incorrect information under RTI

1900 hrs IST, ET Bureau
The Economic Times

AHMEDABAD: India's premier B-School Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, on Thursday faced the wrath of Central Information Commission for withholding and providing incorrect details on information sought under the Right To Information Act (RTI).

Information Commissioner Shailesh Gandhi, in his order, warned the institute's public information officer (PIO) of penal action under Section 20 of the RTI Act if any information, unless classified, was withheld.

The RTI application was made by IIM-A faculty TT Rammohan, who teaches finance. Mr Rammohan, who is planning to write a biography of IIM-A's founding director Ravi Mathai and wanted leave, was refused a sabbatical by the institute. Mr Rammohan used the RTI to find instances of such leaves granted to faculty for various projects in the past. However, the PIO refused to give names. Later, while a list of earlier cases was provided, two names were withheld, for which the IIM-A official claimed there were 'third party' objections.

What drew strong comments from the CIC was the PIO claim that two faculty earlier granted leave, in fact, went on leave without pay. When contested, the institute admitted to the error saying it was a clerical mistake.

Talking to ET, IIM-A's PIO KS Joshi said "We had no intention to refuse the information. It was only a case of our misinterpreting the CIC requirements. We would soon provide the relevant information."

The CIC observed that details like leave granted to faculty need not be treated as invasion on privacy and that the information must be provided. It may be mentioned here that granting of sabbatical at the institute is decided by the Faculty Development and Evaluation Committee (FDEC). In the present case, the committee felt that writing a book on Ravi Mathai did not merit a sabbatical.

16 September 2009

Denied admissions, polytechnic students hit roads

The Times of India
TNN, 07:03am IST

VADODARA: Ongoing protests against the non-admission to post-diploma programme of engineering colleges assumed larger proportions when over 1,800 students staged a protest at the MS University Polytechnic College on Tuesday.

Students set up roadblocks and shouted slogans outside the college. Academic activities were also boycotted and the polytechnic college remained closed on Tuesday as well.

The protests began when many graduates from the college could not get admission to engineering colleges in the state owing to the newly introduced centralized admission process. Students filed a Right to Information (RTI) application with Admission Committee for Professional Courses (ACPC), asking for details of admission procedure for degree engineering colleges.

A memorandum was also forwarded to state education minister Raman Lal Vora, requesting him to look into their demands. A copy of this was sent to Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

"We were forced to resort to this protest as it concerns our future. If we are denied admissions after diploma programme to engineering colleges according to centralized admission process then what are the other alternatives we have?" questioned an agitated student.

There was high drama outside the polytechnic college with hundreds of students taking to the road and blocking the road for commuters. Police had to be called in to control the student mob. Protesting students also stormed inside MSU's main office to meet vice-chancellor Ramesh Goyal, who promised to look into the matter.

Principal of polytechnic college, K S Agrawal said that ACPC has the power to give admission to students from diploma to degree courses as per Gujarat Professional Educational College or Institutions (regulation of admission and fixation of fee) Act, 2007.

"As per AICTE guidelines, only 10 per cent of the total engineering seats have to be filled by diploma students. Earlier, our students used to get admission in MSU's technology faculty, but this is the first batch that is getting admission through centralized process," added Agrawal.

"I have written to the director of technical education of state to introduce common entrance test for admissions as per AICTE recommendation. Common test is used for MCA and MBA programmes and the same system can be used for diploma students. This will help maintain uniformity among students coming from various colleges from the state," Agrawal said.

16 September 2009

Expenses soar on upkeep of CM's grounded fleet

Ajitha Karthikeyan, TNN, 06:23am IST

CHENNAI: Unlike Uttar Pradesh which boasts of a fleet of five planes and three helicopters, Tamil Nadu is less extravagant, owning only a modest pair — a Cessna Citation V plane and a Bell helicopter. However, with chief minister M Karunanidhi not sharing Mayawati's penchant for flying, the two aircraft are left mostly unutilized in the hangar, costing the state exchequer crores of rupees towards maintenance. Information made available on Right To Information applications reveal the state has spent roughly Rs 17 crore on the upkeep of its air fleet between 2003 and 2009, with the cost mounting to an all-time high this year (see box).

The Cessna, bought for Rs 13.09 crore in 1995 during AIADMK chief J Jayalalitha's first tenure as CM, has clocked 438.1 flying hours in the last six years, an average of six hours per month, which is described as "dismally low" by aviation experts. The nine-seater aircraft has not taken to the skies this year and in 2007, it made 10 trips only for testing and calibrations, as per information obtained from the state public department. The helicopter has also been put to little use — it logged 33.25 flying hours till June this year and has not been flown since April-end.

Under civil aviation rules, even the pilots flying them need to clock at least five hours a month to maintain their proficiency. Given the present state of disuse, there could be question marks over their airworthiness. "These flying machines should be in constant use and should have at least 100 flying hours a month. It would have been much cheaper for the government to hire an aircraft when required than lock up two aircraft in the hangar and waste public money on their maintenance," said Captain Mohan Ranganathan, a former pilot and air safety expert.

However, public secretary D Jothi Jagarajan said the helicopter and Cessna aircraft were not for commercial purposes and not meant for profit-making propositions. "In the event of an emergency, the government cannot hire an aircraft within short notice and the state-owned aircraft comes handy," he said.

Interestingly, Karunanidhi, during his tenure from 1996 to 2001, had dubbed the purchase of aircraft as "extravagant spending" by Jayalalitha and announced in the assembly that his government would sell the aircraft and buy 20 ambulances with the money.

16th September 2009

MSU registrar's office sealed

The Times of India

VADODARA: MS University (MSU) registrar's signing authority has been revoked and his office has been sealed, for the first time in the history of university.

Vice-chancellor (V-C) Ramesh Goyal gave the order after a Right to Information (RTI) application filed by a senate member revealed that registrar A V Gupta has been drawing excess salary by not disclosing the actual amount of pension that he received as a retired colonel.

Goyal had sought Gupta's clarification after receiving information that had surfaced after the RTI application made by senate member Narendra Ravat, but when the registrar refused to divulge details, Goyal called an urgent meeting of all section heads on Wednesday.

The RTI reply had stated that every month Rs 8,827 was deducted from the registrar's salary in lieu of the pension he received. Ravat, then, produced Gupta's bank statement that showed that he was getting a pension of Rs 11,216 since 2006, of which Gupta had not informed the university.

"In his reply, Gupta said he was not obliged to disclose the amount of salary he drew from the varsity. There were complaints against him from staffers in the administration and I had to take this step to ensure smooth functioning," Goyal said.

On Wednesday, Goyal issued the circular to all faculties deans, heads of institutions and sectional heads of university office. "All correspondences received in the name of Gupta should be directed to V-C's office and the registrar will not sign any correspondence unless a written approval of V-C is taken," the notice said. Gupta's personal secretary also has been directed to work directly under V-C's control. These decisions came in effect from Wednesday and will continue till October 10.

The notice also stated that Gupta be allowed to handle Thoughtronics Centre at Sayaji Bhawan without any assistance or any intervention in administration. Many feel that these action hints that Gupta's tenure in office will be over even before his retirement date, November 23.

14th September 2009

No financial 'strings' to hold them...

The Times of India

Shailvee Sharda, TNN, 05:10am IST

LUCKNOW: This comes as no music to ears. A person who religiously dedicated his life to the art of music, that too at a reputed institution like Bhatkhande, would be expected to lead a life of comfort post retirement. If you think so, you're grossly incorrect.

Meet Dharampal Badpaga, a visually challenged music teacher, who retired from the Bhatkhande Music University (Deemed) in 2002 after giving in 45 years of service. However, today he is leading a life of penury, even finding it hard to manage two meals a day for his family.

Ironically, the reason for Badpaga's plight is the apathy of the very institution which he served with utmost dedication. Till date, he awaits the release of the pension fund to him despite a high court order directing Bhatkhande to give the same to Badpaga.

Badpaga's son Bharat even filed an application on his father's behalf under the Right to Information Act in March 2008. "The reply said the pension rules were yet to be framed while his case was under consideration," Bharat told TOI. Notably, Bhatkhande music college was elevated to the status of a Deemed (to be) University in 2000.

Surprisingly, Badpaga is not the lone sufferer. Officer-bearers of the Bhatkhande Sangeet Sansthan Vishwavidyalaya Shikshak Avum Karmchari Sangh claim that there are at least 30 persons who retired from Bhatkhande and are leading a similar life of misery. Some of them even died awaiting their pension. "We have been fighting for the cause of the retired employees and teachers but have failed to figure out the reason behind the delay," said Raj Prakash, general secretary of the association.

Guru Banamali Sinha, who taught Manipuri dance at Bhatkhande for more than three decades and retired in 2004, is also in pain. "I am surviving because of my wife who is still working... then my only son is independent.. but i feel ashamed to ask money from them. I never asked for money from anyone all through my life," Sinha said.

President of the association, Dharamnath Mishra, said the employees and teachers presently serving the institution, too, feel insecure about their future after seeing the fate of their seniors. "One is assured of financial

security in a government sector job... if even this would be denied them who would work here. Also, art flourishes only under freedom," he said.

When asked to comment, vice-chancellor, Bhatkhande, Prof Shruti Sadolikar Katkar admitted being aware of the problems faced by the retired teachers. "Although it has been just few months since I joined, I have taken up the case with the government. The matter is under process and it would be soon when the retired teachers get their pension," she said.

14th September 2009

RTI: State sitting on Laxmi Chhaya report for 22 mths

The Times of India

MUMBAI: The urban development department has been sitting on the inquiry report submitted by the state-appointed committee that investigated the causes of the Laxmi Chhaya building collapse for the past 22 months, a Right to Information (RTI) query has revealed.

The Laxmi Chhaya building in Borivli collapsed on July 19, 2007, killing 30 residents. The flowchart procured from the urban development department revealed that the inquiry report went through 21 officials and finally reached the office of the chief minister__who heads the ministry__after seven long months. This showed, said the RTI activist who filed the query, the government was not serious about pursuing the matter or taking steps to prevent such incidents.

The government-appointed committee probed the collapse of the seven-storey building and submitted its report to the state urban development department in three months. The report was lying with the section officer of the urban development department. "Even after I filed the RTI query in April 2008, asking for the copy of the report, the file did not move," said RTI activist S K Nangia.

The flowchart showed that the file was first moved on August 13, 2008 and passing from one official to another, it finally reached the CM's office on March 12, 2009. "The report has been pending with the CM's office ever since," says Nangia."The fact that there was one more major building collapse this year__Yusuf Manzil__shows that the ghost of Laxmi Chaya won't go away soon."

The RTI activist procured the information after a 10-month struggle with the state urban development department. He had filed the query last October. Both the public information officer (PIO) and the appellate authority reportedly denied him information. "I had asked for a copy of the report and that of a flowchart showing how the file was transferred from one level of the department to the other. But they released the copies of the report and the flowchart only after I filed a complaint with the state chief information commissioner Suresh Joshi," Nangia says.

Joshi imposed a penalty on the PIO, Rajesh Govil, of the urban development department for delaying the data and shuttling the RTI query from the municipal commissioner's office to the urban department.

12th September 2009

Stranded without admissions, polytechnic passouts file RTI

The Times of India

VADODARA: Not given admission by the now instituted centralized admission process, students graduating from M S University's Polytechnic College have filed a Right to Information (RTI) application with the Admission Committee for Professional Courses (ACPC), asking for information about the admission procedure to degree engineering colleges.

They also staged a protest at Polytechnic, alleging that ACPC has given admission to handful of students from MSU and the others have been denied admission.

Students blame the centralized admission process due to which many Polytechnic passouts have been stranded with no other option in hand. "Earlier, after completing their diploma from MSU, students would get admission in various engineering courses at the technology faculty through an open test. But, this year only a few students have got admission to the degree programs the centralized process," said a protesting student.

Also, students were not given the choice to select their college and were not given prior information about the admission procedure, the students alleged. "The admission committee in-charge at MSU bluntly told us that the varsity has been allotted only a few seats, that too as a favour to its students," claimed an angry student.

"We are in a fix as ACPC authorities have told us that, admissions are closed for this year and that we have no reshuffling process to fall back on," the student added.

12th September 2009

RTI counter opened at M S Building

The Times of India
TNN, 02:23am IST

BANGALORE: A new counter has been set up to receive applications under the Right To Information (RTI) Act on issues concerning the Vidhana Soudha, Vikas Soudha and the adjoining Multi-Storey (MS) Building.

An initiative of Kria Katte, a voluntary organization dedicated to disseminating information about RTI, the counter is located on the ground floor of the M S Building, adjacent to the BangaloreOne centre there. Citizens can contact a helpline at 65734444 for related queries, the organization's convener Ravindra Nath Guru said.

The move follows difficulties in submitting RTI applications to public information officers at the three buildings due to security reasons.

12nd September 2009

Consistent effort required for RTI Act to be effective'

The Times of India

TNN 11 September 2009, 04:18am IST

LUCKNOW: `Information is power' and that could be the reason why government departments are giving a cold shoulder to the RTI Act. "When a common man comes asking for information, the officials feel that they are losing their power," said Aruna Roy, a social activist. Roy was in the city to share her experiences on how she with a group of activists waged a `peaceful' war demanding the RTI Act.

"We have got the Act in place after about a decade of efforts and that is the success story," she said adding that getting it implemented in letter and spirit will be another success. "Though it will again require a consistent effort," she added.

She was speaking on the second day of the two-day convention on the RTI Act, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act organised by the National Alliance of People's Organisation and National Campaign for People's Right to Information, on Thursday.

The event had about 400 people hailing from across India. Roy stressed on the need for RTI activists and people who have been using the Act to not be disappointed and brave the discouraging response from public authorities.

10th September 2009

SIC working to be streamlined

The Times of India
TNN, 07:20am IST

LUCKNOW: State chief information commissioner (SCIC) Ranjit Singh Pankaj assured that he would streamline the working of the UPSIC and would solve all the problems faced by applicants in the next six months.

The assurance came on the inaugural day of the two-day convention on RTI and NREGA on Wednesday organised by the National Alliance of People's Organization and National Campaign for People's Right to Information. Information commissioner Virendra Saxena also participated in the event.

There were several issues raised by activists and citizens on the first day like no response from PIOs within 30 days, lack of proper information and training of PIOs, inactive role played by first appeal authority and harassment of applicants by PIOs.

9th September 2009

Contempt of court petition against PMC

The Times of India
TNN, 11:58pm IST

PUNE: City-based activists have filed a contempt of court application in the Bombay High Court against the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and the Pune Tree Authority (PTA), alleging that trees have been felled despite court orders that permission has to be sought from a panel of experts before doing so.

Pritten Killedar, advocate for the petitioners Deepak Vahikar and Vaibhav Gandhi, told TOI that the application has been filed because the PMC has felled at least 273 trees since the HC order restrained PMC from cutting trees.

It was on May 6, 2009 that the HC had first issued an order restricting the PMC's Pune Tree Authority from giving permission for cutting trees within the municipal limits without obtaining approval of the court. The order had come during the hearing of a public interest litigation filed by Vahikar regarding felling of 1,522 trees by the civic body.

Although the PMC had appealed against the order, the HC stood its ground and issued a revised interim order on July 8 saying that the tree committee should first carry out a survey with the assistance of an expert body and submit its report to the court after which only those trees which were dangerous to life and property were to be cut.

The HC had noted that these orders were passed in the interest of maintaining the ecological balance and taking into consideration the impact it will have on the environment within and beyond Pune urban agglomeration.

The petitioners have filed an application in the court on September 3, 2009, pointing out the statistics of tree cutting based on the information received from the PMC itself in a reply to a Right to Information application filed by activist Vinod Jain.

Jain had asked the civic body how many tree cutting permissions it had given since May 6 and whether the expert body, as asked by the HC, has been formed or not.

"The PMC has stated that, until September 1, it is still in the process of forming the expert committee and that it has given permission for cutting

dangerous trees. But how have the PMC has decided that the trees are dangerous since the expert committee has not been formed?" Jain asked.

The contempt of court application states: "The respondent PMC, without abiding by the HC order, is still carrying on the activity of tree felling. The petitioner herein submits that, in spite of the directions given by the HC to constitute a committee, namely, expert body, the respondent corporation has totally overlooked the directions and failed to abide by the order which is a clear contempt of court."

8th Sep 2009

CIC orders release of minority report

Daily News Analysis

Rakesh Bhatnagar / DNA

Tuesday, September 8, 2009 2:35 IST

New Delhi: After targeting the judiciary over assets disclosure, the Right to Information (RTI) Act may singe the executive, too. The Central Information Commission (CIC) has asked the government to make the Ranganath Misra commission report available to anyone who wants it, though it has not been laid before Parliament. The commission studied quotas for linguistic and religious minorities, and its suggestions may upset caste and communal equations. The CIC has ruled the government can't claim immunity from disclosing the report when it is available to others.

"If the government does not place any material or report before Parliament or legislature, it cannot claim exemption from giving it to citizens exercising their fundamental right to information," the CIC, comprising chief commissioner MM Ansari and commissioners Satyananda Mishra and Shailesh Gandhi, said.

The CIC's order has created jitters in the government and it is planning to challenge it before the high court. The ruling came on an application filed by one Franklin Caesar Thomas who sought a copy of the controversial report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities headed by Misra, a former chief justice of India. The report was submitted to the government in 2007, but the UPA government has been sitting on it because of its divisive political potential.

The report is said to favour a move towards job reservations based on educational and social status, instead of religion and caste. It says, inter alia, that "the ultimate goal should be the evolution of a uniform pattern of criteria for identifying the backward, which should be based only on the

educational and economic status of people and not on their caste or religion, and its application equally to all sections of citizens, irrespective of their caste or religion".

Currently, Dalits of OBCs who are categorised as Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs or Jains get the benefit of reservations, but not those who converted to Christianity or Islam. The issue has not only aroused religious passions, but also split the scheduled caste/scheduled tribe community since it would mean making reservations available to a larger number of backward categories within the same quota limit.

Little wonder, the government vehemently opposed Caesar's plea on the plea that since the report had not been disclosed to parliament, it continued to be a privileged one.

The CIC rejected this plea on the ground that it was already available to others. Many websites seem to have copies of the report. "If the report has been made available to others, it can also not be denied to the appellant". This means that if a report is with the government, it can't be denied to any citizen who wants its copy.

The exemption under section 8(1)(c) of the Right to Information Act applies only in cases where parliament or a state legislature has expressly forbidden the disclosure of such a report. In this case, none of these conditions hold true.

The Misra panel's recommendations do not favour discrimination in fixing criteria for identifying backward classes. The criteria now applied for this purpose to the majority community - whatever those criteria may be - must be unreservedly applied to all the minorities, it says.

It also wants all those classes, sections and groups among the minorities to be treated as backward whose counterparts in the majority community are regarded as backward under the present scheme of things.

All such classes, sections and groups among the various minorities who are generally regarded as 'inferior' within the societal system should be treated as `backward'.

The Misra panel also recommends that all those social and vocational groups among the minorities who, but for their religious identity, would have been covered by the present net of SC/ST should be unquestionably treated as socially backward, irrespective of religion.

7thSeptember 2009

PCMC allows inspection of records on all working days

The Times of India

Siddharth Gaikwad, TNN, 03:55am IST

PUNE: After granting permission to accept payment for information under the Right to Information Act (RTI) through postal order, the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) has allowed inspection of records for two hours everyday on all working days.

The people can also meet civic officials, inspect ongoing projects and take samples of the materials between 3 pm and 5 pm on any working day. The citizens can file an application regarding inspection of documents of projects at the enquiry counter between 10 am and 5.45 pm. The officials of all departments including the emergency services cell will have to be available on the phone even after office hours.

Additional commissioner Subhash Dumbre said, "The facility was started on August 17 and many people have availed of the opportunity." Shriram Pande, president of Right To Information (RTI) Forum for senior citizens said, "I met municipal commissioner Ashish Sharma on August 6 and also informed the civic officials about the need to make the records available to the public for inspection on all working days."

Pande said the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) has made available its records for inspection on every Monday. But the PCMC has given the facility on all working day. This will save people's valuable time. He said there is a need to inform citizens about the facility.

When asked about lack of awareness among the people about the facility, Dumbre said, "We have put the timings of inspection of records and other activities under RTI Act at the entrance of the PCMC main administrative office building where everybody can read it."

Meanwhile, the PCMC has directed its officials to update its records and make them available for public inspection under the RTI Act. If the official concerned fails to make the records available for public scrutiny then strict action will be taken against them.

7th Sep 2009

RTI's penalised PIOs escape paying fines

The Times of India

Viju B, TNN 7 September 2009, 12:44am IST

MUMBAI: A majority of Public Information Officers (PIO)s appointed under the Right to Information (RTI) Act who have been penalised by central information commissioners for providing incomplete or delayed information have escaped paying fines thus far.

Only around 38.66% of the fines levied by the seven central information commissioners over the past four years October 12, 2005 to August 24, 2009 have been recovered by the treasury. The CIC had imposed total fines of Rs 35.85 lakh, out of which only Rs 13.86 lakh has been recovered.

Records with the central Department of Personnel and Training (DOPT) also show that eight penalties were set aside, writ petitions were filed against seven penalties and high courts stayed fines in three cases.

This non-recovery of penalties, which will make the RTI Act ineffective, was discussed at a meeting held by the central information commissioners recently. The commission observed that in many cases action had not been initiated as the status of orders was not known. "The compliance to the decision of the commission about recovery generally takes 3-4 months. In some cases, where the commission has directed the recovery in instalments, it even takes up to 8-9 months," the commission noted. The commission has now decided to review the recovery of penalties every quarter.

Pune-based RTI activist Vihar Durve, who is fighting the issue of pendency and non-compliance of penalties, said that the CIC does not

follow up on its own orders. He added that it is ironic that the penalties levied by the commission against PIOs for flouting the RTI Act are contested in the high court.

Activist Simpreet Singh who had earlier filed an RTI query with the State Information Commission (SIC) agreed. "We found that only 1% of the fines levied by the SIC were deposited back to the treasury," he said. "The number of pending second appeals is now touching around 16,000. The PIOs have been blocking many of our queries on slum rehabilitation," he said.

According to activists, even complaints that are sent to the CIC take at least two to three weeks to reach the desk of the information commission. This issue was also discussed at a recent CIC meeting. The CIC said that the delay in distribution of letters from the central unit to various smaller units is a serious problem. The commission has now directed the administration to ensure the letters be distributed within 3 to 4 days of their receipt.

Box: Not amounting to much

Oct 12, 2005 to Aug 24, 2009

CIC has fined 213 erring PIOs

Total fine imposed: Rs 35,85,200

Fine amount recovered: Rs 13,86,099

Penalties set aside: 8

Writs in high court: 7

Stays in HC: 3

7th Sep 2009

State bar council comes under RTI

The Times of India

Viju B, TNN 7 September 2009, 12:46am IST

MUMBAI: State chief information commissioner Suresh Joshi and the Central Information Commission (CIC) recently directed that the Bar Council of Maharashtra and Goa do come under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. The directives put state information commissioner Ramanand Tiwari in the spotlight for the wrong reason, because he had earlier ruled to the contrary.

Worli resident Rajan Alimchandani had filed an RTI query two years ago, asking the bar council about provisions under which he could take permission from the appropriate court to take penal action against an advocate before the council. The officials representing the bar council as the public information officer (PIO) and the appellate authority, rejected the query, stating that the bar council did not come under the purview of the RTI Act.

Alimchandani then filed an appeal and Tiwari in his order said the bar council did not fit the definition of a public authority. "It is not a body or an institution of self-government established by law. It is also not financed by the government. It is true that it has been established by law, but any organisation or body which claims to be doing anything legitimate has to be registered under some law," Tiwari said.

He quoted a Karnataka high court order, which held that co-operative societies are not public authorities though they are constituted by law. "I conclude that the bar council is not a public authority, therefore the appeal is dismissed," Tiwari said in his order.

Alimchandani had also approached the state information commission. State chief information commissioner Suresh Joshi, who was hearing a clutch of appeals, including Alimchandani's, against the PIO said that the RTI Act covers a public authority constituted by any law or notification issued by the government.

"The bar council may not be getting any financial assistance. But it is constituted by law made by Parliament and that is sufficient to bring it within the ambit of public authority. The Bar Council of India, which is the apex body, is responding to the RTI applications and there is no reason why the Bar Council of Maharashtra and Goa should not follow them," Joshi said.

Joshi also added that the bar council should appoint a PIO and appellate officer and decide all RTI applications according to the provisions of the Act.

Alimchandani had also written to the President and Prime Minister's Office on the issue. The queries were directed to the CIC, which also replied that the bar council comes under the purview of the RTI Act. According to the CIC, at a convention held last year, the commission had clarified the issue. The CIC said that both Joshi and Tiwari were present at the convention in Delhi.

Meanwhile, Alimchandani has written to the governor asking for action against Tiwari for passing a wrong order. Incidentally, Tiwari is no stranger to RTI controversy. Earlier this year, he overruled Joshi's order and rejected an appeal, seeking details pertaining to deputy registrars of all municipal wards in the city. Tiwari passed the order just two weeks after Joshi passed his order.

September 5th , 2009

RTI has ensured greater transparency: CIC

The Hindu

The Right to Information Act has been able to dispel doubts and bring about transparency in the work sphere, the Information Commissioner of the Central Information Commission in Delhi Shailesh Gandhi said on Saturday.

Addressing a workshop organised by the Delhi Jal Board on the RTI at Delhi Secretariat here, Mr. Gandhi said the trend now is of moving towards greater accountability in governance. He said there was a greater transparency in the standards of performance and service delivery of public agencies to the citizens.

Mr. Gandhi went on to say that transparency and accountability are possible only when the public have access to information related to the functioning of agencies and organisations like the Delhi Jal Board.

He expressed hope that the DJB will keep on moving towards the information regime to honour the true spirit of the RTI Act, 2005. He suggested the execution and administrative procedures to deliver the information well in the spirit of the Act.

Talking about the simplicity of the act, he said standard management practices may ensure the functional transparency and working accountability.

About 180 officers involved in the Information Delivery System also participated in the workshop, which was attended by Chief Secretary Rakesh Mehta, Chief Executive officer of the DJB Ramesh Negi and Secretary (DJB) Dr. Bipin Behari.

Mr. Mehta said the RTI Act was the most relevant act for the people of India and it had the potential to facilitate not just transparent governance but to strengthen the spirit of public service delivery mechanism.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Negi discussed the development of a monitoring mechanism and issuing of user's guidelines, which would help contribute towards the creation of a well strengthened mechanism of delivering information under the RTI Act, 2005.

1st Sep 2009

State Information Commission to be put on e-governance map soon

The Hindu

The State Information Commission will soon be put on the e-governance map, said Commissioner R. Perumalsamy here on Tuesday.

He told reporters that the e-governance project was being fully sponsored by the Government of India.

Once the commission's administrative functions come under e-governance, the day-to-day functioning will be possible at the click of a mouse at Chennai.

Even the Commissioner can deal with petitions pending for long, from the headquarters through videoconferencing and save thousands of rupees over transport and other expenses.

He said the Right to Information Act came into effect in Tamil Nadu from January 1, 2006. After that up to August 31 this year 1,18,400 petitions were received from the public seeking information from various government and government-aided departments.

Out of these petitions 22,450 did not come under RTI purview, hence they were kept aside.

The commission instructed the authorities to reply to the petitioner within the stipulated period as per the Act.

The commission disposed of 8950 appeals up to July, while 850 were pending. These would be disposed of possibly before October.

Since the Act came into effect, 40 officers were fined for not complying with it. They were fined a maximum of Rs. 25,000 under section 20(1) of the Act. In some cases, the commission had the power to recommend departmental disciplinary action under section 20(2). The commission was also empowered to direct the official to give compensation to the petitioner under section 19(8).

Asked if there was any measure to curtail non-serious petitions, he said there was no such provision in the Act.

Mr. Perumalsamy was here to enquire about 20 RTI petitions pending for the past 7 to 8 months. He said 9 petitions are from Salem; Dharmapuri accounted for 4, Villupuram (3), Krishnagiri (2), and Erode and Namakkal one each.