

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS MUST DO MUCH MORE TO BE TRANSPARENT

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Challenges of corruption

Transparency is the bedrock of a democratic State. And since India is proud to be one, the government must take the Central Information Commission's (CIC) transparency audit of ministries and departments seriously. According to CIC, more than one-third of government ministries and departments do not disclose basic information about their decision-making process, foreign visits of senior officials, minutes of departmental meetings, transfer policy and grievance redressal mechanism. "It has been found that out of 838 public authorities, 158 public authorities got grade A, 157 public authorities got grade B, 118 public authorities got grade C, 133 public authorities got grade D and 272 public authorities got grade E," the report said.

The report is disconcerting because of two reasons. One, the lack of public information affects the quality of governance. Second, it also makes information expensive for citizens, giving way to corruption. For example, how would a citizen know what a department is supposed to deliver if she isn't aware of its key deliverables?

If knowledge/information is power, then the lack of it can be misused by interested parties such as touts or lobby groups, who have access to information that is not made public on purpose. Transparency leads to accountability. Opaqueness creates its own hierarchy.

These days in India, e-governance and dashboards, which give information on the progress of schemes and projects, are buzzwords in government circles. In such a scenario, keeping legitimate information beyond the reach of the public is not just wrong, but unhealthy for a democracy. On many platforms, including at the inauguration of the new CIC office last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly stressed that transparency and accountability are necessary for a democratic and participative governance, as they help build trust and improve impact of schemes. An empowered citizen, he added, is the "strongest pillar" of democracy. Government departments that are shying away from being open must pay heed.

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