

A MILESTONE IN GREATER TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Important Aspects of Governance, Transparency & Accountability including Right to Information and Citizen Charter

The Jan Soochna Portal (JSP) launched by the government of Rajasthan yesterday is a remarkable achievement in furtherance of the right to information (RTI) — especially Section 4 of the RTI Act — that deals with proactive disclosure of information. Transparency must be accompanied by accountability, and that is where the JSP has great value and significance since it places the power of making the State government accountable to everyone who accesses the information made available on the portal.

Has transparency accompanied by accountability brought about transformation in any system? During my association with the eCommittee of the Supreme Court of India, and keeping transparency in the justice delivery system in mind, a National Judicial Data Grid was launched. This gave information about all pending cases across the country. Some time back, a year-wise breakup of pending cases was given on the grid and it was found that more than 70,000 cases were pending for over 30 years. These figures meant nothing until the justice delivery system was asked to account for the enormous delay in such a large number of cases. Chief Justices and Registrars in many courts appreciated the fact that they needed to answer questions relating to such enormous delays; now many courts have begun to concentrate on the disposal of old cases with considerable success. This is a good example of transparency accompanied by accountability brought about by civil society.

I had the privilege of a sneak preview of the JSP. Details of every activity of the government such as availability of food grains and ration shops and their distribution, implementation of various schemes and their beneficiaries and a variety of other information are available on a real-time basis virtually making it a Janta Information System. The portal has been arrived at through a regular and rigorous consultative process between government officials, IT professionals and civil society. Such a process of dialogue should be practised in all spheres to genuinely harness the benefits of information technology. Digital divide is indeed a serious problem in India. To bridge this, care should be taken to ensure that access points are open and free.

Since the information is available on the Internet, every citizen, right down to the municipal ward and panchayat, has access to the information. For example, I saw that on a random basis, a number of identified persons in a particular area had not availed themselves of any rations for several months. Such persons can be easily contacted and if they do not want to avail the benefits available to them, they can surrender it in favour of some other deserving person. Similarly, the government of Rajasthan, like some other States, has waived farmers' loans. The portal gives the details of every farmer in every bank branch whose loans have been waived, along with the amounts. Another significant piece of information is about mining leases. Illegal mining has been a major issue in different parts of the country, with people unable to determine the details of clearances given. This portal gives the list of mines in every district, provides geographical coordinates, and the area where mining has been permitted, including the land deed identifiers. It also provides details about pollution and environment clearances. Finally, the portal provides details of production and royalties and taxes paid. This kind of information can facilitate a progressive partnership between government and citizens for a cleaner society.

What is important is that a tremendous amount of information is available on the files of the

government of Rajasthan, which till date could only be accessed through the filing of RTI applications. However, with the use of technology and digitisation of records and information, this information is made freely available on the JSP. To this extent, there is no need for anyone to take recourse to the RTI Act and await a response. All information can be accessed immediately, free of cost.

The mere launch of the JSP is not enough. There are huge challenges with regard to maintenance issues and ensuring that there is no let-up in the availability of information. With this in mind, draft guidelines have been framed for the development and maintenance of the JSP. Once implemented, this will ensure that the information system continues uninterrupted. Various departments of the government of Rajasthan, called Line Departments, have been given a set of obligations that they are expected to fulfil. For example, they are expected to ensure digitisation of records. In addition, the Department of Information Technology will serve as the nodal department for the development, operationalisation and maintenance of the JSP.

This department has been informed of its obligations, which includes adherence to the norms and standards laid down by a digital dialogue advisory group. To ensure that the responsibilities are carried out, the advisory group will be the monitoring agency. Grievance redressal officers will be appointed so that citizens can make the State government truly accountable.

The government of Rajasthan has also taken steps to train citizens so that they are aware of the facilities available. This by itself may not be enough. Therefore, it has been decided to host the JSP in decentralised locations, right down to the municipal ward and panchayat levels. They will have access to welfare schemes, revenue activities such as mining, and other service delivery issues such as health and education.

It would be wonderful if all other State governments follow the Rajasthan government's initiative, which aims to make people, including the marginalised sections, a part of the governance process.

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