

# Turbocharging RTI

Contributed by allan  
 Tuesday, 04 September 2007  
 Last Updated Tuesday, 09 October 2007

## Turbocharging RTI

Technology can help make the Right to Information Act an even more useful tool of empowerment

I love the Right to Information (RTI) Act. In theory, it gives me back a little bit of the power that the government has taken from me. Governments are supposed to work for us, and it is apt that people who work in government are called public servants. Yet, over the last 60 years, our government has become our lord and master. How does one bring it back to heel?

On paper, the RTI is one way of doing so. Much of the power of government comes from its opacity. If you can't put your finger on what's going wrong, you can't hold it accountable. Garbage not being collected from your neighbourhood? You have no idea whom to contact or what action to take. Your ration card is not being given to you? You don't know who's withheld it, or if someone else is using it. For virtually any service that the government is supposed to provide, bribes are often necessary, and there's little you can do.

The RTI changes that. Information is power, and the RTI allows the common citizen access to most information pertaining to government services. A road has been poorly repaired? You can find out which contractor did the job, which officer approved it, and what action is being taken. Sewers haven't been made in your neighbourhood? You can find out if your local municipality officials are lying about working on it. By exposing the actions of our government officials, we render them accountable for their inaction. That's the theory of it.

In practice, I think the RTI is a great tool that isn't within easy reach of everyone. Yes, yes, I know that it has been made quite user-friendly, and I've even attended a workshop on how to file RTI applications. It's simple enough if you want it enough, and if you care deeply about whatever cause you're chasing down. But the common citizen is unlikely to take the time to use it, even if it is likely to be of some use to him or her. The reason for that is what public choice theorists call rational ignorance—the costs of chasing down such information, in terms of time spent, are generally greater than the benefit to any one person.

Also, with the RTI as it has worked so far, information remains dispersed. Individuals and NGOs get information on subjects that interest them, but by and large it remains inaccessible to the common Joe. As a taxpayer, I would ideally like all information about how my money is being spent available in one central source, which I can access without any effort. I don't see why I should have to run after it, no matter how easy that running is. It's my money, after all.

This is where technology can help. Having won the battles to make RTI a reality, some of the NGOs that have worked so hard to make it happen can now take it to the next level. Here's how I think the Internet can be used as an enabler.

First up, it would be wonderful if there was a central database, perhaps using a wiki interface, where anyone who got public information using RTI could upload that information. That would mean two things. One, if I am curious about something but wouldn't necessarily chase it down, I can simply check online if the information has already been dug out by someone else. Two, it prevents duplication, as people don't file for information someone has already dug up, and officers don't waste time getting similar information again and again. Just browsing through such a resource should provide so much insight about how the government works. The existence of it should keep our babus on their toes. Secondly, I'd like to see services that make it easier for you or me to file RTI applications. The Rs. 10 charge for filing an RTI application with the Central government may be nominal, but who's got the time to file applications? If there was a service attached to this central database that could file an application on my behalf without my having to do anything more than register (once) and fill up an online form, I might feel more motivated to ask for information. And thus, the database of information would build up, and we would be empowered.

I've searched online for such services and wikis, but the RTI blogs and forums that exist don't cut it for me, and consist of nuggets of information instead of constituting a repository. Friends of mine in various NGOs have mulled such a project, but not actually gotten down to it. For the RTI to work, for it to be used to empower the common citizen instead of activists and NGOs, we need such a service, and I hope someone takes the initiative one of these days.

Public limited companies are required to make certain essential information available to their shareholders, and even if they weren't mandated to do so, the pressures of competition would make them. Our government, a monopoly, feels no such competition; our bureaucrats are entrenched in their lordships. It is time to take charge and show them who's the boss.

(Amit Varma publishes the website India Uncut, at <http://www.indiauncut.com>. Your comments are welcome at [thinkingitthrough@livemint.com](mailto:thinkingitthrough@livemint.com)). Do let us know on what you feel about this article and whether an online RTI application will broaden the use of RTI, so that we can work towards it. You can also use our Polling feature on "What stops you from using RTI?" for us to know where we can fill in the missing links to make the RTI Act even more empowering.