

Open access to information

Renu Vinod, Business Standard, 27 December 2005

India has finally passed an information legislation, and much to the government's credit, it has kept its promise of making the newly formulated Right to Information (RTI) Act participatory, progressive and meaningful. Now, however, is the time to move as efficiently and effectively as possible from a duty to furnish information regime to a duty to publish one.

In this context, it would be worthwhile to consider the use of advanced software applications such as Wiki. Wiki is a piece of Internet-based software that allows users to create and edit web pages. The most known use of Wiki is through the software Wikipedia. In the context of RTI, registered users can upload information that has been disclosed under RTI. Registering the users would be an effective way to identify users and prevent misuse.

The RTI portal of the National Informatics Centre at <http://righttoinformation.gov.in> could be the starting point for the move towards a participatory and proactive flow of information. According to the officials at the National Informatics Centre, the RTI portal has been set up to create a central repository of information for citizens to access information through a user-friendly search engine.

An efficient and easy-to-use proactive disclosure system would provide many benefits to both government officials as well as the public. Instead of the work being wholly shouldered by the government, as it currently is, even private individuals can participate. This would not only reduce the burden on the government, there also won't be repetitive information requests.

In countries like the US, the government has already placed a lot of information in the public domain. This information relates to what people need to know on a daily basis. The idea is that people should have to put minimum effort to access what is their right, and no government should shy away from its duty to fulfil that right.

Though the RTI Act is brand new, there are some remarkable examples of its implementation. The Karnataka Information Commission, on the basis of a complaint, has ruled that information sought under Section 4 should be given free or at the minimum cost price. Moreover, the ruling states that information should be available to the extent possible in electronic format with public information officers. Section 4 deals with suo motu or proactive disclosure of information and, if seen in the spirit of the Information Act, does not warrant payment for access. If the government is genuine about fulfilling its commitment to an open access regime, then being genuinely innovative with regard to proactive disclosure should not be relegated to the background.