

Role and Importance of Information in Economic Development and Social Prosperity

Dr. Mohit Sharma and Sanjiv Singh Bhadauria

Assistant Professor, Amity University Madhya Pradesh, Gwalior.

Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the meaning, nature and scope of information, in the arena of economic development and social prosperity as an eye-view of law. In this paper an attempt is also made to discuss the various parts and parcel of information and its need. The findings of the paper will help the planners to frame an exact and benefiting policy for right to information and its use in economic analysis for social growth and prosperity.

Keywords: *Right to Information, Democracy, Eternal vigilance.*

1.1 Introduction:

In all over the world the right to get or receive the knowledge was present in different form but was not uniformly codified. The beginning of the twenty first century is considered and marked with the development in the field of the information and technology. It is a key word to keep a pace with progressive trends in the post-modern world. Technologies also play an important role in view of the information that increased the capacity of communication, simplification and storing necessary for the development of the society. Information has an unlimited potential and considered as the heart of all the process of governance and also essential for the functioning of a democracy as it is an instrument of social justice and equity. In a democracy information empowers the people being the real sovereign to act more meaningfully, be more vigilant and therefore, democracy is bound to become more vibrant.

Access to information is the key to development and emergence of a vibrant civil society. Everyday almost we all read newspaper; watch different news channels and surf on net with a view to keep ourselves aware of our surrounding, or even in the world to make known what is going on in and around us. Awareness of our surrounding becomes a key issue in our daily lives that helps us to relate the society we are living in and also to the people with whom we share our collective lives and destinies. A number of medium as newspaper agencies, channels and website have come up these days with a view to enhance the people's craving to know and to be updated with the latest available information. Such business is flourishing because they satisfy people's hunger for information. We are in need of information at the time of buying some product from the market on quality, purity, standard and prices of product or service that is necessary for making an informed choice or decisions. The primary role of the information is to equip the consumer to make an informed choice. The Right to Information lays the very foundation to build the good governance, transparency, accountability, participation and to eliminate the concept of the corruption simultaneously it is considered a very basic to any democracy and fifth pillar to ensure the democracy.

Information is often withheld even when people are engaged in exercising their most basic right of democracy, the votes. In the absence of a continuous flow of information that exactly reveals the functioning of the ministries, the performance of the politicians or even the experience and qualifications of new candidates, election may end up promoting only narrow interest and the voters fall back on their tribal, religion or class affiliation for their choice. Better informed voters mean better informed choices, more responsive legislators, better governances and the degree of success of this process would, in turn depend on the extent of awareness that voters have about the candidate. Their right to gain material information about the candidate is thus intrinsic to the democratic process.

Not merely economic growth but economic equity is also promoted by access to the information. At Coolun in 2002, the commonwealth countries called up the governments to work to reduce the growing gap between rich and poor and declared that the benefits of the globalization must be shared more widely and focus should be channelled for the elimination of poverty and human deprivation.¹The liberation of information that would otherwise have remained unutilized increases economic opportunity not only for the less powerful as much as for the big player. A worker can access the information relating to the labour regulations and their entitlements as any

businessman can find out about the licensing requirements, taxation and trade regulation and farmers can get hold of land records, markets trend analysis and pricing information. A guaranteed right to information is an essential and practical antidote towards the corruption, which is rife in too many commonwealth countries. Rule of law is being destroyed by the corruption and considered the secrecy as required to hide their dark deeds in dark places.

In robust democracies, the media acts as a watchdog that scrutinizes the power and exposes mismanagement and corruption. It is also one of the foremost means of distributing information as radio and television have become the vital communication links. But where the media itself is unable to receive any reliable information held by the government, it cannot fulfil its role to the best of its abilities and lack of access to information also leaves a space of allegation that their stories are inaccurate and reliant only on rumour and half-truth instead of true facts. Information is essential for the health of the democracy and in a true democracy the secrecy in governance has no place and one section of the people cannot keep another section of the people ignorant of happenings in the government. A sound access regime provides a framework within which the media can seek, receive and impart essential information accurately and it is in the interest of the government as well as of the people. The purpose of this Act is to ensure that justice extends to all the sections of the society and there is transparency and accountability in the functioning of the public authorities, at the same time ensuring that this law does not become a “tool to obstruct the national development and integration or to destroy the peace, tranquillity and harmony among the citizens.

1.2 MEANING OF INFORMATION

The original root of the word “information” laid down in the Latin word “informare” which means to fashion, shape or to create to give form to. Information is an idea that gives a form, such as the spoken or written word and it is a means of representing an image or thought so that it can be communicated from one mind to another. In place of worrying about all the information floating in the world, we must ask ourselves what matters belong to us and what do we want to know because it is better than accumulating lots and lots of data. Since we are living in an information based society, access to information has become inevitable to the individuals and also the institutions. Any person who is well informed stands in a better position to exercise his legal as well as other right better than all those who either do not access to any information or ill-informed. It can also be defined as “the human right to secure access to publicly held information and the corresponding duty upon a public body to make information available.”

The law dictionaries do not contain any clear-cut meaning of the word information as understood in recent times. The Black law dictionary defines information as an accusation that exhibited against a person for some criminal offence, without any indictment. The Ballentine’s law dictionary also defines it in a manner as acquired knowledge or to know the facts which advise and lead towards the acquisition of the knowledge in common parlance. In the technical legal sense the meaning is similar to the one given by the Black law dictionary. Business dictionary defines the information data that is (1) accurate and timely, (2) specific and organized for a purpose, (3) presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance, and (4) can lead to an increase in understanding and decrease in uncertainty.² The merriam-webster defines the same as the communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence.³ The free encyclopedia, also explains it as the answer to a question of some kind relating to any data and knowledge.⁴ The free dictionary shows it the Knowledge or facts learned, especially about a certain subject or event.

The Right to Information Act, 2005 defines information in Section 2(f) as any material in any form including the records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinion, advice, press releases, circulars, orders, log books, contracts, reports, papers samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any law for the time being in force.

Section 2(i) of the Act also defines the word “record” as and include

- Any document, manuscript and file
- Any microfilm, microfiche and facsimile copy of a document
- Any reproduction of image or images embodied in such microfilms and
- Any other material produced by a computer or any other device.

1.2 CLASSIFICATION OF INFORMATION

Taxonomy of information is necessary to sort out the legal issues that arise from the information flows across national borders. The legal environment which allows the access of any information on particular matter is totally different from the other legal environment. To avoid the cater of information where a high priority exists for flow

of the same without much legal constraints in the same legal net, one must examine separately the legal environment of each type of information flow. Such taxonomy would include at least 11 types of information.

- Personal
- Political
- Scientific and technical
- Strategic and military
- Health, safety and environmental
- Economic
- Financial
- Management
- Educational
- Religious and moral
- News and entertainment

However all these different kinds of information may not be made available to everyone who seeks it, consideration like right to privacy, official secrets and national security may be cited as one of the reasons for refusing to provide certain kind of information to the private individuals.

1.3 IMPORTANCE AND NEED OF INFORMATION

Information is an empowering tool for knowledge which provokes thought and without thinking process there is no expression. Freedom of expression is running theme of democratic governance. Information is an oxygen for the democratic society. The distinguished statesman emphasised that communication is at the heart of all social intercourse “it is essential that all men and women in all social and cultural environments, should be given the opportunity of joining in the process of collective thinking thus initiated, for new ideas must be developed and more positive measures must be taken to shake off the prevailing inertia. With the coming of a new world communication order, each people must be able to learn from the others, while at the same time conveying to them its own understanding of its own condition and its own view of world affairs. Mankind will then have made a decisive step forward on the path to freedom democracy and fellowship”.

In the beginning, people were not civilized; they always tried to have controlling power with themselves. In the primitive days, everyone was against everyone so, the life was solitary, poor, nasty and brutish. In the primitive days, people were not organized and there was no meaning of liberty and freedom. With the transformation from the uncivilized society to the civilized society people tried to understand the relevance of liberty and freedom in their social life. They tried to make themselves informed about the activities happened around the world. Most of the civilized society adopted the democratic culture so as India. In democracy people are sovereign and not the government. In a democratic country like our people have the right to know every act and activities what the government is doing in their name. People also have the right to take part in day to day working of the government. The necessity to legislate a law on right to information was acknowledged unanimously by the chief minister’s conference “effective and responsive government” held on 24th May, 1997 at Delhi. With a view to make the government more transparent, open and accountable towards the general public, the Indian government appointed a working group on Right to Information to promote the open and transparent government.

Government has three organs legislature, executive and judiciary. Legislature and judiciary conduct their business in the open forums in the form of parliament and court. They discharge their responsibility without any fear and favour. They provide full opportunity to all concerned to join the debate and know the facts available with them but this concept is not with the executive branch of the government. Generally the decision on any matter is taken by this organ of the government in the closed dark room without consulting the concerns of the sovereign “we the people of India” by the servant “the government”. The symbolic relationship of sin and secrecy is now universally recognised. It has been observed that any government which operates in greater secrecy is more prone towards the corruption as compared to a government which operate in greater openness. That’s why, the information is considered as a significant step in empowering the people to combat the corruption. Officials often abuse their discretionary powers to suit various political or other vested interests or to misappropriate the funds. The right to information therefore is important tool to check the abuses of administrative discretion and to ensure fair process. This right is also necessary for protecting the civil liberties for example, by making it easier for civil society groups to monitor wrong doing such as encounter killing or abuse of preventive detention law. The Information helps strengthen the foundation of the democracy. Unlike autocratic government a democratic government needs to be based on the trust of the governed. It should, therefore perform function as much as possible keeping in view the public so that the citizen know its aims, policies programmes and help the government to accomplish them. On the contrary maximum secrecy in the government functioning would tend to promote more corruption, nepotism and misuse or abuse by the authority and thereby the government is alienated from the governed. Openness in the government functioning is regarded as an essential ingredient of the democracy and the right to information as a fundamental democratic right.

In order to be an effective and meaningful democracy, it should have a responsive administration which is a bilateral process. On the one hand administration is required to be citizen caustic which implies that it should be responsive towards the legitimate needs, aspiration and grievances of the citizens and on the other hand citizens also required to be co-operative and vigilant as it is the eternal vigilance of the enlightened citizens which facilitates accountability and prevents the arbitrariness in the public administration. Right to know is an effective tool or mean for the citizens enlightenment which provide them access to the government departments and documents and also enable them to acquire knowledge of what is happening in the government.

Information tends to remove unnecessary secrecy surrounding the decision-making process in the government in order to improve the quality of decision- making in public policy and administration. This right enables the citizens of the country to know about the government decision and also their basis so that they can exercise sound judgements on the merits of public policies and respond appropriately to influence the process of policy formulation and decision-making in public governance. With a view to strengthen the grass roots of the democracy and to ensure people's participation and to bring the local government under the public secreting to avoid the costly mistake, information should be given to the citizens. Consideration the importance of the information James Madison observed: "A popular government without popular information or means of acquired it, but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both". Sometimes government withhold the information from its own citizens on the basis of feudal, colonial and technical grounds. However transparency, accountability and fairness demands equality and openness is one of the principle of good governance. Information is required for mainly three purposes:

- The evaluation of the government by the citizens.
- Citizen's participation in the decision-making process of the public authority.
- To keep eye on the deeds of the government.

Consumer information is also one of the other areas where it is important to have proactive disseminating of information. Information is considered as the currency that every citizen requires to participate in the life and governance of the society. The greater opportunity to the citizens of the access to the information, the greater would be the responsiveness of the government towards the community needs and the greater restriction are placed on the access, the greater feelings of powerlessness and alienation are to be felt. Without a proper information people cannot exercise their rights in a true sense as the government hold the information as national resources and hold that for the benefit of the citizens and not for their own benefits. It follows that government and its officials hold the information as the trustees for the peoples. The net result of the secrecy is the disempowerment of the common people and their exclusion for the process which vitally affect their existence. Getting information on various matters as employment scheme, obtaining certificate for various purpose, recommendations for different types of loans, access to different poverty alleviation programmes, irrigation, drinking water, sanitation, education and more is must for the common people of the country whether provided proactively or on request. Though the free flow of information in India is required but remains severely restricted also. The Prima Facie impact of the RTI is that it provides every individual citizens of the country a right to access to information hence it puts power directly into the hands of the foundation of the democracy, the citizens of the country. The judiciary has already granted the acknowledgement to the Right to Information as a part & parcel of the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression and this right is considered important for many of the reasons as follows:

1.3.1 People's Participation

As the governance in any democratic country implies the effectively participation of the people of the country in the process of the government but for that the citizens must have the necessary information that exactly shows how things are being done and also participate in planning processes and judgment of whether certain plans and schemes are useful for them or not. The concept of Right to Information not only helps in improving the quality of the decision-making process by removing unnecessary provisions of the secrecy but also facilitate the process of the policy formulation on the issues of their concern.

1.3.2 Democratization of Governance

Access to the information is the requirement for the purpose of the democratization of the governance. It helps in many of the ways as to check the misuse of the administrative authority for their personal gains, the process to promote justice, equity and fair play. That's why L.D. White observed. "Power in a democracy requires control, greater the power greater should be the control". Right to information is one of the devices necessary for disciplining the power and ensuring the better accountability.

1.3.3 Public Accountability

In any democratic system of governance the government runs for the benefit of the public at large and not for the benefit of one or a few persons therefore the Government from the village to the central level has to be

accountable towards the people and the People should have a right to know what their Government is doing. A right to information will ensure that people can hold public bodies accountable on a regular basis, without having to lay the entire burden on their elected representatives who are themselves often unable to get the information sought in spite of all the resources at their command. The right to information is primitive of a culture of accountability by providing accessibility to information pertaining to finances, proceedings and decisions of all the social actors whose activities impact the public. It can provide a check on mismanagement, abuse of discretion, bribery, other forms of corruption and malpractices. This shall bring a degree of regularity in the process.

1.3.4 Rule of Law

Right to information reduces the chances of misuse of the resources available with the government, lessens the corruption, helps in better governance functions, making service providers accountable for their functions, creating participatory and transparent environment for the people to contribute in policy formulation and in establishing the rule of law. Taken in true spirit, information has the potential to bring about the required change in the system of administration and getting the obligation to do certain things that are generally ignored.

1.3.5 Checking of the Discretionary Powers

Since officers are given discretionary powers for carrying out their duties in an effective manner, they can abuse this discretion to favour the various political and vested interests or to misappropriate the funds. In absence of any legislation on Right to information they tend to hide the information from disclosure although it is possible by the court's intervention but in practice this is not possible for poor people or villagers as the cost, distance and delays matters. Another problem is the lack of transparency regarding the selection criteria for public posts. The selection of inappropriate employees into the government adds to the inefficiencies and ills in the government. Access to Information is considered a potent tool or instrument not only to check the misuse of the administrative discretion but also to ensure fairness by promoting openness, transparency and accountability in administration.

1.3.6 Administrative Efficiency

Administrative efficiency in any Government comprises of conducting the administration without any unnecessary delays and also any hidden or corrupt motives. If people do not know what is happening in their society, and if the actions of those who rule them are hidden, then they cannot make a meaning part in their society. It is quite seen that grievances of any citizen are kept pending for long periods even for months or years without disposal in several cases. In some other cases applications are simply disposed of by saying that the government or the concerned authority finds no reasons to accede to the request etc. now the Right to Information Act requires information about the pendency of the applications and reasons as to why such applications have not been disposed of or reasons for their rejection, this is likely to improve the efficiency of various departments.

1.3.7 Ensures Transparency

There is a presumption that everything done by the government is done for the public welfare and done honestly with optimum benefits from the funds available. However, as we all know, in recent times, this presumption has been eroded to a great extent by making misuse, misappropriation and also careless use of public funds. To counter this, it is indispensable that there should be a complete transparency in all the public dealings. The concept of Right to Information bounds the concern officials for careful utilization and application of funds. Transparency will also help people to hold the officials accountable for their mishandling of public time and money.

1.3.8 Creating a More Democratic and Open Society

For better democratic governance, participation in the decision-making process is not possible without maintaining the transparency and sharing of the information so free flow of information is essential for the purpose of identification and solution of the problems. Though openness is essential to the functioning of a democratic society, yet secrecy also bears the same quality on certain genuine grounds like privacy, defence matters, diplomatic affairs, crime investigation, trade secrets and similar other reasons. So, it is to be admitted that complete openness is neither feasible nor desirable. Accordingly, a balanced approach has to be drawn between the needs of openness and the requirements of secrecy but this balance has to be tilted in favour of openness.

1.3.9 Protection of Civil Liberties

The right to information is essential for protecting liberties of the citizens by making it easier for civil society groups to keep an eye on wrongdoings like custodial deaths and the exploitation of preventive detention legislation. No democracy can be meaningful where civil society cannot audit the performance of the elected representatives, the bureaucrats and the other functionaries who act on behalf of the state. In order to be able to audit the performance of the government, the people have to be well informed of its policies, actions and failures. Hence an informed citizenry is a condition precedent to democracy.

1.3.10 Reducing Poverty

Legislation on the right to information is fundamental to furthering the effective development of the society and eradicating poverty. Information can empower poor communities to battle the circumstances in which they find themselves needy and helpless and also help in keeping the balance of unequal dynamic power that exist between the people marginalized through poverty and the government. No development is worthwhile that thrives on impoverishment of a large number of people and exploitation of the poor and no democracy is worth its name in which authorities can function in secrecy and people are ignorant and therefore can be managed. Right to know, right to health, right to work, and right to shelter are the emerging human rights of the twenty-first century.

1.3.11 Effective and Proper Implementation of Schemes of Government

In rural areas, numerous schemes such as for providing food, housing, employment and education are run by the central and state government. These schemes are intended for the poorest of the poor in the rural areas and a wide criticism is spread that these funds have been consistently misappropriated or misused on a large scale. In most of the cases, people do not know about the existence of such schemes, even if they know they do not get their entitlements available under the scheme or accept less than their allocation. Furthermore, records are often tampered because no one outside the administration has access to them. Thus, information ensures greater transparency than ever before in the working of the public bodies. The disclosure of vital information thus results in checking corrupt practices in delivery of services and ensuring the reach of entitlements to the poor and also make the administration more accountable. No

1.3.12 Ensure the Strengthening of Public Opinion

Access to information is essential to the health of the democracy because the peace and harmony cannot flourish under a weak democracy. Even if the government provides the right to information, the citizens' resort to media like newspaper, radio, television etc for day to day information about the government activities. The media provides a link between the citizens and its government. The media help to create what can be termed as a "free market place ideas" which promote free thought. So, it is necessary that media is able to access information. The media's right to information is not a special privilege but rather an aspect of the public's right to know. The lack of a right to access official information causes many problems for the media. Balanced reporting becomes difficult when the primary sources of information are denied. In absence of exact information, they provide biased news, suppressing or distorting information. By providing right to information, media and citizens would together make the government more accountable.

1.3.13 Protecting Other Rights

Freedom of Information laws can improve the enforcement of many other economic and political rights. In India, the FOI laws are even used to enforce the ration distribution by revealing that food vendors are not providing the government-subsidized food to impoverished citizens. This has resulted substantial changes in the food distribution system to ensure that citizens as well as vendors are getting their food and compensation accordingly.

1.3.14 Redressing Past Harms

Almost all newly developed or modified constitutions include provision regarding a right to access any information from the government bodies as a fundamental human or civil right. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of the Central and Eastern European countries adopted laws to regulate access to the files even of the former secret police forces. In some of the countries, these files are made available to individuals to see what is being held on them. In Mexico, President Fox in 2002 ordered the declassification of all the files of previous human rights abuses so that the families could find out what happened to their loved ones who disappeared.

CONCLUSION:

Undoubtedly, the role of information is very important in general and economic development in particular. As we know that for accurate forecasting and effective economic policies, correct information is a prerequisite condition. It is not wrong to say that as a level of Information so the level of Economic Development and Social Prosperity.

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