

# People's RTI Assessment 2008

**RaaG**

Right to information  
Assessment and Analysis Group

**NCPRI**

National Campaign for People's  
Right to Information

## Proceedings

### Start up Workshop

23 March 2008

The start-up workshop of the "People's Right to Information Assessment 2008" was organised on 23rd March 2008, at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This day-long workshop was attended by over 30 participants (list at annex 1).

At the start of the workshop, members of the core team explained the background and objectives of the assessment. They also expressed their gratitude to Google foundation for providing support for the assessment and the smooth and speedy way in which the support was made available.

**Aruna Roy**, in her introductory remarks, welcomed the assessment and felt that it was needed and timely, since no accurate data exist on how the RTI is being used on the ground. Once such data become available, concerned citizens and RTI activists can battle more strategically to ensure that the Act is fully and effectively implemented. She pledged her support to the exercise and raised various issues related to the process and methodology of the assessment. She cautioned the team that when talking to villagers it was very important how one asked a question. If a question was not appropriately framed, using terms that the villagers understand, the answer could be misleading. She also warned against imposing our own preconceived notions on the rural people.

**Aruna** suggested that village meetings be added to the proposed methodology and that through the assessment an effort be made to try and understand what excites people about the RTI, and what sorts of issues has the RTI been used for. She suggested that there should be interim feedback so that ongoing adjustments could be made to the methodology and process of the assessment. She also suggested that, apart from the conventional methods of survey, alternate methods like group meetings, songs and plays should also be used. Another interesting suggestion given by Aruna was that kiosks could be set up opposite public authorities in order to talk to the applicants who visit the public authority over time.

**Aruna** also stressed the importance of involving the activist community in some parts of the study. She felt that it would be crucial to bring their voices and perspective in to the study to strengthen current understanding of the RTI. Similarly, the study should draw on the talents of both faculty and students in India's network of law schools, particularly the National Law Schools. Two other valuable sources of information are the vernacular and local press throughout the country, and student PhDs on RTI-related issues. She suggested that case

studies look at how the RTI is being used for sensitive issues such as fighting communalism, and defending Dalit, women's, and land rights.

**Amitabh Mukhopdhyay** expressed his discomfort at the proposed categorization of the Government as a stakeholder, and thought the government was more appropriately seen as an information provider. The assessment should also recognize the special status of the Parliament as the national 'guardian' of the Act, since it legislated it into being. It would also be interesting to assess how the media uses the RTI to assist investigative reporting, in addition to just studying how the media is covering the implementation of the Act.

**Aditya Mukherjee** pointed out that research was very critical to social movements and that all major social movements were preceded by a certain amount of research. He thought that the assessment process of RTI Act should involve other movements also.

Arguing that the Government is very much a stakeholder in any democracy, **Bishnu Mohapatra** said that the assessment should be used to influence the Government's own assessment of the performance of the RTI. **Sowmya Kidambi** wanted to know whether the assessment will use the services of a survey firm, and pointed out that the Government has committed to provide its study consultant, Price Water House Coopers, with all the support required in accessing the information it needs. **Neera Burra** felt that the assessment should also capture of the process by which the RTI Act got introduced into the statute book. **Ashwini Kumar** suggested that methodology for the assessment should be developed in consultation with the villagers, and the survey process should center around group discussions, which are likely to elicit more rounded and insightful answers than individual questionnaires. **Manju Menon** felt that civil servants and politicians should also be involved in the assessment process and reiterated that there was a necessity to remind the people of the process by which the RTI Act was made. **Mridula Mukhrjee** pointed to the relevance of the RTI Act in accessing archival government documents for historical research purposes. **Bharat Dogra** stressed the need to develop regional and location specific case studies and to capture the change in social and economic reality that has occurred because of the RTI Act.

**Mridula Mukhrjee** talked about the relevance of the RTI Act to archives and issues related to research. There was also a discussion on how to capture the process of empowerment in such an assessment and what were the indicators that could be used. **Bharat Dogra** stressed the need to develop regional and location specific case studies and to capture the change in social and economic reality that has occurred because of the RTI Act.

**Sowmya Kidambi** felt that there must be a rigorous comparison between the urban and rural reality and also in terms of the problems being faced in filing applications. **Parth Shah** cautioned the research team against the temptation to do too much and suggested that college students should be used in the survey. **Priyanka Varma** felt that there was no need to have a standard format of a case studies and **Anjali Bhardawaj** stressed the need to have a focus on pro-active disclosures.

Also discussed was the need to ensure that the methodology was robust and protected against bias. **Nikhil Dey** did not feel that there was much danger of bias among researchers, especially those from people's movements, but felt that such researchers were more likely to get to the truth in a rural setting. Responding to some points made earlier, he also thought that asking leading questions was not necessarily wrong and could often result in a better understanding of the truth. He suggested that in all the eight states selected for intensive study, conventions of RTI activists and practitioners be held so that there could be a better understanding of the state of affairs in that state. He also stressed that, in assessing the decisions of the information Commissioners, we should also try and pick up the good decisions and publicise them as best practices.

**Premila Nazareth** stressed that we should also be sensitive to the constraints faced by public authorities. **Bishnu Mohapatra** talked about how RTI must be located in the larger footprint of accountability. He thought that the quantitative survey should be kept as simple as possible and that there should be a dialogue with the people on the methodology to be used. He also suggested that an attempt should be made to capture the systemic changes that the RTI regime has brought about in the functioning of governments and other public authorities. He suggested that the report of the assessment should be user-friendly and translated into various Indian languages so that it becomes accessible to a large number of people. To understand complex issues such as the 'empowering potential' of RTI, Bishnu suggested that the study include ethnographic accounts of user experience and perceptions of the RTI.

**Ahili Chowdhry** spoke about how students were using the RTI and suggested that there be a case study on this. She also suggested that it would be interesting to see how Government itself was using the RTI to access key information from particular Ministries or Departments. **Ashwini Kumar** stressed the need to test the assessment process to ensure that it was participative. He wondered whether we were looking at RTI as a part of larger issues, for example, the issue of decentralisation. He also wondered what, if any, were the limits of RTI, what was the constraints that the government had in implementing RTI, and the linkage between RTI, development and democracy.

**A. Richa** stressed the necessity to focus on the various gender issues relating to RTI. **Gautam Bastian** was concerned whether the sample of states selected would stand up to scientific scrutiny. He also thought that we should focus on analysing web pages and assess how much information has been computerised by public authorities. We should determine which departments were more active and even recommend rewards for departments which responded to RTI requests in the shortest time. Most important, the study should develop benchmarks for 'ideal' pro-active disclosure and measure current governmental reporting practices against these. **Shourie Anant Singh** said that it is important to also track the speed by which individual departments are answering RTI requests, and to recommend rewards for star performers.

With reference to the presentation on the proposed assessment methodology, the following points were made:

1. We need to be clear about the standards against which we will measure the efficacy of the RTI regime.
2. One outcome of the study should be an assessment of how access to RTI facilitates access to other rights.
3. We should also find out whether and how it is causing systemic changes in the manner the Government operates, and records and discloses information..
4. Instead of positing the assessment as a counterpoint to government studies, we should think of it as setting standards for the government.
5. We should also try and capture the levels of expenditure that the government is incurring in implementing the RTI act.
6. Research questions should not restrict themselves to the impact RTI has on the lives of the applicants, but also find out what impact it has on larger (social) issues.
7. We need to find out how other stakeholders, including the media, the corporate sector, lawyers, and others, have looked at the RTI act.

There was an extended discussion on what is empowerment, and how one measure it. It was recognized that the empowerment of the common person was an important, perhaps the most important, outcome of the RTI Act. Therefore, it was all the more important to develop effective methods to assess the type and level of empowerment the RTI Act has brought about. As time was not adequate to thrash this issue out during the meeting, it was decided that **Bishnu Mohapatra** would convene a group that would discuss the following:

1. How does one define empowerment?
2. When is a person actually empowered, and when do they have just a sense of empowerment ?
3. What are the indicators by which both a sense of empowerment and actual empowerment can be captured?
4. What is the methodology that must be used to capture both?

The group convened by Bishnu would report back to the larger group in the meeting on the 21st of April, 2008.

Towards the end of the meeting, many of the participants committed to helping the assessment in various ways. Some of the commitments were:

1. **Bharat Dogra** kindly offered to do a survey of newspapers and other publications in English and Hindi, and to assess the coverage of RTI issues, the use of RTI by the media, efforts by the media to disseminate information about the RTI Act, and how far have media houses, publications and channels internalised the spirit of RTI.
2. **Sowmya** agreed to be the nodal person for the rural survey in Andhra Pradesh.
3. **Parth shah** offered to share the CVs of interns and students that apply to his centre.
4. **Prabhakar Rao** agreed to assist the study by helping with data management and study design.
5. **Nikhil Dey** agreed to be the nodal person for the rural survey in Rajasthan.

6. **Amitabh Mukhopadhyay** agreed to initiate a civil servants group to discuss the RTI assessment issue and to provide ideas and support.
7. **A. Richa** and **Neera Burra** expressed interest in looking at the gender issues related to the RTI.
8. **Aswini Kumar** pledged the support of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences for the assessment.
9. **Shourie Anand Singh** offered to mobilise students to assist in the study.
10. **Priyanka Varma** also offered to support the study through TISS.
11. **Kanchi Kohli** and **Manju Menon** agreed to help with the case study on the use of RTI for accessing environmental information.
12. **Mridula Mukherjee** expressed interest in taking up the component of the assessment that looked at the media and also at the use of RTI relating to archives, museums and scholars. She was also interested in recording, for posterity, details about the RTI movement.
13. **Raman Mehta** offered to help the assessment process by providing support in the design and management of data-bases.
14. **Anjali Bhardawaj** also pledged her support to the assessment, especially in assessing the use of RTI in Delhi.

In general, the participants welcomed the assessment but felt that the study design was too large and complex to be responded to meaningfully in such a short time span. It was, therefore, decided that the group would meet again on April 21, 2008 for another full-day meeting, to discuss and finalise the methodology. This would give everyone the time to assimilate and understand the details of the project and to formulate their own thoughts.

#### Annexure 1

1. Yamini Aiyar, *Right to information Assessment & Analysis Group (RaaG)*
2. Gautam Bastian
3. Anjali Bhardawaj, *Satark Nagrik Sangathan*
4. Neera Burra
5. Aheli Chowdhry, *JOSH*
6. Nikhil Dey, *Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)& National Campaign for Peoples Right to Information (NCPRI)*
7. Bharat Dogra, Journalist
8. Amrita Johri, *Satark Nagrik Sangathan*
9. Sowmya Kidambi
10. Kanchi Kohli, *Kalpavriksh*
11. Ashwini Kumar, *Tata Institute of Social Sciences*
12. Raman Mehta, *Action Aid*
13. Manju Menon, *Kalpavriksh*
14. Madhumita Mitra, *Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative*
15. Bishnu Mohapatra, *Ford Foundation*
16. Aditya Mukherjee, *Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study*
17. Mridula Mukherjee, *Jawaharlal Nehru University & Nehru Memorial Museum and Library*
18. Amitabh Mukhopadhyay, *Lok Sabha Secretariat*
19. Premila Nazareth, *RaaG*

20. Suchi Pande, *NCPRI and RaaG*
21. Prabhakar Rao, *Kalpavriksh*
22. A. Richa, *Jan Chetna Sansthan*
23. Aruna Roy, *MKSS and NCPRI*
24. Parth Shah, *Centre for Civil Society*
25. Shekhar Singh, *NCPRI & RaaG*
26. Shourie Anand Singh, *Prabodh*
27. Priyanka Varma, *Tata Institute of Social Sciences*
28. Renu Vinod, *Times Foundation*
29. Vishaish Uppal, *NCPRI*