

# SECTION 4 of the RTI ACT

## Why in News?

Recently, Central Information Commission (CIC) has undertaken a transparency audit to ascertain the quality of suo-motu disclosures under **Section 4 of the RTI Act** made by various public authorities.

### Related news

India recently ranked **6th** in the **global RTI ranking**.

The Right to Information Rating is a programme founded by **Access Info Europe (AIE)** and the **Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD)** and is conducted by **Transparency International**.

## Findings of Audit

It found that, out of the 838 public authorities audited, over 85% did not disclose information related to: Budget and programming, Publicity and public interface and e-governance.

It observed that most public authorities had taken transparency-related measures, however, vital information is not fully displayed on official websites.

## Major Reason behind Non-Compliance to Section 4 of RTI

### Lack of Awareness among PIO's:

According to an annual report of **State Information Commission (SIC)**, 80% of Public Information Officers (PIO) and Appellate Authorities (AAs) do not know the basics of the RTI Act.

### Demand Based Supply:

There is focus on furnishing information on demand rather than effectively ensuring voluntary disclosures by public authorities.

### Poor quality of information provided:

Information proactively disclosed is not updated regularly leading to obsolescence of information provided, lack of important items of information on websites and relevant facts, which reflect **lack of transparency** in processes and **inadequate training** provided to the concerned PIO.

### Obsolete record management Guidelines:

The current record management guidelines at Centre and in most states are inadequate to meet the requirements specified under the RTI Act as there is **lack of any electronic document management system** in many of the Departments.

### Neglect of record keeping:

Leading to a tendency to provide bulk unprocessed information rather than a relevant and intelligible summarization.

### Lack of Accountability:

Currently there exist **inadequate measures and processes** for an Information Commission to view the adherence levels of this important provision of the Act, also there is **no provision to fix responsibility** on any officer at the level of public authority in case of non-compliance.

### Non-availability of basic Infrastructure:

Lack of basic infrastructure such as photocopier machines at each Public Authority and basic level of automation such as necessary applications and connectivity hampers its implementation.

## Section 4 of the RTI Act

It states that, every government department has to **voluntarily disclose information** through annual reports and websites.

It mandates that public authorities shall maintain all its records duly catalogued and indexed in a manner and form which facilitate the RTI Act.

## Advantages of Suo-moto Disclosure:

### Improving Information Management

### Security

Publishing information also protects the security of individuals within society. Requesting information for some individuals can sometimes be dangerous, particularly if it threatens powerful interest groups.

### Equality in Access

Proactive disclosure makes the information available to the public rather than particular or few individual(s).

### Increasing Participation

It empowers citizens with information which increase their voice in decision making process and policies, which are more likely to benefit them and less likely to be hijacked by special interest groups.

### Limiting Corruption

Publishing information about the actions of the government keeps public officials under the constant watch of the public, makes governments to be more accountable and less corrupt.

## Way Forward

**Awareness drive:** Government should make awareness programmes targeting the public as well as governmental bodies, for educating them and promoting about suo-motu disclosure under RTI Act.

**Training of public authorities:** Public officials should be trained on how to comply with proactive disclosure rules and how to make most effective use of both ICTs and traditional dissemination channels.

**Establishing Public Records Office (PRO) for website monitoring and auditing:** PRO would have responsibility to oversee proper record keeping in all public offices including preparation and up-dating of manuals, modernization and digitization, monitoring, inspections and other relevant functions. The Public Records Office should function under the overall guidance and supervision of CIC or SIC.

**Improving Infrastructure:** The ARC report had mentioned that Gol may allocate one per cent (1%) of the funds of the 'Flagship Programmes' for a period of five years for improving the infrastructure requirements.

**Strict Punishment:** Government officials hide truth/ facts of information for camouflaging their acts of corruption/-carelessness. This act should come under criminal offence.

**Improving Record Management:** Record keeping procedures need to be developed, reviewed and revised; cataloguing, indexing and orderly storage should be mandatory; all documents need to be converted into rational, intelligible, retrievable information modules.

