



Transparency Review

Journal of Transparency Studies

Civil Society Vigilance

Transparency Review, started in the wake of RTI Act has completed six years. While that concern continues to be a key focus of this journal, it now goes beyond to various aspects to do with transparency in public policymaking and on the rights of a citizen. Similarly, in the media review section, the concern now goes beyond conventional mass media to cover soft media, new media and social networks.

This is the first time in the country that some nominations of the State Government as Information Commissioners were rejected by the State Governor because of their “political” affiliations. This was possible because of prompt initiative of RTI activists in the State by way of protests against the very process of selection, by filing PILs in the High Court and by taking the issue to the larger public. In the process, the Commission in the State has come under greater public glare and activists galvanized themselves for renewed efforts. The RTI activists in other states need to take note of the implications of this Andhra Pradesh episode in earlier this month (February 2012). Venkatesh Nayak’s vigil against efforts to diffuse the RTI Act by amending the Act deserve to be taken note.

The 12th Five Year Plan for 2012–2017 period unfolds from April 2012 with hardly any public discussion – even at a time when the country is witnessing a new era of transparency. According

to news media, Deputy Chairman of Planning Commission was unhappy with the draft of the Plan document and that is a reason for the delay. That apart, how “credible and compelling” has the Plans been? It is perhaps time to question the very scope of the Commission. In this journal, an attempt is made to take a critical view of the five year plans.

Jaipur Literary festival reflects soft power of India in several creative fields. Such massive congregation to showcase creative skills should be held in more places in the country similar to cricket matches. Reading books make children think big and beyond and even ensures that knowledge is not for the sake of having it. Against the backdrop of increased inroads of television into lives of children particularly, the significance of book reading need to be revisited.

900 million cell phones in the country! many of them could now have access to internet too. If Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh is a signal, such a scenario should not be far away. What changes could be expected in the life styles and public affairs of the country?. How can we ensure internet content becomes responsible and responsive to the sensitivities of a larger public. Virtual revolution should be on the offing with such large numbers specially youth having a mobile phone. Can we use this medium to be more argumentative and to promote proactive citizenry?

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Is the Idea of Five Year Plans Outlived?

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

We were supposed to have finalized the 12th Plan by December 2011. National Development Council approved its approach paper in October 2011. The plan document is expected six months after the plan period starts in April 2012 without getting deliberated outside Yojana Bhawan. I thought the 12th Plan will go through an extensive consultation in the process and adopt a different methodology for going about the priorities for 2012 – 2017, as indicated by more than one member of the Commission. All that hangama Planning Commission made in the last one year inviting public participation to reposition the very Commission, seems to here made no difference. Same members are now justifying the delay as newspapers write about Deputy Chairman's unhappiness with the draft.

Perhaps this is the time again to ask what has been the achievement of five year plans?. Particularly in the context of social development. It is difficult to show evidence that they served the basic needs of the country. As I contended in the book I edited in 1985, **India 2020** (the first ever such publication in the series on 2020), the idea of Five Year Plans has outlived. That is even more obvious now. In fact, having organized 16 national lectures since 2010 on **Analysing and Envisioning India**, I venture to say that the Planning Commission today perhaps has become a misleading body towards endeavours of equity, growth and development and in unleashing potential of India. Based on my research, Economic Times published in 1987 on how Planning Commission contributes to inflationary trend officially with its bureaucratic practice of approving Plan allocations of the State Governments as well as the Union Ministries. Several more points could be made today to bring out its irrelevance and ineffectiveness. A desegregated analyses of how much of the budgeted allocation was being actually spent and how much is approved for the following year will bring out the point. Let us consider, devolution of powers to elected local bodies as per the 73rd - 74th Amendment of 1992. Do we see more decentralized functioning of local bodies than before? Are the states sharing public finance with local bodies any differently?.

A review of socio-economic development since 1992 further endorses this argument. Worse fears about ill effects of Planning Commission's ivory tower approach are trickling down from Government's own studies as well as studies by external agencies within and outside the country. Thanks to the Right to Information Act, more information is coming out to remind/support the findings of such reports and reviews. The Prime Minister himself had said while releasing a report early January 2012, that we should be ashamed that 42 percent of nation's children are growing malnourished. Around the same time another study on Andhra Pradesh has brought out that dropout rate has increased in certain age groups below 15 and that enrolment into private schools had gone up from 17 to 44 percent between 2002 and 2010. The Pratham report released by the Prime Minister in January 2012, confirmed such a trend nationally. Similar is the trend in the case of health services – shift to private health services is glaring and the schemes (approved and much acclaimed by Planning Commission) are not catering to the basic primary health needs. They had pushed people to unaffordable private health services and into debt traps as if such schemes were created more as a bonanza for corporate hospitals rather than that of the poor – as only 3.2 percent of the poor are able to avail such public services. Same is the case with improved methods of sanitation. Year after year, we are told drinking water problem of the country is being addressed on a priority and yet we are nowhere near. In fact, on various issues involved in the social development, irrelevance of the Planning Commission is too obvious. Economist Utsa Patnaik described all this as “self inflicted” and a result of “flawed policies” (*The Hindu*, 13 January 2012).

If more than five decades of planning could not provide toilets, primary education, basic health services and drinking water to half of our people what else could be the proof for the insights of the commission? Something is a miss in its priorities and approach?. What should intrigue now is its decision not to include health care in the list of essential entitlements, going against suggestion of its own expert group. Despite campaigns on Mother & Child

Health over the years, more than half of mothers do not give colostrums to the new born soon after birth and 58 percent mothers feed water to their infants before six months. Breast feeding is not practiced commonly despite 98 percent of villages having Anganwadi centres. A recent report on public schools in Greater Hyderabad area brought out that most (85 percent) Government schools lack basic toilet facility (January 14, 2012).

What new discipline has Planning Commission introduced anywhere for better delivery of public services or empowering citizens or reducing imbalances between regions and people or for redressal of user grievances?. Neither Citizen Charter nor social audit ideas originated at the instance of the (or initiated by) Planning Commission. In fact, it cannot escape the responsibility for making citizens dependent on Government much more than ever before in India's history. It reversed a fundamental approach. In the initial years of planning, community had to contribute fifty percent for the local development in kind or labour. Planning Commission could be accused for a dependency syndrome crippling the country.

Having started initially with Programme Evaluation Organization (PEO) and Public Cooperation Division, Planning Commission has denigrated both the functions as if it is concerned more with allocations and approval of budgets. PEO remained more as a notional unit all these years. But with time to time revival of the idea without a clear direction or a specific and reliable methodology, the Commission added to the confusion as to poverty levels and, as a result, some States today are operating with more than two estimates for BPL number. Aadhar is yet another recent example for lack of clarity. Had PEO functioned with its original ideas of assessing outcomes, it would have saved the country from some scandals and averted some failures. As if it is a new idea, the Planning Commission has now (2011) revived the idea of activating PEO-with yet another economic theoretician from a US academic campus!. The idea was even put in President of India's speech in 2009 before the Parliament with nothing concrete as of February 2012.

Outcomes has not been so much of a concern of Planning Commission. And, it has not practiced or promoted or inculcated a concern for outcomes or

proof of pudding aspects at any level of implementation of plans or schemes. Three recent studies revealed contradictory things. Together they bring out a 'missing perspective' that needs to be pursued. Both in the case of schooling and health services, the Government has built a huge infrastructure over the years with an intention of reaching out and serving particularly the poor. Immunization campaign and programme is more than a few decades old, Material and Child Health (MCH) promotion, campaign for breast feeding too is more than a couple of decade old, and yet even awareness levels among mothers is disappointing.

The report Prime Minister released on January 10, 2012 brought out that awareness among mothers about nutrition is low. And that, in fact, 92 percent of mothers had never heard the word "malnutrition" or its local equivalent. The report also pointed "to the negligence shown towards girl children" even in their childhood. (The Naandi Foundation Report).

At a point when the need for public broadcasting is more relevant because of proliferation of corporate media in the country, the Planning Commission had induced All India Radio and Doordarshan, build over the years with certain concerns and capabilities, to depend on markets. Now there is ample evidence to link growth and priorities of mass media for the increasing levels of crime, violence and exploitation of women and children and even for certain apathy of citizen. It was during this very period that country's mass media has proliferated and spread to the nook and corner of the country as never visualized before. This is so particularly in the case of news media of the country. What has been their preoccupation? Why planning commission remained a silent spectator?.

Prime Minister rightly described the state of affairs in this regard as a "national shame". By doing so the Prime Minister had reminded that our campaigns over the years have not yielded results that were expected. And there is nothing specific that the Planning Commission did in this regard – even indirectly. One explanation is that our Five Year Plans have lost their relevance. No wonder Prannoy Roy (on NDTV) posed the Question "Should Planning Commission be Shut down"? Our focus now has to be more on implementation and good governance issues.

No Amendments through the Backdoor, Please! in RTI Act

Thank you Venkatesh Nayak for your relentless and vigilant efforts over the years. That is evident from this revelation of Feb 1, 2012. Venkatesh Nayak has send this: venkatesh@humanrightsinitiative.org

Even as we tirelessly debated and agitated over the Lokpal Bill and related issues such as grievance redress, whistleblower protection and judicial standards and accountability in 2011, the Government of India very quietly introduced amendments to the *Right to Information Act, 2005*. The Government introduced *The Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority Bill (NSRA Bill)* in the Lok Sabha in September 2011. This Bill seeks to add a new exemption to Section 8(1) of the RTI Act about nuclear safety matters and recommends the exclusion of an unspecified number of yet-to-be-established nuclear safety agencies from transparency obligations by placing them in Schedule 2 of the RTI Act.

What is the NSRA Bill all about?

The Minister of State for Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions introduced this Bill in the Lok Sabha in September 2011. The same Minister is responsible for the administration of the RTI Act also. The Bill seeks to establish a legal framework for strengthening radiation and nuclear safety in India.

What amendments to the RTI Act have been proposed?

The NSRA Bill introduces two amendments to the RTI Act under Sections 8 and 24.

What are the implications of these proposed amendments?

The proposed amendment to Section 8(1) of the RTI Act is superfluous. The formulation of the proposed exemption also poses problems. The Bill seeks to exclude organisations concerned with nuclear safety that have not yet been established. Such organisations clearly do not fall within the categories of intelligence and security organisations mentioned in Section 24 of the RTI Act.

What is the current status of the Bill?

The Bill was referred to the Department-related Standing Committee on Science and Technology, Environment and Forests soon after tabling. The Committee invited comments on the Bill in September itself. The press release issued by the Committee's secretariat is accessible at: <http://164.100.47.5/webcom/MainPage.aspx> Friends at PRS-India say that the Committee has completed its hearings in January 2012 and is working on its report. Since the report of the committees may be finalised any day before the budget session starts.

What can we do to prevent negative amendments to the RTI Act?

There is an urgent need for the entire RTI movement in India to write to the Chairperson and Members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee to reject the amendments proposed to the RTI Act.

Reality Check on SC Pronouncement

Shailesh Gandhi

The Supreme Court in a RTI judgement on August 9, 2011 made an observation which is affecting the minds of many Ministers and senior officials. The observation was, "The nation does not want a scenario where 75% of the staff of public authorities spends 75% of their time in collecting and furnishing information to applicants instead of discharging their regular duties. The threat of penalties under the RTI Act and the pressure of the authorities under the RTI Act should

not lead to employees of a public authorities prioritising information furnishing, at the cost of their normal and regular duties."

If 75% staff spend 75% of their time, it would mean **56%** (0.75x0.75) of the total time would be spent on giving information. If this possibility ever comes about it would be scary and undesirable.

I decided to do a reality check.

According to the most optimistic estimate not more than 1 crore RTI applications are likely to be received

in 2012 in all the public authorities in the States and Central Government together.

The **average** time to attend each RTI application would be less than 3 hours. This means no more than 3 crore hours spent by all officers.

If we assume that an average government employee works for just 6 hours a day for 200 days a year, it would mean he would work for a total of 1200 hours in a year.

3 crore hours divided by 1200 hours is 25000 which means 25000 employees would be required full time.

The Central Government and all State Governments have about 1.2 crore employees totally. This means that the total time spent by Government employees would be **0.208%**. (25000 divided by 12000000=0.208%).

To put this in the idiom of the Supreme Court's observation, no more than **4.6%** officials are spending **4.6%** of their time presently on giving information. The Supreme Court's observation has no connection with reality.

Nizamabad meet on Section 4 of RTI

A key feature of RTI Act and a critical one for sincere implementation of the Act and for an early realization of its benefits is Section 4(a). But this is the most neglected activity, least implemented and hardly discussed in the last six years although the Act mandates 120 days for its implementation. Eventually, much sooner, the number of applications received/field and replied with specific information depends on the implementation of this section 4(a). Six years should have been good enough to see that departments implemented this Section 4(a) suo-moto. And yet there is no evidence of that. That is perhaps because responsibilities in this regard had not been specified.

Even annual reports of Information Commissions have not recorded or claimed much of its implementation. These suo-moto provisions are fundamental for transparency regime. Applications seeking information under RTI become meaningful and more specific once suo-moto display disclosures are fully and promptly implemented.

CMS had indicated at the very outset in 2006, at its first conference of Information Commissioners at Hyderabad, that apprehensions about the load of RTI applications would disappear once suo-moto provision clause gets implemented. Not all the 17 aspects of functioning of a department require periodic update. Once the exercise is initiated, the update should become easy. That helps and sustains transparency.

And yet, neither of the Information Commissions have taken to earnestly or consistently implement suo-moto provisions. Until the 6th annual conference

in Delhi by the Central Information Commission in November 2011, there was no discussion in this regard. It is against this background a Women's College in a far off district of Andhra Pradesh, Nizamabad, organised a two day meet on Section 4(a) of RTI Act deserve appreciation. That is how I went all the way to attend this two day meet January 17-18, 2012. RTI Act need more women and educational institutions taking interest. So far it has been disappointing. More women's organizations and educational institutes across the country need to take proactive interest with debate on RTI Act, its implementation and as to who is availing and benefiting more.

Seminars like the one by the Women College in Nizamabad go a long way. The message that need to go across is that Section 4(a) of RTI Act need more serious attention, follow up and time bound targets for implementation. The new legislations like Service Delivery Guarantee, Electronic Service Delivery and Grievances redressal become more meaningful with the implementation of this section 4(a). Two initiative are needed in this regard. The Govt should indicate that responsibility for implementation is that of the Head of the service at The Secretary level and that of the collection of the district level (not that of PIO). The second is regarding computerization and on line networks. Since budget is already provided more than two years ago, what exactly is the operational plan need to be indicated to larger public. In fact, this should be part of suo moto disclosure.

NBR

Information Commissioners' appointments spark row

Irked by the way in which information commissioners have been appointed to the AP Information Commission (APIC) in “violation of guidelines,” Right to Information (RTI) activists are planning to take legal recourse for remedy.

V V Rao, convenor of the Social Audit Council on Information Rights, said his organisation will go to court if governor E S L Narasimhan approves the names referred to him by the government. The question remains whether the gov will do so at all. Sources said he has not yet seen the file. On an earlier occasion, Narasimhan had shot down a recommendation from the government to appoint a former information commissioner to the AP Administrative Tribunal citing non adherence to rules.

RTI activists are demanding to know the procedure adopted in selecting the nominees.

Courtesy: The Indian Express (2 February 2012)

The choice of candidates appointed as Information Commissioners, under the Right To Information (RTI) Act, has triggered a row in Andhra Pradesh with the information activists and opposition parties dubbing the exercise as political rehabilitation.

The government has appointed eight Information Commissioners at one go. However, a majority of them are either active members of the ruling Congress or have been recommended by the ruling party bigwigs.

There are allegations that political considerations alone had guided the selection process. And, intense lobbying was said to have tilted the scales in favour of some of the aspirants.

However, the RTI activists expressed dismay over the selection and said that such an approach would undermine the spirit of the RTI Act.

“The entire institution has been converted into yet another rehabilitation centre for politicians and retired bureaucrats, some of whom do not even know how to file RTI application,” a leading RTI activist D Rakesh Kumar said.

The RTI campaigners have been opposing appointment of retired bureaucrats on the ground that they were very much part of the system and would never fully appreciate the public right to information.

There is also a demand for barring politicians from becoming Information Commissioners as they would be more inclined to protect the party in power.

Interestingly, three of the eight new Commissioners had unsuccessfully contested the 2009 elections on behalf of the Congress, the TDP and the Praja Rajyam Party. However, all of them are now with the Congress.

Courtesy: The Tribune (21 February 2012)

Governor rejects 4 names

In a jolt to chief minister N. Kiran Kumar Reddy, Andhra Pradesh governor E.S.L. Narasimhan on Tuesday (20 feb) refused to appoint four “political” nominees as state information commissioners. The governor rejected four out of eight names chosen by a high-level selection committee comprising the chief minister, his deputy Damodar Rajanarasimha and Leader of Opposition N. Chandrababu Naidu on January 31, and asked the government to reconsider the selection, highly-placed official sources said.

Reacting to the development, Mr Nadiu said the government should have heeded his advice and reconvened a meeting of the committee for picking up the commissioners. Mr. Narasimhan returned the relevant file after taking into consideration the “dissent note” written by the Opposition leader.

Courtesy: The Hindu (21 February 2012)

Bangalore Girl beats bribe seeker with RTI threat

A week ago *DNA* kick-started-'Grounding the Corrupt'- series (weekly) to offer its readers a platform to air their genuine stories of victimization at the hands of bureaucracy and the powers that be. The objective of the campaign is not to target individuals or to malign the institution of bureaucracy but to highlight rampant corrupt practices on the ground. That is the task of the government agencies. The exercise instead is aimed at trying to sensitize the common man on the street to the citizen charter to ultimately help reform the system.

The campaign invites readers to write to *DNA* about their personal experiences of dealing both with red tape and corruption. The focus is our reader and the problems he or she faces on a day-to-day basis. Be it the corruption involved in procuring basic tools like a ration card, passport or a driving license. This might well include corruption involved in getting a birth or death certificate.

Or, else be it a case of delayed or rejected income tax refund or an insurance claim denied by the public sector insurer, the series aims to highlight such cases and more with a view to take the fight against corruption to the grass root level. To widen the scope you may also send us corruption or red tape episodes involved in the small and medium enterprise to big business. The messages is — stay away from paying a penny as an extraneous consideration. Paying bribe is as much a crime as bribe seeking.

The victim psychology generally invokes fear of reprisal from the powers that be. That is why most corruption cases go unreported. Most often as an individual victim you 'go along' and seek peace while in case of businessmen the effort is to 'move on' to ultimately secure the business. That is why we would encourage you to speak out against corruption. *DNA* would ensure your identity is protected so long you have a genuine case backed by evidence. Each case would be scrutinized for its veracity.

In today's episode, we bring you two case studies, one highlighting a case of a determined reader who chose to assert her right and ultimately got what was due to her without paying any bribe.

Case 1:

City: Bengaluru

(Name: Withheld)

Department Concerned: Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) — local municipal body

Case Study: Teaching others how to deal with growing corruption, a Bengaluru city girl says she fought with the system and got justice in the end in April 2010. To get a transfer from the Panchayat Khata (account) to BBMP Khata (account) for her house, she says she went through the designated process but could only achieve frustration. The reason, she alleged, was obvious. She refused to pay the bribe. She threatened to lodge a RTI and this worked magic, she added.

Case 2:

City: Mumbai

(Name: withheld)

Department: Income Tax

Case Study: A complainant (a services sector) company alleged that it was asked to pay up through a consultant for genuine assessment. The company further alleged that the amount was paid and assessment worked out accordingly. Since the consultant did not 'equitably' distribute the money paid among all the relevant officials, a junior income tax official pulled out an earlier assessment sheet worked out by the said officer carrying a different income tax figure due to the company. This led to a dispute and now the matter was under enquiry. This shows how consultants act as conduits and at times act too clever, the company alleged.

Case 3:

City: Kalyan, Mumbai

(Name: Withheld)

Department Concerned: Purna Irrigation Basmatnagar/Nanded/Parbhani & Aurangabad, Maharashtra

Case Study: It's not important on which side of the coin you are as the fire of corruption can catch you anywhere.

Consider this official, whose son has alleged that due dearness allowance had been denied to his father even after his death. The employee was posted at Purna Irrigation department office, Basmatnagar, as a junior clerk in 1992. His son alleged that his father did not get Rs 5,403 allowance until his death. Now the son is fighting the system

that has allegedly made bogus signature of his father and someone else claimed the allowance. The deceased employee's son and father (still alive) have now petitioned the CVC, Governor of Maharashtra, and the CBI, without any justice as yet. The son hopes somebody would stand up for his dead father so that he can rest in peace.

Courtesy: DNA (6 January 2012)

Panel: Bring NGOs, PPPs under RTI

Chetan Chauhan

Every non-government organisation (NGO) and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) project should come under purview of the Right To Information Act, a panel appointed by Prime Manmohan Singh has said.

A high-level panel on public health has told the government that RTI should be made mandatory for all NGOs and public private partnerships working in the social sector such as health to improve transparency and accountability.

The definition of the partnership involves hospitals built by a private entity but a land for which was given at a highly subsidised rate by the government. There are several such hospitals across India, which falls under this category, but they refuse to abide by the transparency law.

Transparency watchdog, the Central Information Commission (CIC), has said any project where the government provides land at a subsidised rate or provide annual financial assistance of Rs one crore or more should come under the ambit of RTI.

Planning commission deputy chairperson Montek Singh Ahluwalia had refused to bring all PPP projects under RTI saying the CIC will have to decide on individual projects.

K Srinath Reddy, who headed the PM-appointed panel, said transparency was a must to ensure accountability of PPP institutions working for national building and providing basic amenities to people.

"Many of these institutions were set up with the government's help. We have asked the government to ensure that they come abide by RTI," he said.

Courtesy: Hindustan Times (24 February 2012)

Citizens have the Right to Know how Judges are appointed: CIC

Krishnadas Rajagopal

The Supreme Court's denial of an RTI request for details of correspondence between the law minister and the Chief Justice of India about the procedure for appointment of judges has led the Central Information Commission (CIC) to ask whether citizens have no right to know how their judges get their jobs.

"It cannot be anybody's case that the change in the procedure of judges should happen completely outside the notice or the knowledge of the citizens of India and that (they) should not be given an opportunity to articulate their views. The objective

of the RTI Act is precisely to help create an informed citizenry (which) can hold the state and its instrumentalities to account," Chief Information Commissioner Satyananda Mishra wrote in his order.

"...The procedure of appointment of judges or any proposal for modifying that procedure should necessarily be available in the public domain so that the citizens know what is transpiring among the major stakeholders, in this case, the Government of India and the CJI..."

The order came on an appeal filed by RTI activist Subhash Agarwal to access written communications

between the CJI's office and then union law minister Veerappa Moily on the proposal to modify existing procedure with an aim to appoint judges who meet high standards of competence and integrity.

This is the second time that the CIC has confronted the SC about judges' appointments. It had earlier

ordered that the process of appointment should not be a closed-door affair of the collegium — an order that saw the SC appeal to itself and successfully get a stay on the CIC's decision. The matter was then referred to a constitution bench.

Courtesy: Indian Express (4 January 2012)

Chhattisgarh hikes RTI fees 900%, NCPRI seeks rollback

The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) expressed "dismay" over the Chhattisgarh assembly's decision to increase RTI application fees by 900% from Rs 50 to Rs 500. Fees per copy has been increased to Rs 15 and the inspection of documents to Rs 50.

In a statement signed by Venkatesh Nayak, Nikhil Dey, Angela Rangad and Ramakrishna Raju, NCPRI said, "A move of this nature can only be designed to discourage potential RTI users from filing applications. The net result will be to significantly and negatively affect the transparency of the legislative assembly. In particular, chances of the poor using RTI to ask questions and take documents of documents from the legislative assembly will be seriously compromised."

The group added that the issue of exorbitant fees being imposed by various public authorities was raised many times and in some cases the public authority concerned had reconsidered and brought the fees in line with what has become the national

norm - Rs 10 per application and Rs 2 per copy. NCPRI has strongly urged the Speaker of the Chhattisgarh assembly to reconsider this decision and would like to suggest that the fees be reduced from Rs 50 to Rs 10. Earlier, information commissioner in the Central Information Commission Shailesh Gandhi had written to the Chhattisgarh chief minister, Speaker and leader of opposition urging them to reconsider the decision to hike RTI fees.

Describing the move as "disturbing" and "unfortunate", Gandhi said it was "against the spirit and purpose of the RTI Act and would be unwarranted discrimination against citizens who seek information from the legislative assembly. This would give rise to suspicion and speculation that the legislative assembly wishes to discourage citizens from exercising their fundamental right".

The assembly had ruled that Rs 500 would be charged per application and Rs 15 per page as additional fee.

Courtesy: Times of India (27 January 2012)

CIC Cleans Up

The Central Information Commission (CIC) which has come in for some amount of criticism for the mounting number of cases before it, has decided to make its functioning more transparent. From now on, the CIC will display the list of all pending cases on its website in order to keep citizens informed about its activities. Cases pending before chief information commissioner Satyananda Mishra and information commissioner Shailesh Gandhi have already been uploaded, while those of other commissioners are likely to follow soon.

The CIC has a pendency of 22,000 cases with 2,500 cases added every month. Sources say the idea was born when information commissioners discovered that nearly 110 cases had been ignored completely as they were left out of the cause list due to an error. This new system, it is hoped, will see an end to arbitrariness and also keep complainants in the loop on the status of their complaints. We hope so too.

Courtesy: Chauthi Duniya (10 February 2012)

Government, judiciary not interested in RTI disclosures: CIC

Nidhi Sharma

At a time when the Congress-led UPA government has been battling with Team Anna over a comprehensive anti-corruption legislation, the Central Information Commission (CIC) has taken on the government and the judiciary over the transparency issue saying not even a single public authority has been following disclosure norms.

Even six years after the implementation of the Right to Information Act 2005, the final appellate authority for the legislation feels that the government has not voluntarily disclosed information on its ministry and department websites, as required under Section 4 (1) (b) of RTI Act.

Speaking to ET, Central Information Commissioner Satyananda Mishra said, "The biggest issue on RTI Act implementation is whether the government departments have implemented Section 4 (1) (b) and voluntarily disclosed information on their websites. We have got a study done and when I say that none of the websites of Government of India follow the disclosure law, it is not an exaggeration. Even the high courts are no better."

Each government department is required to disclose information, including number of employees, their education, salary drawn, the tenure of employment, records held by the department, records destroyed, areas of responsibility and similar information.

Mishra said, "When we see websites of the government, we find half-hearted attempt to disclose information. If you randomly go to websites, you will find names of people who have retired and in some cases have even died. There is no updated information. We have sent repeated letters to the

government on how they can improve the information delivery mechanism, which would ultimately mean less number of RTI applications. After all RTI applications cost money not only to the applicant but also to the government."

CIC's suggestion that each ministry should publish a "negative list", which would include information that the ministry would not provide, has also not been followed. "Our national goal should be that no citizen is required to use RTI Act. But our suggestions have not been followed," Mishra said.

CIC had suggested in 2010 that each government department appoint a transparency officer to oversee the implementation of RTI Act. So far, of the 2,200 public authorities registered with CIC, only 324 (about 15%) have followed this.

It is not just the government but also the judiciary that does not seem to be following the rule book. CIC has found that only Guwahati High Court has a website that gives "exemplary information". CIC has directed all the high courts to get their act together by April 1.

Hearing an appeal filed by Hyderabad-based RTI activist C J Karira, CIC has ordered that high courts should voluntarily disclose information as the law provides. Mishra said, "There are other issues like harsh RTI rules also. Allahabad high court has levied a fee of Rs 500 per application and per item, which means that if you ask more than one question they will charge Rs 1,000. We have directed them to at least follow what Supreme Court is doing - levying a standard fee of Rs 10."

Courtesy: The Economic Times (24 February 2012)



The glory and the blemishes of the Indian News Media

Amartya Sen

Some quotes from an article of Dr Amartya Sen on news media appeared in the Hindu OP-ED page on January 7, 2012 are given here

The first problem is that of some real laxity in professionalism in achieving accuracy, which can be harmed even without any deliberate intention to mislead or misinform. The second is the bias — often implicit — in the choice of what news to cover and what to ignore, and the way this bias relates particularly to class divisions in India.

An exaggerated concentration on their lives, which the Indian media tend typically to display, gives an unreal picture of the rosiness of what is happening to Indians in general. There tends to be fulsome coverage in the news media of the lifestyles of the fortunate, and little notice of the concerns of the less fortunate. To refer to three of many unfortunate facts (the list can be quite long): (1) India has the highest percentage of undernourished children in the entire world, measured in terms of the standard criteria; (2) India spends a far lower percentage of its GNP than China on government-provided health care and

has a much lower life expectancy; and (3) India's average rank among South Asian countries — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan — in the standard social indicators, varying from life expectancy and immunisation to infant mortality

and girls' schooling, has dropped over the last twenty years from being second-best to second-worst (even as India has surged ahead in terms of GNP per capita).

The bias in coverage, even though it is by no means unpleasant to the reader,

contributes quite heavily to the political apathy about the urgency of remedying the extreme deprivation of the Indian underprivileged. Since the fortunate group includes not only business leaders and the professional classes, but also the bulk of the country's intellectuals, the story of unusual national advancement gets, directly or indirectly, much aired — making an alleged reality out of what is at best a very partial story.

Our free media, including our largely unfettered press, are a hugely important asset for democratic India. And yet the celebration of the Indian news media can go only so far - and no further. There are at least two barriers to quality that need to be overcome. The first is some real laxity in professionalism in achieving accuracy. The second is the bias, often implicit, in the choice of what news to cover and what to ignore, and the way this bias relates particularly to class divisions in India

Courtesy: The Hindu (7 January 2012)

THE INTERNET AND REGULATION

The halo around the internet

Vanita Kohli-Khandekar

Why does anything to do with the internet become a question of good versus evil?

The Stop Online Piracy Act, or Sopa, has just been put on the back burner by the US government following an online howl. Sopa does need a rethink. However, the debate across the media, largely, was about the government's right to police the Net, not about what the Bill sought to do — control piracy. Closer home in India, Kapil Sibal talked about “objectionable material” online. He was lambasted by magazines, newspapers, TV channels and, of course, online.

The message: don't mess with the internet. It is a beacon of democracy, fair play and free speech. It is a forum that offers hope to all the oppressed people in the world. No one can have any jurisdiction over it. The outpouring of venom, the thousands and millions of digital signatures every time anyone questions anything said on the Net tell you how popular it is. This is not just because it reaches over two billion people globally. But because it has a depth, an interactivity and a ubiquity that no other media offers.

Which is why it is important that we ignore Sopa or Sibal. They are merely messengers. What we need to focus on is the debates they throw up — piracy and “objectionable content”.

Piracy is at best thievery and at worst a source of funding for terrorists. It is a perfectly valid concern for any company trying to run a legitimate business, if its products are being bought, sold or exchanged illegally on the internet. Yet it doesn't seem to rouse either consumers or activists.

If an anchor or a news reporter uses “objectionable content” — meaning spouts rubbish on television news channels — the outpouring against news media is a sight to behold. Yet if someone does the same thing online, it doesn't elicit the same reaction. According to media lawyer Anish Dayal, the laws of libel apply to anything “defamatory” that

has been communicated on a public platform to more than one person. So any publication or utterance on the internet is subject to the same censure as it would be on TV channels or newspapers.

In reality, however, there is an unwritten code for the internet, giving it more liberty than other media. The freedom to steal or spew online is greater, it seems, than our need to maintain civility on public forums such as Facebook, Google or Twitter, among thousands of other sites.

You could argue that if rude behaviour, false information and pornography (one of the biggest industries online) are acceptable on the internet, mainstream newspapers and magazines too should be free to publish paid news or write anything they want. So should film, television or radio.

When the government decided to ban smoking scenes in Indian films in 2005, the industry fell in line. In 2009 a film called Billu Barber cut its name to Billu, because barbers objected to it. There are dozens of perfectly all right films that have had their releases held up, names changed, or scenes deleted because it might cause trouble. TV channels are routinely told to hold back during times of communal crisis.

In almost all these cases the films, newspapers or TV stations have co-operated with authorities. Many of us may not agree with what was demanded. But the fact is that we are a heterogeneous democracy. There are simply too many people in India dying to take offence at the slightest provocation.

With so much disagreement and seeming intolerance, India remains one of the most liberal media markets in the world. If newspapers, film, television or radio follow the rules and still manage to overthrow governments, expose scams or bring murderers to book, why is the internet exempt?

This exemption makes it a natural haven for people who have nowhere else to spew their vitriol. Note that the guys who post the worst, most malicious comments never give their names, religious identities

or locations. If they did the same thing to someone in their homes or in a public place, they would probably be beaten up. But activism and venom come easy sitting in an ergonomic chair far from its physical and moral repercussions.

Therefore, it is time to move the internet out of the privacy of cubicles, offices and homes and bring it into public squares. It is time to acknowledge that this medium is as powerful as television or film. And

to begin an honest debate on how best we can keep all that is good and minimise all that is bad about the internet. This is not happening because every time someone questions the medium, he or she becomes the evil. The messenger becomes the vilified; the debate shifts away.

Without debate or a regulatory framework that works, how on earth can this medium ever be strengthened?

Courtesy: Business Standard (14 February 2012)

Is regulating content feasible?

PN Vasanti

Content regulation or even media regulation through a traditional regulator or government department is an outdated concept given the ecosystem

The recent controversy sparked by Kapil Sibal on the need for regulating content on the Internet, especially the social networking sites, has led to a renewed debate on the subject.

The term content regulation implies the general rules applicable to all media content. Such rules—both formal and informal—always existed and are practised daily by all of us. These rules become controversial when they come to mean the suppression of ideas or images by the government or others with authority, and therefore “regulated”.

Historically, content regulation has always been contentious. Speeches, posters, publications, radio, television or more recently the Internet have always evoked strong reactions. This is primarily due to the fact that content regulation is considered a violation of the basic right of freedom of speech. This is the right on which civilizations, societies, and even governments are built and is enshrined in the basic tenets of a democracy.

It is also because of this that there is authority and power that are invoked by platforms or mediums of content dissemination and public interface. The need for regulation on this revered right was conceptualized only after there was misuse, abuse and exploitation of this right and authority. There are also other basic codes that our societies cherish, such as protecting the vulnerable, especially our children. Governments have usually used the cause of security for introducing regulation.

In India, the right to expression enshrined in our Constitution does not come freely—certain conditions or obligations are attached. So, as soon as this right infringes on other existing rights or laws, it can be checked.

For example, prevailing defamation rules, unless used within the “public interest” purview, can have serious repercussions. This was seen recently in the case of a former judge suing a television news channel for Rs 100 crore for mistakenly showing his picture in relation to a report on a scam.

While there is sufficient ground both for and against the regulation of content, the larger question is whether it is doable or practical to regulate content in the current technology-driven complex media landscape. Related to this is the question of who will do the regulating.

Content regulation or even media regulation through a traditional regulator or government department is an outdated concept given the ecosystem. Even when there are a fixed number of players, as in the case of the current 600-odd television channels, this has been an impossible proposition. Now with the Internet, multi-source content producers are almost equal to the number of consumers, so the question of external regulation is quite irrelevant. When you try to control the Internet, it goes beyond journalism or regulating media organizations. It is the common citizen you are trying to control.

The best bet is then self-regulation of and by the citizen or the consumer of content in this case. That

works in an ideal scenario of the citizen being proactive. However, in reality, awareness of laws even among producers and consumers of content is poor.

In fact, all media—print, broadcast, Internet—have to ensure that their content is not illegal, harmful or offensive as per the law of the country and community standards. In practice, however, like most laws in our country, the implementation and enforcement of various laws applicable to content are quite weak.

Traditionally, across the world, independent regulators address issues of standards and deal with

complaints that arise in the subjective interpretation of content. But even these paradigms are now moving towards more liberal models of co-regulation—a midway between self-regulation and traditional regulation. The prime benefits of co-regulation are the expertise offered by specialized industry-based organizations and a detached regulatory organization with a clear system of legal backing and accountability.

Of course, we have the other extreme example of China, where all content is filtered and heavily monitored—but that is not possible or even desirable in our democratic society.

Courtesy: Mint (17 December 2012)

Jaipur Jamboree

Having attended the Jaipur Literary Festival, PN Vasanti summes up her views here

The Jaipur Literacy Festival received much attention this year for not able to facilitate participation of a controversial author, as per schedule. This incidence became an issue of fundamental rights and suppression of freedom of expression debate that raged throughout the festival.

However the significant thing for this festival is that it has been able to put Jaipur and India on the global literacy scene. Renowned authors and literary figures from across the globe participated in this festival. The usual glitterati and celebrities were also visible to add glamour. The elaborate music shows and performances also added to the overall charm and attraction to the festival.

The festival provides a unique opportunity to participate and meet with Literary figures and favourite authors. Interestingly, the festival is free for anybody to participate – the crowds were a clear indication of the popularity and interest of not just the locals but people all over India and even the world descending in Jaipur to attend this festival. Throughout the 5 days, the four tents within Diggi Palace grounds were over spilling with crowds gathered to hear the panel discussions and Authors.

This was an occasion to rub shoulders and catch your favourite authors and celebrities strolling in the festival venue. It was not unusual to find Barkha Dutt, Vidhu Vinod chopra with wife and daughter, Javed Akhter, Prasoon Joshi, Kapil Sibal, Amy Chua, Ben Okri, Deepak Chopra, Oprah Winfrey, along with local school children, prominent Delhi and Jaipur officials, housewives and young professionals.

Infact, going by the sheer numbers still interested in the written word and printed books, this festival certainly presents a positive trend specially, in this information era dominated by the television and internet.

The festival organisers need to be complimented for putting up such interesting show and impressive program. Managing the show of this magnitude and calibre is indeed something to be proud. It is thru festivals like these that greater public participation and attention is possible to issues and subjects not covered in mainstream media discourse.

Such festivals and forums are needed to showcase and promote writing and young writers. Shared common forums like these also contribute in building much required public spaces in a democratic society. The concept of the festival with glamour and entertainment along with serious discussions and attention to critical issues is the need of the hour as it attracts all – young, old, famous, aspiring, booklovers and also the ordinary person.

Jaipur LitFest as Spectacle

Ashoak Upadhyay

At the Jaipur Literary Festival, 'the Greatest Literary Show on Earth', the writer was on display like a cricketer bathed in IPL floodlights. Its seriousness was trivialised, in typically Indian style

The recently concluded Jaipur Literary festival showed India honours writers, literary producers if you wish, the only way it can: By turning them into “players” in a Spectacle. If it can organise the Indian Premier League (IPL) and variations thereof with all its accompanying signs of entertainment, so can it literary production with its own iconography.

In the IPL, cricket has been turned truly into a gladiatorial sport of Roman times. Played out under the canopy of night sky, with players drenched in the shadow-free yellow of floodlights, the audience soaks in the ‘magical’ grandiloquence of the Spectacle’s signs: cheerleaders, heart-stopping music and of course “sports chatter”, in Umberto Eco’s memorable phrase, as equally important constitutive elements of the Spectacle as the game itself.

A new map for litfests

At Jaipur, the State government and policymakers in New Delhi ‘created’ an iconography that was peculiarly Indian, unlike the IPL that has borrowed wholeheartedly from American sports ‘Spectacle’.

The whole controversy over Salman Rushdie’s participation, in retrospect, reads like a parody of a Kafkaesque moment: a threat to life that the celebrated author later suspected not to exist, and yet he respected it enough not to defy; the readings by four writers of passages from the banned novel; their hurried exit from the site on being informed of the danger to their lives, an episode that parodied the Gulag and “dissident-writer” precariousness. And finally, back to Kafka, as officials (and some troublemakers) refuse Mr Rushdie even a “virtual” presence. Two new signs were, added to the iconography of the hugely “successful” carnival.

One was the fear of “fundamentalist” or what has been identified with it, a Muslim backlash (it was never clear who had threatened Mr Rushdie or why considering he had attended the JLF in 2007, posing for photographs on Juhu Beach in Mumbai)

that rekindled his fame. Two, by denying the most worthy Indo-Anglian literary producer in modern times his “freedom of expression”, it also ignited global attention and turned the event into a Spectacle worth viewing.

Both, the fear of attack by Muslims on Mr Rushdie and the media-perceived onslaught on the writer’s fundamental freedom were not grounded in reality, but in public relations of sorts.

The Famed One was never denied a visa and it’s highly unlikely that the Indian State will hunt him down should he write about the dismal record of the Indian government in upholding writers’ freedoms. All that the Rajasthan government would have needed to do had he done so to do is to simply point to the JLF as vivid testimony to the freedom allowed to writers to “express” themselves.

And express themselves they did, even if few listened even to those who deserved attention and the privilege of critical appreciation. One print media person noticed that Tom Stoppard’s discussion on his art drew a thinner crowd than Oprah Winfrey, and that it was restless.

Writing for writers

Writers couldn’t have cared less, for they came to meet other writers and, needless to say, important publishers and perhaps to just soak in the headiness of the country’s best watering hole for high culture (the other being Goa). One debut writer gushed he had come to meet his “heroes.” He didn’t mean those who bought his literary outpourings, but established members of that fraternity to which he had gained membership.

The combination of the Wonder Boy of cheesecake Indian fiction writing and global writers of no small repute, despite the Kafkaesque parodies or perhaps because of them, lent the JLF a quivering intensity of expectations.

At the JLF, writers were transported from the solitary pursuit of inspiration, under the floodlights of instant and glamorous nobility.

Perhaps many visitors left the carnival site with hopes of returning as a writer, but the uniqueness of the Spectacle was not to inspire in them the noble pursuit of the right word (or the nobler one of reading) so much as to carry away, however briefly, the scent of glamour in a profession once thought “unprofitable”.

The JLF was a celebration of writing, not reading; it was an exaltation of writers in a way that only India, the specialist in Spectacles and the art of turning the serious into the trivial, can achieve.

India’s unique fests

Yet, the JLF was no ordinary Spectacle, with the obvious signs of one like the IPL. In the latter, players are like gladiators in the way American baseball players are; they draw sustenance from the arena in which their claims to fame find justification.

In the case of the literary festival at Jaipur, writers do not “play” for an audience, as they would at the Edinburgh Art festival or in street readings; here they ‘play’ for themselves.

So the JLF simply reasserts or confirms at the very least, the exalted position of the writer: Jaipur represents a journey from exalted solitude of writing to the no less exalted experience of self-affirmation. If the IPL uncovers the cricketer’s persona, the JLF simply confirms the writers’.

But in one crucial sense the JLF is similar to the IPL as Spectacle. Both engage audience attention in the image of the “player” rather than the “sport” or its sublime and sometimes, ineffable qualities.

At JLF it is the writer at work, discussing, empanelled, televised, all of which add up to Gestures that substitute for his art or its inspiration (at least for the audience whose numbers count for the festival’s huge success).

The writer is on display just as the cricketer on the pitch bathed in floodlights is.

The JLF’s official website underlines its success “The Greatest Literary Show on Earth.” It had everything a writers’ carnival needs: good food, good conversation, great writers. But where are The Readers?

Courtesy: The Hindu (1 February 2012)

Investing in Reading

PN Vasanti

In the era of television and the Internet, do books matter? The answer to this question, even today, is a resounding yes.

The TV and Internet versus books debate is more relevant to the younger generation that’s hooked to the screens. So addictive and convenient are the screens that online news sites and e-books have begun to replace newspapers and books.

Yes, reading for pleasure or recreation has certainly taken a back seat with television having become the prominent entertainment medium today. Many studies across the globe and even in India have shown a decline in the reading habit among students and, to some extent, even among adults.

Reading for pleasure is a habit that needs nurturing from very early in life. Fewer students today are reading for pleasure although it’s a habit associated with better performance in school and better communication skills. Studies have also shown reading expands vocabulary, broadens and enriches experiences and stimulates the development of the brain.

So serious is the declining trend in reading that some countries like the UK or Canada have made concentrated efforts to encourage reading beyond text books among school children. The challenge for parents and educators is to instill in students a sense of pleasure in reading by providing reading material that is interesting and relevant to them.

While governments worldwide have focused on literacy skills and general education, reading for the joy of it is often forgotten. Many schools and even colleges in India do not have access to books beyond their curriculum. Until recently, good books for children were not even available in local languages.

Today, schools in India are realizing the importance of reading and providing quality books beyond textbooks as critical learning inputs for children.

Some Delhi schools are making special efforts, such as DEAR (drop everything and read) periods to instill an interest in reading. Book weeks are organized to encourage reading, discussion and writing stories.

However, there are many types of schools in our country and most do not have any interest or inclination in encouraging reading beyond academic texts. Most schools in smaller cities or rural India do not have any libraries. Access to children in village or public libraries is usually discouraged because adults generally use the public space for reading newspapers or to exchange gossip.

Experiments in rural India such as the Mudunuru village experiment in Andhra Pradesh by the voluntary organization BREAD to promote schools and community libraries for children have shown encouraging results.

Even with television competing for time and space in the schedule of a child in villages, children have taken to books, sharing and discussing what they have read. In fact, this experiment claims to have reversed the trend of private schools being preferred over government schools—a library set up in a village government school made the difference.

Unlike television, which requires passive viewing and guided understanding for children, books promote

critical and imaginative thinking. They also improve intellectual and emotional development, useful in using and understanding television and the Internet.



The process doesn't work the other way around—television or the Internet cannot be credited with enhancing communication abilities or emotional intellect.

In this age of information overload, books of all kinds are still a pleasure to physically hold, feel, see and read.

While similar information may be easily available on the Internet today, books and their emotional attachment with us should not be so easily displaced by a gadget and the

technology associated with it.

Books have also taken many new avatars with audio books and e-books; new developments in printing are making available superior quality books at affordable prices. Also, printing books today is relatively easier so we have a number of small publishers experimenting with content and language.

I am still convinced that investing in reading is like planting seeds for lifelong learning, the awakening of the imagination and the broadening of mind and spirit.

Courtesy: Mint (17 February 2012)

BREAD's School Library Activity is a Movement now

Children's library could cause amazing outcomes, if only, children (age of 7-14 years) get a chance to read simple books on a wide ranging topics. Based on systematic experiments and research over the last 7 years, BREAD has taken to setup children's libraries in public schools across Andhra Pradesh.

140 such children libraries are already functioning in 13 districts and in 2012 BREAD proposes to setup 300 more such libraries in all districts. These libraries

will have about 600 titles in 20 different carefully selected themes like biographies, science, sports, adventure, geography etc..

BREAD, founded by Dr N Bhaskara Rao of CMS, is a two decades old voluntary services body encouraging education of children of poor households with scholarships, counseling, skill imparting. So far BREAD has supported 4000 such children across AP to study – book vocational and Professional courses.

BREAD has taken now to honoring teachers and headmasters who are the volunteers in successfully running children libraries in the schools.

District coordinators of BREAD who are self motivated volunteers are responsible for active functioning of these libraries devised and structured very systematically into an ongoing teaching schedule.

Based on an appraisal of functioning of the libraries, it was found that with Rs.25 school child, the very concerns and careers of children could be changed towards making them pro active citizens, school education becomes holistic, and children are able to envision a better India.

BREAD is spear heading this movement of children's library with a belief that it is the most cost - effective way of molding the children of India and shaping the feature of the country,

To selected schools for setting up these libraries, BREAD provides the required Almaras, books and also orientation for the School Teachers. Schools need not incur any expenditure. But they take responsibility for promoting the reading of the books.

Early research has indicated that these libraries in public schools have the potential to reverse the trend of going to private schools, change the class room dynamics, better attendance and comprehends levels and renew interest of parents in the school.

Rekindling school accomplishments

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

Right to Education (RTE) came into force in April 2010 with Government committing to spend Rs.46,000 crores annually until 2015 for improving primary schooling in the country. Findings of *four* studies on school education were in circulation in January 2012 and they require to be taken note. The first was by Wipro's Quality of Education Survey. It found that schools in metros lack quality. The second was by Programme for International Student Assessment. The third, by Pratham for 2011, released by HRD Minister. The fourth, by Naandi Foundation released by the Prime Minister.

The second study indicated that Indian students at higher secondary level are at the bottom just above Kazikastan in the level of their accomplishments! One of these studies included Andhra Pradesh as a case study for India. All these surveys brought out that learning outcomes of school education have deteriorated. For example, not even half of Class V students could read Class II level text books. Pratham indicated that this situation in Government schools had worsened in 2011.

While, over all, enrolment level in 2011 had gone up, Pratham report brought out how attendance level in rural has fallen - from 73 percent in 2007 to 71 percent in 2011. A report in January 2012 from Bihar indicated that one-third of those enrolled in that state were only on paper.

An alarming revelation of Pratham's report was about further increase in the dependency on private schools and private tutors – from 18.7 percent in 2006 to 25.6 percent in 2011, nationally. This percent of children going to private schools is even more in rural, anywhere between 30 to 50 percent. There are already reports on how private schools being profit seeking are generally unconcerned of standards in the schools –infrastructure and teaching (teacher ratio) and that they do not come under any outside monitoring or regulatory mechanism. District Collector of a Telengana district in Andhra Pradesh recently (January 2012) accused private schools for the low levels 10th pass in the district and warned the managements for frequent increase in the fees, etc.

Another study limited to Andhra Pradesh, "Impact of Growth on Childhood poverty in Andhra Pradesh" was by Young Lives for 2010. This report was its third annual report since 2002. Despite mid-day meal programme for years and changing poverty level, one-third of children in the State are stunted in their growth with serious long term implications for health status and educational achievements. This report (reported only by the Hindu, January 12, 2012) even indicated that among certain age groups, enrolment has fallen from 98 percent in 2002 to 90 percent in 2007 and further to 77 percent in 2010. It indicated high dropout rate with more girls

dropping out than boys. Even this study showed that there was considerable shift to private schooling in Andhra Pradesh since 2002 – from 23 percent of children attending private primary schools to 44 percent in 2009 – despite involving “substantial sacrifices” of families by way of fees, etc.

Over all, inspite efforts for better enrolment and attendance in Government schools, the trend to go to private schools continues. This is despite costs more to enroll in private schools and there is no guarantee of better opportunities of going to private schools. And

there is no evidence to substantiate that those from Government schools are any way inferior or their pass rate is lower. Against such a trend, there seems no organized experiments or initiatives to see how some of

these disturbing trends (like shift to private schools, decline in learning including reading and in maths, and overall quality and relevance of primary education) could be curbed and trends reversed. Against such a background Mudunuru Experiment (published in the Transparency Review of December 2011) stands out as an initiative, however isolated and small it may be. But it indicates optimistic outcomes. It experimented with television, PC and book library. Based on that five year long experiment, I maintained that with Rs.25 per school going child per year, the fate of the children and of the country could be changed and school education in Government schools could be put back on rails. What is being spent by Government per child per



year is above Rs.6000 and it goes as high as Rs. 40,000 per year per child in Mumbai Municipal schools and yet, dropout rate remains high even there.

Who is responsible for these disturbing trends in our primary education?. These trends are not over night or of last one or two decades. And yet what have we done by way of correctives, even experimentally?. Is there anything that Planning Commission had ever come up with?. (The Deputy Chairman of the Commission even released Pratham

Report earlier in 2010).

Mudunuru experiment in Andhra Pradesh showed that by reviving Children Libraries in Government schools with carefully selected range of simple books on a range of subjects, it is possible to attract children back from

private to Government schools. More importantly, this Mudunuru experiment shows that with hardly any cost, it is possible to revive primary school education). My slogan is reading book makes children think big and beyond. Convinced of such outcome, BREAD (Basic Research Education and Development) has now taken up seriously the idea of setting up such children libraries in Government schools in all districts of Andhra Pradesh. By the end of 2012 there would be 500 schools with such libraries involving about half a million children. BREAD, like CMS, with two decades of endeavors believes that with such efforts India could realize demographic dividends and make knowledge society a reality.

Is Cell talk an addiction now!

The case of Chittoor

It will be interesting if further analysis is possible as to occupation wise and where the calls are being made. And, more importantly, how cell phones are increasing productivity of people and improving linkages and building new communities and how social communication networks are developing from out of cell phone

Chittoor district with a population of 42 lacs has 35 lacs cell phones. The money paid towards monthly charges is no less than what is spent on essentials. In fact, it is as much as what is spent on electrical charges.

The cell talk is no more limited to essential. The gossip that people who are otherwise reserved or limited in talking to each other, are now spending crores of rupees. The case of Chittoor district is a glaring example.

People in Chittoor district are paying Rs.41.66 crores a monthly bill for cell talk against Rs. 45.7 crores being paid monthly for electricity consumption.

Main production activity in Chittoor district is jaggery and mango. Annually Rs.400 crores of jaggery is produced and revenue from mango is Rs.280

crores. As against this, about Rs.500 crores is paid annually as phone bill. What was invested for cell phones appears to be more than what was invested on agriculture during the period.

Daily sales of liquor in Chittoor district is Rs.2 crore. Annually Rs.720 crores. Rs.700 crores is being spent annually to buy cell phones – at the

rate of Rs.2000 cost of per cell instrument and 35 lacs cell phone connections.

Since 2002 cell connections in Chittoor districts increased by 25 times. Even what is spent on phone bills increased by 12 times during these ten years.

Instead of a book in hand in the earlier decades, it is now a cell phone in the hand irrespective of occupation, age group, rich and poor and education level.

Until 2002 number of cell phones in this district were not many. Landlines were about 1,40,000 which now in 2011 has come down to about 1,00,000. But cell phone number had gone up to 35 lacs.

According to 2011 census population of Chittoor district is 42 lacs; excluding children of less than 10 years, it is 37 lacs. This means, on an average, every one of

above 10 years has a cell phone. But carrying two phones has now become a fashion.

BSNL's revenue for month in Chittoor district was Rs.5 crores. Other cell companies revenue was Rs.36.66 crores. Making it totally Rs.41.66 crores what makes it Rs.500 crores in 2011. BSNL's revenue from landlines in 2002 was Rs.48 crores.

Courtesy: Andhra Jyoti (23 January 2012)

THE MOST TALKATIVE			
All numbers are per user per number			
STATE	MINUTES OF USAGE	OUTGOING SMS	ARPU PER MONTH (RS)
J & K	673	3	160
ASSAM	441	35	113
DELHI	402	76	138
NORTH EAST	380	70	114
PUNJAB	363	44	94
HP	362	29	77
ODISHA	358	16	70
KERALA	351	64	115
AP	349	56	107
KARNATAKA	342	110	103

(Mobile users in J&K talk the most in the country at 673 minutes per users per month but send the least number of SMS. Among the Metros only Delhi figures in the top-10 cities when it comes to minutes of usage. While the industry average for MoU is 331 as on September 2011, all these 10 circles are above that. Another example that the mobile story is shifting from urban centres to rural areas): Source TRAI

TV: Real danger from too much virtual reality

Jayashree Nandi

Delhi children spend 115 minutes per day on average on watching television compared to 94 minutes by Kolkata kids, says a multi-city viewership study conducted by TAM Media Research. The time spent by Bangalore children is the highest - about 141 minutes per day. But this is only an average, in many households children spend almost the entire weekend watching TV.

While TAM attributes TV addiction to the boom in child-targeted programmes and channels, psychologists feel that children fall back on television due to lack of other stimulating activities.

According to clinical psychologist Dr Sujatha Sharma, TV viewing-related complaints are the most common. "It is the most common issue that we get. But the issue has got a lot to do with the change in urban lifestyle. The galli cricket that children used to play has been marred by Delhi's traffic. Neither is Delhi safe anymore for children. Parents are worried about kidnappers and sexual abusers on the streets. So children fall back on TV. I am not sure if the rural kids are watching as much TV. The urban factors are pushing it up," she said.

Long hours in front of TV is not good for a child's development. Cognitive development is nurtured by learning-based methods, not by a passive activity like staying glued to the virtual world, explains Dr Sharma. "The content often causes various

complications in children. The stories are exaggerated and many a times, there is no element of reality in it. There can be mindless violence or there could be premature exposure to sexual content. I have noticed that very young children get really scared or suffer from anxiety phobia after watching supernatural movies or thrillers. This is not good," she adds. Psychologists claim that pornographic addiction or violent behaviour is often a result of TV addiction.

But there are positives, too. If the content is monitored by parents, some of the new channels offer a wide variety, which is not only entertaining but educational, too.

Dr Sharma says that half an hour of TV viewing everyday is not a bad idea. But anything above two hours may be on the verge of addiction. Playing board games and going for walks are better ways of spending time with children than watching soap operas with them, she adds.

"My son wears jeans even when he is sleeping. This is because he watches people wear jeans and look smart on TV. A lot of consumer products are so well targeted towards kids that even advertisements on TV can affect them. But there are some great children's movies and science programmes that I and my son love watching," said Neelu H, mother of a four-year-old.

Courtesy: Times of India (16 February 2012)

Is your child a fussy eater? Blame TV

Shobhan Singh

Apan-India survey of children with fussy eating habits has revealed that 86 per cent of children in Mumbai in the three to seven age group are fussy-eaters, the younger ones more so. The national version of this figure stands at 88 per cent.

The study, commissioned by Abbott Nutrition across metros to understand fussy eating behaviour in India, further revealed that over 59 per cent of mothers worry about their children's nutritional requirements.

Moreover, around 37 per cent of the mothers expressed that their children were susceptible to cold and cough frequently, and 41 per cent believed that fussy eating affected their children's overall performance at school.

Kim Milano, international paediatric nutrition expert and nutritional consultant from Fort Carson, Colorado, said, "Just like learning to walk, children need help learning to eat well. Establishing set meal and snacking times, eating as a family, and selecting

and consistently offering new healthy foods can help your child learn to enjoy them.” Studies have shown that fussy eating can lead to serious physical ailments, including growth complications, increases in chronic illnesses and increased risk of developing an eating disorder later in life.

A mammoth 96 per cent of the mothers too felt that junk food did have a major role to play in the fussy eating habits of their children.

Apart from the TV, the survey listed three other factors that lead to fussy eating: Distraction, eating junk food before meals and neophobia, the fear of having to eat something new.

Courtesy: The Asian Age (14 February 2012)

Supreme Court pulls up SEBI for leaking Sahara Group’s proposal to media

The Supreme Court has pulled up market regulator SEBI for leaking to media details of the proposal of Sahara Group’s list of property sent to it as a guarantee to ensure that interest of investors are protected.

The apex court said it was “distressed” that the proposal sent by Sahara’s counsel to the advocate of SEBI has come on one of the TV channels and such incidents which have been increasing day-by-day “not only affect the business sentiments but also interfere in the administration of justice”. We are distressed to note that even ‘without prejudice’ proposals sent by counsel for the appellants (Sahara) to the counsel for SEBI has come on one of the TV channels.

“Such incidents are increasing by the day. Such reporting not only affect the business sentiments but also interfere in the administration of justice,” a bench headed by Chief Justice S H Kapadia said. Taking strong note of the incident, the bench said it would pass appropriate orders regarding reporting of sub-judice matters. “In the above circumstances, we have requested counsel on both sides to make written application to this court so that appropriate orders could be passed by this court with regard to reporting of matters, which are sub-judice,” the bench, also comprising justices A K Patnaik and Swatanter Kumar said.

Courtesy: The Financial Express (13 February 2012)

Katju writes to CM, Maharashtra

Press Council of India chairperson Markandey Katju wrote a letter to Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan on Wednesday asking him to “show cause” why the State government should not be recommended to be dismissed for failing to uphold the freedom of the press.

“You are, therefore, requested to now show cause why I should not recommend to the President of India to dismiss your State Government under Article 356 of the Constitution since your government apparently seems to have failed to uphold the Constitution as it has failed to uphold the freedom of the press under Article 19(1)(a),” Mr. Katju said in the letter.

The former Supreme Court judge has sought Mr. Chavan’s reply within three weeks.

“it is the duty of the State government to maintain law and order in the state, but it seems to me that your government is neither able to maintain law and order nor prevent attacks on journalists, which seriously imperils freedom of the press.”

Earlier, a group of journalists from Maharashtra meet him expressing concern about the rising number of attacks on the press persons in the States.

“I was informed that in the last ten years, well over 800 journalists were physically attacked, while in the last two-and-a-half years, 213 journalists were attacked by political workers and anti-social elements. More shocking was the daylight murder of veteran, journalist J.Day,” he said.

Courtesy: The Hindu (24 February 2012)



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The Right to Information Act 2005 represents a historic breakthrough in recognising the citizen's democratic rights to monitor measures affecting the public good. Following adoption of the Act by the Parliament of India, the CMS has set up a Transparency Studies wing to document, examine and publicise the interrelation between governance and society in all its aspects. It facilitates dissemination of relevant material, confers with experts and field workers and networks with the media to promote implementation and awareness.

Priority is given to right to education, especially of children; right to work; right to justice and associated human and social rights, especially at the grassroots.



CMS Transparency
Towards Responsive Governance

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