



## A Comparative Analysis of RTI Acts in India and Pakistan: Lessons Learnt and Way

### Forward

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### Abstract

*In both India and Pakistan, the Right to Information (RTI) Acts are enacted laws focused on the same goal, transparency and accountability in one way or another, and a means to promote public access to records held by these authorities with an increased participatory role for the citizenry in a democracy. RTI laws have the potential to help reduce corruption, enhance governance, promote the economy, and bring about responsive and accountable institutions since they give citizens the legal right to access public information held by government bodies. These laws have the potential to enable citizens by giving them the tools to hold government actors accountable for their actions, generate more informed public discussions, and ultimately reinforce democracy. Yet, their full, effective implementation has faced grave challenges in both India and Pakistan. This paper aims to evaluate the existing state of RTI practices in India and Pakistan. More specifically, it seeks to assess the achievement of RTI Acts in improving citizens' access to information and to recognize the key factors that drive success or failure. It aims at providing a cross country analysis of how these laws are being executed in practical terms, ensuring that they are serving the intended purpose of more transparency, accountability and public engagement in the governance process. In addition, the study examines the obstacles to implementation, investigating issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource availability, political interference, public awareness, and government agency willingness to share information. A key finding of the study is that RTI laws are often not used due to administrative dysfunction, procedural barriers, and lack of public awareness, despite their potential to address a number of social problems. RTI laws are intended as a strong tool for citizens to procure information from government bodies, but many citizens found it difficult to file RTI requests, the study says. These challenges include unclear processes, slow turnaround times from government employees, the absence of adequate systems for processing requests and, in some instances, the deliberate obfuscation or delay in responding to requests for information. In addition, it stresses the need for a wholesome, institutional and strategic approach to ensure that the RTI laws are implemented and used, and that RTI legislation alone will not give citizens the right to information.*

*Based on the implications of the findings, this study makes a number of key recommendations. It ends with a call, among others, for strong, sustainable infrastructure to implement RTI laws. These reforms encompass the establishment of dedicated RTI units in government departments, the formulation of specific guidelines and standard operating procedures for processing requests, as well as the creation of an online system for citizens to file RTI requests and track their status accordingly.*

### Keywords

Right to Information, Transparency, Accountability, Governance, and Democracy

### **Introduction**

Right to Information (RTI) laws have been passed in 100 countries worldwide, ensuring that people have the ability to access information and documents that are kept by their governments. Over the course of the last ten years, South Asian countries have made enormous progress toward recognizing this right. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal all formally enacted RTI laws between 2002 and 2009. Lately, Bhutan and the Maldives have approved RTI laws, and Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are presently debating draft legislation. Public awareness and implementation vary greatly, even with this impetus. A recent webinar on the progress and difficulties in passing RTI laws in South Asia featured Anjali Bhardwaj, an RTI activist in India and the founder of the Satark Nagrik Sangathan, a citizens' organization that advocates for openness and accountability in government. Anjali also brought together experts from the Asia Foundation and other prominent RTI voices. As the RTI movement got underway, we quickly discovered that "They are interested in information if it means that they are able to access their rights which are being denied to them, and if that information enables them to hold their governments accountable." Bhardwaj used an example from India to illustrate how the underprivileged and marginalized can use the RTI Act to obtain government-subsidized food supplies. In India, a network of "fair price shops," commonly referred to as ration shops, is used by the government to provide subsidized food and non-food items to the country's poor. The Delhi Right to Information Act of 2001 was invoked in 2004 by slum dwellers and a local non-profit organization to obtain access to their ration shops' records. They discovered that retailers were routinely stealing sugar, rice, and wheat that was rationed and selling it to those who weren't actually in possession of ration cards. Equipped with this newfound knowledge, the residents were able to obtain their just portion of subsidized food (Anjali Bhardawaj, 2016). However, Pakistan became the first nation on the subcontinent to enact freedom of information laws in 2002 (TI, 2014); however, it is noted that the primary cause for the implementation's failure is the government's lack of seriousness and full commitment. The event demonstrates that even if legislation was passed by the government, nothing was done to make it effective in its whole. (Saleem, An Analysis of Right to Information Laws of Pakistan and India, 2015).

It does not provide protection against any legal, administrative or employment-related sanction for disclosing information. In the absence of a clause for protection of whistle-blowers, officials who even sense wrong doings or maladministration, would be afraid of losing their jobs or being suspended, if they disclosed information (Saleem, An Analysis of Right to Information Laws of Pakistan and India, 2015) Though policy making and taking measures to stop wrongdoings is vital, but spotting and amending wrongdoers are also imperative.

The Right to Information Acts in both India and Pakistan are crucial as these laws empowers citizens with the ability to access information held by public authorities ensuring transparency, public accountability, combating corruption, promoting human rights and democratic governance. Analysing different laws of Right to Information both in India and Pakistan comparatively and the ways and means of enhancing more access to information. The study explores the current state of Right to Information in both the countries and the potential of further enhancing and improving access to information. The basic objectives of the study are to explore the bottlenecks and challenges involved in the process, to investigate the problems faced by the people and stakeholders, lessons learnt and further way forward in the matter.

### **Problem Statement**

The Right to Information (RTI) Acts of both India and Pakistan are meant to promote transparency, accountability and citizen participation in governance. However, there are many hindrances in their implementation, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of public awareness, political interference, resource constraints and cultural barriers. Though they radically have the power to fight against corruption and empower citizens, their potential as a tool of change is still constrained by central and procedural barriers. This study seeks to examine the foremost obstacles to proper RTI implementation, to scrutinize the success and failure stories, and to develop tangible recommendations for improving the RTI architecture in both countries.

### **Scope of Study**

This research paper has allowed the researcher to compare the RTI Acts of India and Pakistan in depth, analysing differences in their legal frameworks, implementation challenges, and effects on citizen empowerment and governance. This, before it delves into the institutional, procedural and

cultural barriers which inhibit the effective and efficient use of such RTI laws: bureaucratic inertia, ignorance, political meddling, etc. It also examines the role played by different actors like, government officials, politicians, civil society organizations, media, businesses and the general public in influencing the implementation and outcomes of RTI laws. The study draws on experiences from other successful RTI frameworks across the globe to offer actionable recommendations on infrastructure, capacity building, public awareness, legal reforms etc. Within this context, it encompasses a Thematic and SWOT analysis of RTI laws, stakeholder perspectives, reviews of global best practices towards establishing strategies to improve transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in governance. The findings of the study are intended to provide new insights for academics and practitioners regarding the enhancement of RTI laws in the two countries to enable them to serve their initial purposes and objectives.

### **Literature Review**

The Right to Information had been made the part of Fundamental Rights in the constitutions of South Asian countries. Legislation on the RTI in India began in its States in 1997, with ten State legislatures passing RTI laws. States stopped passing laws after a strong national RTI Act was enacted in 2005 replacing the comparatively weak and un-notified Freedom of Information Act of 2002 (Akhtar, 2017). The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan did not recognize access to information as a constitutional right though Article 19 did provide for freedom of speech. Through the 18th Amendment in 2010, Article 19A was included to grant freedom of information and right to information as a constitutional right in Pakistan. Article 19A reads as: "Right to Information: Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law" (Alam, 2015).

### **Policy Approach to Access to Right to Information**

Article 19(1)(A) of Indian Constitution guarantees the fundamental right to free speech and expression, which includes within it the right to access information. The pre-requisite for enjoying this right is knowledge and information. Thus the right to information becomes a constitutional right as the right to free speech also guarantees right to receive and collect an information. Article 19(2) permits the State to make such laws as to impose reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the freedoms guaranteed under this provision on grounds such as security of the state, sovereignty and integrity of India and other grounds as enumerated in the provision (Garima Malhotra & Saba Grover, 2018)

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan did not recognize access to information as a constitutional right though Article 19 did provide for freedom of speech. Through the 18th Amendment in 2010, Article 19A was included to grant freedom of information and right to information as a constitutional right in Pakistan. The Article 19A reads as: "Right to Information: Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law" (Alam, 2015).

### **RTI Act in India**

Any information that a citizen wants from public agencies must be provided as per the RTI Act of 2005. The information must be given to individuals who seek it by the public affairs officials. However, in terms of personal information, information about other individuals, and national security, this Act sets out particular requirements. A thirty-day period is allotted to the authority to furnish information. In the event that the appellate authority is completely unwilling to release any information, a person may request information from the authority. The "Central Information Commission/State Information Commission" arrangement allows them to later file a second appeal. Terms covered by this Act, including "competent authority," "State Public Information Officer," "Right to Information," and "Public," are defined. Public bodies have an obligation to keep books and records in their areas of interest, and this is covered in the Second Chapter along with the different procedures related to the application of information. The definition of "exemption from disclosure of information" appears in Section 8. Regardless of what is contained in this Act, subsection (1) states that no citizen shall be held accountable for anything. Information leaks could be detrimental to India's security, scientific, economic, and geopolitical interests; they could also damage its relationships with other nations and encourage criminal behaviour. Material that has been expressly prohibited from publication by a Tribunal or Court of law, or whose disclosure would be grounds for contempt. Information whose disclosure would be against the privileges of Parliament or the State

Legislature. Information that, if revealed, could make it more difficult for a third party to compete, such as trade secrets, intellectual property, or commercial confidence, unless the competent authorities are persuaded that disclosing such information is essential for the public's overall welfare. The Act further declared that anybody may file. It is your duty to fulfil the residents' requests. If the applicant feels that the officer is not available, they have the option to file a request with the State or the "Central Information Commission." It also establishes a time restriction to guarantee that the process is finished promptly. Different time constraints apply to different situations. All PIOs who receive applications are required to respond to them within a 30-day period; additionally, applications submitted to assistant PIOs must receive a response within 35 days (Chakarvarty).

There are reasonable limitations on all rights. Consequently, reasonable restrictions on the right to information are allowed by Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution. The Right to Information Act, 2005 grants the following extra exemptions from disclosure: Information that courts and tribunals have expressly forbidden from being divulged; Information that could endanger the integrity of the country, foreign relations, or national security. If information that was not in the public interest and contains private information is made available, it may violate someone's right to privacy. Details pertaining to trade secrets, intellectual property, and commercially sensitive data. Private information acquired from foreign governments, etc (RTI Act, 2005).

The RTI Act creates the right to information as a safeguard against the misuse of the discretionary authority of administrative authorities, but it has certain shortcomings that reduce the value of the right to information. The drawbacks include despite being stated in Section 2(h), the term "Public Authority" lacks a comprehensive and exclusive meaning, which may cause confusion. All non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that obtain government financing, whether directly or indirectly, fall under the category of "Public Authorities." It has been questioned, nevertheless, whether or not NGOs that accept public financing are considered Public Authority, because they are funded by trusts, temples do not appear to be administered by the general public; yet, the Supreme Court has recognized temples as Public Authority in numerous instances. Consequently, it is unclear from the Act whether or not temples are considered Public Authorities. The absence of provisions for contempt in this Act is another problem. Even if the Information Commission was intended to have legal force behind it, the public cannot be forced to abide by the guidelines because there is no "contempt of court" clause. It is not deemed contempt of court to violate the Information Commission's Order. A provision must be included in this Act. As long as the appellate authority does not impose penalties, the applicant must receive the information requested in the RTI application within thirty days of obtaining it, or within forty-eight hours in the case of life and liberty (Tiwari, 2022).

### **RTI Acts in Pakistan**

Every Pakistani has the fundamental right to information under Article 19A. The federal and provincial governments have passed legislation to realize this right, granting citizens access to public information and enabling them to exercise their right to obtain the information they require. The Qanoon-e-Shahadat Ordinance, 1984, governed the issuance of public papers prior to this Ordinance. Articles 85 and 86 describe what constitutes public and private papers, but its main goal was to make it easier for documents to be produced as evidence in the Court—not to guarantee government transparency or to give the public access to information. With the enactment of the Federal FOI Ordinance, 2002 on October 26, 2002, Pakistan became the first nation in South Asia to adopt an RTI statute. In order to put the law into effect, the Cabinet Division later developed the Freedom of Information Rules on June 18, 2004 (Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, 2015). Prior to its repeal and the enactment of the new Right to Information Act in 2013, the Federal FOI Ordinance was in effect for a period of twelve years. In terms of the global right to information, the 2002 FOI Ordinance was a weak law. It was not fully executed in addition to having a lot of flaws. Looking back, it appears that the primary reason it was created was to fulfil the prerequisites of the Asian Development Bank loan, rather than to advance the fundamental human right of information access. The fact that it served as a model and foundation for the subsequent provincial laws is even more concerning. Therefore, this law was exactly duplicated in Baluchistan (The Baluchistan Freedom of Information Act, 2005), which is still in effect, and Sindh (The Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2017), which was passed in later years. Both laws had the same shortcomings, which further limited their implementation (Youngmei N. A., 2023).

**Comparative Analysis of RTI Acts in India and Pakistan**

Pakistan and India both have Right to Information (RTI) Acts, which are vital to government transparency and accountability, and a key tool to combat corruption, in so far as they invest citizens with the legal right to access government records. Although the two laws have a common aim, they were passed at different times, and their legal frameworks and scopes vary in many ways.

Pakistan has implemented the RTI Act on October 2017 which is going to be really beneficial in making public institutions more open and keeping a check on their activities. This Act covers all public entities established by the Government of the Federation with a view to increasing the transparency of government institutions, minimizing acts of corruption and enabling citizens to have the access to information as guaranteed under the same Act. Pakistan's RTI Act lacks a mandatory response time for government bodies to respond to requests for information while upholding transparency and should be amended accordingly. Other RTI Acts around the world are more specific about what constitutes a response, and within how much time that response should be filed, but the Pakistani RTI Act deliberately leaves it vague. The Act defines exempt information, especially where it is about the defence, national security or integrity of the country. Through such exemptions, citizens are restricted from gaining access to information that will be dangerous for the sovereignty and protection of the country and the same keeps a balance of openness versus the interests of the country.

The RTI Act enacted in India in 2005 is more far-reaching and older than its Pakistani counterpart. It replaced the Freedom of Information Act, which was enacted in 2002, with a far more effective legislation — the Indian RTI Act. And when interpreting the definition of Public Authorities, it would mean, the Indian law applies to All Public Authorities; meaning, it applies to all national, state, and local government bodies - thus making it a far-reaching tool in the Indian democracy, for citizens to demand, and have access to information held by the government. One major difference between these two laws is the time for response; under the Indian RTI Act, the public authorities are legally obligated to respond within 30 days to the information request. When it involves the life or liberty of a person, that response time is gruelling 48 hours. But, as in case of Pakistan's RTI Act, the Indian legislation also has exemptions to the right to access information. These exemptions are for information affecting India's sovereignty and integrity, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests, of the State or its relation with a foreign State, information which would cause incitement to an offence.

While distinct, both measures are intended to promote a culture of accountability in government and to equip citizens with the means to monitor public officials. In this aspect, the Indian RTI Act has out-survived the passage of CIA- New Zealand and hence gotten the proper evolutionary trend time for people of the country to get used to it and to get familiar with its use. Pakistan's RTI Act, being newer, serves as an important milestone in the country's continuing quest to modernizing their governance while devolving power to civilian agents. In practical terms, however, the fact that Pakistan's Act does not prescribe a time limit for response may be problematic; people may be left waiting to obtain the information they have requested. While both laws prevented state secrets from being disclosed, they set a fine line between transparency and interest of the state.

In both India and Pakistan, the RTI Acts show the willingness of states to be transparent, accountable and reduce corruption in the government process. Their goals are somewhat similar, but the details really matter — the differences between their legal frameworks are revealing of the differing environments in which these laws operate, including the scope of application, reaction speed, or exemptions. The RTI Act in India has been around for longer and responds to queries within a laid out frame work and, having been proposed by the Indian government, has a vision for timely responses while Pakistan's law is in a budding stage and needs to refine itself more before it can complement citizens in accessing information from the government. It is, however, also crucial that both nations continue to refine and improve their RTI legislation so that they remain instruments that enhance transparency and good governance.

**Research Methodology**

The nature of the study is qualitative and exploratory and needs a rigorous investigation to probe the answer to the questions related to the problem at hand, therefore, data will be collected from secondary sources, such as research articles, journals, and publications. The collected data is then analysed by using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis for Protocol (PRISMA-P) a qualitative approach as mentioned by (Moher, 2015)

**Data Collection**

The data was collected from secondary sources like research articles, published literature and publications and the same were taken into consideration for this study.

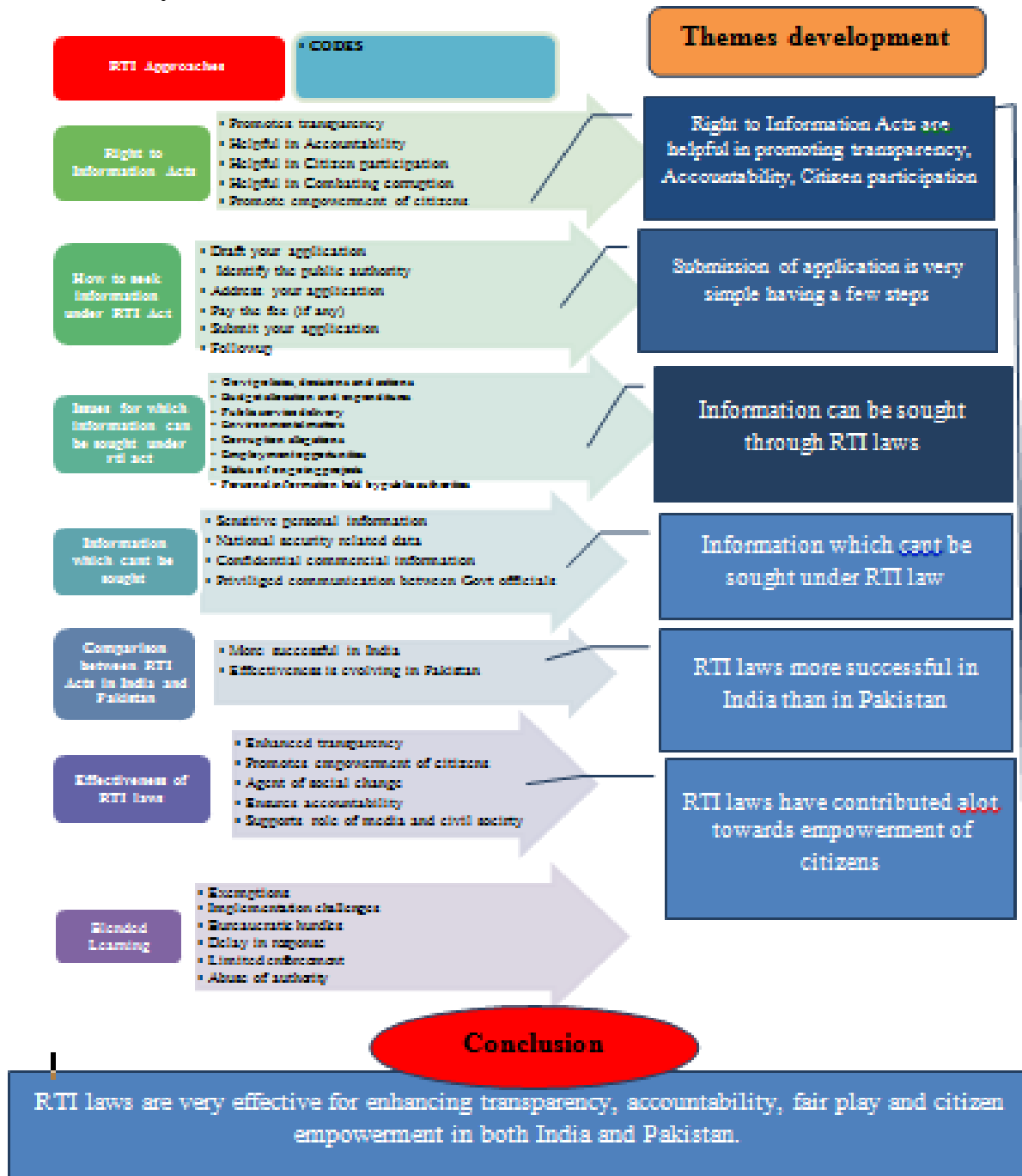
**Data Analysis**

This study is designed to comparatively analyse different laws of Right to Information both in India and Pakistan and the ways and means of enhancing more access to information. The study explores the current state of Right to Information in both the countries and the potential of further enhancing and improving access to information. The basic objective of the study is to explore the bottlenecks and challenges involved in the process and also to investigate the problems faced by the people, stakeholders, lessons learnt and further way forward in the matter.

**Data Analysis**

This section presents the analysis of the data. In first part, the thematic analyses are presented.

**Thematic Analysis**



**Themes Development and Tri-Angulation Process**

1. “RTI laws can reduce corruption and mismanagement”. The developed theme has a strong positive root in the literature like it has been expressed that an appealing and simple way to access to information is through RTI laws. The approach has a strong chance of reaching underprivileged communities and giving them access to more information since the procedure to obtain information is very simple.
2. “Citizens use available forums to access information, especially those who are well aware of the RTI laws”. The ability to get helpful information from a variety of sources through online media can enhance the transparency and is the key factor to develop sense of ownership and transparency in Government official business.

**Synthesis**

The above-mentioned themes in light of the empirical studies and triangulation leads to synthesizing the following statements.

1. Due to their transparency spirit, right to information laws can help lessen corruption in developing nations. Modern technology makes it feasible for people to exercise their right to access information in situations where accessing government offices is hindered or difficult due to geographic location, conflict, or disaster.
2. People use the tools that are accessible to them to access information, particularly those who live in distant and isolated places. Access to information is crucial, and online media can offer valuable information from a range of sources.
3. RTI laws are the source through which access to information is granted but after following the Standing Operating Procedures. However, not much research has been done on how circumstances affect government officials' willingness to accept citizens' requests for information and provide it to them. Due to the customary procedures used in government offices, RTI organizations have had difficulty putting the law into practice.
4. These RTI laws have been found to be very effective in developing a sense of awareness both in the Govt. officials and the citizens regarding the essence of these laws.
5. The traditional official business approach can pose challenges to the successful implementation of RTI laws in both the countries.
6. RTI laws can facilitate the citizens and the Government as well for ensuring transparency, accountability and fairness in the Government official business.
7. RTI laws can also provide opportunities for collaborative efforts enhance the capacity of both citizens and the Govt. officials to implement these laws in letter and spirit.

The study's overall findings indicate that the nation's Right to Access Information might be improved by RTI laws. However, a comprehensive strategy addressing infrastructure, capacity building, and public/citizen issues is needed for its successful implementation.

**SWOT Analysis**

The SWOT Analysis technique illustrates the potential threats and difficulties external to the country's development of access to information as well as the internal strengths, weaknesses and opportunities pertaining to Right to access to information approaches.

**Table 1: SWOT Analysis of Access to Information**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
Increased access to information under RTI laws	Limited access to information constraints	Capacity Building of Stakeholders	Political interference
Promotion of transparency and accountability	Lack of political will	International Support	Institutional Resistance
More citizen participation in Govt. affairs	Awareness problem among the public	Infrastructure development	Cumbersome official procedure
Reducing corruption and bad practices	Lack of infrastructure	Legal Reforms	Legal challenges
Deterrent force against misuse of authority by the Govt. officials	Authoritative unwillingness to give information	Strengthening oversight mechanisms	Misuse of disclosed information
Judicial Support	Resource constraints	Technological integration	

RTI laws are a powerful tool for reconciliation, justice and peace, as they can help Pakistani citizens gain access to government-held information. Yet, though these laws are relatively advantageous by nature, their practical applicability has been hindered in varied ways—foiling their very promise. The absence of essential support infrastructure facilitation of governance RTIs, is one of the major challenges. Such systems are lacking; without them, citizens cannot inquire about or retrieve the information to which they are entitled by law. The effectiveness of the law is also hindered by the lack of strong capacity-building programs within government institutions. Public officials and RTI officers are rarely trained for handling requests efficiently and in a time-bound manner, leading to delays and misuse of provisions of the law.

Also, there is not much awareness of the RTI laws amongst the public, another barrier to implementation. Most citizens do not know about their rights to information, or do not understand how to submit a request. The awareness among citizens about the law is scanty. In addition, political will to prioritize transparency and bureaucratic willingness to implement the law are often weak. This reluctance to release information can lead to ineffective RTI laws, as civil and political leaders, and government officials, will be unwilling to relinquish control over information for fear exposing inefficiencies and corruption. Also, the lack of financial and human resources, and lack of personnel, exacerbates the current RTIs environment in the country where the necessary infrastructure and support systems RTIs implementation works are not available.

Pakistan RTI laws can potentially change the game for citizens, however, they have encountered considerable challenges in practice. A failure of adequate infrastructure, the lack of capacity building, inadequate public awareness and political and bureaucratic commitment have rendered these laws non-compliant in true letter and spirit. As a result, citizens still find it hard to access what is theirs in the first place, while the benefits of these laws are virtually untapped. By mentioning these problems, we can call into question the RTI laws in these countries and ensure that citizens can truly use this right to demand government-held information.

#### **Stakeholder Analysis of RTI Laws**

#### **Stakeholder Analysis of Right to Information (RTI) Acts in India**

##### ***i. Government Agencies:***

The reaction from the various government agencies to India's Right to Information (RTI) Act has been mixed, indicating that there is no consensus on its utility and ramifications. On the one hand, certain bureaucratic circles perceive disclosure as a crucial instrument to ensure accountability, transparency, and good governance. Proponents of the transparency movement argue that when information is made available to the public, it incentivizes government agencies to act more responsibly; officials know their actions will be subject to the scrutiny of the public who can check the facts. This is viewed as an avenue in which the RTI Act is a means to reduce corruption, organize efficient, sovereign, and thus abiding governments, and thus create a level of reciprocal trust between the government and its citizens. It gives citizens the right to request information, which enables their more active participation in governance and it holds public officials accountable for their decision making and actions.

Conversely, those who are against the RTI Act typically fall in the "bureaucratic" category, primarily citing power balance and privacy concerns as reasons to reject the RTI Act. Any government official would recognize that the Act was designed to promote transparency, and introductory training will emphasize that — but they will also worry that transparency can cause their decisions to be undermined, if they are ordered by a superior to make a particular decision, or that inefficiencies and even corruption within their departments will be highlighted. A stuffing in of this content into the wars of challenge and counter-questioning that is bureaucratic-bin can lead to discomfort through unknown scrutiny. There are also privacy issues in regard to sensitive information that can be abused if published. These are among the reasons that explain the resistance within some government agencies to implement the RTI Act in full, as they perceive this as a potential challenge to their power over information, and, consequently, to their power within the system itself. This rift of opinions reveals the tension between transparency and preserving institutional autonomy in government institutions.

##### ***ii. Politicians:***

The RTI is also a subject of contention amongst Indian political leaders as some of them vehemently embrace it as a necessary instrument in the fight for transparency and as a means of



deepening democracy while others are warning about the possible political consequences its application may have. Among those who advocate for the RTI Act (many reform-minded leaders and parties) they make a case that it is indispensable in building the trust of citizens in government. They think that if the rulers are transparent in their governance, the corruption is minimized; this is for empowering the citizen and for ensuring that the office bearer is accountable for his/her actions. The RTI Act will allow for more transparency in a democracy and help break the pall of suspicion cast over the functioning of the government and create an environment of integrity and accountability. They believe it is a foundation of a more democratic, participatory, and responsive governmental model in which the citizenry deserves accountability and answers on important issues from their elected officials.

But on the other side of the political divide there are those who are wary of the political consequences that the disclosures enabled by the RTI Act bring. The critics argue that the law would expose sensitive political decisions, internal deliberations and government policies preferred by critics that could be used against them in future elections or political rivalries. Some fear that other information released in the public domain may be manipulated to ruin politicians' or parties' careers, particularly in the context of controversial decisions or bureaucratic lapses. As well as these, opponents often also talk about the potential misuse of the Act for personal or political purposes, worrying that personal data could be used by people or groups for ulterior motives. Consequently, these political leaders are likely to oppose a complete implementation of the RTI Act and advocate for restrictive amendments, perceiving it as an instrument that may threaten their political standing and expose them to unwarranted scrutiny (Mishra 2015). In contemporary governance conversation in India, this split in political opinion illustrates the balance between transparency and political expediency.

**iii. Media and Civil Society Organizations:**

In India, The Right to Information (RTI) Act has been a vital source to promote absolute transparency and accountability in the Government by media and CSOs. These groups lead the way in using RTI provisions to obtain essential government information that they use to investigate and reveal the corruption, inefficiencies or misconduct of public offices. Media and CSOs have become a source for exposing scandals, misuse of public funds, and abuse of power by obtaining information from what had previously been closed to public access. Through their use of RTI requests, they have made it much harder for corruption to go unnoticed, as they have increasingly been able to see how taxpayers money, and how public resources, is being used. RTI requests enable these organizations to keep public officials in check by holding them accountable, serving as a system of checks and balances beyond the formal political process.

Many people believe in RTI more than the freedom of Information act(stopped long ago), and this is true. The data released through RTI ,some critics argue is used in selective fashion, or distorted to promote a certain agenda be it by the media or civil society groups. It is possible that this might contribute to spreading misleading information or putting the spotlight on issues that do not represent the whole story. It also means people are potentially not taking sensitivity of some information seriously, whereas people might misunderstand information or could use some contradictory information to build unnecessary public panic or distrust. However, the importance of media outlets and CSOs cannot be ignored in creating transparency as they balance information dissemination between the government and the general public in a responsible manner. Notwithstanding the hurdles, such groups are using the RTI Act to augment public oversight and seek a more transparent and accountable governance architecture in the country.

**iv. Businesses and Private Sector:**

The private sector is progressively using the Right to Information (RTI) Act in India, as a means for obtaining public data that may be vital for making informed business decisions and ensuring compliance. Firms use the Act to access crucial information concerning government policies, public procurement procedures, regulatory systems, and other publicly available information that could impact their operations. Having access to this data allows companies to better understand the legal and regulatory environment, anticipate market trends, and assess potential opportunities or threats to their business operations. RTI or Right to Information Act allows citizens the right to request data about the activities of any public authority. In this sense, the RTI Act is just the tool an

investor needs to ensure that the company is complying with the law and is making its decisions based on current and accurate knowledge of its data and information.

However, the use of RTI in the private sector has its dark side too. A key challenge businesses experience is the risk of revealing sensitive or confidential information that can jeopardize their competitive advantage. The fear is that citizen access to this information would result in the disclosure of trade secrets, proprietary data, or strategic business plans and consequently lose confidentiality and a competitive advantage in the market. Some companies fear that even releasing data that seems innocuous can be assembled together to produce critical business information, especially in sectors like technology, pharmaceuticals and finance. Consequently, whilst businesses have welcomed the transparency the RTI Act brings to their operations, they have also called for safeguards to protect commercially sensitive information from being divulged under the Act. However, Maintaining a balance of being transparent while preventing the entry of proprietary corporate data continues to challenge the private sector who still grapple with the RTI Act's ambit without jeopardizing its competitive position.

**v. General Public:**

There has been an omnipresent, unprecedented support for the RTI Act among the people of India because of the active transparency and how it has empowered the people giving them access to vital government information. People like the Act's potential to fight corruption, reduce inefficiencies and promote accountability in government. It provides regular citizens, activists, and civil society organizations with access to information that was previously kept behind closed doors, and increases their ability to monitor and hold public officials to account. The RTI Act has been instrumental in unearthing scandals, revealing bureaucratic inefficiencies, and ensuring that public resources are allotted and utilized appropriately. The RTI Act is regarded as a crucial law for strengthening democracy by allowing citizens to play a larger role in governance, as it provides a mechanism for citizens to hold their government accountable and ensure that it is transparent and responsive to their needs.

However, concerns about the misuse of RTI Act continue despite its many successes. One of the foremost concerns is that of the ethical use of personal data. As the Act has a provision for requesting almost all information from citizens, there exists a fear of inadvertent disclosure of private details of private individuals leading to breach of privacy. For example, some requests for information related to government records might disclose sensitive personal information about individuals when such data is associated with their applications for public services or public assistance programs. Furthermore, opponents argue that at times, the RTI Act can be abused by certain people who expect to be informed of particulars about others for personal or political reasons and misuse the law to victimize certain people or institutions. One of the issues raised is the challenge of effective and consistent implementation of the Act, as bureaucratic roadblocks, political meddling, or simply not being aware of potential benefits, have prevented the Act from reaching its full potential. These challenges underscore the importance of establishing strong protections, adequate training, and an effective implementation process so that the RTI Act remains a powerful instrument for transparency while protecting individuals' privacy and data security.

**vi. Judiciary:**

Judiciary of India has so far up-held the very fundamentals of RTI Act and in fact, RTI Act has been proven the most significant in reigning in the government functions. Courts have been pivotal in interpreting and upholding the provisions of the Act, safeguarding citizens' rights to information. Judicial intervention has played a pivotal role, helping to mediate disputes related to information disclosure and enforcing compliance with RTI requests by government bodies. The judiciary has insisted on accountability in management and in some cases, has also broadened the scope of the RTI Act, to encompass information relating to private parties that handle public funds or operate under the aegis of the government. Such proactive approach on the part of the Courts have always been pivotal in reinforcing the RTI architecture and providing substance to the RTI in the development of transparency and accountability regime.

However, the judiciary is burdened with challenges with RTI matters, that tend to create bottlenecks in the timely disposal of disputes. This is just one of the many causes of the increasing backlog of cases in Indian courts, including those on RTI appeals and information disputes. Overwhelmed by the number of cases as well as limited judicial capacity, the courts have not been

able to settle RTI-related disputes in a timely manner. This back log defeats the very purpose of RTI Act because citizens are discouraged from requesting information due to delays and public loses faith in the law of the land. Now, very importantly, privacy issue has emerged as one of the important issues with respect to RTI cases, especially when the information needed concerns the individuals personal information or sensitive data. The judiciary has to make the decision whether to allow some access to information versus some protection of personal privacy — a task that can prove a delicate balance. Balancing all this is no easy task, as certain data that is important for transparency could encroach on individual privacy rights when incorrect. Thus the matter of how the judiciary is to handle such matters becomes nuanced, balancing the public interest in transparency and the need for protecting privacy.

### **Stakeholder Analysis of Right to Information (RTI) Acts in Pakistan**

#### ***i. Government Agencies:***

A divide shows up in the attitudes of government agencies toward the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Pakistan as well. The Act aims to help restore accountability, but opinions differ within the bureaucracy on the efficacy of its implementation. It covers everything from specific rules and procedures related to the RTI Act to state-wide amendments, showing how some departments and officials within our own government have been resistant to the RTI Act, since it threatens the status quo. These departments often perceive the Act as a threat to their ability to control information that they may manipulate and use to ensure that they keep their influence or evade scrutiny. Reluctance to share information comes from fear of exposing inefficiencies or corruption or mismanagement within the offices of the public. In some instances, bureaucrats fear that giving access to detailed government records could invite public criticism, legal challenges and political pressure. Such resistance has been the reason for the failure of complete implementation of the Act, as such departments could potentially impede and delay RTI requests, defeating the very purpose of the law.

Others in government, while they agree with the principle of transparency, warn against releasing sensitive information, saying it could lead to loss of control over the information. There is a fear among the officials that RTI Act can start empowering citizens and civil society organizations to demand accountability from public institutions, removing them from the comfort of their authority. For instance, departments involved in national security, defence, or intelligence operations are particularly sensitive about the implications of the Act for their operations since divulging too much information could compromise security or expose weaknesses. Moreover, there is a pervasive apprehension that transparency can expose internal shortcomings or have political consequences, particularly where agencies are doing complicated or politically fraught work. Consequently, there is diversity in attitudes towards RTI across the Pakistani bureaucracy, with some support for transparency, but fear of losing information control acting as a significant constraint to RTI implementation.

#### ***ii. Politicians:***

In Pakistan, the political elite is divided when it comes to the Right to Information (RTI) Act, very much with respect to a larger debate on the need for disclosure and public accountability as against the need for maintaining privacy, confidentiality and non-disclosure of sensitive information. Concerns among political class opponents of the Act centre on a potential political backlash that might arise after private information or sensitive government data have been exposed. Such individuals are concerned that the release of certain records may be used by political adversaries to tarnish their reputation or to bring into question their status of power. Examples include news of waste, corruption, or mismanagement of government funds, which would always be politically costly, but especially so during election campaigns or periods of political turmoil. Also, when information is made public, it can quickly fall into the wrong hands, as pressured leaders face the risk of leaked documents being misrepresented, or used to bring them down without cause. Such fears further lead to a resistance among the political class to fully utilize the RTI Act, which otherwise is a potential risk to their political capital and a tool of public audit of their functioning.

RTI Act supporters consider the law to be a critical instrument for consolidating democracy and enabling good governance in Pakistan. Transparency, they contend, is a key part of government reforms and contributes to the reduction of corruption, which improves accountability by allowing citizens to play a more active part in the decision-making process. Applauding these RTI laws, advocates say that these laws are important to ensure that government officials and institutions are

held accountable for their actions and use of resources, which ultimately leads to more responsive and transparent government. The Act can contribute to reducing corruption through shining a light on governmental processes since information that allows monitoring is available, hence enabling citizens, journalists, and civil society organizations to detect and challenge corruption. For these advocates, the RTI Act is a landmark legislation, a watershed moment in the journey towards greater transparency, and an important mechanism in restoring public faith in the government. Nonetheless, the RTI Act could benefit being fully implemented under the political will and commitment of all the political stakeholders towards its success, but the opposition from the political elites had hindered many aspects of RTI Act implementation and to reap its benefits.

**iii. Media and Civil Society Organizations:**

CSOs and media views RTI Act is a useful method of making the government resulting in an important factor in the overall development of the country, combating corruption, and increasing the productivity of the government in Pakistan. Such groups view the RTI Act as a critical tool for holding government institutions accountable (improving their transparency), preventing corruption, and empowering citizens to make informed decisions. The RTI Act is regularly utilized by CSOs, journalists, and activists to shed light on the government's ineffectiveness, mismanagement, and corrupt practices, and they strive to raise the public's awareness of their right to information. Access to government data is a foundation for a more transparent, accountable and responsive government that contributes to a more democratic society ( USA. gov 2012). In particular, the media has used the RTI Act to investigate and report on instances of corruption and maladministration, using the information gained as leverage to demand reform and highlight areas that needed improving. This has been essential in raising public consciousness and in pressuring government changes.

Even amid highly motivated support from civil society and the media, the actual implementation of RTI Act in Pakistan is facing myriad bureaucratic roadblocks and structural issues. That effort faces major challenges, notably entrenched resistance in government agencies, where officials frequently block or delay information. Those tasked with responding to requests fear having their inefficiencies — or worse, corrupt practices — exposed, so bureaucrats are often sluggish in complying; a political will to enforce the law effectively is also often lacking. The Data: Chronic Data-inconsistency, RTI 1.0 Data, RTI 2.0 Data, RTI 3.0 Data, RTI 4.0 Data Outsider agents may encounter a lack of recognition by the bureaucracy as a failure to understand who can rightfully execute requests. Moreover, such structural issues also make it all the more difficult for CSOs and news organizations to utilize the RTI Act effectively, thereby, also restricting its potential towards providing the level of transparency and accountability that the Act was aimed at bringing about.

**iv. Businesses and Private Sector:**

In Pakistan, the private sector leverages the RTI Act to acquire access to public data that is required for making informed operational and compliance decisions. In order to comply with the law and maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace, companies frequently need data relevant to government policies, regulatory change or public procurement processes. For example, companies might ask about government contracts, tendering processes and fiscal policies that affect their operations. Companies collect useful information from the RTI Act that assists them in making informed business decisions, mitigates business risks, and ensures compliance with the industry. Making public data available can also enable a fairer playing field for businesses, allowing them to make better-informed decisions and offer public bids in a more transparent manner.

Yet, just as in India, there is a troubling lack of goodwill in the private sector in Pakistan towards providing sensitive corporate information in response to RTI requests. Sensitive information, like trade secrets, financial data, or proprietary research, could be released — intentionally or otherwise — through RTI disclosures, and companies are especially concerned. The concern is that rivals would use this intelligence to erode competitive advantages and undermine a company's place in a market. Moreover, the fear that sensitive client data, like personal or confidential information, might come to light can cause reputational damage or create legal complications. Such potential for appropriation creates tension between the benefits of information being public and the potential risks inherent in listing corporate attributions in sensitive data. Thus, even though the RTI Act provides a significant mechanism for the private sector to improve decision-making through disclosure, it will also require strong safeguards to prevent confidential information from being misused or disclosed by accident.

**v. General Public:**

In Pakistan, RTI is widely considered by the general public to be an instrumental tool necessary to ensure accountability and transparent governance. Citizens perceive the RTI Act as a tool for demanding accountability from the government and holding public authorities to account before the people. The Act establishes a basis upon which members of the public are able to request access to specific pieces of governmental information, allowing them to peer into public spending, offer scrutiny of administrative decision-making and state institutions more broadly. Its many proponents view it as a tool that empowers average citizens to hold their leaders accountable and create a more open and responsive government. This widespread support is not surprising, as it is a reflection of the need for the governance process to be open and the need to end corruption in order for the government to provide you with public services, to ensure the government remains committed to the public and its obligations to you.

Yet, beyond this broad support, there are myriad of issues that have consistently prevented the public from making full use of the RTI Act, limiting its impact in improving governance transparency. Bureaucratic resistance, administrative inefficiency, and lack of public awareness regarding how to optimally utilize RTI instruments are among the many challenges faced. Many government officials continue to be reluctant to disclose information, appealing, often vaguely, to exemptions, or using procedural delays as an obstacle to access. In addition, inadequate capacity in the government to timely process and respond to RTI applications further compounds the issue, resulting in considerable delays and irritation that citizens experience. Besides, the general public does not know about provisions of the RTI Act, and many citizens are unaware of their rights, or how to effectively navigate the RTI process. Consequently, the RTI Act remains impotent in making the government of Pakistan transparent and accountable because the paperwork available to the bureaucrats came before the law.

**vi. Judiciary:**

Language: English In Pakistan, the judiciary has a very important role in ensuring effective implementation and enforcement of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. When there is disagreement about what information is available, courts interpret the rules and resolve conflicts regarding them, providing a final avenue for citizens who seek transparency from government agencies. The judiciary's involvement in upholding the law is crucial giving that public authorities comply with RTI requests and take decisions in matters where the government refuses to disclose information. By doing so, the courts shield the public's right to know, serves as a check on the government's power and upholds the principles of transparency and accountability. Furthermore, by emphasizing how critical the RTI Act is within the framework of justice, the judiciary plays an important role in cementing the RTI Act as a significant tool to improve governance and curb corruption in the country.

Yet alongside its support for the RTI Act, factors like increasing workload and potential privacy violations often colour judges' views. Like their brethren in India, judges in Pakistan are routinely inundated with increasing number of cases that impede their focus on the disputes related to RTI. Additionally, reasons for withholding data are often protected by privacy and sensitive information. While the RTI Act is predicated on the principle of transparency, judges must also strike a balance against the need to protect individuals' privacy and the propensity for sensitive information to be misused, they said. This tension between the right to access information and the need to protect privacy makes for a complex legal landscape, in which judges must juggle balancing interests. Therefore the judiciary is an important player in the accommodation of RTI laws, but these issues can trim the wings of the Act due to the challenges that the judicial institution faces on a daily basis in relation to both the law and its interpretation.

A stakeholder study of the RTI Acts in Pakistan and India reveals a complicated environment where different people and groups have different interests in the ways these transparency laws are implemented and turned out. While support for accountability and openness is generally widespread, worries about privacy, information misuse, bureaucratic opposition, and difficulties in implementing policies effectively continue to be present across all stakeholders that have been identified. Every nation has distinct difficulties that affect how important stakeholders understand and apply the RTI Acts in their particular settings.

### **Benefits of RTI Laws**

The Indian Right to Information (RTI) Act has changed the nature of the citizen-government relationship in transformative ways. The RTI Act has empowered citizens to gain access to information on many aspects of the government that were previously considered confidential or impossible to obtain, allowing citizens to make informed decisions and hold public officials accountable. For needy people who require crucial facilities in obtaining documents and availing services related to passports, birth and death certificates, pension plans, income tax returns, ration cards, and so forth, this Act has proved extremely useful. The RTI Act has been especially important for marginalized people, groups poor people, people with physical disabilities or socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It has also helped close the gap between them and the services to which they are entitled, increasing their participation in public life.

Such a RTI Act weeded out public institutions to keep records in an organized and accessible manner leading to greater transparency in functioning of public bodies. This essential not only allows a culture to open up, but also forces the division or divisions of authorities to be more open in their operations, enhancing the overall transparency of government business. The implications of decreased or removed transparency would be disastrous for the system, stalling work flow, causing inefficiencies and ultimately creating a more corrupt environment. In absence of RTI Act, public servants are likely to carry on malpractices in future as the law will provide lesser checks on their behaviour. Such erosion of accountability would result in abuse of power, misuse of public funds or assets - leading to clogging of functioning in government institutions and reductions in investment opportunities. The inefficiency and corruption created by such a move would thus come at the cost of both the public sector and the broader economy.

We will then commence solving this issue through good governance, focusing on a substituted and systematized RTI Act. The Act enhances the accountability of public authorities by requiring them to publish information relating to their functioning, and the use of public funds, and the ability of these officials to see that their actions are being monitored helps curtail corruption. Transparency in decision-making, in turn, allows for more appropriate policies and measures to be implemented, which can enable or be implemented for the government programs. Now, the Act has enabled the Indian government to achieve its goals in a way that is not just more efficient, but also more attuned to the will of the people.

One of the most appreciated result of RTI Act is the measurable reduction in different sectors of Indian government corruption. With more access to information about how government works, it is becoming increasingly difficult for corrupt practices to be conducted under the radar. When public servants know their actions will be scrutinized, they are less likely to engage in bribery, embezzlement and other forms of corruption. Not only does this transition to a more transparent system promote a culture of ethical governance, gradually eroding avenues for corruption and bolstering public confidence in the system, but also a transitional process that will culminate in the return of the rule of law in a timely manner. Transparency was one of the positive aspects that came out of the RTI Act in India and is a clear indication of how access to information can be used as a tool for good governance, making the government more accountable, efficient, and fair.

In fact, the RTI Act in Pakistan can also offer similar benefits by empowering citizens to demand transparency and address corruption in public establishments. Just as the RTI Act in India has done, the RTI Act in Pakistan when implemented appropriately could lead to an environment of greater accountability, efficiency and ethical governance. It is important to know that the RTI Act can serve as a powerful tool for citizens to demand access to the necessary public services and documents in government in order for it to function clearly and with responsibility like in India. Canada, too, has benefited from the RTI Act, and so has neighbouring India, where a gradual decline in corruption has proven the RTI Act to be a game changer, serving as a likely template for its application with similar goals in Pakistan, for a more equitable and just society.

### **RTI Laws Best Practices around the World**

Every nation has its own set of regulations for carrying out Right to Information (RTI) laws, while several have won praise for their outstanding strategies. A few examples are as follows:

#### ***i. Mexico:***

Mexico's right to information is safeguarded by the Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Public Government Information (LFTAIPG). This law guarantees access to public information

held by all branches of government. It includes exceptions for privacy and national security, obligates proactive disclosure of relevant information, establishes an appeals process via the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information and Personal Data Protection (INAI) and provides punishments for non-compliance. Reflecting the national legislation's principles of accountability and transparency, multiple states and municipalities have enacted their own transparency laws.

**ii. Sweden:**

The principle of public access, or *offentlighetsprincipen*, is the basis for citizens' right to information in Sweden. In Sweden, laws enshrined in both the Constitution and key statutes (the Freedom of the Press Act and the Principle of Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act) guarantee access to official records held by public agencies. Namely, positive responses to information requests, anticipatory disclosure from the authorities, and ways to appeal in cases where access is denied. RTI in this country is defined in such a manner that there is a firm resolve to facilitate the right to access information maintain transparency and accountability, albeit with exceptions for privacy and national security. Failure to comply may result in penalties for public authorities.

**iii. United Kingdom:**

Access to Information in the United Kingdom is regulated primarily by the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR). These rules allow individuals to access information held by public authorities and certain other organizations. Introduced 4 different types of information that citizens could request Seeks to make public bodies publication of certain information an active requirement Allows exempt information Fails to have public bodies publish sensitive information Appeals to Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) This law states what happens to bodies that do not comply with these requests The EIR specifically refers to environmental info and the FOIA applies to most public entities. This is what the RTI rules under UK RTI, in general, focused on - accountability, transparency, and the entitlement of the citizens to the information in possession of the government.

**iv. New Zealand:**

New Zealand's right to information is governed by the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA). This law provides access to almost any information held by government agencies (subject to limited exceptions). Key features would include the right to request information, a requirement that government entities respond to requests in a timely manner, a reduction in the amount of sensitive material that can be withheld (such as in cases of national security or private information) and the ability to appeal denial of a request to an Ombudsman. The Office of Information Analysis (OIA) promotes transparency, accountability, and public participation in government decision making. In New Zealand, the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 (LGOIMA), provides similar rights in respect of information held by local government authorities. Overall, the RTI legislation of New Zealand reflect a commitment to openness and accountability in Government.

**v. Canada:**

The right to information in Canada is served primarily by the federal Access to Information Act (ATIA). This legislation grants persons the right to gain access to records maintained by federal government institutions. Key features are provisions allowing people to request information, the obligation of government agencies to respond to each request in prescribed time frames, the exemption of certain types of information, and the ability to appeal a request that is denied through the Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada. In addition, each Canadian province and territory has its own access to information provisions as a part of the laws governing public bodies at that provincial and territorial level. The main objectives of Canada's RTI rules are transparency, accountability and public participation in governmental affairs.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

This research study has shown that RTI legislation can be a helpful tool in facilitating citizens on their right to seek information. The study also highlighted the actions needed to be performed within RTI rules when citizens seek information from government authorities. However, effective implementation of RTI regulations requires formulating a comprehensive strategy to address the issues and opportunities that the issue poses.

The report also said, In order to effectively use RTI laws there is a need of infrastructure, capacity building of citizen and RTI Commission, citizen awareness and cultural challenges to be

addressed. Such findings have grave implications for everyone involved in the expansion of RTI laws i.e. citizens, legislators and the other stakeholders. The study reveals that RTI laws can actually change how information can be accessed. It calls for further investment in, and research on RTI infrastructure and capacity-building to ensure rigorous implementation of the RTI laws in both Pakistan and India.

Based on the existing findings, this study recommends that

1. Information Ministers and relevant government departments should focus on increasing the capacity of citizens and the RTI Commission by providing targeted training on RTI laws and their implementation. This capacity building program would enable citizens to understand how to best use their right to access public records and information by educating them on navigating the RTI, filing requests and holding public authorities accountable. Likewise, training of key stakeholders like officials in the government, public services, and the members of the RTI Commission will also go a long way in helping them understand their work under the law. The government can, therefore, provide such training programs, so that it create a culture of transparency and accountability among various stakeholders, who strive to make maximum use of the RTI laws and help strengthen the functioning of the system as a whole.
2. The RTI infrastructure is to be created and strengthened by the government and it is the duty of the government to provide adequate facilities to people to access public information. Not only setting up posts behind closed doors needed (RTI offices), but the clarification of technology for all and available departments, and a forth to avoid running unnecessary paths for the answer. The infrastructure must also be inclusive and enable all citizens, including the vulnerable such as the technophobes and disabled people, to participate; if it is a digital platform, it must address the barriers of a lack of digital literacy or physical access. Also, governments must invest in technological solutions to simplify the conveyance of information like online portals, mobile applications, and help-lines which would allow a more convenient, transparent, and efficient RTI process. A strong RTI framework can foster more participatory governance, open up the current processes and put more faith in the state by the citizens.
3. The Finance Division of the government should earmark sufficient funds and make them available on a regular basis for the RTI Commission to operate without hiccups. The financial resources necessary for the Commission to perform its functions (including information requests, records, investigations, compliance with RTI, etc.) should be adequate. Additionally, this money will need to support operational expenses as staff salaries, training programs, technological infrastructure, and public outreach campaigns. This funding should enable the RTI Commission to be operational, responsive and independent, being able to fulfil an increasing demand for transparency and accountability on behalf of public institutions. Lack of adequate funding can have consequences such as delayed justice, eroded public trust, and inefficient commission operations. Hence, regular and well-planned budgetary exercise is important for the sustained functioning and effectiveness of the RTI framework.
4. RTI Commissions (and of course all other stake-holders should be subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation. Periodic assessments will highlight the importance of key areas that need to be worked on like delays in responding to requests, lack of awareness and difficulty in access to information. As part of the exercise, the government should assess the functions of the RTI Commission and other institutions in a systematic way for identifying performance deficits, service delivery gaps, and the need for any additional training or resources. This ongoing overview will help identify gaps so that corrective action can be taken, if necessary, to ensure that the RTI edifice works as desired, promotes transparency, and keeps public authorities accountable. Policy changes based on evaluation results contributes to an open learning environment that promotes an ongoing RTI process.
5. A well-functioning RTI Commission and its institutions can be ensured only if there is a synergy and collaboration between the government and the local communities and the business sector. These collaborations can lead to a more inclusive and effective approach to transparency and accountability. RTI laws are powerful tools in the hand of the citizens to expose government corruption. The bureaucracy and the government can cooperate with the



local communities and create awareness about RTI laws and empowering citizens to use them. Specially from the business sector which also play their own role by banking on RTI by both voluntary and paid help (e.g. funding, expert consultancy and tech automation), thus improving overall efficiency and making it RTI friendly. A good practice RTI framework should therefore include a close partnership between these stakeholders as transparency is a two-way process and its demands could be much more easily met and the operations smoother if the system works for all.

6. Highlighting RTI enactments, respectively at national and provincial levels, will not only educate the citizens about their right to access information, but also create awareness about the need for transparent and accountable governance. Embedding RTI laws at the centre of government agendas will restore to citizens the information needed to take advantage of the law and the benefits that the law provides both at the (national and provincial RTI institutions). Comprehensive awareness campaigns, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives can achieve this. Prioritization also means investing the necessary resources in officials and people, as well as ensuring that the information flow is strong enough so that citizens receive the information to engage actively with public institutions. The integration of RTI laws into the policy framework and public consciousness drives a higher degree of civic engagement, accountability on part of the government, and encourages a culture of this openness and transparency across all levels of governance.
7. Minimizing secular exemptions as well as disclosure of information is, thus, central to RTI codes so that citizens have access to enough information to hold the government to account. RTI laws are based on the principle that all information held by public authorities should be accessible unless strongly warranted to be withheld for reasons of, for example, national security, public safety or personal privacy. Limiting exemptions to those that are necessary will help create a climate of transparency, enabling citizens to access important information about government actions, policy making and the delivery of public services. Such transparency not only builds trust with the public, it also encourages democratic engagement by enabling citizens to make informed choices, participate in government processes, and hold to task any ineffectiveness or unfair practices they find. It ensures the RTI Act serves its purpose as a measure of transparency and good governance.
8. Also, the introduction of a “Harm Test” into RTI regulations can help decide whether there was any significant risk to national security, individual privacy, public safety, etc., in making certain information public. This test would obligate authorities to balance whether potential harm in releasing particular data outweighs the public interest in transparency. Using this test, decision-makers can balance exemptions to withhold information with the overall objective of openness, tempered by concern for sensitive information. The Harm Test thus facilitates a balance between transparency and a duty to protect that which is key and personal.
9. It is necessary to compare RTI laws with the best practices found around the world to make sure that these laws will be effective and in accordance to the global standards around transparency, accountability, and citizen empowerment. This assessment would be whether the laws are constructed and executed in a way that affords people easy access to information, preserves individual rights, and encourages openness in government. By comparing the way RTI works against effective models from abroad, nations can try to fill the holes in their legal frameworks and revise them while also making sure that the laws are implemented according to international standards for good governance.
10. Organizing workshops as well as seminars educating public officials regarding the need for transparency, the legal framework of the RTI Act and its potential to improve governance, should be a priority for the department to overcome such bureaucratic resistance to the RTI Act. Such events can dispel myths, highlight the advantages of RTI in curtailing corruption, and motivate bureaucrats to process RTI cases based on merit, rather than obstructiveness. McGowan is correct that reluctance on the part of the bureaucratic establishment to share information is one of the key impediments to RTI being effectively acted on.
11. Efforts must be made to speedily process RTI cases to reduce delays and allow timely access to information. To make this happen, enhance RTI offices' efficiency, resource them

- appropriately and enforce timelines for responding to requests. Dedicated teams or officers to handle RTI cases, training for staff on best practices will ensure that information will be shared in a time bound manner. Another one of the ongoing attempts is the use of the digital platforms for filing and tracking the RTI requests, as such approaches have the potential to multiply the speed of getting the information at ease with the least bureaucratic bottlenecks and more responsible government.
12. RTI legislation should be regularly reviewed and amended to ensure that it remains aligned with shifting global standards and the needs of society. By integrating learning from similar best RTI practices around the world, the law would be able to evolve in response to new challenges and technological developments so that it continues to be practical and relevant. So, the transparency and access has to be built through stakeholder consultation, legal experts, civil society and the general public to enrich the agenda there by overcoming these gaps, so that, every legislation is not only accessible to the citizens but also is in sync with global standards of transparency and accountability. Regular updates would also help to sustain public confidence in the system and ensure that its potential to foster an informed and engaged citizenry is realized.
  13. The public bodies should follow a disclosure by default approach where citizen should be able to get the information without asking for it. These bodies can publish information about their activities, decisions, budgets and operations on a regular basis, and that will lead to greater transparency, public trust, and it also reduces the administrative burden of processing of individual requests. By proactively disclosing data and making crucial information easier to find, government agencies not only promote accountability, but also empower citizens to participate in their governance, thus improving institutional performance.
  14. If the request for information is denied, all public authorities must immediately and in an understandable way inform the citizen about the reasons for the refusal. The user must justify this refusal based on that law's specific exemptions and on the understanding that a refusal is not arbitrary.” It is necessary to be transparent in this process so that there is no perception of bias or misuse of authority and trust in the RTI system is not eroded. Providing a clear rationale for rejecting someone not only helps people understand why their applications may have been turned content (and know how to potentially amend their applications if they plan to appeal), it helps, they said, to make the process seem more open and predictable.
  15. Hence, in order to ensure maximum transparency and to prevent misuse of exemptions under RTI Act, categories of information that may be withheld must clearly be defined, and the access to this information must be strictly limited. Any exemptions, whether for personal privacy, national security or third-party interests, must be narrowly construed and only ever apply in situations in which releasing information would genuinely harm such interests. A transparent and specific framework for these exceptions will avoid misuse of the exemptions and arrange its application only at the most essential times that we'll promote the trail of public trust in the RTI system while balancing the need of privacy and security against the need of the public to access information.
  16. Inclusion of Access to Environmental Information in RTI laws is very important. Access to certain categories of environmental information can be put in the RTI legislation itself. Similar to the UK, we have the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) which impose obligations on the public authorities to disclose the environmental information. Such a provision in RTI laws can ensure environmental transparency and sustainability. These provisions guarantee the availability of critical information related to environmental issues, including air quality, waste management, and resource use, enabling citizens and organizations to take informed actions and hold authorities responsible for their actions. Implementing this will lead to better environmental governance, more responsible environmental behaviour from industries and possibly even wider public participation in environmental practices.
  17. It is important to periodically review and amend RTI laws to meet emerging challenges, adapt to technological advancements, and further strengthen transparency and accountability measures. New tools and platforms emerge with the evolution of technology, further facilitating access to information and strengthening the very fabric of RTI systems.

Periodically updating the laws can ensure that they address current issues and allow governments to respond to concerns especially relevant today including digital privacy issues, cyber-security threats and changing societal expectations around government transparency. These principles must, however, evolve in order to ensure that RTI laws remain relevant and capable of promoting public trust in democracy.

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