



Transparency during a crisis

Context:

- Right to Information (RTI) applications seeking information pertaining to the **PM CARES Fund** have been rejected based on the grounds of the fund not being a public authority.

- The author argues in favour of **more transparency and access to information in these crucial times.**

- During the COVID-19 crisis, proper implementation of the law has assumed greater significance than ever before. **Relief and welfare programmes funded through public money** are the sole lifeline of millions who suddenly lost income-earning opportunities during the lockdown. If the poor and marginalised affected by the public health emergency are to have any hope of obtaining the benefits of government schemes, they must have access to relevant information.
- Ground reports have revealed that in the absence of information, it is impossible for intended beneficiaries to get their due from the various relief measures announced by the governments.

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Transparency: Transparency refers to availability of information to the general public and clarity about functioning of governmental institutions.



Accountability: Right to information opens up government's records to public scrutiny, thereby arming citizens with a vital tool to inform them about what the government does and how effectively, thus making the government more accountable.



Predictability: Transparency in government organisations makes them function more objectively thereby enhancing predictability.



Participation: Information about functioning of government also enables citizens to participate in the governance process effectively. In a fundamental sense, right to information is a basic necessity of good governance.

What is the objective of Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005?

- The **Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005**, empowers citizens to access information from public authorities and hold them accountable.

PM CARES Fund:

- No information exists on the official website of the Fund regarding the amount collected, names of donors, expenditure incurred, or details of beneficiaries. The trust deed of the fund is not also available for public scrutiny.

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<http://www.sriramsias.com>

- Reports suggest that donations of over \$1 billion have been made, including contributions from foreign sources.

What are the major concerns?

Corrosive narrative:

- The author strongly argues against the **narrative that public scrutiny of government actions is undesirable during the crisis** and citizens must unquestioningly trust the state.
- Such a narrative undermines the basic democratic tenet that **citizens' participation and oversight** is necessary to ensure they are able to access their rights. Without information, oversight of government's action is absent and corruption thrives.

Critical times:

- Under the current circumstances, the incentives for secrecy are great, and the scope for discretionary actions wide. It is behind such cloak of secrecy that the rights of individuals are most frequently abrogated, **corruption thrives and public trust in institutions is eroded.**

Way forward:

- It is critical to create a culture of openness to empower people to participate meaningfully in the decisions that have profound effects on their lives and livelihoods. **Proper implementation of the Right to Information Act** is more crucial now than ever before.
- To ensure easy accessibility, **relevant information must be made available in local languages** and widely disseminated in line with the statutory obligation of public authorities under Section 4 of the RTI Act.
- In the current scenario the role of information commissions is crucial. While in the midst of a pandemic it is reasonable to expect delays in processing information requests, public authorities must not be allowed to interpret the crisis as a justification for not complying with the RTI Act.