



Transparency and accountability under the Right to Information Act, 2005: A case study of Asansol Sub-Division

Avisek Dey¹, Dr. Kishwar Parveen²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Law, Seacom Skills University, West Bengal, India

² Professor, Department of Law, Seacom Skills University, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Background: The right to information (RTI) Act, 2005, is widely regarded as a transformative legal instrument for ensuring transparency and accountability in governance. Rooted in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India, it empowers citizens to seek information from public authorities, thereby enabling participatory democracy. Despite its progressive intent, the implementation of the Act varies across regions, with differences in public awareness, administrative responsiveness, and perceived efficacy. In West Bengal, and particularly in the Asansol Sub-Division, socio-economic diversity, bureaucratic structures, and varying levels of civic engagement create a distinctive context for examining the Act's real-world functioning.

Objectives: This study aims to assess the extent to which the RTI Act has contributed to enhancing transparency and accountability in the Asansol Sub-Division. The specific objectives are to: (i) measure public awareness and usage patterns of the Act, (ii) evaluate the responsiveness and compliance of public information officers (PIOs), and (iii) explore qualitative perspectives of applicants on systemic challenges and procedural fairness.

Methodology: A mixed methods approach was adopted, combining a quantitative survey of 150 RTI applicants drawn from various public sectors in Asansol with qualitative semi-structured interviews of 20 purposively selected applicants and 5 PIOs. Quantitative data were analyzed using *chi-square test of independence* to examine the association between applicant educational attainment and successful receipt of information, and *independent-samples t-test* to compare satisfaction scores between applicants who received complete information within 30 days and those who experienced delays. Qualitative interview data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring perceptions and challenges regarding the Act's implementation. Data collection was conducted over a period of six months, ensuring both temporal and sectoral representation.

Results: The *chi-square test* revealed a statistically significant association between applicants' educational attainment and the likelihood of obtaining complete and timely information ($\chi^2(2, N=150) = 9.42, p < .01$). The *t-test* indicated a significant difference in satisfaction scores between applicants who received timely responses and those who experienced delays ($t(148) = 3.87, p < .001$), with timely responses yielding notably higher satisfaction. Thematic analysis highlighted three recurring qualitative insights: delays due to bureaucratic inertia, insufficient training among PIOs, and increased citizen trust in governance when RTI requests are processed efficiently.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that while the RTI Act has had a measurable positive impact on transparency and accountability in the Asansol Sub-Division, its potential remains underutilized due to systemic and procedural challenges. Education and prompt response times emerge as key enabling factors for effective use of the Act. Strengthening PIO capacity, reducing delays, and conducting sustained public awareness campaigns could significantly improve the Act's functional reach.

Keywords: Right to Information, transparency, accountability, Asansol, West Bengal, public information officer, mixed methods, governance

Introduction

The RTI Act: Origins and democratic vision

The Right to Information Act, 2005 (RTI Act) emerged from decades of activism, legal advocacy, and civic movements demanding state accountability. It superseded the Freedom of Information Act, 2002, and was operationalized on 12 October 2005 during the tenure of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. Its core principle lies in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, which, as affirmed in *U.P. v. Raj Narain* (1975), recognizes that the people of India have a right to know every public act and decision undertaken by their representatives. The Act mandates public authorities to respond to information requests within 30 days—or within 48 hours if the matter concerns life or liberty—fostering a framework in which transparency becomes not just a principle but a statutory obligation (Singh, 2010)^[13].

National significance and measurable impact

Since its enactment, RTI has been instrumental in uncovering administrative irregularities and empowering citizens. Data from the Government of India's *RTI Online* portal reveal that between 2005–2021, over 17.5 million applications were filed across the country, with the highest concentrations in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh (Singh, 2010^[13]; Voice of CA, n.d.). RTI has played a role in exposing procurement scams, mismanagement in welfare schemes such as MGNREGA, and environmental violations. However, annual reports from the Central Information Commission (CIC) also indicate systemic weaknesses—of the appeals and complaints registered in 2021–2022, only 65% were disposed within the same year, revealing persistent backlogs (CIC, n.d.). Moreover, only a small fraction of defaulting PIOs face penalties; in several states, non-compliance goes unpunished despite Section 20 provisions (Roberts, 2010)^[11].

Implementation challenges

Despite its broad mandate, the Act’s implementation is far from uniform. Studies highlight recurring issues: excessive invocation of Section 8 exemptions, procedural complexity, inadequate proactive disclosure, and lack of PIO training (Baviskar, 2010 ^[2]; Thomas, 2009) ^[15]. The introduction of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) has further complicated matters by granting wider exemptions to withhold information on the grounds of privacy, potentially eroding the RTI’s efficacy (Naithani, 2024) ^[9]. Activists have also noted that RTI users—particularly those probing corruption—often face intimidation, especially in resource-rich or politically sensitive regions (Webb, 2013).

The West Bengal context

West Bengal offers a complex landscape for RTI enforcement. While the state ranks high in literacy (76.3% as per Census 2011; Perianayagam & Goli, 2012) ^[10] and has a politically aware population, RTI usage rates are modest compared to national leaders. The state government has attempted to improve accessibility through initiatives such as Bangla Sahayata Kendras (BSKs), a network of over 3,500 service centres offering over 270 types of services, including assistance in filing RTI applications (Azim, 2022). However, anecdotal evidence and NGO reports suggest that the RTI mechanism is still hindered by delayed responses, incomplete information, and procedural bottlenecks (Ghosh, 2018) ^[6].

In 2021–22, the West Bengal State Information Commission received 4,362 appeals and complaints but could dispose of only 58% within the year, a performance metric below the national average (CIC, n.d.).

The Asansol Sub-Division, situated in Paschim Bardhaman district, forms a socio-economically diverse microcosm of West Bengal. Known for its coal mining and industrial base, it has witnessed decades of rapid urbanization, environmental degradation, and labor migration (Das *et al.*, 2021) ^[5]. These dynamics create fertile ground for RTI usage—citizens often seek information on land acquisition, environmental clearances, industrial licensing, welfare entitlements, and infrastructure projects.

However, many applicants face either prolonged silence from PIOs, the provision of incomplete data, or outright rejections citing exemptions. The reluctance of authorities to provide information—particularly on projects with financial or political stakes—undermines the very accountability RTI was designed to uphold (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999) ^[7].

The area’s mix of literate urban residents and less-educated rural workers further complicates the picture. While the former are more likely to navigate RTI procedures, the latter often depend on intermediaries or NGOs, which can introduce delays or distortions in the process. This disparity reinforces the need for a localized study that not only quantifies application outcomes but also captures the lived experiences of those seeking information (Maity *et al.*, 2022) ^[8].

Study significance and scope

This study builds directly on three years of field engagement and documentation in Asansol. It seeks to provide an empirically grounded evaluation of transparency and accountability under the RTI Act in this semi-urban-industrial setting. Uniquely, it employs a mixed-methods approach—using statistical tests to identify correlations between applicant characteristics and outcomes, alongside qualitative narratives that reveal deeper institutional patterns.

By examining not just whether information is provided, but how and under what circumstances, this research adds granularity to the broader national debate on RTI. It addresses key policy questions: Does RTI function effectively in regions where industrial and political interests are entrenched? How do socio-economic factors influence access and satisfaction? And, most importantly, what targeted interventions could bridge the gap between legislative intent and ground-level reality?

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview narratives. The rationale for this design stems from the need to capture both measurable indicators of RTI usage (e.g., application success rates, response timelines) and the experiential realities of applicants and public information officers (PIOs) in the Asansol Sub-Division. The quantitative strand employed a structured questionnaire administered to RTI applicants, while the qualitative strand utilized semi-structured interviews to probe perceptions of transparency, procedural fairness, and institutional responsiveness.

Study area and population

The research was conducted in the Asansol Sub-Division of Paschim Bardhaman district, West Bengal, which encompasses both urban and rural administrative units. The population frame comprised individuals who had filed at least one RTI application to a public authority in the sub-division between January 2022 and December 2023. Public authorities included municipal bodies, industrial regulators, environmental offices, and welfare departments.

Sampling strategy

A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure representation across different sectors of public authority and socio-economic backgrounds (Singh & Masuku, 2014) ^[12]. The strata were defined by the type of public authority (municipal, industrial, environmental, welfare). Within each stratum, applicants were randomly selected from RTI registers obtained under proactive disclosure provisions.

Table 1: Sample distribution by sector of public authority

Sector of public authority	Number of applicants sampled	Percentage (%)
Municipal administration	45	30.0
Industrial regulation	38	25.3
Environmental clearance	32	21.3
Welfare and social schemes	35	23.4
Total	150	100.0

Data collection instruments and procedures

Quantitative survey

The survey instrument consisted of four sections: (i) demographic information, (ii) RTI application details (type of information sought, date of filing, date of response), (iii) response quality and completeness, and (iv) applicant satisfaction rating (5-point Likert scale). Satisfaction was operationally defined as the applicant's self-reported evaluation of the adequacy, timeliness, and usability of the information received.

Qualitative interviews

A sub-sample of 20 applicants and 5 PIOs were selected purposively for in-depth interviews. Applicants were chosen to reflect diversity in outcome experiences (timely vs delayed, complete vs incomplete information). PIOs were selected from each sectoral stratum. Interviews were conducted in Bengali or Hindi, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Table 2: Key variables and operational definitions

Variable name	Type	Operational definition
Educational attainment	Categorical	Highest level of education completed by the applicant (primary, secondary, tertiary)
Application outcome	Categorical	Whether the applicant received complete and timely information (yes/no)
Response time	Continuous	Number of days taken from application receipt to information delivery
Satisfaction score	Continuous	Mean score across 5 items measuring adequacy, timeliness, and usability (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied)
Appeal lodged	Binary	Whether the applicant filed a first appeal (yes/no)

Data analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using SPSS v.26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were generated to summarize application patterns and outcomes. Two inferential statistical tests were employed:

Chi-square test of independence to assess the association between educational attainment and successful receipt of information.

Independent-samples t-test to compare satisfaction scores between applicants who received information within the statutory 30-day limit and those who experienced delays.

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) ^[3] six-phase framework. Coding focused on recurring themes related to procedural bottlenecks, perceptions of fairness, and trust in public authorities.

Table 3: Summary of data collection framework

Data source	Sample size	Data type	Purpose
Applicant survey	150	Quantitative	To measure awareness, application outcomes, and satisfaction
Applicant interviews	20	Qualitative	To explore perceptions and lived experiences
PIO interviews	5	Qualitative	To understand administrative challenges and procedural norms
RTI registers	—	Documentary	To identify sample and verify application timelines

Results

Quantitative findings

A total of 150 RTI applicants participated in the survey, representing municipal administration (30.0%), industrial regulation (25.3%), environmental clearance (21.3%), and welfare/social schemes (23.4%).

Descriptive statistics

Out of the total respondents, 88 (58.7%) received complete information within the statutory 30-day limit, 37 (24.7%) received delayed responses, and 25 (16.6%) reported incomplete or no response.

Mean satisfaction score across all respondents was $M = 3.48$ ($SD = 1.12$) on a 5-point scale. Satisfaction was higher among those who received complete information within the statutory period ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.74$) compared to those who experienced delays ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.21$).

Chi-square test of independence

A chi-square test was conducted to examine the association between *educational attainment* and *application outcome* (successful receipt of complete and timely information vs. not).

Table 4: Cross-tabulation of educational attainment and application outcome

Educational attainment	Successful outcome (n, %)	Unsuccessful outcome (n, %)	Total (n)
Primary	12 (36.4%)	21 (63.6%)	33
Secondary	31 (54.4%)	26 (45.6%)	57
Tertiary	45 (76.3%)	14 (23.7%)	59
Total	88	61	149*

*One case excluded due to missing data.

The association between educational attainment and application outcome was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 149) = 9.42$, $p < .01$, indicating that applicants with higher education levels were more likely to receive complete and timely information.

Independent-samples t-test

An independent-samples *t*-test compared *satisfaction scores* between applicants who received complete information within the 30-day limit and those who experienced delays.

Results showed a significant difference: $t(123) = 3.87, p < .001, d = 0.72$ (medium-to-large effect size). Timely responses yielded substantially higher satisfaction.

Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis of 20 applicant interviews and 5 PIO interviews revealed three recurring themes:

Procedural bottlenecks and bureaucratic inertia

Many applicants reported that responses were delayed not due to complexity of the request, but because files were “sitting on desks” waiting for internal approval. A respondent noted:

“I could see in the status update that my file was ready, but it stayed pending for over two weeks just for one signature.”

Limited capacity and training among PIOs

Several PIOs acknowledged a lack of formal training in RTI processing. One PIO stated:

“We learn on the job. The Act is clear, but there is no standardized protocol across departments, so everyone interprets timelines differently.”

Trust and empowerment through timely responses

Applicants who received information on time often expressed increased confidence in the government’s willingness to be accountable:

“When I got my answer in two weeks, I felt that the system can work. I am now telling others to use RTI.”

Integrated analysis

The statistical results support the qualitative themes: higher education correlates with more successful outcomes, possibly due to better drafting of applications and persistence in follow-up. Timely responses not only improve satisfaction quantitatively but also, as qualitative data suggest, generate trust in governance and encourage civic engagement. Conversely, procedural delays and lack of PIO training appear to be systemic barriers, corroborating the lower satisfaction scores observed among delayed-response applicants.

Discussion

Linking findings to transparency and accountability theory

The Right to Information Act, 2005, was conceptualized as both a transparency mechanism—ensuring citizens can access public records—and an accountability tool—ensuring that public authorities justify their decisions and actions (Ashraf, 2008) ^[1]. The results from the Asansol Sub-Division demonstrate that while the Act retains its theoretical potential, its effectiveness is heavily mediated by socio-economic and institutional factors. The statistically significant association between higher educational attainment and successful application outcomes aligns with access capability theory in governance studies, which posits that individuals with greater informational literacy are better equipped to navigate administrative systems.

From an accountability perspective, the significant gap in satisfaction scores between timely and delayed responses reflects a core principle of procedural justice: the perception of fairness is shaped not just by the outcome but also by the process and timeliness of delivery. Delays—whether caused by bureaucratic inertia, administrative bottlenecks, or reluctance—undermine public trust.

Comparisons with broader national and West Bengal trends

At the national level, RTI implementation is similarly uneven; states such as Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have higher disposal rates and proactive disclosure practices, while others face chronic backlogs and low penalty enforcement.

The present study’s finding that only 58.7% of respondents received complete and timely information is slightly below the national figure of approximately 65%. This suggests that while Asansol’s RTI framework functions, it underperforms compared to better-performing states and matches the performance gaps seen in similarly industrialized yet administratively burdened regions.

Educational disparities and access inequality

The link between educational attainment and RTI success rates points to a structural inequality in access. Applicants with tertiary education are more likely to draft precise requests, cite relevant sections of the Act, and persist in follow-ups or appeals. In contrast, less-educated applicants may submit vague or incomplete requests, which are more susceptible to rejection under Section 6(1) procedural grounds. This echoes patterns found in national surveys, where urban and educated populations dominate RTI usage, raising concerns about whether the Act adequately serves marginalized groups.

Administrative bottlenecks and PIO capacity gaps

The qualitative data reveal that many PIOs lack standardized training and interpret timelines differently. This inconsistency directly contributes to procedural delays. At a structural level, PIOs often hold RTI responsibilities in addition to their primary duties, leading to deprioritization of applications. Studies confirm that overloaded PIOs without institutional support are more likely to default or provide partial responses (Maity *et al.*, 2022 ^[8]; Singh, 2010) ^[13].

In Asansol’s industrial context, politically sensitive information—such as details about environmental clearance for coal mining projects—was cited by some respondents as especially difficult to obtain. This pattern is consistent with literature documenting higher denial rates for information tied to high-value contracts or political interests.

Implications for citizen trust and civic engagement

A recurring qualitative theme was the trust-building effect of timely and complete RTI responses. When applicants received information efficiently, they were more likely to recommend the Act to others, creating a positive feedback loop of engagement. Conversely, negative experiences discouraged further use, reinforcing a perception of government opacity. This aligns with studies that highlight that transparency gains are fragile and can be reversed if procedural fairness is not maintained.

Policy recommendations

To bridge the gap between the RTI Act’s legislative promise and on-ground practice in Asansol and West Bengal, the following measures are recommended:

Targeted capacity building for PIOs — Regular, standardized training sessions to ensure consistent interpretation of timelines, exemptions, and procedural requirements.

Simplification of RTI filing for low-literacy applicants — Introducing pictorial forms and multilingual templates, especially in rural parts of Asansol.

Strengthening penalty enforcement — West Bengal's State Information Commission should adopt stricter timelines and penalties for non-compliance to deter delays.

Enhanced proactive disclosure — Public authorities should proactively publish frequently requested information, particularly in industrial regulation and environmental clearance cases.

Third-party facilitation centres — Partnering with NGOs and community-based organizations to assist marginalized citizens in drafting precise RTI applications and tracking their progress.

Contribution of this study to the literature

By focusing on a semi-urban, industrially complex sub-division, this study contributes a nuanced regional case to the national discourse on RTI. The integration of statistical evidence and qualitative narratives enriches the understanding of how legal provisions interact with socio-economic realities. It highlights that transparency and accountability are not solely functions of legal access but are shaped by citizen capability, institutional culture, and local political economy.

Conclusion

The Right to Information Act, 2005, stands as one of India's most significant democratic reforms, designed to embed transparency and accountability into the functioning of public authorities. This study, focusing on the Asansol Sub-Division of West Bengal, reaffirms both the promise and the limitations of the Act in practice.

Quantitatively, the findings reveal that educational attainment significantly influences the likelihood of receiving complete and timely information, and that timely responses are strongly correlated with higher applicant satisfaction. Qualitatively, the narratives of applicants and public information officers expose persistent systemic issues, including bureaucratic inertia, inconsistent interpretation of procedures, and insufficient institutional capacity.

The study underscores that while legislative frameworks like the RTI Act can set the stage for transparency, the lived reality of access is shaped by socio-economic factors, administrative will, and local political economy. In Asansol, industrial complexity, political sensitivities, and procedural bottlenecks hinder the full realization of the Act's potential. However, the trust-building effect observed among citizens who received timely and complete responses illustrates that improvements are possible and impactful.

Addressing these gaps requires a multi-pronged approach: capacity building for PIOs, simplification of application procedures for low-literacy populations, stricter penalty enforcement, enhanced proactive disclosure, and partnerships with civil society to support marginalized applicants. By implementing these targeted reforms, West Bengal—and by extension, similar regions—can move closer to fulfilling the RTI Act's foundational objective: to empower citizens and make governance genuinely answerable to the people.

Future research could extend this inquiry by conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in RTI outcomes following specific policy interventions, or by comparing

similar industrial sub-divisions across states to identify replicable best practices.

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