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Article:	Role of Key Stakeholders in the Awareness Campaign of Right to Information (RTI) Act, Punjab
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Abstract

The study aims to check the awareness level of people towards Right to Information Act 2013 and also examines the role of key stakeholders in RTI Act Awareness Campaign. The study further investigates the barriers to effective awareness campaign of RTI Act 2013. A mix method research design has been adopted (Survey and intensive interview) to collect data. The study implies Democratic and Social Responsibility theory by Michael Laurence & Siebert, Peterson and Schramm.

Purposive sampling method was used for conducting survey. Intensive interviews were taken from bureaucrats, politicians and the leaders of civil society from Pakistan. Findings showed few significant perspectives. Punjab Government enacted Right to Information as a bargain for aid from international community which reflects government's disinterest and lack of concern for RTI's effective implementation and awareness of general public.

Keywords: RTI (Right to Information) Act, stakeholders, bureaucrats, society, information

Introduction

In the light of Article 19-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, which guarantees every citizen the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance, Punjab Government has enacted RTI Act on December 16, 2013. As per **the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan** “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” (p.121).

RTI is a step towards making Punjab truly democratic by allowing citizens to not only keep track of the government’s actions but also make it accountable for its services. The basis of RTI is that government information belongs to the citizens, since it affects the citizens directly or indirectly.

This study analyzes the role of key stakeholders i.e. media, bureaucracy, political parties, civil society and general public. Though all key stakeholders have contributed in RTI Awareness Campaign but proactive efforts by stakeholders are yet to be made. The fact that so little attention is being given to bringing Right to Information Act into effect is disturbing, especially in times when Pakistan faces political turmoil, every day, in the name of democracy. In order to bridge the gap between the general public and the government functionaries, it is critical that all key stakeholders endeavor, collectively or separately, to set a precedent of its kind by creating awareness among general public regarding RTI Act in an attempt to pay respect to the citizens’ constitutional right to information.

Significance of the Study

The notion of freedom of information is orthodox and documented by so many other countries of the world. Good governance is not possible in any society without the emphasis on the implementation of freedom of information. Citizens of other countries (for e.g. Nepal

& India) with strong RTI legislations have been successfully using this law to receive public information and highlight areas for strengthening accountability of public services.

In times when relishing ultimate superiority with defunct accountability, corruption and biasness has become one of the most prominent issues, defining RTI as necessary for democracy is correct. When the Constitution of Pakistan allows citizens the liberty to seek information, ask questions and demand for answers, then any kind of indifference in provision of information by the government, judiciary or bureaucracy shall be taken as a violation of law. The key stakeholders of the act, both at the giving end, and at the receiving end of the fence, should realize the significance of Transparency and Right to Information Act. Media, civil society and the government should and make it their responsibility to create awareness in the general public. On the other hand, it is the duty of the citizens to keep them self well-informed about the laws and legislation passed in the name of citizens' betterment. After all, a law is just a piece of skillful writing unless it used and practiced.

Rationale of the Study

Rationale for selecting RTI Act the rising trend of freedom of information in Pakistan cannot be neglected as all four provinces have now united the Freedom of Information (FOI) legislations in the form of acts, RTI Act 2013 being one of them. By revealing corruption and ensuring transparency in the society, this act is in fact, the foundation stone under which democracy will nurture. Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act is a legitimate effort to emancipate society by authorizing every citizen, **a)** access to governmental information, and **b)** the prerogative to question the services of their government. Although every law passed by the provincial or federal assemblies is concerned with the welfare of the general public, but RTI is so deeply and directly addressed to the basic human right of the people, the right to question, that it becomes essential to talk about it.

Objectives of the study:

- Check the awareness level of people towards Punjab Transparency and RTI Act 2013.
- Examines the role of key stakeholder.
- Investigates the barriers to effective awareness campaign of Punjab Transparency and RTI Act 2013.

Literature Review

Baig (2014) states that Pakistan passed its first FOI law in 2002 named as Freedom of Information Ordinance and later on was passed by the assemblies of Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. Taking into consideration the Article 19-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, Freedom of Information (FOI) is also worded as Right to information (RTI). One as well the other terminology has the similar connotation which exhibits that information should appear to the people straightforwardly and without any efforts. The total number of FOI laws in Pakistan is reached to five; four at provincial levels and one at Centre level. Current research assesses the implementation of passing of FOI laws at both the provincial and the federal level. It also examines the responsibility of civil society and media institutions to reinforce the FOI in Pakistan. In addition current research also establishes the core developments of FOI since 2002 and highlights the role of media, civil society and opinion leaders for its improved and better implementation. Current research also emphasizes on the methodologies and invasions required for the needed improvement of this law.

Berlin (2014) stated that transparency is the key to better and improved governance (Florini 2007; Hood and Heald 2006; Stiglitz 1999). Accessibility of information regarding definite rules, regulations and undertaking activities can empower general public and media correspondents, limit the power of politicians, and reveal corruption and dishonesty. Yet in particular these ground reasons, transparency is extremely political. The majority of political personals gives liking to confidentiality in openness and be in opposition to constraints on

their personal dealings. For those who mistreat public organization for personal accomplishment, for this purpose transparency increases the threat of exposing and lessens predictable profits to future fraud and corruption. The key policies meant to increase transparency in Freedom of Information (FOI) laws, which have been accepted and approved by over 80 nations around the world. FOI laws incorporate into system transparency by generating lawful guarantees of the right to demand information about government. They have been motivated for escalating transparency, liability, and trust (Banisar 2006; Birkinshaw 2006; Florini 2007). So far politicians usually find these laws to be a blackthorn in their selves. For instance Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, publically spoken regret over passage of the Freedom of Information Act (2000). In his biography, he cited himself a “naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop” (Blair2010, 511). For the purpose of formulation and implementation of this law, journalists started to inspect government proceedings and expose scandals. Foreseeing such costs, political actors in many states have hold out against and postponed FOI passage for years, even in front of national and international campaigns.

According to Bhattacharyya (2014) RTI is a necessary step in securing transparency and accountability in governmental procedures and processes. When the government of the country is transparent, there are fewer chances for corruption and negligence in country's resources and that government is supposed to be more answerable to its people. This is the key reason of increase in importance of RTI and therefore in this day and age fetching the standard in international ground. RTI usually understood basically the right to contain access to information held by community authorities. It is not just a requirement of the public but it is a state of antecedent to a good and transparent government. To be more precise, RTI makes democracy additional vigorous, collaborative and significant and allows people to contribute in the practice of governance of the state. That is to say, it can be declared that the Right to

Information in true sagacity of the word empowers the common and the poor citizens or known as mango people of the country mainly them who lives primarily in the rural areas of our country (p. 258).

Borah (2013) stated that information is a basic right of every individual. In a democratic state every person has the right to freedom of beliefs and expression. This right comprises the right of ownership in public opinion and to inquire about, accept and pass on information and thoughts from the public authorities. The presented and appropriate information assist people to live a venerable life in a sophisticated society. Furthermore there is closeness among RTI and good governance. Good governance is distinguished by transparency, liability and receptiveness. For that reason, the right of citizen to information is more and more being accepted as an significant technique to endorse honesty, transparency and accountability in government organization. Simply citizens are the component in a representative structure of government organization. That's why it is necessary that they should have to identify all the performance of government actions to make a useful administration of good governance in organizational procedures (p. 11). RTI act is a pathway for creating legislation which reveals the confidentiality of administration of the government. It is a successful means to endorse democratic ideology. The act is very influential instrument to brawl against corruption and dishonesty. By realizing the importance of this act the Second Administrative Reform Commission had organized a comprehensive design for revamp the public administrative structure. The second Administrative Reform Commission, India's government published its initial report in "Right to Information: Master key to good governance." in the course of this report the commission straightforwardly declared that access to information can allow the poor and feeble sectors of society to claim the government information about civic policies and procedures, by this means led to wellbeing of all (Borah, 2013, p. 17).

Singh and Karn stated (2012) in India, RTI Act is considered as the base of democracy as it has created a new way of creating openness and accountability in public Institutions. In short, RTI is making a type of system that is easily approach by every individual. This Act is not evenly implemented in all cities of India. Even after seven years of implementation, it is not properly executed as it was actual prepared. The current study is focused on the implementation of this Act on Jharkhand , a state of India . And it was found that people did not have much awareness about this Act.

Banisar (2011) explains the Right to access information and the Right of Information as they are irreconcilable. RTI law gives every individual to have access to the Government bodies. On the other hand RTI law provides protection and security to any kind of personal information held by govt. or Private sector. On the other hand, they are quite same. They both act as a way to protect the rights of individual and promote government responsibility. RTI says that everyone has the equal right to demand information from govt. bodies. This comes under freedom of expression to Seek and receive information and human right is worldwide acceptable. By this Law, every individual can request for getting information unless there is a legal reason to reject that request. In Rajistan , India , this policy is used to make sure proper distribution of food among people. (Celland & Tillay 2001 AS CITED IN Banisar , 2011) . It is used in non Government agencies as well.

Theoretical Framework

The study implies Democratic and Social Responsibility theory by Michael Laurence (2017) & Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1949). Democratic theory analyzes the role of media in allowing transparency in the system which would ultimately take it to stronger democracy. The article has also focused on the role of media and other stakeholders to guarantee accountability of the functioning of government department. It can only be done through the successful execution of Freedom of Information Laws that a society can get the

status of actual democracy. Social Responsibility Theory includes the major role of media in promoting the issue of Right to Information and making other institutions, such as government and bureaucracy, evaluate their role as well. In order to guarantee accountability in the government departments and effective implementation of RTI Act, all stakeholders need to perform their social responsibility of society's progress and emancipation.

Research Methodology

A mix method research design has been adopted (Survey and intensive interview) to collect data.

Purposive sampling method was used for conducting survey of 200 people. Intensive interviews were taken from bureaucrats, politicians and the leaders of civil society from Pakistan.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Key stakeholders are not playing proactive role in RTI Awareness Campaign
- **H2:** General public is not fully aware of the Punjab Transparency and RTI Act 2013

Findings of Interviews

Hussain Naqi (Former Joint Director,(HRCP) as a journalist; he considers free flow of information necessary for the regulation of an effective media. He said that it is every citizen's right and duty, at the same time, to know what is going on in his/her country. However, according to him Right to Information Act only addresses the literate population of Pakistan. In order to invoke an application under RTI, the applicant must come from an educational background. More than a common man, RTI provides benefits to academics, researchers or media probing a story in depth – anyone in search of a relevant and particular piece of information. However, information can reach general public through these sources, establishing an indirect yet relevant relation between the Right to Information Act and common men. He was of the view that RTI Act is a step ahead in the way to democracy. The

basis of democracy, according to him, lies in knowing that we have a right to 'know' which is strengthened by laws such as RTI. Agreeing to the fact that majority of the population is still unaware of RTI's significance and what powers it brought, he had two facets to discuss. Firstly, he criticized the government for never publicizing this act or any other on a massive level. He highlighted that Punjab government enacted RTI Act under pressure from the international aid providing organizations, which explains half of the lack of government's interest in creating awareness regarding it. To add, he stated that Pakistan has been paralyzed by a corrupt government and domineering bureaucracy for ages. Acts like Right to Information, which feature the power to expose corruption and financial malfunctions, remain a threat to their world of secrets. Bureaucrats and government will forever try to hold people away from information regarding their actions and decisions for as long as they can. The ties and relationships of Punjab Information Commission (PIC) with the government is a reason that fervent decisions of punishment are not taken by PIC, which is a severe violation of law in itself. He also commented on the role of media, as a stakeholder to creating awareness, and the way it functions these days. He stressed that it is extremely unfortunate for any nation when the media stops playing an objective role, preferring finances over professional responsibilities. Secondly, he emphasized that our society needs to change altogether. If bureaucrats, media, government and any other sources are responsible for creating awareness, general public is as equally responsible to strive for consciousness of their own rights.

Zahid Abdullah Program Manager – RTI, Center for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) explaining the legal framework of RTI or someone unfamiliar with legitimate language, He defines Right to Information Act to be a basic human right. Democracy is not all about casting a vote, it means that citizens have the prerogative to analyze and question the actions of people they elected and the performance of public serving

institutes. Every commodity you pay for, every service you use – it makes you a tax payer. No matter how rich or poor, we are all paying our share which multiplies to produce millions and billions of money. RTI Act, to comprehend, allows you to keep a check on where your money is used. In more than 100 hundred countries, laws have been promulgated in order to empower a common citizen with the right to first know, acquire information and then hold government or public bodies accountable on the basis of that information. Talking about the awareness of general public in terms of existence and significance of Right to Information Act, Abdullah said that Punjab is a province with more than a population of hundred million, where 70% of the people come from uneducated backgrounds. He stated that this fact alone is a major reason why people are still unaware of RTI. According to him, Punjab Information Commission has been recently granted funds for setting up proper offices and equipment which make him hopeful that very soon RTI Awareness Campaign will take a huge leap. The constraint that we face in terms of effective awareness campaign is our long standing history of public bodies and bureaucrats to work furtively, behind closed doors, considering themselves all-so-powerful. It is formidable for the government to justify to a common citizen the budget for Metro Bus Project when people are dying at government hospitals, every day, due to the lack of equipment and doctors. It would take tenacious efforts by the society to bring behavioral change to these attitudes. Elucidating the significance of RTI, he was of the view that earlier it was out of question for a citizen to demand accountability from public bodies – but with the advent of RTI we have at least managed to bring bureaucracy or the government to a place where they seek refuge behind unconvincing excuses and deliberate delays. With enduring perseverance and perpetual pressure we can take this a step further. He also said that a law is just a piece of writing unless it is not excessively practiced. Making a law to access information does not mean that information will get to you itself.

Khawar Naeem Hashmi - Bureau Chief Lahore, BOL TV suggests, Right to Information is an act that empowers citizens by giving them the right to know, to seek out information. Further it states that this information will be regarding public bodies, their employees and government officials. Awareness regarding political decisions or legislations takes place at two levels; i) by the government and ii) by media. As part of the media fraternity, He has a view that government and media have deliberately and consciously never tried to create awareness regarding RTI amongst general public. While government's reasons to hold back information regarding its actions and performance are vivid, question rises on the role of media. Elucidating his argument, Hashmi stated that since Zia-ul-Haq's regime, Pakistani media has become habitual of being financially dependent on the government and never endeavors to stand against it. The dilemma that Pakistani media faces is unqualified and inexperienced ownership that cares more about making money than the role they need to play as media professionals. Licenses have been distributed like flyers to anyone and everyone, void of any rules and regulations, for setting up media houses which consequently led us to an insensitive and unprofessional media. RTI Act is like telling a blind-folded man, who cannot even hear or speak, that you are free to ask and act. We are a nation where justice is given in exchange for money, where green-plated cars are never fined for breaking rules and where the poor dies on a hospital bed, untreated, because he does not have money to pay for it. Denial of information is punishable under the law, yet no grave steps have been taken by PIC because be it the government, judiciary or media, they are all tied up against the people of Pakistan. So, it is unwise to expect an act such as RTI to flourish without difficulty. Though journalistic community has a lot of reservations on the legal framework of this act but the point of amendment is too far away when the government has not yet been able to implement the existing law properly. The only hope we have is our youth – young, passionate blood full of determination is our only chance at breaking walls.

Faiza Malik - MPA, PPP said that these days mostly acts are made under international pressure or to keep up with the UN Charter. This reflects government's lack of will and self interest in effective implementation of a lot of laws. Right to Information Act is a law directly concerned with the citizens, giving hope to alter the years old practices of keeping general public away from all sorts of public information. Before RTI, citizens had no route to public departments and their information, accountability was just word in the air and we could only wonder why the bureaucracy is not performing in accordance to the facilities it is being provided with. Bureaucrats have a habit of playing around with information and giving unauthentic answers, even the seekers are members of the assembly. It is however appalling that these behaviors tend to persist even after RTI has been promulgated. Sadly, RTI was passed but it has never been implemented in true sense because government fears to go against bureaucracy, though it is the government's responsibility to remove all barriers and focus on the effective implementation of a law. Punjab government's intents are only to construct monumental infrastructure and they do it no matter what comes in the way. If they have the same level of determination and interest in creating social difference, making education and health sector better, they can surely bring about change. Government has never run any awareness campaign on RTI while the papers and news channels are full of Metro Bus and Ramadan Sasta Bazar advertisements. Seeing this, all that could be said is that government is threatened to let people have access to information because it would mean for them to prepare a long list of clarifications and answers. If the government endeavors to let people know about the law and its significance, before it is made and of course after it comes into effect, it would save parliament from humiliation and embarrassment.

Saadia Tehreem – PAS Officer accepted that bureaucrats, majorly, are unaware of the Right to Information Act, Punjab. She said that government needs to start a trickle-down process in order to educate bureaucrats and office staff at grass root levels. It is extremely

wrong for the government or any other organization to blame bureaucracy for being hurdle in the way of democracy. Sadia brought to notice that whenever government sends a notification in order to implement a law or a new policy, bureaucrats have to do it, compulsorily. Lack of awareness in public bodies about RTI reflects government's personal disinterest and apathy towards implementing RTI Act. Bureaucrats have nothing to reveal neither do we fear trial. Only a person who is corrupt or involved malpractices will be afraid of RTI and that can come from media, government, it does not necessarily have to be a bureaucrat. It is appalling to see how easily governments shrugs off its responsibility and puts the blame on bureaucracy when this country is actually run and managed by the hard work of bureaucrats. Let's assume that bureaucrats, from top to bottom, get profound knowledge of RTI, even then it is impossible for them to effectively and readily carry out the details stated in RTI Act. It requires labor, time and equipment to answer to hundreds of applicants asking for information. When government machinery is not getting enough of the three for their routine tasks how can government or people or anyone expect bureaucrats to provide them with information in blink of eye. Public official do not deny to applications or deliberately delay the process, it is just workload that keeps them from efficiently carrying out the task. Brining another aspect of the problem to discussion, Sadia said that people do not only need to get aware of RTI and their right to know. This process should also involve sensitizing people as to what are their limits and extent to which they can ask for information. One of the major reasons resulting delays is the time taken to filter applications. Public official have a duty to make correct decisions – RTI has led people to exploit information which is why process of information giving goes through a lot of sieving and filtration. It is, however, tiring, lengthy and sometimes irate for bureaucrats to distinct between pseudo and genuine applications. Government is not only responsible for making laws; it should also devise proper

mechanisms for the effective implementation of those laws. Only then we can cooperate and contribute for change.

Survey Findings

The survey revealed that out of 200, 64.5% people never even heard of Right to Information while out of 35.5% who did come across RTI; only 11% knew what the law actually entails. Segmenting population of Lahore on educational bases, leads us to a very small proportion of knowledgeable (at least till matriculation) people. However results revealed by this survey reflected that even the educated segment, highly expected to be well informed and fully aware of their rights do not have knowledge about Right to Information Act. One and a half year has passed since Right to Information Act was promulgated in Punjab – these results augment a lot of questions and skepticism with respect to the role media, bureaucrats, political parties and civil society have played for creating consciousness about RTI in past months.

Where 8% RTI literates said that they have been informed by media, 3% through seminars, 2.5% by political leaders and 19.5% were advantaged through grapevine process, there still was a quotient of 67% who were absolutely uninformed. With that, these statistics portray that civil society has been most active in informing people in comparison to rest. 61.5% people regarded right to information and accountability as democratic, desired and essential for bringing change. If 75% people say yes to have the right to question government actions and decisions, it is inevitable that if informed about Right to Information, people will surely advantage from it.

When people were asked to name one stakeholder they most expect to inform them about news, information and reports of public significance, 64.5% decided on 'media'. It is evident from these figures that society majorly depends on media for their information. However, previously stated results showed that only 8% people got to know about RTI

through media. With this, it could be concluded that media has not played its role as effectively and responsibly as people look forward to, particularly with reference to Right to Information Awareness Campaign.

69% people want to witness change in Pakistan's political scenario, mirroring general public's distrust in recent governance which is why 39% people said a definite yes to using Right to Information before casting votes in future elections for which 60% people made sure that they will make efforts to increase their knowledge regarding RTI. These results depict that general public's lack of awareness is mainly due to stakeholders' inefficient roles rather than self- disinterest.

54% people preferred to gain information through print and electronic media while 39% went with internet. Thus, it can be said that media has to play the most important and objective part in creating social awareness at all levels.

Findings & Conclusions

Through the interviews conducted during research, researcher inferred a few significant perspectives. Punjab Government enacted Right to Information as a bargain for aid from international community which reflects government's disinterest and lack of concern for RTI's effective implementation and awareness of general public. Though the government claims to have made fruitful endeavors in implementing Right to Information, the truth is it has not once been put into practice since its enactment.. Making bureaucracy's reputation as corrupt, arrogant and stubborn, government conveniently finds excuse for its lack of action and will in enforcing Right to Information in its true spirit. As for the rest of the political parties, our politicians have become habitual of playing the 'blame game'. They accept government's indifference toward social development but put forward their stories of being shun and helpless when it comes to their role as opposition force.

Bureaucracy is blamed to be hindering the process of delivering information under RTI Act. This may be true to a certain extent, the facts however state that those bureaucrats are not yet aware of Right to Information or its procedures, completely. They demand for a proper mechanism to mark the extent to which information can be shared and made accessible for general public. Secondly, bureaucracy describes itself as ‘servants to the government and people’. They say that if bounded by government, no bureaucrat can go against law. If bureaucrats are liable for creating obstacles in way of democracy, government has every right to take strict actions against them. The truth been told is that government has made no serious or severe attempts to force bureaucracy into following Right to Information.

The most important aspect of the whole situation was general public’s lack of awareness. Key stakeholder’s ineffective role cannot be denied but another perspective has to be brought forward. People in our society have grown to remain deliberately unaware of their social rights and responsibilities, making it a point to critique and complain but never going ahead with solutions. It is rightly said that ignorance of law is no excuse and this goes for the educated, qualified stratum of society. We, as a society, do not strive for our own welfare and emancipation. Societal issues, community problems, social evils, no matter how significant, never succeed to grasp people’s attention unless they come face to face with one of them. It is high time that we think like a nation, and not individuals. It is our responsibility to know about laws and legislations made in assemblies in the name of citizens’ welfare. Moreover, knowing about a law does not mean things will change on their – a law must be practice, time and time again, for it to prove productive or futile.

During the research, many new dimensions were added to the study. Therefore it was observed that stereotypical attitudes and clichéd behaviors of society, as a whole, were obstruction to Right to Information’s successful awareness campaign. Politician’s sole interest in making and passing laws without keeping tabs on their implementation,

bureaucrats' impertinence in abiding by the laws, media's lack of concern towards social developments and civil society's (including general public) indifference in trying to know and keeping themselves informed our barriers to not just RTI's but to any awareness campaign.

Thus, these inferences support researcher's hypotheses that:

- i) Key stakeholders are not playing effective role in RTI Awareness Campaign
- ii) General public is not fully aware of the Punjab Transparency and RTI Act 2013

For RTI Act, specifically, and every other law generally, it is essential that government, media and civil society work together, sincerely and honest intentions to save parliament from humiliation and to prove supremacy of law. General public's role in any awareness campaign is equally questionable – answers are given when questions are asked. Without seeking information or knowledge, neither would be delivered at public's doorstep. If government, bureaucracy, judiciary and even the media make you feel insecure and helpless, unite as a society and fight for your rights. There is no element more forceful and formidable than a group of literate, aware and determined people, ready to win the battle of justice. Right to Information envisages true democracy with informed individuals collectively making an empowered society, but the vision of this law demand sheer determination, interest and resolve from each and every stakeholder for bringing change and developing better society.

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