



सूचना के जन अधिकार का राष्ट्रीय अभियान

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO INFORMATION

PRESS RELEASE

05/08/2013

The National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information (NCPRI) held a press conference at the Indian Womens' Press Corps to oppose the proposed amendments to the RTI Act and demand the passage of the Whistleblower Protection bill pending in the Rajya Sabha and the Grievance Redress bill pending in the Lok Sabha. The press conference was addressed by Vinod Mehta, Harsh Mander, Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey and Anjali Bhardwaj.

The speakers condemned the hasty and opaque manner in which the government and parties are moving amendments to the RTI Act, which will provide blanket exemptions to political parties from the transparency regime of the country. The move to amend the RTI Act comes as a sharp response to the CIC order which declared political parties to be public authorities under the RTI Act.

Aruna Roy said that public pressure had prevented amendments being brought in as an ordinance. She stated that it was unacceptable that political parties are not initiating any public discussion on this issue and are moving amendments in a unilateral manner. She welcomed the position taken by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Shri Raghuvansh Prasad of the RJD that they do not support any amendments to the RTI Act. She held that political parties need to be empowered for a functional democracy but empowerment does not mean that they non transparent and unaccountable. She referred to the lack of public consultation on this issue by parties as a "trivialization of democracy".

Vinod Mehta, veteran journalist, said that "when all parties are united against something, you can certainly smell a rat"! He said that accountability of the political process is not an ordinary battle, "this goes to the core of what we are trying to do in the country- more openness, more transparency". He stated that if one were to observe the current debate, it is all about parties trying to protect their vested interests and fight to keep their veil of secrecy.

Harsh Mander, an eminent civil society activist, said that every institution is happy to see transparency everywhere but in their own institution. He said that if parties had problems with the CIC order then the answer was not to remain opaque but rather to engage with people on it and have public discussions. He stated that the "use of parliamentary power to address an issue which affects parties, is a clear conflict of interest". Harsh said that all bodies that raise public funds should be accountable.

Anjali Bhardwaj, co-convernor of the NCPRI, said that the rationale of the RTI Act is to ensure transparency, not just in government, but also in governance and to create an informed citizenry.

She said that political parties occupy a critical position in a democracy and therefore there is no rationale for keeping them outside the purview of the transparency regime of the country. Anjali stated that legitimate concerns of political parties about their competitive position being compromised and their competitive strategies being disclosed are already addressed through section 8 of the RTI Act. She said "every time there is a move to hold the political class accountable, parties find ways to scuttle these attempts". She stated that there has been widespread demand for anti- corruption and grievance redress measures like the Lokpal bill, the Grievance Redress Bill and the Whistle Blower Protection Bill and yet, instead of addressing these, the government is moving with unprecedented urgency on the issue of amendments. She said that if "there is a will to be transparent, legitimate concerns can be addressed".

Nikhil Dey, co-convenor of the NCPRI said that in this particular issue democratic balance is completely lost as all the parties are in agreement with each other and therefore none of them will raise the concerns of people on the floor of the house. He said that the way parties and the government are moving amendments is as if "there has been a match fixing of amendments". He also felt that parties were indulging in doublespeak as while stating that they are committed to financial transparency, they are seeking blanket exemptions by way of amendments. He said that people must have the power to directly ask parties about their functioning as "that is where sovereignty of citizens lies in a democracy".

There have been nation-wide protests against the proposed amendments to the RTI Act. Protests are being held in Orissa, Chennai, Punjab, Rajasthan, Delhi, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Calcutta. Close to 300 eminent people have sent a petition to the PM to oppose the proposed amendments to the RTI Act, while an online petition to the PM has already been signed by more than 6000 people.

The NCPRI said that it will continue to protest against the proposed amendments. On the 6th of August 2013 a 'Jan Manch' is being organized at Jantar Mantar, where political parties have also been invited. On the 7th of August 2013, the NCPRI will join the National Right to Food Campaign to stress the crucial importance of the grievance redress bill and the bill for protection of whistleblowers.

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