



## ROLE OF EDUCATION IN RTI APPLICATION: THE CASE OF RURAL WEST BENGAL <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Right is nothing but a privilege, enforceable by law. If we admit to get concerned beyond us, what should be the extent of concern? It is only for family members, neighbors, community or beyond? The concern should be local or universal? From past few decades there has been an unstoppable global trend towards the recognition of Right to Information among all countries. The act put legal compulsion on public officials to disclose information on government decisions and activities. This could be much effective for a rural economy where secrecy in public administration is more prevalent. Using RTI a common man could inspect any government work or document he wishes. This could make possible equitable distribution of resources and may remove economic and social disparities in rural areas.

Under the newly started non-left regime in West Bengal, RTI could be an effective instrument to build a sense of accountability within bureaucrats and other functionaries in implementation of development policies and programmes. As far as the application of the RTI law is concerned, it has been very limited, especially in the states rural counterpart. Lack of institutional and financial provision to raise awareness of people made the utilization of the RTI law a mess in rural areas. Nevertheless poor education of rural people has been major responsible to underestimate the act.

In the present study an attempt has been made to set education as a crucial factor against the utilization of RTI in development of a backward rural economy. Much of the suffering and helplessness of a rural poor could be diluted if he is knowledgeable and capable of evaluating the functioning of responsible authorities with a proper follow-up. It requires an aam admi to be anxious to know about the polity he belongs to. Undoubtedly, a literate person could be more knowledgeable and aware of the things happening in his day to day life.

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The state of West Bengal has been made the focus area for the present study. In spite of taking several meaningful steps in rural development, West Bengal lagged behind many other Indian states in developing a sustainable quality life for rural people. The state has also been reported with very poor RTI awareness status in its rural counterpart. Hence, there is enough justification behind the selection of the state as the focus of the present study.

The study has been conducted in two parts: the first part consists of a secondary data analysis, based on status of application of RTI in rural West Bengal. The second part consists of a primary survey based analysis in few selected areas of rural West Bengal. Both of these have demonstrated that status of RTI awareness among rural people is directly related to level of education of the concerned population.

**Keywords:** RTI, Rural development, Decentralized governance, Information, Awareness, Education

## I Introduction

Development of rural economy is an all-time challenge before the nation of India. Along with vast unemployment and severe malnutrition among children, miserable rural infrastructure has intensified the problem of rural development [1]. It doesn't mean that the nation has not formulated appropriate policies to address the thrust areas. Failure rather lies in the aspect of implementation. As far as the major Indian states are concerned, West Bengal holds the pioneering position in this respect [2]. The leading move of the state towards decentralized service delivery institutions and participatory pro-people approaches were an attempt to activate the public delivery system and organize the poor in demand of quality services. However, in spite of all these, the state lagged behind many other states in developing a sustainable quality life for rural people [3].

The true and meaningful rural development necessitates a bottom up approach with more importance on grassroots level decisions and preferences [4]. It boosts up the spirit of rural poor and is able to bring a positive attitude of them towards the current situation. However, for their meaningful participation in the said activity their knowledge and awareness have to be geared up. Here comes the role of Right to Information (RTI). According to the RTI Act, the responsible public officials can not maintain any secrecy while implementing Government sponsored schemes and programmes. The right of information could also be utilized by the beneficiaries on demand

of any information not disclosed publicly. Hence, RTI keeps rural poor in contact with the implementation of Government sponsored schemes and programmes which may reduce magnitude of corruption and misuse of resources by the implementing authorities [5]. However, utilization of RTI by a poor villager is not an easy task. The first and foremost problem lies in very poor awareness status of RTI within rural people which is directly related to the level of education of the concerned population. The effectiveness of RTI act naturally gets underestimated in a rural economy where majority of people are illiterate or literate at a minimum level.

The plan of exposition for the present paper has been designed in the following way: Section II deals with the role of social infrastructure in application of RTI across different districts of West Bengal. Section III concentrates on a primary investigation necessary for the analysis of the said problem. An analytical study on the incidence of RTI awareness has been reported in Section IV. Section V states the concluding remarks.

## **II Role of Social Infrastructure**

Although ten years have been passed after the enactment of the RTI law, a meager percentage of people has been found to be successfully utilizing the same. As far as the application of RTI in rural West Bengal is concerned, it has been rising over years. However, a major drawback has been observed: people, in general, lack awareness related to procedure to be followed for applying RTI. It has been observed that many information requests have been rejected due to inappropriate authority selection, absence of court fees, requested information being not under the purview of the law etc.

To establish the role of education on the incidence of RTI application in rural West Bengal, we start with a secondary data analysis which has been conducted across the districts of West Bengal [5,6,7]. The study reveals the fact that for few districts like Howrah, Hugli and South 24 Parganas, a positive association is prominent between their RTI usage and literacy achievement. For few selected districts like Jalpaiguri, Purulia and Birbhum an apparent anomaly has been found. However, a detailed study at the sub-district level for the concerned districts has helped to minimize such anomaly. For example, As far as the district of Jalpaiguri is concerned it has been found with a good incidence of RTI application inspite of being recorded with a poor district level literacy status. However, at the sub-district level we find blocks with good literacy rate are mainly the users of RTI in the district. The relevant blocks are Alipurduar-I, Alipurduar-II, Falakata and Jalpaiguri. The similar condition holds for the districts of Puruliya and Birbhum. In Puruliya district, blocks holding good literacy record like Puncha, Manbazar-I, Neturia and Raghunathpur-I

are found with the incidence of RTI application. For Birbhum, the concerned blocks are Khoyrasole and Mayureswar-I. However, blocks like Madarihhat in Jalpaiguri, Arsha in Puruliya and Murarai-I in Birbhum are the exception. These blocks have been found with RTI usage inspite of having poor literacy status. It may be expected that a further micro level analysis for the mentioned blocks representing the anomaly would help to support the extensive role of education in generating RTI queries across rural West Bengal. However, it had not been possible due to scarcity of village level secondary data.

Amongst other major Indian states, West Bengal is the only state where for twenty-five years rural local governments have functioned under the uninterrupted ruling of left government. There usually lied a culture of secrecy in public services regarding things done and not done by the state agencies. Hence, an instrument like RTI that impedes secrecy was on demand. However, a right can not do anything until and unless the beneficiaries could access information about the right. As far as the implementation of the RTI law is concerned, a very slow pace is visible from the course of action taken by Government of West Bengal ([www.drcsc.org](http://www.drcsc.org)). The same practice is still getting continued in the non-left regime. Hence, in West Bengal, RTI is found to be underutilized and subverted. The problem gets intensified as far as the states rural economy is concerned. Such a situation calls for a field investigation where a measurement could be made on the status of RTI awareness of rural people.

### **III A Case Study for Hooghly District**

In the present study the district of Hooghly has been selected for the purpose of primary investigation as Hooghly is one of the economically developed districts of West Bengal and holds a good record of incidence of RTI usage. In Hooghly district, nearly 69% of population constitutes the rural folk. The hooghly district comprises of four subdivisions named Chinsurah, Chandannagar, Srirampur, and Arambag. Each and every subdivision consists of rural areas. Two blocks Dhaniakhali and Chanditala-II have been selected in the Hooghly district for the purpose of primary investigation. The two blocks have been selected in contrast to each other on the ground that the block of Dhaniakhali has not been reported with a single registration of RTI application, whereas incidence of RTI application is pretty good in Chanditala-II. Dhaniakhali belongs to Chinsurah subdivision with 18 gram panchayats and the block of Chanditala-II belongs to Serampur subdivision covering 12 gram panchayats. Although, Chanditala-II consists of both rural and urban areas, the Dhaniakhali block is fully rural. The major point of consideration regarding

the selection of the two blocks has been almost similar literacy status of the same provided these two blocks have been reported in contrast to each other in terms of RTI usage [7,8].

It is a fact that all individuals in a same region do not belong to an identical socio-economic platform which plays a major role in building a level of awareness and consciousness within people especially in rural areas. Hence, without an assessment of the socio-economic profile of rural poor, any analysis related to their status of RTI awareness is not possible. Naturally, educational status would act as one of the important determinant of peoples socio-economic achievement in this respect. The present investigation has been possible to be conducted in the winter of 2010-2011. A scheme of purposive sampling has been used for the present study. As far as the detailed classification of the sampled households is concerned, it has been given below:

### ***Profile of Respondents***

- Among the participants covered, about 41% belong to backward classes.
- Nearly 44 % of the sampled respondents belong to the economically weaker class of society (BPL).
- Again, 44% of respondents covered, are found to be primary/middle school educated, 38% is Secondary or Higher Secondary literate and 18% are graduates.

Some notable facts regarding the incidence of RTI awareness in the selected areas in relation to the households' socio-economic profile has been shown in Table 1:

[Table 1]

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Refer to Table 1, the following observations are noteworthy:

- RTI awareness has been comparatively better in the block of Dhaniakhali than in Chanditala-II.
- In both the blocks no awareness related to RTI has been found within the primary educated persons irrespective of their economic status.

- In Dhaniakhali, altogether 40 percent of secondary or higher secondary passed individuals have been found to be aware of RTI law provided they are economically developed. However, no awareness of RTI has been visible within secondary or higher secondary literates of BPL category.
- In Chanditala-II, among the respondents, 25 percent of secondary or higher secondary literates of BPL category have been found to be aware of RTI. However, within non-BPL category people, no RTI awareness has been found if they are secondary or higher secondary literate.
- In the sampled villages of Dhaniakhali, 100 percent success is visible as far as the awareness of RTI within graduates is concerned irrespective of their economic status.
- Within the sampled respondents of Chanditala-II block, graduates of non-BPL category people are all aware of RTI whereas within BPL graduates no awareness of RTI has been found.

#### **IV An Analytical Study on RTI Awareness**

The foregoing discussion attempts to construct an analytical model to establish a relationship between the RTI awareness of rural households and their socio-economic status. More particularly, this would probably help us to identify the relative importance of factors in improving the status of awareness of rural people. Hence, the scope of the present study to establish education as an essential for successful utilization of RTI, could be reviewed. The insights obtained from such an analysis may generate the need to focus on any generalized macro policy.

The analysis has been conducted by constructing the Household Awareness Function. It would help to validate the existence of the model by comparing it with a null model in the incidence of awareness of RTI across the selected locations. Using the model we would be able to examine the effect of each selected socio-economic variable on RTI awareness of rural households.

#### ***Rationale behind Selection of Variables***

It is only information which enables a rural poor to get their legitimate facilities realized and remove disparities in socio-economic achievements [9]. Much of the sufferings and helplessness of a rural poor could be diluted if he is knowledgeable and capable of evaluating the functioning of responsible authorities with a proper follow-up. As far as the applicability of RTI law in rural areas is concerned, it requires an 'aam admi' to be anxious to know about the polity he

belongs to. Undoubtedly, a literate person could be expected to be more knowledgeable and aware of the things happening in his day to day life. Hence, literacy could be set as one of the essential factors in generating awareness within rural masses.

The lack of participation of poor in rural governance especially acted as a major hindrance in socio-economic development of rural West Bengal. RTI could be a healthy democratic tool to the hindrances of the socio-economic development of rural masses in the state. However, a poor person would have little tendency to get involved in any activity other than subsistence.

In West Bengal, villages suffer from skewed development pyramid where the areas, major backward by both physical and social indicators, hardly receive the expected services of what is their due. RTI could act as an eye opener for backward remote villages to fight for justice with the help of Government machinery. To fulfill the objective we need RTI awareness to be more intensified within people of backward regions.

The caste system plays a vital role in shaping the economic activities, especially in rural areas where the caste division use to be very rigid. In the state of West Bengal, majority of low caste people live in rural areas. In rural areas, low caste poor people are still marginalized and need to fight for improving their lives. It is only information which could act as the key to socio-economic development of the underprivileged low caste people by involving them as their development partner. Hence, if they act more on an instrument like RTI, it would nevertheless fulfill their expectations in education, health and many other essential services which are inadequately supplied to them till date.

### ***Operational Definition of Variables & Their Measuring Indicators***

- **Awareness:** Awareness means an individual's ability to perceive, to feel or to be conscious of events happening around. An individual has been considered to be aware of RTI if he does hear about the term RTI and is able to deliver atleast the literal meaning of the RTI law.
- **Education:** Education is any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of an individual. In its technical sense, education is the process by which society purposefully transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another.

The level of education has been defined in terms of three layers: Elementary education, Secondary education and Higher education. The elementary education consists of the first eight years of formal structured education. The Secondary education covers tenth years of

schooling with Madhyamik or Higher Secondary passed, and under higher education we consider graduates.

- **Poverty:** Poverty is the lack of basic human needs, such as clean and fresh water, nutrition, health care, education, clothing and shelter because of the inability to afford them. In our study we measure the level of poverty of rural people by using BPL indicator. We use BPL as an economic benchmark to identify economically disadvantaged who are in need of government assistance.
- **Caste:** Through caste specification we mean a hereditarily imposed social status on an individual family, group or community in a stratified society. In our study we consider four population groupings called Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and General caste people. Amongst them, Government of India has classified SCs, STs and OBCs under low caste category based on their socio-economic conditions.
- **Regional Development:** In the proposed study we consider an area to be developed if the respective area is able to sufficiently deliver the selected basic amenities to rural poor which influence their quality of life much. The selected variables are safe drinking water supply, supply of basic health services through health sub-centres, elementary school facilities and last but not the least is electricity supply for domestic use. If an area or region is enriched by two or more of the said facilities we consider it to be developed.

### ***Model Specifications***

We fit a logit model for the response variable 'Awareness' of RTI on the explanatory variables: (a) Level of education (b) Level of poverty (c) Regional Development (d) Caste. The logistic regression, also called a logit model, is used to model variables with dichotomous outcome. Generally, in the model the dependent or response variable is dichotomous, such as presence or absence or success or failure of an event. In cases where the independent variables are categorical or mix of continuous or categorical, logistic regression is preferred. In the logit model, the log odds of the outcome are modeled as a linear combination of the predictor variables. SPSS 17.0 version has been used for statistical analysis of the concerned logit model.

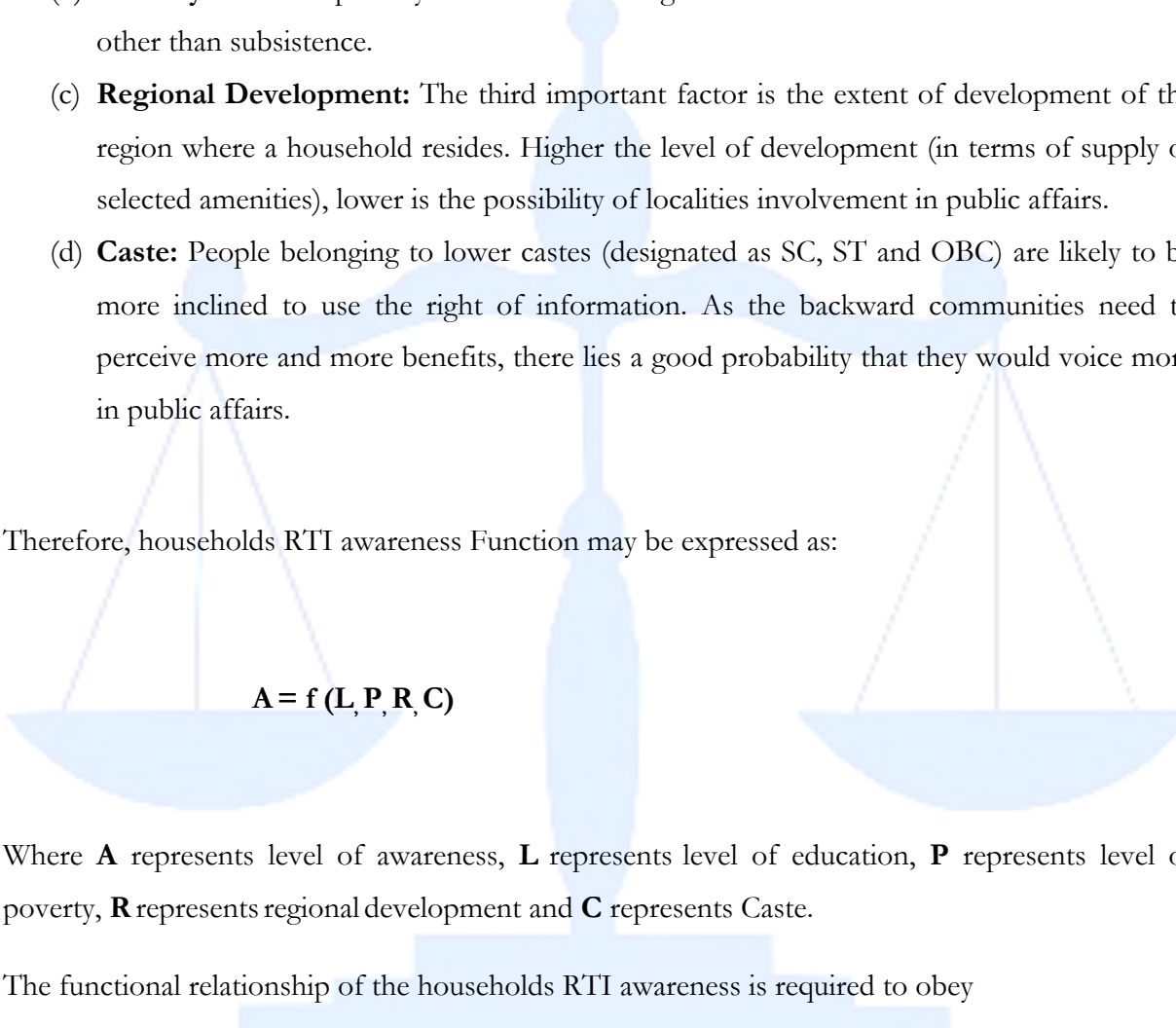
### ***Households Awareness Function***



The awareness of RTI by domestic rural households could be expected to be guided by following factors. They are:

- (a) **Literacy:** Literacy may add to motivation of a citizen to participate in the process of development. Hence, a literate household might opt for an information request.
- (b) **Poverty:** Perils of poverty in a household might restrict an individual to act for an issue other than subsistence.
- (c) **Regional Development:** The third important factor is the extent of development of the region where a household resides. Higher the level of development (in terms of supply of selected amenities), lower is the possibility of localities involvement in public affairs.
- (d) **Caste:** People belonging to lower castes (designated as SC, ST and OBC) are likely to be more inclined to use the right of information. As the backward communities need to perceive more and more benefits, there lies a good probability that they would voice more in public affairs.

Therefore, households RTI awareness Function may be expressed as:


$$A = f(L, P, R, C)$$

Where **A** represents level of awareness, **L** represents level of education, **P** represents level of poverty, **R** represents regional development and **C** represents Caste.

The functional relationship of the households RTI awareness is required to obey the following behavioral properties:

$$\frac{dA}{dL} > 0$$

This implies that higher is the level of education, higher will be the probability of RTI awareness

$$dL$$

$$\frac{dA}{dP} < 0$$

This implies that higher is the level of poverty, lower will be the households' awareness of RTI

$$dP$$

$$\frac{dA}{dR} < 0$$

This means that higher the level of development of a region, lower will be the residents' awareness of an instrument like RTI

$$\frac{dA}{dC} < 0$$

This implies that people from backward caste is likely to be more aware of an instrument like RTI

*Specification of the explanatory variables:*

$A =$   $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 \text{ in case of no RTI awareness} \\ 1 \text{ if RTI awareness lies} \end{array} \right.$

$L =$   $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 \text{ if primary/middle literate} \\ 1 \text{ if secondary/H.S. literate} \end{array} \right.$

2 if graduate

$P =$   $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 \text{ if doesn't belong to BPL category} \\ 1 \text{ if belong to BPL category} \end{array} \right.$

$$C = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if General caste} \\ 1 & \text{if backward caste} \end{cases}$$

$$R = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if the area is backward by status} \\ 1 & \text{if not backward} \end{cases}$$

Therefore,

$$\log \text{ of odds} = \frac{P(\text{success})}{P(\text{failure})} = a + bL + cP + dR + eC$$

Where  $P(\text{success})$  = Probability of RTI awareness

$P(\text{failure})$  = Probability of no RTI awareness

and a,b,c,d and e are the coefficients respectively.

### ***Results & Limitations***

1. No association has been found between the incidence of poverty of a rural household with his awareness of RTI.
2. We found no correlation between caste and level of awareness of rural people for the selected areas.
3. Peoples RTI awareness is not affected by the physical status of the area they reside.

4. Literacy is the necessary condition with respect to the awareness of RTI within rural mass but sufficiency requires an individual to be secondary literate (cross the tenth standard of schooling).

In the first place, the study deals with the sample size which may not be sufficient to derive general inference. Secondly, the study deals with few selected socio-economic variables which may not be sole responsible to influence the awareness status of rural households. There may be other variables which have not been focused in the study.

## **V Conclusion and Way Ahead**

RTI could be a healthy democratic approach to the hindrances to socio-economic development of rural masses[9]. RTI could act as a powerful instrument to conduct a social audit operation. It permits an independent evaluation of administration and decision making which is never possible by the local sabhas in villages. Moreover, in the past few years it has been proved to be successful in delivering the right based entitlements to the deprived and disadvantaged households or group of households [10]. RTI ensures an immediate action of the public servants on the grievances of the disadvantaged which was never possible before the enactment of the RTI law. The RTI act mandates auto-disposal of vital information related with government schemes and their implementation which help to produce a healthy conversation in gram sansad meetings. However, to accelerate the pace of development of rural West Bengal with the help of RTI, the prior requirement is to launch various awareness creating programs which may be implemented by different layers of government through seminars, meetings, camps, walling, slogans etc. It would pave the way to the success of the act. Improvement in the literacy status of rural poor is another requirement of the hour as the success of RTI act is mostly dependent on peoples awareness and consciousness which could only be enhanced through education.

The following suggestive steps could make the application of RTI in rural West Bengal more productive and sustained one [10]:

1. The success of RTI act mainly vests with the awareness and consciousness of rural people regarding the usefulness of the law. Hence Government needs to launch the awareness generating programs as much as possible across villages. The effectiveness of these programs could have been raised manifold if the less developed or backward villages could have been targeted first.

2. The Social institutions like rural cooperatives, NGOs etc. need to perform a more strategic role in generating massive awareness among rural masses about the spirit of RTI. Infact, civil societies in association with local clubs, could take initiatives to mobilize people, particularly of backward rural areas towards successful application of RTI for the removal of hindrances in the process of improvement in the public provision of basic facilities necessary for a reasonable quality of life.
3. The Department of Information and Public Relations need to take the leading role in building RTI awareness among rural poor.

