

Editorial of the Day – 20.02.2026

Index

1. Privacy and transparency- On the RTI Act amendment, petitions (TH) –01
2. ISRO's improved fire-detection algo ready for test in rabi harvest season (IE)-02

1. Privacy and transparency- On the RTI Act amendment, petitions (TH)

General Studies 2- Governance

Topic- Important aspects of governance, transparency, and accountability.

Sub Topic- Right to Information (RTI) – Role of civil society, institutional framework, and challenges.

1. Introduction

The Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005 is a landmark "sunshine law" that empowers Indian citizens to request information from public authorities, making the government more transparent and accountable. It transitioned India from a culture of secrecy (under the Official Secrets Act) to a culture of openness.

2. Background and Evolution

Grassroots Roots- The movement began with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan, demanding transparency in village accounts and minimum wages.

Constitutional Basis- The Supreme Court, in *State of Uttar Pradesh v. Raj Narain* (1975), ruled that the "Right to Know" is a fundamental right derived from Article 19(1)(a) (Freedom of Speech and Expression).

Legislative Path- It replaced the weaker Freedom of Information Act, 2002 and officially came into force on 12 October 2005.

3. Key Objectives

Empowerment- To enable citizens to participate in decision-making processes.

Transparency- To ensure government operations are open to public scrutiny.

Accountability- To curb corruption and arbitrary use of power.

Democracy- To make democracy work for the people in the real sense.

4. Salient Features & Institutional Framework

Scope and Application

Jurisdiction- Applies to all Central, State, and local bodies.

Public Authorities- Includes bodies established by the Constitution, Parliament, State Legislatures, and organizations "substantially financed" by the government (including PSUs).

The Mechanism

Suo Motu Disclosure (Section 4)- Mandates public authorities to proactively publish information so citizens need minimal recourse to the Act.

Timeframes- * Standard requests- 30 days.

Matters of Life and Liberty- 48 hours.

Appellate Structure-

1. **PIO (Public Information Officer)-** First point of contact.

2. **First Appeal-** Internal department officer.

3. **Second Appeal-** Independent Commissions (Central Information Commission or State Information Commission).

Definition of "Information" (Section 2(f))

Includes- Records, documents, memos, emails, opinions, press releases, contracts, reports, and data in electronic form.

Excludes- Seeking personal interpretations or clarifications (questions like "Why was this done?").

5. Exemptions and Penalties

Exemptions (Sections 8 & 9)

Information can be denied if it affects–

National Interests– Sovereignty, integrity, security, and strategic interests of India.

Legal/Commercial– Trade secrets, IP, or information forbidden by a court.

Privileged Info– Cabinet papers (until a decision is made and the matter is complete).

Privacy– Personal info unrelated to public activity, unless the public interest outweighs the harm.

Penalties

The Commission can fine PIOs ₹250 per day (up to a maximum of ₹25,000) for unreasonable delays or denials. The Commission can recommend disciplinary action against erring officials.

6. Critical Legal & Legislative Developments

Landmark Judgments

CBSE v. Aditya Bandopadhyay– Confirmed that students have a right to see their evaluated answer sheets under RTI.

Girish Ramchandra Deshpande v. CIC– Clarified that personal details (like income tax returns) are exempt unless a larger public interest is proven.

RTI (Amendment) Act, 2019

Control– Gave the Central Government power to set the tenure, salaries, and service conditions of Information Commissioners (both Central and State).

Criticism– Critics argue this undermines the independence and neutrality of the Commissions, effectively making them subordinate to the Executive.

7. Achievements vs. Current Challenges

Achievements

Scam Exposure– Helped uncover high-profile corruption (e.g., Adarsh Housing, 2G).

Welfare Delivery– Improved the efficiency of the PDS and MNREGA by exposing leakages.

Participation– Bridged the gap between the rural poor and the administrative machinery.

Challenges (The "Current News" Context)

Institutional Vacancies– High number of vacant positions in Information Commissions leads to massive backlogs.

Pendency– Thousands of cases are pending, sometimes for years, defeating the "time-bound" essence.

Safety– Growing instances of threats, harassment, and attacks on RTI activists.

Misuse– Concerns regarding "vexatious" or "frivolous" applications used for blackmail.

8. Conclusion

The RTI Act, 2005 remains the strongest tool for participatory democracy in India. However, to maintain its "sunshine" status, the government must ensure institutional independence, fill vacancies promptly, and protect whistleblowers. Without an effective enforcement mechanism, the "Right to Know" risks becoming a dead letter.

Source– <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/privacy-and-transparency-on-the-rti-act-amendment-petitions/article70652568.ece>

2. ISRO's improved fire-detection algo ready for test in rabi harvest season (IE)

General Studies 3– Environment

Topics– Environmental pollution and degradation; Developments in Science and Technology.

Sub Topic– Air pollution in Delhi-NCR, Satellite technology for environmental monitoring (ISRO), and Crop Residue Management (CRM).

1. Introduction

In a significant technological upgrade, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is set to pilot a fine-tuned satellite-based fire detection algorithm during the 2026 Rabi harvest. This initiative, prompted by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), aims to rectify existing gaps in monitoring farm fires—a primary contributor to the severe air quality crisis in the Indo-Gangetic Plain.

2. The Core Problem– Stubble Burning Dynamics

Scale of Residue– Punjab, Haryana, and UP-NCR generate approximately 28 million tonnes of paddy stubble annually.

The "Window" Constraint– A narrow 10–20-day gap between harvesting paddy and sowing wheat forces farmers to use burning as the quickest field-clearing method.

Economic Barriers– High operational costs of machines like the Happy Seeder or *Super SMS* make them inaccessible for small and marginal farmers.

Contribution to Pollution– During peak periods, stubble burning accounts for up to 40% of Delhi's PM2.5 load.

3. Limitations of Existing Monitoring Systems

Satellite Detection Gaps– Current sensors (MODIS on Terra/Aqua and VIIRS on Suomi-NPP) often miss fires due to cloud cover or small fire sizes.

Fixed Observation Windows– Satellites pass at specific times. Farmers have adapted by shifting burning to around 5–00 PM (post-satellite pass), leading to under-reporting.

Data Mismatch– Ground teams often find burnt areas that were never "counted" by satellites, leading to policy misalignment and reduced enforcement credibility.

4. ISRO's Technological Intervention

ISRO has modified its in-house algorithm to enhance the precision of thermal anomaly detection–

Improved Differentiation– The algorithm can now better distinguish between active fires and residual burnt patches (smoldering).

Year-Round Monitoring– Moving beyond the traditional Kharif (winter) focus to include the Rabi season (March–May) to establish a persistent pollution baseline.

Integrated Verification– Satellite data will now be cross-referenced with farm mapping and field validation by district-level teams for higher accuracy.

5. Environmental and Health Impacts

Particulate Matter– Release of massive loads of PM2.5, CO2, Methane, and Nitrogen Oxides.

Meteorological Factors– Post-monsoon temperature inversion and calm winds trap these pollutants near the ground.

Health Burden– Direct correlation with a spike in respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, and reduced life expectancy in North India.

Trans-boundary Nature– North-westerly winds transport smoke across state borders, making it a regional rather than a local issue.

6. Institutional & Policy Framework

CAQM Mandate– The statutory body has shifted toward stricter enforcement and state-specific action plans for 2026.

In-situ Management– Central subsidies for Crop Residue Management (CRM) machinery (e.g., mulchers, Happy Seeders).

Ex-situ Management– Promoting the use of straw for Bio-CNG, biomass power pellets, fodder, and packaging.

Judicial Oversight– The Supreme Court continues to monitor the implementation of these technologies to ensure executive accountability.

7. Structural Challenges & Barriers

Economic Rationality- Burning remains the "cheapest" option for a debt-ridden farmer compared to the logistics of machinery.

Fragmented Landholdings- Small farm sizes make owning expensive CRM equipment unviable.

Market Gaps- Weak supply chains for collecting and transporting stubble to Bio-CNG plants (lack of assured procurement).

Enforcement Limits- Penalties (Environmental Compensation) often face political and social resistance.

8. Conclusion

While ISRO's improved algorithm provides the "data teeth" needed for better monitoring, technology alone is not a silver bullet. A sustainable solution requires a multi-pronged approach

Technological- Accurate, real-time satellite surveillance.

Economic- Incentivizing farmers through "Bhavantar" (price difference) schemes or direct cash transfers for residue management.

Industrial- Creating a robust market for biomass and ex-situ utilization.

Federal- Cooperative action between Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi to align environmental goals with agrarian realities.

Source- <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/isros-improved-fire-detection-algo-ready-for-test-in-rabi-harvest-season-10541828/>

