

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

From The Editor's Desk

August was tumultuous as the world witnessed the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. The two decades of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan came to nought as the US withdrew its troops. The last twenty years has been a mixed bag marked by violence and development. There have been bright spots such as lower child mortality rates, increase in per capita GDP, increase literacy rates, empowerment of women etc. What does the future hold for Afghanistan? What does the Talibanization of Afghanistan mean for India? Will Afghanistan continue to be the graveyard of the world? Only time will tell.

While August was tumultuous, September brings hope as we observe The International Day of Democracy, The International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer and the International Day for Universal Access to Information. The number of democracies have increased, humanity has come together to restore the ozone layer and many countries around the world have taken steps to improve access to information.

We hope you enjoy this edition of, "Through the Looking Glass."

-Editorial Team

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This issue:

- The International Day of Democracy, September 15th
- World Ozone Day, September 16th
- International Right to Know Day and International Day for the Universal Access to Information, September 28th

The International Day of Democracy

The International Day of Democracy is held on September 15th every year. This day was founded on the 20th anniversary of the First International Conference of New or Restored Democracies. It is an annual event that has been running for ten years.

The purpose of observing this day is to review the state of democracy in the world, uphold and promote democratic principles.

Democracy: Its beginning

- Ancient Greece is associated with the beginning of democracy. However scholars believe that democratic institutions occurred in other parts of the world well before its beginnings in Greece.
- According to some scholars primitive democratic societies were observed in pre-Babylonian Mesopotamia and in the republics of India- the sanghas and ganas which existed as early as the 6th century BCE
- Yet Athens which emerged in the 7th century BCE is regarded as the birthplace of democracy and remains an important reference point. It was here that democracy took shape and was put into practice before it collapsed
- Democracy as we know it today has taken a long time to emerge. A working system of democratic governance was bolstered by developments such as the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, the French and American Revolutions of the 18th century and universal suffrage of the mid 19th century.
- It was in the 20th century that a democratic form of government became a norm and many nations around the world accepted it as a form of government.
- According to Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, democracy is one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century.

The State of the World's Democracies

According to IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) the erosion of democracy is occurring in different settings and contexts. Older democracies are struggling to guarantee equitable and sustainable economic and social development. New democracies are often weak and fragile.

The Value of Democracy

Democracy produces liberty and equality. With dictatorship or autocracy, a particular person or group has more power than others. By contrast, in a democracy everyone is equal, everyone has political power as we can vote a government out of power, bring a new one in or choose to retain a government

Democracy ensures liberty. Liberty is the state of being free within a society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behaviour, or political views.

What is Democracy?

According to political scientist Larry Diamond a democracy must have the following four attributes:

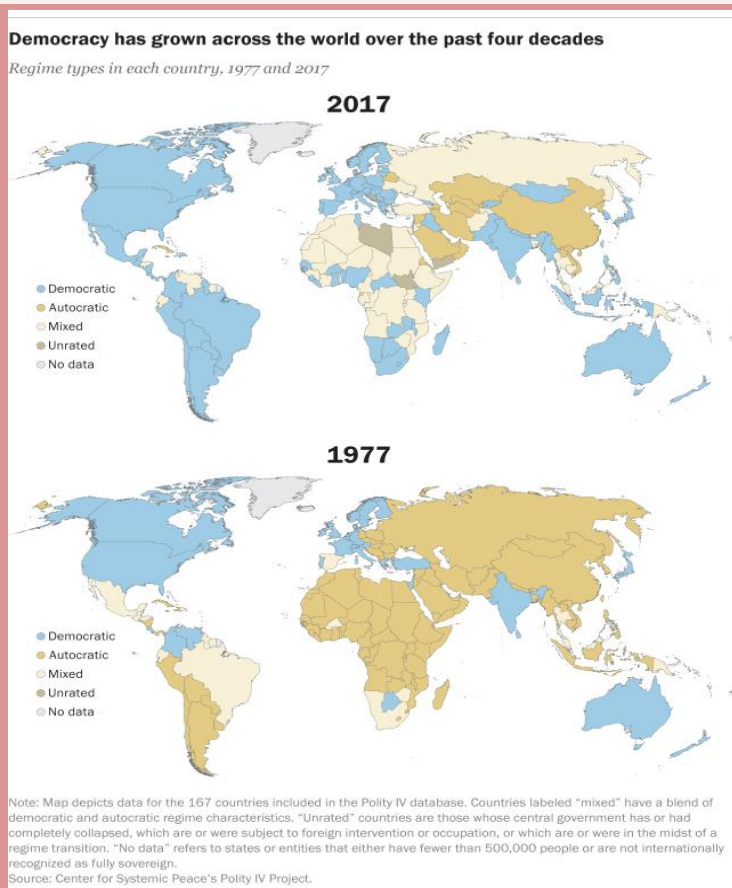
- A system of elections used to choose and replace the government
- Protection of human rights of all people
- Active participation of citizens in politics and civics
- All laws must apply equally to all citizens

Look at Afghanistan. In 2004, the nation adopted a new constitution and an executive president was elected. The following year a general election took place

Hamid Karzai was declared the first-ever democratically elected head of state in Afghanistan in 2004, winning a second five-year term in 2009. Today the nation has descended into anarchy. Civil liberties are at stake and people fear for their lives.

The State of the World's Democracies

- The Democracy Index is a measure of the state of democracy in 167 countries of the world. It is based on five different categories:
 - ✓ Electoral Process And Pluralism
 - ✓ Functioning Of Government
 - ✓ Political Participation
 - ✓ Political Culture
 - ✓ Civil Liberties
- Each country is scored between 0 and 10 in each of the five categories, then an average is taken to obtain for an overall score.
- Overall scores between 8.01 and 10 are considered full democracies of which there are 22 in the world.
- The Democracy Index is compiled by the Economist intelligence Unit



According to the Democracy Index the most democratic nations of the world are:

- Norway (9.87)
- Iceland(9.58)
- Sweden(9.39)
- New Zealand(9.26)
- Finland(9.25)
- Ireland (9.24)
- Canada (9.22)
- Denmark(9.22)
- Australia (9.09)
- Switzerland (9.03)

Pro-Democracy Uprisings Of the Recent Past

Tiananmen Square Protests

These were student led demonstrations in China calling for democracy, free speech and a free press. What started as a student movement gathered steam when over one million protestors from all walks of life initiated hunger strikes, daily vigils and protests. The Chinese government declared martial law and called in troops to quell the uprising. 250,000 troops entered Beijing on 20th May 1989 and this resulted in a bloody crackdown known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. On 4th June 1989 Chinese soldiers and policeman fired on the protestors killing hundreds of them



The “Tiananmen Square Tank Man.”
An unidentified man standing alone in defiance against the advancing column of Chinese tanks at Tiananmen Square. He has become a symbol of defiance and freedom

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring were a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across the Arab world in the early 2010s.

It began in response to corruption and economic stagnation and was influenced by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. From Tunisia, the protests then spread to five other countries such as Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Long standing presidents/ rulers such as Hosni Mubarak and Gaddafi were forced to step down or were assassinated.

Pro-Democracy protests in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was a former British colony that was returned to China in 1997 under a policy known as “one country, two systems.” This policy promised the territory a high degree of autonomy including independent courts, a free press, open internet access and other features that distinguish it from the Chinese mainland where these liberties are not available.

The autonomy, guaranteed under a mini-constitution known as the Basic Law, expires in 2047. However, the Basic Law has been weakened as China’s ruling Communist Party is introducing new laws. One such law is the Extradition Bill which allows Chinese authorities to pick up any citizen from Hong Kong and detain him/ her in mainland China. In 2019, millions of Hong Kong citizens took to the streets to protest against proposed Extradition Bill. The protests soon developed into a movement, demanding universal suffrage, amnesty of arrested protestors, and an independent inquiry to investigate police brutality.

The Thai Protests of 2020

“Prayuth get out,” is the popular chant in Thailand as thousands of demonstrators protest against Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha, the unpopular former army chief who seized power in 2014 with the backing of the monarchy. This youth led movement is calling for political reform and curbs on the clout that the monarchy enjoys. According to the protestors the alliance between the monarchy —estimated to be the world’s richest with a private fortune of anywhere between \$30 billion and \$60 billion — and the army has turned Thailand into Asia’s most unequal society, where tycoons and the military monopolize many aspects of economic life.

The Myanmar Coup

On 1st February 2021 the military seized control from the democratically elected ruling party, the NLD. The elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her party have been detained. Since then massive protests have been taking place and as of 26th May 2021 approximately 800 people have been killed by the military junta and over 4000 people are under detention.

Democracy in India

The August of 1947 was indeed a tryst with destiny as power was transferred from the British to the Indians. The joy of freedom came with the trauma of partition. The common man had become the master of his/ her own destiny while the Maharajas had become the common man.

Despite the stains and the flaws, India has remained a democracy. Pakistan which attained democracy along with India has had intermittent spells of military rule, Nepal, Srilanka and the Maldives have seen democracy come and go. India has seen a change in the national government 17 times through a democratic process and this is no mean achievement.

India has encountered dark periods, the emergency is one of them. On 25th June 1975, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed the then president of India announced a state of emergency on the recommendation of the Indira Gandhi led Congress Government. The emergency is considered to be one of the darkest phases in the history of independent India as there were brutal crackdowns to stifle dissent and civil liberties.

Democracy in India

We have come a long way from the burra memsahib era. The Hindu, recently carried an article about a panchayat in Kerala that has banned the use of 'Sir' and 'Madam' as they are remnants of colonial rule. The 'I request' in letters has been changed to , 'I demand or I desire'. In a democracy government officials and elected representatives are supposed to serve the people. The people are the supreme authority.

“Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, is therefore, education”

-Franklin D Roosevelt



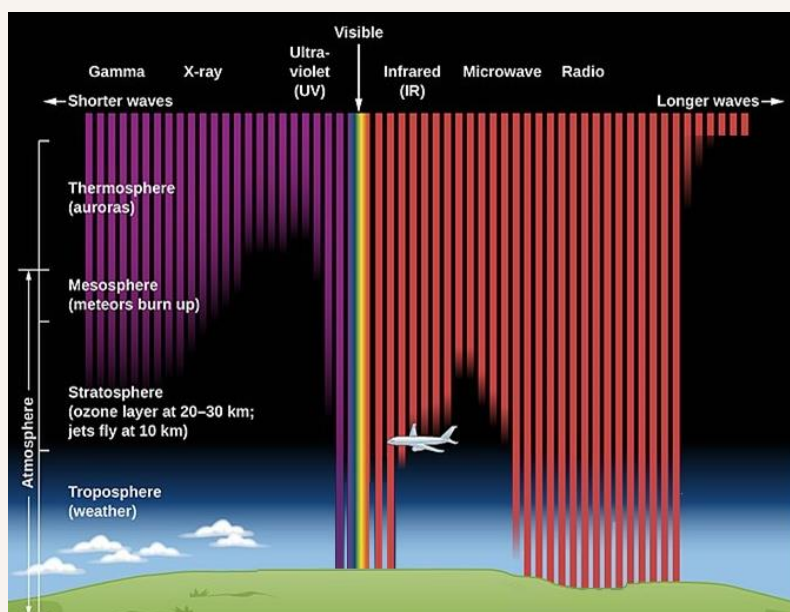
International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer

The “**International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer**” is celebrated on **September 16th 2021**. It is an important milestone in humanity’s quest to preserve the environment. Before learning about this milestone, let us take a look at why the Ozone layer is important.

The Ozone Layer

An Ozone molecule contains three oxygen atoms. The air that we breathe contains oxygen molecules with only two atoms, because the ozone concentration is very low near the surface. However, the Earth’s stratosphere has a region with a higher concentration of Ozone. This layer absorbs most of the Sun’s mid-frequency ultraviolet radiation (97-99%).

The Ozone Layer is not uniformly thick, but is thinner at the equator and thicker at the poles. The thickness also varies according to the season. An important note: The ozone layer is not made up of only ozone molecules – the concentration is only 10 parts per million.



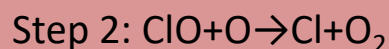
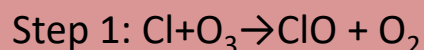
Radiation and the Earth’s atmosphere.

The mid-frequency ultraviolet radiation, if not blocked, is harmful for most living organisms. It greatly increases the risk of organisms developing skin cancer.

Ozone depletion

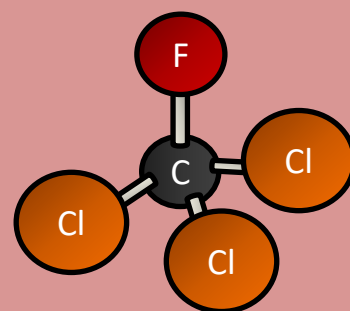
Ozone can react with a number of molecules such as atomic bromine (Br), atomic chlorine (Cl), nitric oxide (NO), nitrous oxide (N₂O) and hydroxyl (OH) ions. These gases can be formed through natural processes. However, in the 20th century, the amount of chlorides and bromides in the atmosphere greatly increased because of the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) and bromofluorocarbons (BFCs). These chemicals, collectively known as Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) were widely used in refrigerants and aerosols.

The chlorofluorocarbons present in the lower atmosphere gradually make their way up to the stratosphere. Here, the molecules are broken up by sunlight, releasing free chlorine atoms. These chlorine atoms react with ozone molecules through the following reactions:



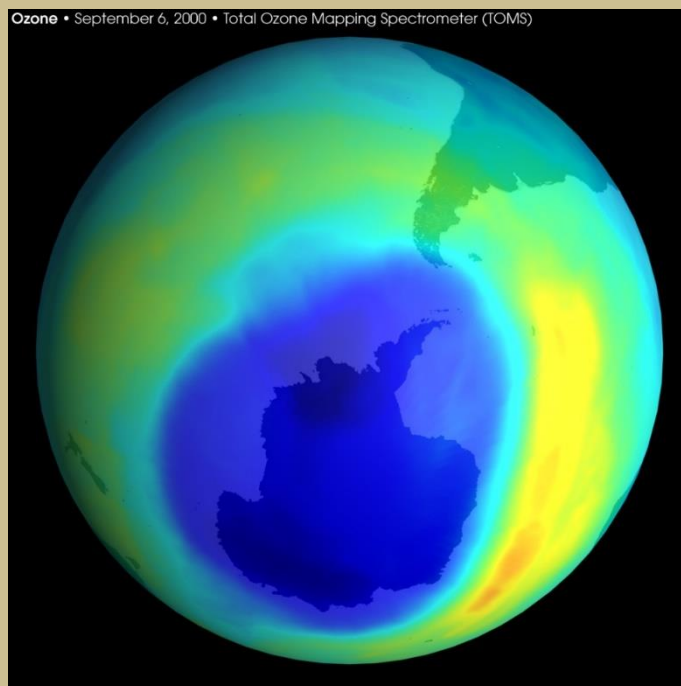
The result is that two oxygen molecules are formed through the destruction of an ozone molecule. The chlorine atom is free to react with more molecules. A single chlorine atom can destroy thousands of ozone molecules.

This resulted in the depletion of ozone molecules in the stratosphere.



Chlorofluorocarbon molecule with 3 chlorine atoms

This ozone depletion was observed as thinning of the ozone layer, especially around the North and South poles. These thin areas are known as “Ozone Holes”. This observation was announced by Joe Farman, Brian Gardiner and Jonathan Shanklin, in the science journal, “Nature” on May 16, 1985.



Ozone hole over Antarctica, 2000

The thickness of the ozone layer depends on the season as well as the location. Around the tropics, ozone-poor air in the troposphere is carried into the stratosphere through atmospheric currents. In the stratosphere, solar radiation photolyzes oxygen molecules, forming ozone molecules. Most of the atmosphere’s ozone is produced over the tropical regions (around the equator) and carried to the poles through atmospheric currents. So, the ozone layer is thickest around the poles, and thinner around the equator.

This means that the ozone layer is very thick over Antarctica. However, Antarctica’s winters last a long time, and during this period the sun rarely rises. As winter comes to an end, sunlight returns and this combined with the cold temperature creates a condition that is optimal for chlorine atoms to react with ozone, destroying large amounts of ozone. This is why the ozone hole is seen over the South Pole during Spring.

Action against ozone depletion

The term “Ozone Hole” shocked the general public as well as the scientific community. The result of this was the Vienna Conference, which took place in Vienna, Austria in 1985. This led to the **Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer**, which established a framework for international cooperation in addressing ozone depletion.



The **Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer** was drafted pursuant to the Vienna Convention, and was opened for signature on **16 September 1987**. The Montreal Protocol is an international treaty, which is designed to protect the ozone layer by gradually phasing out the use of chlorofluorocarbons and Bromo fluorocarbons. It is the only treaty to be signed by all member nations of the UN. This is why the International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer is celebrated on September 16th.

The Role of India

India had to overcome a number of challenges in order to fulfil the requirements of the Montreal Protocol. The Montreal Protocol called for a gradual phase-out in technologies that made use of ozone depleting substances (ODS). India was short of finances and alternative technologies when we signed the Montreal Protocol. In addition, the economic boom of the 1990s meant that a much larger proportion of the population started using air conditioners and refrigerators, largely increasing the amount of ODS released by India.

However, through a combination of public awareness campaigns as well as research and development, India has succeeded in phasing out ODS. CFCs were phased out in 2008, two years before the planned 2010 deadline and HCFCs were phased out in 2020.

The Ozone Layer Today

In 2018, NASA published the first direct proof of ozone layer recovery, as observed by the Aura satellite. This is expected to continue till the ozone layer recovers fully by 2060/2070.

The adoption of the Montreal Protocol and its success shows that the path to recovery from climate change is through global cooperation and awareness. It also gives us hope that we humans can learn from our mistakes and live in harmony with the Earth.

International Day for the Universal Access to Information

- **International Right to Know Day** began on Sept. 28, 2002
- Freedom of information organizations from around the world came together in Sofia, Bulgaria, and created the FOI Advocates Network, a global coalition working together to promote the right of access to information for all people so that they benefit from open, transparent, and accountable governments
- In 2015, the UNESCO General Assembly declared Sept. 28 to be “**International Day for the Universal Access to Information**”

Access to Information

Freedom of information: freedom of a person to publish and consume information

Access to information: the ability for an individual to seek, receive and impart information effectively

Right to Information: the right to have access to information relating to the legal right of any person. This information could be in the form of records, files, registers, maps, data, drawings, reports etc.

The right of access to information is an important human right, necessary for the enjoyment of other human rights.

Barriers for access to information:

- ✓ identification of the source
- ✓ availability of the source
- ✓ price paid by the user
- ✓ cost to the provider
- ✓ cognitive access
- ✓ acceptability

- Freedom of information is related to the freedom of expression
- Freedom of information sometimes comes into conflict with the right to privacy in the content of the Internet and information technology
- The strength of our nation's democracy depends on the participation of informed citizens in its governing processes: a collective of voices representing an array of interests and identities.
- Access to government information, is essential for democracy and integrity in government
- The access to information
 - ✓ makes governments transparent and accountable
 - ✓ allows public involvement in formulating social policies and in the decision-making processes of governance
- This is achieved through
 - ✓ the open publication of information
 - ✓ formal freedom of information laws
- The right to information can only be effectively exercised and implemented on the basis of laws, regulating this right in accordance with international standards.



Access to Information:

Examples to Illustrate the importance and impacts

Health Care

- **Pakistani Newspaper Uncovers Lack of Doctors:** Almost one-third of health facilities in Punjab don't have doctors, 'The News' learns through a request under the state FOI RTI law.
- **Overcrowding in Canadian Hospitals Revealed:** Ontario's major hospitals are overcrowded, creating potential hazards for patients and leading to inadequate care, according to documents obtained by the New Democratic Party. These documents were obtained using, 'The Access to Information Act'

Anti-corruption

- **RTI Request Reveals Suspicious Sale:** A minister from Maharashtra purchased land well below market value, according to information provided via an RTI request by The Indian Express.
- **Corruption Seen in Mexican Projects:** A corruption case involving municipal workers and politicians was exposed when a citizen of a certain province used Mexico's, 'Access to Information Law'.

Historical Record

- **Rate Hikes by Irish Insurers Explained in Government Document:** A briefing document prepared for the Minister for Transport and obtained by *The Irish Times* under the FOI Act, said that insurers “are racing to get back to profitability after years of being forced by a competitive market to give car owners decent deals.”
- **Records Document Malnutrition in India:** Nearly 17,000 children died from malnutrition in the period 2015-2016 in the state of Maharashtra, the Bombay High Court was told based on data obtained through RTI queries.

Public Safety

- **Holding the Jamaican Government to Account:** Reports obtained under the Access to Information Act in Jamaica showed that several government agencies were aware of a string of permit breaches at Blue Diamond Royalton Hotel in Negril, where a building collapse injured at least five construction workers.
- **US Fed Records Show Dozens of Cybersecurity Breaches:** The U.S. Federal Reserve detected more than 50 cyber breaches between 2011 and 2015, according to Fed cybersecurity reports obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request.
- **Parmesan Cheese Made of Wood in US:** A government report on a cheesemaker, obtained through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, concluded that “no parmesan cheese was used by the manufacturer to make its grated Parmesan Cheese. Instead, the grated Parmesan Cheese was a mixture of Swiss, mozzarella, white cheddar and cellulose, according to the report.

Environment

- **Trees Not Planted: An RTI Discovery in India:** Activist Nazir Ahmad used the RTI Act to document the Forest Department's poor record of tree planting in Tossamaidan, the King of Meadows, in Kashmir.
- **Little Work Done to Improve Ganges River Health:** Despite large allocations, statistics revealed through an RTI request show that very little has been done to improve the condition of the holy Ganges River.
- **Data Proves Pollution From Indian Power Plant:** People living around two power plants in western India have long been complaining of ill effects of air pollution. Now government figures are available to support their claims. Information obtained by an activist shows that over 6,000 persons were affected by air pollution in the area in 2015.

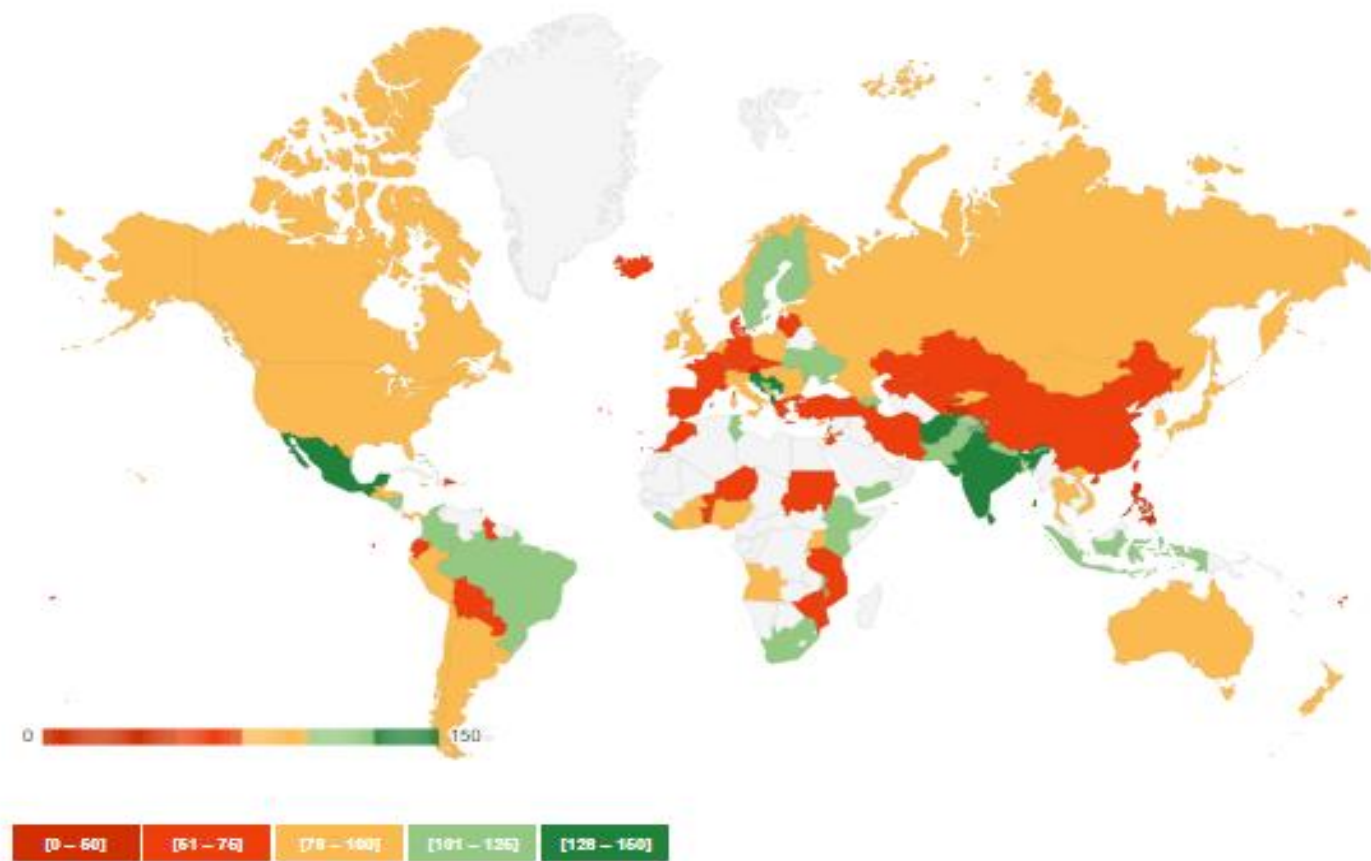
Legal guarantees of Access to Information

To date, 127 countries have adopted access to information laws.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Universal Periodic Review, a unique United Nations process involving the continuous assessment of the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States, underline the importance of having such a legislation in place.

These laws can help empower citizens and hold duty-bearers accountable in times of crisis, when accountability systems such as courts, parliaments and town councils, operate in a limited way, and yet make critical decisions about health, economy and human rights.

Global Right to Information Rating Map



Freedom of Information Organizations

Are nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations

They promote freedom of the press, legislative and administrative reforms

They encourage open, transparent and accessible state, local governments and public institutions

They recognize that information is critical to empowering marginalized groups, healthy civic engagement and democracy

Mission: To help establish, support and empower state coalitions in order to improve laws, judicial remedies, and practice of government information dissemination at the state and local levels.

Constraints in Access to Information

- Access to information is vital for empowering all citizens, including vulnerable and excluded people so that they can claim their broader rights and entitlements
- The access to information lies in both the willingness of government to be transparent, as well as the ability of citizens to demand and use information. In many developing countries, there are barriers in using the access to information to demand better governance and public services
- The barriers:
 - ✓ Government may not support the right to information
 - ✓ Citizens may not be aware of their legal right to information, or may be reluctant to assert it
 - ✓ There might be structural barriers among the poor to access and use information
 - ✓ The capacity of public bodies to provide information may be weak, and officials may be unaware of their obligations

Right to Information in India

The **Right to Information (RTI)** is an act of the Parliament of India which sets out the rules and procedures regarding citizens' right to information. It replaced the former Freedom of Information Act, 2002.

Although Right to Information is not included as a Fundamental Right in the Constitution of India, it protects the fundamental rights to Freedom of Expression and Speech under Article 19(1)(a) and Right to Life and Personal Liberty under Article 21 guaranteed by the Constitution.

Mandates timely response to citizen requests for government information.

Right to Information in India

- The Right to information in India is governed by two major bodies:
 - ✓ Central Information Commission (CIC) – Chief Information commissioner who heads all the central departments and ministries- with their own public Information officers (PIO)s. CICs are directly under the President of India.
 - ✓ State Information Commissions – State Public Information Officers or SPIOs head the state department and ministries. The SPIO office is directly under the corresponding State Governor.
 - ✓ State and Central Information Commissions are independent bodies and the Central Information Commission has no jurisdiction over the State Information Commission.
- Access to RTI related information / disclosures are published on the web by various Public Authorities under the Government of India as well as the State Governments
- The basic objective of the Right to Information Act:
 - ✓ empower citizens
 - ✓ promote transparency and accountability
 - ✓ contain corruption
 - ✓ make our democracy work for the people in the real sense

Right to Information – Recent Success Stories

- Attendance shortage of a village school teacher (Banda,UP) was revealed
- Transparency in public distribution system for BPL families (Bahraich, UP)
- Malpractice in the distribution of school uniforms. (Allahabad)
- Exposing corruption in medicine procurement at PSU (Koria, Chhatishgarh)
- Payment of pension dues from railways (Bhavnagar Division)

GLOBAL RTI RATINGS

RTI in India	
Total RTI pleas received in 2017: 66.6 LAKH	➤ Only 10 states have updated annual reports
Total number of RTI rejected: 4.8 LAKH (7.2%)	➤ 12 states have no vacancies in state information commissions
Total second appeals (to CIC): 18.5 LAKH	➤ 48 of 156 posts for information commissioners vacant at state and CIC level
Total penalty amount imposed by CIC: ₹1.9 CRORE	

Source: Access Info Europe and Centre for Law and Democracy; Transparency International India

Share your thoughts with us.
We look forward to hearing
from you.

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