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## Informed citizens necessary for effective democracy: Shailesh Gandhi

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AHMEDABAD: "A corrupt government is a byproduct of an inefficient system. For an effective democracy one has to ensure that citizens are informed. The RTI is a tool for that," said Shailesh Gandhi, former information commissioner at the central information commission in Delhi, at a talk at IIT-Gandhinagar on Friday.

Gandhi went on to explain the various facets of the Act and how common citizens can use it to their advantage. He also explained the process of using RTI to access controversial file notings which are part of any government file and usually contain opinions and comments of government officers detailing how a decision or a policy was arrived at.

"It is important to know the government file first, as many government officials get through the first stage just because they do not understand the record keeping system of the government. Even though an official may refuse to answer opinionated questions in an RTI application, but a simple demand of file noting attached with a government file is a **genesis** to how a policy decision was arrived at," says Gandhi. He even insisted that at the time of **cloud computing**, a lot of information can be made available to citizens. "If our banking or **finance** sector, which is a highly sensitive sector, relies on the digital world to function effectively, then why cannot simple government functioning," Gandhi said.

Gandhi, during his tenure as an information commissioner was successful in establishing the first paperless government office in the country. Every record, every order and every application was scanned and uploaded-and made accessible to all. "Except for the paper mails I received from various parts of the country, there were no traces of files and books in my office," says Gandhi. Following his example the Maharashtra chief information commissioner too converted his office into a paperless one.

Gandhi explained how nearly 60 lakh RTI applications have been filed across the country and how they are at various stages of appeals. "Even if the 30 lakh people make it a point to file an RTI application a month it would contribute to effecting some change in the system. He dwelt on section 8(1), of the RTI Act, the contents of which, Gandhi said information was refused to applicants. "The most common excuse by information officers for arbitrarily refusing information is that they hold it in a fiduciary capacity," says Gandhi.

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