The politics of information

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An article in this publication, 'The learning state: How information becomes insight' (IE, March 18), written by two economists, has made some important points about "information", but it is their perspective on "insight" that needs to be challenged.

Designing, using and evaluating information systems is all about perception and perspective. Information systems that might strengthen socio-economic transformation, is contingent on the active participation of people. Digital tools have proliferated over the last decade leaving millions out of the ambit of meaningful participation. For instance, an MGNREGA worker is the primary producer of information but she has no stake in its presentation and access. This raises pertinent questions about transparency of what and for whom. The citizen has been made transparent to the State and the market instead of the other way around — Aadhaar is a powerful example of this. Rural workers and pensioners have been coerced to migrate to the Aadhaar platform without their explicit consent. The authors make an important mention of the proliferation of management information systems (MIS) without examining its obvious inherent biases. The term "management" itself reflects the lack of a participatory framework

in information design. There is a genuine concern in the context of MGNREGA that the MIS has become the de-facto implementing agency thereby burying accountability in reams of software codes hidden behind "administrative logins".

The Right to Information campaign has, for long, made a demand for a Janata Information system (JIS), instead, driven by a democratic and moral compulsion towards an information system designed by and for the people. Activists and concerned citizens have had to campaign for generating and accessing actionable information — to dig for pertinent jaankari (knowledge) from the universe of soochna (available information). Years of reiterative practice have demonstrated that for this to happen, it is imperative that the main users of information must be involved in the complete cycle of information — designing of frameworks for information collection, collation, disclosure, and, subsequent action. There has been considerable progress made to take this principle from theory to practice. For instance, the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) of the Rajasthan government has engaged with a consortium of civil society organisations working over a range of issues such as MGNREGA, ration, land rights, mining, education and health over the past two years through an ongoing process of consultation called the "Digital Dialogue": It provided a platform to suggest and determine means by which existing information systems could be reformed for ensuring greater public accountability. This resulted in the development of a JIS for registering, availing and monitoring monetary relief for patients affected by pneumoconiosis/silicosis; for making applications under the Forest Rights Act, and, enabling applicants to trace their status. This also led to the development of a single window portal known as the "Jan Soochna Portal" for disclosing information related to all the gram panchayat/ward-level schemes. Each of these initiatives were based on consultations with the people to demonstrate how people-centric monitoring systems can be strengthened through appropriately designed technology. There is also an urgent need to move away from the myopia of the digital medium as the sole substrate of information: Dissemination of information shouldn't be a mutually exclusive, reductive debate of online versus offline.

Disclosure of information through MIS is not an act of benevolence by the State. It is a legal mandate. Section 4(2) of the RTI Act makes it mandatory for public authorities to "provide as much information suo-motu to the public at regular intervals through various means of communication, including internet, so that the public have minimum resort to the use of this Act to obtain information." Administrators need to be mindful of this legal commitment: While there are indeed 400 MISs developed, it is a matter of great distress that they ignore and violate the RTI Act. Admin logins for viewing rights are regularly introduced in the MIS as a way of doing the opposite of what Section 4 of the Act mandates. In any case the only permissible criteria for placing an admin login is under Section 8 of the RTI Act that mandates exemptions to the disclosure of information. Lack of a framework has created situations when the MIS is causing disempowerment. In the MGNREGA MIS, which is more "transparent" than most others, there are numerous instances of how the highly centralised

system has resulted in software codes overriding the law. For example, in contempt of a Supreme Court order, the BJP government continues to use the MIS to wilfully suppress the delays in wage payments caused by the Centre.

In conclusion, a JIS must have at least the following three building blocks to ensure that information does result in insight in a democratic polity: First, user groups/affected communities must be compulsorily involved in the complete cycle of information production, dissemination, and action. Second, there must be equal access of information between administrators and citizens. The concept of "administrative logins" promoting privileged access of certain kinds of information to administrators must be revoked. Third, the priority must be to recognise and create a system where information leads to enhanced democratic participation and accountability.

The BJP-led Central government has carefully manipulated, fabricated and suppressed critical information in several domains. For example, the leaked Periodic Labour Force Survey containing crucial data on the worst unemployment in the last 45 years, continues to be suppressed. Control over data and information cannot be only in the hands of the government or subject to the whims of the political leadership.Building on the renowned statistician, John Tukey's comment — "Information comes with politics on its back", it is high time that information is seen as a political tool in the hands of every citizen: To question, confront, monitor, and, to more effectively demand accountability.