

## **Goa Right to Information Act gets some attention from the government**

*By Frederick Noronha, Indo-Asian News Service*

PANAJI (Goa), Feb 21 (IANS) Dusty and moth-balled amidst official Red-tap, a useful law passed over half-a-decade ago to promote transparency in the Goa administration could get a new lease of life, as the incumbent BJP-led coalition shows some interest in activating the same. On Thursday, a meeting of Goa's State Council for Right to Information Act was held "to find ways and means to strengthen the implementation of the Act, make it more result oriented and effective for public response", a state government official release announced. The Goa Right to Information Act was passed by earlier Pratapsing Rane-headed Congress government. It made Goa virtually the first state to have a helpful law that offered the citizen access to official information, and thus promised to promote good governance and fight corruption. But, over the subsequent years, bureaucrats were seen as using various means to block the effective implementation of the law, which has been studied by scholars from India and abroad, including some on behalf of the World Bank. Repeated delays or refusals to part with official information meant that citizens lost faith, and applications under this rather rare-for-India law were reduced to a trickle. At the same time, growing complaints have come up about controversial decisions taken in some government tenders -- ranging from garbage collection to computer deals. New Delhi has also since passed a parallel freedom of information law at the federal level. In Goa this week, in the absence of chief minister Manohar Parrikar, the General Administration secretary P Krishnamurthy chaired a meet. The new committee -- comprising officials and journalists nominated by the BJP government -- met for the first time. "Member made valuable suggestion which include reduction in the fees (charged for applicants demanding official information), intimation to the party within 72 hours or three working days if case (seeking access to information) is rejected, designate officers in concerned department to take up cases for immediate results, creation of second level authority to look into the case, besides other matters of concern," said an official statement. It added that members also "felt the need" for an interaction with heads of offices to "educate them" on the provision of the Act and "remove doubts, if any therein". One suggestion was that a workshop be organized with involvement of officers designated for the purpose to be addressed by an eminent personalities familiar with the Act. Officials promised that the next meet would be "held soon", with panel members feeling that this should be done once a month. Goa became one of the early states to pass its Right to Information Act in the late 'nineties, taking most by surprise. Elsewhere in the country, states like Tamil Nadu had passed a law which was seen as largely unhelpful, blocking access to official information under a long list of 'exceptions' which on paper promising access. But there have been various problems with the Goa law at its very inception, apart from journalists seeing some of its earlier clauses as an attempt to muzzle the Press. Currently, citizens are charged Rs 100 as the "processing fee" plus Rs 2 for each page of photo-copied information, if they seek access to written documents. Under this law, the earlier State Information Council hardly ever met. One of the members of that panel, lawyer Albertina Almeida, once complained that she herself had problems gaining access to official information under this law. (Indo-Asian News Service)