Cabinet Withdraws Amendments to RTI Act

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NEW DELHI: The UPA Government on Thursday approved withdrawal of amendments proposed to the Right to Information (RTI) Act almost six years ago, fearing a backlash. At a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the government decided to shelve the proposed amendments, which suggested that the government should exempt file notings and the appointment procedure of bureaucrats by Union Public Service Commission from the RTI ambit.

Seem as an attempt to kill the RTI Act, the amendments had suggested that only file notings related to social and development issues should be disclosed under the Act.

Another far-reaching amendment, the proposal to keep the selection process of civil servants out of the RTI purview was met with resistance from both within and outside the government.

"Civil society opposed the RTI amendments, proposed by the government in 2006. Since there were several views, we took this decision," V Narayanasamy, Minister of State for Personnel and Training, told 'Express'. His ministry acts as the nodal agency for implementation of the RTI Act.

"The amendments have been withdrawn, following the advice of Congress chairperson Sonia Gandhi. She made it very clear that the government cannot be seen accepting these proposed changes," said the minister.

"Our intention is to strengthen the RTI Act," Narayanasamy said, while contradicting the view of the activists that government wanted to dilute the Act.

Both the civil society and former Information Commissioners hailed the new move.

"It is an important decision. The amendments would have killed the RTI Act," said RTI activist Nikhil Dey.

The Cabinet cleared the amendments in 2006, but could not bring it in Parliament due to stiff opposition from activists and even Central Information Commission. Aruna Roy, a leading RTI campaigner and National Advisory Council member, led the campaign against the government on the proposed amendments.

Except for explicit exemptions provided under Section 8 of the RTI Act, including matters of national security, privacy and protection of commercial interest, all file notings and other information would be accessible from now on.