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The growing maturity of RTI use in Bangladesh



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Last month, the International Right to Know Day was an occasion for the champions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh to show how the law helps to strengthen democracy and advance good governance.

Unlike earlier years, the discussions and exchanges this year were more upbeat and hopeful about the future of the law in the country. Despite the hurdles citizens face to use the law, many have been motivated by the painstaking efforts of NGOs to do so to address and redress issues of public concern. Users include people from low-income groups and the educated middle class. There is a noticeable change from the earlier practice of using the law primarily for private needs to invoking it for larger issues of public interest.

From among many examples cited in public discussions and included in reports and publications for the occasion, we have chosen a few to elucidate the development. They demonstrate the growing maturity of the users in invoking the law and the relative increase in the willingness of the authorities to respond.

Some of the most inspiring stories are contained in a publication titled “Magic Happens When Women Carry the RTI Torch.” An NGO called Management and Resource Development Initiative (MRDI) sensitised a group of young women from low-income backgrounds on the RTI law. They managed to hold to account various government agencies responsible for delivering social services to citizens. Their efforts contributed to changes in the way public officials relate to ordinary citizens and improved the quality of services delivered to people in their neighbourhoods. In the process, they had to deal with high officials and face hearings at the Information Commission, which are no mean feat. They have been rightly called brave change-makers of their communities.

Rabia Khatun Shorna is one such change-maker who lives in a low-income neighbourhood of Dhaka. She used RTI to address a variety of issues including prevention of sexual harassment that women face in public places and missing manhole covers in her neighbourhood. She turned them into subjects of RTI applications sent to the relevant authorities.

Shorna’s major gripe was against inappropriate behaviours she faced every day on public transportation, including indecent comments about her body, or even groping by fellow passengers. She knew it was a common experience of most women and wanted to use RTI to fight it.

Shorna filed an RTI application with Khilgaon Police Station. As she did not get a response, she filed another application with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. She asked what they did to protect women in public transportation, since the general welfare of women fell under their responsibility.

When the ministry did not respond, she filed a complaint with the Information Commission. While waiting for a hearing by the Commission, she filed another application on the same issue to the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), responsible for public bus services. She asked what the BRTA did about sexual harassment on public transportation and how many complaints it had received and what actions had been taken to address them.

This time she got an answer. The BRTA informed her that it had no statistics on complaints as none were filed. She did not doubt the veracity of the response because even though sexual harassment is rampant, women are normally reluctant to make formal complaints about them. She was, however, reassured to learn that the BRTA was training drivers to handle such

situations. She is convinced that a greater use of RTI mechanism with unwavering determination will improve the situation.

Shorna got better results from her RTI intervention on missing manhole covers on the streets in her neighbourhood. They were either broken or missing, through which sewage would spill on to the streets during rain and on which rickshaws would trip. Initially, she received no help from the Dhaka South City Corporation, as it had not appointed the mandated information officer, and no one else was willing to accept her application. As a result, she complained to the Information Commission, which did the trick. Soon Shorna found that the manhole covers on her streets were repaired and even elevated by a few inches so that rickshaws no longer tripped over them. The examples illustrate the impediments citizens face in applying the law but also its tremendous efficacy, if pursued doggedly.

Another change-maker, Jhorna, used RTI persistently, ignoring rejections and insults, to force Dhaka South City Corporation to spray mosquito insecticide in her neighbourhood regularly. Beauty Akhter of Sonir Beel area filed a similar RTI request; her local authorities sent her a detailed list of names, areas, dates, times and types of insecticide they sprayed in her area. While she saw little action on the ground, she was happy that her application was heeded to and future action could be expected. Her faith in RTI has increased.

The variety in the use of the law is equally encouraging. Lawyers of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) used the law to find out the state of compliance of the High Court guidelines and subsequent Education Ministry circular on ending corporal and mental punishment on students in educational institutions. They submitted RTI requests to different field offices of the ministry and received responses indicating that while in many instances the guideline/circular was being duly followed, many shortfalls remained. However, assurances were given that the gaps would be filled immediately. More such RTI interventions by citizens to different public bodies can advance the implementation of similar government directives and policies.

The plight of Bangladeshi female domestic workers in the Middle Eastern countries was the subject of an RTI intervention by a journalist, Zakir Hossain, in North Bengal, who was sensitised on RTI at a training session jointly conducted by the Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and The Hunger Project (THP) of Bangladesh. He asked the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment for information on the number of women workers who were victims of torture by their employers overseas and who had to be repatriated, the role the

government played in the process, and measures put in place by it for their physical and mental treatment. To his great satisfaction, he received a detailed response from the ministry, including measures with regard to the safety and welfare of the women. Even if not all the measures are fully respected, the fact that peoples' concerns are being registered in the minds of public authorities is a good omen for the future.

The same journalist had asked the Railways Ministry about government plans to introduce double-lane railway tracks in the northern Bengal routes. He was again pleased to receive a detailed answer on the work in progress of all the eight projects undertaken by the government in that regard. If he and others follow up on the response by tracking the work schedule mentioned therein, the real value of RTI will become apparent.

Let us conclude with an encouraging example from the supply side. It relates to an RTI request filed by an activist of the Hunger Project, Biplob Chandra De Kunal, from Dinajpur district, to the office of the Rangpur Divisional Commissioner. He wanted to know the names, designations, emails and mobile numbers of designated Information and Appeal officers of all government departments of Sadar upazila, Dinajpur district. He not only received the information sought but was also invited to the office of the Assistant Divisional Commissioner, Laila Anjuman Banu, who informed him that upon learning about Kunal's application, the Divisional Commissioner had ordered the inclusion of RTI for discussion at the next monthly meeting, where he ordered all the Deputy Commissioners of Rangpur Division to collect information about RTI-related officials of all the government departments in every district of Rangpur Division and send it to his office. This was duly followed. It is a significant achievement and augurs well for the future of RTI in the country.

We say "bravo" to the Divisional Commissioner and hope others will emulate his example. The RTI ball in Bangladesh has been set rolling. It is up to its citizens to keep it moving faster.

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