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Let's stand by our lone rangers: The role of RTI activists



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Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz

When young Shovon moved to Dhaka from his village not very long ago, he went looking for ponds to bathe in. He discovered quite a few of them, spread all over the city. But he was soon dismayed to learn that ponds and other waterbodies were fast disappearing to make way for development. Fearing the same fate for the remaining ponds, he began looking for those which were in danger, hoping to do something to save them. He has done so since then. The activist in him put him on a relentless mission to help the remaining ponds of Dhaka to survive.

It may not seem obvious, but Shovon is following a long Bengali tradition. Bengal was the bastion for social and political activism during British India. Activists of Bengal led the way for

the eventual departure of the British from India. Similar activism during Pakistani times hastened the emergence of Bangladesh.

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Activism is, however, context-dependent. What was useful in colonial times may not be so under democracy. The approach deployed against a more democratic and tolerant regime may not fare well under repressive and harsh rule. The current international trend towards greater authoritarianism and control is reflected in Bangladesh as well. The government is better equipped today than before to deal with public dissent. As a result, the methods we used in the past such as blockading, boycotting and the like, appear to be out of place today: the word “hartal” has almost disappeared from our political lexicon.

New approaches for activism are sprouting in this new era. Much has been written about the explosive growth of social media—and the other technological advances of our time—and their role in social change. But let us not ignore a new, albeit low-tech, tool. It too is readily available and full of promise: the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009.

The adoption of the RTI Act was based on the principle that in a democracy citizens have the right to know how well their government is serving their interest. Citizens may obtain relevant information available with most public bodies to monitor their work and ensure that they perform their tasks honestly and diligently. Activism is thus built into the system.

While the law is yet to be fully understood and used by our citizens, a few who have are already putting it to good use.

People entitled to government’s safety net programmes such as vulnerable group feeding, old age and maternity benefits, etc. are being helped by activists to send RTI queries to relevant bodies, seeking information on—for example—who is on the list or how recipients are chosen. Such requests were often enough for them to be called in and told that they are indeed on the list: the authorities would rather give in than have their misdeeds revealed. In some places, it became a practice to post recipient lists on notice boards.

RTI interventions were addressed to public health clinics for information on the list of medicines made available to them by the government for free distribution to the indigent. Where previously

the medicines were sold to the intended beneficiaries by corrupt officials, the free medicine lists are now published on notice boards of the clinics.

Similarly, scholarship money meant for school children is now being disbursed in full. Before RTI activists turned their attention to them, they were subjected to unlawful deductions by school authorities. In all these examples, the law helped to bring systemic change for proper implementation of government programmes.

Sadly, there are not enough such stories. RTI activists must jump over many hurdles and through many hoops. They face difficulties and threats from irate public officials or those fearing exposure of their corruption. The Information Commission too is far from helpful. Instead of being pro-active, as envisaged in the law, it is prone to question the intention of the applicant for seeking the information in the first place. It is enough to dampen the spirit of any RTI user.

When Shovon discovered that ponds in Dhaka were being filled up, he informed himself on the law and found that the Natural Waterbodies Conservation Act 2000 made filling of ponds a punishable offence. He then began to contact the Environment Directorate whenever he learnt about any imminent danger to a pond.

In early 2016, Shovon learned that a pond, known as “Pottery Pukur”, in Rayer Bazar area of the city, was being filled up by a Housing Company. He immediately tried to contact the Environment Directorate. He called, wrote and cajoled. His dogged persistence forced the Directorate to finally undertake an on-site investigation, in May 2016. It revealed that “Pottery Pukur” did indeed exist but was now totally filled up, illegally. A Housing Company was preparing to commence construction on the spot.

The Environment Directorate ordered a halt on all further activities on the spot, threatening the Company of legal action in default. It informed the concerned city authorities to undertake necessary measures to bring the pond back to its original state. A fine of more than Tk 14,00,000 was subsequently imposed on the Company and duly levied. But after that nothing happened to indicate that the pond would resurrect. Fearing inaction, Shovon proceeded like a lone ranger, with more phone calls, more letters, more outreach to anyone who could help, including the media. He also resorted to the RTI Act for help.

He found the Information Commission’s role particularly unhelpful and perfunctory. His complaint hearing took place without him, as the Commission refused to change the date despite

his formal request for a short postponement due to personal reasons. The Commission heard only the representative of the Environment Directorate and directed him simply to provide the information sought by Shovon. It made no effort to find out about the fate of the pond itself, as clearly anticipated in the RTI Act. The Environment Directorate simply informed Shovon what he already knew. There was nothing to indicate what further action it intended to take on the matter, if at all.

More than three years have passed since Shovon embarked on his mission to save “Pottery Pukur”. He hasn’t given up yet, though he fears retaliation by those disturbed by his intransigence. His efforts with all the concerned authorities have continued, yielding only perfunctory and evasive answers.

Will the matter simply fizzle out? Will our “Pottery Pukurs” continue to be stolen? Will our Shovons be forced to give up their dreams to be useful citizens of the country? Are the days of activism in Bangladesh over? Let us remember the contribution of activists of the past to bring us where we are today. And remember that each age needs its own activists.

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are Chairman and Project Coordinator (RTI section) respectively of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). Email: rib@citech-bd.com