

How citizen engagement with RTI law is transforming lives



Illustration: Collected

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During the construction work of a regional highway in Dinajpur, local inhabitants were increasingly bothered by the dust it generated. One of them, Mosaddekul Islam, fired by his new-found knowledge of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, asked the concerned public authority what measures were taken to ensure that no harm was caused to the local population by its operation. On receipt of his RTI request, the project engineer immediately directed the construction firm to spray the affected areas with water twice a day, which was promptly done.

This and similar other stories were shared last month among activists and fans of the RTI Act from all over the country. They had gathered for a virtual meeting to find out how the law had fared during the pandemic. It appeared that fear and devastation caused by the pandemic had spurred their appreciation of the tremendous importance of transparency and accountability in governance. Our earlier fears about the negative impact of the crisis on the operation of the law were largely belied.

We were elated not because a larger number of citizens were utilising the law or had become more proficient in seeking pertinent information from public authorities, nor because the latter had become more responsive to peoples' information requests. Nor had the Information Commission become more attentive to removing impediments citizens face in applying the law, or more prone to chastise public officials for disobeying its provisions. We were particularly encouraged by the remarkable growth in citizens' understanding of the value of the law in monitoring the work of public authorities and drawing their attention to peoples' concerns. They had begun to grasp the tremendous transformative power of the law. A few examples will illustrate the point.

RTI application stops embezzlement of public fund

An RTI activist, Mominul, of Taraganj upazila of Rangpur, once discovered that a group of day labourers who were beneficiaries of the government's "40-day Work Programme", meant to help the unemployed during times of employment scarcity, were engaged in earth-filling work under its "Housing Programme" for the homeless. As he knew that there were separate budgets for the two programmes, he suspected that the contractor was perhaps trying to dupe the government by engaging the work programme beneficiaries on the housing programme, thereby embezzling the money allotted for the latter. So, he decided to ask for copies of relevant project documents from the project coordinator's office. Soon after submitting his RTI request, he came to know that the concerned labour force was removed from the earth-filling work under the housing programme and engaged in road construction work elsewhere. As the news spread, peoples' appreciation of the timely RTI intervention by Mominul spread far and wide.

RTI halts illegal money collection by traffic police

RTI activist Marufa Akhtar of Dinajpur town was vexed by the police practice of seizing auto-rickshaws under one pretext or another and releasing them afterwards against payment of a so-called fine without any money receipt. She decided to submit an RTI request to the local police authority seeking to know if there was any rule about not providing money receipts against fines levied and how the money thus collected was accounted for. She was soon informed that the police super had issued orders to stop the practice and that the defaulting police officials would be properly dealt with in the future. The odious practice has reportedly stopped now.

RTI resolves long-standing problem for a local community

RTI activist Nowshad Hossain of Dinajpur came to know that the construction work on a road in Chirirbandar upazila had remained stalled for over 18 months. He decided to submit a RTI request to the upazila authorities asking for information relating to the suspension of the work for such a long time and the expected time for its completion. Within ten days of his submission, local residents were pleasantly surprised to find that the construction work had resumed.

RTI reveals irregularities in purchase of musical instruments

RTI buff Mominul Islam Sarker of Taraganj upazila in Rangpur wanted to find out how many cultural bodies of his area had received government fund designed to promote cultural activities. He submitted an RTI request to the upazila office asking for the list of local clubs which received such funding during the year 2019-2020. On the basis of the response he received, Mominul checked with his local club and discovered that not only was no musical instrument bought with the money, but the fake receipt adduced as evidence of such a purchase was a voucher from the local brick kiln. The news both amused and angered the local population. Mominul subsequently submitted a complaint to the upazila executive.

RTI application stops irregularity in agricultural service

The same Mominul Islam Sarker of Taraganj upazila, now well-known in the area for his RTI activism, submitted an RTI request to the upazila agriculture office asking for the list, with photographs, of local cardholders and recipients of government stimulus packages on agriculture. He received the information in due course. Upon checking the list, he discovered that same pictures appeared on cards of different persons and there were other irregularities as well. So, he followed up with another RTI request seeking reasons for the irregularities and asking to know whether remedial measures were taken. In his response, the designated officer admitted that irregularities were indeed found, and remedial measures already taken. It increased Mominul's faith in RTI, as his earlier efforts to engage the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in this regard had failed.

The examples give us hope about the future of RTI in the country. They demonstrate the progress made in inculcating an awareness among the users that the law can be invoked for myriad reasons, impacting society and the nation at large, and not for personal needs alone.

To translate the progress into furthering the overall objectives of the law more proficiently, it may be useful for the captains of RTI to unpeel the various components of the concept. Towards that end, we share below our own perceptions of the subject and hope that others in the civil society will do the same.

To us, the RTI law aims to do the following: 1) promote citizens' role in monitoring the work of the government and other public bodies; 2) help citizens share their concerns on specific governance issues with the relevant public authorities through seeking pertinent information on them; 3) assist public authorities to realise that their work is being watched by the people and they may face consequences for any delinquency; 4) create opportunities for public officials to interact with the people and become more people-friendly and law-abiding; 5) change the age-old, "ruler-ruled" mentality in people's mind and make them realise that public officials are not their masters but allies; 6) contribute to systemic change in the way public authorities do their job; 7) inculcate a sense of "citizenship entitlement" among the people and make them feel that they have a say in governance matters, whatever their place in society; and 8) strengthen democracy by facilitating the development of a "whistle-blower" role for citizens to alert the government about irregularities in governance and promote transparency and accountability in public work.

We leave it to the readers to decide how many of these objectives have been achieved through the above examples.

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