Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz

Jamaluddin of Dinajpur had learnt at a training session that the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 of Bangladesh was enacted to provide a legal basis for citizens to exercise their rights as "owners of all powers of the Republic". He reflected for some time on the concept of "legally enforceable ownership" of power by the people and looked for an opportunity to put it to the test. So, when he learnt that a local government official was notorious for his rude behaviour towards subordinates and members of the public, he decided to put a stop to this colonial practice. He submitted an RTI request to the concerned office, where this very government official was the Designated Officer (DO) to deal with such requests. Jamaluddin simply asked to know whether such misbehaviour was permitted under the rules of conduct of government officials. The official did not reply, and Jamaluddin appealed to the higher authority in Dhaka. This obliged the DO to reply, admitting that indeed misbehaviour was not permitted. Since then, the official's behaviour reportedly changed for the better and Jamaluddin emerged as a hero to the public.
RTI empowers citizens to stand up to impolite bureaucratic behaviour

Anowar Hossain, an RTI activist of Dinajpur, led a group of three farmers to the local agriculture office to learn about the procedures for obtaining potato seeds. They were initially refused entry into the office of the senior official, but were eventually permitted when they insisted that they had the right to see him. However, they were asked to take off their shoes before entering, as their soiled shoes might spoil the carpet on the office floor. Anowar Hossain's immediate reaction was to ask why they were being discriminated against when others in the room had their shoes on. He also asked whether the carpet was bought with the public's or personal money. At this, the official changed his stance and became more accommodating. The story boosted the spirit of RTI enthusiasts and highlighted the concept of peoples' ownership of power in a democracy.

RTI contributes to systemic change in distribution of potato seeds

The same Anowar Hossain of Dinajpur, together with his friend, Shaheen Rasel, submitted an RTI request to the local agriculture office, asking to know about the situation of potato seed stock in the district and the manner of its distribution among farmers. Soon after submission, they found that the seeds are, in practice, distributed through dealers. While this practice is permissible, it is susceptible to abuse. They learnt that the seeds are normally produced or bought at Tk 9 per kg before storage. As the market price of the seeds soared this year, they were sold at Tk 43 per kg to the dealers who in turn sold them to the farmers at Tk 60-70 per kg, that too after mixing them with non-seed potatoes, causing great harm to the farmers. They submitted another RTI request asking why the seeds could not be distributed directly to the farmers, minimising the possibility of malpractice by unscrupulous dealers. To their great delight, the agriculture office decided to sell the seeds directly to the farmers.

RTI prevents irregular levy of school fees

RTI enthusiast Nowshad Hossain of Dinajpur had learnt that local schools were disregarding a government directive not to charge admission fees for promoting students to the next grade, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. When he discovered that a local school was charging an exorbitant amount from guardians, including a hefty admission fee, he submitted an RTI request to the office of the District Commissioner (DC) wanting to know what steps were being taken to implement the government directive. Upon receiving the query from the DC's office, the school authority immediately dropped the admission charges from Tk 4,260 to Tk 860 only. What was the potential savings of 2,500 guardians? Tk 1 crore and 10 lakhs.
RTI unearths irregularities in construction of sewerage drains

Mominul Islam of Taraganj sub-district of Rangpur District submitted an RTI request to the project engineer of Local Government Office asking for information, with specific breakdowns and bill vouchers, on the amount of money spent from 2016 to date on specific development activities in his area under the Annual Development Programme. On receiving the information, he discovered that Tk 2 lakhs shown spent on construction of a sewerage drain in his locality during fiscal 2018-19 was fake; no such drain existed. He found that the vouchers shown against the expenditure contained items unrelated to drain construction, such as mini fans, switches, and regulators. While the local community found the information intriguingly funny, Mominul decided to bring the matter to the attention of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer for necessary action.

The stories show how citizens are turning to the RTI Act to exercise their citizenship rights and address issues of public concern relating to governance. This is good for democracy and augurs well for a healthy citizen-government relationship. The law seems to be helping to narrow the traditional divide between the two sides.

The list of issues shared with us by RTI groups on which information requests are being made to public authorities in the country ranges from the environment, climate change, food security, SDGs, administration and public services to government benefits and Covid-19 economic packages. They show that people are focusing more on public interest issues than personal ones. This is indeed the primary objective of the RTI Act, enhancing peoples’ role in governance of the country.

The Cabinet Division of the Bangladesh government in May 2018 had set up committees for the Supervision and Observation of the RTI Act at Central, Divisional, District and Upazila levels in the country. The committees, composed of relevant public officials within respective jurisdictions, together with civil society and NGO representatives, have been entrusted to oversee smooth operation of the law to achieve its objectives. We recommend that the minutes of the bi-monthly meetings of the committees be shared regularly with the public. They provide a legal complement to the selection of stories we share here. A close interaction between the Cabinet Division, overseeing the operation of the RTI law, and the RTI community in the country should help advance the objectives of the law.

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