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Success stories can improve our woefully low awareness of RTI

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Syed Fazle Rabbi Dollar, a resident of Bogura, has been concerned about the harmful effect of the rampant use of nitric acid on the environment and its abuse by criminals. He has been particularly bothered by its uncontrolled use at more than 500 jewellery shops/workshops in his city. He learnt that 400 of these enterprises had no licence at all to use nitric acid in their workshops. And yet, all of them used it indiscriminately to dissolve solid metals such as gold, silver and bronze, causing health hazards and emitting foul smells. Nitric acid can lead to breathing problems and severe asthmatic attacks. The liquid discharge from the acid used in these workshops passes through drains to end up in the nearby Karatoa River, poisoning its water and killing fish and other living organisms.

To make things worse, as obtaining acid was relatively easy, acid-related crimes, including acid attacks on people, were on the rise. Efforts by the local community to draw the local administration's attention towards the problem produced little result. So, an exasperated Fazle Rabbi finally decided to submit a Right to Information (RTI) request to the Office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Bogura on July 31, 2022. He sought information on how many business entities/workshops were issued licences to use nitric acids, whose licences were renewed, and the number of those who had licences to sell and transport acids. And then he waited.

To his surprise and great satisfaction, Fazle Rabbi received a response to his RTI request from the assistant commissioner within the stipulated period, together with the information sought. Being a journalist, he immediately decided to share the information in the local daily *Amader Kontho*. And to his further satisfaction, he soon found that the local administration had gone into quick action and conducted raids at various places in the city. The drive resulted in the eventual closure of many entities/workshops that operated illegally. Many others who were in the business of using acids hastily approached the DC office to obtain the required licence. As a result, the local administration now possesses the information on the number of entities licensed to operate acid-related business at one place.

Fazle Rabbi used one of our most powerful instruments to hold our government accountable. The recent release of the "Right to Information (RTI) Survey, 2019" on Bangladesh, convoked by the DFID and the World Bank, provides useful data on the use of the law, particularly on aspects hampering its application, which could help proponents identify appropriate remedial measures.

We must do so in order to fully benefit from this potent instrument for citizens to monitor our government's work and contribute to better governance.

Both positive and negative messages emerge from the survey. Clearly, the most positive finding is the seeming preparedness of the supply side for its role in the implementation of the law. The survey found 99.7 percent of Designated Officers (DOs) appointed by public offices, including government bodies, are aware of the RTI Act. This is an increase from the 94 percent found in a 2012 survey. Equally impressive, 97.9 percent of the heads of government offices knew about the law. It must be noted, however, that only around 40 percent of them were aware of its objectives, and even less of its procedures. Additionally, among DOs, two-thirds had never received an RTI request.

Complementing this, the survey also found that on the demand side, only 7.7 percent of our citizens were aware of the law. This is a precipitous drop from 23 percent in 2012. The few who use the law and contribute to an average of 10,000 RTI requests annually must, therefore, be mainly those helped by NGOs engaged in promoting the law, plus those motivated and helped by individual RTI activists and, of course, those who attended training sessions conducted by the Information Commission.

For a nation long known for its political activism, why should there be such neglect of a most potent instrument for change and progress? A law of such revolutionary possibilities must not be allowed to wilt away.

Despite the general lack of knowledge about the law, the few who are aware of its tremendous power are indeed using it for beneficial purposes. And the objectives, though still largely limited to personal and professional needs, often include important areas of public interest. We believe that while we search for other ways to excite our fellow citizens, bring awareness to them, and motivate them to a greater use of the law, one effective approach would be to acquaint them with success stories that continue to emerge from its use – such as that of Fazle Rabbi.

Locals have observed that increased monitoring by the DC office and strict enforcement of the law has helped control the rampant and illegal use of nitric acid. More importantly, due to strong monitoring of the acid business by the government, the sale of acid to criminal elements to maximise profit is likely to drop significantly.

Such an inspiring story about the dramatic impact of an RTI intervention by an ordinary citizen is likely to raise people's awareness about the efficacy of the law in promoting public interest, and will hopefully lead to its greater use. It depicted a win-win effect of close collaboration between citizens and the government. As a nation of storytellers and oral historians, let's use those skills to spread such tales.

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