

## Reassuring stories of progress



VISUAL: FREEPIK

People living along the road from Garments Bazar to Boideshirhat in Chirirbandar upazila, Dinajpur were fed up. Road repairs, which began in 2018, had been going on for five years. So, in June 2023, a group of right to information (RTI) activists from the region decided to use the RTI process to try and resolve the inconvenience caused to local residents. Naushad Hossain and a number of his colleagues submitted separate RTI requests to the designated officer (DO) of the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in Dinajpur. They asked, inter alia, for information including the budget and time frame for the road construction project, the reasons for the delay and the measures taken—if any—to alleviate inconvenience for residents, and to penalise the contractor and government officials involved for their role in the delay. They also wanted to know if and how the public was kept informed.

The RTI law stipulates a time frame for responses to such queries, and Naushad received only partial information within this period, so he launched an appeal to the higher authority of the LGED office. Receiving no response, he filed a complaint to the Information Commission (IC). At its hearing on December 18, 2023, the commission noted the discrepancies between the information sought by Naushad and those provided in the partial disclosure by the DO. The DO was duly reprimanded by

the IC and starkly reminded that, as he drew his salary from public funds, he was accountable to the public. The IC further imposed a fine of Tk 3,000 on the DO and instructed him to provide full information within 10 days.

Most importantly, Naushad and the local population were heartened by the sight of the road repair work resuming immediately, with increased manpower. This made people appreciate the potential of the RTI law and its efficacy.

Although the RTI Act, 2009 has been around for some 14 years, its use is not widespread. The law has been kept alive over the years largely through the efforts of a few dedicated NGOs and die-hard RTI activists. Stories such as the one above illustrate the kind of issues propelling citizens to resort to the law for corrective government measures. They also indicate a better understanding about the law's transformative objectives.

Our second story relates to the travails of Mainuddin Islam Sumon of Dinajpur Sadar upazila. A bookseller who bought books from wholesalers and sold them to retail purchasers, Sumon noticed that Dinajpur wholesalers, who received a sizable commission on their purchase from publishers, did not provide much discount to retail sellers, while wholesalers in the neighbouring districts did so. So, Sumon began buying books in bulk from nearby districts and selling them to retail purchasers in Dinajpur, offering higher discounts. As more customers were drawn to his shop, the Bookseller Samity in Dinajpur was enraged. As part of a harassment campaign, they sought to block Sumon's application for membership in the Dinajpur committee, demanding a hefty fee and instigating other booksellers to shun him.

A distraught Sumon discussed his problem with local RTI activists and submitted RTI requests to three authorities: the office of the Additional District Commissioner (Library, Media & Publication) of Dinajpur; the secretary of the Ministry of Commerce; and the president of the Bookseller Samity, Dhaka (which is registered with the government). He asked to know the requisite fees for new members of the Bookseller Samity, the amount collected between 2017-2023, and where they were deposited.

Upon receiving his request, the ADC office in Dinajpur advised Sumon to submit the same request to the president of the Dinajpur Bookseller Samity as well, which he did. Soon thereafter, the president of the Dhaka committee contacted Sumon to learn more about his concerns. Upon his intervention, Sumon soon received the requested information and learnt that there was a fixed membership fee of Tk 800 only and clear-cut rules for wholesale book purchasers regarding offering discounts. The news

spread quickly in the region, revealing the illegal practices of the booksellers' syndicate and contributing to more transparent interactions between wholesalers and retailers. A sense of victory permeated the local RTI community.

The third story concerns alleged malpractices and fraudulent activities of the land settlement office in Dinajpur's Nawabganj upazila. Jamaluddin, a local RTI activist, was approached by a man named Mofazzel Hossain who claimed to be a victim of such corruption. After mutual discussion, Jamaluddin submitted an RTI application on August 16, 2023 seeking information on the processes of land transfer and recording of land ownership. In particular, he wanted to know the status of the land owned by Mofazzel Hossain, for which the latter had proof of ownership.

Receiving no response to his application, Jamaluddin filed an appeal on September 14, 2023 to the deputy secretary (for zonal settlement) of Dinajpur. A hearing was fixed for October 3, 2023; after listening to both parties and consulting relevant documents, the appellate authority not only instructed the DO to provide the requested information but also initiated an investigation into the recording practices of the land office. A mobile court was established to identify the brokers who worked at the Nawabganj settlement office.

These stories indicate growing maturity, however tentative, of both the demand and supply sides of the RTI regime in Bangladesh. As citizens learn to use the law to address collective concerns of local communities and of society at large, public officials too are realising that they must change their age-old practice of official secrecy and instead cater to the growing public interest of transparency and accountability in their work.

Of late, the Information Commission of Bangladesh has begun to display greater maturity and better understanding of their role in promoting proper implementation of the law, which is clearly the most potent instrument in the hands of citizens to check the work of government and other public bodies. To sustain progress, there is a need for greater and more continuous use of the RTI Act by citizens from all walks of life. Only citizens' groups can take the lead and keep the ball rolling through individual and collective efforts. A supportive government has much to gain in return.

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