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How RTI activists keep the law alive



'It is equally fundamental that all political parties seeking a mandate to govern uphold and promote the RTI Act as a cornerstone of good governance and participatory democracy.' FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The absence of Bangladesh's three information commissioners—vacancies that, almost a year and a half on—have left the Right to Information (RTI) regime severely debilitated, with replacements still inexplicably pending. However, instead of lamenting about it today, let's learn how the country's dedicated RTI activists—our "RTI warriors"—are coping with the situation. Trained over the years by a handful of committed NGOs, these individuals are locally recognised for helping people use the law to promote transparency and oversight in governance. In the absence of a functioning information commission, their work has become riskier and more complex, demanding greater perseverance and strategic acuity.

Encouragingly, although some have grown disheartened and stepped back, a significant number continue with remarkable determination and tenacity. Rather than retreating in the face of bureaucratic inertia, these RTI warriors have adopted a strategy of persistence: signalling to

public officials that—even without formal oversight—citizens remain vigilant, committed to monitoring public services, and prepared to demand accountability.

The experiences they shared—several of which will be mentioned later—show how ordinary citizens have continued to use the RTI Act not only to resolve immediate problems but also to signal institutional scrutiny, promote transparency, and sustain civic pressure on authorities. These examples demonstrate the power of citizen engagement, even when institutional support is temporarily lacking, and offer critical insights into the resilience, strategies and impact of Bangladesh's RTI movement.

The following case studies highlight how RTI has been used to ensure public health accountability, protect infrastructure, and safeguard citizens' rights despite the challenges posed by a dormant information commission.

Ensuring public health accountability

In June 2025, Mukta Akter used the RTI Act to address the denial of free medicines to her sick brother at Jaldhaka Sadar Hospital in Nilphamari district. Despite entitlement under government policy, hospital staff told her to buy medicines privately and responded dismissively when questioned.

Mukta, trained in RTI law by an NGO, filed an RTI application requesting (i) lists of medicines provided by the hospital and those purchased externally, and (ii) the hospital's annual government allocation for medicines for FY2024-2025.

Fearing scrutiny, the hospital immediately provided all required medicines free of cost, corrected staff behaviour, and improved procedures—demonstrating RTI's power to secure services, enforce transparency, and catalyse institutional reform while strengthening public trust.

Protecting public infrastructure

In Sarkar Para, Nilphamari Sadar upazila, residents were isolated after a private landowner illegally excavated a pond beside an unpaved road, which then collapsed during heavy rain. Trespass over adjoining private land by the neighbouring population became impossible when the owner blocked access. The excavation violated buffer requirements and provisions of the Penal Code, 1860, and the Land-related Offences Prevention and Remedy Act (LCPRA), 2021.

On November 26, 2025, RTI-savvy residents filed applications with the Nilphamari Settlement Office and the assistant commissioner (Land), seeking mouza maps and khatian records to establish the road's legal status. Confirmation of the land as public triggered the AC (Land)'s obligations under the LCPRA to investigate, issue recovery orders, and complete remedial action within three months. The case illustrates RTI's value as a non-judicial tool for evidence-gathering and administrative accountability, enabling communities to protect infrastructure and enforce legal remedies efficiently.

The deterrent power of RTI

On September 29, 2025, following a severe accidental electrocution, Dayal Chandra Roy's son was admitted to Nilphamari Sadar Hospital. Although entitled to free treatment, the attending doctor demanded that the father supply a required utensil and purchase medicines externally. After an altercation on the matter, the doctor abruptly referred the child elsewhere for treatment.

Aggrieved by the doctor's decision, the father, with support from a local RTI advocate, threatened to file an RTI application, signalling scrutiny of the denial of treatment, the availability of medicines, and the doctor's administrative conduct. The hospital superintendent intervened immediately: care continued uninterrupted, regular updates were ordered, and the doctor and nurse apologised. The episode demonstrates RTI's deterrent effect—compelling responsible conduct and reinforcing transparency under the prospect of legal oversight.

These cases show the continuing, practical power of the RTI Act, 2009—even without a fully operational information commission. Strategically invoked, RTI enables citizens to secure essential services, correct administrative failures, protect public assets, and hold officials to account. They also testify to the resilience, creativity and impact of Bangladesh's RTI activists in promoting transparency, safeguarding rights, and reinforcing institutional accountability.

We hope the interim government—now preparing for a free and fair general election—will heed citizens' aspirations for transparent, accountable governance, as illustrated earlier, and promptly revitalise the RTI regime and advance a more robust, citizen-friendly RTI law. It is equally fundamental that all political parties seeking a mandate to govern uphold and promote the RTI Act as a cornerstone of good governance and participatory democracy.

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