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## In a democracy, RTI is an accountability tool



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

While awaiting the completion of a government-initiated process to select the three information commissioners, following a prolonged vacancy that this column has lamented time and again, it may be useful to revisit the enduring value of right to information (RTI) in strengthening democratic governance. Few would dispute that transparency and accountability are fundamental to this endeavour. Citizens can participate meaningfully in public affairs only when they have access to information about how decisions are made, how public resources are used, and whether public institutions are fulfilling their responsibilities. RTI provides an essential bridge between citizens and the state, replacing a culture of secrecy with one of openness and strengthening public trust.

Bangladesh took an important step in this direction by enacting the Right to Information Act, 2009, one of the country's most progressive governance reforms. The act is founded on the principle that information held by public authorities belongs to the people. By enabling citizens to access official information, it promotes transparency, strengthens accountability, reduces opportunities for corruption, and encourages informed public participation. Over the past decade, through this column, we have consistently argued that transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and citizen empowerment constitute the greatest contribution of the RTI law to good governance.

Transparency is the foundation of good governance. When information about procurement, recruitment, public expenditure, development projects, and service delivery is accessible, arbitrary decision-making is deterred and public confidence grows. The RTI Act enables citizens

to seek information from ministries, local government institutions, statutory bodies, and many publicly funded organisations. Equally important is the fact that it encourages proactive disclosure, making information routinely available without the need to file formal requests.

Access to information benefits the government as much as it benefits citizens. Public institutions that operate transparently tend to make better decisions, maintain more reliable records, and earn greater public trust. Openness should be seen as a hallmark of responsible governance, not an administrative burden.

Without access to official records, citizens, journalists, researchers, and civil society cannot determine whether public authorities are acting fairly, efficiently, and in accordance with the law. RTI transforms accountability from an abstract principle into a practical mechanism. Citizens can seek explanations for delays in public services, examine expenditures on development projects, monitor government programmes, and verify compliance with laws and regulations. This is particularly important in Bangladesh, where health, education, local government, land administration, infrastructure, and social protection directly affect crores of people. Information obtained through the RTI law enables citizens to identify weaknesses in governance before they become systemic failures.

Democracy requires informed participation, not passive acceptance. The RTI Act empowers people by reducing the traditional information imbalance between the government and citizens, enabling communities to monitor local development projects, parents to inquire into school management, patients to examine health services, and beneficiaries to verify social protection programmes. Access to reliable information also strengthens public debate and helps counter misinformation.

One of RTI's greatest contributions is its ability to prevent corruption. When officials know that records and decisions may be subject to public scrutiny, arbitrary actions and misuse of public resources become more difficult. International experience demonstrates that RTI laws expose irregularities in procurement, recruitment, licensing, and public expenditure. Bangladesh has the same opportunity if a wider and more effective implementation of its RTI Act is adopted.

Beyond improving administration, RTI strengthens democracy itself. Elections provide citizens with periodic opportunities to choose their representatives, but accountability must continue between elections. The RTI law makes way for continuous public oversight by allowing citizens to question decisions, monitor government performance, and participate more effectively in public affairs. An informed citizenry in turn contributes to better policymaking, constructive public debate, and greater confidence in democratic institutions.

Of course, RTI is one component of a broader accountability framework that also includes independent oversight institutions, effective auditing, investigative journalism, and an impartial judiciary.

Despite its considerable promise, implementation of the RTI Act in Bangladesh continues to face important challenges. Public awareness remains limited, particularly among rural communities and marginalised groups. Many citizens are unfamiliar with their rights or the procedures for

requesting information. Weak record management and inadequate digitisation also delay responses and undermine the law's effectiveness. A strong and fully functioning Information Commission is essential here. Prolonged institutional vacancies inevitably weaken implementation and undermine public confidence. A robust commission can ensure compliance with the law, prompt resolution of disputes, and safeguard citizens' right to information.

The government should embrace a culture of proactive disclosure by routinely publishing information on budgets, procurement, recruitment, development projects, and service delivery. This will reduce the need for individual RTI applications while also enhancing transparency and administrative efficiency.

Realising the full potential of the RTI Act in Bangladesh requires sustained political commitment, timely appointments of information commissioners, stronger institutional capacity, better records management, wider digitisation, continuous training for designated information officers, and nationwide public awareness programmes. Civil society, universities, media and development partners also have important roles to play in promoting the responsible use of the RTI Act and helping citizens exercise their rights effectively.

The Right to Information Act remains one of the country's most significant democratic achievements. It affirms a simple but powerful principle: information held by public institutions belongs to the people. By promoting transparency, strengthening accountability, encouraging citizen participation, and deterring corruption, RTI contributes directly to better governance and sustainable development. As Bangladesh seeks to build a more democratic, inclusive and prosperous future, effective implementation of the RTI Act should be treated as a national priority. Governments open to public scrutiny earn greater public trust, while informed citizens become active partners in development. Together, transparency and accountability provide the foundation for stronger institutions and a more resilient democracy.

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