

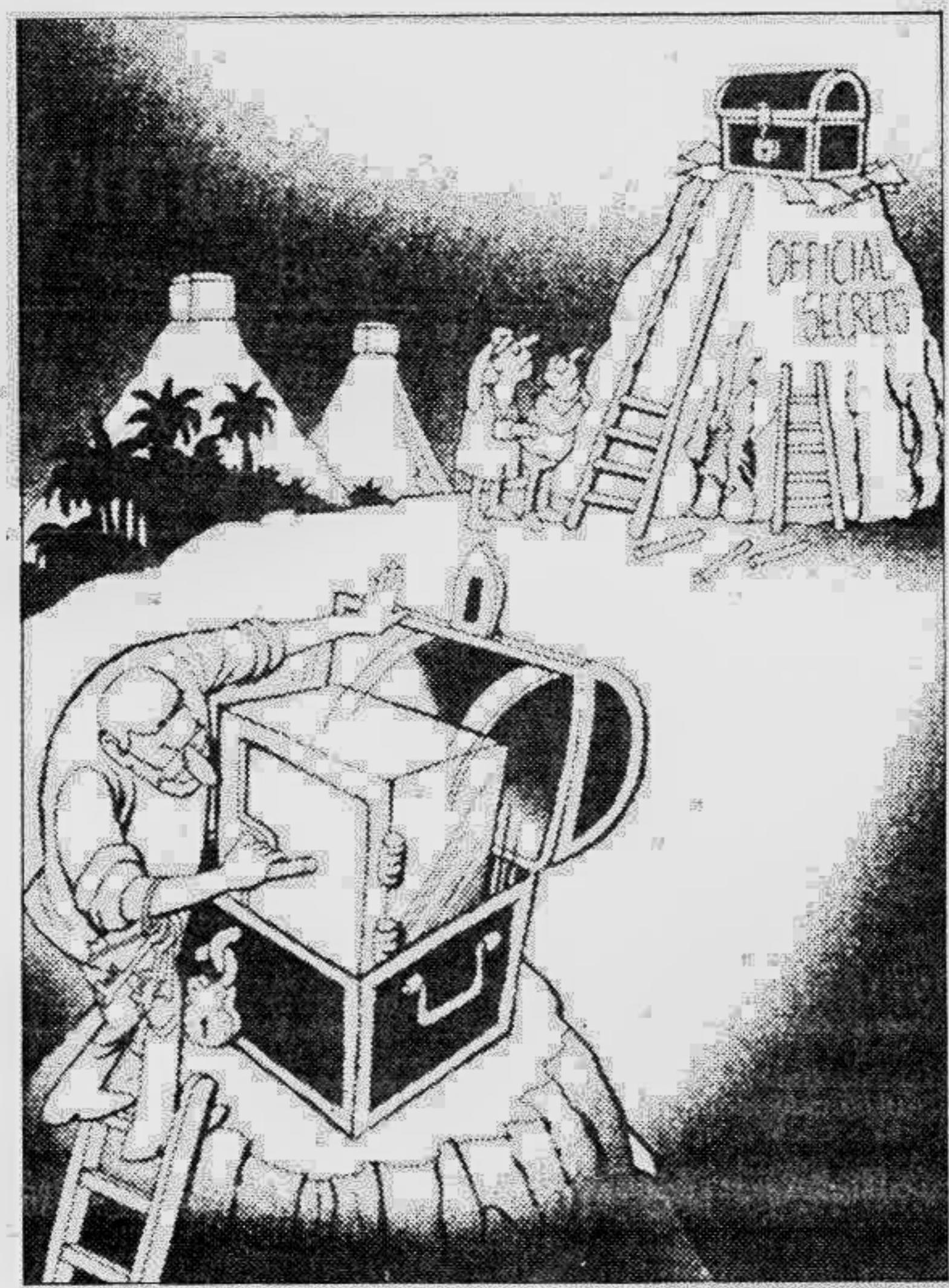
Law and Our Rights

"All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law"-Article 27 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Towards a Right to Information Law for Bangladesh

By A H Monjurul Kabir

"Open government laws are not simply for the satisfaction of citizens' curiosity, they usually derive from the rights of access to records relevant to a legal interest, and there is a continuing connection between the interest which a citizen has in how the country is governed and a right of access to records about government. Such a right of access may be important in disclosing inefficiency and even corruption."



Courtesy: Liberal Times 1999

About the Issue

THE right to Information is an issue which has gained considerable importance in recent years. More and more people are beginning to feel the need for more access to information which has till now been in the exclusive possession of the government even though it relates to the well-being of the individual or the public at large.

Growth of democratic values have led to the feeling that government must be made more transparent and accountable in order to make democracy meaningful.

To break away from the feudal system in which even now government is viewed as the lord and master of the common man, people's participation is most important for good governance.

The Right to Information is also being viewed as a possibly potent instrument for minimising corruption and inefficiency in government.

....a consensus has evolved among the political parties on the need to legislate the right to freedom of information.... The courts too have, in a series of judgements, declared that the right to know is a facet of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression.... In the bureaucracy also there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of openness and transparency. A consensus emerged in the Conference of Chief Secretaries, held November 1996, on the need for an early enactment of a law on a Right to Information."

Report of the Working Group on Right to Information and Promotion of Open and Transparent Government, Government of India, 1997.

Source: Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)

What is Right to Information

A Right to Information in the context of means two things:

• A right to have access to information held by the government relating to a legal right of any person. This information could be in the form of records, files, registers, maps, data, drawings, etc.

• A right to be told something which could affect a person's rights. This means that the government has a positive duty to give certain types of information without waiting to be asked for it. This would include information on issues concerning projects which directly affect the people or the environment, information on health, agriculture, weather conditions etc.

In a government of responsibility like ours where the agents of the public must be responsible for their conduct, there can be but few secrets. The people of this country have a right to know every public act, everything that is done in a public way by their public functionaries. They are entitled to know the particulars of every public transaction in all its bearings. The right to know which is derived from the concept of freedom of speech, though not absolute, is a factor which should make one wary when secrecy is claimed for transactions which can at any rate have no repercussion on public security."

—State of UP vs Raj Narain (Air 1975 SCC 865)

Source: Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)

be held to account for their conduct. No democratic government can survive without accountability and the basic postulate of accountability is that the people should have information about the functioning of the government. It is only if people know how government is functioning that they can fulfil the role which democracy assigns to them and make democracy a really effective participatory democracy. 'Knowledge', said James Madison, 'will for ever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of obtaining it is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy, or perhaps both! The citizens' right to know the facts, the true facts, about the admin-

constitution are not different from what these mean in the United States, India and other countries where these rights are constitutionally guaranteed. Plainly speaking, these freedoms mean and include expression, publication, distribution and circulation of anything and any idea of any sort subject to the restrictions that may be imposed by law for securing any of the eight purposes mentioned in clause (2) of Article 39 of the Constitution.' [46 DLR, page 600, para 16]

From the observation of our High Court Division in the case of *Abdul Kader V. Bangladesh* cited above, it is clear that the

FOI legislation breaks with the often entrenched tradition

Why it is important to have a Right to Information

Principle of accountability

OURS is a democratic system of governance in which the government is run for the benefit of the public at large and not for the benefit of one person or a few persons. Governance from the village to the central level therefore has to be accountable to the people. People have a right to know what the government is doing. Just as the elected representatives like the MPs have a right to get information regarding governance on behalf of their electorate, the people themselves have the right to ask about things and get information. A Right to Information will ensure that people can hold public bodies accountable on a regular basis, without having to lay the entire burden on their elected representatives who are themselves often unable to get the information sought despite of all the resources at their command.

Principle of participation

Since most governmental works are carried out for the people, they must be involved in the planning process and must know exactly how things are being done. To participate in planning processes and judgement of whether certain plans and schemes are useful for them or not, people must have sufficient information about the nature of the projects and programmes. This will enable them to give their opinion well in time for required changes or modifications. This will reduce project costs, and will increase projects outputs, manifold.

Principle of transparency

There is a presumption that everything that is done by the government is done for the public good which means, it is done to further the objective of public well-being, is done honestly with optimum benefits from the funds used. However, as we all know, in recent times, this presumption has been eroded to a great extent by misuse, misappropriation and also carelessness of public funds. To counter this, it is essential that there should be complete transparency in all public dealings. This is bound to bring about a more careful utilisation and application of funds. Transparency in government functioning will also help to hold people accountable for their mishandling of public time and money.

Most people also feel that the misdeeds of a few are reflected in the image of the entire system. Transparency would go a long way in helping to expose the corrupt and allow the honest to do their jobs without fear or favour.

Source: Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)

Concepts of freedom of speech and expression

and that of press are similar to the principles as enunciated in the USA and in India. But the reality is different. The existing policy of governance is 'anti-people's right to information.' It appears to be that all information in the possession of the government is secret unless there is good reason to allow public access. Access to information is most often refused because

* The bureaucracy is still secretive and self-serving. It wants to protect itself under the cloak of secrecy.

* The information asked for is difficult to find because the system of filing and keeping record is outdated.

* People even do not know that they are entitled to get the information. So if they are refused, they do not insist on their right. In fact there is no

of secrecy in several countries

and, in doing so, helps empower the citizen vis-a-vis the state. Such legislation can be an effective and powerful aid to the process of economic development not just democracy. Enacting a new law to ensure people's access to information has become the demand of the day.

At the same time we should not forget another very important aspect rightly mentioned by Shri Ajit Bhattacharjee in his article in the *Hindustan Times*.

... Laws and notification are not enough. Lacking public awareness and involvement, laws and rules have little impact. And without committed grassroots workers capable of arousing popular awareness, right to information may remain an academic achievement.

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law watch

What a Right to Information Law Should Contain

effective and speedy remedy for them to realise their right to information.

* There are some colonial laws under which certain types of information can be withheld. Some of the laws which restrict giving information are:

The Official Secrets Act, 1923.

The Evidence Act, 1872.

The Conduct of Civil Servants Rules.

Some of the provisions of the above mentioned laws go against the democratic system of government established by our constitution and must be changed or removed altogether.

There are several means to ensure this valued right. Turning this right from theory to a living reality can be done by:

* giving executive orders directing various departments of the government and NGOs to give required and relevant information to the people which largely depends on the continuity of the government policy of openness.

* reforming various existing archaic to adopt the right to information laws and rules which is no doubt a large and complicated process.

* by having one uniform enactment which enables people to get the information as of right.

A comprehensive separate legal enactment can ensure people's right to information better compared to two other options.

The options may be supplementary to making separate right to information law. That is why there is a growing worldwide demand that the national government must make a law which applies uniformly to the whole country and sets out a clear procedure for getting information.

The last thirty-five years or so have been seen the passage of freedom of information legislation in several countries beginning with the United States in 1966. Denmark and Norway in 1970. Australia and New Zealand in 1982. Canada in 1983. Greece in 1986, and Ireland in 1998. South Africa, the United Kingdom and India are now seriously considered access legislation of their own.

The law commission of Sri Lanka in its recent 'Report on Freedom of Information' unequivocally states: 'Sri Lanka should currently adopt a regime that clearly defined what information was secret and establish guidelines in respect of the exercise of discretion by government officials for giving access to other information.' It also proposes a model law titled 'Access to Official Information Act'. The Law Commission of Bangladesh should seriously consider of joining this global trend of suggesting formulation of a Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation.

FOI legislation breaks with the often entrenched tradition

of many groups consisting mainly of jurists, media persons, civil society members have been advocating the issue strongly over the last few years, there have been suggested drafts from different quarters.

The Press Council of India, under the guidance of Mr P B Sawant drafted a law which was later updated and changed at a workshop and renamed 'The Press Council-NIRD Freedom of Information Act, 1997.'

* The Consumer Education and Research Council (CERC), Ahmedabad, under the guidance of Prof Manubhai Shah drafted a law on the Right to Information.

* The Working Group appointed by the United Front Government, under the Chairmanship of Mr H D Shourie drafted a law called 'the Freedom of Information Bill 1997.'

* The present government of India has also prepared a draft on Freedom of Information law which is not available. However, it appears that it is substantially the same as the Shourie Bill as the law drafted by the Working Group is better known as.

All the above drafts have their strong and weak points. However, there are certain things which any Right to Information/Freedom of Information/Transparency Law must contain. These are:

Minimal exceptions

The Right to Information is a fundamental Right and can be subjected only to the restrictions allowed by the Constitution. In drafting the law, care must be taken to keep the exceptions within the limits prescribed by the Constitution.

The right of access to official/government-held information should be a wide right. The exceptions to the rule of giving information must be limited and specific. The law must not contain a long list of exceptions couched in terms general enough to ensure that all kinds of information can be refused taking the help of the law. This has happened in the case of the Tamil Nadu Right to Information Act which has all of 22 exceptions, and the Shourie Draft Bill, which, along with numerous exceptions contains an all-pervasive clause that information can be denied if its disclosure does not subserve any public purpose. A Right to Information does not need to disclose any specific need. If a person must show public purpose every time he seeks information, it would give unlimited discretion to public bodies to refuse information.

Upgradation of systems

The law should contain provisions for setting up specific systems for storing and disseminating information and upgrading the existing systems for enabling easy access. There must be specific provisions for priority-wise computerisation etc. of government offices.

Allocation of funds

The law must contain a specific allocation of funds for the purpose of operationalising the Right to Information. Without this, the law will be a dead letter and will have no effect.

Accountability

A Right to Information law must lay down clearly the principle of accountability. That is, it must state specifically as to who is responsible for providing the information. Penalties should be imposed on officials, who delay, without any just cause, the giving of information or refuse on unwarranted grounds.

Independent forum for appeals

The law should contain a simple and independent procedure for appeals from refusals to give information. The appellate forum should be an independent person or institution such as an ombudsman.

Duty to inform

The law must cast a positive duty on public bodies to inform the public in case of certain projects and activities which relate to the public. This envisages giving information without being asked for it. It must be made mandatory and regular to give out certain kinds of information on a mandatory basis. This kind of information would include rules, information on proposed projects and schemes, and other relevant information which needs to be given out and updated routinely.

Reasonable fee structure

The law, if it provides for a levy of a fee for getting information must ensure that the fee is reasonable and does not act as a deterrent for asking information and does not end up debarring information from the disadvantaged groups who cannot afford the fees. The law must provide for waiver of fees in certain circumstances and for certain classes of people such as those living below the poverty line.

Methods of communication

The law must contain specific directive for simplification of official language. Information-giving should be in a form which can be easily understood by people. There must be a focus on traditional means of giving information. As of now, most information is contained in official gazettes and publications which are usually unavailable and are of no use to the lay citizens, given the low literacy levels. The law should ensure proper use of the electronic and print media as well as use of conventional methods of communication as per the target group.

Time limit

The law must contain a provision for timely imparting of information. The concerned public officials should face a penalty in case the information is not given in time. The time limit should be reasonable and should not jeopardise a person's rights. Time limits should be set in order of urgency and accessibility. Information regarding a person's life and liberty should be made available forthwith or within the shortest possible time, say within 48 hours. Information which is available at hand should also be given in a shorter time. The Shourie Bill provided for a period of 30 days with a further period of 30 days for giving information. This period seems unreasonable for all kinds of information.

Protection of privacy

The law must take into account the protection of an individual's privacy. Personal information held by the government must be exempt from disclosure. However, if disclosure in the public interest greatly outweighs the preservation of individual privacy, then disclosure should be allowed.

Application to private bodies

Although, strictly speaking, the Right to Information is for government-held information, the law must make it binding on private bodies to disclose certain kinds of information which could affect the public health, etc. This is especially in view of increasing globalisation and incidents like the Bhopal Gas Leak in India which claimed many lives and put to irreparable harm even future generations.

Protection of whistleblowers

The law should give protection to public officials who give certain exempted information where it is necessary to do so in overwhelming public interest or to disclose some serious corrupt practice, etc.

Publicity and training

The law must contain a mandatory procedure for publicising its contents. Often, laws are passed without their knowledge percolating down with sufficient speed or impact and therefore fail to bring about the desired change in the systems.

The Right to Information law must also contain a strong aspect of training and orientation of public servants at all levels, in order to bring about an effective change in the culture.

Source: Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)

About CHRI

THE Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an international, independent nonprofit organisation headquartered in India. Its objectives are to promote the practical realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth. It educates on human rights issues and advocates for greater adherence to human rights standards.

CHRI has been working on the Right to Information as part of its commitment to the values of freedom of speech and expression and good governance. Our work includes:

- collecting and disseminating information and material on the issue;
- educating people about the issue;
- networking with different groups consisting of NGOs, lawyers, bureaucrats, media persons, rural and urban elected representatives like panchs and officials from public bodies;
- promoting debates and discussions on the issue; and
- carrying this feedback to policy makers.