included in the official website of the law ministry. The Bengali version had been launched in the official website of the ministry in July 2007. Doubtlessly, this is an appreciable undertaking. The question is, how many people in the country have access to the internet?

The British Council in Dhaka took an initiative to reach the Constitution to the people free of charge, publishing Bengali and English editions in 1996 during the British-Bangla Law Week celebration and distributing them to the public. It is uncertain whether any individual or organisation will be charged with selling the Constitution if they provide it at no cost. The British Council reprinted pocketbook size copies, which were given to the public free of cost, during the celebration of 50 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1998. Now that the Constitution has been installed in the websites of different agencies, how can the ministry stop someone from downloading and publishing it? More surprisingly, a leading publishing house published copies of the original handwritten Bangladesh Constitution in February 2010 and sold them at Tk 4,000 each. The publisher also presented copies to prominent political leaders and lawyers. When asked about the copyright issue, a law ministry official said that they just "overlooked" it and were "carefully careless" about the issue.

Due to the holdup in printing the Constitution, the civic education and human rights organisation Change Makers applied to the law ministry on October 10, 2005 seeking permission to print 5,000 copies, mentioning that they would be used for civic education and would be distributed free of cost among high school students. The ministry did not give permission. On November 4, 2008, Justice Syed Amirul Islam said in a program on ntv: "The law ministry is obliged to grant permission if anyone seeks permission from the ministry to print the Constitution."

It is quite strange that all the information posted after July, 2007 in the official website of the ministry has been converted to PDF file. In the constitution segment, every page has been overprinted with "copyright@ Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs."

By using the name of the ministry and copying the monogram of the government, one can sell copies of the Constitution; the ministry or law-enforcing agencies will not stop you. But the ministry will stop you if you want to print the Constitution for educational activities and distribute them free of charge, even if you do this with the approval of the ministry and with due regard for the laws. One of the reasons given for not allowing others to print the Constitution is, who will take the liability for any mistake in those copies?

Why should any person or organisation not be able to print the Constitution if they take responsibility? As per the ministry, "illegal or pirated" copies of the Constitution have met the demand of the people since independence. How many mistakes have been detected? Why has the ministry suddenly become worried about "copyright and ownership" of the Constitution?

Dr Kamal Hossain and Barrister Amirul Islam said in a television interview: "This decision of the law ministry is not proper. Anybody can print the Constitution for educational purpose and the ministry should help in this respect." Except Dhaka, in how many districts is the Constitution available, even a pirated copy?

The circular of the law ministry made it seem that the Constitution of Bangladesh was a highly "sacred book" which should not be available to the people. The Constitution is of course a sacred book but, more importantly, it is a very vital and necessary document that has been framed for the well-being of the common people of the country, the main document for governing the state.

The supply of pirated copies has not been blocked even after the publication of the Caution Notice. They are even sold in the Supreme Court complex. If the circular of the law ministry is correct, the institution that violated the "copyright and ownership" of the law ministry, and published, printed and distributed copies of the Constitution among the advocates is the Bangladesh Bar Council, which deals with certifying the competence of people in the legal profession.

Since the birth of the Constitution about 38 years ago till today, the people have been kept in the dark about its contents. In this connection, Patrick Henry said: "The constitution is not an instrument for the government to restrain the people; it is an instrument for the people to restrain the government -- lest it come to dominate our lives and interest."

Dr Kamal Hossain said in a discussion on Constitution Day that it would take only five minutes to resolve the matter but 38 years have already elapsed. How long will our government "lock-up" the Constitution and in whose interest?

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