

# Promoting Child Rights



## Birth registration still to cover all children

**RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR**

At least 66 percent of the country's population have received birth certificates over the last six years -- a feat that seemed virtually impossible in 2006 when only 10 percent of the population had the certificates.

However, thanks to more government attention, NGO support, an online registration system and legislation that make the birth certificates mandatory for receiving different government services, enrolling children to schools and getting employment, 76 percent of the country's population are in the birth register as of 2011.

Many government officials now claim that the coverage has reached 98 percent in 2012.

While experts call this claim absurd, they agree that many more children now have birth certificates than ever before.

"If you go to the local municipality offices, you would see many men and women rolling in to obtain birth certificates for their children," said Md Kafil Uddin, a noted child rights activist.

"If you go to a school, you would see that parents are now submitting their children's birth certificates along with admission forms to enrol their children," he said. "And all the statistics also confirm that birth registration has increased over the years."

The Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS 2009), jointly done by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Unicef, also confirms issuance of birth certificates to 53 percent of children under the age of five years.

However, the picture of Dhaka city, the country's capital, is starkly different with only 25.36 percent



Proud parents complete birth registration for their child.

PHOTO: KIRON

included in the birth registration database according to 2011 government statistics.

Experts attribute the low percentage of birth registration to a lack of awareness among the gigantic population living in slums and underprivileged conditions, and a lack of knowledge of where the local municipal office is.

"In district towns and rural areas, everybody knows where the union parishad office is, wherefrom people can obtain their birth certificates," said Kafil Uddin. "But in a city like Dhaka, rarely anyone knows the ward commissioner's office."

What is more, many slum dwellers in Dhaka do not even know

about birth registration or are barely aware of the need for it.

Moreover, the thin promotional activities for birth registration have become background noise to aggressive and lavish advertisements of products and other services, experts say.

Mohammad Ishak, a rickshaw puller living in Dhaka and a father of four, told The Daily Star that he heard of the term birth registration, but hasn't any idea what was the point of it.

Runa Begum, who was seen selling hand-fans near Farmgate bus stand told this correspondent that she has not even heard about anything called birth registration.

A child without birth certificate is invisible to the state of often excluded from the basic services provided by the state.

According to the Birth and Death Registration Law, 2006, it is mandatory to show birth certificates for receiving 16 services -- passports, driving licences, TIN numbers, applying for jobs, business identification, admit card for taking public examinations, opening bank account, applying for microcredit, withdrawing governmental allowance and land purchasing and selling.

At the same time, the certificate should be used for getting trade licences, purchasing and selling

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vehicles, involving oneself in an insurance scheme, marriage registration, voter identification in different elections, admission in educational institutions, gas-water-electricity connection, telephone-mobile, internet, cable TV connection, receiving governmental subsidy, filing any case or appeal in court and applying for company shares and for other governmental services.

Birth registration also helps the government to plan for its development activities, as the birth registration statistics helps the government to pinpoint the number of children in the country.

The list of its need does not end there, experts said, adding that birth certificate is a proof of a child's actual age, which would come in handy on numerous occasions.

"The police cannot arrest anyone below the age of nine. That is the law," said Kafil Uddin, who has been working with child rights for over 25 years.

"But in many cases police pick up children below nine, and show their age in the case files as nine years and three or four months," he said adding, "when asked, they simply say that the child did not have any document certifying his age".

These practices can be stopped through birth certificates and birth

registration, he added.

Birth certificates can also be used as handy tools to prevent early marriage and child labour -- two of the major children-related problems Bangladesh is facing.

After it began in 2001, the process of birth registration only managed to register around 59 percent people in eight years, making it apparent how sluggish the process of the programme has been. Furthermore, imposing a fee on birth registration made the process more slow, especially in Dhaka City Corporation area.

The online birth registration was introduced in 2009 to create a central database of birth registration data and ensure the interoperability of the software with other databases of the government and strengthen the monitoring and reporting system. After successful piloting of the online software, the system was rolled-out in 29 (out of 64) districts with full geographic coverage.

The system ironed out some of the anomalies available in the manual birth registration process, and provided some reliable statistics for the policymakers.

However, for a country that seeks cent percent birth registration covering every child, there is a lot more that needs to be done, experts say.

High-level coordination is needed within the government agencies to establish a harmonised registration system, they said, adding that further human resources are needed as volunteers of the permanent staff.

The online registration system also needs to be used as a protection tool for children. A child protection information management system should be developed and piloted for evidence-based advocacy in the future, they added.

## SUSTAINING BIRTH REGISTRATION

### Coordination among govt agencies imperative

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

High level coordination is needed among various government agencies to establish Birth Registration Cell for a sustainable birth registration system in Bangladesh.

The policy makers should design an effective framework to harmonise birth registration, voter list and national ID to make it sustainable and effective.

According to the government statistics 76 percent of the total population has received birth certificates until December 2011 against only 10 percent in 2006.

Linking birth registration with education and health services should be the main strategy to ensure inter-sectoral cooperation with a view to establishing a low cost and sustainable process of birth registration in Bangladesh.

To ensure the sustainability of the progress, the government should strengthen its mechanism to integrate the birth registration system into service sector.

The government should create the demand for birth registration for availing different government services with a view to sustaining its success, said AKM Saiful Islam Chowdhury, project director of the government's Birth and Death Registration Project.

"If authorities of all the primary

schools make birth registration certificate mandatory for entry, it will create a huge demand for birth registration and all the parents will seek for the certificate," said Saiful.

Although the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has already issued a notification to make it mandatory, but school headmasters and authority very often relax the provision to minimise the age of children to facilitate job availability for then in future.

The present legal framework has made the birth certificate mandatory for getting 16 basic services.

These include -- passport, marriage registration, admission in school, appointment in job market, driving licence, enrolment in voter list, land registration, opening bank account, getting export and import licence, getting utility connection, getting tax identification number, getting contractor licence, approval of building plan, registration for vehicles, trade licence and National ID cards.

To sustain the progress of birth registration, the agencies will have to implement the rules properly.

"Our main focus is to cover 100 percent new born children under birth registration programme. Authorities of primary schools can play an effective role by doing the same," said Saiful Islam.

Talking about the marriage registration system, he said the gov-

ernment plans to introduce online marriage registration.

If the online marriage system is introduced, it will create huge demand for birth registration certificate because marriage registration will remain incomplete without the birth registration number, he said.

Negotiation is going on with the mobile phone operators so that people can check their birth registration status through mobile phone.

"The more information and technology will be developed, the more birth registration system will be developed," said Saiful.

Talking about strengthening the government institutional mechanism, he said to make each government service available to rural people, the government should strengthen the union parishad.

The secretary of every union parishad has to bear huge burden of workload. If the manpower of union parishad is increased, the parishad can implement the government's services properly.

UNICEF is providing financial and Technical assistance to the government's Birth and Death Registration Project. It will continue its support till 2013.

Asked what will be the government's initiative after expiry of Unicef's assistance, Saiful said the government will set up a central monitoring body to run the birth

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registration activities smoothly.

People have to pay certain amount of fees for birth registration. The government will arrange financial support with the fees, he said.

A report of Unicef suggested to increase human resources in the form of volunteers and permanent support staff to assist registers to overcome any backlog in issuing certificates to facilitate the data collection process of vulnerable groups of children.

It also suggested developing capacity of registers on basic computing and usage of online birth registration information system.

Full data from the manual registration book of the register's offices has to be digitised and cleaned to generate a reliable statistics for the decision makers and a child protection information management system (CP-IMS) should be developed.



PHOTO: NASER SIDDIQUE  
A woman holds her baby after completing his birth registration.

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## 'Online system will make it easy for all'

AKM Mozammel Hoq, Additional Secretary, Local Govt Division, Ministry of LGRD

## 'But miscreants must be kept at bay'

AKM Saiful Islam, Birth and Death Project Director

They talk to The Daily Star

THE government will think about harmonization of the birth registration system with the data base of voter ID cards, said a government official.

"It is a good idea. We will think about implementation of it," said AKM Mozammel Hoq, additional secretary of Local Government Division under the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD).

"Either the Election Commission or we can come forward with the proposal to harmonise the two systems. It will be a good information resource for the government," he said.

Asked about the government's initiative to harmonise the systems, he said, "Till now, we have not taken any initiative in this regard, but we will think about the matter."

Talking about the significant improvement of birth registration rate in last few years, he said introduction of online system is the major reason for this achievement.

"Through the online system, we have been able to take the service door to door," he viewed.

About the government's plan to institutionalise the system, he said the government thinks to make a separate department for the birth registration system.

"Unicef will arrange fund for the project till 2013. Then we will have to introduce some mechanism to run the birth registration activities smoothly," he said.

There will be a central monitoring team to supervise the birth registration activities, he maintained.

He also stressed the need for making the people aware about the service and to end misuse of technology.

"We are trying our best to make the service more people-friendly. Local government institutions--union parishad, municipalities and city corporations -- are the major components to make the service effective," Hoq said.

The government's Birth and Death Registration Project Director AKM Saiful Islam said the government is working to update the Birth and Death Registration Act-2004 to make it more effective.

There are some loopholes in the existing act. But with its amendment all the possibility of misdeed, in birth registration will be shunned completely.

Besides, the government has taken the initiative to bring all the districts under online birth registration system to make the service more available to the people.

"We are thinking to crash the manual birth registration system if online registration system can be introduced," he said.

He also expressed concern that some miscreants try to use the online birth registration system to serve their ill-purpose like increasing the number of voters, birth registration of Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar, changing date of birth and others.

"We from the central monitor guard these activities, but the officials at local level should remain alert for that," said Saiful Islam.



PHOTO: KIRON  
Birth certificate of a child.

## 'It's first step to ensure child's rights'

Md. Kafil Uddin, a noted child rights activist talks to The Daily Star



BIRTH certificate is a child's first document -- the very first verification of his existence as a person and a citizen of the country, said Md Kafil Uddin, a noted child rights activist.

"Birth registration is the first step to ensure a child's rights; it's a permanent and official record of his or her existence," he said talking to The Daily Star on Thursday.

"It is a part of the civil registration process, which gives a child an existence before the rule of law."

Without birth registration, the children are being deprived of many of their rights, and they would be in the future as well, he said.

They could be deprived of their rights of inheritance, along with health and education facilities because of not registering their birth, he added.

"Without birth registration, many children fail to prove their age, become victim of childhood marriage, and are used in child labour and other hazardous activities," he said.

According to Kafil Uddin, Bangladesh has always been in the forefront when it comes to issues related to children and their rights. The country had promulgated the Children Act in 1974, far before the issue of children rights was officially included in the United Nation's agenda in 1989, he said.

"This goes on to show how

important the rights of children is to the country, he said, adding that it would be impossible to ensure a child's rights if he or she is invisible to the state.

"That is where the birth registration comes in. It gives the government the accurate number of children in the country."

Government officials claim that nearly 98 percent of the population has been included in the birth register, said the child rights experts, adding that the percentage is quite absurd.

"If you go out on the street,

gather 200 random people and ask them whether they have birth certificate, I believe that most of them would reply in the negative," said Kafil Uddin.

He however agreed that many people have obtained their birth certificates from before, and that is undoubtedly a good sign.

"But there is a need for more awareness," he said. "There is a need for communicating with parents that they need to register the birth of their children for the sake of their protection, if not anything else."

While the government has made it so that many of its services along with other facilities are available only to children or people with birth certificates, the general citizens of the country need more incentives to register the birth of their children, he said.

While many government hospitals register the birth of newborns who are under their care, not all hospitals offer this facility, he added.

According to Kafil Uddin, the biggest problem that is holding back many parents from registering birth of their children is the fees that are needed to cough up for the registration.

The government needs to play a vital role in the issue, as NGOs would only come to the picture if they receive support, he said.

If birth registration is not made free-of-cost, a large number of children would remain out of the database, he added.

## Some barriers constrain smooth progress

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

WHILE more people in the country now have birth certificates than ever before, the government is still far away from its goal to have cent percent of the population in the birth registry.

The charge associated with the birth registration process, a lack of incentives for the general citizens to register their children's birth and a general lack of awareness stand in the way to achieve that target, experts say.

Shortage of manpower and equipment, and a lack of coordination between different government agencies are also a couple of other major concerns that are needed to be dealt with, they add.

"Above everything, the process needs to be free-of-cost," said Md Kafil Uddin, a noted child rights expert. "The charge required for the registration discourages many parents [from registering the birth of their children]."

The parents need to understand that once a child is in the birth registry, he or she is also in the national database, which is used to formulate development policies for children, he said.

"Unless [a child's] birth is registered, he or she is invisible to the state."

While an online birth registration system allows one to register the birth of his child without any cost, they have to take a printed copy of the page to the local municipal or commissioner's office to receive birth certificate, which requires charges.

As of 2011, as much as 76 percent of the population has received birth certificates com-

*Many local government authorities from different parts of the country tend to report 90 to cent percent birth registration coverage despite not achieving that...many children in those areas remain invisible to the state and to development activities.*



PHOTO: NASER SIDDIQUE  
A social worker visits households in Khagrachhari to convince mothers to complete birth registration for their children.

ernment authorities responsible for churning out birth certificates.

The authority, which has to handle a lot of other responsibilities, should give birth registration more focus, and create awareness regarding the process at the same time, experts add.

According to governance and

child rights experts, many local government authorities from different parts of the country tend to report 90 to cent percent birth registration coverage despite not achieving that.

While this practice helps to boost the statistics, many children in those areas remain invisible to

the state and to development activities.

Not having a birth certificate, the children are often subjected to exploitation. The children in contact with law often get punishment as the authorities do not know his or her original age.

"It needs to be communicated

to all parents -- regardless of their social standing -- that they need to register the birth of their children at least for their own protection," said Kafil Uddin.

"It is the first document that would ensure their rights as human beings and citizens of the country."