

RTI ACT Bangladesh should further proactive disclosures

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BA NGLADESH enacted its Right to Information Act in 2009. However more than three years following its enactment, very little is known about what the law means and what it can do to improve people's life and governance in the country. Except for a handful of civil society groups and people, the masses remain ignorant about the existence of such a law. Additionally an important body like the Information Commission (IC) that is mandated to "increase public awareness on right to information" also remains little known across the country and can do much more to popularise the access law.

Since its passage very little information requests have been filed. This has been compounded by the fact that majority of the population live below poverty line with high illiteracy rate. It is in this context that the government can do much more by proactively disclosing information in the public domain so that the people do not have to file an information request.

Initiatives taken up by the government

Given the fact that the people are not accessing information in a manner any Freedom of Information activist wants it to be, it is heartening to know that the government has taken up some efforts to comply with the duty to make information available to the public without any request being made. The Bangladesh Government has initiated steps to set up "front desks" in the office of the various district administration to provide information relating to services and other matters to the general public. Many front desks have its own website "totho batayon" with the objective of storing and disseminating information. Several district websites have also uploaded the RTI Act 2009. Additionally Union Information Service Centres (USIC) launched in 2010 have been set up in most of the unions with the sole objective of providing the people access to basic services and providing information about agriculture, education, health, legal aid, human rights and employment.

Further the IC in collaboration with Manusher Jonno Foundation took initiatives to introduce specific mechanism for implementation of proactive disclosure in Bangladesh in 2011. They targeted three Ministries namely Ministry of Health and family Welfare; Ministry of Women and children Affairs and Ministry of Information along with attached departments/directorates so that they can develop a guideline on proactive disclosure. These ministries and their attached offices are now disclosing information through annual reports & uploading it on their websites. The Government is also gradually trying to bring other ministries under compliance of RTI Act following the guidelines already developed. However since it is three

years that the RTI Act was enacted, it is time all other ministries and departments proactively start disclosing information simultaneously. The efforts made by the government are commendable but it cannot reach out to the millions living in remote places and having no access to the internet.

Provisions laid down under the Act

The kind of information that the "authorities" should disclose proactively under the Bangladesh Right to Information Act are organisational structure, decision making process, official records and updated contact details of the designated officers. Additionally if an authority frames any policy or takes any important decisions, it must publish all such policies and decisions along with reasons for support. The Act also states that all publications of authorities shall be available to the public at reasonable price and that the authorities shall publish and publicise



matters of public interest through press notes or any other means. The reports that would be prepared by the public authorities shall be made available for free and its copies shall be stocked for sale at nominal price.

The Act further declares that information cannot be published or publicised if it is not stored or preserved properly and lays emphasis for preservation of information as well which ensures every authority to prepare, catalogue and index all the information. The Act underlines the fact that the information should be preserved in computer that could be accessed by maximum number of people within a reasonable time limit. In the Right to Information (Publication and Dissemination) Rules there is a clear guideline on the timeline within which the information needs to be published and the means in which it needs to be disseminated. Information unit of every department as well as the internet in every department is specifically chosen to disseminate information.

Good Practices for Proactive disclosure

While the RTI act lays down what should be proactively disclosed, however people living in far flung areas cannot access information disclosed through websites and reports. In this context, it is pertinent that the government should look into various means through which information could be disclosed taking into account easy accessibility to the public, cost effectiveness, local language and effectiveness of the various means of communication. That is to say the means of communication should keep in mind the low internet penetration and literacy level in rural Bangladesh. Some of the most effective means to reach out to maximum number of people with maximum information is through notice boards, newspapers, public announcements, media broadcasts and inspection of offices of any 'authority'. We have to remind ourselves time and again that a large population in Bangladesh is unlettered so public announcement, union parishad meetings and direct meeting with the beneficiaries helps in imparting information. The old practice of beating a drum for attention and making an announcement in the village square is more effective than any other practice and should be encouraged even today. Penalties should be enforced to implement proactive disclosure and to prevent unnecessary delay and withholding of information. In Gujarat, India Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative along with Nagarik Adhikar Kendra used wall painting to make information known by the government widely known to the masses. This is easy, inexpensive way of providing new information and addresses the basic queries of a common man by engaging with them directly.

Proactive disclosure is not only about how to publish the information. What is crucial is what information needs to be conveyed. Merely reproducing complicated schemes or lengthy laws would defeat the spirit of the Right to Information Act and information seeker would be dejected. Information has to be made simple and also kept current. This is defiantly not a small task for any government given the volumes of information that are held by them. This takes me to the next requirement for a need of backrooms where information is stored to be well organised and readily accessible. The wave of spirit for accountability that is seen among the youths in Bangladesh makes us believe that the heart of any progressive law cannot stop beating. This can only be realised with the support of civil society, Information Commission and by the citizens filing information requests and seeking and demanding information from the government legitimately through the Bangladesh Right to Information Act.

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Giving "sorrow words"



MILLIA ALI

RECENTLY, when our amiable and helpful Irish-American neighbours lost their eldest daughter my husband and I wanted to pay them a visit, to offer our sympathies. But a friend advised that we send a handwritten condolence note and some flowers instead -- which we did. My instincts, however, were against this detached and distant form of communication. What I really wanted to do was cook a meal, take it to them personally, and give them a warm hug.

Unfortunately, when you live in a culture that you adopt ... rather than inherit ... you are often compelled to act against your instincts. In Bangladeshi tradition a certain period of time is dedicated to mourning when friends and relatives visit the family to condole. Such visitations are therapeutic for the bereaved, who use these occasions to revisit their emotional connections with the loved one they have lost.

In the West there is rarely any demonstration of emotions apart from a formal funeral ceremony and/or a memorial service. These events are meant to celebrate the life of the person who passed away. As a norm, people are reluctant to mourn in public and want to keep their grief private. The perception seems to be that exercising restraint is an indication of will power and maturity. The logic is clear: why dwell in the past and make matters worse by allowing your pain to take over the present?

This approach may appear rationally sound. But can sorrow be rationalised? I recall vividly when my mother passed away a little over a year ago; it was very difficult for me to cope with her loss without my family near me. Once in a while I did lose my equilibrium in public. I was embarrassed about these outward demonstrations of grief until I realised



BIPUL BHATTACHARYA

that there was no shame in expressing pain for the loss of someone who was such an intimate part of my life. The opportunity to ventilate my sorrow with a few friends, and the tearful recall of my mother's memories helped me heal.

Through the process I learnt an important lesson. I consciously decided that whenever my heart overflows with emotion for a departed friend or family member, I would "give sorrow words" rather than keep churning my grief inside. This is why, today, I want to express my sentiments about friend and singer Bipul Bhattacharya who passed away earlier this month. Bipul was a core member of our singing squad Shadhin Bangla Mukti Shingrami Shilpi Shingstha in Kolkata in 1971. During the trying months of the Liberation War our group toured numerous refugee camps in remote parts of West Bengal. Bipul was by far the most popular singer in the squad. When he sang his famous refrain "Bolo bolo bolo shobe, bolore Bangalir joy" in his beautiful tenor voice, the audience would erupt with emotion, singing along with arms raised in excitement and eyes burning with hope. In many ways he kindled the spirit of freedom through his inspiring renditions of "Gono Shangeet"! Like many of us, Bipul also believed that we could sing our way into a free country. It was a belief that we all held close to our hearts -- with the kind of naiveté and fervour that only the young and inspired can possess at a time when history demands great things of them.

Last year my friend Shaheen Samad and I visited an ailing Bipul in his Dhaka apartment. We spent a memorable afternoon singing, reminiscing, while Bipul's wife, Kumkum, treated us to the best shorshe ilish that I have ever tasted. In the midst of the fun and laughter we shed a few tears. Not only for Bipul's failing health, but also for the state of affairs in the country. "What happened to the Bangladesh that we sang for?" we asked.

Today as I remember Bipul and his contribution to Bangladesh's independence, I wonder ... What happened to our utopian dream of a "free" and egalitarian country? A country where workers do not die due to the greed of rich factory owners and the callousness of the government, where innocent boys are not hacked to death in the city streets by politically protected goons, where minority worship places are not desecrated by bigots, where millions of landless women are not victimised because of some inexplicable agenda of the establishment. And above all, a country where religion is not used to perpetrate hate and divisiveness!

Perhaps it's time to sing our songs of freedom once again to revive the spirit of muktijuddho. But we need you, Bipul, for who else can sing the song of victory, "Bangalir Joy", with so much passion and conviction?

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The new monetary policy

DR. MAHFUZ KABIR

BA NGLADESH Bank has announced its semi-annual monetary policy on July 25, 2013 for the first half of this fiscal year. As the last monetary policy of current government it has been placed before the nation in the midst of a 'low level equilibrium trap' emanating from lower economic growth than stipulated, low private investment, low aggregate demand and low external sector performance. In fact, monetary policy is gradually becoming an area of attention of the scholars, practitioners and donors because of its influence over the economy through financial sector.

The outgoing fiscal year witnessed a number of unwanted dissident events riding on the economy's shoulder. The stipulated growth path therefore skewed downside even though there were different speculations over the GDP growth by influential international actors that predicted considerably lower growth than our national projection. The economy, by dint of its 'intrinsic strength', could cross the hurdle of six per cent growth as its exports showed U-turn since outset of this year despite incidents. Thanks to four million diligent RMG workers who still have not lost heart notwithstanding being burned and crushed alive. Now we expect a reasonable breathing space without scare in the coming days to let the economy walk. This calls for a rather flexible monetary policy through pumping money to productive and economically vibrant sectors.

The two fundamental objectives of our monetary policy are boosting economic growth and curbing inflation. The previous couple of monetary policies are claimed to be have been successful in pursuing the second objective. However, the first one has remained a formidable challenge in the context of projections made in the Sixth Five-Year Plan. The budget speech 2013-14 reaffirmed 7.2 per cent growth that seemed to be a 'mere' target. Speeding up growth should now be the most important agenda during transmission of the monetary policy even at the cost of moderate inflationary pressure.

The policy statement is, however, not that firm in steering growth; rather it seemed to be more scared about stringent credit policy for private sector by the domestic financial institutions that recently led the borrowers to gradu-

ally switc to external credit. While it is a welcome news neither for 48 plus banks nor for the external balance of the economy, it is the high time for Bangladesh Bank to motivate a few private banks friendly and motivated to serve the private sector and help them introduce flexible credit strategy. Boosting aggregate demand should now be the first strategy to accelerate growth, which would be followed by economic expansion. This should be pursued by pulling investment demand through devising lucrative credit package. We are keeping the private sector unfed standing on a 'mine' of loanable excess fund. Lowering the lending interest rate can be a pragmatic short term strategy for contributing to economic expansion and edging out the foreign competitors, both of which can protect their business interest.

Bangladesh Bank will continue aggressive sterilisation of foreign assets to maintain a 'stable' foreign exchange rate as the monetary policy reaffirms, but it cannot continue for long in the midst of poor import demand. Forceful sterilisation is likely to create bubbles more in the asset market than recurrent sectors. The government has set export target of 30 billion in the current fiscal year, which should be trailed effectively. This would help increase import demand of intermediate goods, raw materials and capital machinery. Nevertheless, careful attention should be paid so that the reserve is not exhausted by imports of unnecessary consumer items.

Some experts criticise the overemphasis of lending in trade and commerce, thereby leading to relative deprivation to other deserving domestic sectors that immensely contribute to the economy through feeding, and forward and backward linkages along with generating employment. True, external trade is now more than half of the country's GDP. But the contribution of RMG that has the overwhelming majority in export basket is meagre in the value of total supply in the economy as revealed from social accounting matrix of the economy. Keeping in mind the economic lifelines, there is a need for comprehensive indexing the sectors for devising credit strategies keeping in mind their employment generation alongside other virtues. A very recent good initiative is the Agricultural & Rural Credit Policy for current fiscal year that updates the eligibility conditions based on the changing realities in the rural economy.

The monetary policy seems to very wary of inflationary pressure compared to the likely benefit of wage growth in public and private sectors due to a potential Pay Commission in the public sector. Point to point general inflation was 7.97 in 2012-13 with an upward trend since January of this year, which is still higher than the target of the ongoing fiscal year stipulated in the budget document. Core inflation that takes into account non-food, non fuel prices is also on the rise. Bangladesh Bank's apprehension may be that an incautious monetary policy may open the 'flood gate' of price hike while curbing inflation which is considered to be its one of the major successes in the last couple of years. What harm would the wage growth do other than partly offsetting the additional wage through further inflation? It would immensely contribute in pulling aggregate demand which is now badly needed. Then what else: demand-pull itself provides boosts in output growth and employment in the short run that is also desirable. Therefore, let us help reap the benefit of addition income exploiting the advantage.

A missing component of the policy statement is to devise ex ante measure towards credit scam in both public and private banks. As the news reports are gradually uncovering indiscipline in the financial sector, the entire check and balance in the monetary system needs to be examined thoroughly. It calls for constituting a high level independent taskforce including scholars and practitioners in the relevant field with sufficient technical knowledge, which would find facts and suggest remedies besides the ongoing vigilance of Bangladesh Bank. It is an imperative for ensuring financial stability in the near future.

Finally, the share of public investment in the investment-GDP ratio has increased considerably in the last fiscal year while share of private investment has reduced. Public investment is required especially in providing durable social goods but it should be considered as a facilitator of attracting private investment. The investment ratio grew at 0.3 percentage point in the last fiscal year which was due to increased public investment. Now we need to pull off the aggregate demand necessarily to let the economy move ceteris paribus, which must be supported by a cautious transmission of the monetary policy measures.

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CROSSWORD puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down.

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle with grid and clues.

BEETLE BAILY cartoon strip by Mort Walker.

HENRY cartoon strip by Don Trachte.

QUOTABLE Quotes section with Aristotle quote.