

# A good law gone to waste?

## Right to Information Act 2009: The role of media

DR. SHAMSUL BARI

**M**EDIA'S power to shape public opinion is succinctly captured in a story from Peru, dating back to the 1990s. Alberto Fujimori was the president of Peru then, but the country was actually run by his Secret Police Chief, Vladimiro Montesinos Torres. Montesinos did so primarily through bribery and corruption. His vast experience had helped him know exactly who among the opposition parties, judiciary and media were the most influential people, and who could be bought with what amount of money. He managed to control them for several years in this manner before his government fell. After the fall, the meticulously-kept diary of Montesinos revealed that he had paid the owner of the most powerful TV station of Peru five times more money in bribes than he had paid to all the opposition politicians together. Such is the power of the media over the state.

I shared this story at a seminar in Dhaka in early May on World Press Freedom Day. The story appeared to be well-received by the audience, most of whom were journalists or budding journalists. But I am not sure if my exhortation for greater engagement of the media with the Right to Information regime had cut much ice with them. I had made two key points. One, the RTI Act is one of the most important laws of the land and deserved support from all citizens, including journalists. And two, the latter would find the law of great value to their job.

On the first point, people will know about

a law if the media talk about it. Unfortunately, uptake of the law is still slow. All available records indicate that there is hardly any increase in the number of RTI users over the years: simply because not enough people know about the law. Here is where the media need to be more systematically engaged in promoting RTI. By publicising positive outcomes of RTI interventions in the country, media can nurture the feeble RTI flame.

In many countries, wide publicity of successful RTI stories has helped its growth. A news story or feature showing marginalised communities using RTI to access social safety net programmes would motivate others to use the law. It also shines a spotlight on public officials who dispense the benefits, encouraging them to be more careful in exercising their authority. Fear of public opprobrium is key to changing a corrupt mindset.

Successful RTI interventions follow a pattern that looks like this: RTI application? disclosure of information? publicity of information? transparency in the work of public officials? accountability to people. Obtaining information from government offices through RTI cannot be the main goal of the law. To be useful, information must lead to change in the behaviour of public officials. It is important to understand this basic philosophy of the law.

In the pattern above, the key piece is 'publicity of information'. In countries where RTI has been effective, as in neighbouring India, media has played a key role in spreading its value. That media stories have encouraged

more Indian citizens to use the law is evidenced by the fact that more than 5.5 million RTI applications were made by them to different public authorities at the centre and in the states last year alone. Compared to this, the Bangladesh average over the years is around 15,000. This is very discouraging indeed for a nation of 160 million people.

The least that the media can, therefore, do is simply to publicise the results of outstanding RTI interventions gathered from all over the country. Their local correspondents, based in different parts of the country, could be asked to collect and report on them on a regular basis. In some countries, best reports are recognised and rewarded appropriately. This can be done here as well.

On my second point, RTI is a valuable tool for a free and fair press that holds its government accountable. Media can use the law for investigative journalism, as is done in many countries. Investigative reports have brought to light many corrupt and abusive practices of public offices throughout the world, leading to important corrective measures. They have also helped to dig up information that governments normally wish to hide from the public.

Examples from different countries were cited in my paper to show the type of subjects that are normally of interest to the public for investigative journalism. It has been found that well-documented investigative reports, based on information obtained through RTI, are extremely popular with readers/viewers since, among other things, their authenticity is normally beyond

reproach.

Topics for investigative journalism depend largely on public interest and national perspectives. In many countries, a compilation of popular RTI-based investigative reports is released annually. Following are a few topics culled from a UK and Scotland compilation:

- Treatment of soldiers affected by Gulf War Syndrome and arrangement for their treatment.
- Number of patients affected by mistreatment in public hospitals and measures taken for their compensation.
- Efforts made to bring down waiting periods for patients in different government hospitals.
- Government measures to help public universities overcome financial crisis.
- Involvement of police forces in crimes and measures taken over the years.
- [For more topics/stories see: [www.cfoi.org.uk/pdf/FOIStories2005.pdf](http://www.cfoi.org.uk/pdf/FOIStories2005.pdf)]

RTI-based investigative stories from India are closer to our realities in Bangladesh. One Indian journalist, who is now well-known to the RTI world, is Mr. Syamlal Yadav, Associate Editor of the weekly news magazine India Today. He and his colleagues made one RTI intervention a day to different offices in India. One popular intervention related to his application to 60 ministries over a period of six months. The responses he received had revealed that in three and a half years, 71 ministers of the Central Government had made foreign trips, covering a total distance which was 256 times the

distance to go around the world. The report created such a stir that the then government had to issue letters to all the ministries to stringently follow official rules for foreign and local travels. It led to significant savings in travel costs for the country.

Another outstanding piece of investigative journalism by Mr. Yadav revealed that over 59 million life insurance policies under LIC of India had been permanently closed over a period of seven years because of non-payment of premiums by policy-holders. He then asked to know whether the huge amount of money remaining in their accounts was returned to policy holders. LIC refused to disclose the information claiming secrecy. The Central Information Commission agreed with LIC. This prompted Mr. Yadav to make the information public. Less than a month later, LIC put an advertisement in local newspapers, informing policy holders whose accounts were thus permanently closed that they could revive their policies. This is unique in insurance history.

Such inspiring stories show the immense power of the media in making RTI a nationwide reality - and the power of RTI to serve the media in the pursuit of truth. Our law-makers have made an excellent law. But we need our media to help ensure that people know their rights.

The writer is Chairman of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). His paper Access to Information by Journalists: The Right to Information Act 2009, written in Bengali, can be downloaded from: [www.rib-rtibangladesh.org](http://www.rib-rtibangladesh.org). Email: [rib@citech-bd.com](mailto:rib@citech-bd.com)

## PROFESSOR REZAUL KARIM SIDDIQUEE

# The Scholar Gypsy

MD. SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

**M**Y heart aches as I write about my teacher and colleague. It is often said that the dead are more powerful than the living, and that absence is more intensely felt than presence. The sudden and unnatural death of my teacher has made me and our department realise, more deeply, the importance of this man.

He was, without a doubt, successful and popular as a teacher to his students of all generations. He would rarely miss a class, and would hardly ever have friends visiting him during working hours; he simply did not have time to waste. He was a bit of a loner and often quoted from Matthew Arnold: "We mortal millions live alone." He was always busy with classes, books, students, cultural programmes, sports, music, and yet, he was a little reclusive. He never shared his personal life, never talked about his joys, sorrows or anxieties. He was humble but outspoken at the same time. He had the rare quality of calling a spade a spade. He was fearless on the point of moral values and welfare of the students. He prescribed traditional values, but not those that would obstruct freedom of thought and speech. This combination of the classic and the romantic in his character is what made the professor an eternally unforgettable soul in the hearts of his students and acquaintances.

Victorian literature was his specialty; be it Browning, Arnold or Tennyson, Siddiquee sir could explain the texts to his students with ease. He is known to some of his contemporaries as a self-supervised PhD holder (on Robert Browning), possibly the first in Rajshahi University. He was interactive in the classroom, and would read between the lines of poems, plays or even non-fiction, to make literature more relatable to his students. He persistently gave reading and writing tips to his students.

He missed no cultural programme of the students, be it the Freshers' Reception or a farewell meet. In fact, he would always be on hand, recording cultural events of the depart-



A fearless mentor

PHOTO: ATIK HOSSAIN ZISAN

ment with his video camera. After joining the university as his colleague, I visited Siddiquee sir's house with my wife. He received us cordially and immediately took some snaps of all of us with his camera, adding, "God knows whether you will visit me again. So let me contain this memory in my camera. These fleeting delightful moments should be preserved."

He often showed students classic movies, especially those which were based on either English or Bengali novels. I borrowed movies from his vast collection. He wanted to lend me Kongi's Harvest, but could not do so because of his untimely death at the hands of

brutal murderers.

Apart from the cultural programmes, he organised the department's sports events... He set up the football and cricket teams of the department, sometimes with my help, for the inter-department tournaments of the university. He himself was a football and volleyball player of the said teams when he was a student. One of his regrets was that our department could only win two cricket matches but fortunately, he was able to see us win our third match this year. He motivated the players on field but could also turn into a critic when the time demanded. His words of hope regarding the cricket team still rings in my

ears, "Sakhawat, I want our team to learn how to fight for a win. If we don't win, it doesn't matter but we need to learn how to enjoy every moment of the game. That's the game. That's life."

I am personally indebted to him for my career. When I was doing my Masters, I had to write a dissertation on Joseph Conrad. I got the idea of my thesis from two of my teachers, Professor Rezaul Karim Siddiquee and Abdullah Al Mamun.

While teaching Browning he referred to a critic named Hoxie N. Fairchild who said that Browning's dramatic monologues apply "give away" techniques, that is, in a tricky situation, his characters obliviously and inadvertently reveal something to readers. Learning of this technique held me decide on my dissertation topic, "Betrayal and Self-betrayal in the Selected Novels of Joseph Conrad."

Siddiquee sir was a very well-read person. He was a compulsive reader. Even in the exam hall, he would often place a chair near the entrance of the door of the exam hall, and read a book while keeping a keen eye on the examinees. One day I told him that students would often be found talking when he was in the classroom. He replied, "Their performance will remain the same even if they have a book in front of them. Our students do not get common questions to which they can give rote answers. Moreover, they are mature and I don't want to disrespect them."

He had a profound sense of humanity. He had a world of his own, where he was busy writing Bengali poems, short stories and film criticism for the bilingual literary magazine *Komal Gandhar*, which he published and edited. He spent his spare time singing and enjoying classic Bengali songs, and practicing his sitar. Sometimes, he would organise cultural functions with students. He often provided financial help to people. This generous heart, this avid reader, this cultural-minded man had an all-inclusive view towards life and the world.

The news of his murder first appeared to me as an unreal dream. I thought that there was a mistake, and rushed to the spot with other colleagues and the Proctor at around 8:15 am. When we reached the spot, we could not believe

our eyes; Sir's still body was lying on the road covered in blood and dirt. A bed sheet was spread over him.

Words cannot express the cruelty of the murder. A 61-year old man was hacked to death by terrorists. Killing such a man was a nefarious act of cowardice. When we met his family to offer our condolences, his wife said that even a patient of a heart attack would get some time to have some final thoughts but he was deprived of even that. Every man wants to say something, some final word to their near ones before dying, but he was cruelly snatched from the world without getting the chance to say goodbye.


We know that "only Allah can create life, so nobody has any right to take it away." It is clearly mentioned in the Quran that "if anyone slew a person ... it would be as if he slew the whole people. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people" (Surah Maidah, Ayat 32). Man lives a life of uncertainty and danger as it is. Hunger, diseases, natural disasters, road accidents - these are a part of our daily life. So when you are confronted with senseless murders in the name of religion, you are forced to question the logic behind it.

Perhaps the reasoning behind such acts can be understood by recalling W.B. Yeats: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world....The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity."

The state cannot avoid its responsibility. And neither can we. We need to stand united against such brutality. When there is no unity in the society, terrorists take advantage of the division. This is what made imperialism a reality in the past. We should all stand under the same sky of Bangladesh with our distinct and noticeable differences. Let us create democratic minds that will remain faithful to their duties. And the duty to create such minds falls on the shoulder of teachers. If teachers of madrasas, schools, colleges and universities teach rationality, tolerance, equality, liberty, love and, above all, justice, apart from their respective subjects, we will hopefully be able to build an ideal nation.

The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Rajshahi. Email: [sakhawat191@yahoo.com](mailto:sakhawat191@yahoo.com)

**QUOTABLE Quote**



**CHE GUEVARA**

*Cruel leaders are replaced only to have new leaders turn cruel.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Long seat
- 5 Sevilla's nation
- 11 Musical work
- 12 Put in the fridge
- 13 Occupy
- 14 Threw
- 15 Travel sci-fi-style
- 17 Corp. bigwig
- 18 Casual eateries
- 22 Pens for hens
- 24 Dodge
- 25 "The Simpsons" clerk
- 26 use deceit
- 27 Not wordy
- 30 Soda fountain orders
- 32 Quartet doubled
- 33 Compass trace
- 34 Grilling need
- 38 Gross, as income
- 41 Island dance
- 42 Power of films
- 43 Cuts off
- 44 Blackened
- 45 Sports figure

**DOWN**

- 1 Feathery
- 2 Andy's son
- 3 Kind of basketball press
- 4 Snoozing
- 5 Caving sound
- 6 Origin
- 7 Doorway
- 8 Completely
- 9 Social page word
- 10 Say further
- 16 Not neg.
- 19 Bating situation
- 20 Fix copy
- 21 Spots
- 22 Roman censor
- 23 Oil gp.
- 28 Region
- 29 Odorous gas
- 30 Disfigure
- 31 Utah national park
- 35 Fired
- 36 "M\*A\*S\*H" star
- 37 Endure
- 38 Scoreboard abbr.
- 39 Reuben bread
- 40 Important time

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11									
13									
15									
22	23								
25									
27									
32									
38	39	40							
42									
44									

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

G	U	M	S	C	R	E	W	E	L
I	R	A	S	R	E	V	I	V	E
F	A	T	E	A	M	A	Z	E	D
T	L	C		T	W	I	N		
				H	U	R	L	S	P
				A	R	E	N	A	S
				J	E	D	I		S
				A	B	U	T	S	H
				R	A	P		T	E
								L	Y
								R	E
								O	L
								C	O

**DBH HOME LOANS**

FOR **DREAM APARTMENT** AT BIJOY RAKEEN CITY



**DBH** The Specialist in Housing Finance

**Rakeen** REAL ESTATE

DBH contact: 09612 334455 | Rakeen contact: 01977 799100