

# LANDLESS BUT NOT HELPLESS

## THE LANDLESS WOMEN ARE USING RTI TO WIN THE SYSTEM

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Glance through the Information Commission's publicly available database of applications made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, and something striking stands out. A number of the applications that the Commission dealt with were requests made for data on how much *khas* land exists in a particular union, and who are the landless people being allocated the land for use.

Take this one made by Tilak Mandal, a woman from Kazirhola village in Dumuria, Khulna in 2012. She requested the assistant commissioner of land in Dumuria to provide her with a list of landless farmers selected for providing the agricultural *khas* land at Sahas Union from 1987 to 2012. As the government official refused the data, Mandal challenged the AC in a hearing at the Information Commission in Dhaka. The story has a positive ending—Tilak Mandal

got the information she wanted. This village woman from coastal Khulna could then check the information to see which land belonged to whom, and if the people who got the *khas* land from the government, were actually landless or not.

*Khas* lands are government-owned lands, including those which stay submerged for a significant part of the year, islets that appear mid-river, lands confiscated from landowners who had more land than was allowed by the state, and lands whose taxes had not been cleared, among others. Following independence, vested properties also got included in that list. Agricultural *khas* land is legally reserved for distribution to landless households, but across Bangladesh, these fallow lands are being encroached by land grabbers/*jotedars*, often with the blessings of the local state machinery, particularly the district

administration and the police.

In all these years, there has not been a proper appraisal of exactly how much *khas* land exists where and who has been allocated how much. This also means we don't know how much land is being illegally occupied.

This is where RTI applications come in. Making available government information regarding how many acres of *khas* land there are in a certain union, or who are included in landless lists, is a way of releasing the landless class from needing to depend on landowners, to continue tenancy of *khas* lands. The impact of this cannot be understated—in a country where 57 percent of the population do not own any lands whatsoever—access to information itself is a breakthrough.

There is another aspect to this—by making the requesting of information a public right, it also somewhat levels the playing field between men and women. Experts note that knowledge about *khas* lands exists mostly in informal male circles, that do not include women. In his book *Political Economy of Khas Lands in Bangladesh*, Prof Barkat notes, "Around three-fourths [of those who were allocated *khas* lands] came to know about the listing of landless from informal sources and the rest were informed through official media channels. Female-headed households—about 12 percent of all rural households and most of who are hard core poor—get rare chance to be enlisted for *khas* land". When a woman can simply go to a government office and demand to know whether a certain land is *khas* and how she can get it, it completely changes the game.

Mahmuda Begum, of Panchgachi union in the Pirganj upazila of Rangpur, was one of the many landless women who used RTI to stop a local influential from taking over a 700-acre water-body two years ago.

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