

The widening range of RTI use in Bangladesh

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

JAMALUDDIN of Dinajpur had learnt at a training session that the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 of Bangladesh was enacted to provide a legal basis for citizens to exercise their rights as "owners of all powers of the Republic". He reflected for some time on the concept of "legally enforceable ownership" of power by the people and looked for an opportunity to put it to the test. So, when he learnt that a local government official was notorious for his rude behaviour towards subordinates and members of the public, he decided to put a stop to this colonial practice. He submitted an RTI request to the concerned office, where this very government official was the Designated Officer (DO) to deal with such requests. Jamaluddin simply asked to know whether such misbehaviour was permitted under the rules of conduct of government officials. The official did not reply, and Jamaluddin appealed to the higher authority in Dhaka. This obliged the DO to reply, admitting that indeed misbehaviour was not permitted. Since then, the official's behaviour reportedly changed for the better and Jamaluddin emerged as a hero to the public.

RTI empowers citizens to stand up to impolite bureaucratic behaviour

Anwar Hossain, an RTI activist of Dinajpur, led a group of three farmers to the local agriculture office to learn about the procedures for obtaining potato seeds. They were initially refused entry into the office of the senior official, but were eventually permitted when they insisted that they had the right to see him. However, they were asked to take off their shoes before entering, as



their soiled shoes might spoil the carpet on the office floor. Anwar Hossain's immediate reaction was to ask why they were being discriminated against when others in the room had their shoes on. He also asked whether the carpet was bought with the public's or personal money. At this, the official changed his stance and became more accommodating. The story boosted the spirit of RTI enthusiasts and highlighted the concept of 'peoples' ownership of power in a democracy.

RTI contributes to systemic change in distribution of potato seeds

The same Anwar Hossain of Dinajpur, together with his friend, Shaheen Rasel, submitted an RTI request to the local agriculture office, asking to know about the situation of potato seed stock in the district and the manner of its distribution among farmers. Soon after submission, they found that the seeds are, in practice, distributed

through dealers. While this practice is permissible, it is susceptible to abuse. They learnt that the seeds are normally produced or bought at Tk 9 per kg before storage. As the market price of the seeds soared this year, they were sold at Tk 43 per kg to the dealers who in turn sold them to the farmers at Tk 60-70 per kg, that too after mixing them with non-seed potatoes, causing great harm to the farmers. They submitted another RTI request asking why the seeds could not be distributed directly to the farmers, minimising the possibility of malpractice by unscrupulous dealers. To their great delight, the agriculture office decided to sell the seeds directly to the farmers.

RTI prevents irregular levy of school fees

RTI enthusiast Nowshad Hossain of Dinajpur had learnt that local schools were disregarding a government directive not to charge admission fees for

promoting students to the next grade, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. When he discovered that a local school was charging an exorbitant amount from guardians, including a hefty admission fee, he submitted an RTI request to the office of the District Commissioner (DC) wanting to know what steps were being taken to implement the government directive. Upon receiving the query from the DC's office, the school authority immediately dropped the admission charges from Tk 4,260 to Tk 860 only. What was the potential savings of 2,500 guardians? Tk 1 crore and 10 lakhs.

RTI unearths irregularities in construction of sewerage drains

Mominul Islam of Taraganj sub-district of Rangpur District submitted an RTI request to the project engineer of Local Government Office asking for information, with specific breakdowns and bill vouchers, on the amount of money spent from 2016 to date on specific development activities in his area under the Annual Development Programme. On receiving the information, he discovered that Tk 2 lakhs shown spent on construction of a sewerage drain in his locality during fiscal 2018-19 was fake; no such drain existed. He found that the vouchers shown against the expenditure contained items unrelated to drain construction, such as mini fans, switches, and regulators. While the local community found the information intriguingly funny, Mominul decided to bring the matter to the attention of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer for necessary action.

The stories show how citizens are turning to the RTI Act to exercise their citizenship rights and address issues of

public concern relating to governance. This is good for democracy and augurs well for a healthy citizen-government relationship. The law seems to be helping to narrow the traditional divide between the two sides.

The list of issues shared with us by RTI groups on which information requests are being made to public authorities in the country ranges from the environment, climate change, food security, SDGs, administration and public services to government benefits and Covid-19 economic packages. They show that people are focusing more on public interest issues than personal ones. This is indeed the primary objective of the RTI Act, enhancing peoples' role in governance of the country.

The Cabinet Division of the Bangladesh government in May 2018 had set up committees for the Supervision and Observation of the RTI Act at Central, Divisional, District and Upazila levels in the country. The committees, composed of relevant public officials within respective jurisdictions, together with civil society and NGO representatives, have been entrusted to oversee smooth operation of the law to achieve its objectives. We recommend that the minutes of the bi-monthly meetings of the committees be shared regularly with the public. They provide a legal complement to the selection of stories we share here. A close interaction between the Cabinet Division, overseeing the operation of the RTI law, and the RTI community in the country should help advance the objectives of the law.

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'Internal affairs' suck under globalisation

CHINITTO SINCE 1995



NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

I am not at all concerned about the Tatmadaw takeover in neighbouring Myanmar, a foregone conclusion, some say, to a power struggle in the land of a hundred ethnic groups, and was somewhat expected given the country's six decades' tradition of robust military interest in politics and governance. Such disinterest in "internal" matters of another country is common in my generation (guess which?) because we have been taught so. Hands and eyes off! No reference that to robustness.

USA is punishing Myanmar monetarily, New Zealand diplomatically, while adjacent Bangladesh, in dealing with an exodus of refugees, has been the epitome of collective patience, tolerance and love for mankind. When a people within a country suffers, the matter acquires global scent. Repression within borders cannot, nor should be protected as domestic violence, more so when you have to bear the brunt of the spoils of someone else's war.

We could be least interested in angry farmers' protest since late last November against some legislation introduced in September in next-door India, but we do suffer if the onion trucks stop rolling across the border. Despite the bitter winter up north, there is little sign of the standoff thawing, except for the farmers having to backpedal due to the uncharacteristic overenthusiasm of some in their midst on their Republic

Day. Commendably though, both sides have shown utmost restraint, and mutual longing to resolve the impasse; as if there was any alternative.

Our lack of interest was, however, challenged when the war of words and repeated failed negotiations turned into an online Star Wars among some totally local, a few internationally local, and a handful of global celebrities. The world takes notice when there is twittering by Rihanna and Greta, retort by Sachin, and *palta* by Shatrughan and daughter. The matter then enlarges from internal to international, but with no malice.

Every now and then Uyghur pops up on TV scrolls for the wrong reasons, whereas they have a rich historical and cultural tradition. I for one never knew about this Xinjiang province until external media broke news time and again claiming that Chinese Muslims in their thousands were being detained in camps, away from homes, and subjected to rigorous edification towards targeted orientation. Many countries, including those standing on the high pedestal of self-proclaimed morality, as custodians of the world, practice such indoctrination; they are called print, electronic and social media.

China denies the allegations and claims that the men from Uyghur, as well as members of other ethnic minority groups, are being trained for social integration to counter extremism and terrorism; in large groups yes, because it is the most populous country. China's internal matter was caught on the world's radar of conscience because it seemed humanity was lacking. It could be a matter of misinterpretation by either side, sometimes defended as cultural difference.

Pakistan too in 1971 defended the indiscriminate killing of innocent



A person holds a picture of Aung San Suu Kyi and raises a fist during a protest against the military coup in Myanmar outside United Nations venue in Bangkok, Thailand February 6, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Bangalee in their thousands as an internal matter, but not for long. Their citizens too were kept in the dark about the brutal force employed on the liberated former eastern wing, and their subsequent losses. Whereas in that era of limited transmission of information, it was possible to hoodwink a global audience, after five decades of leaps and bounds in e-communication, not much can be swept today under the carpet. There lies the socio-political positive impact of technological advancement in global communication of information.

Some government spokespersons, more so state lackeys, try to mute genuine global interest in their country's people as out-of-bound "internal" matter. "Patriotic" conspiracy theorists, and there is a steady supply in every country, will go the extra yard to dub transnational interest in any domestic affair as part of a smear campaign to

defame that country; as if a country's reputation is that much trivial. Nay! A nation has forever been larger than a tweet, even before the arrival of tweets.

Some countries do not care. They are above this "internal" conspiracy syndrome. We rose up as one world when BLM came alive after the brutal killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 at Minneapolis, Minnesota. The "8 minutes and 46 seconds" knee lock was never defended as an internal affair, despite the fact that there was universal shock and condemnation.

A three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi was found dead on September 2, 2015, his head buried in the sands of a Turkish beach. Alan's mother and brother also perished in the Mediterranean Sea. The deaths were not swept away as an internal affair of either country, nor of Greece which the boy's family was trying to reach, or of

Canada, where they wanted to settle. In fact, the deaths and the wider refugee crisis became a factor in the subsequent Canadian federal elections. Nothing was "internal" any more.

There was widespread international "interference". French President François Hollande called Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, not to blame him but reciprocally appealed for a more humane response to the world's refugee crisis. Borders were broken and world leaders were moved. They discussed about their responsibility towards migrant populations, who were risking their lives not necessarily by choice, but usually under duress.

Taking notice is not interference. That's a lame excuse to shun criticism or conceal a guilt. It is natural human instinct to be interested in current affairs. Nipping external interest in the bud as a keep-off policy is a poor pretext to continue oppressive measures on one's own people.

Worldwide, we are willing to take advantage of globalisation where social and cultural influences merge to affect an array of governance parameters. We are enthusiastic to reap the fruits of a global village, and yet are not prepared to invite opinions that favour the persecuted amongst our own.

Political matters of a country are definitely internal, but up to a point where there is no undue discrimination and tyranny. About humanity issues, we can all be concerned. Of course, every self-ruling country has to sort out its own mess, but if the dirty linen is on show, others are bound to talk. It's only human.

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