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Nothing justifies polluting the Dhaleshwari

Central authorities must step in and fix the tannery estate

AFTER decades of government planning, court orders, and failed deadlines, the common effluent treatment plant (CETP) in Bangladesh's only tannery estate in Savar is still not fully functional. As a result, untreated industrial waste keeps polluting the Dhaleshwari River, leading to the death of aquatic life and ravaging of the surrounding environment. Currently, the CETP can treat 25,000 cubic metres of liquid waste, while 132 factories at the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) tannery estate produce up to 40,000 cubic metres of waste. That means, on a busy day, the authorities have to release 15,000 cubic metres of waste directly into the river through an alternative channel, according to a recent report by the Department of Environment.

The CETP project, which was initiated in 2003, took years—if not decades—longer than was originally planned to complete, cost way more than the initial estimate, and yet still seems to offer no resolution. It is a perfect example of poor planning and execution by the authorities. With the CETP having gone into operation nine years after the project was taken up, one would have expected it to function much better. Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case.

According to a report published by this newspaper, the CETP still does not have an online monitoring system, and testing facilities at its laboratory are also inadequate—only four out of eight kinds of testing facilities were installed in the laboratory. To fix these and other issues, the government will now have to take up a Balancing, Modernisation, Rehabilitation and Expansion project to make the CETP fully operational. But we must ask: why weren't these constructed in the first place (as per the agreement)? What did the monitoring authorities do? Were they not aware of these problems, or did they simply not care?

In the meantime, while the Dhaleshwari River and the surrounding environment get destroyed by the industrial waste of the tanneries, the BSCIC and tanners have been shifting blame, ignoring the real problem. This has been going on for far too long. It's about time all sides owned up to their responsibilities.

In August, one may recall, a parliamentary standing committee had recommended that the environment ministry shut down the Savar tannery estate. And we believe it is high time for the authorities to take a strong stand against the polluting of the Dhaleshwari. If the BSCIC and the tanners cannot come to an agreement and sort out these issues, we see no reason why they should be allowed to continue with this business-as-usual attitude. We call on the higher authorities to immediately look into the matter, and if need be, shut down the tanneries until the CETP is fully up and running.

Theft of RMG products cannot continue

Arrest the gangs involved, ensure stronger vigilance on the highway

WE are worried to learn about the increasing incidents of theft of RMG products on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway. According to a report by this daily, organised gangs have been stealing garment items from the lorries on the highway, which has reached an alarming rate of late. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), two incidents of theft were reported in 2019, nine in 2020, and 22 until July this year. Industry insiders say the actual number of incidents would be much higher.

These incidents are not only ruining the reputation of our apparel industry, but garment exporters are incurring huge financial losses as well. They are losing the buyers' trust, which they fear may also lead to cancellation of work orders, affecting the country's export earnings. Reportedly, the gangs involved in these crimes have established such a foolproof system to steal that it is impossible to find out about the theft by exporters and buyers until they open the cartons. According to police, in some cases, 30-40 percent of the total consignment is stolen and sold at much lower prices in the local market or to some foreign buyers. The situation is, no doubt, alarming and calls for urgent action.

It is, however, good to know that the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has identified some of the gangs and has also arrested some of their members, including the ringleader of a gang. The police have reportedly also found out about the entire process of how and where the thefts take place. We hope that they will continue their operations to arrest all the gangs involved in the crime.

While the police play their part, we hope the central authorities will also take the issue seriously. They must ensure proper vigilance by immediately arranging for CCTV cameras to be installed on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway. In addition, to protect their goods, RMG owners can also consider carrying those by their own trucks, if possible, or send trucks by police escort, as proposed by the law enforcement agency. They can also use GPS trackers to monitor their vehicles. If these steps are taken by the garment exporters, the police, and the government in a coordinated way, we think the theft of garment items on the highway can be prevented.

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

LAST month marked the International Right to Know Day. From the few seminars and webinars arranged on the occasion, it was evident that even 12 years after the Right to Information (RTI) Act was enacted in Bangladesh, we are still largely preoccupied with how to spread awareness about the law. We discuss numbers, identify impediments to implementation, assess the response of public officials while handling RTI requests, and debate the value of proactive disclosures to minimise the use of the law. But what about the objectives of the law, and the underlying principles and philosophy that drive them?

The preamble to the RTI Act describes the law as an "Act to make provisions for ensuring free flow of information and people's right to information." The words "free flow of information" deserve emphasis. Information is a continuous process, constantly being created by all sorts of public authorities, to which citizens must have access. Proactive disclosures can only meet a minuscule part of that need.

Why is the citizens' access to information so important? The answer is provided in the law's preamble: "Right to information is an inalienable part of freedom of thought, conscience, and speech" of the people, and "all powers of the Republic belong to the people, and it is necessary to ensure right to information for the empowerment of the people." By seeking information, people wield that

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power and exercise their right to participate in the affairs of the state.

Why is exercising that right important for society? If the right to information of the people is ensured, the transparency and accountability of all public (offices) will increase, corruption of the same will decrease, and good governance of the same will be established, says the preamble.

Obama underscored their importance by saying, "A democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency." People must understand why.

The concepts of transparency and accountability arose at the end of World War II. They were cemented over the years, and by the end of the Cold War in the late

They must have access to all documents created or used by the governments, limited only by exceptions and exemptions necessary to protect essential public interests.

Accountability, on the other hand, is the ability to provide sound reasoning for one's actions. While transparency focuses on openness, accountability is taking responsibility for one's actions.

These two principles form the basic philosophy of the RTI Act. A government that is of the people and for the people must also be open and accountable to the people. Assessing the success of the law should be based on how much of these two ideals have been achieved, not how many requests have been positively responded to. Have these requests yielded or moved us towards the desired results? Has transparency been advanced? Is there any systemic change in governance? Are public actions becoming more predictable? We have to learn to develop proper metrics to assess them.

Based on this perspective, it should be clear that the RTI Act is a people's law par excellence. People are the pivot. They must take the lead and be the watchdog to safeguard its interest. They must not only measure government actions based on the principles of transparency and accountability, but also do so with regard to the actions of the Information Commission, which is the main guardian of the law. Through its own transparency and accountability, the commission can lead the way. It must ask, after every action, whether it has helped to advance the objectives of the law. Its accountability is to the people.

A constructive and collaborative interaction among the people, public authorities, and the Information Commission is the best way to move the objectives of the law forward. Ideally, the annual Right to Know Day should be the best occasion to discuss a public audit on the performance of all the stakeholders of the law. The civil society is most ideally placed to undertake the audit. Let us show some maturity.

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Simply put, RTI is not just a right; it is also a responsibility. When citizens use the law, they fulfil a civic responsibility which is of benefit to society. This is the crux of the matter: citizens use the law primarily for public good. Nowhere in the law does it talk about individual benefits. Serving public interest is the ultimate objective of the law.

Two basic principles inspire and guide our RTI Act: transparency and accountability. In his memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies in the US on the Freedom of Information Act in 2009, President Barack

Obama underscored their importance by saying, "A democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency." People must understand why.

The concept of transparency arose as an antidote to the culture of secrecy in governance that the post-war "new age" sought to erase. Secrecy in the new era would be replaced by openness—an important element for participatory democracy that emerged as the ideal of "the new world order." People, as the source of all power of the state, must know how their governments function.

Looking Back at the First War Course



RP SINGH

then acting president of Bangladesh, Syed Nazrul Islam, took the salute. The ceremony was attended by then Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad and his cabinet colleagues, members of the national and provincial assemblies, other Bangladesh dignitaries, and the Indian instructors. The ceremony was held at the Officers' Training Wing (OTW) of Mukti Bahini in the Murti Camp of the Alpha Sector under "Operation Jackpot" of the Indian Army. It was located on the foothills of the Himalayas in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, and was far away from the public eye too, since its security and secrecy were of paramount importance. The area of Alpha Sector was fenced with high parameter wire. Sentry towers were erected to keep watch around the fencing, and the area was patrolled to ensure security.

I was a captain in 1971 and was selected to teach in the OTW. A team was constituted to study the curricula of the Indian Army's Officers Training Academy Chennai (OIS Madras in 1971) and the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun. I was a part of this team. The syllabus of tactics, field and battle craft, weapons training, physical training, and unarmed combat—termed military subjects—was compressed into a capsule of 16 weeks. Administrative subjects, military manners and etiquettes, ceremonials, and academics that were peculiar for the Indian Army Gentleman Cadets (GCs), were excluded from the syllabus of Bangladesh GCs, because they were being trained to lead guerrilla forces or act as platoon commanders. Drill periods were also reduced; yet, the total number of periods of military subjects turned out to be 865. This was in addition to physical training, weapons training, handling of explosives, etc. Fitting these many periods into 80 working days was a big challenge, which was offset by carrying out day and night training.

The facilities provided to GCs in Murti Camp were spartan. Bamboo tarza barracks with tin roofs, bamboo cots with no electricity, plenty of mosquitoes, and the sultry heat of North Bengal made the living conditions miserable. The bed bugs added to the misery at night. During outdoor training in the forest, leeches hanging from tree leaves dropped on the GCs, latched on, and gorged on their blood, noticed only when they were detached from the victims' bodies. The Indian Army had devised drills for every problem. Weekly de-bugging parade was an essential part of the training. Each GC was made to carry salt water to apply periodically on exposed

body parts. After returning to the barracks, an inspection of each other's bodies by buddies was essential before sleep. The food, although nutritious, was tasteless, because soldiers were doubling as chefs in absence of a proper cook, since civilians could not be employed.

The training was tough and prolonged, spanning over day and night hours. On top of it, almost all GCs were uncertain about their families in Bangladesh, with very little information about their well-being. The Indian Army instructors were told to engage the GCs in conversations during the off hours to distract them. All instructors, particularly those in captain's rank, and the GCs became good pals and discussed almost everything; jokes (including non-vegetarian) were part of

to their units and sectors during the war and created havoc in the Pakistani ranks with relentless raids and ambushes. Sheikh Kamal was posted as ADC to C-in-C Colonel MAG Osmani. We parted company, wishing well to each other. He invited me to visit Dhaka to meet his family. Somehow, I could not meet him or any other officer. On August 15, 1975, I heard the news of Bangabandhu and most of his family members, including Sheikh Kamal, being assassinated. I was astonished to hear about the end of a budding future leader's life. It was a personal loss to me.

After the military coup of August 1975, I was instructed to stop correspondence with my Bangladeshi friends. I could not meet anyone during my service, and did

During the meeting, I told her about my association with Captain Sheikh Kamal and the conversations we had. It was an emotional moment for her, but like her brother, she did not show it. I think such composure is a legacy of Bangabandhu, one of the greatest leaders of last century.

I also visited *The Daily Star* office, where the editor, Mahfuz Anam, told me an anecdote about his experience in the Second War Course. He recalled he had complained to the administrative havildar about not getting sleep on his first night at the OTW because of bed bugs. The NCO told him that he would get used to it after a couple of days. "I don't know whether it was the effect of de-bugging or I used to be too tired to notice a bit of pain from bug bites, but I slept well during the rest of my



The First War Course of independent Bangladesh, which took place during the Liberation War, trained the cadets on guerrilla tactics.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

conversation. I made some of my lifelong friends among the GCs. Sheikh Kamal, brother of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was one of the most affected. On August 4, 1971, the news of Yahya Khan saying that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had committed "acts of treason, and acts of open war," and would be tried by a special military court for "waging war against Pakistan," came out. The commencement of Bangabandhu's trial was quite a chilling news for everyone. From the first week of August, there was a news item, almost daily, about the trial. It was a trying time for Sheikh Kamal. He was also worried that the Pakistani military junta might harm his mother and other family members who were under house arrest. However, he displayed tremendous courage and equanimity.

All the 61 young officers were commissioned into infantry. They went

not have any news about them. After my superannuation, I, along with my son Hitesh, got an opportunity to visit Dhaka in December 2011, on the 40th anniversary Bangladesh's victory in the war. We received a tremendous amount of love and affection during the visit. At the Dhaka airport, I was received by Major Mizan, the older one of the famous Mizan-Munib twins of the First War Course. That evening, there was a get-together arranged by Major Matin Chaudhury, where I met most of the officers and their families. I also gave them photos taken during the training. Shaheed Lieutenant Mustafa's parents thanked me, because it was the only picture of him, since he never met them after March 26, 1971.

I was granted an audience with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on December 15, 2011. I presented to her photographs of her brother, taken at Murti Camp in 1971.

stay in OTW," Mahfuz told me. Over the last one decade, I have spent almost two months in Bangladesh and enjoyed the hospitality of Major Qayyum and Captain Tajul Islam.

All of us are now in the twilight zone of life. It is time that the ties were built between our next generations. I appeal to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to build a memorial at Murti Camp, where all officers of war courses and their family members should be invited on Bangladesh's independence and victory days every year. Murti Camp has an emotional link with the Liberation War, and that legacy must be passed on to next generations.

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