



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

ONLINE BIRTH REGISTRATION

# Futuristic or farcical?

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Naim Ahmed, applicant

**“If the registrars cannot find information in the server, they can always check the hardcopy files. This is why they have been given 15 days to deliver a BR certificate. The provision of filing the application form in-person has been kept deliberately, to ensure that all the information are not lost in case of a server collapse or cyber-attack.”**

Palash Kanti Bala, Registrar General, ORGBDR

**“It’s not clear why the government shifted the burden to the people, when this transition could be technologically possible by adding a provision to the database which would automatically update existing 16-digit certificates to 17-digit ones. In that case, the new certificates could be then sent to their respective addresses.”**

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director, TIB

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Naim Ahmed, a father of two, has been struggling to get the new digital 17-digit birth registration (BR) certificates for himself, his wife and children. All of them already have the old 16-digit BR certificates, and passports which were issued against them.

However, when he wanted to enrol his children to a new school, he was informed that he must submit the new 17-digit BR certificates of his children. When he went to apply for them through the government portal, he was puzzled to find that the online system was asking for his 17-digit BR number to get his children registered.

“I filled the form with my 16-digit BR number, but it didn’t work. After much hassle, I learned that I must get a new certificate first before I can apply for my children’s.”

Naim finally submitted applications for the 17-digit certificates for his whole family, but more than a month later, they were yet to get any response.

He highlighted another hassle in the process. Although citizens have to apply for the

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17-digit BR through the online application system, they have to take a printout of a filled-up application form and submit it to the local registrar’s office in person.

“To avoid the harassment, many people are hiring brokers to submit the application form. I didn’t want to do that and submitted the application following the due process. Now, I’m going from table to table at the DSCC zonal office in Azimpur, but nobody can tell me when I will get the certificates. Those who hired brokers in exchange of Tk 500-1,000 per certificate got them within one or two weeks. Is this what you call digital Bangladesh?” said an agitated Naim.

Naim’s certificate is one of more than 2,000,000 pending applications to get the 17-digit digital BR certificate. All of the aforementioned issues have led many to blast the digitalisation of the application process as a farce and a waste of their time.

Many sufferers like Naim are asking the same question: why did the government force its citizens to go through all this when the service delivery system is not at all prepared?

According to the Office of the Registrar General, Birth and Death Registration (ORGBDR), the number of pending applications was 17,86,0094 as of February 10. Every day, it receives around another 100,000 new applications.

According to officials of ORGBDR, when a citizen with a manually done BR certificate files an application to get a digital one, the registrar’s task is to check the submitted information with



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



the 16-digit BR certificate uploaded in ORGBDR’s server. If the information checks out, the registrar can issue the 17-digit certificate immediately.

For new applicants, the registrar checks the authenticity of submitted documents such as citizenship certificate, hospital discharge certificates, vaccine certificates etc.

However, according to registrars of both the city corporations, for most cases, they cannot retrieve the old 16-digit certificate from the server and verify the information.

According to anonymous sources at DNCC and DSCC, when the government launched the new website and server on December 15, 2011, millions of 16-digit BR certificates could not be uploaded on to the new server.

Sources said this number can be as high as 68 million.

As a result, data of these certificates are now lost and cannot be accessed anymore. The city corporation sources also claimed that is the reason why the government so hastily embarked on the new BR initiative.

However, talking to this newspaper, Registrar General Palash Kanti Bala denied this claim.

“We started a new online BR programme as the previous one was prone to numerous errors and clerical mistakes. As the registrations were done manually, many people took advantage of the system and got multiple birth registration numbers. This is why our total number of BR is 190 million although our total population is a little over 160 million,” he said.

“If the registrars cannot find information in the server, they can always check the hardcopy files. This is why they have been given 15 days to deliver a BR certificate. The provision of filing the application form in-person has been kept deliberately, to ensure that all the information are not lost in case of a server collapse or cyber-attack,” commented the registrar general.

But according to experts, this problem could easily be solved by using better and efficient technology.

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said, “Even if the change was indispensable, it’s not clear why the government shifted the burden to the people, when this transition could be technologically possible by adding a provision to the database which would automatically update existing 16-digit certificates to 17-digit ones. In that case, the new certificates could be then sent

to their respective addresses.”

“Besides, they could’ve made another provision for people to simply collect the new certificates upon submission of the old ones, which would not be fully free from public harassment and corruption either, but at least it would be a lesser evil [compared to the current process],” he added.

In fact, at present, the registrars rarely verify the submitted information and in many cases deliver the certificates at their whim, which opens up the opportunity for manipulation and corruption, sources said.

During recent visits, this correspondent saw scores of brokers in front of every BR office who are delivering the fast-tracking the delivery of certificates in exchange of money. The situation is similar across rural and municipality areas.

Contacted, the registrars blamed difficulty in accessing information, slow servers and acute staffer shortage for this crisis.

Requesting anonymity, a DSCC zonal office registrar said, “How can we verify the data online when we rarely have a stable internet connection? It’s also not possible to check with the handwritten records—we don’t have the time to sift through heaps of files and documents to find every citizen’s information. We receive more than 400 applications every day, but there’s only two registrars at each zonal office to process them.”

According to Dr Fazole Shamsul Kabir, chief health officer of DSCC, who supervises the birth registration process in DSCC area, “When our registrars want to verify the information, we often find that the server is inaccessible. Even when it’s active, the server is very slow, which is one of the main reasons why we end up being late in delivering the certificates.”

Meanwhile, DNCC health officer Dr Md Emdadul Haque said, “Besides slow and inaccessible servers, we are also struggling with acute human resource shortage. Only two registrars for an entire zone comprising hundreds of thousands of people is too inadequate. Besides, most of our officials do not even have the kind of IT training needed to do this task. To tackle the crisis to an extent, we are employing outsourced workers and engaging officials from other departments to help us with birth registration.”

Given all this, experts have questioned the very rationale behind the digitalisation process.

TIB’s Dr Iftekharuzzaman said, “This chaotic scenario was created by the mandatory provision of 17-digit BR certificate instead of the old ones. This is an example of the lack of foresight and strategic thinking of the relevant authorities. Not only has this made life difficult for the applicants, but it has also created loopholes for harassment

and corruption.”

Talking to this correspondent, Registrar General Palash Kanti Bala admitted to their technical shortcomings and promised to solve everything in the near future.

“Our server has collapsed in the past due to excessive pressure. Recently, high traffic has reduced its speed as well,” he said.

“I have only joined this office recently, but as soon as I did, I started the process of renting cloud servers to tackle the increasing pressure. We are also trying to use servers of the 4-tier national data centre, which will give us greater speed and storage space.”

However, the registrar general could not say much regarding how to put an end to people’s harassment and ongoing malpractices.

“The staffer crisis is also evident in my own office. We’re running with one-third of the required team. We are managing the largest data bank of the country with only four IT hands.

Moreover, three of them are on leave and the only programmer of our office is on maternity leave,” the registrar general said.

**Population of Bangladesh (According to BBS)**  
**172,094,000**

➔ Current number of Birth Registration  
**190,000,000+**

➔ Number of pending BR application around  
**2,000,000**

**IN 2021**

➔ **2,52,500** children got birth registration within **45** days of birth

➔ **6,18,565** children got birth registration within 1 year of birth

➔ Number of total birth registration (citizens of all ages) **149,37,511**

➔ Only **19** percent children got birth registration within 1 year of birth

➔ By **2024**, Bangladesh is committed to register **100** percent children within first year of birth

“Sometimes, the applicants willingly employ brokers to save time. We admit that we have some administrative and technical issues, but we’re trying to resolve all of it. We urge our citizens to apply for their BR certificates for newborn children in time, abstain from employing brokers and stop applying for unnecessary corrections.”