

Let us honour the legacy of Bangabandhu

We must rededicate ourselves to building his Sonar Bangla

Today, August 15, marks the 48th anniversary of the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with almost his entire family – one of the darkest chapters in the history of our nation. The untimely death of the father of the nation, only four years after independence, and at a time when the country needed his leadership, lofty ideals and vision the most, was a great tragedy for Bangladesh.

The significance of Bangabandhu's role in uniting the people to both dream and pursue the dream of freedom and independence cannot be overstated. His vision of creating a fair and just society, in which each individual would be equal in the eyes of the law, is one that every Bangladeshi fell in love with. Unfortunately, it is also one that is yet to fully materialise. And until it does, the cause for which he sacrificed everything will remain unfulfilled. Thus, it is the duty of each and every freedom-loving, patriotic Bangladeshi to work towards establishing a country where justice is at its core. We must realise that one of the best ways to honour Bangabandhu and his legacy would be for us, as a nation, to continue working towards bringing back his ideals into our national psyche and to solidify them into the functioning of our society in general.

Bangabandhu worked his entire life not for any personal gain. In fact, oftentimes he took action that ran contrary to his personal well-being, but would serve the interest of the ordinary people whom he loved and cared for with his whole heart. It is extremely disappointing that despite the example that he had set, since his departure, we have not had many politicians or statesmen who learnt from it and dedicated their lives to working for the betterment of their countrymen. Nevertheless, we would call on the current and potential future leaders of this country to study Bangabandhu's life closely, and try to understand why and how he managed to inspire an entire nation to go through such a trial by fire.

Bangabandhu believed that citizens should be at the centre of power, and have fair representation. More than 50 years after Bangladesh's independence, that is still something we are greatly struggling with. He also believed that people must have the freedom to express themselves, including their grievances. As we mourn the assassination of Bangabandhu today, we also mourn the gradual undoing of his legacy and vision through the decades. This we must try to rectify. We must rededicate ourselves with a renewed vigour to realising his fundamental mission: building a Sonar Bangla.

Why can't we stop question leaks?

Recent CID drive serves as a wake-up call for education authorities

Recently, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested 12 members of a question leak racket in a case filed in 2020. Reportedly, the members of the racket leaked question papers for medical entry exams at least 10 times between 2001 and 2017. Surprisingly, among those arrested, seven are doctors, suggesting the involvement of high-level offenders. The CID has found that the arrestees had helped hundreds of students to enrol in medical colleges through illegal means, earning crores of taka in the process. While we appreciate the CID's efforts, it is important to dig deeper to find out how this gang operated and secured access to an apparently secure system to prevent future leaks.

In a country where corruption is pervasive, it is perhaps natural that the education sector would not be immune to it. But the way question papers for public exams of all stripes got leaked in recent years is unimaginable. From primary and JSC exams to SSC and HSC exams, from university admission tests to job entry exams, the last decade saw an unprecedented level of activity from question leak syndicates. In case of medical admission tests, papers were reportedly leaked in 2001, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2012 and 2013. In 2006 and 2015, the leaks are said to have been massive. While some measures were taken by the authorities to prevent this practice after widespread reporting in the media, those involved in leaks were hardly held to account. Against this backdrop, the CID arresting 12 culprits is commendable.

The CID has also come up with some important findings. It has, for example, identified 10 coaching centres, mostly based in Dhaka, which were involved in the leaks. It has also found out how the question papers were leaked from the printing press under the Directorate General of Medical Education (DGME) and how some influential DGME officials helped spread leaked papers all over the country. Furthermore, it has found evidence of transactions of crores of taka from the arrestees' bank accounts. We hope these findings will lead to substantive actions, including building a foolproof security system for question papers as well as punishing corrupt officials and their external collaborators as per the law.

The repeated instances of leaking question papers, particularly of medical admission tests, have exposed the weaknesses of the education management. As such, the relevant authorities must take responsibility for their failure to prevent it and ensure that it doesn't happen again. This questionable practice – both by those behind the leaks and their clientele – can only be removed by establishing accountability in the relevant public departments and upholding the true value of education.

Did the Dohazari-Cox's Bazar rail line worsen floods?



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Southern Chattogram, including areas such as Bandarban and Cox's Bazar, is experiencing devastating floods due to a week-long spell of incessant rainfall. While heavy rains and the overflow of hill water into rivers and canals are typical climatic events in this region, the recent flood was exceptionally catastrophic. This disaster has raised questions about the role of the newly constructed Dohazari-Cox's Bazar railway line in exacerbating the crisis.

The flood significantly affected areas through which the railway line passes, such as the upazilas of southern Chattogram, namely Chandanaish, Satkania, and Lohagara. Some upazilas of Cox's Bazar, including Chalkaria, Pekua and Ramu, were also impacted by the floods. All of this has prompted the need for a comprehensive analysis of the current circumstances.

The hydrological dynamics of the region are distinctive, with natural water patterns varying across different seasons, much like in haor areas. The canal-river system of southern Chattogram is characterised by water primarily flowing in from hills. These canals wind through expansive marshlands, and the marshes serve as pathways for the heavy water flow of the hills. These trails are not visible during the dry season. But during rainfall, these invisible trails in the marshlands serve as reserves to contain excessive water from the canals. This constitutes the hydrological rhythm of southern Chattogram.

However, recent developments have introduced a new dynamic. The under-construction rail project has unintentionally created an obstacle for the natural water flow in the region, resulting in water levels reaching heights of three to five metres across the landscape. Although the project did incorporate bridges and culverts designed to facilitate water passage, it would be interesting to see how a limited number of small culverts could manage the level of water flow typically handled by a vast expanse of marshland. On the other hand, some of the culverts are misaligned with the natural water flow. In certain instances, culverts have been allocated in areas



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

The recent heavy rainfall has caused unprecedented levels of flooding in multiple areas of southern Chattogram region.

where water rarely passes through. This highlights a lack of thorough environmental assessment during the project's inception. It is also evident that the project authorities lack an adequate understanding of southern Chattogram's age-old water dynamics.

But the crises emerging from the Dohazari-Cox's Bazar railroad project do not end here. The railway line runs from north to south, intersecting numerous east-west roads that are equipped with dual-sided culverts for effective water drainage. These roads now face a challenge. The culverts, originally designed to direct water from one marshland to another, now find themselves bisected by the railway, dividing the marshlands into sections on both east and west. As a result, only one culvert is available for water drainage, but the marshland has been split into two by the rail track. Consequently, either the western or eastern part of the marshland experiences blocked water flow. This

of stagnation – a phenomenon that the area's residents have not faced before.

The grand ambition of the Dohazari-Cox's Bazar railway project is to enhance regional connectivity. But this has been clouded by the unforeseen consequence of waterlogging. Currently, discussions about constructing several bypasses in southern Chattogram are underway. But given that the railway project has already disrupted the natural water flow of southern Chattogram and Cox's Bazar, the new bypasses could further worsen this issue.

Of course, the railway project alone cannot be blamed for flooding in southern Chattogram. While the canals serve as reservoirs during heavy rainfall in the hills, over time, the smaller canals have been encroached upon. Since these canals depend on mountain sourced water, they remain dry for a significant portion of the year. And this scarcity has led to a perception among the populace that these canals

Unfortunately, the lack of emphasis on environmental study, typical water courses, and the climate of the Chattogram region when planning and executing the railway project has now resulted in an intensely waterlogged situation.

In light of the ongoing climate crisis, it is imperative that we exercise heightened caution when embarking on large-scale development projects. These ventures are designed with the future in mind, often spanning a century. While some disruptions in water flow might occur as a consequence, environmental scientific evidence indicates that these flows tend to reinstate themselves within a 15-to-25-year time frame. Therefore, it is not only essential to heed the knowledge provided by the environment, but to also keep in consideration local histories that can provide insights into the characteristics of a region's natural environment.

If your court case is stuck for lack of evidence, try RTI

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Rafiqul Islam, a madrasa teacher of Taraganj upazila in Rangpur district, was terminated from his job by the madrasa authorities in March 2014 for protesting against irregularities in the appointment of a teacher to a higher post (to which Rafiqul had also applied). In 2015, he filed a civil declaratory suit with the Assistant District Judge's Court, challenging his termination. While his case remained pending, a certain Rezwanaul Haque was appointed in his place. In April 2016, Rafiqul filed an injunction suit with the same court seeking to block Rezwanaul's enlistment under the government's Monthly Payment Order (MPO) scheme, claiming that his appointment was illegal pending the resolution of Rafiqul's declaratory suit. The court granted the plea and issued an injunction order in September 2016.

However, the very next month, the madrasa authorities went ahead and paid Rezwanaul his benefits under the MPO scheme. While proceedings and appeals went back and forth, Rezwanaul continued doing his job.

As time passed, a dejected Rafiqul shared his frustration with Mominul Sarkar, a local right to information (RTI) activist. In January 2020, Mominul submitted RTI requests to the upazila education office and upazila nirbahi (executive) office, seeking relevant documents to prove Rafiqul's claim of irregularities by the

madrasa authorities. Through his tenacity, Mominul managed to obtain the documents, which Rafiqul submitted to the district court to strengthen his claim.

In the meantime, the madrasa authorities appealed to the High Court against the confirmation of the injunction order. In June 2021, the High Court confirmed the order of the district court, imposed a fine of Tk 5,000 on the madrasa, and ordered the court to dispose of the suit.

In February 2023, nearly nine years after the beginning of this tale, the district court passed an order of civil imprisonment for five months against all defendants and imposed a fine of Tk 7,000 on each. More recently, regarding Rafiqul's declaratory suit, the court declared his termination illegal. RTI's role in resolving these cases was evident.

This story was told last month at a seminar organised by an NGO to share its findings on an RTI project it had conducted in six northern districts of Bangladesh. It was attended by many RTI users and enthusiasts, NGO representatives, and a former chief information commissioner. It shed light on the progress of the law in recent times, highlighting gains made in many areas, and the recurring critical challenges confronting its users.

Many success stories were also accompanied by many disconcerting stories about the attitudes of designated officers (DOs) and relevant public officials towards RTI applicants, and the unfriendly behaviour of the Information Commission towards complainants during hearings. Overall, the seminar provided a rare forum to assess and understand the respective roles of the three main

players of the RTI law, namely the demand side (citizens), the supply side (public officials dealing with RTI), and the adjudicator of disputes (the Information Commission).

Important strides have been made by the demand side in taking the law forward, most significantly in broadening the sphere of RTI requests. While in earlier years applicants were more focused on personal needs, social safety net programmes, entitlement to government services, and other areas of personal interest, they appear to have gradually moved on to issues like land registration, repair work of local roads, and infrastructure construction (such as culverts and bridges). More recently, RTI interventions have included governance and administration issues such as school management, the workings of courts and hospitals, staff training, narcotics control, disbursement of social development funds, road management, climate change, and environmental issues. In the process, citizens have gained experience, confidence, and the courage to confront RTI challenges.

Many NGOs have played a critical role in promoting the law as well. The change of focus in the application of the law, being scaled up gradually from seeking information primarily for personal needs and entitlements to seeking transparency and accountability is largely the outcome of their efforts. Some NGOs, which were earlier focused on rural areas, have subsequently moved on to urban areas, engaging more educated and socially aware citizens. If such progress of RTI law application continues, attention to larger issues of national interest is likely to follow soon.

The gains made by the demand side have been possible because of positive

inputs from the supply side. Out of 5,239 RTI requests made during 22 months of the project period presented by the NGO, 1,840 replies were received, amounting to 35 percent responses. While not satisfactory, this is still noteworthy, given that RTI requests are no longer limited to personal needs – which are easier to handle – and now cover a wide range of transparency and accountability issues. The supply side deserves recognition for this.

But the fact that 65 percent of the requests went unanswered must be a matter of serious concern. This will also reflect poorly on the Unesco report on SDG 16, which includes ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. The statistics on non-response were also exacerbated by many negative stories about the unpleasant behaviour of DOs towards applicants and their penchant for phoning and threatening them with serious consequences for their "audacity" to seek sensitive information. The Information Commission's seeming indifference to DOs ignoring the law is also concerning.

Indications of the growing maturity RTI Act users and the increasing willingness of public officials to abide by its provisions are indeed welcome developments. Measures by the government to bring the large number of delinquent public officials to book and the willingness of the Information Commission to apply the prescribed sanctions against them will take it further. The regeneration of the RTI forum in Bangladesh to coordinate demand-side efforts is equally crucial. Together, we can unfurl the limitless benefits of this versatile law.