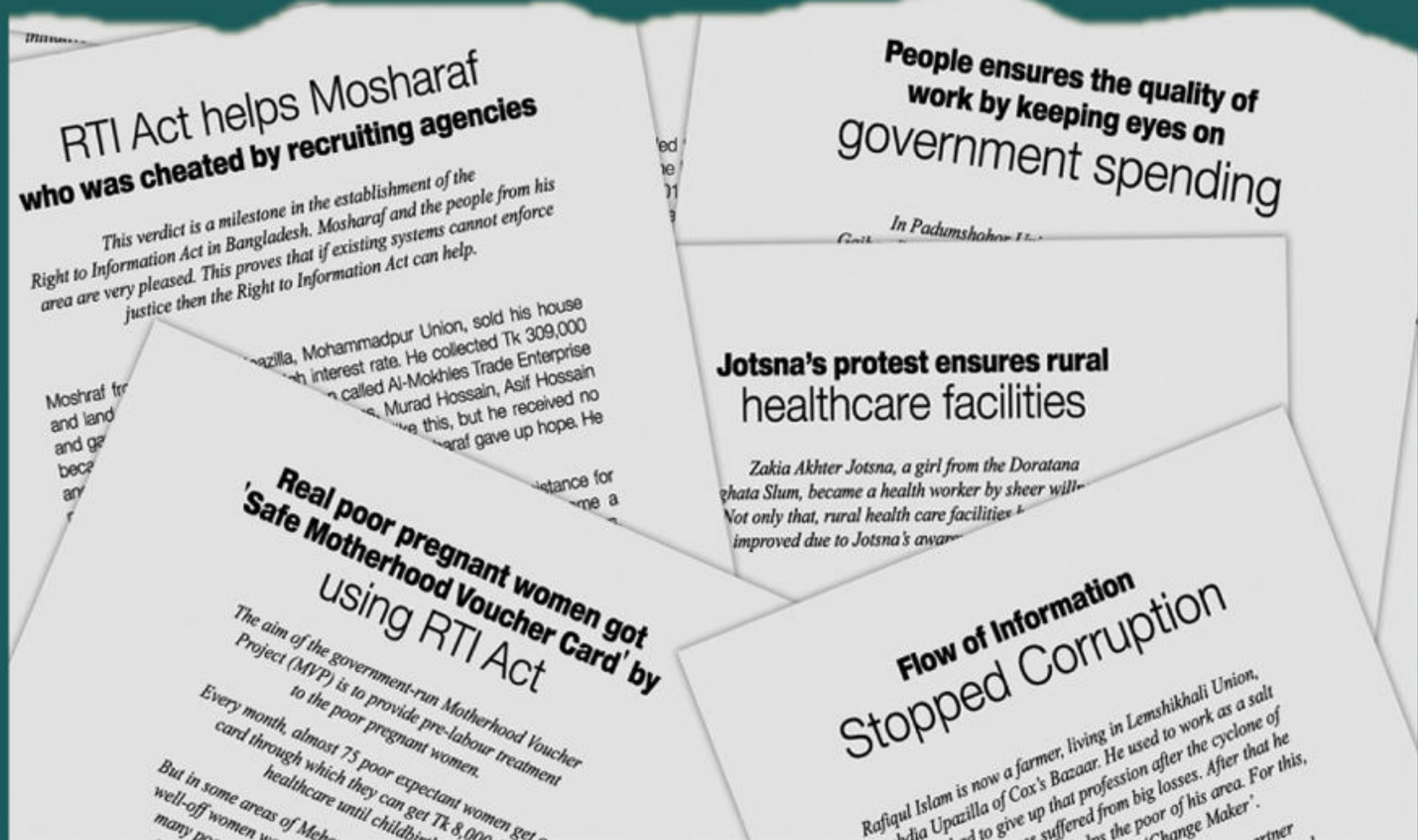




RTI Act 2009, Bangladesh

Success Case Stories of Empowering People



মানুষের জন্য
manusher jonno

promoting human rights and good governance

Right to Information Act

Some Achievements

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Manusher Jonno Foundation

Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) was established with the aim to carry forth human rights and good governance in Bangladesh. This organization is set to achieve people's rights in places where they are ignored, to create connections between projects about human rights and good governance, and to challenge the society's selfishness which is responsible for poverty. To pass a Right to Information Act in Bangladesh, MJF has worked with more than 100 of its partner organizations and also led NGO protests on this matter. At present, MJF is trying to make the government organizations as well as the partner organizations aware of RTI. With this aim in mind, MJF has built a partnership with the government training institute BPATC (Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre) to train government officers and assistant officers related to RTI. Many partner organizations of MJF and groups working with them are using RTI to properly implement the government's projects. Some examples are shown in the booklet.

Flow of Information Stopped Corruption

Rafiqul Islam is now a farmer, living in Lemshikhali Union, Kutubdia Upazilla of Cox's Bazaar. He used to work as a salt farmer but had to give up that profession after the cyclone of 1991. His salt business suffered from big losses. After that he started farming and he also helps the poor of his area. For this, the people elected him as the 'Change Maker'.

Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre, a partner organization of MJF and held a training course on Good governance and Social accountability in 2009 in which Rafiqul took part. He got to know about the RTI Act and learnt that the public also has the right to get government information

Rafiqul's application for information and its result

In November 2009, Rafiqul learnt that the authorities were planning to distribute free rice among the poor of Lemshikhali Union which is under the 'Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)' project. During times of natural disasters, or when food becomes scarce, selected families are given food rations for a few months. But to receive food under this project a VGF card is needed.

Food and Disaster Management Ministry runs a safety net project called 'Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)' to provide food security for the poor in times of famine, flood, cyclone, drought and other natural disasters. This project was started mainly to help day labourers, people without a regular source of income, the landless or people with less than 0.15 acres of land, disabled or victims of natural disasters.

After getting the news of rice distribution, Rafikul asked the Kutubdia Project Implementation Officer (PIO) how much rice each person would get against the VGF cards. But the PIO did not give him any information.

The next day Rafikul went to the PIO's office and said that he knew about the RTI act quite well, and that it was the PIO's duty to give the citizens information about this project. Hearing this PIO told Rafikul that in Lemshikhali 2,725 poor people will get 10 kilograms of rice each. Although Rafikul did not apply any official procedures to obtain this information, he got to know about it anyway because of his awareness of his rights.



The effect of knowing information about rice distribution

On the day of the rice distribution at the Union Parishad Office, the chairman told the rice collectors that each person will get seven kilograms of rice against each VGF card. Hearing this, Rafiqul informed everyone that he learnt from the PIO that each person was supposed to get 10 kg of rice.

After hearing this from Rafiqul, everyone demanded their fair share of rice. The Union Parishad chairman then said that it was not possible for him to give 10 kg because he had to pay for transport and other works related with the rice distribution. The people could protest because they learnt about the original allotment. Finally they forced the chairman to pay them 9.5 kg each.

RTI Act proves the illegality of BGMEA Bhaban

Information extracted with the help of the Right to Information Act has been used in the case against the illegally built BGMEA building. When RAJUK was requested to provide information related to the building, it did not respond in the first place.

Then, after appealing, RAJUK was forced to provide information based on which the court came up with an exemplary verdict in this important case.

Introduction

The construction of the BGMEA building (BGMEA Tower) was nothing but breach of the existing weak administrative laws. The land on which the building was constructed did not have a government registration. During the construction of the building, the 1953 Urban Development Act and Waterbody Conservation Act were violated, and the original owner of the land was not BGMEA but the Bangladesh Railway.

Background

The Export Processing Bureau (EPB) purchased the land from Bangladesh Railway. Later on EPB sold the land to BGMEA. The court's verdict was that the government acquired this land for the people's welfare, and the

government has the constitutional right to do this. But the government cannot sell the land to any private company. If people's welfare is not fulfilled by the acquisition of this land then the government should return it to the original owner.

BELA's Appeal

On 8th July, 2008, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyer's Association (BELA) first appealed to RAJUK, which is covered by the Right to Information Act and looks after land related affairs, for information related to the construction. The matters that were inquired into were whether the building plan was approved, and the reasons and process that went behind the permission to construct a building on a government owned water body. According to the RTI Act, BELA waited through 20 working days, but this did not bear any result.



**Information must be provided when asked
because the RTI law says so**

On the 17th of December, 2009, BELA applied to RAJUK asking for information for the second time. This time an added information was requested for -- whether according to the RTI Act, RAJUK had appointed an Information Officer. But this appeal also concluded in failure. After this, the Public Works and Housing Secretary was considered as the appeal authority of RAJUK and appealed to. According to this, information extracted with the help of the Right to Information Act has been used in the case against the illegally built BGMEA building. When RAJUK were requested to provide information related to this, they did not respond at first. Then, after appealing, RAJUK were forced to produce information. Based on the information supplied by RAJUK, the court could produce an exemplary verdict for this important case.

BELA's complaint to Information Commission

BELA expected the Public Works and Housing Secretary to order the Information Officer to supply information within 15 days, as the 24(3) clause of the RTI Act stipulates. BELA did not get any response to this appeal either. BELA then filed a complaint to the Information Commission. After getting the complaint the Information Commission ordered RAJUK to produce the name and title of their Information Officer and the Appeal Authority. It also asked RAJUK to let the steps it took about this complaint be known, or otherwise, lawful measures would be taken.

As usual, RAJUK remained silent and violated the Information Commission's order.

On 22nd July, 2010, a legal notice was sent to RAJUK's chairman. At long last RAJUK handed over the desired information to BELA on 19th September. It could be clearly seen from the information that conditions tied to the sanction of the land were not followed.

On 2nd October of 2010 a report was published in a daily newspaper. It said that the BGMEA building was constructed without government approval. This news caught notice of the government and the civil society. Accordingly, legal actions were taken. The issue quickly changed to a movement. BELA's lawyers provided documents acquired with the help of the RTI act to the court. BELA's Executive Director, Rizwana Hassan, said at a hearing, '(The construction of this building) breached some laws including the environmental convention.'

The court's verdict was in accord with expectations. Before construction of a structure on a place like this, certain conditions must be fulfilled. It

was also mentioned in the verdict that the land on which the building was constructed does not belong to BGMEA, and the authorities must evict it. The BGMEA building was ordered to be demolished. Relevant organizations were given time to remove their offices from the building. The court agreed that the Hatirjheel Project was to go on according to the plan.

BELA has not yet received the complete copy of the verdict. But no matter what the end result is this verdict will work as a cautionary example for the influential people. This case proved that the Right to Information Act can aid the general people to uphold their rights and opinions and also to establish them.

Landless farmers got information after following the procedure

In Char Alexander, the landless had been fighting for long to get the government to allot Khash land to them.

Recently, by appealing under the Right to Information Act, they have been able to get information related to the Khash lands in the Union, though not of the Upazilla.

By faking the papers, the tenure holders of the area have taken illegal possession of most of the khash lands.

Lack of interest in distributing the Khash lands on the part of government workers has made this even easier for them.

This year the landless people's committee has taken the initiative to find out the state of their Khash lands with the help of the Right to Information Act.

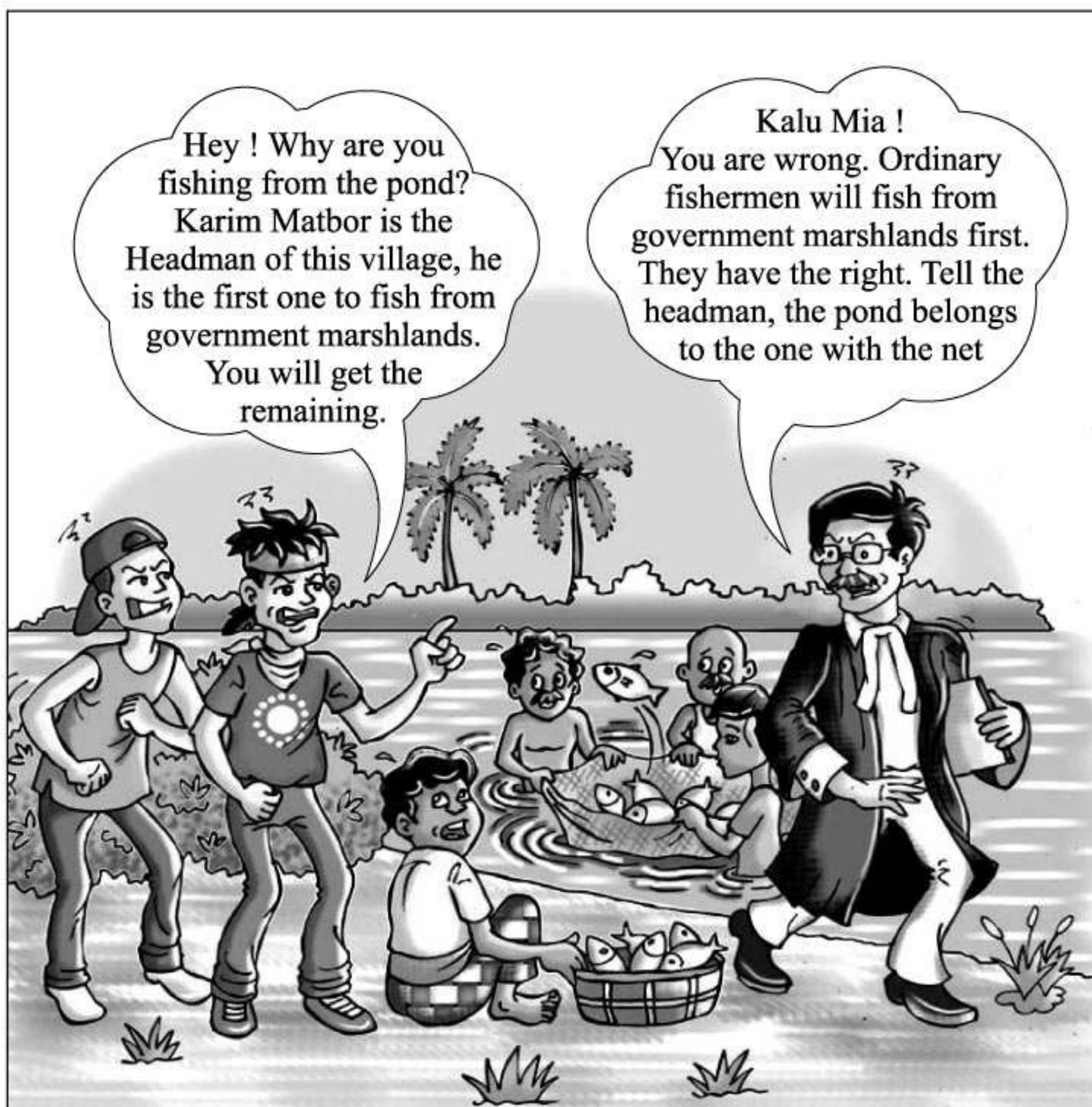
Failure at first

Reaz, a member of Char Alexander Landless Committee, appealed to the Union's Assistant Land Officer asking for information related to the Khash lands under the Right to Information Act on 23rd September, 2010. The assistant land officer accepted this appeal and as a proof of acceptance signed it. When Reaz went to get the information on the appointed day, he was told that it would not be possible to entertain his appeal. When Reaz

wanted to know the reason behind this he was told by the assistant land officer to appeal again to the Upazilla Land Officer.

Success at the second appeal

The landless committee held a meeting with its members about what actions could be taken next. It was decided that a complaint will be filed to the Upazilla Administration about the lack of co-operation by the Upazilla Land Office to produce information. On 24th November, more than a hundred landless people formed a rally in front of the Upazilla Land Office. They verbally complained to the Information Officer that the Upazilla Land Office refused to give them necessary information without providing any reason. The Assistant Commissioner, faced with their demands, proposed to discuss the matter immediately. At one point during the discussion, the assistant commissioner said that there is an information officer in the Upazilla land office and he also assured that if appealed to him he will provide necessary information within a short time.



A landless person named Siddikur Rahman appealed to the Information Officer of the Upazilla Land office. The Information Officer produced Khash Land related information which the landless people wanted to know.

From this incident, the landless people realized that verbal complaining has no results. For this reason the Administration did not take any step against the Union Land Office for not co-operating with the landless people. The landless people have decided that from now on they will file a written and unified complaint if they ever need to.

People ensures the quality of work by keeping eyes on government spending

In Padumshohor Union of Shaghata thana, Gaibandha, work was disrupted during the extension of a government school house. Landless leaders associated with the school management committee raised questions about this.

When they built public opinion on this, the government authorities were forced to take notice of the matter. At last, under pressure from all sides, the contractor also finished the work appropriately.

Majider Vita Government Primary School is situated in Padumshohor Union. Though it was a government school, it had many problems including a lack of space. For these reasons, it was not possible to continue educational programs. The teachers filed an application to the government, asking for it to extend the school building.

In the 2010-2011 election, landless committee leader Fazlul Haque became the president of the school management committee. After getting elected, Fazlul Haque discussed plans of the school's extension with other members of the landless committee. The members collected 3000 signatures in a petition to extend the school building. With the support of



the landless leaders, the school management committee presented a memorandum to the officer-in-charge of Primary Education Improvement Project. Copies of the application were also sent to the primary education ministry, local government ministry and also the rural development ministry.

The application for the school extension was approved. This project was named the 'extra classroom construction' project. The engineering department of the local government ministry was given the responsibility to implement this project. The cost was estimated at TK 12, 75504. In June 2010, the local government's engineering department called for tender. Abdul Hamid Babu, being the lowest bidder, was given the work.

Later on Abdul Hamid Babu gave the work to local contactor Enamul. Sub contractor Enamul started the work on 7th August, 2010 but did not pay much attention to the quality of the work. Seeing this, the landless committee wanted detailed information about the project, including the design of the building and the specification of ingredients. The committee got this information on the 26th of September and started using it to inspect the work's progress. The landless committee saw differences between the project's plan and actual work.

On 27th September, the committee discovered that more sand was mixed with the cement than was specified in the plan, and the rods used were of inferior quality. Then the landless demanded that the developers showed their construction plan. Instead of listening to them, the developers threatened them. To avoid scuffles the landless left the place and sat at a meeting to discuss what actions they could take. They decided to give the memorandum to the upazilla technician and the local government technical office. They also decided to invoke public opinion on this and highlight the contractor's failure before the government authority.

On 29th September the landless submitted 200 signatures and a memorandum to the upazilla administration's technician. After submitting the memorandum the landless committee stopped the construction work. On 10th October the Upazilla's technician, the owner of the main developer organization and the chairman of Padumshohor Union Parisad came to inspect the situation. Almost 300 men and women came to support them. Investigations proved that proper ingredients were not used to build the foundation. Members of the landless committee demanded the answers to some of their questions:

- 1) Why the sub inspector was appointed
- 2) Why the contractor did not provide information of the construction though it was demanded
- 3) Why builders from outside were appointed and
- 4) Why the project manager did not come to inspect the work regularly

After hearing these questions the technician agreed that the project inspection was insufficient. For this reason some changes were brought to the project. The main contractor was asked to do the work himself. They built the foundation again based on the specifications, and the engineer agreed to visit the building regularly. The extension project was completed on 9th November due to the unified intervention of the landless.

Movement of the landless forced Union Parishad to change the Policy

After the 2010-11 national budget was declared, members of the Amanullah landless committee became interested to learn about the agriculture sector programmes in the budget. They also analyzed the national agricultural policy themselves.

Seeing the importance of Union Parishad while implementing the agricultural policy, they also became interested in the Union Parishad's budget. Consequently, the landless discovered some problems in the Union Parishad's administration, especially in the distribution of agricultural cards. When they raised protests against this, the Union Parishad was forced to correct its ways.

At first the landless collected a copy of the National Agriculture Policy 2010 with the help from 'Nijera Kori'. After reading it they learnt that the Union Parishad was given great responsibilities in the implementation of the agricultural policy. They also wanted to learn about the budget and development plans related to the Union Parishad. The committee at one point raised questions about the legality of the Union Parishad's source of income.

To collect the 2010-11 budget of the Union Parisad the landless applied to the Union Parisad chairman on the 3rd August, 2010. The chairman gave them a photocopy of the budget on 21st October. They analyzed the budget and found that instead of the needs of the local people, the Union Parisad undertook the development projects according to its own wishes. The landless decided that they will raise demands to undertake correct development projects based on the needs on the local people. Meanwhile, the Union Parisad started distributing the agricultural cards. The landless committee decided that it will at first investigate how the Union Parisad chose the farmers to give the cards.



The landless people demand information

On 16th September, 2010, Amanullah Union Parisad organized a discussion on the opening of the agricultural card distribution programme. Government officials, elected representative for the people, and the locals all took part in this. After the opening speech, a member of the landless committee, Shah Alam, demanded that the Union Parisad inform everyone about how the farmers, who got the agricultural cards, were selected. Shah Alam also wanted to know -

- 1) Whether the draft of the list of people will be displayed before everyone
- 2) Whether it will be finalized after considering everyone's opinion and
- 3) Whether the farmers will have to pay to take the card

Everyone present at the meeting supported these demands. The Upazilla chairman and assistant agricultural officer gave a short speech on the procedures of the card distribution and the responsibilities and duties related to it. They said Along with the proposal the draft will be sent to the Upazilla Agricultural Officer. The cards issued by the Upazilla Parisad will be sent to the Union Parisad for distribution. The farmers will collect their cards from there free of charges.

Unlawfully demanding money in the name of the Union Parisad's income

When the farmers later went to the Amanullah Union Parisad, the UP Secretary demanded Tk 20 for each card. Some people agreed to give the money. Quickly, the news of the secretary's demand for money spread. The landless committee organized a meeting with the local people about the actions to be taken. The landless committee wanted to find more information about this. They also decided that if possible, the Union Parisad would be held responsible before the people. Led on by the landless committee, more than 400 people congregated at the Union Parisad on the 28th October.

The Parisad's secretary said money was taken from the people to fill the Union Parisad's treasury. But the people would not give in. they said there was no mention of money to be paid in the government rule. The Union Parisad was not giving any receipt for this either. The landless clearly stated that what the Parisad secretary did was bribery and thus a crime.

Establishing accountability

The landless gathered at the Upazilla Parisad office and started shouting slogans. Then the chairman said, “The Union Parisad cannot demand 20 taka per card as its income. The government’s law has fixed the source of income of the Parisad. We decided to take the money to increase our income, because the money kept aside for the development work is not enough. But we should have consulted you first. We didn’t do that, and that was a big mistake. We are sorry for that. We can promise you that this will not happen in the future and from now on we will make unified decisions through discussions.”

Lesson Learnt

The landless challenged the information given out by the Union Parisad. For this, 300 farmers could get their cards without paying bribes. The landless understood that it is not possible to obtain information by individual action but by protesting together.

Jotsna's protest ensures rural healthcare facilities

Zakia Akhter Jotsna, a girl from the Doratana Ferryghata Slum, became a health worker by sheer willpower and goodwill. Not only that, rural health care facilities have been ensured and improved due to Jotsna's awareness and movement

Although she herself is very poor, Jotsna has sympathy for everyone else. Whenever someone is ill or in trouble, she tries to be by their side. One day Jotsna had to leave her village and go to Dhaka to find work. She started working at a private clinic.

After working there for a while she returned to her village. One day, a neighbor of her who recently became a mother suddenly fell ill. Hearing the news, Jotsna went to her. After seeing the condition of the child and the mother, she took them both to a Mother and Child Care Clinic. But even after waiting there for two hours they were forced to return without any treatment.

A few days later a woman from an NGO called Shaplapool came to Jotsna's village to teach them about reproductive healthcare. The women of the village understood the value of unified endeavour to ensure their rights. A village development committee was formed with 25 women and Jotsna was elected the chairperson. This is how the movement to ensure reproductive healthcare started there. Information about reproductive



health, treatment procedures for expectant mothers and places to receive healthcare service from was provided by Shaplahpool.

Jotsna says, "We have learnt a lot about women's health. Now we are aware and confident. We no more have to return from hospitals without getting treatment."

A year went by like this. Meantime, Jotsna took part in some health related training courses and workshops and became more aware of her rights. She also helps women in her neighbourhood by giving them advice. One day she had to take another pregnant woman to the mother and child care centre. They got the same kind of behaviour from the clinic workers again. But Jotsna was not silent any more, she protested.

Hearing her voice, the doctor came out and took her to his chamber and tested the patient and gave her a prescription. But they had to buy medicines from outside. A few days later Shaplahpool organized a meeting where Jotsna mentioned how she could not get medicine from the clinic. The doctor present heard this complain and assured her that patients will get medicines in future.

Jotsna's responsibility has increased. She now has to go to village development committee meetings as well as accompany patients to the hospital. She has become a familiar face to the doctors there. Jotsna says, "Now when I take patients to the hospital the doctors behave nicely with me and talk to me. I never expected such good behaviour from them!"

RTI Act helps Mosharaf **who was cheated by recruiting agencies**

This verdict is a milestone in the establishment of the Right to Information Act in Bangladesh. Mosharaf and the people from his area are very pleased. This proves that if existing systems cannot enforce justice then the Right to Information Act can help.

Moshraf from Daudkandi Upazilla, Mohammadpur Union, sold his house and land and took a loan at a high interest rate. He collected Tk 309,000 and gave the money to an organization called Al-Mokhles Trade Enterprise because he wanted to send his three sons, Murad Hossain, Asif Hossain and Zakir Hossain abroad. Years passed by like this, but he received no news from the recruiting agency. At one stage Mosharaf gave up hope. He was already in hardship.

At a time like this Mosharaf came in contact with AHRDT (Assistance for Human Resource Development with Technology). Mosharaf became a member of a committee working with the rights of the migrant workers. From this committee he learnt about migration. Mosharaf found out that the government's Manpower Employment Training Bureau (BMET) received online complaints about fraudulence of recruiting agencies. He then sought help to file a complaint from MRPC and AHRDT.

In August of 2010 Mosharaf complained to BMET online about the recruiting agency. He also went to BMET four times himself to get a hearing but to no avail. MRPC or AHRDT could not help him about this either.

Using Right to Information Act

Manusher Jonno Foundation hosted a daylong workshop about Right to Information at Daudkandi of Kushtia in January of 2011. Local members of MRPC and AHRDT took part in this. Through this they learnt how through this act they could get answers to their problems. After learning that the cheated workers could get justice, the workshop participants got very inspired and told the locals about this.



Moshraf also learnt about the Right to Information Act. Then he, with the help from MRPC and AHRDT, applied to BMET this March, asking for a copy of the verdict on his complaint. But he did not get any response within the stipulated time. So in April he applied again to the Information Commission, and became successful.

In May he got a letter from BMET director general about the verdict. The letter stated that Musharaf's complaint was correct and that the recruiting agency would have to pay Musharaf 2 lakh 52 thousand taka within June 15. If it failed, then according to the 1982 Immigration Ordinance the recruiting agency would be punished.

To view government documents RTI Act makes it possible

On an average, more than 2 lakh 25 thousand Bangladeshis take jobs abroad and immigrate. To ensure orderly immigration, until now the Bangladeshi government has signed Memorandum of Understandings (MOU) with more than seven labour receiving countries.

Before signing the MOU, different civil society organizations and migrant workers' associations had urged the government to hold discussions with the stakeholders. In many meetings and discussions they had wanted to see a copy of the MOUs, to get to know if the rights of the migrant workers have been properly represented.

It is very important to analyze the MOU to find out if it has any shortcomings. But the ministries and relevant departments have been displaying nonchalance under the excuse of secrecy. For this, the people knew little about the MOUs.

On 2nd November, 2010, an official from Manusher Jonno Foundation tried to obtain information with help of the Right to Information Act. He had sent an application to the Expatriate's Welfare and Foreign Employment Ministries asking for a copy of the MOU signed between Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates.

The relevant official gave him a copy of the MOU on the 27th December, 2010. The demand of human rights workers was fulfilled by this. Now many individuals and organizations working with the rights of migrant workers can get it easily and help the government by discussing different aspects of the MOU.



**To cure a patient
you need medicine
and to cure the administration
provide information**

RTI Act ensures social accountability of government organizations

Awareness about the RTI Act has made it possible for Abdus Sattar of Islamkathi Union of Tala Upazilla in Satkhira to exercise his rights and on the other hand ensures social accountability of government organizations

Abdus Sattar of Islamkathi Union of Tala Upazilla in Satkhira collected information about the Union's pension from the Upazilla Social Welfare officer under the Right to Information Act. In the documents he found some inconsistency about the total number of beneficiaries. He talked to the UP chairman about this, but the UP chairman could not provide him with the correct information. Rather he asked the Upazilla social welfare officer why he gave Abdus Sattar the information.

To get a clear answer Sattar went to the Upazilla social welfare officer again. But this time the officer told him that he could get it after auditing. Once the audit was done the officer acknowledged that the inconsistency occurred in the list as some beneficiaries died.

In another case, the project officer of an organization, Agrogoti, asked for some information from the Upazilla social welfare officer. The officer hesitated to provide the information. Then the project officer reminded him



that he is legally obliged to give the information. The officer asked him to apply according to the procedure.

Following filing of the application, the social welfare officer provided the project officer with a list of widows who receive benefits in the Islamkathi Union, and pensioner in the Magura Union.

The social welfare officer has asked Abdus Sattar to apply properly after the finalization of the draft. The audit has ended recently. Abdus Sattar is preparing to apply for information about this matter again.

This has been possible because of inclusion of Right to Information projects by Agrogoti Shongstha with help from Manusher Jonno Foundation. Projects like 'ensuring transparent and accountable local government' and 'community scorecards in primary schools and social security' have been noticeably successful in establishing the people's rights about receiving information.

RTI Act helps ensure minimal wages in the shrimp processing industry

On 21st November, 2009, the government declared a minimal wage for the shrimp processing industry. The aim of the minimal wage was to ensure financial security of the labourers. It must be mentioned that the minimal wage is an essential part of the labour law.

Safe, a partner organization of Manusher Jonno Foundation, tries to observe whether the labour law is being correctly implemented. So they ran a survey on the implementation of the labour law in the shrimp processing industries

It was important for Safe to acquire information on the number of factories that paid the minimal wage in the Safe project areas. Safe worker Asaduzzaman wanted to know from the Khulna Labour Office about the number of shrimp processing factories which paid the minimal wage.

On 15th July, 2010, he personally went to the Information Officer of the Deputy Head Invigilator's (DHI) office, and applied for the information under the Right to Information Act. The DHI refused to accept the application.

Seeing his reluctance, Asaduzzaman applied a few days later through a registered letter.

But after 20 working days he still did not get a reply. As it did not work, he appealed through mail to the appeal authority (Head invigilator, labour office). In reply to this, the head invigilator sent a letter to the deputy head invigilator of Khulna division, advising him to give the information. Then a phone call from the related office asked Asaduzzaman to write an ordinary letter and ask for information. Asaduzzaman accordingly sent a letter to the deputy head invigilator, but even then there was no response.

On the 30th September, Asaduzzaman filed a complaint to the Chief Information Commissioner. Surprisingly, he got a letter from the related office with his information on that same day. But it was not mentioned in the letter that the information was supplied according to the RTI law, and the information was partially incorrect.

On the 31st January, 2011, Asad got a letter from the Information Commission, asking him to participate in a hearing on the 15th February. Asad informed the information commission about the misinformation. The labour office said that 39 organizations pay minimal wages. Asad told the commission that out of these, one is from Chittagong, which is not a Safe project area. According to Safe, in that area the number of operating factories were 34. The rest were closed at that time.

Since Asaduzzaman could not be present at the first hearing, he appealed for time. Later on the 15th March, he presented evidence in favor of his complaint at the hearing. At the hearing on the 21st March, the chief information commissioner ordered the deputy head invigilator Belayet to provide correct information within the next Tuesday. The chief information commissioner also criticized two assistants of Belayet, present at that time, for not providing information. Asaduzzaman got his desired information at last on the 27th March.

It can be observed that because of the Right to Information Act, the quality of government operation has improved. Related offices have also become more active in providing information. As a result, all 37 shrimp processing factories working under Safe project areas are paying the government declared minimum wage to its workers.

Real poor pregnant women got 'Safe Motherhood Voucher Card' by using RTI Act

The aim of the government-run Motherhood Voucher Project (MVP) is to provide pre-labour treatment to the poor pregnant women.

Every month, almost 75 poor expectant women get a card through which they can get Tk 8,000 for healthcare until childbirth.

But in some areas of Meherpur district, some relatively well-off women were enlisted in the project, depriving many poor women. At last, the landless of the area succeeded in preventing this with the help of the Right to Information law.

The landless committee received complaints about inconsistency in the distribution of 'Safe motherhood voucher project' cards. Members of the committee then went from house to house, collecting information from poor expectant women. They saw that instead of the needy, many relatively well off women had gotten the card. They also found out that the officers of Dhankhola and Shohorbati Union's Gangni Municipality took Tk 200 as bribe for each card they distributed. The officers also stopped distributing cards at one point. It probably happened because some of the poor could not pay bribes.



Application for Information

The President of the landless committee of Gangni Municipality, along with three other members, applied to the Upazilla health officer on the 19th July of 2010, asking for information about the Motherhood Health Voucher project. They wanted to know --

- 1) How many cards will be distributed every month in each Municipality and Union
- 2) What are the conditions of receiving the cards
- 3) Who is in charge of distributing the cards
- 4) What are the services available under the card
- 5) What is the amount to be paid under the card
- 6) Whether the selected families need to pay a fee to register for the card and 7) If they need to pay a fee to register, what the amount of the fee is

It could be known from the Upazilla health office that 47 families of Dhankhola and 33 families of Shohorbati had received the cards till now. No information was provided about Gangni Municipality.

The landless people complained that the health officer took very long to provide information and also provided incomplete information. The landless health committee meanwhile called an urgent meeting about this inconsistency and the reluctance of officers to provide information. The committee initiated to collect proper information, evidence and support. Well wishers, workers of the elected municipality mayor, and the Upazilla chairman supported this initiative.

From death to life

“After conceiving my second child, I went to the hospital thrice for check-up. My child was a caesarian baby. I received financial help and treatment for three months before the child was born, I got baby food and diapers from the hospital after the baby was born” said Bilkis Akhter, a member of the landless committee.

Bilkis went through many hardships after her marriage. Her husband did not have any land and worked as a day labourer. When her first child was born she did not know about the facilities of Safe Motherhood Voucher Card (SMVC). Bilkis got to know about the SMVC before her second childbirth. Bilkis thinks that she could get one card because the landless committee held a protest rally and demanded impartial distribution of cards.

She said, “It was not possible for my poor husband to pay for the operation as well as the household expenses. It was possible to get this operation free for the SMVC. It was possible to ensure my health and also the health of my newborn. It also helped manage my familial expenses.”

On the 29th July, more than 200 people held a protest rally. At the end of the rally, a memorandum was submitted to the civil surgeon's office. Copies of the memorandum were given to Meherpur district administrator, Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (UNO), Upazilla health and family welfare officer, and the chairman of Meherpur's Gangni Upazilla.

The landless also made a list of 20 families who paid bribes to get the card. To show evidence of inconsistency to the municipality chairman, Upazilla chairman and Upazilla health officer, the landless held a discussion with them. At the meeting, the landless leaders wanted to know details about the project. In reply, the Upazilla Health officer admitted that information could not be supplied due to lack of sufficient information at the office and grassroots level. He assured the landless leaders that proper information will be supplied.

Knowing about the application filed by the landless, the Civil Surgeon came to investigate it on the 1st August. He found that the complaints were correct. More than 300 landless gathered at the school field of Dharmachaki village and demanded justice from the civil surgeon. The civil surgeon asked the people present to draw up a list of beneficiaries. They enlisted the names of 20 poor expectant women. All of these women got the cards, and the health officer convicted for bribery was transferred. He also had to return the bribe he received from the people.

Synopsis on

RTI Capacity Building Pilot Program

This pilot program was undertaken to mobilize both demand and supply sides in a pilot district to popularize the use of RTI Act, 2009. 59 Designated Officers of Manikganj District (as pilot area) from 8 departments were given training on RTI in Bangladesh Public Administration Training Center. 5 local NGOs were onboard in the program to create awareness (on RTI) at community level. A number of their staff received training on RTI.

Objective of the programme

- a) to capacitate the Designated Officers so that they can implement RTI Act efficiently,
- b) to sensitize the communities for creating demand for information and
- c) mainstreaming RTI training through institutionalizing it into other training institutes.

The major components of the programme

- a) trainings of selected DOs working in GOB departments of seven Upazilas of Manikganj district,
- b) NGO capacity building for raising awareness of communities of Manikganj and c) training of trainers (TOT) targeting GOB training institutes.

As per the plan (developed during training session) the trained designated officers have started providing information. Most of them are reported to be sincere in releasing information. They are less likely to delay. A number among them maintains track as far as information request is concerned. A

number of information requests have already been submitted to the trained Designated Officers. Sought information was provided. The concerned organizations carried out activities like courtyard meeting, announcing, arranging drama show and local level seminar which, to certain extent, resulted in creating awareness among the community people. 8 training institutes have received Training of Trainers (TOT). These institutes are expected to incorporate RTI in their regular programs.

Major lesson learnt

- Partnership with Public training institutes for capacity building initiative is a key step for mainstreaming RTI into training curriculum. Example foundation course
- Unless RTI is linked with livelihood issues directly demand for information will not be at momentum peak. NGOs and other intermediary group should learn how to link RTI with right to food, shelter and other basic rights.
- Only training to Designated Officers is not enough to ensure functional information unit mass awareness for demand for information and sensitization at all level particularly higher authority are key factors
- On the job training for handling information request, proactive disclosure and documentation is needed apart from institution-based training.