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We Want Effective Implementation of the Right to Information Act

The Right to Information Act 2009 was passed in the Jatiya Sangsad on 29 March this year, with the goal of strengthening democracy and establishing good governance in the country. We know from our experience that successful implementation of a law is more difficult than its formulation. According to Section 13 of the Right to Information Act 2009, the main responsibility for implementing the law lies with the Information Commission. Almost three months have elapsed since the formation of the Commission on 1 July 2009. Everybody expects that the operations of the commission will soon be geared up.

Free flow of information has proved to be a precondition for institutionalising democracy, establishing good governance and curbing corruption. Showing respect to its election pledge, the government earned praise and accolade of all by passing the bill in the very first session of the Parliament. Expectations of people also rose considerably as a consequence. The responsibility for creating an environment to make information available in line with the needs and demands of the people primarily lies with relevant quarters both within and outside the government.

There are clear stipulations in the law on obtaining and providing information. According to Section 8 of the Act, any person can submit application for obtaining information in writing or through e-mail to the concerned official by mentioning his name and address. This application should be in a printed form in general. However, citizens should be given a comprehensive idea on the subject to implement this law properly. The demand for information can be generated only through creating awareness. Different public and private sector bodies, the Information Commission and the mass media should play a proactive role in generating such mass awareness. When the people become conscious about their right to get information, then demands will be raised and they will be benefited in the process.

A culture of secrecy has been in vogue in the administration of Bangladesh since long. Although not impossible, it cannot be changed overnight. A mindset in favour of disclosing information should be nurtured by all concerned institutions, especially in the light of pledges made from the highest echelon of the state. People will get benefit and the law will bear fruit if different organisations disclose information spontaneously. Although the main responsibility in this area lay with respective organisations, the Information Commission can play an enterprising and active part. The mass media should also play a supportive role.

There is lack of clarity among government officers and employees regarding the Right to Information Law. As it is ultimately their responsibility to implement this law, proper application of the law would become difficult without their cooperation and support. Training of relevant officials on the subject is therefore urgently needed. Relevant non-government organisations should come forward in this regard alongside the government.

An effective system of the delivery, management and storage needs to be built up for deriving benefits from this Act. Modernisation of information management is essential for examining required information and making its copy. The relevant offices should also be modernised by utilising various facilities of information technology, so that people can obtain information fast.

Section 33 of the Act mentions about framing of rules by the government through a gazette notification, after consultations with the Information Commission. Similarly, Section 34 stipulates that the Commission can frame regulations through gazette notification after receiving permission from the government. It is known that the work on formulating rules and regulations is now under process. It should be done through consultations with relevant experts.

Above all, firm political commitment is needed for successful implementation of the Right to Information Act. The government will have to play the most important role in ensuring proper application and utilisation of this law. Progress should be made by following a specific implementation strategy and action plan. This can be done through participation of all relevant quarters including the ministries, civil society, non-government development organisations and the media. All concerned should be mobilised for this purpose. We want an effective implementation of the Right to Information Act.
Compared to the 8th Parliament, the first session of the 9th Parliament played a much more effective and positive role in strengthening democracy. Formation of the Parliamentary Standing Committees and regular holding of the Prime Minister’s question-answer session were notable features of the first session. All the 48 standing committees were constituted in the first session, which is a positive development in the annals of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. Another notable facet was the election of some of the committee chairmen from opposition MPs.

Speakers made the above comments while speaking at the roundtable discussion titled ‘What should be done to enhance the effectiveness of Jatiya Sangsad’. The roundtable was organised by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) on the occasion of releasing its regular research report on ‘Parliament-Watch 2009: First Session of the Ninth Parliament’ held in Dhaka on 4 July.

The event was chaired by the Secretary-General of TIB Trustee Board, Prof. Abdullah Abu Sayeed, while the Deputy Speaker of Jatiya Sangsad, Shoukat Ali MP was present as the Chief Guest. A number of parliamentarians including Prof. Syed Ali Ashraf, Lt. General (Retd.) Mahbubur Rahman, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, Mainuddin Khan Badal, Rasheda Begum Heera and Junaid Ahmed Palak, former Chief Election Commissioner Justice M A Rouf, TIB Trustee Board member Prof. Muzaffer Ahmad and Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman were present. Research Fellow of TIB Tanvir Mahmud presented the key findings of the report.

According to the findings, a notable feature of the 9th Parliamentary Election was the direct election of 20 females as MPs, which was the highest in all the previous elections. However, on the other hand, female members were nominated to only 17 out of 48 standing committees constituted during the session. One of the female members was made the Chairperson of a committee, which, nonetheless, is a good beginning. It can be said on the basis of available information that the role of the women MPs still remains marginal in framing...
laws, representing people and establishing accountability despite their growth in numbers.

TIB has monitored all the 23 sessions of the 8th Parliament since 2001, and published six reports at different stages. As a continuation of that practice, TIB started this research from the very first working day of the 9th Parliament. This study has been carried out to evaluate the expected role of the Parliament and parliamentarians, analyse qualitative changes in parliamentary proceedings of current parliament compared to the previous one, and to formulate recommendations for strengthening parliamentary democracy.

It was observed that in total 1548 minutes or 25 hours and 48 minutes were wasted due to shortage of quorum. Almost 40 minutes on an average were wasted per day due to this problem. Around Tk 35,000 per minute is spent during the Parliament sessions. Based on this estimate, around Tk 54 million 180 thousand were wasted in the first session due to shortage of quorum.
Main Report

A total of 1,538 candidates contested in the 9th national election held on 29 December 2008. Among the elected members, 58% were elected for the first time. Most of the MPs are well-educated, while the main profession of 59% MPs is business.

The first session commenced on 25 January 2009. It was observed that the first working day of the first session started 18 minutes after the scheduled time. The total time spent in 39 working days of the first session was 145 hours 22 minutes. The average sitting time for working days was 3 hours 43 minutes. Of this, 23.8% was spent for question-answer session of ministers, 3.3% for question-answer session of the Prime Minister, 20.5% for discussions on the President’s speech, 9.7% for framing laws, 14.6% for rejected notices, and 7.2% for discussions on accepted notices.

A total of 29 hours 45 minutes was spent on discussing the inaugural speech by the President Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed on the first working day of the first session, where 184 MPs including the Prime Minister, ministers and leader of the opposition took part. Another notable aspect was that although the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina congratulated the outgoing President while discussing his speech, the Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia did not thank him who was basically nominated by her government.

Eight working days were apportioned for the Prime Minister during the first session. Of these, the Prime Minister gave direct answers on seven days, while the answers to questions were placed on the table on one occasion. It was observed that a total of 4 hours 48 minutes was spent for this purpose, of which the Prime Minister consumed 3 hours 11 minutes, while the ministers consumed 34 hours 33 minutes for answering questions, which was 23.8% of total time spent.

A total of 5 hours 20 minutes (3.7% of the total time) was spent on points of order. The members paid eulogies to the leaders of their respective parties 251 times. Maximum incidents of eulogies were enacted by the members of the Treasury. The ruling and opposition members criticised their counterparts 342 times, while dwelling on irrelevant discussions, of which the treasury members had a share of 300.

The first session went on for 145 hours and 22 minutes. The Speaker presided over the sessions for 96 hours 43 minutes (66.5%). Study says he hurried the members to finish their deliberations 733 times. Of this, the treasury members had a share of 642 times while the opposition had a share of 91 times. He turned the microphone off 46 times, of which 32 times in case of the ruling party members while the number was 14 for opposition party members. It was observed that he did all these to all categories of members irrespective of party affiliations for the sake of time-management.

Of the 39 resolutions brought during the first session, 29 were put to vote. Of these, only 4 were adopted by the Parliament through voice votes. Beside, 72 notices were accepted for discussion. It was observed that the acceptance and distribution

Reactions and TIB’s Statement

A long discussion took place on 7 July in the Jatiya Sangsad on TIB’s ‘Parliament-Watch 2009’ report, which was earlier released on 4 July.

It may be recalled that TIB observed all the sessions of Eighth Parliament starting from the first session and published six reports based on them at different stages. As a continuation, the TIB report on the first session of the Ninth Parliament was released on 4 July at a roundtable. This report was not anything new, rather was a continuation of the research undertaken during the tenure of the Eighth Parliament. As before, various data were supplied by the Jatiya Sangsad Secretariat after sanction by relevant authorities of the Parliament for the purpose of conducting research. Besides, time was measured through stopwatch by listening directly to parliamentary proceedings broadcast by Bangladesh Betar. Various data were analysed after collecting them through specific research formats.

It was seen after making a comparative analysis of the first sessions of the Eighth and Ninth Parliaments that some positive measures were taken during the first session of Ninth Parliament. These were specifically mentioned in the report. These included formation of all standing committees during the first session and their active functioning, nomination of committee chairmen from among the opposition, neutral stance of the Speaker in allotting floors on various issues, election of female MPs to reserved seats and their nomination to committee chairmanship during the very first session, participation of opposition members alongside those of the treasury during question-answer sessions of the ministers and the Prime Minister. The pledge and
of notices were proportionate to the representation of parties in the parliament. A total of 14 hours and 6 minutes were spent on legislative work during the 1st Session of 9th Parliament, which was 9.7% of the total. Besides, 32 bills were passed during this period.

The main opposition party had boycotted the Parliament for consecutive 17 work-days with effect from 28 January 2009, in protest against seating arrangements in the Parliament. They returned to the Parliament following a proposal and assurance given by the Speaker regarding a solution of the problem on February 2, 2009. In addition, they staged walk-outs on various issues which is a part of our parliamentary culture. However, the main opposition party had pledged in their election manifesto, “No party or alliance shall boycott any session or sitting of Parliament with the exception of issue-based walk-outs.” This pledge should be fulfilled for the sake of institutionalisation of democracy.

After analysing the facts and data on the 1st Session of 9th Parliament, TIB made a number of recommendations. Some of these are: bringing amendment to Article 70 of the Constitution; nominating opposition members for Chairmanship of important standing committees including that on public accounts; not making a Minister a member of committee related to Ministry; introducing one hour-long direct question-answer session for the Prime Minister every week; regular attendance by the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition in the Parliament; joining of Parliament by the opposition and shunning the culture of parliamentary boycott in order to institutionalise parliamentary democracy; avoiding un-parliamentary languages in deliberations and upholding mutual respect and tolerant outlook; taking measures for recording attendance of MPs through an automated process and informing the people about it through website or other mass media; reducing the current provision of 90 days to 30 days for vacation of parliamentary seats on account of absence; election of the Deputy Speaker from among opposition MPs; verifying the assets of MPs and making those public; making the budget preparation and execution process transparent and participatory; enhancing the powers of committees dealing with official funds and freeing them from party influence; according to rules of business 188 (2) ensuring omission of members in committees whose inclusion may lead to personal vengeance or clash of interest; raising the share of women MPs in committees; increasing the number of reserved seats for women and holding direct elections for filling up those seats; informing the people about the proceedings of standing committees including their recommendations; holding of sessions during mornings instead of afternoons; raising the number of working days to 135 from the present 100; providing access to all mass media including public and private radio stations, television channels and newspapers during parliamentary sessions; and appointing a parliamentary ombudsman and framing of code of conduct for MPs.
September 8 is the International Literacy Day. The UNESCO declared this day as International Literacy Day on 17 November 1965. Since then, the day is being observed globally each year through various programmes. The United Nations General Assembly declared the decade starting from January 2003 as the literacy decade. The main objective of International Literacy Day is to highlight the importance of literacy to all people, communities and societies of the world. This year, the main theme of the day was ‘Literacy and Power’.

Although right to education has been recognised as a fundamental right in our constitution, this right of the people could not be established yet. It may be noted that 15% of the national budget is allocated each year for education, of which 60% goes to the primary education sector. But despite of getting highest allocation, the common people are still deprived of literacy or quality primary education. This is happening due to irregularities, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability in this sector. Education is in fact one of the most corrupt sectors in the country.

TIB has been conducting research and advocacy programmes as an organisation supportive of establishing an honest, transparent and accountable education system, especially in the area of primary education. TIB expects that everybody concerned with primary and mass education programmes, especially the education authorities and policy formulators of the government will come forward to establish good governance in the sector by eliminating prevailing anomalies and corruption. Various non-government development organisations and the common people including the civil society will have to play an active role in this regard. It is possible to achieve progress in establishing transparency and accountability through coordinated efforts of all stakeholders. Otherwise, it would not be possible to ensure universal primary education in the country by the year 2015 in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals.

TIB has been observing the International Literacy Day through various programmes at local and national levels out of such a commitment.

Some teams of Dhaka YES Group took up various programmes on the occasion of International Literacy Day 2009 with the slogan 'Literacy is the empowerment of the people .... we want corruption-free education system'. The YES groups of Stamford University Bangladesh, Institute of Social Welfare and Research, Rokeya Hall, Bangladesh-Kuwait Friendship Hall, Begum Fazilatunnesa Mujib Hall and Institute of Education and Research of Dhaka University organised cartoon exhibitions, signature-collection drive, poster campaign, debate and quiz contests and seminar with assistance from TIB.

The seminar was held under the joint auspices of TIB and IER at 3.15 in the afternoon at No. 3 Training Room of the Institute of Education and Research (IER), Dhaka University. The keynote paper titled ‘Role of literacy in curbing corruption: Perspective Bangladesh’ was presented by Professor Dr. Masuduzzaman. He said in the essay: ‘Among humans, the literate people were the most sensitive ones. Based on this sensitivity, they are imbibed with patriotism and awareness. These people can be most helpful in uprooting corruption. However, the Bangladeshi experience showed that it was generally the literate or highly educated people who were mostly involved in corruption; in this backdrop, the ordinary people have virtually
no scope to commit corruption. Deprived of the light of education, the illiterate people cannot understand who are their friends or enemies. We ourselves will have to solve our own problems, not through the path shown by the Westerns, who want to control our politics from behind the scene in the name of eliminating corruption, and who take pride in their civilisation and teach us democracy’.

The Acting Director of the institute, Professor Dr. Siddiquir Rahman presided over the seminar. He said, “It is not possible to uproot corruption merely by framing laws. A value-based holistic education system is needed for that.” He also called for ensuring reflection of the education received in the working arena. Teacher of IER, Professor Dr. Md. Abdul Malek and TIB’s Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman were present in the seminar as the main discussants. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, “Corruption is present not only in the education sector but in almost all service sectors. If we cannot establish corruption as a punishable offence, then it cannot be curbed easily. We shall have to strive hard to bring corruption within a tolerable limit. If we succeed in doing that, then the growth rate of our national income will touch 9 percent. All categories of citizens, especially the teachers will have to play an active role in this field.”

Elites of the society including teachers, students, development activists and representatives of the mass media were present on the occasion.

The YES Groups of the Institute of Social Welfare and Research, Rokeya Hall, Begum Fazilatuneesa Mujib Hall and Bangladesh-Kuwait Friendship Hall of Dhaka University and Stamford University Bangladesh conducted a signature-collection drive on the occasion of the day. The programme was inaugurated at the Institute of Social Welfare and Research by its Director, Professor Dr. Mohammad Samad. The YES Group of Rokeya Hall also arranged a cartoon exhibition alongside with the signature collection drive. The 2-day programme was inaugurated by the Hall Provost Dr. Laila Noor Islam. On the other hand, the programme at Bangladesh-Kuwait Friendship Hall was inaugurated on 7 September through a quiz competition. Besides running signature collection drive, the winners of the quiz contest were awarded prizes on 8 September. It was inaugurated by the Hall Provost Professor Farida Begum. The YES group of Stamford University Bangladesh distributed awareness-generating leaflets on the day in addition to holding daylong opinion-sharing and signature-collection programmes at its Siddheswari campus on 8 September.

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Satellite Photography and Cartoon Exhibition

Bangladesh Government, GTZ (Germany), SIDA and TIB jointly organised six day long satellite art, photography and cartoon exhibition in five places of Chittagong division in order to create awareness about health rights at grass root level. This exhibition was held from 26 June to 13 July at Patiya, Chakaria, Ali Kadam, Cox’s Bazaar and Chittagong metropolitan of Chittagong division with the participation of local government and mass people and overall assistant from CCC and YES Members. The key objective of this exhibition was to provide information about health service to the marginal people. This satellite exhibition travelled 107 KM way altogether while campaigning in 12 government hospitals and health centres, 61 schools and 140 people’s gatherings in the way. It was possible to reach about 50 thousand male and female from different strata of the society with the information of health related information.

Different information regarding different health problems, remedies and rights to treatments available were presented through this exhibition. Commissioner of Chittagong division, DC of Chittagong and Cox’s Bazaar, local government and representatives from public service proving organisation emphasised on the importance of such initiatives.
TIB and YES Groups of Dhaka observed the International Youth Day through various programmes on 12 August. The YES (Youth Engagement and Support) campaign initiated under the aegis of TIB was formally inaugurated in Dhaka on the day. Held with the slogan ‘Invincible Youths Shall Resist Corruption’, the programmes included anti-corruption rally, cartoon exhibition, debate contest and youth gathering.

The programme started with an anti-corruption cartoon exhibition at the TSC compound of Dhaka University at 10 o’clock in the morning. A huge number of spectators enjoyed the exhibition. The anti-corruption rally was organised at 12 noon. It was inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University, Professor Dr. AAMS Arefin Siddique. The rally went out from the TSC compound and terminated in front of the commerce faculty building after passing through the Arts Faculty compound. Apart from the YES members, many students also participated in the rally. Besides, two mobile vans carrying anti-corruption cartoons went round various important spots of Dhaka which attracted the attention of spectators.

An anti-corruption debate competition was organised at the conference hall of Business Studies Department of Dhaka University at 10 in the morning. Farah Diba Mitul, a student of Bangladesh-Kuwait Friendship Hall of Dhaka University, occupied first position while Rokeya Hall’s Antara Biswas and Kuasha Pal stood 2nd and 3rd respectively.

The anti-corruption youth gathering started at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre at 5 in the afternoon. The celebrity hall came to life with around one thousand spectators. It danced in dazzling lights amid a magnificent laser show. Notable programmes of all YES groups in the anti-corruption campaign were highlighted through this laser show. After that, the audience were mesmerised by the choreography accompanying the theme song ‘Wake up People---’. The winners of the debate competition were awarded prizes during the programme. Performances by the YES groups followed one after another. In between, the Vice-Chancellor of IBAIS University, Professor Khandakar Rezaur Rahman and TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman addressed the students. Khandakar Rezaur Rahman said that transparency and accountability should be practiced if democracy is to be upheld in this country. Therefore, the values of transparency and accountability should be held close to their hearts by the youths.

Star singer Ayub Bachchu came to the stage at 7.30 in the evening. His captivating performance continued up to 9 pm. In between, the youths took anti-corruption oaths. The daylong programme arranged on the occasion of International Youth Day came to an end with this presentation by Ayub Bachchu. Star presenter Hasan Abidur Reza Jewel acted as the presenter in the youth gathering. Channel-I, ABC Radio, Metro-net and BD Jobs were the media partners of the programme. The programme was broadcast live through the web-link www.metro.net.bd/TIB/.

It may be mentioned that the students of Rokeya Hall, Bangladesh-Kuwait Friendship Hall, Management Studies Department, Institute of Education and Research and Institute of Social Welfare and Research of Dhaka University, East-West University, Northern University, Stamford University Bangladesh, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Uttara University, IBAIS University, RAJUK Uttara Model College, Bir Sreshtha Munshi Abdur Rouf Rifles College, Bir Sreshtha Noor Mohammad Rifles School and College and Dhaka YES-I Group members participated in the programme. Besides, on 29-30 July IBAIS and on 10 and 11 August Uttara and East West University arranged cultural program and cartoon exhibition in their respective campus.
Opinion-sharing meetings were organised at some divisional towns of the country under the joint initiative of NGO Affairs Bureau, TIB, BRAC, Oxfam GB and Manusher Jonno Foundation on the roles of various stakeholders in curbing the irregularities, mismanagement and pervasive corruption in the NGO sector. A concise report on those meetings is being presented below:

**Chittagong:** Coordinated initiatives of the government and NGOs are essential for ensuring good governance in the NGO sector. The Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong MAN Siddique said this while addressing an opinion-sharing meeting on good governance in the NGO sector in Chittagong on 13 July. He also said that the NGOs function as a supportive force in development programmes of the government. The government and NGOs should both work together for establishing good governance and for this, all NGOs should have similar citizens' charter.

Held at the Chittagong Theatre hall, the opinion-sharing meeting was styled on ‘Good Governance in NGO Sector: Problems and Ways of Remedy’. Chaired by the District Commissioner of Chittagong Farid Uddin Ahmed Chowdhury, Director General of NGO Affairs Bureau Mustak Hassan Md. Iftekhar, Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation Dr. Shamim Imam, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman and the convener of Committee of Concerned Citizens, Chittagong Advocate Akhtar Kabir Chowdhury were present on the occasion. Assistant Director of NGO Affairs Bureau Pronab Kumar Ghosh presented a paper on ‘Good Governance in the NGO Sector, Rules, Monitoring and what should be done’. TIB Fellow Sadhan Kumar Das presented another paper on ‘Good Governance in NGO Sector: Problems and Ways of Remedy’.

The Executive Director of TIB Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said that establishing good governance in the NGO sector is very urgent as it is making contributions at home and abroad in various fields including good governance, people’s right to information and micro-credit programmes. In his presidential address, District Commissioner of Chittagong Farid Uddin Ahmed Chowdhury said, priority-based action-plans should be formulated through proper coordination between the programmes of NGOs and the government. A map should be prepared on the areas of NGO operations throughout the country. Director General of NGO Affairs Bureau Mustak Hassan Md. Iftekhar stressed on the need for monitoring in the NGO sector. He said that the NGO Affairs Bureau had already started a number of reviews in this area. Moderated by the TIB Executive Director, district and upazila level government officials and NGO representatives participated in the open and lively discussions. They recommended about setting up of NGO Bureau cells for intensive monitoring of NGOs at the upazila-district levels, and if that was not possible then at least at divisional level. The note of thanks was delivered by the Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation Dr. Shamim Imam.

**Khulna:** Irregularities, corruption and mismanagement exist in the country due to absence of government oversight. The executive head of many organisations exert monopoly power in decision making. There is dearth of transparency in financial management. Irregularities and corruption abound in appointment and promotion of employees and payment of their salaries. Side by side, many NGOs resort to secrecy in providing information. This picture of anomalies and corruption among the NGOs was depicted by the discussants participating in the opinion-sharing meeting on ‘Good Governance in NGO Sector: Problems and Ways of Remedy’ held at the Zia Auditorium of Khulna city on 23 July.

The Divisional Commissioner of Khulna Aumio Kumar Ghosh was present at the programme as Chief Guest. The address of welcome was delivered by the Director General of NGO Affairs Bureau Mustak Hassan Md. Iftekhar. The Executive Director of TIB Dr. Iftekharuzzaman and the Executive Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation Shaheen Anam were present as Special Guests.

The speakers said that the NGOs could play a bigger
role for the country’s welfare if the irregularities and corruption were removed. A few organisations were also getting involved in militancy after obtaining registration from the NGO Affairs Bureau. Actions should be taken against those organisations after identifying them. The speakers opined that the rates of interest of NGO credit were too high. They should take steps to reduce this rate.

In his address as Chief Guest, the Divisional Commissioner of Khulna said that the present government had passed the right to information act. As a result, opportunity has been created for the people to gather information about government offices and NGOs. Due to the right to information act, corruption would diminish among the NGOs and transparency cum accountability would be enhanced. He also hoped that the NGOs would play a stronger role in the development of the country as they are also stake-holder of our development.

Barisal: An opinion-sharing meeting on ‘Good Governance in NGO Sector: Problems and Ways of Remedy’ was held at the conference room of Barisal Circuit House on 20 August. It emphasised on enhancing transparency and accountability and proper coordination between the government and the NGOs. The speakers said that although there are thousands of NGOs in the country, proper institutional arrangement could not yet be developed for supervising their activities. As a consequence, the problem of good governance has become acute in some areas of NGO programmes. Programmes based on people’s needs could not be incorporated in the activities of these NGOs although their role was quite widespread. As a result, the NGOs’ contribution to GDP is only 0.7%, although they received 25% of foreign aid.

Over 200 delegates including a majority of Deputy Commissioners in Barisal division, 40 Upazila Executive Officers, government officials, NGO representatives, Bank officers and journalists were present at the programme. The Chief Guest and Director General of NGO Affairs Bureau Mustak Hassan Md. Iftekhar said that the new government has taken over with new hopes and new visions. The NGOs need to play an effective role for reducing poverty in the country. It is possible to ensure good governance through proper coordination between the NGOs and the government. In his address as Special Guest, Binay Krishna Bala said, all should come forward to stop the funding of militants. The NGOs need proper internal management. The other Special Guest Mehedi Hasan said that the NGO sector needs powerful monitoring. The Executive Director of TIB Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said that the purpose of the discussion meeting was to enhance transparency and accountability through proper coordination without increasing the distance between the government and the NGOs. At the same time, mechanism for proper coordination and supervision should also be put in place.

Chaired by the District Commissioner Mashiur Rahman, others who spoke on the occasion included the District Commissioner of Bhola Mesbaul Islam, District Commissioner of Barguna Swapan Kuman Sarkar, District Commissioner of Pirojpur Ruhul Amin, District Commissioner of Jhalakati, Upazila Executive Officers of Charfassion, Baufal, Betagi and Bhandaria Mostafa Kamal, Md. Mozammel Hossain Khan, Firoz Ahmed and Khairul Hasan, Women Affairs Officer of Pirojpur district Khadim Aktar Jahan, Director of Saint Bangladesh Kazi Jahangir, Executive Director of Abhash Rahima Sultana Kajal and Director of ICDA Anwar Zahid. The address of welcome was delivered by the CCC convener Mr. Manabendra Batabyal. A number of recommendations emerged from the meeting including strengthening of the supervision of NGO activities, raising the quality and coverage of services and ensuring transparency and accountability.

Information and Advice Desk

An information and advice desk programme was run at Dhaka Medical College Hospital during 8 and 9 September. The members of Dhaka YES Group helped a total of 1 thousand 902 service recipients with information during the programme. Of them 1 thousand 149 were males and 753 were females. The YES group members also distributed a fact-sheet on various services rendered at the hospital among the service-recipients.
The Right to Information Act in the Eyes of Journalists

The Right to Information Act was passed by the Jatiya Sangsad on 29 March this year. The government has already constituted the Information Commission in accordance with this law. Just as the people will get the fruits of this law, similarly the journalists will also be benefited. Through its successful application and proper utilisation, it will play a supportive role in establishing a corruption-free, transparent, accountable, democratic government and society. The views of some journalists working in various mass media on this law have been presented below in this report.

**People should be Made Conscious**

*Manzoorul Ahsan Bulbul, Chief of News Section, ATN Bangla*

The right to information law has not been framed only for the journalists. The journalists had functioned even when this law was absent. I believe that the journalists will definitely get some advantage after framing of this law. But there are three challenges in its implementation. Firstly, the existing arrangements for storing information are very weak. It needs to be modernised on an urgent basis. Secondly, it is a right-based law. The general mass are not very conscious about this law. They need to be made much more aware about it. Lastly, unlike other commissions, the job of the information commission is not regulatory in nature. Their job is to help the people in obtaining information and create a favourable atmosphere for the purpose. But I will say, despite various limitations, the right to information law is undoubtedly a good example. It will help the people in obtaining information.

**The Journalists are Getting Benefit from the Right to Information law in India**

*Sultana Rahman, Senior Reporter, NTV*

The right to information law is not merely for journalists, it is for the common people as well. Although the right to information law has been passed in Bangladesh, its practice has not yet started. The process through which it is supposed to become functional has not yet materialised. The journalists are getting the benefits of the right to information law in India. Because of this, they can usually obtain any information they seek. Otherwise then can apply for redress under the law.

**The Culture of Spontaneous Disclosure of Information should be Nurtured**

*Tipu Sultan, Senior Reporter, Daily Prothom Alo*

We journalists have not yet started using this law. It is also not possible for journalists to get information swiftly by taking recourse to this law. All ministries have public relations officers. The journalists can know many information if these officials publish the decisions and activities of ministries through press releases. But in reality, that does not happen. What they actually do is provide news on various programmes of the ministers. I believe, we shall have to build up a culture of disclosing information spontaneously. It would then be easier for journalists to gather information.

**The Information Commission will have to Play a Key role in Generating Awareness:**

*Anwar Ali Himu, Staff Reporter, The Daily Star, Rajshahi Office*

The passage of the right to information law was an epoch-making step. But the general mass, many mofussil journalists and even some government officials do not know about the existence of such a law in the country. The common people speak about their fundamental rights. So I think mass awareness should be generated about the law on a wider scale. The general mass should be informed. The main responsibility in this area lies with the Information Commission. They should play a dynamic role in this matter.
Koiarbeel UP of Chakaria Signs an Integrity Pact

The Koiarbeel Union Parishad of Chakaria upazila under Cox’s Bazar district has signed an integrity pact with the local citizens’ committee and the TIB-inspired Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC). The pact was formalised on 2 September at the UP office. The CCC Chakaria acted as the catalyst in signing this tripartite agreement.

The first party in the agreement was Koiarbeel UP, the second party was union citizens’ committee and the third party was CCC-Chaokaria. The first party agreed to the effect that it would strive to meet the fundamental rights and development needs of the citizens after getting elected by the voters of the area. Highest degree of honesty, transparency and accountability will be maintained by the first party while executing plans, projects and programmes for meeting these needs. Programmes will be formulated and implemented by considering the needs of the people and encouraging their participation. In this regard, the second party will have the right to know any information at any time from the first party about the programmes. The third party will render effective advice on issues like strategy formulation to the first party. The third party will also provide assistance in arranging fruitful programmes like ‘Face to Face with the People’ in order to ensure accountability of the first party to the people.

In concert with the second party, the first party will make maximum efforts for proper coordination between the government and non-government organisations working in the union and improving the quality of services rendered by these organisations. The third party will offer effective advice and maximum cooperation to the first party in this area. The third party will also cooperate in taking up and implementing programmes for making the school management committees effective and increasing the participation of guardians in order to raise the quality of education. The third party will run awareness generating programmes for solving social problems of the union. Above all, the concerned parties will sit among themselves every three months for reviewing plans, achievements and areas of mutual cooperation.

Networking Meeting at Brahmanbaria

Assisted by TIB, a networking meeting was held under the aegis of CCC Brahmanbaria with various non-government organisations working in Brahmanbaria at the local CCC office on 15 September. Presided over by the convener of the information and advice sub-committee of the CCC Advocate Md. Tareq Hossain Jowel, the CCC convener Abdur Noor delivered the address of welcome. Representatives of BRAC, Proshika, Bangladesh Nari Mukti Sangsad, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, Padakkhep, ARD, Help Manobik Unnayan Kendra, Shapla Manobik Unnayan Kendra, Biz, Change, Isa Samaj Kalyan Sangstha, ASA, Srijan Manobik Kolyan Sangha, Nabajagaroni Sangstha, Surjer Hansi, Concern Worldwide, Mary Slopes VDC attended the meeting and made presentations on their own programmes. They all agreed to set up a powerful network for working as associates in TIB’s anti-corruption movement. At the same time, they gave assurance of mutual cooperation in different programmes.

CCC convener Advocate Mr. Abu Taher also spoke at the gathering. Those who were present on the occasion included CCC joint-convener Ms. Nandita Guho, CCC member Engineer Md. Rafiqul Islam, Md. Ali Akbar Mojumder, Mr. Joydul Hossain, Mr. Mohammad Arzu, Prof. Md. Shafiqul Bari etc. The YES members of CCC extended overall support.

Exceptional Initiative at Nalitabari

When the school students were euphoric with the joy of Ramadan vacation, at that very juncture some resolute YES and Friends members of Nalitabari upazila decided to work at the four government primary schools of the upazila. They imparted lessons on various subjects to students belonging to classes one to four between 10 am and 1 pm everyday by sacrificing their own pastime. Side by side, they conducted various extra-curricular activities. Everyday, over one hundred students uttered steadfastly, ‘I am making a pledge to study regularly, to always speak the truth and to engage myself for the service of my country and people’.
People’s Theatre Workshop at 15 CCCs

People’s theatre is one of the principal programmes in TIB’s anti-corruption initiatives. This year, refresher workshops on people’s theatre have been started by keeping in mind the themes related to education, health and local government. These workshops were concluded in presence of 270 YES members from 15 CCC areas (Munshiganj, Kurigram, Chakaria, Jamalpur, Rajbari, Comilla, Rajshahi, Faridpur, Jalalakati, Chittagong, Savar, Nailltabari, Gazipur, Madaripur, Satkhira) between July and September 2009. Besides, technical shows of new dramas were also staged. Regular shows of various CCCs have also started and these are receiving positive responses from the local audiences and elites.

Friendly Debate Competition and Open Discussion at Savar

The YES group of CCC Savar organised various programmes on 8 September with the theme of ‘Achieving literacy, empowering people’. A friendly debate contest was arranged at the CCC office in the afternoon with the slogan, ‘Through debates, come to the path of light’. The topic of the contest was, ‘Only good education can curb corruption’. Roksana Tamanna, Afia Khanam and Nanda Karmakar of Savar Girls’ High School spoke in favour of the topic while Md. Raju Ahmed, Md. Lutfur Rahman and Md. Nayeemul Ahmed of Savar Agrani High School were against it. Prizes were distributed among the participating teams of this lively debate competition. Besides, CCC convener and retired metropolitan magistrate Jainal Abedeen Khan presided over an open discussion, which was attended by former principal of Savar University College and Swajan member Deepak Kumar Ray, principal of MM Chakladar Women’s College Md. Atahar Uddin and CCC member freedom fighter Khandakar Mohd. Hamid Ranju.

Opinion-sharing Meeting with NGO Representatives in Barisal

An opinion-sharing meeting with the representatives of NGOs working in the healthcare sector was held on 12 July under the auspices of CCC Barisal. The NGO representatives present in the meeting briefed everybody on their respective programmes as well as successes and limitations of those undertakings. The CCC highlighted the ongoing programmes of YES group for raising the service-quality of Barisal General Hospital and plans for starting YES group’s programme at Sherbangla Medical College Hospital. Cooperation of those NGOs who were already working in the latter hospital was sought. During the session, the discussants pledged to work in a coordinated fashion for raising the quality of healthcare services.

Chaired by the convener of CCC Barisal Mr. Manabendra Batabyal, those who spoke at the opinion-sharing meeting included joint-convener of the CCC Ms. Noorjahan Begum, CCC member Ms. Tunu Rani Karmaker, Adv. Hari Das Saha Chowdhury and Ms. Kazi Selina Begum. Among the representatives of healthcare related NGOs, programme coordinator of SDS Hasina Begum Neela, Executive Director of Barisal Mohila Kalyan Sangstha Kawsar Parveen, director of Chandradwip Development Society Jahanara Begum Swapna, Executive Director of HRDP Nigar Sultana Hanufa, Executive Director of BASAS Bandana Saha, coordinator of Abhas Morzina Begum, instructor of PSTC Afroza Akhtar Shiuli, secretary of PDO Ranjit Datta, Executive Director of Map and district representative of SUPRO Shubhankar Chakrabarti spoke on the occasion.

Anti-Corruption Campaign at Jhenaidah

The YES members of Jhenaidah participated in an anti-corruption campaign at Jhenaidah on 16 and 17 September. The participating YES members organised a rally in Jhenaidah town. After going round the town, it journeyed towards Kushtia. On the way, it conducted anti-corruption campaign at Bangabandhu Memorial Degree College, Khater Ali Degree College and among the teachers and students of Islamic University. They also collected anti-corruption signatures on a banner. Besides, they elicited pledges from the local people at local Bhatoi Bazar, Sheikhpura, Alamnagar and Kushtia town on not committing corruption.
TI Global Corruption Report-2009 Published

Private sector must counter corruption to foster economic sustain-

The massive scale of global corruption resulting from bribery, price-fixing cartels and undue influence on public policy is costing billions and obstructing the path towards sustainable economic growth. This information was published in the Global Corruption Report (GCR) released on 23 September by Transparency International (TI). The Global Corruption Report 2009: Corruption and the Private Sector (GCR) shows how corrupt practices constitute a destructive force that undermines fair competition, stifles economic growth and ultimately undercuts a business’s own existence. In the last two years alone, companies had to pay billions in fines due to corrupt practices. The cost extends to low staff morale and a loss of trust among customers as well as prospective business partners.

“Fostering a culture of corporate integrity is essential to protect investment, increase commercial success and ensure the stability in economy and banking system sought by poor and rich countries alike, particularly as we climb out of an historical crisis,” said TI Chair Huguette Labelle. Each year TI publishes illustrative report worldwide on corruption related issues. Illustrative report on Corporate Corruption of 45 countries including Bangladesh is the Global Corruption Report 2009: Corruption and the Private Sector.

According to the report, in 2007 on sixth of the total news on corruption published in mass media was regarding corruption in the private sector. That year the major corruptions in public and private sectors were looting of resources (84.6%), cheating (12.3%) and power abuse (3.1%). Government decisions are influenced by the illegal influence of the telecommunication companies of the country. Consequently, the private mobile phone companies get involved with illegal VOIP business. Quoting the IMED of Planning Commission, it is said in the report that 85 contractors/companies/bidders were excluded from the bidding process due to fraudulent practices. Also, corruption regarding establishing container in Dhaka and Chittagong and pre-shipment inspection in import-export business were specified in the report.

In this regard TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, “A culture of economic and business integrity is needed to be introduced with the help of government, private sector, consumers and all other stake holders. It is possible to curb the corruption of private sector by incorporating transparency and accountability in both public and private sectors. The culture and policy of responsibility, honesty and transparency should be adopted in the private sector for that.

The report documents many cases of managers, majority shareholders and other actors inside corporations who abuse their entrusted power for personal gain, to the detriment of owners, investors, employees and society at large. In developing and transition countries alone, companies colluding with corrupt politicians and government officials, have supplied bribes estimated at up to US $40 billion annually, according to the GCR. Research in the report also shows that half of international business executives polled estimated that corruption raised project costs by at least 10 per cent. Ultimately, it is citizens who pay: consumers around the world were overcharged approximately US $300 billion through almost 300 private international cartels discovered from 1990 to 2005.

It has been found by explaining TI’s yearly Corruption Perceptions Index that private-sector corruption occurs not only because they are victim to unscrupulous governments but to major firms that are more than willing to enter into corrupt deals with these governments. These intricate webs, involving more than simple bribes, are possible because companies believe that they can get away with such criminal practices. On the other hand, companies with anti-corruption programmes and ethical guidelines are found to suffer up to 50 per cent fewer incidents of corruption and to be less likely to lose business opportunities.

Corporate integrity is about more than sustainable earnings or returns on investment. When reckless companies engage in corruption, the consequences can be devastating. From water shortages, exploitative work conditions or illegal logging to unsafe medicines and poorly or illegally constructed buildings that collapse with deadly consequences, corruption can bring about unprecedented harm. No matter how much emphasis is been given on profit making in private sector, transparency, honesty and accountability is unavoidable for its sustainability. The dearth of confidence in corporate ethics highlighted by the present economic crisis makes the need to promote anti-corruption mechanisms, as an integral part of a company’s operations, all the more urgent.
Exchange Programme for TI Chapters of South Asia

A joint experience-sharing programme for the Transparency International (TI) chapters of South Asia, viz. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Maldives, has started from July 2009. The objective of this programme is to create opportunities for exchanging experience and knowledge on research and policy-related programmes undertaken by those working in the field of good governance as well as anti-corruption measures in the countries of South Asia. Besides, this programme is expected to enhance mutual understanding on research and programmes on good governance and anti-corruption initiatives in neighbouring countries in the spirit of SAARC.

Approved by the Government of Bangladesh, this project has gone into operation with financial assistance from Fredskorpset of Norway. Fredskorpset is an international voluntary organisation run with financial assistance from the Norwegian government. Under the purview of this project, TIB's programme manager Zahidul Islam has started working on exchanging experiences on integrity pact with the Indian chapter of TI. At the same time, programme manager of TI-Sri Lanka Dhanuska Bandara Waizekun has come to TIB; senior administrative assistant of TI-Nepal Dina Nath Bhattarai has also arrived for sharing experience on research and fund-raising. Besides, an official from TI-Pakistan has gone to TI-Nepal, while another from TI-Maldives is working with TI-Sri Lanka this year in order to exchange experiences.

Initiative on water integrity to Bangladesh

Bangladesh is facing serious challenges in its water sector and sub sectors. The water sector is characterised by institutional complexities with political dimensions. Political corruption was reported to be among the difficulties faced when promoting integrity and transparency. Transboundary water rights and governance comes up as an important factor affecting water management in Bangladesh and causes water scarcities resulting in competition for water as well as an increase of water quality problems. Corruption is most visible in Dhaka with examples, such as, illegal land development in riverbeds, terrible water pollution largely due to release of untreated and heavily polluted industrial waste waters. Also, another one of these main problems relates to increased salt intrusion in the coastal zones.

Mr. Teun Bastemeijer, manager of Berlin based Water Integrity Network (WIN) visited different places of Bangladesh during July 5-9 in order to verify the possibilities of the programme 'transparency in the water sector'. The main objective possibility verification visit was to specify the activities of the water sector of Bangladesh related to the work policy of WIN as well as to the proposal taken in the workshop "Transparency and integrity in water sector of South Asia" organised in Dhaka during 2007 by the joint venture of WIN and TIB. Apart from these, the other objectives were to identify how the water sector related organisations can be combined, how the survey regarding transparency and integrity in the water sector can be conducted, to what extent the political and institutional environment is or could be influenced to be conducive to success etc.

As most of the meetings with government officials and other informants were meant to initiate dialogue about the possibility of developing a water integrity initiative in Bangladesh, follow-up steps are proposed to aim at better defining the possible contours of such initiative and developing a step wise planning for the first steps including formation of the core group or platform to provide facilitating leadership as well as cluster groups with the capacity to address water integrity issues in specific sub sectors/themes with geographic focus. Both the Ministry of Water Resources and the Dutch Embassy point at the need to strengthen integrity perspectives in water management through increased participation of the population through water management committees. Besides other organisations, TIB has already started its operation in this sector by carrying out different types of integrity surveys and diagnostic studies.

Mr. Bastemeijer discussed with Mr. Wahid-uz-Zaman, Secretary Ministry of Water Resources, Dutch embassy, WARPO, WASA, TIB and TIB CCC. Also, he discussed with the director and senior engineers of Barendro Multi Purpose Development Authority (BMPD) of Rajshahi district and visited the irrigation programmes of the area.
TIB News

TIB’s Annual Members’ Meeting Held
ACC Urged to Play an Effective and Active Role

The annual members’ meeting of TIB was held on 25 July 2009 at a hotel in Gulshan, Dhaka. Members present at the meeting called for an effective and active role by the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC). Chaired by the TIB member and former principal of Dhaka’s Kabi Nazrul Government College Momtaz Begum, secretary-general of TIB trustee board Professor Abdullah Abu Saeed and eminent journalist Mahfuz Anam were present on the occasion.

The members urged everybody to build a just, well-governed and democratic Bangladesh by uprooting the poisonous tree of corruption. They said, “We are urging everybody including the government, political leaders and the civil society to make the country’s anti-corruption programmes long-lasting and effective. At the same time, we hope that the Anti Corruption Commission would play an active role in combating corruption as an independent, efficient and effective institution.”

The meeting reviewed the programmes executed during the previous year and held detailed discussions on future strategies of the ongoing ‘Driving Change’ (2009-2014) project. In his address as Special Guest, the chairman of Biswa Sahitya Kendra and secretary-general of TIB’s trustee board Professor Abdullah Abu Saeed said, “TIB’s anti-corruption movement has to be strengthened. Those who are sitting here in this meeting seek to eradicate corruption and build a corruption-free Bangladesh. The whole country is vocal against corruption. We will have to become qualified, which implies becoming conscious, voicing protests and building up resistance.” Trustee board member Mahfuz Anam said, “TIB’s members are the major support-force in its anti-corruption movement. This movement is advancing forward with their combined strength.”

The participating members expressed their resolve to abhor corruption from the core of their heart and to effectively resist it from their respective positions by shunning corruption in their personal lives. They also expressed their firm determination to work together in all possible areas through various initiatives and efforts in order to reduce the pervasiveness of corruption in various sectors of society and state by expediting the social movement against corruption.

It may be noted that TIB has been granting memberships to professionals and general citizens including students and youths who are interested in joining the anti-corruption movement in order to strengthen anti-corruption drive in Bangladesh. After becoming members, they get the chance to involve themselves in various programmes of TIB. Apart from attending annual members’ meeting, they provide valuable advice through their presence in quarterly members’ meetings.

TIB’s Recommendations for National Health and Education Policies

TIB has been working with local level service-providing organisations for curbing corruption and establishing transparency and accountability. Side by side, it is working with health networks in order to take policy initiatives at the national level. Three separate roundtables were organised on ‘National Health Policy 2009’ between July and August this year under the aegis of national level health network, as a continuation of ongoing programmes in the health sector. The main committee of the network NHRMC, which includes TIB, submitted its opinions and recommendations within the time-frame stipulated by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Apart from executing programmes related to the national health policy, the health network has decided to form a watchdog committee for community clinics and arrange trainings for media personnel working in the healthcare sector.

Alongside working for ensuring transparency, accountability and quality in the education sector at local level, TIB has continued efforts for expanding its role at the national level as well. As a follow-up to this, TIB is implementing various programmes through issue-based partnership with the NGO ‘Ganasakharata Ovijan’. TIB participated in the preparatory meetings organised by Ganasakharata Ovijan for observing International Literacy Day. Besides, TIB also participated in the meeting jointly organised by Ganasakharata Ovijan and Education-Watch on 27 September for giving opinions on the draft education policy prepared by the Ministry of Education. It may be mentioned that later on TIB sent its opinions and recommendations on ‘National Education Policy 2009’ to the Education Ministry on its own initiative.
Although it is autumn, still there are heaps of dark clouds. It seems rain will come down very soon. I go out for morning walks everyday before sunrise. Seeing the sky laden with clouds, I remembered a Bengali date. It was 2 Aswin 1416 according to the Bangla calendar. When I moved towards the door after picking an umbrella, somebody came up and stood before me, “Brother, please save me, and my daughter.” I saw that she was none other than my part-time housemaid Hurmati. There was a girl with her. She seemed familiar to me. Her face was swollen. When I looked at her closely, I saw that her clothes were torn, and there was blood in some places. Her name was Romana.

I tried to guess what had happened to her. Has the girl become a victim of assault by a criminal? Both the girl and her mother broke down in tears the moment I asked them to sit. I tried to console them. After the situation cooled down a bit, I tried to know what had actually happened! Dear reader, then listen to what Romana had to say:

Paint-mason Akkas seduced and took away Romana – the 12-13 year daughter of Hurmati – four years ago in 2005. Before our innocent Romana could understand anything, she became pregnant; they were then married. Romana’s beauty and health gradually declined due to her childhood marriage, pregnancy, child-rearing and financial hardship. With a broken health, Romana could no more bring colour to the life of her paint-mason husband. Like the pallid colour of an old building, Romana also became the picture of a colourless woman.

Love had disappeared; there were then insults instead of caressing, beatings in place of affection. Romana’s fate was similar to thousands other poor, repressed and tortured women of Bangladesh. The husband abused her physically on a daily basis, made unjust demands on her, and asked her to bring dowry from her insolvent rickshaw-puller father and mother. The mother tried to meet the demands of the paint-mason son-in-law by collecting zakat and other donations from the houses where she worked. A few days passed without incidents, then the insults, tortures and inhuman beatings started all over again.

Romana and her illiterate parents did not know about the need for registering marriage due to their ignorance. Consequently, the legal basis of her marriage was not strong. They also did not know where to go and whose help to seek for getting redress from tortures. The helpless girl along with her children had escaped to her father’s house in order to save herself from her husband’s repression. But it was beyond the capacity of her poor father to give shelter to his daughter. Then where will Romana go now? Isn’t there any other way out for her except to commit suicide? Considering her children’s status, she went back to her husband’s place even after so many tortures.

There was repetition of the same incident last night. First vocal rebukes, then beatings, the whole of Romana’s body had become bloody. But this time, Romana wants to resist. She wants remedy for this injustice and repression. But how! Finding themselves at a loss, they had come to seek my help.

I asked her, ‘where is the nikahnama (marriage-certificate) of your marriage’? Surprised, both mother and daughter looked at one another. They asked me what it really was! I said, ‘kabinnama (registered certificate) of marriage’. They replied that a pious man had conducted the marriage by keeping Allah and his Prophet as witnesses. But there was no registration. Then, how can the torturer husband be punished? If he claimed that the marriage had not taken place? Seeing no other way, I told them to go to the guardians of the locality. They told me, the preacher of the local mosque had said that Romana would have to be purified first through lashing for not offering prayers, for moving about without modesty and for improper marriage. Then would come the question of justice. Where would Romana and her children go? They did not have any address to go. I told them to file a petition to the municipal mayor seeking remedy. Romana then filed a petition seeking justice. Hearing about her complaint, her husband threatened her with throwing acid, or abducting her by using hired thugs. Romana was spending her days in a terrorised state. She did not know when the trial would commence, and whether she would get justice!
Dear reader, the main reasons for this descent of darkness in Romana’s life are as follows: 1) Romana and her parents did not know about the legal age of marriage and other relevant rules and regulations; 2) They had no idea about the nikahnama (marriage certificate); 3) They did not know where to go for seeking redress against physical torture; 4) They were not familiar with laws related to threats, fraud, acid throwing as well as the role of law enforcement agencies; 5) They did not have any information on the names, address and particulars of service providing organisations working in the area of legal assistance and arbitration. As a consequence, Romana and her family became the victim of a despicable social vice like women’s repression, which has now taken the shape of a story with question marks.

The kind-hearted mayor has given the notice for a hearing after receiving Romana’s petition; he has asked the local councillors to investigate the matter. But he did not seem to be sincere about it. When contacted to know developments, he said, “Akkas has a naughty character. It is better not to poke one’s nose in matters involving him." Even then, I humbly requested him to resolve the issue in a satisfactory manner. He replied in a careless tone, “OK, let’s see what can be done.” Deprived of education and repressed by society, Romana may not know about her rights. But what are we knowledgeable people doing? Will she really get justice from these protectors of law?

A class of beneficiaries are getting advantage due to weaknesses in the information flow related to life, livelihood and human rights; on the other hand, the ordinary people who belong to the relatively poorer and weaker segments of society and a majority of whom are women are facing deprivation. Although it is the responsibility of the state to provide security to all its citizens, violence against women is not anything new in Bangladesh. Everyday, we read plenty of stories on victims of dowry, acid attacks and rapes or other atrocities against women. Although our constitution has clearly mentioned about human rights, freedom, good governance and justice, in practice the picture is quite different, often reverse. There are provisions for rigorous imprisonment, even death penalty for crimes related to women and child repression. But violence against women is not diminishing. Where lies the roots of this defiance? Is it merely due to a dearth of information flow on law and awareness? Or is it because of the arrogance of a patriarchal society?

But it must be acknowledged that free and proper information flow and its correct application touches people’s minds, mentality and awareness. Consequently, right to information is a fundamental right of the people. The International Right to Information Day is observed globally on 28 September each year by attaching due importance to this slogan. Bangladesh also does not lag behind. The principal objective of observing this day is raising awareness among the people regarding their ‘right to know information’; to make a strong demand for establishing a transparent, accountable and democratic state through spontaneous participation of the people in governance. We believe that the conscience of the people will be aroused through a free and proper flow of information. It will give rise to a civilised, just and well-governed society.

Engineer Md. Delwar Husain
The writer is coordinator, gender sub-committee, CCC Chandpur.

TIB Condoles the Passing Away of Nazrul Islam Dulu, Anil Kumar Chakraborti and Mohiuddin Shiru

Eminent lawyer and founder-convener of CCC Jamalpur Advocate Md. Nazrul Islam Dulu passed away on 30 August while under treatment in the UK. On the other hand, convener of CCC Munshiganj Professor Anil Kumar Chakrabarti passed away on 10 August, while the adviser of CCC Sylhet Mohiuddin Shiru died on 24 September.

TIB has expressed deep shock at the deaths of these three eminent persons. In separate condolence messages, the Executive Director of TIB Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, “In their deaths, TIB has lost fellow warriors active in its social movement against corruption. TIB will always recall their contributions with reverence.” The members of the TIB trustee board and advisory council, CCC members working in 36 CCC areas throughout the country, Swajan, YES and YES Friends members and all staffs of TIB have been saddened by their demise. TIB prays for the salvation of the departed soul and extends deep condolence to the members of the bereaved family.
Cultural Programme at Uttara University

A discussion meeting and cultural programme was organised on 10 August by the Uttara University YES Group on the occasion of observance of International Youth Day by upholding the slogan ‘Invincible Youths Shall Resist Corruption’. A daylong cartoon exhibition also took place on the university compound. The Vice-Chancellor of the university Dr. M Azizur Rahman was present as the Chief Guest in the programme while the Dean Yammin Ara Lekha was present as Special Guest. Besides, teachers of various departments and the Director of outreach and communications department of TIB Rizwan-Ul-Alam were present on the occasion. The YES group members of Uttara University presented a beautiful cultural programme after the discussion meeting. Apart from YES group members, students of various departments were also present at the cultural programme.

Formal Inauguration of Dhaka YES Campaign

16 YES groups have been formed in Dhaka under the aegis of TIB. The Dhaka YES Group Campaign was inaugurated at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre on 12 August on the occasion of International Youth Day. The TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman launched the campaign formally. Apart from the YES group members of Dhaka, YES advisers and concerned heads of institutions were also present at the programme. The YES groups of Dhaka have generated much enthusiasm amongst the youths through their activities.

Information and Advice Desk

TIB's satellite information and advice desk programme is undoubtedly praiseworthy in building social resistance against corruption. Many of us are not much conscious about our rights. The programmes that TIB and CCCs are running for providing necessary information and advice about the rights and responsibilities of the people through easily understood fact-sheets and counselling are playing a supportive role in establishing good governance in the country. I wish this effort all success.

Redwan, South Surma, Sylhet

Women’s Rights

Corruption curtails women’s rights. Corruption must be curbed for establishing women’s rights. I thank TIB for publishing the cover story titled ‘Wake up people, wake up for women’s rights’ in the January-March 2009 issue of TIB Newsletter. I very much liked the comments made by distinguished persons including Advocate Sultana Kamal and litterateur Selina Hossain.

Manju Rani Saha, Khilkhet, Dhaka

TIB to Shift to New Office-Building from January

The TIB office will be shifted to Dhaka’s Banani from January 2010. The new office address is: House no. 141, Road no. 12, Block-E, Banani. The existing telephone numbers will remain unchanged. It may be mentioned that the TIB office has been housed at the present Gulshan address since 2003.

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