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Social Movement Against Corruption

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Passport Delivery Service: A Diagnostic Study

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Executive Summary

In Bangladesh, the demand for passports has been on the increase over the years. People expect that passport delivery service would be easy and smooth. However, in Bangladesh this service is beset with numerous irregularities. Unwarranted delay and harassment in passport delivery is so common that people opt for easier options and give bribes at different stages of processing a passport.

According to the Public Service Reform Commission Report, *Public Service in Twenty First Century, 2002*; some limitations are present in the passport delivery system. These are: the complexities of the process, waiting in long queues for application dropping and passport receiving, harassment by brokers and thugs, delay in passport delivery and police verification and forgeries of attestation.

In the present world, passport delivery service is one of the essential services in any country, but this service in Bangladesh is replete with corruption and irregularities and rendering poor service to the citizens. Therefore, a diagnostic study was undertaken to find out the nature and extent of corruption and irregularities in this service and help the government and policy makers to weed out the problems and streamline the service.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) undertook the responsibility of conducting the study with the following objectives:

1. To review the existing passport delivery system and process
2. To identify the existing limitations of the concerned departments
3. To identify the nature and extent of corruption and irregularities in passport delivery process
4. To make specific recommendations on the basis of this study

The study was conducted in the regional passport offices of Dhaka, Sylhet and Rajshahi, but the main focus was given on the Dhaka Regional Office. The main sources of data for this study were a survey of passport applicants, interview of and discussion with applicants, brokers and some key people involved in the service and review of newspaper reports. The interviews of and discussions with the key persons were very a useful source of information.

The survey was done at the delivery counters of the Dhaka regional office. During survey 624 passport receivers were interviewed. A multi-stage sampling survey design was used for the survey. For the first stage, twenty working days were selected randomly, while for the second stage, two mutually exclusive time intervals were selected randomly from those selected days. At the final stage, every 5th passport receiver was systematically selected for interview.



The sample size was determined using some estimates of desired variables from the responses of first 300 respondents. The desired variables were the percent of applicants who had made additional spending and bribe to brokers and police respectively. The sample size was increased almost twofold to ensure precise estimates for calculating the amount of bribe or service charge received annually by passport office, police and brokers. This design ensured precision of estimates of additional spending to brokers and bribe received by police at 3.81% and 6.63% respectively.

This study was not able to ensure the institutional participation of passport office staff, officials, and the SB police. A letter was sent to the DG of Department of Immigration and Passport requesting to provide some information from the department. The department then forwarded the request to the Home Ministry for permission, but the Home Ministry finally declined to give the permission. So any information related to passport department and the SB police had to be collected through informal discussions with persons involved in the service.

Key findings

Passport Application and Official Processing:

Although several attempts have been made in the past to ease the passport application process, still there remain some problems, which are: each applicant has to meet different requirements and go through several steps while applying and receiving a passport. It is observed that time-to-time the authorities have taken some measures to prevent forgery and irregularities; but those measures, in turn, have made the process more troublesome, especially for ordinary citizen. Applicants now have to be present while handing in their application as well as receiving the passport.

Passport offices cannot process a passport without police verification report. This rule has made applicants more dependent on the SB police. During the process of verification, the police ask for various documents to establish the identity of the applicant. If the applicants are unable to satisfy the police, they have to endure harassment and delay.

Besides the communication of the Department of Immigration and Passport with citizens on its services is not adequate. The passport offices have not developed sufficient services to inform the applicants on passport application process and requirements. They just distribute application forms. As a result, the applicants who are illiterate and hail from rural areas have to depend heavily on brokers.

The Department of Immigration and Passport:

There are 15 regional passport offices across the country; each of which provides service to the people of the some adjacent districts. Among these, the Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet offices are considered to be big offices in terms of total number of passports issued.

In the fiscal year 2004-05, the government earned Tk. 500 crores from this department; the lion's share coming from passport fees. While the earning has doubled over the last five years, the increase in expenditure on the department has been slow, which has risen from, a total of Tk. 15.96 crore in 2000-01 to Tk. 21.24 crore in 2004-05.

In the period 2001-2006 (May), the Department of Immigration and Passport issued 57.23 lacs passports from its 15 regional passport offices, among which, 52.32 lacs were International Passports while 4.91 lacs were Special Passports. During the same period, the government earned Tk. 1578.74 crores by issuing passports.



There exist some limitations in the structure and governance of the Department of Immigration and Passport. Although three Deputy Directors were made supervisors of three regions, they were made heads of Dhaka, Chittagong and Jessore Regional Offices. This was designed by the corrupt section of the department to exercise their influence on the regional passport offices.

A shortage of staff is the chief limitation that exists in passport offices. Altogether 100 positions are lying vacant in the Department of Immigration and Passport and Regional Offices. This shortage is one of the major causes of corruption in passport delivery service.

Since its inception as a Department, most Director Generals of the department have been appointed from the police department, so the passport department personnel cannot articulate any resentment against the difficulties they may be facing for delays and irregularities in the system of police verification.

The researchers were told that honest officers' opinion is not heeded even if it is a senior officer. Honest people are not assigned to positions where they might block the chain of corruption. They are appointed to positions where they can hold up a good image of the department.

It is learnt that officers who can give regular bribes to controlling authorities of the department and at Home Ministry can get 'good' transfers and promotions regularly. They are given a rating of 95-98 out of 100 in the Annual Confidential Report (ACR). But honest officers who are unable to give bribes are rated low in the ACR.

Every year the Department of Immigration and Passport needs one million passport books, supplied by the same foreign company that has been the single supplier in the last decade. A few years ago, corruption was alleged against the process of tender processing for passport books.

The Dhaka Regional Passport Office:

The Dhaka regional passport office is the largest in Bangladesh. Almost half the passports of the country are issued from here. There are 87 approved positions at the Dhaka office, among which 13 positions are vacant. As a result, the office has to struggle with huge work overload, so that officers and staff have to work even up to 7:00–8:00 PM. To relieve some workload, about 18 non-staff are working in different sections of this office.

Brokers are largely responsible for bringing in corruption to this office. For facilitating an easy and smooth delivery of passport, they usually take Tk. 800-1500 from each applicant, out of which they give the office a fixed amount of Tk 500 per passport from which the office keeps Tk 400, and gives Tk. 100 to the SB police for police verification. It has been estimated that the Dhaka office receives Tk 2.5 lacs per day (Tk 7.49 crores in a year) from brokers. This fund is distributed among the staff and officials at different rates.

In the survey of 624 passport applicants in the Dhaka office, it was found that 61.2% applicants received their passports on time. This percentage rises if passports are processed through brokers, or travel/ recruiting agencies.

During busy hours all counters in the Dhaka office are crowded with applicants and brokers to such an extent that lateral movement is impossible. Counter queues sometimes stretch from the booth to the office lawn and to the gate, with more than hundred applicants for each counter. Brokers approach applicants at these counters with the offer of submitting the application on their behalf. In those cases an applicant



has to give them Tk20-200, a share of which goes to the staff at the counter. Sometimes applicants fall to their temptation and endure harassment.

The 11 police personnel employed on fortnightly duty inside the passport office to maintain law and order are also involved in the corruption, and harass ordinary passport applicants. Each broker has to pay these police Tk. 20 per day to be allowed to work inside the office. Sometimes the police compel applicants to give them bribes by preventing applicants' entry to the office, or making different accusations against them, etc.

Brokers:

Over the past decades, brokers have become an integral part of the passport delivery service. They range from general brokers and recruiting agencies to passport office and bank staff. They maintain a close tie with officers and staff of passport office, and the SB police for quick delivery of passport. However, for this service applicants have to give them money. In the survey, it was found that in Dhaka 33.3% applicants processed their application through brokers and travel agencies.

The survey showed that 69.9% and 81.5% of applicants got their passport on time when they processed their passport through travel/ recruiting agencies and brokers respectively. Statistically, there exists a significant relationship between asking for brokers' help, and receiving passports on time.

In the Dhaka office, on average an applicant has to give Tk. 930 to a broker for a passport. If 33.3% applicants go to them for help with passports, the brokers at the Dhaka Regional Passport Office receive approximately Tk 13.81 crore from passport applicants, almost two-thirds of which goes to the passport office and the SB police. At 95% confidence interval this amount lies between Tk. 12.81 crore and Tk 14.91 crore.

Although brokers provide services to the passport applicants, they also cause harassment by or depositing 'ordinary' passport fees while taking money for a 'very urgent' or 'urgent' passport and also by not delivering the passport as promised. Some brokers can even abscond with the money. To make their task easy, sometimes brokers persuade applicants to provide fake addresses places close to Dhaka city, so they can more easily arrange the police verification report.

Again, the renewal of and endorsement on passports are simple and straightforward jobs that can easily be done by brokers by using counterfeiting materials and imitating the signature of the concerned official. Such malpractice not only goes against the security of the country, it also deprives the government from a legitimate earning.

To safeguard their interest and give themselves more clout, some senior and influential brokers have formed an association called the 'Passport Application (Dolil) Writers' Association' to which brokers pay a monthly subscription of Tk. 500-1000. The money is used to ameliorate threats to them and ensure their ability to operate safely. A part of this money also goes to the thana police, DB police, political leaders, etc.

Police Verification:

Police verification is mandatory for each applicant for a new passport. The government made the SB police responsible for this verification. In Dhaka it is conducted and coordinated by the SB office at Malibag. This office has 10-20 Sub-inspectors (SI) for the work in Dhaka city, where separate areas have been assigned to each officer.



The present rule is that a passport office cannot issue any passport without clearance from the police. So the police report is very crucial for passport delivery. Brokers sometimes give the responsibility of getting the police report to passport office staff. The messengers of the SB office who formally come to receive applications from passport offices are their contract people for this job. These people help ensure the payments and the timely delivery of police reports. Sometimes brokers also contact the SB police for the report.

The survey shows that police verification was done for 82.2% of the applicants. However, it is seen that carrying out the police verification can depend on who has processed the passport. It was found that 34.6% and 51.7% applicants did not have a police verification done when their passport was processed with the help of brokers, and travel/recruiting agencies respectively, while only 5.6% of the applicants, who processed the passport themselves, did not have police verification. Statistically, the relationship of the source of help taken and carrying out of the police verification is very significant.

According to the survey, 60.0% applicants had to bribe the police during verification, while 38.5% and 55.2% applicants did not have to do so when passports were processed with the assistance of brokers and travel/recruiting agencies respectively.

The survey also shows that applicants in the Dhaka office have to give an average Tk. 260 to the SB police. From this, it is estimated that the SB under Dhaka Regional Passport Office annually receives approximately TK. 7.02 crore in a year directly from the applicants. At 95% confidence, level this amount lies between Tk. 6.10 crores and 7.93 crores.

During verification the police ask awkward questions of the applicants, and require them to produce documents such as educational certificates, house or homestead ownership documents, utility bills, job certificates etc. If applicants are unable to satisfy them, they have to give a high amount of bribe. However, even when the police find the given information correct they demand bribe outright, saying that the SP or ASP would not sign the report without bribe.

Everyday hundreds of applicants have to come to the SB office, Dhaka for the verification report. If the police do not find the applicant at home during police verification, or are not satisfied with the bribe offered, they ask applicants to come to the SB office with some documents, where they again use different pretexts to ask for bribe.

Applicants whose permanent address is outside the jurisdiction of a regional passport office suffers the most in the process of police verification, and generally never gets the passport on time. Also, they have to spend a lot of money for commuting to passport and SB offices. To avoid such delay and sufferings, the applicants and brokers resort to using fake addresses.

According to police officers, verification is not the most important part of their duty as they have other priority assignments. They and specially the DSB consider the job of verification as an additional and bothersome assignment, added on to their duty of VIP security and intelligence activities.

9.1 Recommendations:

According to the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made in order to help policy makers, the Department of Immigration and Passport and the SB police to streamline this service.



A. Policy Level

▪ **Increase of budget allocation for the Department of Immigration and Passport:**

The budget allocation for the Department of Immigration and Passport is very low as compared to the earnings from this department. As a result, infrastructure and technological development of this department have been neglected for years. The department is understaffed and has less manpower than approved. So the budget of this department has to be increased at least twofold for its modernization and efficient functioning.

▪ **Increase of manpower, institutional capacity and development of infrastructure**

Shortage of manpower is one of the prime causes of corruption and irregularities in passport delivery service. Manpower shortage along with institutional capacity and deficiency in infrastructure aggravate poor service delivery for the people.

▪ **Outsourcing of passport service:**

As an alternative measure, agents should be employed for an interim period to weaken the dominance of brokers and travel and recruiting agencies in this service. They can be assigned as passport agents under some legal framework, so that they cannot indulge in any wrongdoing.

▪ **Modernization and Computerization of passport offices:**

Presently, a huge amount of administrative work, register maintenance and record keeping are done manually, which is time consuming and difficult in the present situation of huge demand for passports at some offices. Computerization would save time and help reduce some of the problems resulting from staff shortage.

▪ **Introduction of Machine Readable Passport (MRP):**

Machine Readable Passports (MRP) should be introduced immediately, to eliminate passport forgery and for enhancing the country's image. There are some interest groups who oppose this proposal for bringing in MRP (Machine Readable Passport) and National Database, as it would make their services redundant.

▪ **Creation of more offices in Dhaka:**

At present, huge passport pressure is visible at Dhaka Regional Passport Office. During working hour this office is crowded with thousands of passport applicants and brokers. Thus the office faces immense trouble in dealing with such large numbers. More offices should be established in Dhaka to reduce the existing work overload and pressure.

▪ **Implementation of proposed National Information and Registration Department:**

A national database of the entire population should be set up on the computer, where personal data of each citizen will be available for multiple uses. The government has already completed a feasibility study for setting up a National Information and Registration Department (NIRD). So its implementation should be accelerated.



- **Withdrawal of Official Secrets Act, 1923:**

Official Secrets Act 1923 should be withdrawn to enable the media and public to have access to the information of the department. Its withdrawal would increase transparency and accountability of the passport service.

- **Provision of Incentives for the staff:**

Incentives for the officers and staff of the passport department and the SB police can be introduced based on the number of applications processed/ written, and the number of applicants verified. This will provide impetus to the officers and staff to reduce delay in processing applications and issuing passports. The money for incentives can be taken from passport application fees.

B. The Department of Immigration and Passport

- **Simplification of passport application and delivery process:**

Several attempts have been made to date to simplify the process of passport application and the passport delivery process, some of which have proved effective. However, there exist some limitations in the application from and process and steps should be taken to remove them.

- **Transparency and accountability in the passport department:**

The corruption of a section of officers and staff has been shown up by this research, and also the fact that it has helped create administrative indiscipline and non-professionalism in the Department of Immigration and Passport. Transparency and accountability must be restored in the department.

- **Setting of a website and provisions of Internet application:**

Although the Department of Immigration and Passport has a link on the website of the Home Ministry, a separate website of this department must be set up. Necessary information on applications can be made available on the website, so that applicants can get information on the status of application. An Internet application provision can also be introduced on this website.

- **Preparing a Free booklet or Leaflet:**

A booklet can be developed that include description of passport types, fees, location of banks, place to enquire, steps for processing applications, and other requirements for documents and payments. This booklet can be distributed with the application form free of charge.

- **Creation of a Complaint and Grievance Cell:**

Splitting inquiry and complain counter into separate Information Counter, and Complaint and Grievance Cell should be introduces that would increase the accountability of its services towards passport applicants.



C. Police Department

- **Reducing the complexities and involvement of Police Verification:**

Police verification is now an essential part of the passport delivery system. Once the passport office could issue passport after a certain period whether the police report was available or not. But, recently the government has changed this rule presumably of the allegation of receiving passports by the foreigners and terrorists. Alternative measures to ensure the same objectives, and revamping of the SB police need to be explored. But in the long run the involvement of police has to be reduced.

- **Provision of adequate transport allowance for the police verification**

There is no specific transport allowance earmarked for the police for performing the verification. This situation allows and provides an excuse for extortion from the applicants being verified. To counter such practices, there must be adequate provision of transport allowance for police carrying out the task of verification.

D. Others:

Customer's satisfaction survey:

In the present passport delivery system, consumers do not have any say in improving this service. At the same time, the authority does not have a system of assessing the state of the service. A customers' survey like 'Report Card Survey' can be carried out at regular intervals to learn of the quality of, and the loopholes in the service, after which measures can be taken to improve the service. The authority or a citizen's committee could conduct the survey.

Conclusion:

At a time when the process of passport delivery has become easier in developed countries, and measures are being taken for the expansion of international business, higher education, better treatment and travel, Bangladesh seems to be walking reverse. Even after paying the requisite fees for passports, people in Bangladesh are not getting the proper services from the present passport delivery system. Unfortunately the way this service is delivered seems to be a privilege for the citizens, rather than a right, which is a clear breach of public service. The worst sufferers of the present passport delivery service are the people belonging to lower income group and unskilled laborers who bring precious remittance for this country. The problems in this service are not new, and are increasing day by day because of indifference at the policy level. The government must take necessary measures to streamline the service as soon as possible.