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School Libraries in Bangladesh: A State-of-the-Art Report

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Libraries at the institutional level in schools in Bangladesh are deplorable. Various commissions have been framed at various times to inquire into and set up standards and policies, as well as strategies for the eradication of many problems. But since 1971, there have been no improvements in services or facilities, either proposed or placed in practice, in spite of the recommendations of the commissions. Almost no data are available on school libraries as they now exist, and survey research at the field level on the status' of school libraries and librarianship in Bangladesh is badly needed.

Introduction

Bangladesh is a country of 147,570 sq km with a total population of 117.72 million. It is in south Asia and is surrounded by Indian territory with a small common border with Myanmar (formerly Burma) in the southeast. It is a low-lying, riverine land traversed by the branches and tributaries of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. Elevation averages are less than 600 feet above sea level. Tropical monsoons and frequent floods and cyclones inflict heavy damage in the delta region. It is an overpopulated country with a population density of 755 inhabitants per sq km. About 80% of the people live in villages, and the rest are urban and city dwellers. About 95% of the population speak Bangla (Bengali), the state language, and the remainder mostly use tribal dialects. English is used widely in Bangladesh.

The Education System of Bangladesh

The education system of Bangladesh is currently divided into the following categories: universal primary education, adult education as a part of literacy programs, secondary education, higher secondary education, *Madrasah* education, vocational education, special education, and higher education.

Universal primary education runs from minimum literacy to class V. In government-funded primary schools, the school building, teachers' salaries and all other expenditures are paid for by the government's education budget. There is another sort of primary school, for which the government pays the staff salaries but nothing for the building or any physical facilities. There is a third type of primary school, which is entirely managed and funded by public effort.

Nongovernment organizations like PROSHIKA, BRAC, ASA, the Ahsania Mission, and others run schools in rural and urban areas where govern-

ment-funded education is entirely unavailable to educate underprivileged children and adults through informal methods.

At the secondary level there are state-owned schools where all costs, including building construction, development, and staff salaries are borne by the government. Nongovernment schools are first established either by an affluent donor or by a collective endeavor of the local people. After receiving recognition and affiliation from the appropriate authority, they are entitled to get grants-in-aid under an Annual Development Program (ADP) from the government for construction or extension of the school building. The major international donors to ADP in Bangladesh are the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, IDA, DENIDA, and some other international development agencies. Teachers in nongovernment schools get 80% of their salaries from the government at the rate set for their specified categories under the national pay scale; the remaining portion of salaries and any allowances are paid from the school fund (tuition and other fees collected from the students plus income from the school property).

Madrasah schools teach the basic concepts and terminologies of Islamic theology and literature from the religious perspective of Mohammedanism. In Bangladesh, the following categories of Madrasahs are equivalent to secular or public schools. The *Ebtedayee* is equivalent to primary schools of general education. The *Fazil* is equivalent to SSC (Secondary School Certificate) level, the "0" Level of the British standard. The *Dakhil* is equivalent to HSC (Higher Secondary School Certificate) level, the "A" Level GCE standard. The examinations of Madrasahs are conducted by the Madrasah Education Board.

The problems of developing Bangladesh are manifold, in view of the widespread poverty, malnutrition, and underemployment in a growing population with a poor resource base. Beside these, illiteracy is one of the most important obstacles to the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh. According to the census data published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 1993, the adult literacy rate (15 years and over) was 24.8%, and 45% of the population rated below poverty level. The rate of enrollment in primary schools was 86%, and the secondary school enrollment rate was 33%. In spite of an extensive and intensive program of universal primary education, the rate of enrollment is not increasing significantly.

Between the last two census takings, school enrollment showed a decline for boys in both urban and rural areas, but there was an upward trend in the enrollment of girls. A high dropout rate appears to be a serious problem in primary school, and is especially acute in grade 1 and grade 2. As the school curricula are not appropriate to the demands of today, people do not find direct application of their acquired knowledge in their daily life. The high unemployment and underemployment of educated people has reduced the rate of return on educational investment and thus reduced, to a considerable extent, the economic and social value of education to the people.

Because the state of school libraries and librarianship in Bangladesh is so desperate, and because there are few data available, the outline established for the State-of-the-Art Reports in this issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* is difficult to follow for Bangladesh. The number of schools that have libraries, and specific information about those libraries and their staff, will remain unknown until and unless a proper survey is conducted on a national basis. Therefore, the remainder of this report is organized under two major headings: "History of School Library Development" and "School Librarianship and School Management."

History of School Library Development

In 1974 the Bangladesh Education Commission (BEC) stated, "It is by no means possible on our part at present to set up library in primary school, and if we extrapolate the possibility of any such implementation it will likely remain as nightmare" (*Bangladesh Education Commission Report*, 1974, p. 233). This statement by the BEC in 1974 gives a clear picture of primary school libraries, or rather the lack of them. No attempt was made to include any kind of supply of books for teachers and students in primary schools in any development scheme before 1990. At present, this situation has been improved. Although libraries in a real sense are not established in primary schools, at least textbooks are supplied free to the pupils by the government. The history of school library development in Bangladesh is therefore restricted to secondary schools.

Where school libraries do exist, in secondary schools, they have been generally neglected, and the total amount of money allotted for the library was always small. In almost all schools no provision was made either for the construction or for the expansion of the library building and, where there was such provision, it was altogether meager, with the result that school libraries all over Bangladesh face an acute accommodation problem. The money allotted for the procurement of books and journals, the number of library assistants and their degree of ability to perform their duties, and the items of furniture are so insufficient that libraries virtually do not exist in the schools and colleges of Bangladesh.

Libraries in most of the secondary schools consist of heaps of books in the Headmaster's room, or in the teachers' common room, or in the *almirah* (wooden or steel bookshelves covered with wooden, steel, or glass doors in which books may be stored and preserved) under lock and key at different places in the school building. Often books are relegated to a corner where there is no proper ventilation or separate reading room. As a result, new books are quickly damaged as they are haphazardly kept among old worm-eaten books; the heavily damaged books cannot be separated for lack of space and accommodation; and the sickly look of the scattered books inspires neither the teachers nor the students.

Before the independence of 1947, the British government from 1913 to 1944 conducted three Education Commissions, and 16 study reports were produced, but no library policy was formulated. *The Bengal Education Code - 1931* is the first initiative or directive that specifically mentioned the issues of libraries or of librarianship. This Code stated the following:

A good library is an essential part of the equipment of every secondary school. It should in high schools generally consist of three parts: (1) A reference library (2) A teacher's library and (3) A scholar's library. (This division need not to maintained in middle schools.) Adequate arrangement should be made for lending books to the pupils and teachers should encourage their pupils to make use of the books in the school library. (*Bengal Education Code-1931*, p. 208)

In 1954, during the Pakistan regime, the East Bengal Education System Reconstruction Committee, headed by Maulana Akram Khan, declared that the library was "essential and fundamental" and important for the reconstruction of secondary education. Thus a library for both the teachers and the students was a criterion for recognition of any secondary school by the government (*East Bengal Educational System Reconstruction Committee Report*, 1954, p. 95).

Next, the Aatur Rahman Khan *Education Commission Report*, published in 1957, recommended a "well equipped library in every school consisting of two parts (1) a class library and (2) a subject library attended by trained librarian. In order to supervise, coordinate and vitalize their proper functioning, teachers should as well be properly trained through Teachers Training College (TTC) under structured curricula" (*Education Committee Report*, 1957, p.193).

The Shareef *Education Commission Report* of 1959 declared that the "library should be the life center of school education and so as to meet up this necessity, it should be fully equipped and properly developed" (*Education Commission Report*, 1959, p. 92).

The Noor Khan *Education Commission Report* of 1969 identified the importance of a library at the school, college and Madrasah level and marked its lack as the principal cause of degradation in the educational standard.

The Bangladesh Education Commission 1974, headed by Dr. Kudrat-e-Khuda, was the first one after Bangladeshi Independence that, keeping in view the lifeless state of the secondary school libraries, gave top priority to them and clearly laid out the state of affairs of the libraries as well as librarianship:

We feel the need of some quantitative standards in the context of our conviction that secondary school libraries must be built anew. We, therefore, recommend the following minimum standards:

a) size of the library building: It should be at least one thousand square feet. If necessary, or rather preferably a separate house for the library should be built. When preparing its blue print one should keep in view the following criteria:

- 1) Expansion of the building will be inevitable in future;
 - 2) most of the books will be placed on open shelves;
 - 3) the floor must be insect and damp proof;
 - 4) dust-storm, wind driven rain, scorching sun must not have direct entry, and
 - 5) sizes of furniture and equipment, number of pieces and their placement must be mapped out before construction of the building.
- b) Furniture of the Library: must be of functional type scientifically made.
- c) Blue Print: more than one alternative blue-print of the building in which size and shape of furniture and equipment and their placement will be shown, must be prepared by the administrative authority concerned and distributed in advance to the managers of the school.
- d) Budget: at least Taka five per capita of teachers and pupils per annum, in other words, price of one low priced book per capita, inclusive of cost of book binding, repairs and incidentals.
- e) Opening hours & library period: library will open one hour before class work should start and remain open until one hour after dismissal. At least two library periods will be provided in the schedule for every form.
- f) Librarian and Assistant: (i) One whole-time Librarian who must have obtained a library training certificate and has passed the higher secondary examination. (ii) One secondary school certificate examination passed library trained cataloguer and (iii) one peon-cum-cleaner-a three-man minimum staff.
- g) Review of standard: Every five years, the above standards must be reviewed for upward revision when possible. (Bangladesh Education Commission Report, 1974, pp. 235-236)

But the recommendations of the Commission could not be generally implemented due to political change in the country.

Government pilot schools with libraries run by a trained librarian and a skilled attendant were established as a result of the 1974 Bangladesh Education Commission Report. "Whole time librarian with minimum qualification H.S.C., completed short term library training course was appointed in 22 pilot schools" (*Bangladesh Education Committee Report*, 1974, p. 33). Lots of books were given to these schools through the Education Extension Center. Those secondary schools that were brought under the development scheme at this time received some grants for a one-time purchase of books. But in 1981, the Administrative Reform Committee, popularly known as the Enam Committee, abolished the positions of trained librarian and skilled attendant in secondary school libraries (Chowdhury, 1993, p. 164). This was a setback for the school and college libraries in Bangladesh that still survive.

The second commission chaired by Dr. Mofizuddin Ahmed, widely known as the National Education Commission, 1988, made the same recommendations for school libraries as those made by the Bangladesh Education Commission of 1974. But alas, nothing was done. "The governments paid very little attention to the development of libraries in schools in Bangladesh" (Chowdury, 1993, p.164). The most recent education committee report (of the Nurun-Nabi Committee, 1994) has not yet seen the light of the day.

Some library development efforts have come from the private sector and from benevolent efforts. Since 1986, the Human Development Foundation (HDF), a nongovernmental organization, under its School Library Development Program has been helping 60 rural schools to build up and develop their libraries. Teachers responsible for these school libraries have been given basic concepts of library management through a short-term training program. Another nongovernmental organization, the Biswa Sahitya Kendra (World Literacy Center) does not set up libraries in conventional form, but it is creating interest for books and inculcating the habit of reading in the minds of the schoolchildren through its 212 school-based centers.

Children who reside in some towns and cities can enjoy library services of other kinds. The Bangladesh Central Public Library (BCPL) maintains a library section exclusively for children. Some other public libraries procure books for children. The Bangladesh Shishu Academy (Children's Academy), an autonomous body linked with the Social Welfare Ministry, maintains 21 libraries for children. The central library of this organization, located in Dhaka, has a collection of 25,000 books. Branch libraries situated in various district headquarters also have good collections, and all these libraries are run by professional staff.

The Islamic Foundation (Bangladesh), another autonomous body, linked with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has created about 2,500 book clubs in secondary schools. The Foundation has donated many books on Islamic literature and on science and technology to the schools concerned. In 1987, the Islamic Foundation (Bangladesh) launched a program to set up 450 book clubs per year in schools, colleges, and Madrasahs, and this program still continues.

School Librarianship and School Library Management

At present, the responsibility for a secondary school library is given to a teacher. Because of this position and responsibility, he or she is sometimes freed from the workload of two or three periods per week, but this is not always possible, as often this teacher has to take the classes of absent teachers. There is no separate library period for the pupils. Some nongovernment secondary school teachers were trained in the certificate course of the Library Association of Bangladesh (LAB) in both the Pakistan and Bangladesh regimes. Library science as a subject has been included in the syllabi of the Teachers' Training College. The Education Extension Center (EEC) also conducted a short library training course for teachers of the government secondary schools. But the present condition of the secondary school libraries is discouraging, because the dissolution of the posts of librarian and attendant of the secondary school libraries in 1981 seriously affected their activities. At present, secondary schools are not getting grants even for one-time purchase of books; and so the training programs conducted by the EEC and LAB have no practical use.

There is currently no plan for improvement of school libraries either being implemented or likely to be implemented. It seems that "the heart of most of the educational institutes needs to be better cared after" (Ahmed, 1993, p. 57).

It is inevitable that the failure of the library system in secondary schools has endangered the proper development and use of libraries at the higher institutional level. As regards librarianship, it is discouraging that in the 247 government colleges in Bangladesh there are only 10 librarians, and only 23 colleges have separate accommodation for a library or reading hall. Since 1971, no efforts have been either proposed or carried out to create the library as an institution and/or to raise the status of librarianship as a profession in Bangladesh.

However, I have visited some professional librarians in nongovernment schools that have created and maintain good libraries for their pupils in spite of dissolution of the post of school librarian in 1981. In fact, some nongovernment schools, which are financially sound and have enlightened persons as office bearers or managing committee members who have a keen interest in education, maintain libraries and library staff as a part of their internal self-help arrangements.

Conclusion

The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has currently constituted a 54-member committee under the chairmanship of Prof. Shamsul Haque to formulate a realistic national education policy reinforcing the report of Bangladesh Education Commission of 1974. The present Education Committee will review the reports of the 1974 Commission and examine all aspects of the educational problems prevailing in the country in order to update different proposals of the commission. Now we can only wait to see the report of the Committee and the subsequent action of the government.

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