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THE STATE OF NON-GOVERNMENT LIBRARIES IN BANGLADESH

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THE recent deteriorating trend in the non Government Public Libraries of the country shows in eclipse the brilliant past of the library movement in Bangladesh. As mentioned elsewhere, the first four district libraries were set up under private initiative at Barisal, Bogra, Jessore and Rangpur as early as 1964. Although this demonstrates over a hundred and thirty years tradition in library development in the country, many a non government library has lately deteriorated much.

A very brilliant example is provided by Ramnala Library in Comilla. Set up in 1912 by a famous philanthropist of the district late Mr. Mahesh Chandra Bhattacharya, the Ramnala library and Museum was housed in a building in 1935 when it was named after the mother of late Mohesh Bhattacharya Ramnala Devi. The Library was finally moved to its present two-storied building at Iswar Pathosia.

When I visited this library in 1985, I found the library in a uncared state. The Admirals packed up with rare Sanskrit books and scripts and other books of general interest, covered with dust most of which remained unused for years. I was told that the total number of books and scripts was over twenty thousand providing a heaven for the researchers but for lack of proper maintenance and facilities it has almost defeated the purpose.

Thus the patronage and enthusiasm of the philanthropists and educated class witnessed even in the waning British period in the field of library development, is almost missing in the recent years. Even the traditional libraries in most cases are now thriving on limited membership fees partly public donations and token government grants. The importance laid by the government in the post-independence first five-year plan for the development of some of the traditional libraries provided an exception.

There had not been much investigation into the actual state of these libraries until it was done under foreign assistance programme by Mr. Parker. This survey culminating in the Parker Report revealed a large gap between actual requirement of these libraries and collections through the non-government sources. Collections from users as subscription and membership fees, according to the Report stands for ten per cent while collections through commercial activities account for two per cent only.

EDUCATION COMMISSION REPORT

The National Education Commission set up immediately after independence described the overall condition of libraries as 'deplorable' in its report published in May 1974 and released in October 1975. The report proposed as a national target the setting up of a nationwide network of Public Library service points so conveniently situated that a reader need not walk more than a mile to find one. Taking into account the socio-economic condition now prevailing in the country this "national target" envisaged by the commission would appear too ambitious a proposal to achieve in near future. Of course amongs its other recommendations the Education Commission laid great stress on setting up of a Divisional-level Public Library at

Rajshahi as well as meeting the additional space problems of Central Public Library and the existing Divisional Public Libraries at Chittagong and Khulna, all of which has since been either fulfilled to a great extent or taken up at government level.

Simultaneously similar attention to the private sector libraries will help improve the prevailing situation to a great extent. A welcome signal has already been provided by the inclusion of some of the private sector district level libraries in the First five-year plan for development. Some of these libraries bears a traditional background. Following the examples set by the Key Plan and subsequent social welfare schemes in the pre-independence period some 15 district-level libraries came under the post-independence first five-year development plan.

BARISAL PUBLIC LIBRARY

One of the four pioneer libra-

ries of Bangladesh the Barisal Public Library was founded by Mr. Kemp I.C.S. the then District Judge of Barisal in 1854. The old and dilapidated Library building was taken up for renovation and improvement after a century of its birth in late fifties under the initiative of the then Deputy Commissioner Mr. S.M. Usman, C.S.P.

In the post-independence development strides the Barisal Public Library was undertaken as one of the five non-Government Public Libraries for development under the first five-year plan. Each of these libraries was to receive 3.50 lacs for construction of building and 75 lacs for the purchase of books furniture and equipment.

According to Parker Report the Library records a sanctioned amount of Taka 3,20,000 of which Taka 1,50,000 was allocated for construction works but the amount spent upto the period of the said Report totals 62,300/- of which only Taka 11,000 was spent on construction. This represents only 19 per cent of the sanctioned amount which itself represents only 64 per cent of the amount provided in the project proforma.

The Barisal non-government Public Library has a stock of about 10,000 volumes and a staff of eight of which only one is a graduate professional and serves a total number 550 users.

Four other libraries included in the same project involving construction of building and purchase of books and equipments are Muslim Institute Public Library Mymensingh; Rangamati Public Library Chittagong Hill Tracts; Kazi Nazrul Pathager Patuakhali and Noakhali Public Library.

WOODBURN PUBLIC LIBRARY BOGRA

Another pioneer library set up at Bogra town bearing the name of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal between 1898-1902 provides a brilliant example of public endeavour in the advancement of education and culture through libraries. Founded by one Mr. Royal by the river Karota the library underwent multiple changes with the passage of time. It has associated with it the names of Mr. T.P. Larkins I.C.S. the District Collector of Bogra in 1890, Nawab Abdus Sobhan Chowdhury known as the Nawab of Bogra Nawabzada Altaf Ali

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Mr. J.N. Gupta I.C.S. District Magistrate and the author of the District Gazetteer Bogra and the Maharaja of Kakina all of whom provided patronage and made generous contribution towards the growth and development of the library at different points of time. With the donation made by Mr. Harmad Ali, son of Bogra Mohammad Ali of their rich family library collections in the late sixties of the present century the status of the Library was much elevated.

After independence this library was classed with ten district level non-government libraries to receive funds for the expansion of library building and purchase of books furniture and equipment in the first five years development plan. The bookstock of this library was raised to 17,000 volumes and it used to serve 1,800 users at the close of the first plan period. (To be concluded).