

A Magic Wand in Library Development

BANGLADESH, carved out as a sovereign state in the world map in 1971, has a rich and variegated cultural heritage. The country had also the privilege of sharing with the rest of India the modern trend in education and culture, which came to the sub-continent with the advent of the British rule.

Besides other activities in the field of education and culture, the introduction of modern library system in the country dates back to 1854, which saw the opening of 4 libraries; one each at Barisal, Bogra, Jessore and Rangpur of course under private initiative. A century later book-lovers of the country witnessed the foundation laying of the first ever Government sponsored public library—the Central Public Library at Dhaka in 1955.

Though this shows the very slow and belated response of the Government to a vital aspect of public need and aspiration, this landmark in the country's library movement was progressively followed by various steps including the library development plan submitted to Government, known as key-plan by an Australian Library Expert, Mr. L.C. Key in 1953. The Key-Report envisaged, for the first time, a net-work of public libraries in the country. Since then opinions were voiced through information media, library movement launched through debates and discussions and conferences were held until the second and most vital survey of libraries was conducted through foreign assistance resulting in the spectacular Parker Report, resulting in the spectacular Parker Report.

But to what consequences? The long-cherished chain of public libraries under one central administration was no where in sight even after the Second Five Year Plan was launched. Even the recommendations made in the Parker Report in 1979 confirming Mr. Key's Plan of 1956 for a centrally controlled countrywide library system failed to invite adequate government measures for their implementation.

The first two years of the Second Five Year Plan period rolled by and there had been about three years from the date of submission of Parker Report, without any step or even contemplation of such unification of the country's library system when, suddenly, a magic wand was seen in operation. A Government Order issued on July 7, 1982 sought to amalgamate the erstwhile Bangladesh Parishad Centres of the country with the three existing Government libraries under one unified command.

Thus out of the scope of the second plan targets and quite in contrast with the government objectives pursued so far in the field, the said order paved the way to the speedy realisation of the cherished goal of a countrywide public library network. The speed and efficiency in which this epoch-making order was carried out should be regarded as an outstanding landmark in the country's library development, for all times to come. Needless to say that the real strength of this magic wand was, perhaps, the

experience gained by the service rendered over years by the Bangladesh Parishad through its 64 Centres, spread all over the country, under one unified command.

BANGLADESH PARISHAD

Stemmed from Pakistan Council and Bureau of National Reconstruction, Bangladesh Parishad played a significant role for a decade of sovereign Bangladesh by providing both lending and reference library service to the country's six universities and numerous College students and reading facilities to hosts of people from all walks of life all over the country. The Parishad also presented the country's development measures and her cultural heritage through simple but dignified programmes participated by eminent scholars, artists and a cross section of intellectuals as well as the students community.

Paying a glowing tribute to the library administration of Bangladesh Parishad, the Parker Report termed it as "the only organised library system" and "nearest approach to a nationwide public library network which exists in Bangladesh".

The following remarks in the

5.3.6.3. Each of the main centres provides a meeting hall and a public lending library. The smallest of these, in Khulna has a stock of some 12,000 volumes. The biggest, in Dhaka, has more than twice that number. The smaller centres are essentially reading rooms with small book collections of about 2,000 volumes and range of newspapers and periodicals.

5.3.6.4. The Bangladesh Parishad library in Rajshahi, the main centre for which a completed questionnaire was received, may serve as an example of the kind of service being provided in the main centres. The library has a stock of about 12,000 volumes, and receives 36 current periodicals. It has a staff of ten, including two full-time graduate professionals and three full-time non-graduate professionals and had a total annual budget in 1977-78 of Taka 119,000. The collection is classified by the Dewey Decimal classification and indexed in a card catalogue. The Library has nearly 5,000 members and issues about 13,000 books per year for home reading, with average attendances of 221,000 per year. It is open from 0830 to 1900 six days a week.

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Parker Report underlines the important role played by erstwhile Bangladesh Parishad both in the library and cultural fields of the country:—

5.3.6.7. The Bangladesh Parishad is an organisation, said to have modelled on the British Council, but operating mainly within Bangladesh, which aims to promote a sense of national identity among the people of Bangladesh through organising cultural activities of various kinds, including the provision of Library facilities. It is administered by the Department of Mass Communication of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting but consideration is being given to the possibility of transferring it to the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs and Sports.

5.3.6.2. There are five main Bangladesh Parishad Centres, in Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Mymensingh. (The sixth Regional Centre was set up at Comilla after the survey was over) There are two sub-centres in Dhaka and one in each of the other four towns. There are fourteen district information centres in the district headquarters towns not served by the main Parishad centres, and 38 sub-divisional information centres in sub-divisional headquarters.

Since Bangladesh Parishad originated after independence from Pakistan Council and BNR, we may look back to probe into the functions of these two organisations:

PAKISTAN COUNCIL

Isolated from the system of libraries developed under the aegis of the Education Department of the then provincial government, a two-pronged library system, one sponsored directly by the then Central Ministry of Information & National Affairs and the other under the provincial Department of Information received spontaneous public response and paved the way to the growth of an integrated Public Library System in the country.

Pakistan Council under the direct supervision of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, opened its first Centre at Motijheel, Dhaka in August, 1964 and was closely followed by the Centres at Chittagong (1965) and Rajshahi (1967). Two more Centres, one at Khulna and the other at Mymensingh came up later. All these centres with open shelf libraries provided reading facilities to students and general readers and also lent out books for home reading. Since the Central and Divisional Public Libraries remained ever shy to open lending system, des-

pite their avowed policy to do so, the book loan service of Pakistan Council Centres provided added attraction to the student community and general public alike.

THE BUREAU

In course of the period from 1963 to 1965, Bureau of National Reconstruction opened as many as 61 Information Centres, each containing a small library throughout the country. Nine of these Centres were located in and around Dhaka while the remaining 52 Centres were set up at the District and sub-divisional headquarters. These libraries run with grants provided by the provincial government, attracted local initiative through advisory committees composed of local leaders and educationist and headed by the D.Cs. and SDOs.

A report published in a souvenir captioned HISTORY OF THE INFORMATION CENTRE produced on the occasion of the opening of the Armanitola Information Centre in 1963, which speaks about the initiative taken by the Bureau for setting up of a nationwide library network, says:

"The Armanitola Information Centre is situated at the Armanitola Maidan in the heart of the historic old Dhaka—an area which once hummed with cultural activities. Housed in a dilapidated building now reconstructed and remodelled at the Maidan, the centre consists of a library, a reading room, a lounge, an office and a children's corner with a small walled compound in front. With about 1200 books on various topics, daily newspapers and available journals, it provides reading facilities to the people of the surrounding areas.

"Set up in August, 1962 by the Bureau of National Reconstruction at the head of its network of Information and Reconstruction Centres in Dhaka and Narayanganj, the Armanitola Centre is managed directly by the Bureau with the assistance of an 11-member Advisory Committee. The members of the advisory committee include 9 non-officials—5 Chairmen of the surrounding Union Councils and 4 leading educationists of the area. The Deputy Director of the Bureau is the ex-officio Chairman of the committee. The Secretary of the Committee is also an official of the Bureau who is entrusted to look after the normal functioning of the centre. The Centre has a skeleton staff consisting of one Librarian, one peon, one Darwan and a Sweeper.

"Apart from providing reading facilities to general readers, the Centre conducts some other programmes including occasional film shows, seminars and cultural programmes. The Cultural Week now being organised intends to present to the readers and visitors more or less a compact notion about the various functions of the Information Centre.

(To be concluded)