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Of Libraries

Ever since man mastered the art of writing, he has been writing down his thoughts and ideas. It was only a matter of time before he would devise a way for maintaining permanent records of whatever it is he has writ. One of his devises for protecting his mental hard labour was by collecting books and keeping them in libraries.

The first libraries were in existence in ancient Mesopotamia, long before paper was developed. Inscribed clay tablets have been found going back to the year 3,500 BC. The most famous library of all in the ancient world was the Alexandrian Library founded between 305-283 BC. But it was not until man transcended the limitations of the materials at his disposal by the development of papyrus, parchment and, eventually paper that writing really took off.

When printing was invented in the 15th century, man's flight of imagination had conceived of the library as the guardian of all human intellectual efforts. The emergence in the 19th century of an urban industrial society that required a generally literate population plus the serious commitment of the state to free, universal, compulsory education made libraries a necessary amenity for the general public. This was aided by the happy coincidence of the development of the high-speed, steam-powered, rotary press and mechanical methods of producing paper from wood pulp, for this made it possible to produce books, magazines and newspapers for mass consumption.

In Bangladesh there are three national libraries, 65 government run public libraries, around 500 privately operated ones open for public use, 15 university libraries, more than 800 government and private college libraries and 665 specialised libraries. In addition some newspapers and tabloids have their own libraries where staff can research their material before going into print and, a positive highlight is that some high schools do have their own libraries for the use of their students which indicates the library tradition is not yet dead. But considering the number of literate people there is a need for more.

That the government is alive to the problem is clear for it has already approved a National Book Policy (NBP) that recommends a Library Legislation be introduced for the proper development of libraries. This policy states that professional librarians should be appointed at libraries of all educational institutions. Library services should be extended to Union Parishad level as well for the benefit of the rural areas. As libraries contain more than just books, they are very much needed if intellect is to be properly stimulated. But as access is still limited to a few, what we need before we are lured by the glamour of the 'quick access' electronic devices is to restore our present libraries to good health and encourage people to use them more.