Status of Rural and Small Libraries in Bangladesh: Directions for the Future

By Faizur Rahman

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of rural and small public libraries in Bangladesh in the light of present and existing opportunities they provide within limited capacity and of poor infrastructure. Until recently, small libraries have been ignored as models of service both in the developed and developing countries. According to Cigler,[1] probably because rural communities, in general, have been neglected units of study. The scenario is probably the same all around the globe and it is even worse particularly in the developing countries. Sturges and Chimseu[2] stated that the fact that the villages in the developing countries are impoverished, neglected, and frequently isolated by geography, language, and culture, represents one extreme in a global range of information environments, which stretches from virtual reality back through to painfully hard reality.

Bangladesh, as a developing country, is struggling to face this reality. As Bangladesh has attempted to adjust from an agricultural to industrial infrastructure, ignoring almost 80 percent of the people living in the village. It is now confronted with a new sociological challenge-who will assure the village dwellers right to information access and use? The most important questions: How can the infrastructure development best fit in the public library system in Bangladesh, if at all? What is its role in the future of rural Bangladesh? And who will meet their daily information needs, where people are mostly illiterate and deprived having urban amenities?

Limitations

The limitations of this paper should be noted as well. It is mainly a study based on a literature review, though the author believes this topic would be an excellent piece of empirical research through extensive field visits and the face-to-face interview method. This paper also lacks adequate statistics and census reports that would be appropriate for better understanding to all, though the author tries his best to depict a clear picture based on the existing literature. Finally, it would be wise to mention that the developing countries always have one common characteristic concerning the existing literature: the

information may be biased at any level mainly to satisfy the government either selected or elected.

Review of Current Problems of Developing Country Libraries

The phrase "developing countries" refers to a group of roughly 130 countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that have yet to achieve the social, economic, educational and technical standards common in areas such as Western and Eastern Europe, North America, Australia, and Japan-known as the industrialized world. Examined broadly, Horowitz[3] noted developing countries can be characterized by rapid population growth, poverty, illiteracy, rising urbanization and industrialization, low life expectancy and inadequate resources to meet basic needs such as food, healthcare, housing and education. While recognizing the situation within every developing country and every library is unique, a broad list of problems that afflict libraries can be compiled. A single problem that is common to many libraries and information centers in developing countries is the isolation and the lack of well-developed telecommunications infrastructure to overcome that isolation.

Bangladesh: An Overview

Bangladesh, a semi-tropical reverie nation with fertile soil, is constrained by high vulnerability to frequent natural calamities and floods, which often hinder the usual economic progress of the country. Bangladesh is known as one of the 31 least-developed countries and one of the 49 low-income group nations of the world, although the agricultural output has increased steadily over the last several years. With 120.5 million people crowded into an area of 143,999 square km (smaller than the state of Wisconsin), Bangladesh has the highest population density (1,625 per sq. mile in 1991) of the world, excepting city-states like Singapore. Rural populations are concentrated in over 86,000 villages. According to one of its national publications,[4] Bangladesh has 24 million acres of cultivated land, and 12 million small farms, which average about 2.0 acres of land per farm. More than 80 percent of the total population lives in the countryside, while about 45 percent continue to live below the poverty line. The 1991 census report of Bangladesh showed the agriculture section contributed approximately 46 percent to the gross domestic product (GDP), whereas, the industrial section contributed around 12 percent of the targeted GDP. This panoramic land has already undergone a number of political vicissitudes moving from one-party dominance to one-party rule, to military regimes, to a democratic transition. But the problem of existing bureaucracy both at civil and military levels has been much more serious in Bangladesh than in either India or Pakistan. Consequently, it results in the huge scale of inequalities in the agrarian section. The current dilemma of Bangladesh is fairly basic: its pace of economic growth cannot be sustained

without substantial decentralization of both wealth and power to the mass population living in the countryside.

Present Status of Bangladesh Libraries

Post-independence governments of Bangladesh did not do anything very notable in the field of libraries but rather proved themselves retrograde. For example, the country does not have a National Information Policy, no policy regarding the funding of the existing libraries, no administrative directions and long term planning and policies to improve the present conditions of the libraries in this historically deprived land. Every successive government, both in autocratic and democratically elected, claimed to have given in their budget a heavier weight to education, but no government fixed an equitable quota or taxes for libraries out of both revenue income and development funds. Consequently, the present situation of the libraries of Bangladesh remains extremely poor, and the school libraries are practically inoperative. The conditions of academic and special libraries are more presentable in terms of collections and quality of services offered than that of the public libraries in Bangladesh. The following table depicts an overall scenario of the present status of Bangladesh libraries.

Table I
Present Status of the Libraries in Bangladesh

Type of Library	Total	Collection in 1995 (n=1,594,687)	No. of Staff (n=432)	Daily Average Readers
National Library of Bangladesh Bangladesh	3	150,000	56	125
Central Public Library (Govt.)	1	118,279	106	2000
Divisional Libraries (Govt.)	3	154,293	68	4,751
District Libraries and Branches (Govt.)	62	421,096	202	8,615
Public Libraries (Non-Govt.)	369	—	—	—
Academic Libraries	1,141	751,019	—	—
School Libraries	13,845	—	—	—
Special Libraries	665	—	—	—

Table 1 shows the number of libraries by type, the total collection, number of staff, and the daily average of readers in the year of 1995. These numbers may be varied slightly though it depicts a clear picture about the present status and conditions of libraries in Bangladesh. It should be noted that with some few exceptions in university and special libraries, most libraries have been functioning in a traditional way: these libraries have books, journals, and other conventional reading materials. According to a recent survey by the Bangladesh National Scientific and Technical Documentation Center (BANSDOC)[5] only thirty-six of the ninety-three specialized libraries have equipment and technical support. Of these, only 10 libraries have and/or use personal computers. Only a few have CD-ROM drives and CD-ROM databases. Micro- CDS/ISIS is the common software used by almost all of these libraries, where the Inmagic and dBase software is also used by two libraries.

Development of Public Library Systems in Bangladesh

The first government public library was established in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh in 1995, which was called the East Pakistan Central Public Library. The library was opened to the public in March 1958. There were two more government public libraries-one located in Khulna divisional headquarters and the other located in Chittagong divisional headquarters. The fourth library, also located in Dhaka, was called the Central Library of Pakistan, established after 1962 to receive the books and publications under the provisions of the Copyright Ordinance of 1962, as well as to form the nucleus of the National Library for the Erswhile Pakistan in its eastern part.

There was another set of libraries giving public library services under the auspices of an organization called the Pakistan Council, with branches in major cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Mymensingh, and Comilla. There were also, under the administrative control of Mass Communication Department of the Ministry of Information, Information Centers in the entire district and sub-divisional headquarters with 2,000-3,000 books and some other publications in each center. After the liberation of the country in 1971, the first set of four libraries were renamed, respectively, as the Bangladesh Central Public Library, Divisional Public Libraries in Khulna and Chittagong, and the National Library of Bangladesh under the administrative control of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The Pakistan Council was renamed as the Bangladesh Parishad, while all the district and sub-divisional information centers of the Mass Communication Department were brought under the administrative control of the Bangladesh Parishad.

The country inherited still another category of public libraries called non-government public libraries. The Zaminders started the establishment of these libraries sporadically during the British colonial period at the behest of the British Crown's civil servants. In some cases they were established by trusts or foundations sponsored by high officials of the government or philanthropists

after the Public Library Act was passed in 1850 in England. The first such public library was established in the district town of Jessore in 1851. In 1854, public libraries were established at Bogra, Rangpur, and Barishal district towns. Subsequently, public libraries were established in Rajshahi (1871), Dhaka (1874), Comilla (1884), Pabna (1890), Noakhali and Sylhet (1897), Chittagong (1904), Cox's Bazar (1906), Munshigang (1908), Kishorganj (1909), Khulna (1914), Mymensingh (1930) and so on. All these libraries were established with the private initiative and not under any mandate of law. Although, the Local Government Act of 1885 and its subsequent amendments in 1919 entrusted the local government authorities, such as District Boards and Municipalities with the responsibility of establishing and managing public libraries. Since this task was not mandatory in nature, the local authorities probably felt little concern about these libraries. They used to give a small amount of financial support as and when requested. These libraries had, by that time, good collections of books. The number of such government-aided libraries at the time of liberation was around 110. According to a recent survey, the number of such government-aided non-government public libraries is 865. These are subscription libraries scattered throughout the country in municipal as well as rural areas, run by social workers, and are open to only registered members who pay regular fees for borrowing books.

In 1982, the Bangladesh Parishad was dissolved and, at the behest of an administrative reorganization committee, a Department of Public Libraries was established in 1983 with the Bangladesh Central Public Library as the apex organization in the system along with the divisional public libraries at Chittagong, Rajshahi, and Khulna. The libraries and information centers of the dissolved Bangladesh Parishad in the district and sub-divisional (now turned into districts) headquarters were also brought under the Department of Public Libraries as the district public libraries and sub-centers of the Department. But all activities and policy decisions regarding the public library system, the national library of Bangladesh, and the national archives of Bangladesh are taken by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. But it is painful to say that the country still doesn't have any library legislation enacted after the liberation of the country. In the absence of such legislation, no integrated library system could evolve until today.

Defining Rural

The Bangladesh live in villages. According to Khuda,[6] there are about 84,000 villages in Bangladesh and 80 percent of the total population live in these villages. So, defining "Rural Bangladesh" is not a problem as it is in the case of "Rural America" where the population is changing continuously and is encroached upon by urbanizing influences. Vavrek,[7] a pioneer in this field, stated that while statistically describing rural America as a place comprising 2,288 counties, containing 835 of the nation's land, and home to 215 of the

population (51 million) is not a problem, defining a "rural model" is more of a challenge. The U.S. Bureau of the Census does it by indicating that a place of at least 2,500 people denotes an urban area, and, therefore, really doesn't define a rural space. But in 1978, the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship (CSRL), at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, added to the dimensions of the rural metaphor by including populations up to 2,500 in its studies-in addition to the non-definition provided by the Census folks.

In the case of "Rural Bangladesh," the population should include up to 75,000, considering its limited geographical boundary, nature of the rural community, and job availability in the rural places. It is also important to note most of the rural people in Bangladesh are farmers, while according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, only about 5 million people, less than 10 percent of the rural population in the United States, live on farms. In Bangladesh, the economy of the rural people is deplorable and their income is highly limited. Most rural people either live below or are very close to the poverty level. They do not have any formal education; the rural people, according to Khan,[8] are mostly illiterate, even among the educated, most do not cross the school-level education. This situation is almost the same or not much better in the case of rural America, as Weinstein stated,[9] the complex socio-economic issues sometimes hide the realities of life on the farm; poverty, abuse, low educational attainment, malnourishment, and the absence of medical practitioners, etc. In reality, the rural populations are the most deprived and sometimes isolated mass group of human beings until struggling to fulfill the basic needs irrespective of geographical demarcation in this globe.

Types of Information Needed

Examining the information needs of rural America, Vavrek,[10][11] in his two successive research studies that are comprehensive and systematic, discovered both users and non-users indicated their daily information needs include knowing about current decisions of local government, health and medical services, and local news. On the contrary, there is no reported study of information-seeking pattern of the rural population for Southeast Asia. However, in 1996 Shariff[12] explored a study covering 358 library users from several rural communities in Malaysia. It seems a rural library service, where provided, has rarely taken into consideration the actual needs of the communities concerned. Another study reveals scarce resources are wasted on materials and services in Malaui, Botswana, and Tanzania, which do not fit the needs of rural clients. That is why it is an urgent need to conduct studies of the informational needs of the rural population before planning a rural library service. Following this perspective, Mchombo[13][14] has carried out two most notable studies on the informational needs for rural development in Malawi, Batswana, and Tanzania that are common to all developing countries in the world. They are as follows:

- Information on income generation.
- Community leadership.
- Literacy support.
- Basic economics.
- Government policies on rural development.
- Soil conservation, fertility, restoration, and soil erosion.

In another study, Musib[15] examined the information needs of rural India and he concluded a rural population requires more information on problems regarding consumer education, employment, and medical issues. Khan[16] stated the information needs of rural Bangladesh consisted of various information on agriculture, health, food and nutrition, environment, new and appropriate technology, education and training, credit system, business and trade, government policies and plans to improve their socio-economic conditions. In such situations, the traditional forms, patterns and nature of providing library services, literature and information support must be different for the rural community, as opposed to the requirements of the educated urban people, especially true in the developing countries. Therefore, library/information services must be designed on a continuous basis to match the information needs of the rural population that would be supportive and relevant to that particular community.

Services

Public libraries have constantly been in search of new paradigms to meet the needs of their users in Bangladesh. Throughout public library history, adaptations have been made to find purposes that are in line with the changing needs of society. According to the existing literature, public libraries in Bangladesh have traditionally rendered a "passive service." Users were expected to make use of the facilities of their own accord. Active outreach programs have not been part and parcel of many of the services offered. Services have mostly been geared to the needs of the well-educated, literate, middle-class members of the community, thus excluding the new literate and the illiterate. However, some non-government organizations (NGOs) have been organizing resource centers at the community level for the geographically rural populations that are isolated and vast. These include: Community Development Library (has 40 branches), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Proshika Manabik Unnayan Kendra, Gono Shahajjyo Songstha, Asha, etc. BRAC has already established some rural libraries on an experimental basis, and has plans to establish 350 libraries in the rural areas by the end of 1999. With the support of UNESCO, three library and information centers have been organized and maintained jointly by BANSCOC and the Library Association of Bangladesh (LAB) in three villages of Dhamrai Thana (similar to County), around 40 kilometers from the capital, Dhaka. The LAB

has also been working to create awareness of various levels for developing some model well-equipped and technologically advanced rural library system for the country.

To support the rural activities and for the benefit of the rural, poor people in particular, Khan[17] proposed the establishment of rural library and information resource centers in and all around Bangladesh, particularly in the most remote areas that would serve in parallel to the existing public library systems. As a result, the rural community members would be able to:

- Find information about subjects of their interest,
- Take part in learning and promotional activities,
- Discuss and share knowledge, information and concerns with extension and other community workers, planners, and administrators,
- Find materials to help them retain their literacy and numerical skills,
- Meet to organize and work together on community projects,
- Use equipment to produce their own information materials, and
- Enjoy cultural and leisure activities.

But the problems of rural library service may be characterized in simple terms of cost and distance. It is even more difficult and worse when the population is dispersed. Along with these shortcomings, the rural communities of Bangladesh also do not have enough opportunities to decrease their isolation through the advancement of telecommunications. But recently "Grameen (Rural) Telecommunications" has been introduced in the eastern and western part of the country successfully with limited bandwidth and system performance that could easily offer connectivity and thus, would be able to partially change the existing situation.

Review of Current Problems

There are several factors that have been playing an adverse role in the rural and small public libraries in Bangladesh. The problems fall into six broad categories: economic factors, information resources, organizational structures, human resources, political factors, and geographical isolation. The following is an analysis of the mentioned problems:

Economic Factors

- Lack of funds to buy books, provide services, and to automate library functions.

- Foreign exchange restrictions limit the delivery of materials directly from producing countries.

Information Resources

- Insufficient collections and physical resources to house them.
- A general lack of policy regarding information organization and retrieval.
- Lack of assessing community needs.

Organizational Structures

- Lack of cooperative agreements among libraries for acquisition, storage, and inter-lending.
- Lack of outreach services offered on a timely basis.
- Lack of standards library and information work.

Human Resources

- Inadequate training of library staff.
- Lack of technically trained staff personnel.
- Insufficient user demand because of reliance on traditional oral transmission of information.

Political Factors

- Interference and sometimes apathy of the government depending on the socio-economic and political situation.
- Lack of government supports both politically and monetarily.
- Lack of government information as it is often classified, resulting in legal obstacles to the flow of government information. It results in apathy to the rural community to use the library.

Geographical Isolation

- Lack of well developed transportation, mail, and freight to reach to the rural libraries.
- Lack of adequate infrastructure support, for example, extremely poor telecommunications facilities.
- Isolation of users. They do not have access to library services because libraries are few and widely isolated.
- Lack of workstations, software, and hardware support. It results in almost no access to databases in industrialized countries.

Recommendations

The advent of telecommunications, the Internet, and low cost of computers have made possible the exchange and sharing of the world's vast information resources among all the countries in the world instantaneously. To keep pace with other countries of the world, Bangladesh should take immediate action to improve her human resources. It is only possible to establish some well organized an carefully planned rural library resource center that not only will be able to show various positive directions to the mass population of Bangladesh, but also it will work as a nucleus of socio-economic development as a whole. The following recommendations should be implemented carefully on a priority basis to reach the destination-"a self-reliant Bangladesh."

1. An integrated approach should be introduced and implemented to extend public library service facilities to the people, especially for the rural population of Bangladesh. It seems that there are too many departments and sub-departments in this sector that eventually results in lack of coordination and also stimulates the level of corruption. Considering these adverse effects, it is highly recommended to set up a single library authority that should also include the esteemed library experts with civil bureaucracy.

2. It is required to reform the telecommunications sector in Bangladesh as a matter of urgency. It is highly recommended to install higher bandwidth capacity (ATM preferred) that will be served as a national backbone of data transfer and access to the Internet. Packet radio technology, based on the application of packet switching to radio, can also be used temporarily to create computer links among rural public libraries that would be considered an asset for Bangladesh.

3. The government should allocate sufficient funds to support the purchasing and maintenance of books, journals, and computer systems by all the rural and small public libraries in Bangladesh. Tax and Vat on workstations should be withdrawn immediately if the country wants to be in good shape.

4. Public libraries should develop a centralized database to include all documents and sources of information available in the country in order to create the national database. Such a database is needed in order for that library to be linked with other international networks

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potentiality of rural librarianship, networking, establish programs to visit these countries physically, and convince the administrators to allocate enough funding for this purpose.

11. The library associations of Bangladesh should organize more seminars, workshops, and training programs to create mass awareness in this regard that will allow the administrators and government to allocate enough funding to initiate networking and resource sharing among the public libraries in Bangladesh.

12. The faculty members in Bangladesh should explore the funding possibilities offered by the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) under its "ALP Program" to build up a "Rural Information Network" in Bangladesh as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Access to information and its effective use is imperative and knowledge is a critical element of successfully living in today's world. This proven and universal truth is neglected in all developing countries, and is particularly true for the least developing countries like Bangladesh. The absence of economies of scale and remoteness, as well as government apathy to improve the existing situation, seriously hinders the national economy as a whole. The present challenge to rural areas is to make sure that their people, businesses, and communities have access to the information to ameliorate socio-economic conditions and raise standards of living to be able to contribute to the national development. It is ridiculous that decision-makers of Bangladesh have yet to understand the value and power of rural and small libraries in "Rural Bangladesh" that would stimulate the national development by eradicating illiteracy, alleviating poverty, and expanding the educational base of the country. The offering of information support to the village people by establishing some well organized "Rural Information Resource Center" is, thus, very vital and crucial. Through such an organization, people-farmers and businessmen-could continuously build their skills and knowledge bases and improve their competitive position in the coming century.

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