

Status of Rural Library and Information Services in Bangladesh: Directions for the Development

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Abstract: In this paper an attempt has been made to give a short overview of the rural library situation in Bangladesh and their role in providing rural information services. Besides, an effort is also made to trace the Multipurpose Community Telecentre (MCT) which providing ICT based rural information services in Bangladesh. Finally, recommendations are also given for the development of rural libraries in providing rural information services in Bangladesh.

Key words: Rural Library, Multipurpose Community Telecentre (MCT), Rural Communities, Rural Information Service.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a small country of 1,47,570 square kilometers and is about 126 million people^[7]. It is almost surrounded by India, except for a short southeastern frontier with Myanmar and a southeastern coastline on the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh is mainly a rural and agro-based country. About 85% of the total population of the country lives in the rural areas.

Bangladesh is known as least developed country and low-income group nations of the world. Bangladesh has been struggling to meet the basic needs of its people, viz., food, clothing, shelter, health, education and the like and to substantially raise the living standards of the people. Different social problems like population explosion, natural disaster, gradual increase of unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, unhygienic environment, etc. are aggravating the socio-economic situation of the country^[11].

Like other basic needs of the people, information is another basic requirement. But the people who are especially living in grass-roots areas of Bangladesh, they are far away from the reach of their basic informational needs. To develop people's capability to participate in an evolving knowledge-based society, we should need rural library or rural information resource center.

Rural library and information resource center plays a vital role in providing rural information services. Simply rural library or information service is defined as library as information service in rural setting. A rural library is one of the most effective ways of disseminating information to the people. The major aim of rural library is to provide basic rural information to the rural dwellers. Rural libraries can act as information and community centers to improve living conditions and the quality of

life. In this context^[13] have identified the following aims of a rural library and information center: (a) to infuse awareness among rural people of the sources of information and encourage them to make use of information which are available in the library; (b) to take care of economic, educational, social, cultural and information needs of the local people; (c) to convert uneducated/illiterate and neo-literate into potential users; and (d) to provide information on all aspects, such as agriculture, financial, public hygiene, family planning, legal matters, etc.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper is mainly based on the review of primary and secondary sources of information, which include books, journals, research reports, research articles, etc. Relevant literatures were also collected and consulted through the Internet browsing.

Objectives of the Study: The main objectives of the study are:

- to delineate the status of rural library in Bangladesh
- to know the role of rural libraries in providing rural information services
- to identify the problems hindering in providing rural information services
- to provide directions for the development of rural libraries in Bangladesh

Rural Communities in Bangladesh

Rural Communities in Bangladesh comprise:

- Literate and illiterate farmers
- School teachers
- Literate and illiterate women

- School and college students
- Employed and unemployed peoples
- Businessman
- Religious personnel
- Small traders
- Community development activists
- Agricultural and health extension workers, etc.

Status of Rural Libraries in Bangladesh: Bangladesh has had libraries in rural areas since the beginning of nineteenth century. But for many rural people the concept of a library or information center is somewhat difficult to understand. Many of them do not see any difference between a library and a commercial bookstall. Among rural people, the most common way of transferring information is word of mouth. Information sources originate from traditional institutions such as the local tea stall, the market and other places where people gather and exchange information^[2].

According to the National Book Centre of Bangladesh and other sources, the country has 4,000 libraries in rural areas. But the number is insufficient compared with approximately 90,000 villages. Moreover, most of the libraries are tiny and have very small collections^[9]. The government of Bangladesh did not take so much initiative to establish the rural libraries. According to the National Book Centre of Bangladesh^[15], at present there are 68 government public libraries and 1603 non-government public libraries in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. Besides, some giant non-government organizations (NGOs) have been organizing information resource centers (rural library) at the community level.

Community Development Library (CDL), a non-government development organization, was established in 1980 with the mission of delivering development information and the organizations committed to the promotion of sustainable development, gender equity, social justice, human rights and community education^[16]. The mission of CDL is to narrow the existing knowledge gap between information rich and information poor through sharing critical and urgent information amongst the social change activists, the state and the civil society for a sustainable social and economic development in Bangladesh. The primary mission of CDL is to provide sustained access to key information to the society in a meaningful way.

The main objective of the organization is to raise the critical consciousness of the society personified in catalysts. Catalysts include, policy makers, gender and development activists, communication personnel, cultural activists, political activists, human right activists,

environmentalists, researchers and community leaders^[10]. Realizing the importance of information for the socio-economic development of the rural people, CDL initiated its Rural Information Resource Centre (RIRC) programme in 1982.

The RIRC has library facilities and organize seminars, workshops, study circles, discussion meetings, video shows, sharing experiences to enrich the knowledge on development issues of the community people and NGOs working at the community level. RIRC also maintaining news clippings on regular basis. The main thrust of RIRC is to create a knowledge base and make access to information on health and sanitation, environment, human rights, gender, poverty alleviation, good governance. Also the RIRC provide facilities for continuing education^[12]. So far CDL has established 26 RIRC, which are operating as a network of development information and communication for the last two decades. It has been playing a key role in making development information available to the people of rural and inaccessible areas^[6].

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), the leading NGO, in Bangladesh was established Gonokendro Pathager, meaning public library, or BRAC Union Library later in 1995, as a component of BRAC's Continuing Education Programme. The main focus is to create a "learning society" in the rural areas of Bangladesh^[5]. The aim of union libraries or Ganokendro Pathagar is to make reading materials available to people in villages. Apart from its basic role of providing reading materials such as books, newspapers and magazines, the union libraries also carry out several other important functions of as educational, socio-cultural and sports activities in an effort to bring the community together. In addition the library members are provided with free skill training on fisheries, electrical, refrigeration, poultry and livestock, electronics, computer, tailoring, nursery, handicrafts, etc. in different areas in collaboration with government departments. The libraries are essentially operating as Community Centres providing focal points within communities – places where people can come to read, borrow books, become involved in socio-cultural activities, or to take advantage of the textbook lending scheme for high-school students from poor households. Usually a local person (preferably a woman) is selected as a librarian and he/she receives necessary training from BRAC to learn how to operate the library. BRAC has 7,300 Reading Centers with BRAC schools as the center and 570 union libraries or Ganokendro Pathagar since 1995^[4]. The Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) started organizing Rural Libraries or Ganokendro as post-literacy centers in 1992. With the passage of time and gradual adding of multi-sectoral services Ganokendro has evolved as an

approach to life long learning and community development and its role gradually widened to cater the diverse learning needs of the community including providing facilities for economic and socio-cultural activities. At present, the organization is running 823 rural libraries in the country^[9].

With the support of UNESCO, three library and information centers have been organized and maintained jointly by the Bangladesh National Scientific and Technical Documentation Centre (BANSDOC) and the Library Association of Bangladesh (LAB) in three villages in the sub-district of Dhamrai, around 40 kilometers from the capital city of Dhaka^[14].

In the Bangladesh model of MTC (Multipurpose Community Telecentre), the focus is on youth (both professional and unemployed) and women community of the society. MTC offers sharing ICT based services and knowledge. Alternate Connectivity is the strategic strength of MTC which can be defined as the combination of phases: Collecting the relevant and local / global information and material available in any format (Hardcopy, Soft copy, CD version) with social and development aspect, Selecting the related and relevant content / materials for dissemination, Converting the materials into CD version (PDF/ Word/ Graphics), Releasing the CDs on periodical basis and disseminate to the target rural communities, Ensure minimum infrastructure (PC with CD Rom) at field level. Alternate Connectivity will open new channels that bring new knowledge and information resources to rural communities. Some private business houses extended their support as their corporate social responsibility to promote the concept which is significantly contributing towards bridging digital divide in Bangladesh. This is a unique model of partnership between NGO and private sector to bring the benefits of ICT to the deprived rural communities in different (at present two centers, one at Feni and another at Gaibandha) locations in Bangladesh. A local NGO, named SEBA (Society for Economic and Basic Advancement) has a long presence in the rural areas and is now mobilizing local communities to make aware the target groups and offer ICT services at their premises. The project is using both traditional media (like print media – newsletter) and new technologies (like the Internet, CD) for disseminating information and advisory services to the rural people^[1].

Grameen Communications, a sister organization of Grameen Trust, has established two Village Computer and Internet Facility Centers in Madhupur, Tangail and Sharishabari, Jamalpur district under their Village Computer and Internet Program (VCIP) which aims to introduce and provide computer and internet facilities to

the rural people of Bangladesh. The centres are providing services that promote and support farmers, educators, researchers, planners, designers, journalist, social worker and entrepreneurs for improving their access to the national and global information. The centres are providing information on agriculture, fisheries, livestock, health, education, environment, etc. VCIP is providing important benefits to rural society in Bangladesh. Also it is providing IT facilities to the villagers, creating jobs in rural areas.

With the financial assistance from Grameen Trust, Grameen Communications launched another center in Mirzapur, Tangail under the project "Grameen Digital Center (GDC)". The center is on-line and connected with head office in Dhaka via Microwave Link. GDC familiarizes the village people, particularly the young generation, with the use of computer and the Internet. It also provides them computer training at a minimal price and thus facilitate building up a computer literate generation in the country, provides free e-mail services to teachers and students for educational purposes and to doctors and journalists for emergency purposes, provide e-mail facilities for families having relatives staying abroad and local^[8].

Besides, Grameen Cyber Society established a Telecentre in Beraid near Dhaka City. This non-government organization has established the Telecentre for the socio-economic development through education and development of rural people. The Telecentre provides important development information, professional training, fundamental computer training to the local people specially women.

Apart from the above-mentioned library and information centres, the following special library and information centres have been providing rural information services. These library and information centre do not provide information services directly to the rural people. The rural people receive information from researchers and scientists engaged in these library and information centres.

Bangladesh Rice Research Institute Library (BRRIL) was established at Joydebpur, Gazipur in 1970 for accelerating rice research. The library is playing vital role for the development of rice production in Bangladesh. The library possesses a rich collection of rice related books, periodicals and reference materials.

Bangladesh Sugarcane Research Institute Library (BSRIL) was established at Iswardi, Pabna in 1974. BSRIL library disseminates currently published information through journals, annual reports, etc. It is the premier institution for the research of sugarcane development.

Bangladesh Tea Research Institute Library (BTRIL)

came into existence in 1957. It is located at Srimongol, Sylhet. The library collects tea related publications from the country and outside the country and provides tea related up-to-date information to the scientists and researchers.

Bangladesh Forest Research Institute Library (BFRIL), Chittagong was established in 1955 to help the country with the objectives of determining the optimum uses of timber and also to develop management practices. The library procures forest related books and provides information to the scientists and researchers engaged in forest research.

Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute Library (BLRIL) was established in 1986 and located in Savar, Dhaka. It is the largest library in the field of livestock. The library collects and preserves the livestock publication published within and outside the country and keeps the researchers aware of the latest information in the field of livestock. Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute Library (BARIL) was established in 1976. It is located in Joydebpur, Gazipur. The library collects various publications related to agricultural research from national and international agencies.

Fisheries Research Institute Library and Documentation Centre, Bangladesh (FRILDC, BD) was established in 1984. The library is situated near Bangladesh Agricultural University. The library collects books on fisheries, zoology, fish culture, fish disease, agriculture and shrimp and disseminates up-to-date information to the fisheries' scientists and researcher in the country^[19].

Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development Library (BARDL) was established in 1959 in Kotbari, Comilla about 90 km from the capital city. It is a national organization for rural development in the country. Its main objective is to help ameliorate rural poverty through conducting of training, research, organization of workshops, seminars and extension services, development support communication, documentation, exchange of information and publications^[3].

Bangladesh Sericulture Research and Training Institute Library was established in 1962 and it is located in Rajshahi. The library helps to researchers in sericulture research. The library procures books on sericulture, agriculture, ecology, genetics, entomology, textile, etc.

Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Shangha Library (TMSSL) was established in 1985 and it is located in Bogra. The library helps in establishing women's rights. TMSS library also maintaining news clippings on development, women development, human rights, education and health issues.

Moreover, some other Government Organizations (GOs) and NGOs such as Rural Development Academy

(RDA), Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS), ASHA, PROSHIKA are providing information services to the rural people and trying to meet various informational needs of rural dwellers.

Role of Rural Libraries in Providing Rural Information

Services: Rural library and information service center plays a vital role for the spread of knowledge and information to the rural community. To support the rural activities and for the benefit of the rural poor people in particular, grameen (village) library and information centers of excellence need to be established, organized and maintained with required facilities. From such a resource center, the rural community members can: (a) find information about subjects of their interests; (b) take part in learning and promotional activities; (c) discuss and share knowledge, information and concerns with extension and other community workers, planners and administrators; (d) find materials to help them retain their literacy and numeracy skills; (e) meet to organize and work together on community projects; (f) use equipment to produce their own information materials; and (g) enjoy culture and leisure activities^[14].

Rural libraries help to village people keeping fresh their knowledge. It can supply reading materials relating to various fields of rural development. Various types of information needs can be supplied by the rural libraries. To help and assist in upgrading the economic conditions of the rural people and raising their living standards, rural libraries can help better in this regard^[19].

Rural libraries of Bangladesh provide information services in the following fields^[14]

Agricultural information: Rural library provides agricultural information which may be helpful for farming, fishing, animal husbandry, animal diseases, production, fertilizers, harvesting, irrigation, plant diseases, etc.

Health, food and nutrition information: Rural library supplies information on health, diseases, malnutrition, sanitation, cleanliness, family planning, population control, mother-child health care, etc. The women particularly needed information on pre and post natal care and the current immunization facilities for their children and themselves.

Environment information: Rural library provides environmental information to the rural people, which make them to become careful from floods, natural calamities, earthquakes, various kinds of pollution, etc.

Technological information: Rural library provides

technological information to the village people such as pumps, corn cutters, solar dryers and farming tools, which are very much needed for agricultural production.

Business information: Rural library provides information on credit system, business and trade information. From this information many rural people can become self-reliant.

Information on famous people cultures: Rural library provides information on famous people cultures. By this, rural people can know about many famous people contribution, which may be helpful for everyday life. Besides, rural library provides political information, helps to eradicate illiteracy from the mass people and to alleviate poverty of the rural community.

Political information: Rural library provides political information which help to engender in effective participation process of nation building. Political information to rural dwellers raises their awareness and consciousness about the government policies. Besides, rural community need to know what parliamentary and presidential government are and how they affect their lives, they need to know how to vote, the danger of selling their votes, the role of opposition parties, etc. (Mamodu, 2002).

Helps to eradicate illiteracy: Though the central theme of the library and information center is self-education, it can also be highly supplementary to formal education system. To disseminate light of education to the rural people, rural library plays a significant role. Rural library is an important forum by which farmers can make use to eliminate illiteracy and acquire life long learning. For the farmers and their children who live in poverty and remote areas, school facilities, resources and reading materials are extremely scarce, in this respect, rural library serves the farmers and their children by their reading materials. By this way rural libraries can help to eradicate illiteracy from the mass people.

Helps to alleviate poverty: Rural library helps to alleviate poverty of the rural community. Rural library provides information on poultry farm, small business, sericulture, apiculture, etc. Besides, it also provides different information on how to make of mat, doll, cloth, wood and cane furniture, various fancy items, making of cycles and rickshaw, etc. By this information rural people can change their life style and make a happy life.

Role of Rural Librarian: Librarian in rural libraries plays a significant role for disseminating information to the rural

dwellers. He collects and organizes information for users in a systematic manner. The librarian alerts to the local communities and making them one of the first recipients of any correct information. He also reviews the literature and carry out research to determine changing local information needs. He constantly raises people's awareness of library services. So, the rural librarian should develop oral-oriented services and become the human medium through who repackaged and remodeled information can easily reach to the rural population^[16]. For this reason appropriate education and skills are needed by the library professional to face and accept the challenge of new environment and to deliver the information to the rural incumbents.

Constraints of Rural Libraries: Some of the problems hinder to provide rural information through rural libraries in Bangladesh. The most important constraints of rural libraries in Bangladesh are:

- Absence of a national information policy
- Lack of proper idea about library and information centers
- Lack of professional attitudes and skilled manpower
- Low priority given to rural library and information center in planning and management
- Bureaucratic hindrance
- Lack of government supports and initiatives to establish rural library and information resource centre
- Lack of funds to buy books, provide service and to automate rural library functions
- Lack of cooperative agreements among the rural libraries for acquisitions, storage and inter library loan
- Lack of well develop transportation, mail and freight to reach to the rural libraries
- Lack of adequate infrastructure support, for example, extremely poor telecommunication facilities.

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 and planned rural library and information resource centers that not only be able to show various positive directions to the mass population of Bangladesh, but also it will work as nucleus of socio-economic development as a whole. The following recommendations should be carefully implemented on a priority basis for providing rural information services through the rural libraries:

- The rural people should be served with appropriate information suitable to their requirements, so that

their information needs and interests are best served. To facilitate this a Rural Library and Information Resource Centre should be established in each village.

- An integrated approach should be introduced and implemented to extend public library service facilities to the people, especially for the rural population of Bangladesh.
- CDL's Rural Information Resource Centre (RIRC) or BRAC Union Library may be regarded as model for rural libraries in terms of finance and management which could be used by other organizations or the government in Bangladesh as well as in other developing countries.
- More MCT (Multipurpose Community Telecentre) should be established for providing up-to-date rural information. MCT should work as alternative library. In this case Grameen Communications, Grameen Cyber city, SEBA (Society for Economic and Basic Advancement) can be played role as model.
- The government should allocate sufficient funds to support the purchasing and maintenance of books, journals and computer systems by all the rural libraries in Bangladesh.
- NGOs can take a vigorous and integrated program jointly with the government to establish and maintain rural libraries and information centers.
- Favorable government policy relating to rural library should be formulated.
- The rural library would disseminate relevant information to the people through means such as displays, book mobile, meeting talks, demonstrations and films, slides or other audio-visual presentations.
- In most developing countries of the region, the rural economy plays a major role and is a significant contributor of the national economy. It is, therefore, very much essential to Bangladesh to seriously consider supporting the information needs of those who are behind this contribution.
- The village library and information resource centers should be entrusted with the responsibility of creating reading habits and habits of information use among the rural people.
- Village club libraries, wherever they are available, may be converted to village library and information resource centers. Government may extend financial support for maintaining these libraries.
- Computerized database containing rural information to be arranged in the rural library and information center. These should be made accessible to the users.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present day, information is regarded as a major resource for socio-economic development activities. Access to information and its effective use is imperative and knowledge is a critical element of successfully living in today's world. The present challenge to rural areas is to make sure that their people, business and communities have access to the information to ameliorate socio-economic conditions and raise standards of living to be available to contribute to the national development. In this regard, rural libraries should play a key role in accessing to information at the rural and remote levels in Bangladesh. The thrust of rural library development towards 21st century should be to reach out to the rural areas so that the imbalance of library services between urban and rural communities can be reduced and there will be equal access to information for all. So, the offering of information support to the village people by establishing some "Rural Information Resource Center (Rural Library)" is, thus, very vital and crucial. Through such library and information resource centers, various people like farmers, businessmen, etc. could continuously build their skills and knowledge bases and improve their life style and competitive position in the coming century^[17]. To achieve this, library and information professional around the country should work together towards for changing in the concept of rural library and socialization efforts will be needed to convince the government and non-government agencies to develop an appropriate library and information system and services for the rural community.

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