

Strengthening Non-government Public Libraries in Bangladesh to Support Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

Worldwide public libraries serve institutional and self-learning needs of people and as the source of information for citizens. It is a public service that governments provide. In Bangladesh there are only 70 government public libraries to serve its huge population. In addition to these, there are over a thousand non-government public libraries (NGPLs) serving the people of this nation. A government strategy to expand library services is to develop the NGPLs. This study is an attempt to describe the countrywide distribution of NGPLs and the government initiatives for the development of NGPLs. Recommendations are offered which the government could consider in its plan to strengthen the reach of NGPLs in the country.

Keywords: Public libraries in Bangladesh, Non-government public libraries, Lifelong learning

1. Introduction

The non-government public library (NGPL) movement in Bangladesh commenced in 1854 with the establishment of four public libraries in the district towns of Jessore, Bogra, Barisal and Rangpur which were financed by the local philanthropists, especially the zamindars (large landowners). The idea of establishing public libraries is a concept that spread in this part of the world as an impact of western culture on our society and intelligentsia (Syed, 1968). With the spread of modern education and growth of an educated middle class, social groups, clubs and cultural organisations came into existence, some of which saw setting up a library as a part of these initiatives. The efforts, interest and support of a handful of public spirited persons, government officials, Zamindars and social workers who saw the importance of public libraries helped pioneer the movement for building public libraries (Syed, 1968). Thus we see more than a thousand NGPLs, according to government statistics, which are in existence today.

In contrast, the first government public library (GPL) came into being in this part of Bengal in 1958 with the establishment of the Central Public Library in Dhaka. It was the apex institution in the government public library system in the country. Since then, till 2017, there are now 70 GPLs in the country spread across Bangladesh. This is obviously not adequate in terms of the reach and scope of an important public service.

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2. Role of public libraries in lifelong learning

Since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 as an independent nation, great progress has been made in expanding opportunities for education of the population. The goals and aspirations of the nation to reach the status of a middle income country, overcoming poverty and building a modern and progressive nation, new avenues of acquiring knowledge, information and skills have to be created. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2030) adopted in 2015 by the international community including Bangladesh call for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning. Much wider access to libraries for all has to be a part of the effort to achieve the SDGs. In today's world of knowledge economy and information society, libraries as a hub of knowledge and information for citizens have a vital role.

UNESCO has defined the public library as the local gateway to knowledge that provides a basic condition for lifelong learning. UNESCO urges national and local governments to support and actively engage in the development of public libraries. It laid down 12 key missions which should be at the core of public library services. These include:

- Creating and strengthening reading habits in children at an early age;
- Supporting both individual and self-conducted education as well as formal education at all levels;
- Providing opportunities for personal creative development;
- Stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people;
- Ensuring access for citizens to all forms of community information;
- Providing adequate information services to local enterprises, associations and interest groups;
- Facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills;
- Supporting and participating in literacy activities and programmes for all age groups, and initiating such activities if necessary (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994).

IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) has undertaken a project entitled "Role of public libraries in lifelong learning," the aim of which is to prepare guidelines for designing public libraries and their services. Key elements of this IFLA project are the following.:

- Use of public libraries in work related education and further education;
- Pedagogical methods and strategies developed and adapted to adult education and groups with special needs;
- Professional profile and skills of the librarian;
- Creation of networks between public libraries with research institutions, academic institutions and specialised libraries;
- Use of information and communication technologies in the libraries to promote lifelong learning;

- Consideration about the relation between the interior design and inner structure of public libraries and an environment conducive to learning and education (IFLA, 2004).

IFLA with support from UNESCO is engaged in the effort to build public library systems that will enable people to participate in lifelong learning in countries.

3. Objectives of the study

The objective of this article is to highlight the potentialities of non-government public libraries to act as an active partner of the agencies that are involved in the promotion of lifelong learning programmes for the people, especially those who are deprived of education and access to sources of knowledge. With this aim, data on the present state of non-government public libraries have been gathered, analyzed and tabulated. More specifically, the following aspects have been given attention:

- Current status of non-government public libraries (NGPLs) in the country;
- Development of NGPLs in the recent decade and examining their sustainability;
- Review of government initiatives (ongoing and forthcoming) to strengthen the capacity of NGPLs in the country; and
- Recommendations that would strengthen the role of NGPLs in Bangladesh to serve lifelong learning goals.

4. Methodology

The research depends on quantitative and qualitative information and is based mainly on secondary data. The secondary data have been drawn from the directories of non-government public libraries published in 2003 and 2014. Primary data have been collected through structured interview of the personnel of the National Book Centre (NBC) and a former senior staff of the central public library who was involved with the work of NBC related to the development of non-government public libraries. Relevant literature has been reviewed to examine the concept and practices of lifelong learning and role of public libraries in lifelong learning. The collected data have been analysed and graphical presentation of the data have been prepared.

5. Public libraries in Bangladesh at a glance

At present there are two categories of public libraries in Bangladesh: government public libraries (GPL) and non-government public libraries (NGPL). The GPLs are operated solely by public funding whereas NGPLs receive funding from various sources: donation by the founder and/or the philanthropists, NGOs, business organizations, financial institutions etc. Some of these NGPLs also get yearly fixed allocations from the public fund subject to their effective operation. Table 1 shows the status of public libraries in Bangladesh in terms of geographical spread and population.

It is evident from the table that there are 64 GPLs in 8 divisions of Bangladesh. Essentially, there are 64 government libraries in the 64 districts of the country – one government library supported by public budget in each district. There are only 6 branch GPLs in a few of the larger districts -- 3 are situated in Mymensingh division whereas Rajshahi and Dhaka divisions have 2 and 1 branch each respectively.

Table 1: Public libraries in Bangladesh at a glance (c. 2013)

Divisions	Population (in millions)	Number of government public libraries			Number of non-government public libraries		
		District libraries	Branch libraries	Total	No. of libraries run by full-time librarian	No. of libraries run by part-time librarian	Total
Dhaka	3.43	13	02	15	64	151	215
Chittagong	27.16	11	-	11	61	111	172
Rajshahi	18.03	08	01	09	42	92	134
Khulna	15.39	10	-	10	38	151	189
Barisal	8.49	06	-	06	19	77	96
Sylhet	9.18	04	-	04	15	21	36
Rangpur	15.43	08	-	08	24	117	141
Mymensingh	11.37	04	03	07	13	56	69
Total	141.48	64	06	70	276	776	1052

The NGPLs are divided into two categories: Libraries having full time librarians and libraries operated by part-time librarians. The number of NGPLs run by part-time librarians is almost three times larger than the libraries having full time librarians. The respective numbers are 776 and 276. NGPLs in different divisions are distributed unevenly in the country, without the consideration of population distribution. There is apparently no set policy or guideline regarding setting up NGPLs.

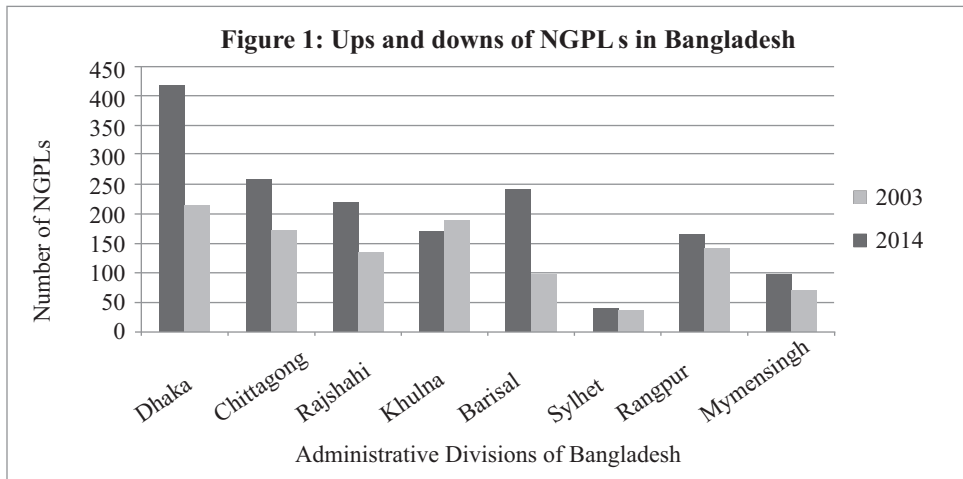
6. The state of non-government public libraries

As noted, NGPLs have come into being due to the initiatives and efforts of affluent philanthropists or by efforts of public-spirited citizens, often young people dedicated to the idea of enriching the educational and cultural environment of the community. Usually the founders of these libraries take the sole responsibility to support and operate the library. When the initial enthusiasm and dedication fade over time, often because the local champions of the initiative move away or are no longer capable of devoting the time and the effort, continuation of the library activities becomes difficult. The government support in the form of occasional or regular grant is usually meagre, and few libraries have a regular source of income from membership fees or fund-raising. The financial resources may be derived from the following sources, though not all NGPLs benefit from all of these sources (Nafiz and Rowshon, 2012):

- Contribution from the founders;
- Donation by local philanthropists;
- Renting space to commercial organizations or coaching centres; NGPLs that have good infrastructure can make use of this source;

- Small grants as honorarium for the librarian from the district council, social organizations or religious institutions.

The discontinuous, unpredictable and meagre sources of funds severely hinder the purchase of books and other reading materials, furniture, and payment for librarians and even utility charges. So the number of NGPLs in our country is in decline. A comparison of the Directories of non-government libraries revealed that the number of NGPLs in the country decreased from 1,606 in 2003 to 1,052 in 2014. Figure 1 shows the division- wise position of NGPLs in the country:



It is clear from the data that between 2003 and 2014 the number of NGPLs was reduced in all divisions except Khulna where a few new NGPLs were established during this period. Dhaka and Barisal divisions saw the most decline of NGPLs followed by the divisions of Chittagong and Rajshahi. In Dhaka nearly half of the NGPLs and in Barisal more than half of the NGPLs closed down during the designated period; and there was almost one-third decline in the Chittagong division.

7. Government initiative for the development of NGPLs

National Book Centre (NBC), Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Bangladesh is mainly responsible for the development of NGPLs in Bangladesh. NBC in cooperation with GPLs and local government authorities, is involved in this exercise. The development projects initiated by NBC are described below briefly.

- i. Compiling directory of NGPLs: One of the vital decisions taken by NBC regarding the development of NGPLs is the compilation of a directory. NCB's personnel in cooperation with district GPLs and local government authorities published "Directory of non-government public libraries" in 1991 for the first time. The 2nd, 3rd and 4th versions of the directory were published in 2003, 2011 and 2014 respectively. Due to this directory planning of promotional activities of the NGPLs has become much easier for the government and others involved.

- ii. Arrangement of training for librarians of NGPLs: Most of the NGPLs are run by nonprofessional people who do not have knowledge of formal library operations. Without a minimum knowledge in library management extensive public library service development is quite impossible. Considering this fact NBC has undertaken the project of providing basic library management training to the librarians of the NGPLs of the country. NBC introduced the training programme in 2001 and till 2017 it has given training to more than 400 librarians. NBC tries to select librarians equitably from each division of the country, giving priority to librarians who did not get training earlier. Librarians have to apply for the training with the approval of local government authorities when the training is announced through public advertisement. Finally the selection committee scrutinizes the applications to make the selection. The funding for this training is meagre; so NBC cannot offer this training programme regularly.
- iii. Yearly fixed allocations for library collection and other regular expenses: Most of the NGPLs are financed by their founders as part of their social work and contribution to society. Statements of the librarians of NGPLs cited in the study of Nafiz and Akter (2012) would be pertinent in this regard:

“I do pay every month some amount of money from the profit I gained from my business to run my library and consider it as service to my society”- Non-Government Public Librarian from Satkhira District of Khulna Division.

“I always try to pay a small amount of money to my library from the salary I receive from my permanent job”- Non-Government Public Librarian from Kushtia district of Khulna Division.

Some of the NGPLs get a small amount of money from the government under two heads: one half for book purchase and the other half for other expenses which is not regular. For getting a grant; the NGPLs have to apply with approval of the local authorities and recommendation of the concerned constituency's MP. In the fiscal year of 2016-17 NBC got an allocation of only Taka 25 million - which was distributed among 800 NGPLs all over the country.

Apart from the on-going schemes NBC has undertaken some other development projects and is considering other projects in the near future for improving the quality of NGPLs' services in the country. Some of the initiatives are:

- i. Creating web based database of the NGPLs: The latest project undertaken by NBC is the development of a web based database of the NGPLs in the country. At the first phase it will be an online directory of the NGPLs. However NBC is planning to add electronic catalogues of all NGPLs to this database which will be a vital step toward creating a digital bibliographic information base for the country.
- ii. Infrastructure development of century old NGPLs: NBC is contemplating to place a proposal to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs for budget which will be used for infrastructure development of the NGPLs that have been serving the people for more than a hundred years. Under this project the library building will be renovated, reconstructed or new building will be constructed to incorporate in it all the modern library facilities. It was found from the analysis of the data of NGPLs that there are 14

libraries in the country which have been in operation for more than a hundred years, earning a reputation and establishing a tradition of promoting education and cultural activities in the community. It is necessary to revive and restore this tradition.

- iii. Giving library personnel MPO facility: NBC's another future plan is to create the MPO facility (Monthly Pay Order – a mechanism for the government to pay a regular monthly amount) for the librarians of NGPLs in the country. If these libraries are brought under the MPO facility the appointment of full-time librarians will be possible which will benefit the lifelong learning initiatives through NGPLs in the country.

8. Recommendations for the development of NGPLs in Bangladesh

Worldwide public libraries are taken as a focal point when designing a national lifelong learning system. In Bangladesh, the number of public libraries is very limited and as an institution it is neglected. Public libraries, especially the non-government ones, can play a noteworthy role to support all lifelong learning if the following measures are given serious consideration:

- i. Guidelines for library resource and collection development through community need assessment: It is essential to understand the diverse educational as well as information needs depending on the age, aptitude and socio-cultural conditions of the community. Thus needs assessment or alternatively market research is an important task before planning design and development of a public library. This assessment requires expert people's involvement including library professionals, educationists, concerned government officials and cultural activists, who should work jointly in a committee for creating guiding principles for the collection and service development of the NGPLs in the country and each community.
- ii. Building effective workforce: The librarians of the NGPLs should get continuous training on library management as well as lifelong learning policies and practices so that they can develop personal skills to mediate between the educational community and the needs of the local or national environment. Through intensive training the librarians should be turned into skilled personnel to implement innovative lifelong learning activities and systems that are suitable for the socio-cultural context in which they would be undertaken.
- iii. Broadening the scope of CSR to include NGPLs in Bangladesh: It is not possible or feasible to increase the number of government public libraries rapidly. Rather, Government should undertake effective initiatives for nurturing the already established NGPLs of the country. To this end one of the vital initiatives would be to encourage sustainable private funding for the NGPLs. One way of doing this is to broaden the scope of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds to include NGPLs. As a result, there will be new avenues for supporting the development of NGPLs in the country.
- iv. Involving NGOs in the development of NGPLs: Many national and international NGOs are working all over the country for educating the disadvantaged population and improving their well-being and livelihood. The governing authorities concerned with NGOs, such as, the NGO Affairs Bureau, NGO forum, PKSF (a credit and support provider for NGOs),

the microcredit regulatory authority and Bangladesh Bank can review their policies and practices to include NGPLs as a local hub of education and social development and thus support and promote NGPLs. NGOs may, for example, rent the existing facilities of the NGPLs for various activities and help upgrade these in a partnership arrangement. Besides, the library personnel can be included as trainers of the NGO education programmes so that the learners are encouraged to use and benefit from NGPLs.

- v. Recognition of NGPL activities and functions in related national policies: National education policy, library policy and publications and books policy etc. should include the role and functions of NGPLs to foster better understanding of NGPLs and promote their contribution.
- vi. Implementing early childhood and pre-school programmes through NGPLs: National book policy noted the need for appointing and preparing more teachers/facilitators for pre-school activities which has not been implemented yet. In this policy the instructional programmes of the mosques, temples, churches, and pagodas also have been considered as pre-schooling. The infrastructure for pre-schooling remains inadequate; NGPLs, as one of the stakeholders, can be involved and can contribute in this sphere making the library a welcoming place for toddlers and young children.
- vii. Library hours for primary school children: Libraries are ideal places for running different informal education programmes for children such as storytelling, book reading, drawing competition and so on, which are important tools in developing literacy and love for reading during the critical early years. Primary school libraries are not so resourceful to offer such kind of programmes. Primary schools in cooperation with NGPLs can bridge this gap by keeping weekly hours of library visit in the routine for each class. In this hour children can do the things or read the books they like most. This practice may help children become self-motivated learners in future life.
- viii. Partnerships with other education providers: Secondary and higher secondary education are also important stages for personal development and sustainable economic development of the country. These educational institutions have manpower and time constraints to support their pupils' self-motivated learning. Public libraries may play their role as the laboratory for students to engage in different formal and informal education activities. Thus NGPLs should be encouraged to build liaison with those involved in literacy and reading habits initiatives to determine needs and areas of library support for existing and planned programmes. Libraries should form partnerships with secondary and higher secondary educational institutions to support students' self-conducted education and facilitate their learning. With the collaboration of the schools and students, NGPLs may extend library services to the rural community.

9. Conclusion

Different forms of literacy, such as, conventional reading and writing, information literacy, digital literacy etc. are prerequisites to a community's progress. Public libraries all over the world are recognized as the single most important institution that supports various literacy, education and information needs of the community they serve. Caring for people's personal

and professional skill development, enriching leisure time, supporting different social and cultural movements of the community are the mandates of public libraries all over the world. Thus public libraries work with community agencies in the delivery of programmes that offer multiple forms of literacy and learning activities.

The public libraries in Bangladesh at present serve only in a limited way people's leisure time pursuit by providing books for reading. The library resources are not diversified enough to attract and serve the diverse needs of all of the community people. Furthermore, the total number of government public libraries is so few that it is beyond their capacity to serve the huge population of the country. This shortage of GPLs can be mitigated by broadening the scope and reach of services of non-government public libraries.

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