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Rural Libraries in Bangladesh: Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee Experiences

Md Nasim Iqbal

This study focuses on assessing the experiences of, and challenges to, Union Libraries (or *Gonokendra Pathager*) operated by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in rural areas of Bangladesh. BRAC is one of the giant non-government organisations in Bangladesh, and has earned a worldwide reputation for its innovations in poverty-focused programs and for the unprecedented growth in the content and coverage of it's programs.

At the beginning of the nineteenth-century, local landlords, government officials and social workers felt that public libraries were an important medium for informal education, culture and recreation. As a result, a few notable libraries were established in the district towns of what was then Bengal, however, most of these stopped providing services after a few decades. In contrast, not a single BRAC Union Library has failed to provide services since 1995. This paper will discuss the library services of BRAC Union Library Program and also other additional activities performed by these libraries. Recommendations are also given for further improvement of the program. The major success of the BRAC Union Library program is that it established a model for rural libraries in terms of finance and management which could be used by other organisations or the government in Bangladesh as well as in other developing countries.

Methodology

This study emerged when the author was working as a research associate with the BRAC Continuing Education Program to evaluate its library program in the rural areas of Bangladesh. The study was conducted from the beginning of March to the end of June 2001 during a field visit. A list of the BRAC Union Libraries under the Continuing Education Program was collected first for the purpose of selecting the study areas. Out of the ten operational areas existing at the time (there are now 13) of BRAC Education Program (Continuing Education) (BEP(CE)) six were surveyed. The areas were: Gazipur, Jossore, Mymensingh, Norshingdi, Rajshahi and Srimongal.

Thirty libraries were selected, from a total of 470, based upon their performance as indicated in the monitoring reports of BEP (CE). Of the selected libraries, 24 were general, three were small and the remaining three were libraries for women. Half of the libraries selected were performing well, and the other half were performing comparatively poorly.

Data was collected from the librarians through an open-ended semi-structured questionnaire. In addition to this, the researcher also physically searched the registers, documents and monthly reports available in the libraries to cross check the information provided by the librarians to ensure accuracy. The grading sheet of BEP (CE) was used for evaluating the libraries' performances. Furthermore, during the field visits, data was also collected through observation and informal discussion with respective librarians, library members, BEP (CE) Managers, Program Organisers, the members of the Trustee Board and staff of BEP (CE) at BRAC Centres.

Background to the Study

Bangladesh is a country that truly lives in her villages. At least 76% of the total population is based in villages (Bangladesh Preliminary 4). That is why Hossain, a leading librarian, advises that the rural people of Bangladesh need an organisation that will work to increase their consciousness and decrease the gap between urban and rural people. He also states that there is a difference between other social organisations and the library in terms of establishment or management in the rural area because, in Bangladesh, the idea of a library is of an urban-based institution. But national development in Bangladesh depends upon the development of rural areas, which is why there is an imperative to establish rural libraries. Currently, agriculture employs 68.5% of the labour force. This sector directly contributes around 32% to the gross domestic product (Bangladesh Statistical, XXIV). S.M. Zabed, Md. Munshi & Minhaj Ahmed suggest that, in a country like Bangladesh with an agro-based rural economy, rural development can play a major role in national development. They argue, therefore, that quick and easy access to information is vital to the development of the rural community. Eduardo Talero & Philip Gaudette state that rural and poor urban communities can be integrated into the mainstream of economic life, and thereby can raise their income levels, through better information services. They suggest that satellite networks, wireless communication, public telephones, and community information centres are effective channels of information (14). The general assumption in Bangladesh is that one desirable source of such information would be a library and information centre.

Zabed et al. state that for many rural people the concept of a library or information centre is somewhat difficult to understand. Many of them do not see any difference between a library and a commercial bookstore. 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. According to Samsul Islam Khan, one of the major benefits of having a rural library and information system is that "[t]he rural people, if considered a vital economic force and active partners in shaping the country's economy, are without any question the key players at the national level, and they need to be properly educated and to be provided information support, so that they can play their due role in shaping the national economy" (20).

Zabed et al. explain that the people who work in the agricultural sector of Bangladesh are small and marginal farmers, and agricultural labourers. These farmers and labourers need, among other things, information in those matters that contribute to an increase in agricultural productivity and related issues. These include grants, subsidies, provision of credit, supply of fertilisers and agricultural implements. Various conditions suggest that the need for information in rural communities is largely centred on problems of daily life and earning a livelihood. Approximately 70% of the people are illiterate and, therefore, literacy programs need to be promoted. Poverty and social inequality are also striking features of the rural community. Anti-poverty programs and legislative measures to ease the burden of social inequality may be of interest to them. Facilities for housing, health and hygiene are poor. Food and nutrition, childcare and family welfare are neglected aspects of social organisation. Under-employment and unemployment are common features of village life. Rural business people, with their small capital, small volume, and lack of reliable market information are at a disadvantage compared with wealthier business people in the rural and urban areas (Zabed et al 131). These situations suggest a demand for library and information centres in rural Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has had libraries in rural areas since the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to the National Book Centre of Bangladesh and other sources, the country has 4,000 libraries in rural areas. But this number is insufficient compared with approximately 90,000 villages. Moreover, most of the libraries are tiny and have very small collections. From the author's own experience, rural and poor urban areas have never been considered as a component in planning for library services, and are still being neglected and overlooked in government policy and decision making. However, some non-governmental organisations have been organising information resource centres at the community level. The Community Development Library has

27 regional, district and local Rural Information Resource Centres throughout the country (Rashid, 6). BRAC has 7,030 Reading Centres with BRAC schools as the centre and 518 Union libraries since 1995 (BRAC Annual report, 1999).

With the support of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) three library and information centres have been organised 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, 40 km from the capital city of Dhaka. The Dhaka Ahasania Mission started organising Rural Libraries or *Ganokendra* as post-literacy centres in 1992. At present, the organisation is running 823 rural libraries in five administrative districts of the country. Though the name is similar to the BRAC Program, the Mission's activities are only similar to the Reading Centres of BRAC. Grameen Communication, a sister organisation of Grameen Trust, has established two Village Computer and Internet Facility Centres in Tangail and Jamalpur district under their program which aims to introduce and provide computer and internet facilities to the rural people of Bangladesh.

Overview of BRAC Union Libraries

BRAC was established as a relief and rehabilitation organisation in 1972 after the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Over the years, BRAC has gradually evolved into a large and multifaceted development organisation with the twin objectives of the "Alleviation of Poverty and Empowerment of the Poor" (www.brac.net). In an attempt to reduce mass illiteracy, contribute to the attainment of basic education, strengthen the government's universal primary education Program and promote increased participation of girls in education, BRAC introduced its Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) Program in 1985 for under-served children who were not able to attend, or had dropped out of, the formal system (Begum and Akter 1996). There are currently over 34,000 schools, with 1.1 million students, a large number of whom complete a three year course. As it is important for students to continue their education and retain the literacy skills learnt at schools, BRAC started the Reading Centres in the early 1990s. During the implementation of these centres it was noticed that they could also extend their service to people in the area other than NFPE graduates. As a result, the first BRAC Union Library was established in 1995 as a component of BRAC's Continuing Education Program.

The main focus of the program is to create a "learning society" in rural areas of Bangladesh (Non Formal Primary Education Report). The specific objectives of a BRAC Union Library are:

1. to build a reading habit among the villagers leading to human resource development;
2. to improve education, literature and culture;
3. to create opportunities for learning about Bangladesh and the outside world;
4. to enhance skills through education, training and discussion;
5. to improve the standard of sports;
6. to develop new values among the community;
7. to ensure women's participation in all activities; and
8. to develop the library as the information centre in that area.

As a result, these libraries are currently operating as Community Centres, providing a focal point within communities: a place where people can come to read, borrow books, and become involved in various socio-cultural activities.

Kaisar Khan identifies three types of Union Libraries: a) General, b) Women's and c) Small (1). The categories reflect the type of membership, the number of members, and the amount of operating funding. General libraries are open to all and require at least 400 members, 50% of whom should be women. Women's libraries are operated by women and require at least 300 female members—men are also allowed to use the library if they are library members. Small libraries are usually set up in economically underdeveloped areas where it is hard to raise the funding required for a general library or to find sufficient library members.

As shown in Figures 1 & 2, the number of male members and their daily attendance in the General and Small type libraries was high compared to female members. However, male membership and attendance was found to be poor in the Women's libraries. It was also found that most of the readers in all types of libraries were students. This is because the libraries mostly operate in school premises and therefore the number of general readers was poor (20%) in these libraries. The percentage of women users was found to be especially low in the General and Small libraries. This situation differs from that found in western public libraries where people from all sections of society use such services. Unfortunately, there is little incentive for BRAC librarians to increase the number of general members, as these members do not enhance the performance indicators used to evaluate the libraries.
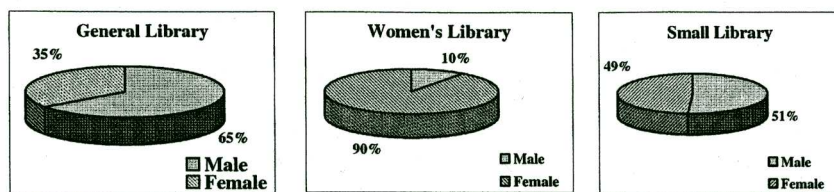
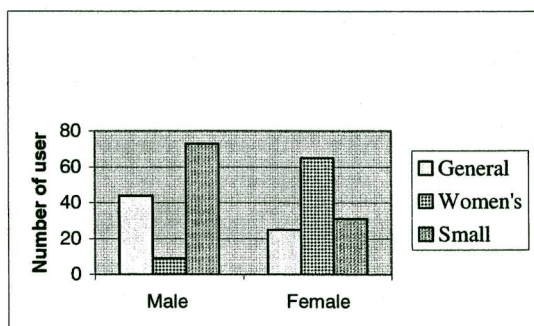Figure 1. Membership rates in different types of BRAC Union Libraries (March-May 2001).

Figure 2. Average daily attendance in different types of libraries (March – May 2001).

Strategies for Finance and Management

A BRAC Union Library is usually set up at the union level, where the union is the lowest unit of the local government structure in Bangladesh. The set-up procedure has several steps. The community provides at least one room (500-600 square feet) free of cost. The community then forms a local committee to organise library activities, such as renovation of library room (paid for by the community) and attracting members. Initially, 200-300 members are required with a minimum total subscription of Tk. 30,000 (AU $1,000) necessary before the library can be opened. The number of members has to increase to 500-600 with a subscription of Tk. 50,000 (AU $1,700) within a period of two years. These requirements can be relaxed in the case of Small libraries and Women's libraries. These types of libraries can be opened with 150-200 members and with a minimum subscription of Tk. 25,000 (AU $850).

Once open, the community agrees to transform the library into a self-managed autonomous Trust to be registered with the relevant government department within a stipulated period, and to develop an "endowment fund" through community contributions to sustain the library financially. According to the current procedure, the contribution of the community cannot be less than Tk. 25,000 (AU $850) for Small libraries, Tk. 35,000 (AU $1,200) for Womens' libraries and Tk. 50,000 (AU $1700) for General libraries. Once these conditions are met, BRAC provides 1,000 books and two-thirds of the total cost the necessary furniture for the library. Following the library's registration as a Trust, BRAC donates an amount equal, but not be more than Tk. 50,000 (AU $1,700), to the match the library's existing fund raised by the local community. The total amount (AU $3,400) is deposited in a recognised financial institution in the name of the Trustee Board on a fixed-term basis. The monthly interest from the reserve fund is used to meet the library's recurring expenditure such as librarians' salaries, electricity bills and newspaper subscriptions. BRAC pays for these expenses until the Trust has formed and the library is receiving interest. However, during the fieldwork, a good number of people raised the issue that BRAC should contribute again to the library funds if there is a need.

The routine activities of a library are performed by a locally recruited part-time librarian, preferably a woman, and managed by a committee formed from the community. BRAC prefers female librarians because its programs are mainly focused on women. This strategy also helps to give jobs to poor, but educated women. In rural areas women are more disadvantaged than men and need support for empowerment. The librarians receive a short training course on the operational aspects of the library. At the initial stage, a convenor committee, consisting of 11-13 members, is formed which exists until the Trustee Board is formed. The respective team-in-charge of the associate BRAC Education Program is included in both committees as the BRAC representative. The other members of the convenor committee are selected from within the community. My research shows that, though the staff are operating these libraries successfully, they need professional training on librarianship in Bangladesh, as well as in developed countries, so that they can upgrade the libraries to become community information centres or telecentres.

Most BRAC Union libraries have a youth committee to help the librarian run the library and organise different activities. Members of this committee can also act as a substitute for Trustee board members when they are not available. This opportunity is helpful for young people as it gives them the chance to build leadership skills.

Benefits of BRAC Union Libraries

All groups of people in the community are expected to benefit from the BRAC Union Libraries. Registered members can borrow books but non-members are also allowed to read books and newspapers inside the library. Newspapers were the most used library material. In most of the libraries only 20-40% of books were issued once or more. This is due to the selection policy at the central level, as there are many titles which are not of interest to many rural readers. BRAC provides more or less the same set of books to all of its libraries. However, in my experience, librarians believe that the demand for reading materials varies from region to region. The study I conducted showed that an inter-library loan system could be a useful tool for these libraries to create greater opportunities for users to choose from a larger collection.

The 30 libraries I examined had, on average, 462 members and 1,146 books, and the daily attendance was 67. As shown in Figure 3, an average 337 books were borrowed per month in these libraries
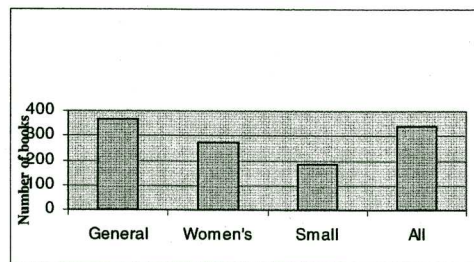

Figure 3. Average issue per month in different types of libraries (March – May, 2001).

Though female members were found to be 36% of the total users and their attendance in the libraries was 35% of users, the percentage of book issued to female users was 48% (see Figure 4).
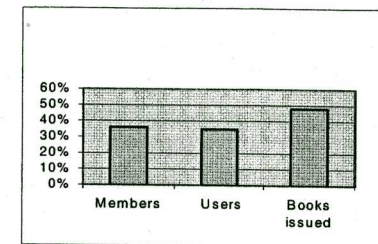
Figure 4. Women's participation in BRAC libraries (March – May, 2001).

Women do not benefit much from the General and Small libraries. This is arguably due to socio-cultural factors such as the patriarchal structure of the society that discourages women's attendance at libraries, particularly those which are sited in public places or in boys' schools/colleges. This situation could be improved by a mobile library facility at each library to service women, and disabled and elderly dwellers of the community who are unable to access the library due to its location. In this way, the library can become a real rural community information centre. Mobile library units are already operating in a few libraries on a pilot basis after my recommendation to the Program Coordinator. Furthermore, the BEP(CE) could introduce a mobile audio-visual unit to show selected films and awareness building documentaries to attract more non-users to the library.

While organising Union Libraries, BRAC recognised that students in secondary schools, particularly girls from poor households, faced difficulties in obtaining textbooks. BRAC, therefore, introduced a textbook lending program in 1996. The library charges an annual fee of Tk. 50 (AU $2) to Tk. 70 (AU $3) for the books. This is approximately one-third of the total cost of purchasing the books. It is estimated that a set of books can be used for three academic years and, therefore, the total cost can be recovered in that period. Students return the set at the end of the academic year and receive another set for the next grade. Each library issues around 15-20 sets of textbooks for the students of adjacent schools.

BEP(CE) advises each Union Library to organise a "reader's forum." The main objective of the reader's forum is to increase lending and the literary awareness of members. The competitive nature of the forum is designed to increase the interest of participants. A reader's forum consists of 30 students; at least 10 students each from the 6th, 7th and 8th grades of the adjacent school. When selecting the participants, girls are especially encouraged to participate, and one-third of the

total number of participants should be BRAC non-formal school graduates. The period of the forum will usually be two to three months. Each participant borrows at least one book a week and is expected to write comments about the book in a separate notebook. Every 15, all the participants meet and discuss what they have read. At the end, after evaluation, the reader who borrowed and read the highest number of books is rewarded.

Most of the Union Library have a small space especially for children called "children's corner," which is equipped with sports items for indoor games, musical instruments and a small collection of juvenile literature. The objective of providing a children's corner is to create a reading habit from childhood in a delightful environment. I concluded that there should be more cartoon books and comics in the children's corner to attract more children to the library.

Socio-cultural Activities

In addition to library services, BRAC union libraries play an important role in socio-cultural activities such as national celebrations, running or organising eye clinics, medical camps, discussions, sports, exhibitions, cultural programs, and celebrating the anniversary of the library. These types of programs increase the very limited opportunities for social gatherings, leisure and recreation activities available in rural areas.

The seasonal crop collection was found to be a good example of raising money for the recurring expenditure of the libraries. The members of the committee, especially the youth committee, collect local seasonal crops. Residents of the associated community are asked to provide a portion of their crop, such as rice and onions, according to their ability. This idea was initiated to increase the connection with the local community and to form an annual fund. The library committee then sells the collected crops and the money is kept in the library's savings account. The money can be used to buy books or meet the expenses of organising different activities.

Training in different income generating activities is another good initiative incorporated into the BRAC program. In cooperation with different government departments, like the Department of Youth, skills development training in fields such as the fishery and poultry industries is organised for library members. Training of members in the development of skills has multiple effects. It widens the scope for cooperation with different government departments, an important aspect of sustainability. Furthermore, members who receive training will benefit from additional income/employment.

Computers can not only bridge the digital divide between rich and poor, urban and rural, but also offer new opportunities for development and employment. They also have the potential to benefit the larger community by providing databases on health services, connection to the internet and inter-library loan systems. With these objectives in mind, BRAC provided a computer with a printer to ten libraries on a trial basis. They also trained the librarians as instructors. The libraries agreed to pay the cost of the computer by instalments. During the period when my study was done, BRAC was planning to provide another 20 computers to a further 20 libraries. However, the funding policy has been changed so that participating libraries pay one-third of the total cost of the equipment in advance and the other two-thirds by monthly instalments. This change is to make sure that the respective local community has a sense of ownership of the computer, as well as the responsibility for its maintenance. While BRAC is planning to give another 200 computers to other libraries, I believe that even more are needed in order that local residents have the chance to become computer literate.

Conclusion

Almost all the respondents in my survey, especially the educated people in each area, expressed their positive reactions towards the library program. According to them, the library provides a magnificent opportunity for gaining knowledge not only for students, but also for everyone in the community. Before libraries were established, information was difficult to obtain in these areas. Now they have easy access to a variety of reading material and they have current information on a regular basis. Respondents also voiced the opinion that the libraries might help in the appropriate development of their children's character and provide them with bright prospects. They said that their children used to spend their leisure time in an undesirable manner, but now they use their leisure time effectively by acquiring knowledge.

The major success of the BRAC Union Library program is that it established a model for rural libraries in terms of finance and management which could be used by other organisations or the government in Bangladesh as well as in other developing countries. In a country like Bangladesh it is not cost-effective to disseminate different types of information from various organisations and departments through a multitude of different services at the grassroots level. I believe that the Union Libraries could become the centre for all kinds of information services, such as health and family planning information dissemination, and agriculture information services working at the local level. This will save both money and labour, and will gain the attention of the targeted people. That will in return make the library a true community information centre.

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