

# Bangladesh Librarianship Calling For S.O.S.

— Dr. A.M. Abdul Huq

**PRIOR** to the partition of India, library movement was unheard of in what is now Bangladesh. Since 1947 progress was made and by the end of the sixties several institutions had made significant impacts and a basis for library development was laid. Today all of these are about to dissipate through neglect, lack of awareness of the value and usefulness of libraries and inaction or improper action by the authorities.

In writing this tale of woes of libraries and librarians, the fate of the Central Public Library (CPL) has to be mentioned first. The CPL was visioned throughout by all concerned as the premier library of the country. The expectation has however, been belied again and again both before and after Bangladesh. In the fifties, the Key Report (after L.C. Key from Australian National Library) put the CPL on the map and was proposed as the national-cum-public library. Although it became just a public library and later had a building, soon it became annexed to the Dhaka University Library. Since 1989 through 1980 it has been run by an Assistant Librarian. If this was bad, worse

was yet to come. Before we get to that part of the story, it ought to be mentioned that the 1974 Education Commission recommended that the CPL be converted into the national library and, of course, nothing happened. In January 1981 the Parker Report (J.S. Parker, UNESCO expert) stated that it will be impossible to promote the development of public libraries without an organisational structure and that the CPL can be the focus and the nucleus of it. It pointed out that the appointment of a Director of what was to be the Bangladesh Library Service was the single most and urgent step. Of course, Parker was crystal clear in stating that the Director be fully qualified, academically, professionally and through experience. This was not to be. When the present government came to power it decided to abolish the Bangladesh Parishad and to have the CPL take over its resources. It became a creation which is neither the library nor the Parishad but worst of both with Parishad people on top and CPL and Parishad employees under one umbrella called the Department of Library. A library that was hardly capable

of performing its regular functions now being burdened with the functions of the Parishad can perform neither functions satisfactorily. For all practical purposes, public library service in the country has been uprooted with its fountainhead disrupted. It is indeed a sad episode in the history of librarianship in Bangladesh.

Mention has been made of the fact that the CPL was conceived as the national library. The Education Commission of 1974 also recommended the CPL to be the National Library. Of course, these did not materialise. There is a National Library under the Directorate of Archives and Libraries within the Cultural Affairs Division of the Ministry of Education but without a Librarian. The National Library of a country is a principal and most prestigious institution charged with tremendous responsibility. Today a country cannot be considered civilized without a befitting national library that collects, preserves and makes available its cultural heritage to the citizen and be the formative force in the cultural, social and political life of the nation. The present set-up of the National Library alongwith

the staff it has is not equal to its task. The Parker report mentioned earlier makes it clear that the present Directorate of Archives and Libraries should be made responsible only for archives. The need of the hour is giving the National Library its due status.

While the present National Library situation is alarming, one would find the "National Science Library" situation shocking. The Annual Report of the Science and Technology Division of the President's Secretariat for the year 1982-83 states that it is designed to meet existing requirement of science books and periodicals required by scientists, researchers and technologists and that it has acquired 3,101 text and reference books on all branches of science and technology including agriculture and medicine. For a country like Bangladesh where every effort has to be made to economise, unnecessary duplication of agriculture and medicine collections in the presence of National Agricultural Library and the National Health Library is beyond any logic. Besides, the spacious library of the BCSIR is in the same compound, not to mention. (See page 6)

lection of the scientific and technical publications published in Bangladesh, although as a national library it is expected to have all such publications. If agricultural, bio-medical and engineering books are disregarded because of presence of strong collections in those areas in the city, the size of the collection will be reduced to less than 1500 books. A library of this size with this nature of collection, without any organized reference collection and without any concept of library service (e.g. books are classified by Dewey Decimal Scheme but not retrievable by it) is run by 12 or more people and kept open 12½ hours daily. The head of this library is a non-librarian.

According to published literature, Bangla Academy Library is considered the largest special library in the country. This may be the single largest Bengali collection anywhere including the most complete Bangla deshi Bengali publications. Also included in the library is the famous private library of the Muktagacha Zamindar, Raja Birendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury, containing several thousand rare books. Thus Bangla Academy Library is a national treasure. Unfortunately, however, this unique collection has been in a godown since April and will remain there pending completion of renovation of the library building, the Burdwan House. The pace at which the renovation work is going on it will be a while before the building will be ready. By that time most of the books, if not the entire collection, is likely to disintegrate or otherwise be unusable. Such a loss in unthinkable especially because it can be stopped. It can be stopped in several different ways with initiative, foresight, pragmatic planning and forceful plea from the library.

Now on to just one other example. Dhaka University, despite all of its shortcomings, is still the premier University

It is clear that libraries are being neglected they are being de-professionalised and they are being left to rot. Librarianship is a profession and recognized as such all over the world. A library's role is not to be seen as a provider of materials for pastime. A library is a reservoir of knowledge, of past human experience from which everyone can draw whatever is needed to put knowledge to work. To the extent such a role is played by libraries to that extent a nation is benefited. In order for a library to play such a role, it is essential for a library to be in the hands of professionals. Libraries must cease to be regarded as a place even for well-meaning amateurs. There is not a country in the world that is advanced and did not recognise the value and usefulness of libraries and for that matter, professional librarians in national development and prosperity. We can turn a blind eye and deaf ear to what is happening today to libraries and librarians only at the cost of national progress.

[The author is Associate Professor St. John's University New York USA].