

# Role of libraries in building 'Smart Bangladesh'

By investing in libraries, prioritising digital connectivity, raising awareness, and providing professional development opportunities to librarians, Bangladesh can take significant strides towards realising the vision of 'Read books in the library, build Smart Bangladesh', write Ashik Mosaddik and Dilara Begum



Inside view of Science Library, Dhaka University

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ACCESS to quality education and knowledge is a fundamental factor in shaping the future of any nation. In Bangladesh, the slogan "Read books in the library, build smart Bangladesh" for this year National Library Day-2024 (observed on Monday) emphasises the importance of promoting reading habits and building a knowledgeable society. However, to achieve this vision, it is crucial to address the current status and challenges facing the country's libraries. In the digital age, where information is at our fingertips, the role of traditional libraries is often questioned. However, for Bangladesh to build a smart and innovative future, the significance of libraries cannot be overstated. The slogan "Read Books in the Library, Build Smart Bangladesh" encapsulates a vision that goes beyond a simple call to reading—it's a call to transformation, particularly for university students and faculties. This editorial delves into the current status of libraries in Bangladesh, explores challenges, and examines research reports from around the world to make a compelling case for the pivotal role of libraries in building a smarter nation.

Bangladesh is home to a substantial number of libraries, including national, public, academic, special and community libraries. These libraries play a pivotal role in providing access to books, information resources, and educational support to individuals across the country. However, the current status of libraries in Bangladesh presents a mixed picture. Bangladesh's library landscape is diverse, ranging from well-established urban libraries to under-resourced rural counterparts. Research indicates a digital divide between urban and rural areas, with urban libraries often having better infrastructure, resources, and access to technology. However, even in urban centres, the challenges are evident, including out-dated collections, insufficient funding, and a lack of digital integration. Bangladesh boasts several reputable universities, each housing its own library to support the academic pursuits of students and faculties. These libraries are vital resources for research, study materials, and expanding knowledge. However, an assessment of the current status reveals certain challenges that hinder their effectiveness. One significant challenge is the inadequate number of libraries in rural and under-privileged areas. Access to libraries is limited, depriving many individuals, particularly those from marginalised communities, of the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills. Additionally, existing libraries often face issues of insufficient infrastructure, out-dated collections, and a lack of trained staff. In an age dominated by digital distractions, the allure of a good book is often overshadowed. Efforts must be directed towards instilling a love for reading from an early age, with initiatives aimed at promoting literacy and providing easy access to books. Community libraries can play a crucial role in this regard, acting as hubs that bring people together and foster a sense of intellectual curiosity.

Many libraries in Bangladesh face challenges due to limited infrastructure, such as inadequate physical space, out-dated facilities, and inadequate funding. Insufficient resources lead to difficulties in expanding collections and providing a conducive learning environment. The digital divide is a substantial hurdle in building a smart Bangladesh. Many libraries struggle to provide access to technology and digital resources, limiting the availability of e-books, online databases, and other digital learning materials. Despite the importance of libraries, awareness regarding their benefits and services remains relatively low, particularly in rural areas. It is crucial to raise awareness among communities about the role libraries play in promoting education and facilitating lifelong learning. Building a knowledge-based society requires a well-trained library workforce. Investments in professional development opportunities for information professionals are essential to enhance their knowledge and skills, enabling them to meet the changing needs of library users effectively. Also, recent research shows that service performances of major university libraries are lagging far behind

from students' minimum expectation.

Despite efforts by universities to build extensive collections, many libraries struggle to provide access to diverse and updated resources. This challenge is particularly prevalent in specialized academic areas where the availability of specific texts or research materials may be limited. A significant challenge faced by libraries in Bangladesh is the out-dated infrastructure. Insufficient space, the absence of modern facilities, and a lack of proper seating arrangements hinder the learning experience and discourage students and faculties from utilising the library fully.

The digital revolution has transformed the accessibility of information. However, the digital divide is a notable challenge in Bangladesh's higher education institutions. Limited access to reliable internet connectivity hampers the ability to access online resources, e-books, and digital databases crucial for research. While libraries offer extensive resources, many students and faculties lack awareness of these services beyond the basic learning system.

Several global studies underline the critical role of libraries in education and societal development. A UNESCO report emphasises that libraries contribute to information literacy, a skill crucial for navigating the complexities of the modern world. Additionally, a World Bank report notes that investment in libraries correlates with increased literacy rates and improved educational outcomes. These reports affirm that

libraries are not relics of the past but essential components of a knowledge-driven society. At the World Library and Information Congress on 22 August 2023, UNESCO and the International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA) emphasised that libraries are essential partners in building inclusive knowledge societies and achieving sustainable development, requiring strategic collaboration and focus on accessibility in the digital age. Research reports from around the world highlight the crucial role of libraries in the academic development of university students and faculties. According to UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report on Education, the availability of library resources positively correlates with improved reading outcomes and academic performance. Additionally, studies conducted at leading universities worldwide indicate that students who regularly utilize library resources perform better in exams, exhibit stronger critical thinking skills, and have higher graduation rates. Several countries have successfully navigated challenges similar to those faced by Bangladesh. Singapore, for instance, has embraced a "Smart Library" initiative, integrating technology into traditional library spaces. The Netherlands prioritises library partnerships with universities, fostering an environment where research and learning converge seamlessly. These global best practices serve as inspiration for Bangladesh to tailor its library development strategies to its unique context.

University libraries in Bangladesh should prioritise the

expansion of collections to offer comprehensive resources across various disciplines. Collaborations with international libraries and organizations can assist in obtaining access to a wider range of books, journals, and digital resources. To bridge the digital divide, universities must invest in upgrading internet infrastructure and providing reliable connectivity within libraries. Moreover, partnerships with publishers and online databases should be explored to ensure access to a vast array of digital materials. Emphasis should be given to innovation rather than implementing traditional out-dated services. Collection and services should be developed based on the needs of the users. Therefore, focus should also be given towards conducting research on various issues of the library and implementing the outcomes. Future technologies and opportunities like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR), Internet of Things (IoT), green technologies etc. should be explored properly for possible inclusion in the libraries. Universities should allocate adequate resources to upgrade library infrastructure. Creating conducive study spaces, introducing advanced technologies, and incorporating ergonomic seating arrangements would encourage greater utilisation of library facilities.

Libraries should conduct regular awareness programmes to educate students and faculties on the benefits and services offered. Strengthening information literacy skills through workshops, seminars, and online resources will empower users to maximize the library's potential. Universities should foster collaborations with other institutions, both nationally and internationally, to exchange knowledge, resources, and best library practices. This exchange can contribute to the overall growth and development of libraries in Bangladesh. For university students and faculties, the challenges are multifaceted. While some institutions boast state-of-the-art libraries, others face resource constraints. Limited access to academic journals, outdated reference materials, and inadequate study spaces are common issues. Moreover, the digital transformation in academia demands a paradigm shift, with a need for enhanced e-resources, online databases, and collaborative digital platforms. To address the challenges faced by university students and faculties, a holistic approach is essential. Increased government funding, collaboration between universities and private sectors, and initiatives for digital literacy are key components. Developing a national framework for library modernisation, encompassing both physical and digital resources, is imperative. Moreover, university curricula should emphasize information literacy skills, ensuring that students can critically evaluate and utilise a vast array of resources.

Building a Smart Bangladesh through libraries is essential for creating an educated and knowledgeable society. By investing in libraries, prioritizing digital connectivity, raising awareness, and providing professional development opportunities to librarians, Bangladesh can take significant strides towards realising the vision of "Read books in the library, build Smart Bangladesh." University students and faculties have a significant stake in this endeavour, as libraries play a pivotal role in their research, learning, and overall intellectual growth. By addressing the challenges of limited resources, out-dated infrastructure, digital access, and awareness, universities in Bangladesh can build smart libraries that empower their academic community and contribute to the nation's progress. It is time to recognise the transformative potential of libraries and invest in their development to create a truly Smart Bangladesh. As Bangladesh embarks on the journey towards the goal of becoming a smart nation, let us remember the profound words of Frederick Douglass: "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."

Professor Ashik Mosaddik is the Pro-Vice Chancellor, East West University and Dr. Dilara Begum is the Associate Professor, Department of Information Studies, and Librarian (In-Charge), East West University. dilara@ewub.edu