

# **Government Public Libraries in Bangladesh: Governance Problems in Services and Management and Way Forward**

## **Executive Summary**

### **1.1 Background and Rationale**

- Public Library is a non-profit service organization that provides books and information services to common people through which it plays an important role in enlightening them and developing their reading habits
- History of public libraries in East Bengal began with the establishment of four private public libraries in 1854; The East Pakistan Government Central Public Library was established in 1956 on Dhaka University premises
- Divisional public libraries were established in Chittagong (1963) and Khulna (1964); After independence, public libraries were established in Rajshahi (1973) and later in other divisional cities as well
- Establishment of the Department of Public Libraries in 1983 on the basis of recommendation of the Enam Committee for the development of public libraries run by the Bangladesh Parishad, which is now run under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs
- Under this department, there are 71 government and national libraries at different levels in the country, and 1,389 private public libraries under public libraries
- The total number of books in 71 government public libraries is about 26,20,295 and the number of registered member readers is about 11,000; In the financial year 2019-2020 a total of 34,92,803 readers received various services from these libraries
- Various strategies and steps have been taken by giving importance to the public library
  - Establishment and development of a public library network with infrastructure and services up to the upazila level
  - Conversion to electronic library through computerization
  - Connecting all public libraries in the country through affordable, advanced and secure broadband network
- The UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4) stated about the opportunity of lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Reports published in various researches and media painted a picture of the deficiencies and limitations of good governance in the service and management of public libraries
  - Lack of capacity of public libraries against the demand for books and information and poor provision of services and ICT services
  - Shortage of public libraries, problems in modernization, shortage of manpower, limited supply of required textbooks as per demand, corruption in project implementation etc.
- Although various information has been published about the limitations in the service and management activities of public libraries and incidences of irregularities and corruption, there are lack of structured research in light of good governance indicators

- As part of its work, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) conducts research activities on the challenges of good governance in various institutions, including the education sector; this research is conducted considering the importance of public libraries in the field of education

## 1.2 Research Objectives

Identify the challenges of good governance in the management of public libraries

### Specific objectives

1. Review the laws, rules and policies of public library
2. Identify institutional limitations in services and management and review effectiveness
3. Identify the types, areas and levels of irregularities and corruption in services and management
4. Recommend ways to overcome existing challenges

## 1.3 Scope and duration of research

- The services and management activities of government public libraries at different levels of the country under the Department of Public Libraries have been included
- The study was conducted from July 2019 to November 2020

## 2. Methodology

- This is a qualitative study
- Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources
  - Primary information collected through interviews with key informants – Officers and staff working in various levels of government public libraries (Chief Librarian / Director, Principal Librarian / Deputy Director, Assistant Director, Librarian, Assistant Librarian, Administrative Officer, Junior Librarian, Technical Assistant/Cataloguer, reading hall assistant, Library Assistant), Academics, Library Professionals, journalists and readers
  - Secondary sources of information include reviewing relevant laws, regulations and policies, relevant research reports, information collected from public library offices, information published on websites, and related news and articles published in the media
- 20 out of 71 government public libraries were selected randomly for data collection. Out of these, one was selected as National Public Library, seven public libraries at divisional level, 10 by random selection from 56 public libraries at district level, one randomly selected out of two public libraries at upazila level and one from 4 branch level public libraries

### 2.1 Analytical framework of the study

Indicator	Sub-indicator
Capacity	Relevant laws and regulations, library-related legal framework, institutional capacity (human resource, training, infrastructure and logistics, budget, digitization)
Transparency	Proactive disclosure system, website and up-to-date information management, civic certificate, disclosure of information about new books, sale and purchase process information
Accountability	Supervision and grievance management; positive, negative or punitive measures; monitoring and auditing
Effectiveness	Supply and management of books, proper use of the library
Corruption and irregularities	Areas, types and dimensions of corruption and irregularities

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1 Recent Initiatives to Increase Effectiveness of Services (2015-2020)

- Formulation of draft National Public Library Policy 2020
- Undertake various projects for infrastructural development to increase readership (three)
- Integration of government public library web portals into national information window
- Construction of central data center for management of online public libraries
- Introduction of a software to send book list online for purchasing books
- Experimental launch of online library services at Sufia Kamal National Public Library
- Undertaking projects to provide internet services in divisional and district public libraries (with The British Council)
- Conducting book reading activities in 3160 areas of 64 districts of the country through 76 mobile library vehicles under the 'Nationwide Mobile Library' project
- Provide advanced training to the officers and employees of the department and public library to enhance their skills
- Creation of 366 new posts in different categories for public libraries

#### 4.2 The legal loopholes and challenges

- There is no separate law to conduct the services and management activities of government public libraries, mainly through various policies and executive order.

Act/ Policy	Limitations	Implementation Challenge
National Library Policy 2001	Keeping local books out of conventional tendering system as a special product by relaxing prevailing procurement system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Books not purchased according to demand</li> <li>○ Risk of corruption</li> </ul>
Book Issuance Policy 2012	A member is forced to borrow book from the public library in his home area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A reader is forced to become members of multiple libraries and membership fee</li> </ul>
	Insufficient collateral in the context of time (Tk 500 for general members and Tk 200 for Children)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Members are not issued books worth more than the fee</li> <li>○ Readers are deprived of useful books</li> </ul>
Internet Service Providing Policy 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Obligation of being long-term member and limited to deposit amount</li> <li>○ Restrictions on internet access for a maximum of 20 minutes</li> <li>○ Action in the use of unapproved, indecent and offensive websites not mentioned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Users not interested in using internet</li> <li>○ Impossible to complete use within stipulated time</li> <li>○ Opportunity and risk of abuse of internet</li> </ul>
Dept. of Public Libraries (Officials and Staff) Recruitment Rules, 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Conditions of recruitment of Director General and Director not mentioned</li> <li>○ Criteria for Posting in Director (Chief Librarian) through deputation not mentioned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Opportunity and risk of arbitrariness in recruitment and promotion</li> <li>○ Opportunity and risk of nepotism, political influence and unprofessionalism created in recruitment</li> </ul>

### 4.3 Institutional Constraints and Challenges

**Manpower Shortage:** The shortage of manpower is noticeable as per the institutional structure of the Directorate of Public Books. Against a total of 822 approved posts in the Department of Public Books, 387 are working, while an overall 53 per cent are vacant. Out of these, 53 per cent are vacant in first class posts, 28 per cent in second class posts, 55 per cent in third class posts and 54 per cent in class IV posts. Among the vacant posts in the public libraries included in this research are directors (all 4 posts are vacant), principal librarian deputy director (3 out of 8 posts are vacant), senior librarians (all vacant in 12 posts) and assistant programmers (all 4 posts are vacant). Moreover, most of the posts in classes II, III and IV are vacant. There are 8 working in departmental libraries against an average of 23 posts, district level libraries have 4 working against an average of 9 posts and upazila level libraries have 3 against an average of 8 posts.

**Infrastructure shortage:** Most government public libraries have infrastructure weaknesses, limitations and deficiencies. Many library buildings are dilapidated due to lack of renovation for a long time. Sometimes the ceiling plaster is broken, which has caused accidents many times. Moreover, in the slightest rain, the ceiling is washed away and water falls, and the walls inside the building are damp. Moreover, there are various infrastructure problems including space crisis in reading rooms, separate readership crisis for children, shortage of required office rooms in district level public libraries, crisis in store rooms, shortage of separate computer rooms, incomplete quality toilets as compared to requirements, and lack of effective firefighting system.

In addition, most library buildings have shortage of special arrangements or facilities for disabled readers, especially the lack of ramps to enter the library, shortage of special rooms and corner. Moreover, the location of many library buildings is sometimes very remote for readers. At least two library buildings included in the study are located far outside the main city. Due to which the library complex has become a place for drug addicts and bad boys to hang out in a quiet environment. Again, women readers are not interested in going to libraries because of their location outside the city.

**Logistics Shortage:** Government public library offices at all levels are in shortage of necessary logistics such as furniture, computers, printers, photocopy machines, different types of forms, registers, book shelves, catalogue cards, catalogue boxes, catalogue printers, etc. Of the 20 libraries included in the study, 17 have such shortages. On the other hand, there is a lack of fast internet connectivity in district and upazila level offices. There is also no vehicular system for divisional and district level officials for transportation. As a result, the officials of the divisional office find it very difficult to visit the district and upazila level offices.

**Budget Deficit:** There is a budget deficit in the department. Public libraries are allocated about 70 per cent of the average demand. According to the officials, the amount allocated makes it very difficult to bear the official expenditure. In addition, various national days have to be celebrated as a government institution. An allocation of Tk. 50-60,000 is there to observe various events. However, it is not possible to perform more than 2-3 events with this budget and it is not possible to provide a full award of various competition standards. Computers, printers, photocopy machines, etc. cannot be repaired easily once they are damaged due to lack of budget allocation in the repair and conservation sector.

The Department has provided an annual average allocation of Tk. 27.37 crore for the last four financial years and only 7 percent of the total budget for purchase of domestic and foreign books and periodicals. This allocation is not enough to buy the necessary good and quality books.

**Lack of digitization in library services:** Government public libraries are far behind in digitization. There is no online catalog of collections of public libraries or no database of collection lists and no central information store for public library member readers. The Department of Public Libraries has undertaken a project titled 'Management Development of Public Libraries Online' in December 2017 with a budget of Tk. 300 million. The project aims to provide libraries and information services to the people of this country online. For this purpose, the work of creating databases of books and text materials collected in

public libraries, creating online public accounts catalogs, using software in library management, construction of data centers, providing RFID in each book, scanning rare books, manuscripts and magazines, etc. But studies show that the system has not yet started working fully even after extending the project. Only Sufia Kamal National Public Library has started providing experimental digital library services at limited levels. However, though digitization system has not been introduced in reader service, several positive digitization initiatives have been taken under the management of the Department, e.g., introduction of e-documents, arrangements for sending list of books online and introduction of statistics software for monthly reporting etc.

#### **4.4 Transparency, accountability and effectiveness in public library services and management**

**Citizen Charter:** Out of 20 public library offices under this study, 13 offices have citizen charters. However, in some cases citizen charters are not placed in suitable positions for service recipients, and in some cases the information is either not updated, or the text is not clear. Out of the 13 offices where there are citizen charters, 10 offices have citizen charters on the office premises, which are visible to the service recipients. In addition, the information of citizen charters of 6 offices is not updated and almost all charters do not mention the fee of services, the member registration fee, the price of the member form and the fees of other service.

**Information Board:** Out of 20 public library offices, 15 have information boards. In 11 of these offices, the information board is visible for service recipients. The information boards of six offices do not mention the fees for various service. In addition, the information boards of 14 offices out of 15 offices do not mention the name of the information officer and any phone or mobile number to contact him. Some offices have been visited within the information board office room.

**Information Desk:** No separate information search desk was noticed in any of the 20 public library offices at the national, divisional, district and upazila levels. No direction mark was displayed where any specific service information can be found in all the public library offices.

**Designated Information Officers and Appellate Authorities:** The Right to Information Act, 2009, The Right to Information (Information) Rules, 2009, the Right to Information (Information and Publicity) Regulations, 2010 and the Self-Information Release Guidelines require that the names, designations, contact numbers and media of the officers, alternate responsible officers and appellate authorities responsible for providing information to each government office should be displayed for public knowledge outside the Public Library office. But most of the public library offices in the study do not display the names and means of communication of the officers and appellate authorities responsible under the Right to Information Act.

**Deficiency in Data Management:** Deficiencies and weaknesses in both manual and online data management and data disclosure are noticeable. Information management work is still being done manually in public libraries at divisional, district and upazila levels. It is noteworthy that information on information management such as directorate and public library based (national, divisional, district and upazila level) manpower, library members list, number and list of borrowed books, list of books collected in libraries, number and list of collected magazines and journals etc. are not centrally maintained and coordinated. Almost all of the 20 public library offices included in the study do not use a separate registrar to provide information.

**Website:** There is no proactive disclosure policy in the Department of Public Libraries. Information on libraries under its control has not been published on the website in the light of the proactive disclosure of information guideline issued by the Information Commission. Though the public library department website is relatively informative and fairly updated, there is a lack of information on public libraries at divisional, district and upazila levels and in most cases the information provided is not updated. Again, the name, contact address and phone number of the designated officer, alternative designated officer and appellate authority is not mentioned in the website.

**Supervising the activities of officers and employees:** There is a shortage of effective monitoring and supervision of district and upazila public libraries due to lack of inspection policy. The inspection activities of the District and Upazila Public Libraries by the Divisional Director/Deputy Director were hampered as the permission of the Director General is binding and prolonged permission process for inspection. Moreover, even if subordinate public libraries are not visited by the Divisional Director/Deputy Director, there is no accountability and there is a shortage of effective action by the higher authorities in this regard.

In addition, regular stock taking (accounting for collected text and other materials, especially loss, loss, and not getting back issued books) were disrupted in the public library due to lack of monitoring activities. Due to lack of monitoring of attendance and activity of officers and employees at divisional and district level, the field level officers and employees have been accused of coming to the office late and involved in irregularities and corruption. Moreover, in many cases superior employees are informed about the negligence of their subordinates but failure to take exemplary action hinders overall supervision.

**Complaint Management and Public Hearing:** There is a system of receiving/filing complaints online and in a conventional manner (written and directly) but it is not effective. Most service recipients do not complain as there is no campaign about online complaints management procedures. Most of the libraries in the study (18 out of 20) did not have complaints boxes - two offices where there were complaint boxes but did not file any complaints and every office were scheduled to have a public hearing on a particular day of every month but there were reports of it not being regular.

**Financial Audit:** Financial audits of the Public Library Directorate are conducted regularly from the Office of the Controller and Accountant General (CAG). But financial audits by the CAG are not regular in divisional and district public libraries and there is a delay in audit reporting. Moreover, there is a shortage of effective action in the context of audit reports. A total of 7 audit observations have been raised in the audit conducted by the CAG in the financial year 2018-19 of the Department of Public Libraries. The total amount of these seven audit observations is around Tk 24.68 crore. The types of audit observation included expenditure in one sector to another, travel bills of officers, receipt of selection grade of deputy director, variety in cost etc.

**Slow implementation of projects:** Slow pace in implementation of various development projects run under the Department of Public Libraries is noteworthy. The 'Six District Public Library Development (Revised) Project' was extended for the fourth time but the project could not be completed overall by June 2019. The 'Management and Development of Online Public Libraries' project is scheduled to be launched in December 2017 and completed by November 2019. But the project could not be completed even at the end of July 2020. The extension of the project has already been extended once. The 'Chittagong Muslim Institute Cultural Complex' project is scheduled to be launched in June 2018 and completed in December 2020. However, the tenure of the project has already been extended once till June 2021. But in two years, the project has progressed only 24 per cent. The progress of work and budget expenditure indicates that it will not be possible to complete the work within the stipulated time. Lack of skills and capacity in project planning and management, involvement of project manager in other work, lack of supervision and delay in redress of irregularities and corruption are the reasons for slow implementation.

**Effectiveness in Public Library Readership:** Readers' services in public libraries are hampered due to poor quality books, lack of skilled and required manpower, lack of supply of books, periodicals according to the needs of the reader, limitations in the management of books, especially cataloging and classification (indexing and classification), compilation of thematic bibliographies, management of older newspapers, etc. Moreover, due to lack of seating arrangements and lack of space, readers are deprived of library services due to presence of job seekers. In addition, due to lack of digital services and institutional capabilities, skill-based manpower (librarians, cataloguers, reading hall assistants) and sincerity of a portion of library staff on providing services hamper effective readership.

#### **4.5 Irregularities and Corruption**

**Recruitment:** Allegations of irregularities and corruption in appointment of manpower to various posts in the Department of Public Libraries are there. In particular, there are alleged irregularities and corruption in the direct recruitment of various posts in the third and fourth classes, recruitment through outsourcing, attachment of officers in the department on deputation and appointment of project directors, in exchange of illegal financial transactions. There are examples of taking up to Tk 100-300 thousand for the third and fourth class posts. In the fiscal year 2019-20, a total of 33 people were recruited through outsourcing in the newly created 2 posts of fourth class (electrician and office assistant) of the Department of Public Libraries and various divisions and districts public libraries. There are also allegations of taking financial advantage against a class of officials of the department in this appointment.

**Posting and transfer:** There is lack of transparency in the placement and transfer of some positions where there is an opportunity to be paid illegally. There are allegations of discrimination in the appointment, transfer and promotion of general officers. There are also allegations that some selective staff are serving in certain positions in the Department of Public Library and in various branches of the Sufia Kamal National Public Library for a long time and appointing a person who is 'favored' as a project director and transferring a non-favored person to departmental and district level public libraries. Again, many of the informants have also mentioned financial transactions in case of transfer.

**Training of officers and employees:** Allegations of irregularities in training of officers and employees of the Department of Public Libraries are noteworthy. There are irregularities in the selection of trainees such as not considering the need for training, bias in the selection of trainees is significant. In some cases, there are allegations of selection of trainees on the basis of political considerations and 'favors' of higher authorities in the field of training at home and abroad. Participation of high-ranking officers appointed on deputation in the department is high. The informant also alleged that multiple trainings were organized at the same place with the same participating trainees at the same time to embezzle the money allocated in the training.

**Procurement:** It is alleged that financial benefits are availed through undue interference by some officials of the directorate in the procurement process. It is also alleged to include the purchase plan without considering the usefulness of the procurement plan in terms of demand. The department purchased books arbitrarily without considering the needs of local readers, mainly because of commission business. In this procurement process, the concerned members of the syndicate receive commissions from publishers and distributors from 10 to 12 per cent. Accordingly, in the financial year 2019-20, there was corruption of about Taka 20 to 23 lakhs in the purchase of books and periodicals (budget allocation for book-periodical purchase slots is Taka. 2.31 crore). There have been allegations of collusion in the tender evaluation and contractor selection process, as well as involvement of a class of officials in the department and part of their families with the contracting company. Again, due to lack of supervision at the implementation stage, there are allegations of not supplying books as per the work order and supplying substandard books. In case of assessment and audit (bill submission, bill payment), the entire work mentioned in the work order has not been verified by the concerned officer, the contractor's bill has been prepared by the concerned officer, in case of receipt of the bill. There are allegations of withdrawing money through bill-vouchers.

A commission of 3-5 per cent of any bill has to be paid to the concerned accounting office to withdraw any local purchase process bill.

**Implementation of projects:** General complaints in the implementation of various projects of the Department of Public Libraries include slow pace of implementation of the project and increased expenditure, irregularities in appointment of consultant and project directors, financial irregularities and various procurement policies of the government. For example, two years have passed since the sanctioned period was over due to negligence and slow pace of the authorities in implementing a project but the work has not been completed. In this case, the cost of the project increased by about Taka 30 million due to extensions three times. Some of the informants also alleged nepotism and irregularities in the appointment of project directors in two recently concluded and ongoing projects of the Department of Public Libraries.

The project has been formulated keeping in mind the impossible expenses at the time of taking up the project, allocating unnecessary foreign trips in the name of gaining experience and keeping impossible cancellations in other sectors. For example, for the project on ‘Multi-story building construction project of the Public Library Department’, a total Tk 6650 million was allocated for two multi-storeyed buildings. However, an amount of Tk 30 million was allocated for foreign visits of 30 officials to gain experience in the construction of multi-story buildings. However, in some cases, the Planning Commission has recommended to reduce the expenditure.

Moreover, other types of irregularities include making it mandatory to give a certain official Tk 500 from each upazila from the money allocated for prize for essay competition, embezzlement of money allocated for miscellaneous heads through fake documents, and use of vehicles allocated for Divisional Libraries for personal use and collect expenses of driver and fuel.

## **5. Overall Observation**

- There is a lack of effective initiatives and plans at the policy-making level to enhance the legal and institutional capacity of public libraries
- The government’s education policy and other national policies and plans have given importance to public libraries, but there is a lack of effective initiatives to implement them
- The lack of initiatives to make public libraries up-to-date in delivering effective services to the readers through digital technology is noticeable and the trend of irregularities and corruption in recruitment, posting, transfer, training, procurement process and project implementation is noticeable
- Due to lack of transparency, effective supervision and accountability of higher authorities and officials, part of the staff is prone to irregularities and corruption, and overall lack of good governance, the potential to provide easy and accessible education and information services to the general public cannot be properly developed, and effective reader services are interrupted

## **6. Recommendations**

### **Law and Policy**

1. In the light of the National Library Policy 2001, a separate law should be enacted for public libraries
2. A full-fledged policy for government public libraries should be formulated in coordination with all policies

### **Institutional capabilities**

3. Vacancies need to be filled on a priority basis. Employees need to undertake appropriate training initiatives and ensure recruitment and selection of all trainees on the basis of merit
4. Financial allocation should be increased, infrastructure and logistics and its own modern firefighting system should be ensured subject to proper demand formulation
5. Public libraries need to be modernized and covered by digital services. Wi-Fi internet should be provided in all public libraries
6. Need to create a structure to meet the needs of the readers and arrange for the purchase of necessary textbooks accordingly. In order to make the procurement process transparent, the procurement laws and policies of the government have to be followed properly

### **Transparency and Accountability**

7. Self-motivated information release policy should be formulated and information accordingly open and the name, address and contact number of information officers and appellate authorities should be displayed
8. Officers and employees should be brought under strict surveillance; sudden inspection and introduction of digital attendance system and audit activities should be ensured proper regular performance



9. Campaigns for filing complaints and regular public hearings should be made and quality assessment system of service should be introduced at a specified time

**Anti-Corruption**

10. In case of irregularities and corruption, exemplary punishment should be ensured subject to departmental inquiry