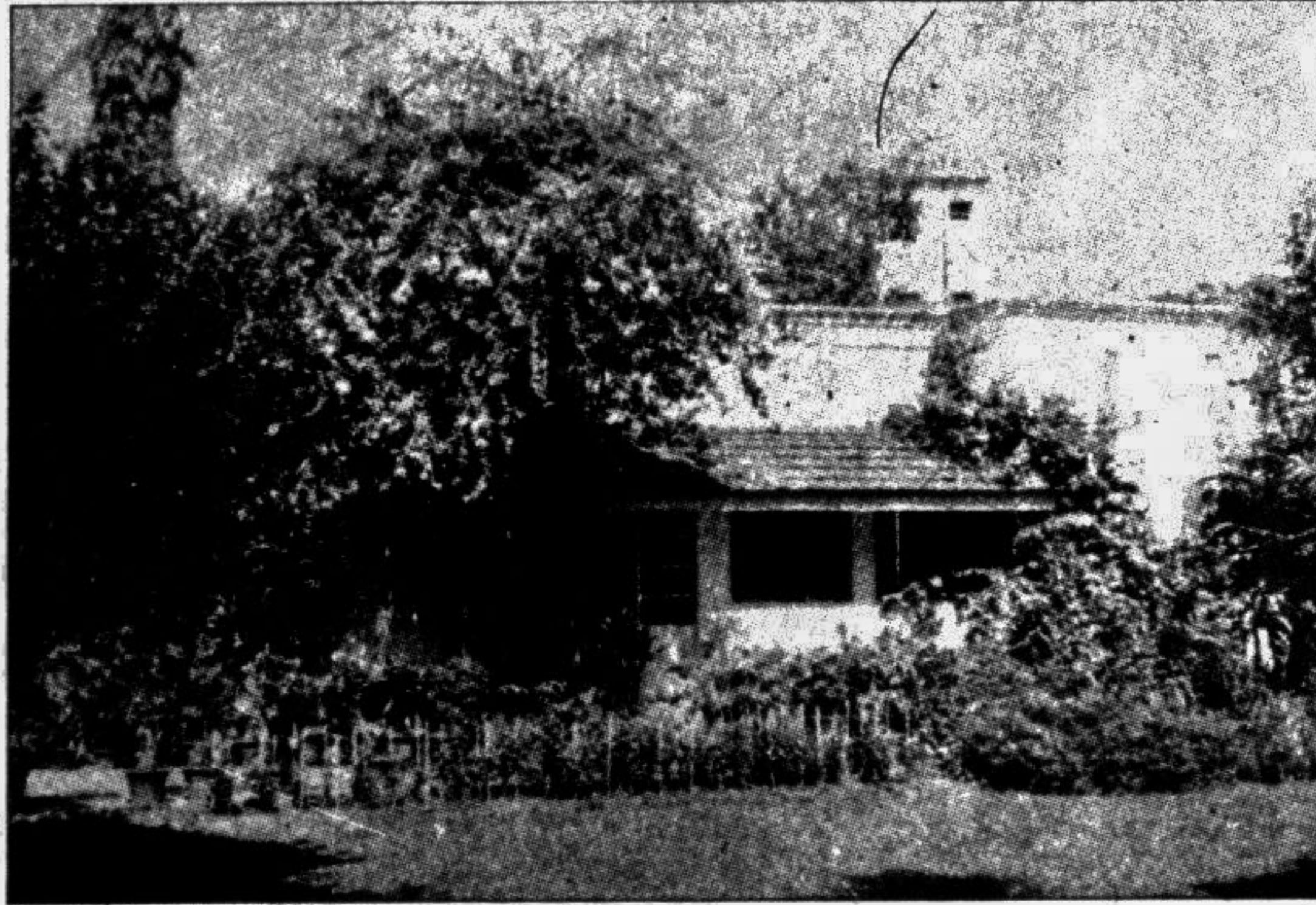


Biswa Sahitya Kendra In Pursuit of a Dream

by Iftikhar A Chowdhury



The Kendra in its idyllic setup.

corners of the country by the year 1998.

As it is claimed, the *Biswa Sahitya Kendra* does not harbour any political aims in expanding its network, nor does it preach and indoctrinate in any political 'isms'. Although it has been the target of one of the identified fundamentalist parties for its 'suspected radical nature', the Kendra has

always claimed to be free from any political or religious bias. As in this modern age, every individual has a right to her/his own belief, that is why 'today it is an absurd notion to unite men and women according to their beliefs'. The Kendra, if it at all believes in any philosophy, — it believes in the free growth and intellectual enrichment of a human.



The old site — where it all started.

being. All the works and activities that the Kendra performs comes largely under a single task: 'Nation-wide Intellectual Excellence Programme'. Efforts are underway to establish branches of the Kendra in all the zilas, thanas and towns of the country under this programme. These branches will help

nurture the hidden talents of young and spirited young men and women throughout the country. Each of these centres perform various tasks in this regard. Each centre gives an individual the chance to read books and acquire knowledge according to their age groups. The school and college level student members, on an average, read 16 books. So, in seven years of their membership they read at least 110 books. They also have the option of reading nine more books each year. That is why its members, before even crossing the threshold of HSC, have an opportunity of knowing about the Bengali language and literature and also have an orientation with the world of knowledge outside our country through the reading of at least 175 books.

To make reading interesting and to add a little incentive to it, the Kendra organises Book Reading Competition between various age groups and gives attractive prizes to winners. The post-HSC and university level student members too have formed 120 'reading circles' throughout the country.

For improving the mutual bond among the members, the Kendra organises various literary discussions, cultural programmes, public speaking and debate on enlightening subjects, cinema screening, music rendition and poetry recitation programmes. All these pro-

grammes are intended to do only one thing — nurture the intellectual faculty of its members.

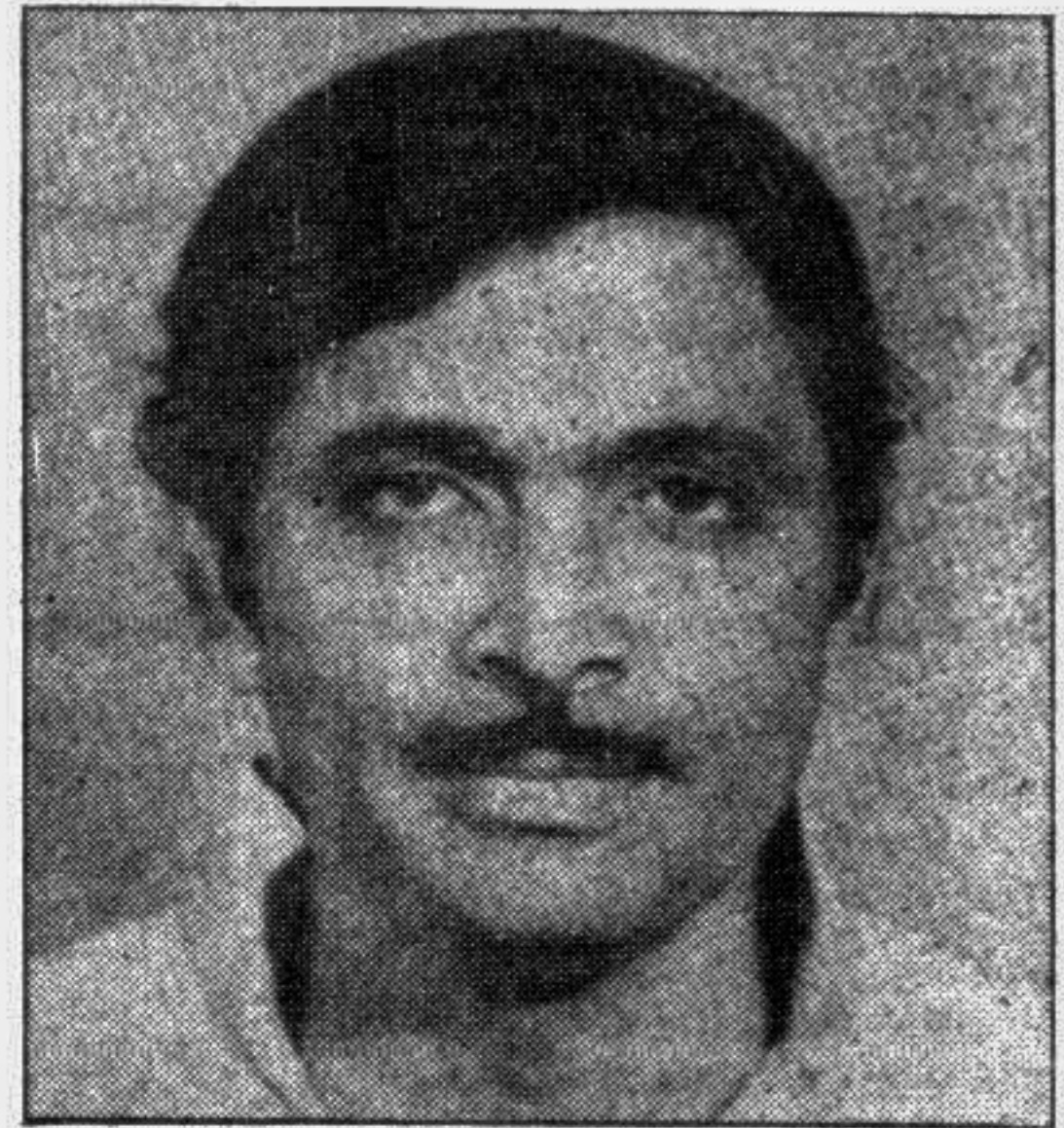
Most outstanding among other programmes that come into the fold of its activities is the library programme. The Kendra's Dhaka library is quite enriched. In Bengali and English, it has a substantial

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We Want to be Big

In an exclusive interview to *The Daily Star*, the founder of the *Biswa Sahitya Kendra* Abdullah Abu Sayeed describes how he got it started; how things started to look up, bit by bit, despite constraints and obstacles; and the realm of the Kendra's achievements now.

by Raffat Binte Rashid



Abdullah Abu Sayeed

The Daily Star (DS): What prompted you to create something like this Biswa Sahitya Kendra?

Abdullah Abu Sayeed (AAS): In the 19th century Hindus in the society were quite well placed. There came up Rabin-dra Nath, Bankim Chandra and many others. It was then British rule and the renaissance spirit was very high and many a British people who came here had apparently high aspirations, dreams and ideals and many Hindus at that time wanted to be like those 'shahibs'.

This desire to be like those spirited British helped them to become as big as them. Then when our Muslim society opted for education, the Muslims wanted to be as big as those Hindus and many shot into fame—Nazrul Islam, Mir Mosarraf Hossain and a few others.

But after '47 when we were completely separated and naturally education was completely new, we came face to face with a big opportunity. Then again in '71 another thousand doors were opened before us. But unfortunately, values, tradition, ideals everything plummeted only into pockets.

be only confined to literature; science, philosophy, politics, social sciences should also be included.

But the point to be noted here is that, it did not get started in a single day only. It was a day to day progress. It grew daily, reshaped and moulded its face continuously. Thus today's *Biswa Sahitya Kendra* is quite different from first day.

Then we thought that we would undertake a five-year experimentation plan with few bright girls and boys. We were only 15 to 20 people at that time. We thought what would happen to these boys or girls if we gave them these kinds of inputs.

We put emphasis on reading books and handed the girls and boys about 250 books to read. All this took place with the university level participants then. They turned up very bright, no doubt but one thing, that they really couldn't change their 'heart' and their 'mind'. They kept on thinking in terms of 'mine'; it was always me, me, me. This I could not change.

Then we thought, whether we could go a bit further behind the age level, when their minds and hearts are still un-

have a 16-book programme. Among them, those who could read seven books — get certificate, 10 books — get a complementary prize, 13 books a congratulatory prize, and 16 — a *Biswa Sahitya Kendra* prize. Then, of course, there are more books if they want to read more.

Their intellectual mind, creative mind, philosophical mind are broadened. This is not done in any other children's programme, there they mostly get to dance and sing, their thinking mind and inflexion etc are never tried for improvement. We work only with this part of their mind. And through cultural programmes, they bloom and grow.

DS: The dream that you had, is it fulfilled now?

AAS: My dream or the model that I had in my mind has really been fulfilled. Because now I have 600 students at the intermediate level only. They come to me, read around 32 to 34 books in about 9 to 10 months. Interestingly, the students who walked in and who walked out after completing the course are different. Their change is amazing, simply dramatic.

They all sit down with me, divided into groups, each group takes a single book home, they all read the same book and each writes down any special quotation or line they liked best. Then the brain storm session starts.

Everyone reads the same book and discusses it — their views, their ideas, and if they want to oppose or support someone else's views. And in this process of discussion and healthy debate they grow and their change is just fantastic.

With me in this 10 years, 4000 to 4500 students are reading and all the bright available students come here. Among the present 600 students, about 100 get prizes — books worth Tk 1000. We saw that they were all so good and not to give them anything would just break their and our hearts, now we give all 100 the prizes.

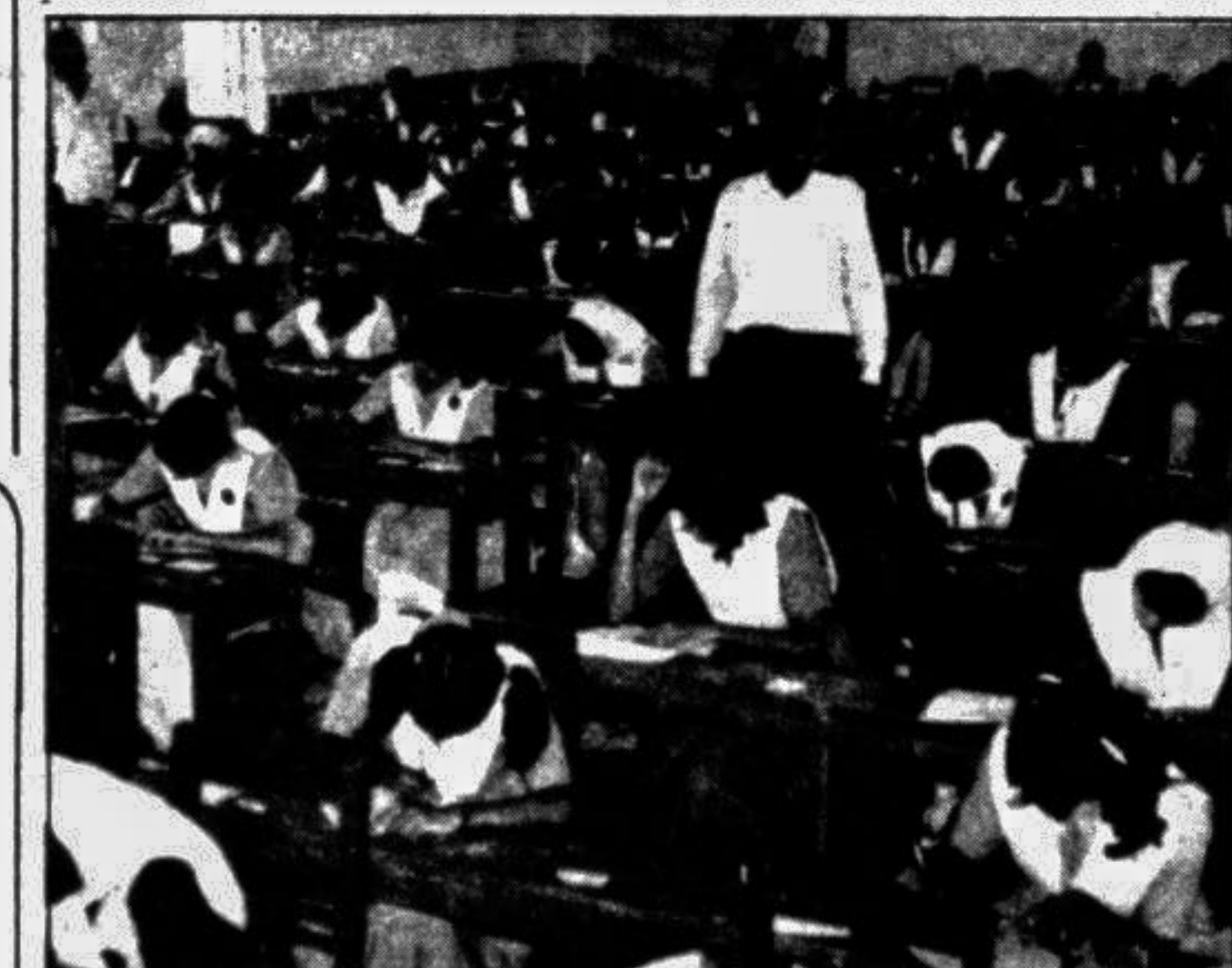
DS: You say you are not politically involved, why?

AAS: We believe that first we should educate ourselves then show others the way. Let me educate myself, learn to think, then automatically I will find my way.

However, it's not that we don't do politics. One thing is, we don't do it like, for example, the Jamatis do. Our selected books are all for a modern, progressive man. The books that are being read worldwide now. Therefore there is a politics involved but that's subtle.

DS: We heard that your first working capital was only Tk 35. Would you please explain.

AAS: First we were only 10 people just gathered and gossiping. One of us suggested



Participants in the school-level programme.

Actually it is no one's fault. A poor nation which never had the chance of eating better, living better, had remained poor through decades, and when they saw these chances they could not sit back.

They had to jump and avail of the opportunities, but in this rate race there was no value, no ideals; in a word the one who could come first had the opportunity to enjoy the better slice. As a result the country faced a sort of crisis, a void. Levels of education, values deteriorated, formal education degenerated.

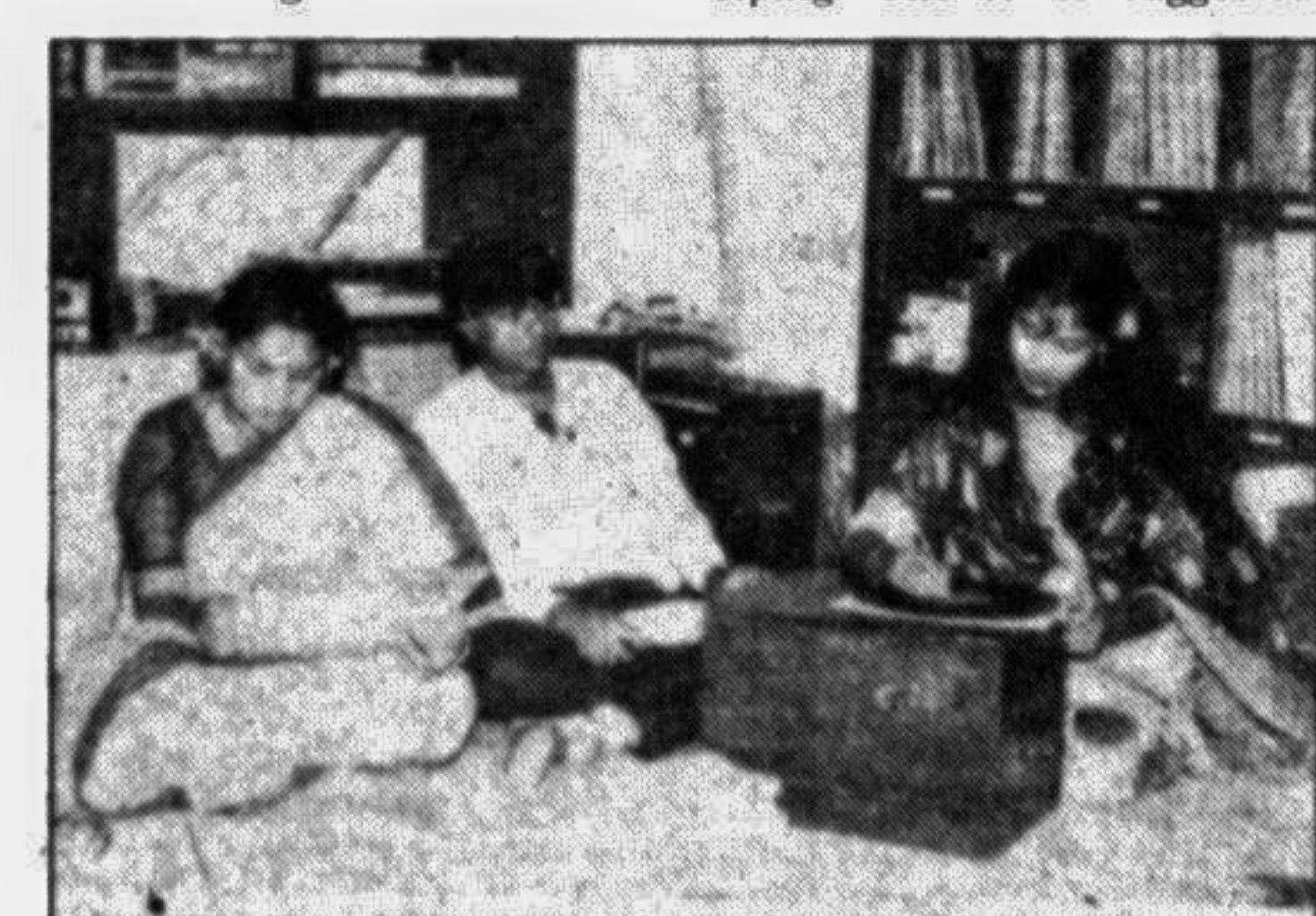
And if there were any resourceful and enriched people they were also lost in the melee or behind. It was at that time that I felt the level was coming down and something should be done. In my times at Dhaka College I started a study circle with a few bright students but later on the '69 independence followed and things got scattered in the process. We thought we had achieved 'Sonar Bangla' and we would have to do nothing, things would automatically take their own shape. In fact the feeling was that Bangabandhu would do everything, we won't have to do anything. But afterwards we realized that to make *Sonar Bangla* we have to work, it won't happen on its own.

Then in '78 i.e. 10 years later, we started the study circle once again and since I was a student of literature I thought if it was possible to make at least a few persons competent in this field. Those who would have a top level of education, maturity, understanding sending beams beyond borders. As things got started we realized again that it won't be that easy; studying literature only won't solve all the problems. We thought that it should not be interdisciplinary rather it should be multidisciplinary. It should not

der construction, in the formative stage. We focused on college level. A college programme got started, then we went to the school level. We realized college was better but school, much better. Things gradually started working.

At one stage we urged the Dhaka DC (Deputy Commissioner) to give us a sum of Taka two and half lakh, saying that I would make an experiment on 3,500 school children. Then we started the programme with a number of schools inside Dhaka and its adjoining districts. And the result was very good, and now we have 152 centres, including the recent addition of Habiganj.

This is how it all started and now to further culture their mind, different programmes, from various schools, are encouraged and held. For



The music library.

example, in a city all such students, as are assumed creative, bright, intelligent are brought together. And with this, two things are happening simultaneously. One they all meeting each other and expanding their mental horizon in exchanging views and ideas. The other, for every class they

that let's buy a book. What should be the book? *Nakshi Kathar Math*. It was Tk 3.50 then. 10 copies would cost Tk. 35. Ashrafuzaman Khan paid the money, our first working capital.

We used to buy books on a 30 % to 35% rebate and after Continued on page 11

A Nation-wide Enrichment Programme

by Elaine Bigelow

THE *Biswa Sahitya Kendra* runs an extra-curricular programme of enrichment for students. The purpose of this programme is to assure basic intellectual and cultural enlightenment of the participants and associates of the Kendra's programmes leading to an overall expansion of their perspectives, activating their social and national commitments, thus preparing them to be effective activists of tomorrow.

The Nation-wide Enrichment Programme is conducted at school level, college level, university level, and for general seekers of knowledge.

Tomorrow's leader lies dormant in today's child. The Kendra's Nation-wide Enrichment Programme starts with school children of ten to fifteen years of age, from class six to class ten. Thirty thousand students participate in this programme at present. The projected enrollment is 50,000 students by 1996.

At the school level the project is comprised of a Book Reading Programme and a Comprehensive Enrichment Programme.

Since the students at this stage of life are eager, inquisitive, responsive and impres-

sionable, the Book Reading Programme is designed to make available to them books which assure their overall mental development. Careful selection is made from juvenile literature, classics, biography, popular science and history.

The Book-Reading Programme is modeled after an enlightened family headed by a devoted, erudite and enthusiastic teacher. In the larger cities of the country this programme is conducted separately in prominent schools. In the smaller towns, the programme is administered centrally from the Kendra's district office, and students gather from different schools.

Participating students are required to read 16 books every year and are tested at the end of the competition. There are four categories of certificates and prizes for reading seven, ten, thirteen and sixteen books. Consistent with the goals of the programme, the prizes consist of books.

If twenty-five boys and girls in one school read sixteen books each, a lottery is held on Awards Day. The student whose name is drawn receives books totaling Tk 1000 in value.

In addition to the sixteen books on the reading list, the Kendra provides nine other titles for optional reading. Thus, the boys and girls participating in the Kendra's programme read 125 good books over five of their school years.

Over and above the book-reading competition, guest lectures, literary and cultural competitions, group discussions, and field trips are held regularly to provide for the participants a wholesome atmosphere of interaction conducive to moral and intellectual integrity and an overall awareness of man's historical and ideal role in the course of natural and human history.

The college level programme is designed for students of classes XI and XII (first and second year college level students in Bangladesh). The programme is conducted in the same manner and with the same objectives as at the school level in smaller towns.

Initially, the participants take part in a book-reading competition. After reading twelve books they are given eighteen carefully selected books from various disciplines appropriate for their intel-

lectual development. Like the school level programme, at the college level the programme is expected to cover all the 64 towns of the country by 1996, involving a total of 7,000 students annually. In each centre the Kendra's district office organises this programme. To date, these programmes involve 3,500 students.

The university level programme is an extension of the college level programme. Participants read a minimum of 50 significant books of different disciplines, keeping in view the advancement of human civilization and man's varied attainments through the ages. Like the school and college level programmes, this programme is conducted nationwide in the form of close study circles. These study circles ensure everyone's active participation, interaction, and a thorough understanding of the different aspects of the topics and books discussed and reviewed.

The university level programme is expected to cover 40 districts of the country by 1996 involving 2,000 students annually. To date, 22 districts

have been covered.

A general 'enrichment programme' is designed for people connected with different disciplines of human knowledge and effort, and includes university students, teachers and other professionals. The programme is designed to bring about a higher level of intellectual attainment of the participants. It provides a comprehensive exposure of the historical and philosophical development of various disciplines, and in the process bring them closer to the great minds of all the ages.

The general enrichment programme is conducted in the World Literature Centre, Dhaka. The Kendra arranges regular study circles, seminars, group discussions, guest lectures and other supporting programmes fed by the different schools of the Kendra and the audio-visual department.

These programmes are extensions of the Nation-wide Enrichment Programme which is further extended through the Kendra's Programmes Department. This department serves a wide-range of disciplines and significant national and international issues. People of all professions, interests, and talents in various fields participate.

taken by the Kendra. To date, 103 books have already been published and 80 are awaiting publication.

The extensive Rare Books Collection Project has been undertaken by the Kendra as a step towards the preservation by means of photocopying rare and valuable Bangla books currently out of print. Books on the verge of deterioration are collected from individuals and libraries throughout the country.

In Bangladesh there is a dearth of high quality literature in Bangla appropriate to the interests and understanding of children. The Kendra alleviates this need by making the best of suitable foreign and Bengali literature available to children.

ELAINE BIGELOW is a teacher at American International School, Dhaka.

A Library for Global Understanding



preciation courses, featuring high quality films from both home and abroad.

The music library, the first of its kind in the country, has a good collection of long-play and an added collection of mu-



sic on audio-cassettes and spool-tapes covering representative music of both Bangladesh and from around the world. The library offers music listening facilities to the members and associates of the

Kendra. A comprehensive publication project for making 400 world classics of all disciplines available to Bangladeshi readers in authentic vernacular renderings has been under-