

School burnt 'over land dispute'

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owned a part of the land the school has been built on, might have torched the school.

Komol Basini, a local, donated nine decimals of land for the school in 1947. Since its establishment, the school had been running with the donation of the well-off families of the area, said locals.

The school was destroyed by a flood before the Liberation War. Several locals then rebuilt the school on the same place in 1972, and two of them donated seven more decimals of land for the school, they said.

But three sons -- Julhas, Hasem and Kashem -- of late Maha Haji, who bought other parts of Komol's land, have been claiming that they own nine decimals of the school land, they said.

Though Komol sold his land to

Maha leaving out the nine decimals of land, Maha's three sons have been claiming its ownership and a case is pending with a court, said Abdul Jalil, incumbent president of the school managing committee.

Earlier, Maha's sons tried to gain control of the land by constructing a tin-roofed structure, but the villagers removed it. They vandalised the school signboard twice, damaged the foundation stone of the under construction building and also felled trees of the school, he alleged.

Meantime, the school was nationalised in 2013, and a two-storey building was being constructed beside the school's tin-roofed structure, locals said.

Nobody claiming ownership of the school land could be reached for comments.

Contacted, Shamsul Haque, Kalihati

upazila primary education officer, said he visited the spot and asked the acting headmistress of the school to file a general diary with the local police station.

"Setting a school on fire is a very sad and despicable matter as the school is for children," he said.

"I have already informed the Kalihati upazila nirbahi officer and the district primary education officer of the matter. Tougher action will be taken against the people responsible," he added.

Mosharaf Hossain, officer-in-charge of Kalihati Police Station, said acting headmistress of the school has lodged a GD with the police station.

"A police team was sent to the spot for investigating the incident. Necessary steps will be taken after the investigation," he added.



Rohingya refugees stand in line to receive relief aid at Thangkhal refugee camp near Ukha yesterday. A top UN official said Bangladesh's plan to build the world's biggest refugee camp for 800,000-plus Rohingya Muslims was dangerous because overcrowding could heighten the risks of deadly diseases spreading quickly.

PHOTO: AFP

Road to transformation

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people across the country, even in far-flung areas.

And it's easy and time-saving to remit and receive money using the system.

One just needs to go to a post office or Banglalink service point, hand in money to the official or agent concerned, and give the mobile number of the recipient.

A pin code is then sent to the mobile phone of the recipient, who can withdraw the money from nearby

points are offering the service.

The DG hopes the revamped service would gain popularity.

"2017 is a year of transformation for us," he told The Daily Star.

In December last year, the postal department started delivering products sold on e-commerce websites in the capital. The service is now available at 22 post offices in the city.

The department plans to expand the service to other parts of the country, Sudhangshu Shekhar Bhadra,

Most banks offer around 7 percent interest on deposits.

The DG said the department is now working with a private commercial bank to launch agent banking service.

It has also sought approval from the prime minister for launching basic banking services all over the country.

If approved, it would be the country's largest banking network in terms of coverage. Among the 9,866 post offices across the country, the department plans to launch banking services in 3,000 offices initially.

With some 1,200 branches, state-run Sonali Bank now has the largest banking network.

Talking to this correspondent, Tarana Halim, state minister for posts and telecommunications, said, "Post offices can ensure the government's presence in the remotest part of the country. It will also be able to provide digital services as traditional postal services are going to be obsolete gradually."

She also highly appreciated the increase in the postal department's revenue which rose to Tk 374.22 crore in fiscal 2016-17 from Tk 301.18 crore in the previous year.

However, the postal department has suffered setbacks in some of its initiatives.

Its foreign money order and Postal Cash Card services have failed to gain popularity.

The department didn't receive any foreign money order in the last two fiscal years, according to its annual report.

However, as an agent of US financial services company Western Union, it processed 1,765 transactions involving Tk 6.61 crore and earned only Tk 39,000 in fiscal 2015-16.

About a couple of years back, the department launched Postal Cash Card, which can be used as a debit card at ATM booths or outlets under Qcash network.

But the service failed to get the expected response from consumers, as it cannot be used at ATM booths or shops that use transaction networks other than Qcash, according to postal department officials.

Sushanta said they now have 20,000 point of sale (POS) machines at post offices where the clients can use these cards to withdraw money.

The department has already signed agreements with 12 commercial banks which would accept its cards at their ATM machines.

He mentioned that more than one lakh individuals are now using Postal Cash Cards.

They include 51,000 marginal beneficiaries who receive allowances through these cards under social safety net programmes.

Besides, 1,257 garment workers get salaries through these cards, according to the postal department's annual report for fiscal 2016-17.

The DG said they were drawing up plans to make the card service popular all over the country.

Barely surviving, yet serving

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and damp and the employees at the six counters had one computer, a laptop. Most of the service seekers queuing up were women and they had books in their hands.

The Daily Star correspondent visited this post office twice, six months apart, to see how it moved ahead.

In March, then postmaster Golam Mahub said he had heard a lot about post office service development and digitisation. He predicted that he would be retiring in July without even a computer on his desk.

"It doesn't seem essential to me," he had said, sitting at his ground-floor office desk. In his career, he had to deal with changing priorities of postal services but not much digitalisation.

He was right. When this correspondent visited the same office on October 04, the new postmaster was there but no computer on his desk, just a CCTV camera monitor.

There are only two computers in this relatively large post office. Most of the work is still done on paper. Eight operators do clerical jobs along with 19 postmen.

Even though the number of letters has fallen sharply in the age of mobile telephones, instant messaging and texts, the number of registered letters has increased significantly.

However, financial services seemed to be the key.

The time The Daily Star correspondent spent there, many women visited the post office, either to deposit or withdraw money.

New Postmaster Giash Uddin Bhuyan said every day more than Tk 5 crore is transacted at the post office and almost all of it is done on paper. "There was a money counting machine but it went out of order a long time ago. We need one badly."

Golam in March had talked about the broken machine and explained how badly the post office needed a working machine.

Six months have passed and postmasters have changed but the office still has a broken machine.

Giash said the service would be better if three more operators and three more postmen were appointed. He also said they did not have enough savings forms and savings books.

The post office employees should be trained on digitalisation of postal services so that they could cope with the changing times, he said.

The drop in the number of personal letters and increase in other services, like financial, registered letters and package deliveries is seen in rural and small-town post offices as well.

Md Hazrat Ali, 50, was a university student when a post office was set up at a room of Khorkhori High School in Rajshahi. He was appointed as its postmaster on May 27, 1987.

"Khorkhori Hat was a busy place. I used to deliver as much as 150 letters and money orders worth Tk 1.30 lakh each day in the early days," he

said.

Hazrat, who runs the "extra departmental branch post office" along with a postman and a runner working four to six hours a day, said he deals with roughly 15 to 50 registered letters a day now.

Regular mails decreased over the years at the post office which is one among 8,138 such post offices that are run by part-time employees.

"The number of personal letters has come down to zero but documents from courts, offices, banks, and businesses have increased over the years," said Hazrat.

He said the mailbox outside his post office remains almost unused. "I open it [mailbox] regularly. Most of the times, I find it empty," he said. He could not remember the last time he found a mail in the box.

Mokhlesur Rahman joined the postal department in 1985 and he is now the postmaster of Bazar Post Office in Pabna town.

They used to deal with over 250 personal and registered mails a day but now they handle hardly 50 registered and no ordinary or personal mails, said Mokhlesur.

Even though a new mobile money order service had been launched, Mokhlesur said there were not many customers of that.

Prospect of another services keep his post office buoyant. While some services show downturn, the number of deposit holders has increased in the last few years due to the handsome profits the customers get.

"Several hundred deposit holders, who used to deposit their savings in banks only a few years ago, now deposited their savings at the post office," said Mokhlesur.

But apart from digitalisation, infrastructural issues and employees' grievances also plague the sector.

While expansion and transformation are taking place, the shabby state of many rural post offices highlights the concept that not only quantity, the quality matters too.

Tangail's Bera Buchina Post Office is a case in point. Housed in a worn-out corrugated iron sheet structure with a leaky ceiling and broken door, a rusty iron letter box, enveloped in dust, dangles beside a sidewall at the six-foot by eight-foot post office.



The dilapidated structure of Bera Buchina post office at Alao Tarini village in Delduar upazila of Tangail.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

Down but not out

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social networking sites.

"We don't get personal letters that often now," said Bakul Chandra Das, a postman from New Market Post Office, as he was looking for an address in the capital's Jahanara Garden on Green Road.

Wearing a trademark khaki uniform and carrying a mailbag, Bakul covers a vast area on foot every day, delivering around two hundred letters, most of them official letters.

"Today I delivered only two personal letters so far. Previously, we used to have a few hundred of them each day. People now talk over cell phones; they do not write letters anymore," he said. Bakul has served in this position for 18 years so far and has seen the shift in trends up close.

Fortunately, systems have been put in place to ensure the survival of the

sector. While a major upheaval hasn't happened as of yet, the industry seems to be ready for adaptation.

IN NUMBERS

Not very long ago, the postal service was a thriving and prestigious means of communications in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Post Office grew from a 6,667 offices in 1971-72 to 9886 now. Likewise, the number of its personnel also increased from 24,983 to around 40,000 currently. Today's post offices offer some 30 types of services and cover a total route of 51,000 km.

The postal service took a new turn in 1980 as new post offices were constantly opened and new services introduced every year. Services like the Guaranteed Express Post (GEP) and International Express Mail Service were introduced in 1984.

To provide training to officers and

staff, a Postal Academy was established in Rajshahi in 1986 and then gradually some more postal academies were established across the country.

Data from the Bangladesh Post Office reflects the institution's significance. Each post office serves around 15,000 people in 15 square km areas and each employee of the department serves 3,760 people.

But technological development has drastically changed people's way of personal communication. Against the 41 crore ordinary letters the postal department handled back in 1983-84, the number fell to 27 crore in 2000-01, a couple of years after mobile companies started their operations in 1997.

In last financial year (2015-16), the number of ordinary letters dropped even further to a record low of 5 crore only.

To motivate people to write letters, postal departments adopted a slogan urging citizens to 'write letters to your dear ones, it is permanent'. But this has been to no avail.

The digital wave has apparently been slow to reach this sector but plans are in place to remedy this.

EMBRACING CHANGE

Postal officials said the digitalisation process of the postal service basically started in 2008 with four post offices.

There was a legal barrier to introducing new services as the postal service was a traditional service. The Post Office (Amendment) Act, 2010, was passed in parliament paving the way for the postal department to widen its horizon.

"Since then we have started digitalisation with a number of new services. If everything remains on the right track, the whole postal depart-

ment would be made digital with a promise of better services," Sudhangshu Shekhar Bhadra, additional director general of Bangladesh Post Office told The Daily Star.

He said many rural post offices of the country have already been turned into e-centres following a government directive to do so.

Bhadra said rural people get numerous services, including internet surfing, remittance transfer, video calls, filling up of applications for admission to colleges and universities, and gathering information about agriculture, education and health.

On 16 August, 2000, post offices initiated electronic mail services. Since 26 March of 2010, the post office has also launched Electronic Money Transfer Service (EMTS).

To make the best use of its human resources in a changing scenario,

Postal Academy in Rajshahi is now offering training on e-commerce, process automation and mail routing and circulation.

From its inception in 1982, the academy has conducted around 500 courses attended by around 5,500 officers and staff.

"Postal department wants to capture the opportunity of e-commerce, capitalising on the built-in expertise of mail," said one of the academy's instructors, Hussain Syed Gowhor.

Post officials said the services are adapting with changing times and so are the employees. For example, there was a post for "radio inspector" whose job was to make sure everyone with a transistor radio had a valid license to own and use it. Now the position is no longer required and employees can opt for retraining.