



IN QUEST OF ENLIGHTENMENT

ON ITS 40TH ANNIVERSARY, WE LOOK BACK AT HOW BISWHO SHAHITTO KENDRO INITIATED A JOURNEY TOWARDS THE RENAISSANCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXCELLENCE IN BANGLADESH

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So far, BSK has given 34,38,000 books as awards to the participants of its nationwide excellence programme.

December 17, 1978. A study circle, comprising only 15 members, was formed at an auditorium of the then Bangladesh Education Extension Department (now National Academy for Educational Management). The members of the study circle pledged that every week they would read a book and reflect on it through a spontaneous, interactive discussion. Forty years later, such study circles have been replicated in 14,000 secondary and higher secondary level educational institutions all over Bangladesh—engaging 8,30,0000 students in reading and reviewing some of the world's greatest literary works. Besides reaching out to school students, BSK's fleet of 46 mobile libraries, buses and trucks converted to libraries, run all over the country to serve almost half a million readers from all walks of life.

Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed, the convener of that study circle, ultimately founded an organisation called Bishwo Shahitto Kendro (BSK)—with the motto “we want enlightened humans”—that has created generations of enlightened

young Bangladeshis.

How did Professor Sayeed, a teacher of Bengali language and literature, inspire millions of people to join his movement of reading books—at a time when reading anything except textbooks was frowned upon, when teachers actually used to instruct their pupils not to ‘harm’ their academic performance by reading ‘unnecessary’ books?

“I was brought up in a society and family in which literary practices were valued as part of the anti-colonial movement. In the sixties, when I completed my study and entered the teaching profession, literature was regarded as a weapon to fight the Pakistani authoritarian regime,” he recalls.

“But when Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation, I realised that the general masses were far from the light of arts and literature. Appreciation of literature as a source of knowledge and excellence was confined to a small group of urban elites and academicians. In most of the educational institutions, arts and

literature were regarded as unnecessary subjects and our students' intellects were confined to some particular textbooks,” he adds.

The formation of the study circles was his first initiative to dispel people's ignorance. Inspired by the success of these study circles, he thought of establishing a library in Dhaka. “At that time, I was also working as a presenter at Bangladesh Television. This engagement helped me a lot to reach out to people from different quarters with my plan of setting up a library and a centre for study circles.” With the help of well-wishers, Professor Sayeed established a library of 100,000 books. To his dismay, however, the rich library could attract no more than a hundred regular members.

“I was really shocked to see that even most of our regular members wanted to read cheap detective fictions and film magazines in the library. I realised that setting up a library in Dhaka is not a solution to the problem. So, I started to

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