

Creation of Learning Society Through Community Learning Centres (Ganokendra): An Innovative Approach of Basic and Lifelong Learning in Bangladesh

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Learning Society and Lifelong Learning

The ultimate aim of education is to develop autonomy of learning among the majority of citizens so that society as a whole becomes a Learning Society. In a learning society everybody learns and also teaches others throughout life. In such a society, schools and colleges as well as other organisations such as factories, business and social agencies work as education providers. In other word, a learning society is one in which all agencies of a society are educational providers, not just those whose primary responsibility is education (e.g., schools). In a genuine learning society all citizens engage in education from birth to death i.e. learning occurs throughout the life.

Lifelong learning is a process that involves purposive and directed learning. Each individual sets a series of learning objectives and then pursues these by any means available through the many agencies available in the society. But making a conscious commitment to life-long learning and being willing to take advantage of the learning opportunities of a society requires that people be autonomous learner.

Rationale for Community Learning Centres (Ganokendra) programme

In a country like Bangladesh with low literacy rate and widespread poverty, it is a big challenge to bring a visible impact of non-formal education programme in the life of the neoliterates. Without adequate provision of retaining the newly acquired literacy skills by the illiterates, the danger of losing much of the impact of literacy skills is always there. One of the devices to retain the literacy of the neo-literates, particularly the adolescents and the adults, who do not intend to enter into the formal system of education, is organizing multi-purpose community learning centres at the doorsteps of the neo-literates. Again, to offer opportunities for continuous updating of knowledge and life-long learning, there is need for institutionalized education and information support services in the society. Dhaka Ahsania Mission's (Ganokendra) started to meet these needs.

Objectives

The general objectives of organizing Ganokendra, with the ultimate objective of creating a learning society, are to provide learning opportunities to the people through institutionalized information support services for improvement of quality of life. Specifically following objectives are pursued in organizing Ganokendra.

- a) Organisation of an institution through which non-formal education and training can be provided to those who have completed basic literacy courses for promoting a culture of lifelong learning and development. Which non-formal education and training can be basic literacy courses far promoting a culture of lifelong learning and development.
- b) To organize community library stocked with easy-to-read materials, wall magazines and newspapers making available to remote communities information that is relevant, practical, and that can be understood by people who have only basic literacy skills.
- c) To build up an institution that brings people of a community together, enabling them to network with NGOs and Government and to access services that are available to them.

Evolutionary process

DAM's initial post-literacy programme was aimed at providing short-term back-up support to the neo-literates. As there is dearth of reading materials in the rural areas, at times it was found that without institutionalization of the post-literacy programme, literacy skills of the neo-literates do not sustain. To provide a structured post literacy programme, in 1992 DAM initiated Ganokendra as a post-literacy centre.

Initially Ganokendra was established for post-literacy purpose only; gradually its role was widened to cater the learning needs of the community in other Fields. Ganokendra now play the role of village community centres with a library and facility for recreation and other socio-cultural activities. The peoples also participate in regular discussions on issues of local interest.

On the one hand, the output of non-formal education programme in the area are linked with Ganokendra for continuing education, on the other, the community in general utilizes it as their own place of sitting, reading and socio-cultural activities. Ganokendra now functions as a community learning centre.

Ganokendra is organized in all programme areas of DAM where basic literacy programmes are being implemented over couple of years. Following chart shows number of Ganokendra organized in different years.

Innovative aspects of Ganokendra

- It is organized and run by the community
- Its post-literacy learning support is not time-bound. It addresses learning needs of the neo literates for indefinite period.
- Autonomous learning is targeted by the users of Ganokendra
- It is accessible to all people in the area, not limited to the neo-literates from literacy centres. The out-of-school children, people with limited reading skills, local school students and youths attend Ganokendra for reading newspaper, meeting people, discuss social issues and playing games.
- It is used as training and issue-based discussion centre
- Socio-economic and environmental programmes are linked with Ganokendra activities.
- It works as an information centre where daily/periodical newspapers, newsletter, communication-communication materials of other agencies are available.
- It is being used as a platform to provide educational and financial services. In many Ganokendra, DAM is providing educational services and partner NGOs are providing financial services.
- It is being used as service delivery centre by some other agencies, including government extension departments.

Target population

Ganokendras were initially opened to serve those completing adult and adolescent literacy courses. Ganokendras are now open to all members of the community in which they are located. About 70% of these beneficiaries are female. A Ganokendra serves for approximately 75 - 100 learners, providing them continuing leaning opportunities to ensure that they are able to retain their literacy skills and acquire new skills to supplement their family income. Men, women and children are all welcome to come to read the materials available and to join different training, education and cultural programmes organized through the Ganokendra.

Features of the programme

Ganokendra are locally managed institutions, and as such each Ganokendra is developed differently

according to local needs and expectations. Essentially, Ganokendra,

- provides service to the neo-literates and autonomous learners to increase in 3Rs;
- arrange for basic education of illiterates and people having learning difficulties;
- promote schooling of non-school children for acquiring basic education;
- promote reading habit for increase in knowledge and skills for human development;
- arrange skills training for the members;
- create opportunities for further training/retraining in activities which are felt need of the community or individual members;
- promote community development activities;
- create leadership in solving local problems.

Each feature mentioned above reinforces the others. Basic literacy skills allow materials on issues such as health and hygiene to be read and understood. The availability of useful materials that people want to read facilitates the retention of literacy skills and promotes lifelong learning, the availability of reading materials in the Ganokendra brings the community together. The provision of development services encourages the community to ensure that the library services are maintained.

Providing services to the neo-literates and autonomous learners to increase 3Rs

Ganokendra in its most simple form is a community library. This in itself is a valuable service since in rural Bangladesh reading opportunities are extremely rare. The neo-literates have hardly access to reading materials to practice their newly acquired skills in 3Rs. The booklets provided to the Ganokendra are simply designed as follow-up materials to suit the difficulty levels of the new learners. There are also books and materials for the advanced learners. These are the resource that promotes essential messages in rural Bangladesh, including the importance of drinking clean water, the need for good nutrition during pregnancy, and the need for replacing trees that will be cut down for firewood. Other issues including the problems of dowry and beneficial agricultural practices are also covered. Running of community library is the responsibility of the Ganokendra facilitator. Any member can take out books on loan.

Promoting basic education for the out-of-school children and illiterate adults

Ganokendra not only works for post-literacy and continuing education, it plays a significant role in promoting basic education to the illiterates and out-of-school children. Campaign programmes are arranged for enrollment of children in primary schools. Literacy courses are organized for the out of school children and illiterate adults in the Ganokendra. Follow-up courses are as well organized for the semi-literate and the people with limited reading skills.

Promoting reading habit for increase in knowledge and skills for human development

As a resource centre in the village, Ganokendra initiates activities to promote reading habit of the people, dissemination of information, providing counseling services towards development of life skills. The means of arranging the information, counseling and resource services vary from Ganokendra to Ganokendra. Few scenarios are: arranging study circles, inviting local experts (a local craftsman) to facilitate discussion groups, getting assistance of outside resource persons (e.g. Government health workers), collecting information from local branches of national organisations (e.g. on methods to detect arsenic poisoning). Each Ganokendra is encouraged to prepare its own wall newspapers. These promote interest, encourage involvement, and raise awareness of local issues. Community level social awareness programmes are organized to raise awareness on the issues of gender, drug abuse, environment, rising arsenic levels in tube well water, etc. Campaigns addressing health issues such as the high death rate during childbirth, infant mortality, diarrhea, drug abuse, AIDS, are also organized coinciding with national days.

Arranging skill training programmes for the members

At the initiative of Ganokendra vocational training courses are organized to increase income generation Skills of the members. Courses are organized either in the Ganokendra or in other convenient venue. Local level resource persons for government and non-government agencies are invited to facilitate the training sessions.

Promoting community development activities

A number of community development issues are addressed in all Ganokendra. These include gender sensitization, environment conservation, income generation, health awareness, water and sanitation, early childhood development, and socio-cultural development. DAM provides training support to the Facilitator who in turn orients the members. All such training courses are organized at field level and, where appropriate, local resource persons (e.g. from Government or other NGOs) are invited. Few examples are: a) organisation of gender sensitization, Campaign and orientation programmes at community level; b) environmental programmes that include like tree planting and the promotion of smokeless ovens; c) income generation programme; d) socio-cultural activities; e) water and sanitation programmes.

Facilitating Networking Functions

An important function of the Ganokendra is that they can link up with other service providers. There are already a few examples of this in the existing Ganokendra. Gradual strengthening of the Ganokendra fully realizes their potential for accessing services that are already available to the community. Examples of current and future possible networking functions of the Ganokendra are: a) use of Ganokendra as an immunization centre; b) availing veterinary services from Government; c) collecting educational materials and organizing local events on a national days.

Curriculum and materials

A variety of printed materials, including booklets, games, posters, chart, stickers, and audiovisual materials are used in the Ganokendra. In addition to these materials, one newsletter and a wall magazine specially designed for neo-literates are supplied on monthly basis. Handwritten wall magazine prepared by the Ganokendra members and the mimeo newsletter produced at the local level are also used as information and educational materials.

The books and booklets, posters and stickers, used in the Ganokendra are collected from internal and external sources. Books and IEC materials supplied from DAM is easy-to-read ones developed by the Training and Material Development Division of DAM. These contain information on agriculture, poultry farming, livestock raising, kitchen gardening, small business management, organisation of groups, environment and sanitation, health and hygiene, food and nutrition, dangers of drug addiction and in a variety of other Fields of interest to the readers, including comics, stories etc. Books and information materials are also collected from external sources, like NGOs, government extension departments, and individuals.

Organizational level external collections are made by DAM central office, while field offices arrange collection of IEC materials from local offices and Ganokendra members/management committee collect books/materials from individuals in the village.

Besides focusing on the life skills issues, language level of the materials are also kept in mind while selecting books and materials for Ganokendra. Since a majority of the users are neo-literate, easy to read books are supplied. Books covering all levels (Basic, Middle and Self learning) of the National Adult

Literacy Curriculum are made available to suit the difficult levels of the users. It is expected that autonomous reading skills is achieved by the users of Ganokendra

To facilitate dissemination of local news through Ganokendra and to encourage the neo-literate to practice writing, the facilitators, supervisors and selective Ganokendra members are actively involved in developing wall magazine at the Ganokendra level, which is produced monthly/quarterly basis. This is an indigenous material prepared on a poster paper with handwritings of the contributors and hanged at the news board in the centre.

Teaching-Learning process

The participants in the Ganokendra activities learn through self-reading, guided reading, discussion over issues, and training. Literacy support is provided by the facilitators/Community Worker as a regular activity. Books and materials are used by the members in the Ganokendra or may be borrowed for self-reading. The supervisors on monthly/fortnightly basis facilitate discussion sessions. On occasions resource persons (local extension personnel) are invited to facilitate discussion on specific topic(s).

The learners also learn by doing. Socio-cultural activities are organized by the centres with community support for promotion of gender development, environment conservation, recreation, immunization, etc. Each Ganokendra has its own plan for organisation of Social activities depending on the decision of the members. Examples of few current activities are organisation of *uthan baithak* (courtyard meeting), rally, running immunization centre, observance on Independence Day/Victory Day, arranging drama, folk song session, exhibition of women's products, sports, etc.

Implementation, supervision and management

Organizational steps of Ganokendra include survey, organization of learners/community group, formation and orientation of the management committee, training of facilitators, and physical construction or renovation of the centre house, and supply of materials, equipment & books to the centre.

Ganokendra is organized and managed by the groups of neo-literates with back-up support from DAM and in collaboration with the local community. One facilitator is recruited from the community who works as Community Worker. (S)he initiates the activities and looks after smooth functioning of the Ganokendra. Ganokendra facilitators are normally women from the locality. Women facilitators are preferred since the majority of the initial users of the Ganokendra are women. The facilitator remains responsible for the overall operation of the Ganokendra. Normally the centre remains open for 4-5 days a week and 2-3 hours daily. She maintains the library/information centre, collect books and materials, issue materials to members, organize Ganokendra-based activities in Consultation with the Management Committee maintain liaison with various Government and NGO service providers. The facilitators are supported by field staff of DAM and report monthly through the Management Committee to Dhaka Ahsania Mission.

The overall management of the Ganokendra is the responsibility of the Management Committee, formed by people of the locality. Local people, existing and potential users of the Ganokendra are consulted in the process of the formation of the Management Committee. The Committee is equipped to develop plans for the activities that the centre is to undertake (e.g training courses, networking activities, community library, etc.) and to ensure that the activities are implemented satisfactorily.

There is regular communication between the Facilitators, Management Committee and Dhaka Ahsania Mission Field staff, all of who attend Monthly Management Meetings at the Ganokendra. DAM's supervision personnel supervise the functioning of the Ganokendra and maintain close liaison with the

Ganokendra committee formed with 5-7 members. DAM technical, materials and financial support are provided during the initial year(s) of its operation. Ganokendra members raise funds for undertaking activities at local level. Gradually DAM's support will be phased out. The Management Committee will be responsible for ensuring the financial viability of the Ganokendra at the end of the five years of support from Dhaka Ahsania Mission.

DAM equips all Ganokendra with basic furniture, including benches, news board and bookshelves. Each Ganokendra is supplied with booklets that have been designed as follow-up materials to the literacy courses, and other easy-to-read materials (all in Bangladesh). These include booklets that deal with topics of national, community and individual interest, including issues related to current events, the environment, legal rights, health issues, biographies of prominent people, and agricultural practices.

Ganokendra is developed as a community-based learning centre. The people around Ganokendra are involved at different stages of its implementation and management. For example, in selecting the Ganokendra place, the members, the timing of instruction, the areas of economic activities, skill development training, gender awareness training and environment preservation training, etc. Over time their involvement become more and more. This is because the learners of literacy centre, group members, Ganokendra members got benefited from the on-going programmes of Ganokendras and become more involved in implementation of those.

Ganokendra intervention is planned by DAM as part of total education programme, to ensure life-long learning to the literacy graduates. At present, Ganokendra is addressing basic leaning needs of the adults. Since there is little or no scope for further learning of the rural adults in Bangladesh, opportunity for mainstreaming for further education is slim now. DAM however, plans to break the silence here by using Ganokendra as an outlet for further learning of rural population. At present, it links up the Ganokendra members with other socio-economic development programmes for ultimate improvement of quality of life.

Cost

Costs for organizing Ganokendra include expenses for housing, furniture, books and materials, training and services, supervision and monitoring. Depending on the activities the operation cost vary from one to other. Cost of one Ganokendra with post-literacy and common awareness raising activities are mentioned below. Per person cost again depends on how many members the Ganokendra serve. Commonly, one centre is planned for 100 members. On that basis expense per person comes at Taka 553 per year, including costs for post literacy and training courses on gender, leadership, and environment conservation.

Sharing of operation cost of the Ganokendra starts from very beginning, though initially it may be nominal. DAM has now developed five-year plan with gradual reducing of contribution and leaving the management committee of the Ganokendra to take over fully by that time.

Lessons learnt

- There are demands for learning life skills among the adults and adolescents in the rural communities. These need to be delivered in flexible modes and in easy language.
- The learning materials should always be suitable to the difficulty level of the users.
- Only books do not attract the learners in the community libraries. People enjoy joining in recreational programmes and learning can be integrated with those activities.
- The neo-literates have potentialities to produce information bulletin for the community.
- Literacy and community development activities can be integrated at any point of delivery of the service package of the organisation.

Limitations, challenges & opportunities

- Availability of a permanent venue for Ganokendra suitable for all is not easy.
- Absence of incentive for financial and professional development of the Facilitators affects their enthusiasm.
- Irregular flow of information materials, particularly in remote areas. Supply of daily newspaper becomes a big challenge. Improvement in road communication and increasing number of users of newspaper might open avenue to face this challenge
- Facilitators face difficulty in management of multi-sector activities