

As the people of the village wake in the morning, the first thing they see is Polan Sarkar. He stands there, smiling, with a bag of books on his shoulder. He is 96 years-old, but as sprightly as any young man.

He travels on foot for miles, going from village to village with his books. He buys the books with his own money and lends them to the people. After a few weeks, he comes by again. The villagers return the books and borrow from the fresh lot he brings along. He's been doing this for the past 30 years. He covers about 20 villages in Rajshahi, a district of Bangladesh, spurring an innovative reading revolution in the region.

A large number of people are poor and illiterate in rural Bangladesh, this country with a population of about 150 million. Polan Sarkar's dream is to rid his village, and the surrounding villages, of illiteracy and ignorance.

Polan lost his father when he was just five months old. He went to school, but only to class six. After that, poverty curtailed any chance of further education. He didn't lose his habit of reading, but there was a dearth of books in the village. He would borrow books from here and there to read.

After spending a childhood in poverty, the extremity of his poverty somewhat abated after he inherited some land from his grandfather. He grew up, married and continued to nurture his dream.

As a young man, Polan joined Jatra, a local folk theatre. He'd play the role of a clown and make people laugh. In those days there were very few Jatra artistes who would read and write. There were no photocopiers or cyclostyle machines. The scripts had to be copied by hand. Polan Sarkar would do that. He would also sit in the wings, prompting the artistes on stage. That is how his love for reading grew.

Polan Sarkar grew up in the home of his maternal uncle. He would collect the taxes from the peasants on his uncle's land. Later he also worked as the union council tax collector. He'd buy books with the money he earned. He'd not only read the books, but lend them to others to read too.

One day he set up a secondary school in the village, on his own land. He would lend the students books to read. He would reward the meritorious students with books. Thus he sowed the seeds of his book-reading revolution.

Diagnosed with diabetes, Polan Sarkar was advised to take regular walks. It was then that he was struck with an idea. "People came to my house to borrow books from me," he thought, "Instead I can walk to their homes delivering the books to them."

"That was the beginning," says Polan Sarkar. "When people would see me lending books, they'd come up to borrow too. Distributing books on foot became an obsession to me."

He began going from home to home with his books. As word of his visits spread, all sorts of people, including students and housewives, would come to him requesting books. He became a mobile library himself. His home was the local library of the village.

Polan Sarkar loves to give people the classics of Bangla literature to read. He also likes lending books of folktales and stories by other popular authors.

It is because of Polan Sarkar that the Abdur Rahim, now 55, became an avid reader. Rahim has a grocery shop in Digha Bazar. Now not only does he read books, but every afternoon he has a book reading session at his shop. He says, "Polan Sarkar ignited the love of books within me."

Polan Sarkar's book-reading movement was limited to a few villages of Rajshahi. No one knew about this movement outside this remote area, until the daily newspaper Prothom Alo published a story about him on 27 February 2007. He was given the national Ekushey Padak Award (*editor's note: the Ekushey Padak Award is the second highest civilian award in Bangladesh*).

Polan Sarkar still goes walking with his books every day. He is a humorous man with a zest for life. He has been an inspiration to the people around him. His enthusiasm for books has spilled over from his village. Many other have followed his example in setting up libraries and distributing books from village to village.

In the darkness of illiteracy that enshrouds rural Bangladesh, Polan Sarkar is a bright beacon of hope.