Bangladesh is a unitary and sovereign republic known as the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. It emerged as an independent nation on 26 March 1971. The nine-month long war of liberation culminated in the victory of Bangladeshi forces over the Pakistani occupiers on 16 December 1971. This region was under Muslim rule for five and a half centuries since the 13th century, then under British rule for two centuries from 1757 to 1947, and remained a province of Pakistan between 1947 and 1971.

**Location and Land area** - Located in the Eastern part of the South-Asian sub-continent, the country is bordered by India on the East, West and North, and by the Bay of Bengal and a small border strip with Myanmar on the South. It covers a land area of about 147,570 sq. km (56,977 sq. miles). Its alluvial plains provide fertile agricultural lands. The land mass is deltaic comprising mainly the delta of three mighty rivers – the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna, with a network of numerous rivers and canals. Vast green fields are bounded by low hills in the North East with average elevation of 244 and 610 meters respectively. The highest point is located at the South-Eastern extremity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The country is divided in administrative units: 6 Divisions, 64 Districts, 469 Upazillas, 4,484 Unions, and 59,990 Mouzas.

**The climate** - Bangladesh has a tropical monsoon climate. There are basically four seasons in a year – winter (December – February), Summer (March – May), Monsoon (June – September), and Autumn (October – November). The average temperature across the country usually ranges between 11 and 29 Celsius in winter months and between 21 and 34 Celsius during summer months. The annual rainfall varies.

(See page 2)

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**History of Gonoshasthaya Kendra:** Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK) is a Public Charitable Trust established in 1972. It has started with a 480-bed field hospital for freedom fighters and refugees from the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the war of liberation in 1971. It was developed as a secular Public Charitable Foundation (Trust) to work with the people of different geographical areas, caste, religions and ethnic origin. To expand the scope of our work and to receive foreign funds, the organisation was later on registered with NGO Bureau in 1981. The organisation has a Board of Trustees of renowned persons from private and Public sector. There is also an elected “Workers Committee” to overview grievances and ensure equal opportunity to all workers and fairness.

(See page 4)
from 1600 to 2000 mm in the West, 2000 to 4000 mm in the South-East, and 2500 to 4000 mm in the North-East.

■ The fauna - A variety of wild animals are found in the forests. Out of the 200 species of mammals, the place of pride goes to the Royal Bengal Tiger found in the Sundarban. Elephants are found in the forests of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Six species of deers live in the Hill Tracts and in Sundarban. Among the bovine animals, buffalo, ox and bison are commonly seen. There are about 150 species of reptiles, which include the sea turtle, river tortoise, mud turtle, crocodile, python, rat snake and cobra. Hundreds of species of birds, and fresh water fishes are abundant both in quantity and variety. Of the 525 recorded species of birds, 350 are resident. The total number of species of marine and fresh water fishes is about 200.

■ The flora - The tropical climate has made the country luxuriant in vegetation. The villages are usually buried in groves of Mango, Banana, Jack fruit, Coconut, Palm, Bamboo, and other useful trees. Forests cover about 17% of the land area and most of the hilly regions. The largest forest is the Sundarban, which stretches along the south western seaboard and provides sanctuary to the famous Royal Bengal Tiger.

■ The People - The population of the country stands at about 140 million. Around 75% of the people live in rural areas and 60% of them depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Rice and fish are common diet. Lungis and vests are the usual attire for men in the rural areas as opposed to Sharees are the common dress for womenfolk. There are about 1.8 Million tribal people, the majority of whom live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The tribes have distinct cultures of their own.

■ Religion - The four major religions in the country are Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianism. The Muslims represent about 88% of the population and the Hindus about 10%. The rest comprises mainly Buddhists, Christians and animists. The Constitution guarantees religious and cultural freedom to all citizens of Bangladesh.

■ Anniversaries & Festivals - Anniversaries, fairs and festivals play a vital role in the social life of common people in Bangladesh. The biggest religious festivals are Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha and Eid-e-Miladunnabi, Muharram and Shab-e-Barat. Other festivals includes Hindus’ Durga and Sarashati Puja, Christians’ Christmas and Buddhists’ Buddha Purnima. Among the non religious anniversaries, Bengali New Year’s Day (Pohela Baishakh, on 14 April), Language Martyrs’ day (on 21 February, now celebrated worldwide as International Mother Language Day), Independence and National Day (26 March) and Victory Day ( 16 December) are observed nationwide.

■ Sports - Football, cricket, hockey, swimming and rowing, kabadi, volleyball, badminton, basketball, lawn tennis, table tennis and chess are popular games in the country. In rural areas hadudu is a common and popular game.
**Language** - Bangla or Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh. Bangla is spoken by more than 200 million people throughout the world. English is widely used in education and business. Arabic is also read, understood and studied by many.

**Economy** - Bangladesh has an agrarian economy and 25% of its GDP comes from the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sector. The main agricultural products are rice, jute, wheat, potato, pulses, tobacco, tea, sugarcane, etc. The country is the largest exporter of jute and jute goods in the world. Readymade garments occupy the first position among the exportable items. Tea, frozen shrimps, fish, leather goods, flowers and vegetables, ceramic-ware and handicrafts are also major exportable commodities.

The government has adopted a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper which focus on employment generation, human resource development and revitalization of the rural economy. The income per capita in Bangladesh was estimated at US$ 440 in 2004.

**Health, population and family welfare** - Bangladesh ranks 9th in the world and 6th in Asia in terms of population. The national density of population is 841.9 people per sq. km and one of the highest in the world. The sex ratio is 103 males per 100 females. Fertility rate 3.6 per woman (2002). Life expectancy at birth 63.35 years (2004). The population currently stands at around 139.2 million (2004) with an annual growth rate of about 2.2% on average between 1975-2004.

Considerable progress has been achieved in Bangladesh in the field of health and family welfare. The immunization programme, which has been acclaimed worldwide, now covers 80% of children compared to 55% in 1990-91. Infant mortality per 1,000 live births (below 1 year) was 56 in 2004 and maternal mortality rates have come down dramatically. Contraceptive Prevalence Rate has increased to around 58 %, as a result of which population growth rate is now below 2 %. (Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2006*).

### Bangladesh and the Netherlands

The Netherlands and Bangladesh established diplomatic relations shortly after Bangladesh emerged as a state following its independence struggle in 1971. Early 1972 this was followed by the opening of this Embassy, reflecting the interest the Netherlands is taking in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was selected as one of the priority countries of the Dutch Development policy. The development co-operation sectors, mutually chosen by Bangladesh and the Netherlands, are Integrated Water Resources Management, Basic Health Care, Rural Electrification and Basic Education.

**The Dutch development Cooperation in Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is one of 36 countries with which the Netherlands has a long-term bilateral development co-operation relationship. The development co-operation between the two countries began shortly after independence in 1971. By 2000, the Netherlands had contributed some 1.36 billion Euro. In recent years disbursement levels were between 35 and 45 million Euro.

During the 1970s support towards re-launching the economy of a war-ravaged Bangladesh was emphasised, and in the 1980s increased attention was given to activities that directly addressed poverty. The first half of the 1990s showed a substantial increase in project support to social sectors and aid through NGOs. Since 1997 the program focuses on social sectors, i.e. Primary Health Care, (including nutrition and population welfare) and Basic Education, as well as Integrated Water Resources Management. (Source: Embassy of The Netherlands in Bangladesh Website)
Mission and values: GK Slogan is to “Grame Cholo Gram Goro” (“Let us go to village to build the village”) and committed to work for poor and disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities with a particular focus on development activities that will benefit women and children.

Activities: GK’s main activities fall into 2 categories: Voluntary (non-profit), and Commercial but related to essential basic services (Pharmaceuticals, Educational Publications and Textiles, Food, etc.). In terms of advocacy and lobbying, GK played a lead role in influencing Bangladesh national drug and health policies.

National and International Networks: Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), People’s Health Movement, Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Health, the Bangladesh Coordination Council for Human Rights and Consumer Association of Bangladesh, etc.

Awards: GK activities are well recognised by National and International Award committees. GK received World Youth Peace Award in 1974 (Sweden), Independence Day Award in 1977, (Highest Level National Award by the Government of Bangladesh. 1978 Alma Ata Declaration with inclusion of case studies presented by GK, Mag say say Award in 1985 (Philippines), Moulana Bhashani Award in 1989, Right Livelihood Award in 1992 (Sweden), One World Action Award in 2001 (UK), Public Health Hero in 2002 (United States).
The foundation of the educational system in Bangladesh was laid down during the period of British rule. The system has three levels - primary, secondary, and higher education.

- Primary education, which is free but not compulsory, is for children up to about 10 years old. Only about half of all children attend primary school.
- Secondary education is divided into three levels - junior secondary, high school, and higher secondary (intermediate college) - with public examinations being held at the conclusion of each level of schooling. Schools in cities and towns are generally better staffed and financed than those in rural areas.
- Higher education: There are more than 600 colleges, most of them affiliated with the University of Dhaka, the University of Rajshahi, or the University of Chittagong.

The Primary Education system consists of several types of primary schools, the main ones are: government, non-government, the non-formal primary schools and the Madrasas. The first two types follow the national curriculum whereas the third one follows its own curriculum. The Madrasas are religious Muslim schools. There are about 80,000 formal and non-formal primary schools in Bangladesh, of which about 38,000 are run directly by the State.

Of the 17.56 million students reported in official statistics for 2002 - which excludes students in non-formal school - 10.67 million were in government-run schools.

Bangladesh has adopted the Education For All (EFA) agenda of the World Conference on Education For All (Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990). A compulsory primary education law was promulgated and the government proceeded to implement a compulsory primary education programme since 1991 with increased resource allocation and efforts to mobilize public support for this programme.

A major achievement of the last decade was progress in gender parity in primary school enrolment from a boy-girl ratio of 3:2 to full equality. Various government measures, including stipend and free tuition fee for rural girls in secondary schools, increasing women teachers in primary schools with 60 percent quota for new recruitment, and vibrant NGO involvement, contributed to this achievement.

Bangladesh has been ahead of its South Asian neighbours, such as India, Nepal and Pakistan in this respect and is set to achieve the 2005 gender parity target of the UN Millennium Development Goals in primary and secondary education enrolment.

However, taking into account the current enrolment and completion rate, it can be said that over 40% of the children cross their primary schooling age without the benefit of a full cycle of primary education.

Thus a large number of children, mostly poor and disadvantaged in other ways, are deprived of a complete primary education: 1 out of 5 children does not enrol in primary school; 1 out of 3 of those enrolled drops out before completing primary education; 1 out of 3 who complete five years of primary schooling still remains non-literate or semi-literate.

Moreover, in some remote areas, the government schools are either inexistent or without teachers, worsening the condition of the children living in these places. That is where GK primary education programme implements most of its activities.

(Source: CAMPE, Education Watch 2003/4)
Gonopatshala is the formal basic primary education programme of Gonoshasthaya Kendra Trust. It started this programme for the children of destitute and landless families at Savar in 1976.

Since then GK developed this programme, in response to inadequate national primary education facilities in some of the poorest and most inaccessible regions of Bangladesh.

It now runs 187 schools, supporting 17,775 students in 26 upazilas of 15 districts.

**Our mission - To give underprivileged children access to quality education**

The overall aim of GK Education programme is to enable the children from underserved communities and indigenous minorities, living often in remote and difficult to reach areas, to receive participatory qualitative primary education coupled with basic life skills to improve their living standards.

GK's slogan "Education can liberate people from poverty" expresses an approach of teaching that aims to challenge prevailing prejudices and perceptions of people, including gender stereotypes and the way boys and girls perceive themselves and each other.

**Principles of action**

- **Reaching the unreached**: Most of the children from the Gonopatshalas comes from marginalised and underserved communities including ethnic minorities from the Chittagong Hills Tracks and riverine Charhs.

- **Challenging stereotypes, particularly gender bias**: The schools implement a policy of positive discrimination towards girl children, and GK recruits and trains local women as teachers.

- **Flexibility**: The Gonopatshala teaches the national curriculum with flexible time table to enable children to go to school as well as to carry out work for their families. Besides the full national curriculum is completed in 4 instead of 5 years.

- **Teaching life-skills**: The pupils are trained in preventive health, poultry rearing, homestead horticulture, children’s rights, and other issues relevant to the local culture, history and environment.

- **Building on communities’ commitment**: The Gonopatshala seeks the villagers’ full involvement through locally organised School Management Committees.
Our programme - Implementing the right to primary education for all

Where we work

We ensure access to quality education in some of the remotest areas of the country - GK is currently involved in the most difficult to reach and poorest regions of the Chittagong Hills Tracks, in the disaster prone areas like the riverine chars (serious soil erosion and floods), in the coastal area (cyclone and tidal surge prone). GK has considered their economic, social and linguistic background, to determine their particular education needs.

- In the Chittagong Hills Tracks, GK run 98 Gonopatshalas for pupils who all belong to various indigenous communities.
- In the riverine Chars area, GK has established and runs a school on 68 chars.
- The Southeast coast and islands are disasters prone areas where GK has built 7 cyclone shelters. They integrate primary education, health care, and disaster preparedness activities.

What we do

- **Ensuring the access to quality infrastructures:** We build new schools or restore derelict ones using locally available materials and manpower. The community provides land, locally available construction materials, a share of the maintenance costs, as well as the teacher’s food and accommodation.

- **Empowering local female teachers** - The schoolteachers, all women and mostly from the local communities, receive a four-month basic training as well as refreshers. Employing female teachers has been recognised as an important incentive to promote the enrolment of girls. We provide them with the opportunity to increase their level of education as much as possible, by giving them access to studying at the Open University.

GK University, Gono Bishwabidyalay, which is the first approved University initiated by an NGO in Bangladesh, provides its support. It trains the Gonopatshala teachers for a period of four months in Bengali, English and mathematics with a maximum of 250 teachers per annum.

- **Intercultural Bilingual Education** - The indigenous communities are taught in their mother language and in Bangla in the CHT, and in the northern Saital area. Basic primary books following the national curriculum have been published in 3 mother languages (Mro, Marma and Bawm). Teachers’s training on mother language is also provided.

In the wake of the peace treaty accord in 1997, GK has supported the publication of formal primary books up to level III in Mro language, Marma and Bawm. At the same time GK will mainstream them to follow NCTB curriculum in Bandarban hill district, for the first time in the history of the CHT. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Gonopatshala in figures (3rd term 2006)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>187 schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17,775 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.18% students are girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>475 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99.57% teachers are women</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Marma and Bawm groups have developed their texts in their mother language with the support of Bandarban Hill District Council and Tribal Cultural Institute. GK has provided the printing cost for the publication of Marma and Bawm books. GK runs also Trainings of Trainers for their adoption in the schools. It will gradually reach other ethnic minority groups. The Gonopatshala programme thus participates in raising the awareness of the value of education and of community participation, improving access to education, justice and strengthening local level democracy through an understanding of human rights in 187 inaccessible indigenous communities and areas vulnerable to natural disasters.

■ Reaching Out of School Children (Rosc) Project - The Rosc Project is managed by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education of Bangladesh. GK is one of the 14 Education Resource Providers. We train and supervise 1,053 teachers of ROSC Ananda schools, located in outreached locations of 6 working districts and 8 Upazillas. Thus GK has established a privileged partnership with the communities and with the government primary education system. The Gonopatshala has also initiated a teachers’ support programme in government primary schools at Thanchi and Naikhongchuri Upazilla of CHT to ensure an increase in the enrolment, quality education of the students and the participation of local communities. GK has also proposed to address to include pre-primary education and to link primary education graduates with secondary education system.

■ School health care - GK provides health care services for 1 million poor people all over the country. Our pupils receive personal health and hygiene education (de-worming, diarrhoea and malaria prevention and treatment, etc.).

■ Life-skills training - Where we can - that is mostly in the Plain Land schools at this stage - we also provide basic computer literacy skills, as well as trainings in homestead horticulture and poultry rearing.

■ Students’ dormitories - In response to local demands and in order to increase the enrolment level of children living in remote places, GK runs 9 dormitories accommodating 249 school children in the CHT.

■ Food security - All student dormitories and CHT Gonopatshala communities benefit from a modest food security scheme. The parents maintain these reserves by reimbursing an equivalent amount of paddy after the harvest. We also provide seasonal crop loans in the Char area.

■ Keeping the communities involved in the schools: The School Management Committees established in the Gonopatshalas are composed of 11 members (5 men and 6 women). They meet regularly to discuss… Besides, special meetings of the mothers take place every month, and a meeting of the Guardians of the children is held on a weekly basis. A Students’ Committee is also set up in every school.
### Regional Distribution Of The Gonopatshalas

**Areas:** Plain Land (4), Coastal Area, Char area, and Chittagong Hills Tracks

**Schools:** 187  
**Students:** 17,173  
**Teachers:** 450

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**AREA: Plain Land 4**  
Schools: 1  
Students: 195  
Teachers: 5  
Teacher/trainer: Ms Farjana

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**AREA: Plain Land 3**  
Schools: 9  
Students: 247  
Teachers: 55  
Programme Officer: M. Md Obaidur & Ms Farjana

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**AREA: Coastal area & Chittagong Hills Tracks**  
Schools: 104  
Students: 4,576  
Teachers: 154  
Deputy Director: M. Murtoza Ali Babu

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**AREA: Plain Land 2**  
Schools: 4  
Students: 962  
Teachers: 24  
Programme Officer: Ms Monoara

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**AREA: Plain Land 1**  
Dhaka (Savar)  
Schools: 1  
Students: 443  
Teachers: 10  
Teacher/trainer: Ms Farjana

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**AREA: Char area**  
Schools: 68  
Students: 8,536  
Teachers: 202  
Deputy Director: M. Kaosar Ali Reza

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Source: Third Quarter Report (18 January 2007)
Contact us

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And have a look at our DVDs

Realised by our partners
One World Action (UK) & the French Support Committee to GK (France)

Kyong: A school in the Hill Tracks
The life of one of the Gonopatshalas in the Chittagong Hills Tracks: the commitment of the community, the involvement of the teachers...
52 min. Narration by Michael Palin

Cher - Tarash, Friends in Bangladesh.
Story of an ongoing cultural exchange programme between a school of the centre of France and a Gonopatshala for the Mahato community.
56 min. In French and Bangla
(With fully detailed script available in English)