

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Catching a big catfish in Brazil.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Fishy Mornings

A string of failures followed by success – that is the story of my childhood fishing.

When I was eight, I developed an obsession for fishing. I tried the spear called *kucha*, various fishing nets, the fishing pole and my bare hands. They all provided entertainment but only one caught me fish.

As a child I seemed to be surrounded by fish. They were everywhere, taunting me, daring me to catch them.

The pond in front of our house had schools of fish that tickled my feet when I swam there, but when I dived to catch them they slithered away.

During the rains our lawn flooded and I saw tantalizing glimpses of fish playing in the grass under the clear rainwater. But there were also snakes and leeches so I had to be slow and cautious. I tried to trap the fish with a triangular frame net, but the clumpy grass underneath left enough openings for them to escape.

There was a large open canal running along the front of our house. The rains brought a flow of clear water and the fish came along. I could see them swimming in the shallow water. So I got a *kucha* – a spear-like contraption – which was the preferred fishing tool for shallow water. But no matter how hard I tried I missed the fish. Today I realize that refraction of light had something to do with it.

Then one day my luck changed.

My aunt Amu Fufu stopped by for a visit and saw my interest in fishing. “Why don’t you come and fish in our pond,” she suggested, “and don’t forget to bring a fishing pole.” Her family lived across town on Jail Road. The pond stood just outside their main compound. I had never given it

a second look, but that was about to change.

And so a bamboo fishing pole was procured from the market and I got to work early the next morning. A household staff helped me prepare the bait – small balls made of dough – and showed me the basics. We hailed a rickshaw, and with two long poles sticking out the back window, we were on our way to Jail Road.

The pond, surrounded by a raised grassy bank, was separated from Amu Fufu’s house which was fenced off by a hedge punctuated by *koroi* and banana trees. We found a spot to sit and I placed the bait on the hook. The buoyant stem of a water hyacinth plant served as the sinker. I cast my line and waited quietly. Soon the sinker started bobbing. There were nibbles and gentle tugs; then it went quiet. Pulling it out I saw the bait was gone. I had to replenish the bait several times before I felt a strong pull on the pole. The fish thrashed and my pulse raced. I finally pulled it out; it was a *tilapia* of decent size.

From that day, my fishing life changed. I kept returning to the house on Jail Road, landing *tilapias*, *putis* and the occasional *koi*. For bait, I started using earthworms. They were not as easily stolen by the fish and were ubiquitous under the topsoil.

After a month or two, I grew tired of catching those *tilapias*. My interest in fishing waned just as mysteriously as it had appeared. But even today, when I see someone land a fish – like the giant catfish I saw in Brazil – I feel a tug in my heart for those fishy mornings on Jail Road.

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ENGLISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS

Parents demand 30-60pc tuition waiver

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A section of parents of English-medium students yesterday demanded 30-60 percent tuition waiver based on school categories, as schools are only conducting online classes.

Under the banner of Bangladesh English Medium School Parents Forum, they alleged that many schools discontinued online access to classes for those who had not paid full tuition fees. The parents made the remarks in a press conference at the capital’s Jatiya Press Club.

They said many parents of English-medium students -- who are working at private institutions or operating businesses -- are facing a financial crisis amid the pandemic.

AKM Ashraful Haque, the forum’s president, said they divided schools in three categories based on if they have their own campus, and smaller schools with lower revenue.

He demanded 60 percent waiver from schools that have their own campuses, and 40 percent for those that are on rented campuses. He also sought 30 percent waiver from the third category of schools with fewer than 500 students.

“We want every school to meet the parents’ forum of respective institutions and come to a solution. It is inhuman to cancel studentship due to delay in tuition payment or non-payment during the crisis,” he said.

They also put forward a six-point demand, which includes ensuring quality education at all schools by formulating a policy and formation of school management committee with representation from guardians.

AZM Salahuddin, the forum’s general secretary, presented the demands and urged the prime minister’s intervention in this regard.

Due to the pandemic, both Bangla and English medium schools are struggling. All educational institutions remain closed since March 17.

RIDESHARING SERVICES

Bikes allowed to ply again

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has finally allowed motorcycles to resume operations under ride sharing services, on condition of following a set of health safety guidelines.

However, only 1,156 motorcycles will be able to carry passengers under the popular services for now, as the authorities decided to give permission only to the vehicles enlisted to provide the services.

Besides, the service can be provided under the area of Dhaka Transport Coordinator Authority’s jurisdiction only -- within Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Narsingdi and Manikganj.

People of Chattogram and some other cities, where the services were available at pre-Covid time, would not get the service.

BRTA issued a circular in this regard on Thursday and has already served it to all the service providing companies, a BRTA official told The Daily Star yesterday.

The development came two days after the government allowed buses and minibuses to carry passengers with full capacity from September 1 and reinstated previous fare.

Ride sharing service, like other public transport remained suspended from March 26, when the government announced shutdown. Although, buses and other modes of public transport hit the roads on June 1, but ride sharing services remained suspended until June 21.

Following the request of the companies, including Uber and Pathao, BRTA allowed

only enlisted four-wheelers to resume operation from June 21.

But, bikes were not allowed to resume the service, considering the risks of spreading the coronavirus.

“As the government decided to normalise public transport services and already allowed buses and minibuses to operate with full capacity, we have decided to allow motorcycles [in ride sharing service] too,” another official said wishing not be named.

According to a BRTA document, some 1.23 lakh cars and motorcycles operate with different ride-hailing companies. Of them, 1.04 lakh are motorcycles.

However, some 9,000 cars and 1,156 motorbikes received the enlistment certificates, a mandatory condition to operate vehicles under the service, so far, BRTA sources said.

“When BRTA made enlistment certificate must for providing the service, some 1,300 vehicles had the certificate. The number of vehicles with the certificate has increased sharply after the decision and we hope the number of enlisted motorcycle will rise soon,” the officials added.

BRTA also issued guidelines to be followed to provide the service.

Both the biker and rider have to have to mask, hand gloves, face-shield and hand sanitiser. Both biker and passenger have to wear standard helmet and disinfect it after each trip. The biker would disinfect their bike before and disinfect passenger’s bag if any, as well.



While it may strike as an odd placement of household items at a first glance, a closer look clarifies that this is in fact a sales point for second-hand furniture under Khilgaon flyover in the capital's Shahjahanpur. A group of rickshaw-van drivers started this business eight months ago, looking for a bargain when people take their services to move houses and are sometimes looking to get rid of old items. They then paint and fix them up, and sell them from this roadside display. A seller said they take turns to guard their vans parked under this flyover at night, and also make sure nobody runs away with their furniture. When asked if they are aware that they are encroaching public space, they said no one has asked them to move from the spot, and they would do so if asked.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

VIRTUAL FUNCTIONS

CJ forms two SC benches

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain has constituted two benches of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court for virtually hearing and disposing of cases.

The benches will start functioning from tomorrow.

One of the benches will be headed by the chief justice, and another by Justice Muhammad Imman Ali, according to a notification issued on Thursday.

Other judges of the CJ-led bench are Justice Hasan Foez Siddique, Justice Md Nuruzzaman and Justice Obaidul Hassan.

Other judges of Justice Imman Ali-led bench are Justice Mirza Hussain Haider, Justice Abu Bakar Siddiquee and Justice Tariq ul Hakim.

Children anxious of post-Covid-19 life

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

About 40 percent children in Bangladesh believe that life after the coronavirus lockdown will be more complicated, found a study conducted by Educo, an international NGO focusing on education and children’s protection.

More than 500 Bangladeshi children participated in the global survey, held online between May 7 to 23.

A total of 4,500 children and youth aged between five to twenty-four participated in the study conducted across 10 countries in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, schools in Bangladesh have remained closed since late March. In the meantime, a number of schools are running classes online.

Against such a backdrop, the Educo study sheds some light on the state of the student’s minds. Although children are not normally seen as the face of this pandemic, experiences suggest that such economic hardships have tremendous effect on their emotional and mental wellbeing, said Abdul Hamid, country director of Educo Bangladesh.

“Children are very aware of what is going on around them and the impact of the situation on the family,” he said in a statement released on Thursday.

With no end of the pandemic in sight, students and their parents are completely in the dark over when schools can reopen, the study found. It also study found that children in Bangladesh were mostly worried about their family’s finances.

‘Publishing books a social responsibility’

Webinar speakers dissect local book trade

DS BOOKS DESK

In addition to business and livelihoods, the coronavirus has also struck down cultural footfall around the city -- silencing some of our major book hubs including Nilkhet and New Market, and forcing some remarkable establishments such as Dhaka’s Kobita Café and Dipanpur to shut down and Bengal Boi to relocate.

In the wake of this inactivity, the only upside has been the triggering of critical discussions on the virtual space, as Facebook Live sessions attempt to parse through important facets of sociocultural and political life.

Life online, these days, simulates life in the city as we knew it, making these conversations easily accessible to all.

One such discussion unfolded on August 23 at Rokomari’s Career Café Live Facebook webinar with Mahrugh Mohiuddin of University Press Ltd (UPL) and Mahmudul Hasan of Adorsho Prokashoni. The event addressed some of the pressing difficulties of our local book trade, such the issues of breaking even, collecting revenues from booksellers, selecting writers and manuscripts, choosing print over digital books, and the underlying question of whether young aspirants should try to enter an industry that barely manages to stay afloat.

It is common practice for books to be published only in 300-500 copies in Bangladesh -- something that significantly hikes up per unit production costs for publishers -- while only a tiny fraction of them end up selling. Collecting the sales revenues from booksellers is often an additional hurdle. For a country of close to 170 million and counting, these figures for book sales indicates an almost negligible state of cultural and intellectual activity among the wider population.

For publishers, this means dire business circumstances. “Just the material and production costs account for 30-35 percent of our revenues,” Mahmudul Hasan of Adorsho Prokashoni shared during the webinar. “Sales and promotions take up 10 percent, wholesale commissions account for up to 40 percent, and writers are owed around 10 percent royalty. Given the roughly 5 percent that remains, it’s a

miracle that we are even surviving.”

“These costs are further spurred on by the local paper industries which often artificially inflate prices,” added Mahrugh Mohiuddin of UPL. “A general practice for publishers in other countries is to add 5-7 percent mark-up on their cost price, but we can’t even mark up to 3 percent.”

A major reason for the latter is readers’ opinions -- while other commodities like fast food or clothing have managed to build up a brand value which deters customers from expecting massive discounts on them, books are often thought to be unfairly expensive. The cost price of materials and binding, and the intangible yet crucial elements of editing, proofing, promotion and, most importantly, the author’s intellectual input comprising months or years of writing and training, all of this goes unaccounted for.

For publishers like UPL, which mainly produce books on research and the social sciences, the readership is even more niche.

“Publishers are just one component of the ecosystem of our knowledge economy,” Mahrugh explained. “How are the other components functioning? We have schools which produce young thinking minds, who then move on to universities and on into the job market or leadership positions. In most of these educational institutions, rote memorisation and a lack of critical thinking is nurtured. We are encouraged not to challenge teachers and leaders.”

This vacuum of critical thinking deters the production and prioritisation of works of research. As a result, for their larger projects, publishers like UPL have to rely on institutional support.

“Publishing isn’t just business, it’s a social responsibility. Our primary duty is towards our readers, to add value to [intellectual work] and help it reach an audience. But how will I reach my reader? Where is that bridge? Is creating it only the publishers’ duty? Our ecosystem also needs to offer its support.”

Daily Star Books is published in The Daily Star every Thursday. Follow them at <https://www.facebook.com/dailystarbooks/> or @thedailystarbooks on Instagram.

SHIFTING BOOK SALES ONLINE

Of challenges and opportunities

DS LIFESTYLE DESK

With the ever decreasing number of readers visiting brick and mortar bookstores in the city, most sellers are passing difficult times during the pandemic. For a select few, online sales have picked up, but even they are struggling to meet high overhead costs.

Tareq Abdur Rab, head of operations at Baatighar, said that overall sales are still almost 25 percent less than average.

“Online demand has significantly increased, but as we have four physical stores in Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet, the cost of maintaining our physical presence is becoming harder. Our business in Sylhet suffered the most,” he said.

Popular bookshop Bengal Boi at Dhanmondi started online sales through Facebook in late June.

“We felt that given the current circumstance, meeting readers’ demands by taking online orders is the safest way to serve their needs. Initially, we had opened our outlet in June. We observed that not all our clients are equally aware of the stringent health protocols necessary to fight the coronavirus, and we closed our doors soon after,” said Akhter Hossain, brand and communication manager of Bengal Boi.

“The closure was only temporary,” he said.

Much to readers’ delight, Bengal Boi re-opened yesterday at Bengal Shilpalay, nearby its previous location.

Some sellers have claimed that online sales have in fact increased in the last few months. Indo-Bangla Book Shop, one of the most popular “online-only” stores, is one.

“Compared to December 2019, we are now receiving almost double orders. We import from India, so the supply chain was disrupted for a while. But we are still delivering whatever we have in stock,” said Sajjad Sakir of the shop.

He also said more and more people are buying books on how to run businesses. “Educational reference books are also on high demand,” Sakir added.

Rise in sale of self-help, business guides, and books to aid admission exams, is noted by retail giant Rokomari.com.

Mahmudur Hasan Sadi, head of communication and inbound marketing of Rokomari, said, “Demand for fiction has significantly decreased since the outbreak. People are mostly buying nonfiction.”

On the state of affairs in the book business, he said, “Rokomari.com was closed during March and April, and began operations on a limited scale in May following health protocols.”

Although a few months have passed, their business has not picked up as expected.

“Most of the publishing houses have not become operational yet. We are currently doing business based on our inventory. We are also taking back-orders,” he said.

Online trade has started for most booksellers, but the loss incurred during the lockdown still makes the future in book business uncertain. Those stores who have not been able to adapt to this “new normal” are contemplating closing their ventures altogether.

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An ambulance practically squeezes through illegally parked buses on both sides of this road at port city's Sagorika area. No amount of road expansion will solve the woes of drivers unless authorities act against this practice. This photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN