

BOOKS : The Challenge and Prospects before Bangladesh

The Challenge

Bangladesh is a small nation with a big population. Small because it is poor and yet big as it has the highest density of population in the world: just over 2100 per square mile. This duality rules over most aspects of the national life of Bangladesh. It has a very rich language — Bengali, the sixth largest spoken language in the world — which has a long literary past. Its great poet Tagore earned for the language and its speakers the Nobel Prize in the opening years of this century. The Bengalees were a very old literate society. At the advent of British colonialism 200 years back, school seats were available to 1 in 4 persons of the whole population. When a search for old manuscripts were made a hundred years back, hundreds of thousands were found — most of them of high historic-cultural and literary value. These were found in the unlikely places — from lowliest of peasant homesteads to the royal court of Nepal and Lamaistic Gomphas of Tibet. Bangladesh — or Bengal of yore — was steeped in high culture, both oral and literate. And yet, as of now, the nation has one of the poorest literacy figures in the world with possibly the lowest figure for book consumption for any nation above a 100 million population. It has progressively been sapped of its literate culture for 200 years. Colonialism has taken its toll in the form of growing illiteracy. Half-baked, haphazard and half-hearted and all the way ill-advised attempts at urbanisation and industrialisation took an all-in toll of the oral non-literate traditions — the mother to a nation's whole culture and transmitter of a nation's values and norms, practices and etiquette. Builder of the national ethos. Mauled on all sides as material and cultural entity. Bangladesh, in spite of its fabulous riches stands before the challenge of building a decent life of security and culture for its pensive population. This challenge can be expressed in a particular and quantified formulation: Building universal literacy and reaching a per capita book consumption (exclusive of school books) of 1.

The book trade in Bangladesh — from investment and production to marketing and consumption has not had a smooth development over the last four decades. The main reason for that was political instability contributing to a very constricted literacy base and consequent feeble social demand for books. Trade based on a commodity not much in demand can never prosper to the level of having devised its own inner values and discipline, norms and dynamism — and this is exactly the situation in Bangladesh now. The overall unsatisfactory book situation generates a matching unhappy trading situation in which no norms operate and the unscrupulous make some quick money at the cost of sustained development towards a stage when the highest socio-cultural values of the commodity in question, as it is essentially a socio-cultural product — will be the object of realisation for all involved in the

trade.

The development of book trade in Bangladesh — all struts and toays — has again been distinguished by an unfortunate duality. School books have acted as the very lifeline of publication and book trade ever since the hub of book

production and distribution, Calcutta, went to India with Bangladesh forming a part of Pakistan in 1947. Bookwise this nation was reduced to a desert. But schools and colleges had to carry on and their needs dictated the first flourish of book production and trade. And over the last 47 years school books have continued to form by far the biggest part of our book situation.

It took about a decade for people investing in school books as also for others to venture into the field of publishing creative literature and literary periodicals. But school books continued to dominate enterprise as well as market. Throughout the sixties some publishing houses started attracting respect both for the literary and production quality of their non-text book publications and their business acumen. A simple trick helped allure investment to book publishing and sustain it — the publishers earned permits for importing books for which they had a ready market of institutional purchasers. Book traders not publishing any book, competed with each other to buy these permits from entitled publishers, for the imported volumes could always be sold at a premium price to university and office libraries and an elite of book lovers.

The Liberation War following a genocide perpetrated on the Bengali people by the ruling military junta of Pakistan freed what was East Pakistan into sovereign Bangladesh. And this brought in train a chain of radical developments affecting the book trade. To grasp the true causes underlying the miserable book performance of Bangladesh, one must remember the political upheavals that overtook this region in the last half century. It took 150 years of continuous development centring on Calcutta to arrive at the wonderful book situation of the 1930s — and only a day, the day India and Bengal was partitioned, to dash it all. In the 23 years of Pakistani semi-colonialism, book industry and trading somehow started coming into its own. Then there was an all consuming war killing millions and destroying tens of billions worth of industry, property and public facilities. Bangladesh, the new state, had to start everything from scratch. Books were no exception.

The first government of Bangladesh was one of socialist predilection. They nationalised the whole of primary education, made it wholly free, exempted girl students of tuition fee up to the eighth grade and took over the production and distribution of almost all school text-books. While setting in motion a very welcome surge towards literacy and education, two of these measures boomeranged on the society subsequently. Both have relevance to our discussion here. Government took over the control of the tens of thousands of primaries in the nook and cranny of the country and all of their teachers became secured government employees. This took the primaries out of their social milieu — social supervision and monitoring of the schools and their teachers' performance came to an end. But this could not be replaced by governmental care for government simply had not the means for that. The primaries started to deteriorate and the resulting fall in book use at this level could not be revamped by isolated attempts of free offerings of books. But by far the more damaging result came from the other ac-

tion. Production and distribution of all school books — which account for at least 80 per cent of the nation's total book business outlay was taken out of the hands of the book investors and traders. Books almost ceased to be a commodity and the book market was as good as gone.

With time book business stalled but in a strange haphazard manner. With only ad hoc arrangements, hitting snags every now and then, and with no general pattern emerging, the book business is probing its way uncertainly. While holders of titles having market demand have their way in dealing with the booksellers, the sellers balance it off by going easy on

by Nazira Ahmed

commitments to less fortunate publishers. Cash whoever can impose it, credit whose commodity goes slow. Such a free for all situation tends to make the market, small and unorganised as it is without the school books, to go for sub-standard fictional narratives tinged with generous helpings of soft-porn titillators or, oppositely, whitewashed by heights of domestic womanly virtues and chivalrous male bravado.

The newly earned independence apparently occasioned a rush of new readers who had come through indifferent schooling and were barely literate. Hundreds of thousands of these were very ably quizzed or caged by a matching rush of yellow-sheet periodicals in full-colour covers of inviting young ladies. The magazine business is completely outside of the book trade but is enticing away prospective book readers or at any rate undermining the taste of book buyers — by tens of thousands.

Institutional purchases are on a gradual steady increase with government coming to the help of public libraries with modest doles and education authorities keeping their pressure on the schools and colleges to enrich their libraries. This is, in the complete absence of quality control at the buyers' end, spawning conditions in which publishers of low quality staff unable to stand open market competition, can manipulate a good sell. Institutional purchase is on the whole filling the institution shelves with useless unattractive and often enough harmful reads. The fact that purchases made out of government doles must be made from a semi-government set-up is not contributing to the expansion of the book trade either.

As things are, the market is as slim as little better than non-existent — may be around 5,000 titles a year releasing 20,000 to 300,000 copies to the market in a national of 120 millions — involving possibly no more than 20 to 40 million taka — at the very best five hundred thousand to one million US dollars. This is, of course, exclusive of the school book account. For a nation receiving around 2 billion dollars in annual consortium aid and matching it with mobilisation of home resources — this volume of trade in the book sector does not qualify it even to be called a cottage industry.

We have seen how during the bad days school books acted as the lifeline of the publication and bookselling business. Subsequently, the self-same school books came to sap the life out of the same trade. Now perhaps time has come for the school book sector to once again bale out the whole

business and in the process make its own business efficient and paying and useful for the pupil. Freeing school books from the clutches of state monopoly and sending it to the competitive market would infuse in the business a hefty chunk of cash of some millions of US dollars. State monopoly of school books had driven the publishers out of the market and had filled the void by printing contractors parading as publishers. Privatisation of school book production and distribution would result in a veritable resurgence in the nation's book situation.

In the very constricted atmosphere of the book business during the two decades of independence the investors who published and even thrived, although a handful in number, did a heroic job of the thing. They are the leaders who should reap rewards in a resurgent book situation. And that resurgence is a matter of certitude rather than of speculation.

The Prospects

The problem of poor book consumption in Bangladesh does not lie in its poor literacy rate. At the rate of 30 per cent there are 40 million literate people here in an area of 56 thousand square miles — 750 to a square mile that is. How many nations can boast of either the absolute number of the lettered or of such density of their distribution? If this section only consumed book at 1 per capita, Bangladesh would have become one of the largest

book economies in the world. Some may say lack of motivation is at the root of one in every 40 literate person buying a book in a year. But motivating one million people to buy more than one book a year is a task easy enough for well-thought up campaigns. The main stumbling block is there is hardly any use for literacy in the system that is now moving Bangladesh, if at all there is one. Most literate persons, even some among the very highly so like eminent professionals and even teachers, do not consume books because they are not required to do so in the course of their calling. Outside a very small elite of intellectuals, very few social, political and economic leaders read — not to speak of the common run of professional, business and service people. Even in the most sophisticated circles of Dhaka mention of books amount to *faux pas* and the bright young people of the middle class have a way of denigrating the reading types among them as 'antel' whatever may that mean and wherever might that have come from. Nobody loves or even likes the 'bookish' boy or girl. Strangely, the least book using section of the literate population seems to be the students who do not buy even their text books. Many of them have hardly come across a text-book and set eyes on it in the course of gaining a masters in any discipline. Motivation, however clever and persuasive — and pervasive — is not going to heal any of these people of their disease.

Fortunately for us all, while the base of literacy is being

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Of Wackos and Politically Correct Male Feminist

by Maqsoodul Haque

WEST

I do not blame the BBC, CNN, ABC, Deutsche Welle for devoting such time and energy into the region. After all they have high profile jobs at stake, and news to gather and report in a competitive media market

and more than eager

wackos everywhere, volunteering news that keep their sensibilities in a perfect quagmire.

As Poet Shamsur Rahman so aptly remarked, Whether we acknowledge it or not Taslima is today an international cause celebre. Bangladesh has been most faithfully reported as and when a typhoon or a famine deluged the country, but rarely has it been exposed to such an intellectual drama. Taslima's course was our 'Wacko'.

Regrettably, political expediency and not basic 'civility' was the criteria, and elected government chose in handling the Taslima Nasreen crisis. A classic case of applying butter on both sides of a bread and eating it, which resulted in a double dose of obesity leading to complacency. The Government sat back with singular lack of apathy, as it was 'politically correct' to reap more mileage out of the controversy perhaps as a result of its debacle in the recently concluded city corporation elections and the opposition demand for a caretaker government.

Getting back to Taslima, with the exception of a few, I have thoroughly enjoyed, read and re-read many of her books. To my wife's great joy, I believe — well I am almost proud to state — that I am a genuine male feminist! Her writing has changed the very concept of my thinking, and has given me enough food for thought to keep me awake for nights on end, reading, debating, arguing and shouting myself hoarse over the last three years with friends and foes alike. It was only when I was hard driving my newly acquired feminist beliefs that I realised how obnoxious males in our society are, and how humiliated I felt at being one of them!

The fine line was however drawn on Taslima's reported 'wacko' statement in the Calcutta daily *The Statesman*. I was on the receiving end this time, and night after night salvoes were fired at me. I am no theologian and religion being a very private matter, all I could do was follow what the Bible preaches: 'For fools to triumph, all it needs for wise men is to remain silent'. My wife pleaded that I do not utter a word for the duration of this crisis. My sister, a year elder and lot more sensible than I, called me the morning Taslima's warrant was issued 'Keep your trap shut — not even one of your feminist statements' she warned curtly.

Anyway as the saying goes — all good things must come to an end, and perhaps it would have, had I not read and re-read all the paper reports on her 'surrender' to the court. The fact that in the subcontinent, for almost half a century, millions have died over religion still excites and keeps the West in good humour, all in anticipation of another 'Wacko in Waco, Texas' drama — all in for a fast buck! Most believe the region's hopelessness at being provoked into senseless retaliation — as being a genetic peculiarity of people of our region — and I suspect thus serves as an object of genuine curiosity for the entertainment and news starved

made to transit through Cyprus. Somewhere on the journey she will be beaten, humiliated, often raped or tortured into submission.

A freed Colombian woman told the French newspaper *Nouvel Observateur* that women escaping and caught by police in Cyprus are usually simply handed back to their handlers.

Visas are obtained by traders masquerading as impressarios or show-biz agents. Commented one human rights investigator: 'Young women from Bangkok, Santo Domingo, Lagos or Sao Paulo are forced into Western Europe on enter-tainers visas.'

Immigration requirements and other legislation make

Elles sont si gentilles, monsieur: Les strafquantes de femmes en Europe, published by Editions La Longue Vue, Brussels.

France and Britain inhospitable destinations, though one of Europe's most prolific sex-industry impressarios operates fairly openly in Paris.

In Germany, a trial is underway of an allegedly billion-dollar prostitution organiser, though observers are pessimistic about the possibilities of securing a conviction.

In the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate, police are investigating 20 civil servants, including police and justice officials, suspected of being cosy with flesh traders.

Germany has other active traders. The Federal Crime Office estimates 60,000 women from former communist bloc countries are working as prostitutes in Germany, many lured or even kidnapped

Bernard Lemmette, a Paris-based *Nid* official, believes there is extensive complicity between 'white slavers' and public officials in Europe in the countries of origin of the imported women.

An indication of that complicity is the traders unshaken self-assurance. De Stoop's book depicts them as 'moral monsters.'

'Undeterred, some of them are proud of what the book reveals, of their role in it and are even using the book as publicity for their activities.'

'It's really terrifying,' admits De Stoop. 'More readers for me means more clients for them.'

GEMINI NEWS

Tatli Sarker works for Radio France International in Paris. women, children and the elderly. Indeed the glorious law of our land provides for women who are accused of even murder to be granted bail. Taslima would have made me and other feminist proud had she rejected the bail granted to her as a 'privilege' offered only to women, and instead opted to go to jail. The feminist in me sobbed uncontrollably.

As I read on I learnt, that had Taslima not surrendered on or before the 4th of August 1994, her property, and all things worldly, movable or immovable, that she had acquired over her years of giving well intentioned hell to male chauvinist, the Government, the Opposition, the fanatics extremists and lunatics — would stand to be confiscated. By surrendering she showed shrewd business judgement, and in today's world of free enterprise, I congratulate her.

And then, My heroine, flew off to Sweden! Between the lines, it read like a perfect 'coup de grace'. It once again smelt of a male chauvinist conspiracy and let us all wait in anticipated breath for the next provocation that surely will engulf, as my heroine jiggles once again between her doubtful talents and a flair for intellectual infidelity, through her professed plagiarisation of other Western feminist works: which only TIME will reveal, as more and more of her worked gets translated into English. Her intellectual insincerity can only be open for inquiry if she lives in Europe, if at all. Her intellectuality in the English language, has already being revealed thanks to the shameless translation of 'Shame'.

Two days after Taslima took off I read in distress, as carried in no more than fifty words in one column was crammed, the sad plight of Dr. Ahmed Sharif. He had also lived with a 'death threat' hanging over his head, due to his 'blasphemous' utterances, by extremists since 1992. He 'surrendered' to the court very quietly. There was no TV or press camera, there was no ripples of support from the West. The female species had her moment in history — while the male returned home sensibly to a dejected defeat, or was it victory? Obviously Dr. Sharif did not have good looks or the right sex on his side.

Where are we going from here? Hard to say. Only this should suffice that sooner or later all heroes (or heroines) end up as big bores.

Buckingham Palace Opens for Second Season

by Delia Ancombe

BUCKINGHAM Palace, the London Home of Queen Elizabeth II, is open to the general public for the second year running from 7 August to 2 October 1994. Last year some 379,000 people visited the state apartments.

With about 1000 visitors passing through per hour, and the net income raised was 2.2 million pounds sterling.

It was decided to throw open the doors of the Palace to help meet the cost of restoring

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The World of the Starving Lotus-eaters

C OMPEL a horse to drink water? Rights: cruelty on the consumers by the shopkeepers. Wrong: the politicians are not amenable by the voters, and are alleged to be perpetuating cruelty on the naive citizens. Needed: a Society for the Protection of the Voters. Problem: how to make refined gentlefolk of the politicians, instead of fire-eaters, and make them accept the first priority be the development of the country, and not that of the aggrieved party, political or otherwise.

This vice-like political grip is more noticeable in the developing countries due to the wide social disparities, and lack of peer-level confrontations. Needed: voters' resistance against *jhanu* (veteran) politicians who are myopic on the *stratul-mustaqeem* (the right path), socially and morally. Double charge: they spoil the younger generation with perverted philosophies of life. Proof: the country could not take off even after 40 years. Remedy: 'greater movement' against the present

style of politics (use the weapon of the opponent).

Question: how to organize it — and keep the politicians out of it, (the grimy part!). They keep on intruding everywhere — a force of habit or a habit of encouraging the use of force; or unleashing undisciplined forces to create law and order situations, popularly known as *hartaal* (the word is no longer in *italics*), and should get into

The above gripe-list has to

be qualified. The chameleon changes colour in and out of power, as the behaviour pattern is different in these two states. During an autocratic regime, three main forces are at work: the opposition is not allowed enough elbow room to organize effectively to be able to disrupt the daily routine of administration and 'development'; and the quick action by the enforcement agencies acts as a deterrent. The third

the English dictionary), agitation, *andolan*, and *dabis* (demands) spurious, dubious and unlimited. The bottomless basket of hope? cannot hold anything. Besides, things are rather slippery on this alluvial soil of ours, especially during the monsoon.

Who are the greater lotus-eaters, the voters or the politicians? People are said to be the government they deserve. On that basis, the citizens get

device is the use of corruption and nepotism to silence the hungry lotus-eaters.

When an elected party takes over the administration, it is kept busy in the day-to-day running of the country. As for the opposition in the third world countries, another proverb comes to mind: the empty brain is the devil's workshop. Their job is to keep the other busy, by hook or by crook. One tool not in short supply in the gift of the gab. The art of gullibility becomes a standard practice; and exploitation against the so-called Human Rights Declaration, a product of the west, where the sun sets, but never rises. After the politicians. The reason is obvious: the HR is operated by the politicians, for the politicians, and against those who oppose the ruling ideologies (and free trade, may be).

Who will bell the cat (or the Royal Bengal Tiger)? Belling the cat might not be objected to by the environmentalists, but, so far, there is no precedent about belling an RBT. The fact that in the subcontinent, for almost half a century, millions have died over religion still excites and keeps the West in good humour, all in anticipation of another 'Wacko in Waco, Texas' drama — all in for a fast buck! Most believe the region's hopelessness at being provoked into senseless retaliation — as being a genetic peculiarity of people of our region — and I suspect thus serves as an object of genuine curiosity for the entertainment and news starved

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