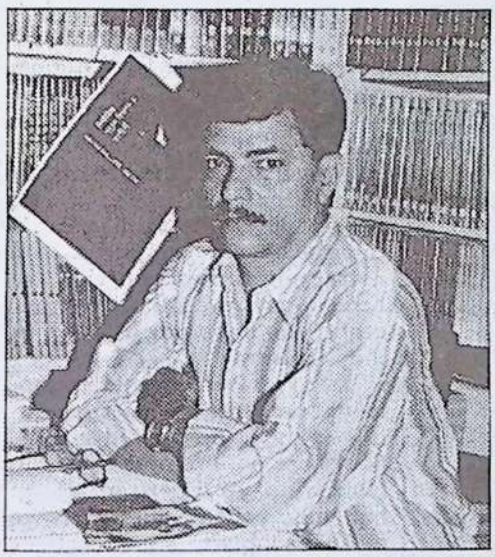
"Nobody gives a book as gift in marriages or festivals"



Milan Kanti Nath
Convenor of Ekushey Boi Mela Committee and Bangladesh Book Sellers and Publishers' Association

Ziaul Karim: We now have a book policy. How do you look at it?

Milan Kanti Nath: No step has yet been taken to implement the book policy. The publishing industry is now virtually functioning without any policy. The industry basically serves the Bangladesh Book Sellers and Publishers' Associations purpose. An industry should not run like this. Just look at the contrast. Our neighbouring country has a ministry for publication. The government has never given a serious thought about this industry or about initiating a movement to create readership.

ZK: What needs — you are yourself a publisher — to be done to increase readership?

MKN: We are going through a time of decadence. I remember when I was a kid we had a good school library. Now kids complain that they don't have libraries in their schools. No one reads for pleasure now.

ZK: There is a persistent complaint from the reader that books are overpriced. For an average 150-page book you are pricing 100 taka or more. Don't you think by pricing as high as an amount of Taka 100 or more you are loosing a sizeable readership?

MKN : I agree with you but we are quite helpless. We can't print more than 1200 to 1500 copies for any edition of books except Humayan or Milan. Moreover it takes over a year or so to sell out the edition. I am not running a charitable organization. I have to make a profit to eke out a livelihood.

ZK: Book promotion and marketing is poor in Bangladesh. Apart from notebooks advertisement of creative books are seldom seen in the print or electronic media. Why? Don't you feel you need to market books?

MKN: This is mainly because there is no special discount for book ads. This industry is not as profitable as other commercial enterprises. So, how come you expect us to publicize our titles in print or in the election media. Note book people have the money and clout to use the media and they are using it. Even postal charges are high. Had there been a discount in mailing charges we would have reached a greater number of people.

ZK: How do you think that the government can support this industry?

MKN: I am not in favour of subsidy. If the government waives the duty on paper that is enough. The price of books will at least go down by 20 per cent. Till today the publishing industry has not been recognised as an industry. I think this recognition is vital for the growth of this industry. And most importantly bank loans should be made available for publishing purpose.

ZK: What steps can be taken to increase readership?

MKN: Surprisingly book has lost its status as a gift in our country. Nobody gives a book as gift in marriages or festivals. Even in prize giving ceremonies of schools and colleges cutlery are preferred to books.

What we need is a movement to change this and make reading a habit and buying books a culture. ■

"The whole industry is mela based"



Syed Iqbal
Twice winner of best jacket design award from National Book Centre

Ziaul Karim: The 80's and particularly 90's have witnessed a qualitative change in book production at least design and printing-wise. But is there any improvement in payment or are you getting better incentives now from, say, back in the 70's?

Syed Iqbal : Surprisingly no. What we are offered now for a jacket cover, a meagre 1000 Taka, is what we used to get back in the 70s. In the past 10 years everything has changed except the payment structure for jacket covers. Today when any decent production involves not less than an amount of four lakh taka, an artist gets only 0.25 per cent of it. Miserable. Isn't it? To make things worse, even this paltry sum is given very reluctantly.

ZK: But why is this so?

SI: This is mainly because the industry is not at all organized. The whole industry is *mela* based. An industry can't sustain only on an annual event. Look at Calcutta. The city has a book fair 10 times bigger than us but its publishing industry does not depend on the fair only. There can be *mela* for an industry, not an industry for a *mela*.

ZK: Only a handful of artists are involved in jacket cover designing. Why?

SI: Everything in the world is driven by money. No doubt the publishing industry is growing but not in a systematic way. Amateurism is there, there is a dearth of skilled hands also. The artist's contribution in book promotion has not really been recognised. Jacket designers are not really respected which is manifested in the amount we get and the number of artists involved in cover designing. ■