

Book fair crowd grows, spirit goes missing

MIZANUR KHAN

Publishers are coming up with new books, the bubble of visitors is expanding, but the Ekushey Book Fair is running low on spirit by the year, as brazen commercial attitude clawed its way into the whole affair.

"It was small, clean and less-crowded, but there was warmth. Now the size is bigger, the number of real and so-called publishers has increased, but we have lost the real spirit of the fair," said Moinul Ahsan Saber, writer and owner of Dibyo Prokash, who has been visiting the fair since 1976 when he was a university student.

The Bangla Academy introduced the fair in 1972 with its own publications in memory of the 1952 Language Movement martyrs. Three years on, some private institutions led by Muktohdara, a publishing house, joined in before the fair became full-fledged in 1978, historian Muntasir Mamun recalls.

Only 12 to 15 publishing houses took part in the early editions of the fair that has seen 315 this year in a sign of business expansion, Muntasir, also professor of history at Dhaka University, told Star City.

In early days the fairground had enough open space for writers and visitors to mill around, talk and have tea. "It was beautiful structurally and mentally," Artist Qamrul Hasan made sketches sitting on the mud floor and sold them to painting lovers. It is now only a memory.

"Armed cadres now control tea-shops and you cannot sit there," Muntasir says.

"It has all been done politically and the Bangla Academy let it



Places meant for authors in the book fair are occupied by police and others.



happen. Think of Ekushey seminar themes, you will see the change. Political cadres took over the front of the fairground with giant stalls," he says.

Pijush Bandopadhyaya, an actor and cultural activist, involved with the fair from its first edition, says: "Look at it from outside, the spirit is seemingly there. About inner spirit, I must say it is gone."

Readers blame authorities for turning the fair into a book market like Bangla Bazaar or New Market. "Books are no longer books, they are just another commodity," said one of them.

"We spent time, from 11:00 in the morning till midnight leafing through books," Shihab Sarkar, journalist and poet, fondly remembers his early days.

Now only a few writers show up, as there is no seating ar-

range for tripartite dialogue between writers, publishers and readers.

"Those who still visit the fair only autograph, launch other writers' books and talk to journalists," Saber says.

Those were the days for all - university teachers, students, journalists, intellectuals and cultural activists. Politicians too gathered there to talk about the political situation and plan their future activities.

"Crowds rush in every day, but a few of them are serious readers. It's just another craze. People return home, kitchenware in hand -- not books," Shihab says.

"The spirit of Ekushey is in two things -- voices of dissent and love. I don't see them here ... I can't feel it. Dust is prominent, not fresh and free air," Pijush says.

"Ekushey is the pure concentrated essence of our finest sentiments, our valour, our dedication and sacrifice culminating in our freedom and all our striving, ever since, to win for ourselves the position of a strong, self-reliant nation," he added.

Many united in the view that the eastern philosophy faded away and the aggression of the western values spread under the influence of globalisation, media and sky culture.

Television channels and newspapers are blamed for highlighting only popular writers, helping them far outdistance most others in media attention.

Zakaria Swapan, an IT professional, who returned home after a seven-year stay in the US, says of the change: "I miss the emotion and spirit of the Language

Movement."

Some believe the fair shed its intrinsic value because of extreme control and the spontaneity lost out to the professional and formal attitude of authorities.

"We have to make it free from red tape to keep the emotion alive. Why will the prime minister have to inaugurate the fair? Where are national intellectuals?" Pijush asked.

A few said the changes are natural. Nirmalendu Goun, a leading poet, said: "The fair has to be bigger for survival. There is no way to keep it small. Past is always better and sweeter, as we are an emotion-driven nation."

Most intellectuals call for saving the emotion that has cultural and political significance to advance the nation on a secular path and is the source of the

struggle that led the country to independence in 1971.

But Goun says: "Emotion is not ever-lasting. It wanes with time and we all have to accept it. I am happy as there are more books, more publications, more readers and more investment."

"We need political stability and if there is a change in political culture at the top, the quality will also improve," a visitor said.

Ahmed Mahmudul Huq, owner of 48-year-old Maula Brothers, said: "The spirit is there. A countrywide strike or political chaos does not affect the fair where all are united."

He believes the spirit is on the rise and backs up his claim: "Ten years ago, I published only eight new books for the fair but now I bring out at least 50."

Cheated, devastated

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

Eager to have a blissful wedded life in the so-called promised land, shattered dreams, a broken heart and broken ties are all she is left with as her husband leaves her forever.

Maksuda Bari Rosy, 30, now reproaches herself for being too adventurous, but naïve, yet marrying a foreign citizen without thinking of the consequences.

She accused Ahmedullah Kamal and his family of negotiating and luring her into a marriage contract with an American. Kamal is the son of a retired air commodore of Bangladesh Air Force Kamaluddin Ahmed.

Rosy related her tale of woe to Star City. Kamal who lives in the United States was known to Tracy Dewani Easley, a black American who converted himself and took the name Abdullah Mustafa.

Mustafa had asked Kamal, the imam of the mosque at Nashville in Tennessee to look for a Muslim bride for him.

"Kamal approached me with this marriage proposal as I was closely acquainted with his family," Rosy said. "My mother advised me against falling into this trap but I didn't listen to her as I believed Kamal's family would never harm me."

Rosy also savoured the idea of going abroad and on July 23, 2002 she married Mustafa by telephone. She said Kamal's family asked her to arrange Tk 200,000 to go to the States and she gave it to them.

Mustafa came to Dhaka on January 2, 2003 and Rosy was this time married to him according to Muslim Shariah. They lived together for 16 days and Mustafa went back to America on January 18.

After Mustafa's departure

Kamal's family went to the US and came back in September. They said Mustafa was unable to take her to America because of financial constraints and wanted more money from her.

"I then began to doubt their intentions and declined to pay them any more. I asked them to return the previous amount I gave them," Rosy continued her story. She claimed that Kamal's family was threatening to physically harm her. She had been told that her husband did not want to continue the relationship.

Rosy showed Star City a letter written by Mustafa, retrieved by the police from Kamal's house stating he was divorcing her on his own without any influence by Kamal or his family members. He cited the reasons for divorce as concealing her real age and that she, Rosy, had a defect in her left eye and left leg. However, Rosy believes the letter could be fabri-

cated.

She later filed a case against those who negotiated her marriage. Dilruba Aftab of Bar Council Human Rights Monitoring Cell is helping her to go ahead with the case.

On the other hand, the Kamal family filed two general diaries with Uttara police station against Rosy claiming she and her family were threatening them. They claimed that Kamaluddin Ahmed was merely a witness in Rosy's marriage with the American. They also claimed in the diaries that Rosy blamed Kamaluddin's family after her relationship with her husband deteriorated and he divorced her.

They mentioned that Rosy and her brothers Milton and Panna are continuously threatening to harm them.



The beginning of 16 rosy days.

city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.



"Those who put up roadblocks to development should be confined to their homes."

-- Khaleda Zia
Prime Minister

Tells BNP rally at Jatrabari in the city on February 14.
Source: Prothom Alo

"You build costly houses but demand cheap food -- that's not reasonable."

-- Saifur Rahman
Finance Minister

While exchanging opinion at an ERF meeting on February 18.
Source: Bhorer Kagoj

"Don't play further, otherwise khabar achhay (face consequences)."

-- Ruhul Kuddus Dulu
State Minister for Land

Warns main opposition Awami League at a protest rally in Natore, on February 19. Source: Prothom Alo.

"Nationalist forces are becoming a minority at Chittagong University."

-- Dr Siddique Ahmed
Member, CU Syndicate

Tells the Bangla Daily Prothom Alo on February 16.

"Business leaders can say in which areas which criminal resides."

-- Amir Khosru Mahmud
Chowdhury
Commerce Minister

Tells meeting of the council of chamber presidents on February 19. Source: Bhorer Kagoj



"To become a good soul, everybody in the society should become a poet."

-- Rabiul Hussain
Poet and architect

In his presidential address to the national poetry festival on February 18.
Source: Bhorer Kagoj

"Police, too have become panic-stricken by the deterioration of law and order across the country."

-- Syed Fazlul Karim
Charmonai Pir

Tells a public meeting at Bagerhat on February 16.
Source: Prothom Alo

ON AMAR EKUSHEY DAY

Besides the book fair at the Bangla Academy, two other events on the Amar Ekushey day attracted good crowds. A Bangla handwriting contest for children was arranged by the National Museum (centre) and a Baul (folk) song conference took place at Bakultala of the Charukala Institute.

