

## Ekushey Book Fair: Familiar grounds, revived enthusiasm

KARIM WAHEED

UNTIMELY showers have left the Bangla Academy premises with puddles of mud, but book lovers of all ages didn't seem to mind. Running into its second week 'Amar Ekushey Granthamela' seems to maintain a steady growth in fairgoers.

There are certain discrepancies -- books of a certain publication house being sold at stalls of other publishers, rampant availability of printed books and adult material found at a stall displaying largely children's publications -- but the arrangement this year seems rather different, in a positive way of course.

Queues from opposite directions started from *Shoparito Swadhinota* and *Doyal Chattar* but unlike the last couple of years, impatient fairgoers didn't have to wait for hours. Security procedures were brief. Inside the fair, things seemed somewhat changed as well. The general attitude of the fairgoers as well as publishers was upbeat.

Are things really that different this year? Says Shaheen, a student of Sociology, Dhaka University. "This year there is no obnoxious manipulation by political parties. So the Academy can ensure that the rules and regulations are carried out. Yes, there are certain irregularities but everything can't be fixed in a day or a week. I think this year's arrangement is quite commendable." Salman Ahmed, a Pakistani citizen who has never been to the Ekushey Book Fair before, said, "Going by the norm on the streets, I expected a lot of pushing and shoving, chaos but this is amazing."

This positive outlook might be inspiring potential buyers. Stalls of major publication houses like UPL, Anya Prokash and others seemed to attract crowds. Like previous years, novels and fiction by popular writers are most lucrative. There is however, a growing demand for translated versions of international bestsellers. Stalls of Bangladesh National Museum and Archaeological Depart-



ment do attract occasional enthusiasts but the familiar complaint is "the display is rather shabby and new publications are not offered." Publications on Bangladeshi theatre are available at the stall of Theatre.

Certain celebrities have turned writers through books available at the fair: *Nishiprantey* by veteran actor and director Abul Hayat, at Annesha Prokashon for example.

The fair however, just doesn't limit its focus to books. Groups of friends immersed in their *adda*, people bumping into their relatives and young lovers spending some quality time, getting faces painted -- all are familiar features.

On February 7, a discussion on 'Feminism in Bangladeshi Literature' was held at the Academy premises. Presided over by noted writer Zubaida Gulshan Ara, the discussion highlighted subjects



Clockwise (from top-right): A view of the crowd, a folk artiste performs at the Bangla Academy premises and a young one gets his face painted

like 'feminism and socialism', 'exploitation of women in different sects of society', 'radical feminism' and more. Rashida Akhter Khanam was the keynote speaker; Najma Begum, Maleka Begum, Shawkat Ara Hossain and Farzana Parveen were other discussants.

In the evening, a cultural programme was held on the premises.



PHOTO: ISHTIAQUE BIN QUASHEM

## 'Bostrobalikara': Zooming in on 'garment girls' of Bangladesh

Tanvir Mokammel talks to Ahsan Habib about *Bostrobalikara*, his latest documentary on female garment workers.

What made you do a film on garment workers?

I have observed the garment girls for over a decade. They are so conspicuous, akin to a silent army of dedicated workers walking on city pavements. I know their wage is very low and the factories they work in, are in most cases, no better than sweatshops. I once composed a poem about these girls titled as *Bostrobalikara* (*The Garment Girls*), that poem was the genesis of this documentary.

For whom and against who is the *Bostrobalikara* film made?

Not against anybody in particular. If the film is against anything, it is the low wage they receive and the dismal working and living conditions of these girls.

And if you ask me the film is for whom, well, I think the film is definitely for the garment workers. The film is a sort of humble homage to these hardworking people and to their courage and resilience against economic hardships and social odds.

To what extent has your film succeeded in giving a voice to the exploited and oppressed workers in the garment sector?

As an artiste my job is to give voice to the voiceless. There are almost two million garment workers in this country, 85 percent of whom are women, mostly young girls, who are new in this unfriendly city. The labour of these girls produces 75 percent of our foreign export earning yet our society instead of respecting them, often looks down upon them. My intention was to project the problems and pains, the life and the dreams of these girls. How much I have succeeded, well, I

guess, the audience would be the better judge!

How would you explain the dominating presence of male and non-workers in the film?

I don't think there is any overwhelming presence of males in the film. The film is obviously about the garment girls. But unfortunately, the owners and most of the officials in Bangladesh, are male. Our intention was to show the ground reality of the garment girls from different angles. So their workplace, the garment industry, featured in a big way. I had to interview quite a few male officials -- a nutritionist, an economist, few trade union leaders, factory-owners and middle-level executives, and unfortunately, they all are male! I couldn't help much in that regard.

The film gives the impression that the main focus of the film is on the industry, not the workers -- what do you think?

The industry generates employment for nearly two million poor girls whose prospects in life would otherwise be quite bleak. We all owe some responsibility towards this multi-billion dollar industry, which is so vital for the economy of such a poor country like Bangladesh. Well, these girls are exploited, but wouldn't it be fallacious to throw the baby with the dirty basket? The film is, as told before, based on the poem *Bostrobalikara*, the leitmotif of the film, is definitely about the female workers. But as their workplace is the garment industry, the industry occupies a significant portion of the film. And without describing the history of the industry, its problems and prospects, wouldn't the description of the workers' condition hang in a limbo?

Who is the target audience of your documentary? What do you want the film to achieve?

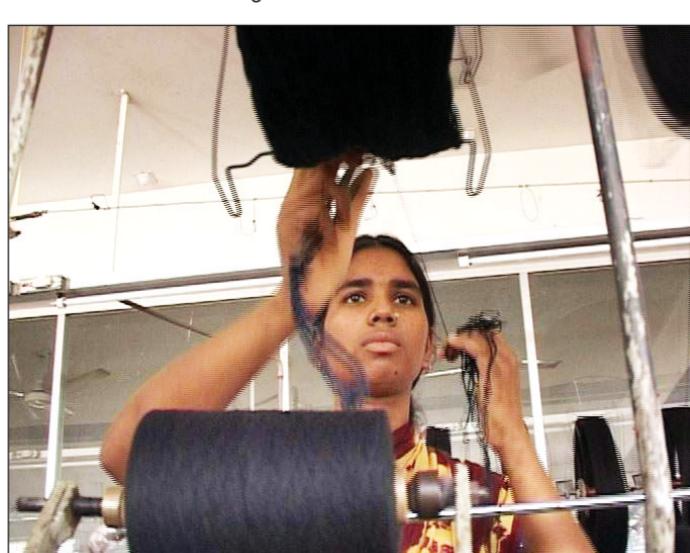
To be honest I never make a film with an eye on the potential audience. My films, especially in



the case of *Bostrobalikara*, originate from a prick of conscience for my inability to do anything to mitigate the sufferings of these girls. Who will use the film is not my concern. But I guess researchers, NGOs, trade unions, civil and human right organisations, even factory-owners can make some use of the film. Besides, though garment is such an important sector for our economy, very few people of Bangladesh are firmly conversant with the industry and the ground realities of its workers. The film may be of some help in this regard.

What are the messages, in general, you sought to convey through the film?

I think the idea was to sensitise our people about the dismal condition of these garment girls. Naturally the wage issue emerged as the focal point. But I will be immensely pleased if our society also learns to respect these hardworking and silent girls, who make such immense contribution to our exchequer. If, due to my film, any change of attitude takes place towards these girls, I will feel very happy that our effort has not gone in vain.



Scenes (left and right) from the documentary

## National Street Theatre Festival '07 ends

KHALID BIN HABIB

The weeklong *Jatiyo Patho Natok Utshob 07* (National Street Theatre Festival) ended yesterday. Arranged by Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation (BGT), in association with Bengal Foundation, the festival began at the Central Shaheed Minar premises on February 2.

Six theatre groups, Udichi, Prachchonat, Padatik, Natty Sangsad, Oboyan Natya Dal and Bhashor Natya Dal from Dhaka, Onirban Sangskritik Sangsad from Madaripur, presented theatre performances on the last day of the festival.

The plays staged on February 7 were *Aaina* by Shaheed Sufi Natty Chakro (written and directed by Sheikh Farid Ahmed), *Ekti Non-fiction* by Jahangirnagar Theatre (written and directed by Mahfuzul Alam Masum), *Bornomalar Jonye* by Noborupi (written by Shahjahan Shah and directed by Shamim Reza), *Abaro Sangram* by Mymmensingh Lokokriti Sangstha (written by Ibrahim Khalil and directed by Babul Rahman), *Abaro Paney* by Tarunya Natya Goshthi (written by Abu Naser Moni and directed by Badrul Islam) and *Molichhonna Mohish* by Anannya '79 (written by Monoj Majumder and directed by Swapon Mahmud).

The main objective of the play



Actors of Tarunya Natya Goshthi in Abaro Paney

*Abaro Paney* is to generate awareness about mass education among people of all social strata. The comic presentation by the group conveyed the necessity for measures to improve the literacy rate of the country, especially in the rural areas of Bangladesh.

The story of the play *Aaina*

revolves around the forceful and unlawful activities of influential people of our rural society.

The main theme of the play is the

necessity to develop people's

potential and fine-tune their ability

to confront and adapt to various

challenges in life.

The play *Bornomalar Jonye* is

based on the love story of a young student of Dhaka University and a girl from a village during the Language Movement in 1952.

*Abaro Sangram* is based on a true story, set against the backdrop of the war of Independence of 1971.

## 'Jodio Shondha'

## Valentine's Day special



Afsana Mimi and Mahfuz Ahmed in Jodio Shondha

Valentine's Day special play *Jodio Shondha* will be aired on February 14 at 9:15pm on Bangla-vision.

The plot: The harmonious marriage of Mashkur and Kabori turns sour because of painful incidents. Kabori accidentally loses her eyesight and falls victim to another accident. Though these incidents do not have an immediate negative

impact on their relationship, a chasm develops between the couple. The play examines whether the duo can be reconciled.

Humayun Faridee, Afsana Mimi, Mahfuz Ahmed, Munira Yousuf Memi, Deepa Khondoker and Orbik are the main characters of the play. The play is written by Sadekur Rahman and directed by Arif Khan.

8" x 4"

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