# Stimulus Package for Bookstores?

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

y good friend, Manan, is looking to buy or set up a bookstore in the Boston area. So far, I have not been a very enthusiastic supporter of his new project, since I am aware that independent booksellers have been fast disappearing from the US map. According to the American Booksellers Association, the number of independent bookstores has plummeted from about 6,000 in the early 1990s to 2,200 today. In the current economic situation, more stores will be closing their doors as they fail to cope with declining readership and the onslaught of the likes of Amazon.com. And even the ones that might survive, such as Barnes & Noble and Borders, will do so only because they are diversifying, have customer loyalty, and are retail chains themselves. The era of the neighbourhood bookshop or the true mom 'n pop bookstore is at an end.

However, these facts and other statistics have not deterred Manan from occasionally suggesting that I invest with him in a small bookstore. He also is hoping that the Obama Administration will throw some money from the Stimulus Package at booksellers, a dying breed! "So who do you think is going to buy a book from your store?" I asked him in exasperation when he brought up the issue again last week. He instantly retorted that "You may not, given the penny-pincher that you are. But all my friends and students buy and read books regularly." Then he did something that even surprised me. He took a line from a well-known Bengali poem, "Jootey jodi ekta poisha," and adapted it to "If you are left with only one dirham, O beloved follower, do buy food to satisfy your hunger, but if you have another dirham, go and buy a page or two to read, my loyal devotee.'

I protested weakly, "But the last line was asking the follower to buy flowers, phool kiney nivo hey anuragee."

But, I am not sure whether he heard me or not, since he was probably savoring his tactical victory over me.

I conceded that point to him. Yes, people do still'buy books, and statistics do indicate that used book sales are up, but his jab at my fragal habits did not sit well with me. It is true that I do not spend too much money on buying books these days, but on the other hand, his business acumen and experience is much stronger than mine. He has dabbled in commercial enterprises since we both landed on the shores of the United States around the

same time, even hawking encyclopedias door to door in summer, and later enlisting as an independent distributor of household products.

In my self-defense, I will say though that I know a thing or two about buying books. Until very recently I was an avid book buyer myself. As a little boy, one of my most favorite pastimes was to save up enough money to buy a book. The first book I bought cost me eight annas that I had received as a salaami from my mom on Eid Day. I took the money, and with my elder brother, my constant companion in all my adventures during those years, walked towards the city center in Mymensingh town. We stopped at a cluster of little shops, and bought some candy. However, my 'adhli', as it was called, was still in my pocket when we stopped at another shop, lured by its colorful festoons. It happened to be a little book stall, measuring at most five by eight by six. The bookseller was sitting on a raised platform, almost as if guarding the book collection. Weekly and monthly magazines were hung for display on a rope strung along the entire length of the store. Most of the magazines in those days were Indian, including Jalsha, Ultroroth, Ghoroa, and Betar Jagat. With my hand in my pocket still clutching the half-rupee, I asked the shopkeeper if there were any books that cost eight annas. He fished out a thin book printed

on coarse paper and a soft cover. The title was 'Gopal Bharer Golpo.' I had no idea who Gopal was nor did I know what the story was about. But the shop owner and another customer must have praised the book and its characters, Gopal and Raja Krishnachandra, since I was willing to part with my precious adhli for the choti-boi. For the rest of the day, we wandered about near the school area, and along the banks of Brahmaputra River, protectively clutching the precious book.

When I finally reached home, I opened the book, and could not lay it down. Even after all these years, I can still remember most of the stories I read in that book. Gopal, as nearly all Bengalis, or nowadays perhaps all Bengalis of a certain generation, was a comic and wit with a scrurrilous turn of mind, and his adventures still resonate with me. I was also fascinated to learn Bengali words that I did not know at that time even existed, for example 'kosto kathinya, 'mall tyag,' 'minshey', etc.

The first magazine I ever bought also has its own history. Since we did not have any allowances or any money to spend, my brothers and I had to be enterprising in earning and saving money. One of our uncles lived with us for many years. He was in the habit of smoking and chewing betel leaves. More importantly, he had more disposable cash than we did and would indulge us from time to time. We lived in Joginagar in the old city and my uncle would command us to run

to the corner shack at least a few times during the day to purchase the items he needed. Pretty soon my brothers and I realized that if we bought a packet of cigarettes ourselves, and sold individual sticks to him at the retail price, we could pocket the profit. So we pooled our resources and our little commercial trading enterprise, with my uncle as the only customer, took off and became a profitable venture. Every day our profit was over a shiki, a quarter of a rupee during those days. Soon I had more than one rupee, and one day my brother and I decided that we had to go to New Market on a shopping junket. But we did not know the market well and

soon found ourselves among bookstores, stationery shops, and magazine stalls. Fortunately, we were familiar with the Indian Bengali magazines and the Puja Specials that came from West Bengal. We spent a good deal of time browsing the hard covers, but then settled on a current copy of the weekly magazine Shuktara. Sandesh was a little thicker, and I would have preferred that, but since the price was out of my reach, I came back with Shuktara. Again, the joy of laying my hand on my own copy of the magazine was beyond description. Seeing this and knowing that I was not going to waste my money on candy and jhal muri, my mother offered to give me ten annas a week for the magazine. The magazine would come to the stall every Thursday, unless the flight from Calcutta was delayed or cancelled. I would anxiously wait to run to the store to buy it from our flat in Azimpur Colony in Dhaka, where we had moved the same year.

Nowadays, I am an economist and a realist insofar as investing is concerned. Book readership and the market for booksellers have been dwindling over the last few years at a precipitous rate, and this trend has only accelerated with the Internet and the economic downturn. The numbers are just too stark to ignore. The following statistics about book publishing and reading are on www.parapub.com, the Web site of selfpublishing guru Dan Poynter:

• 1/3 of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives.

 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after college.

 80 percent of U.S. families did not buy or read a book last year.

• 70 percent of U.S. adults have not been in a bookstore in the last five years.

In a recent study of all major US cities, Boston, my home town, ranked 47th, well behind Las Vegas, in the number of bookstores per 100,000. Ironically, Boston is host to some of America's most literate and cultured society, dotted with numerous universities and arts and cultural centers. Las Vegas, on the other hand, is a city known for its gambling and show business. Of course, one could find a logical explanation for these apparently paradoxical numbers, but the fact of the matter is new entrepreneurs in publishing and distribution face an uphill task.

I showed Manan all the statistics, and explained to him what the trend lines show. As soon as I started talking about data and statistics, he rolled his eyes, and said, "There you go again. Don't you remember, you told me once "There are lies, damn lies, and statistics"? I couldn't believe my own ears. He had used my words, which I myself had borrowed from Disraeli, and flung it back to me to point out the weakness of published statistical data, to cut me down and my logic

Finally, after a pause, I turned towards his son, Mikey, to for some needed support. But that gambit had the opposite effect. "A book store with a few other features like a coffee shop, Internet cafe and a gift shop might not be a bad idea," he interjected, and I could see he had thrown his lot with his father and they'd ganged up against me. Reluctant to admit defeat, I unloosed a parting shot at Mikey, "Hope you are not thinking of getting into the publishing business, since that has no future in this age.

"Well, Uncle, if I do, it will be in electronic publishing. Touché!

As I was finishing up this story, a BBC News

item caught my attention. In London, two friends, Alfie Boyd and Claire Wilson, have embarked upon a project to give away free books to the underground railway riders. Thinking that there must be something better than reading give-away newspapers while commuting, they have started loaning free books on London's subway riders. They plan to continue offering free novels to commuters outside five London's Tube stations once a month in line with a program they call "Choose What You Read." Once commuters finish the books, they are to add their names to a list of readers inside the cover and return them to a drop box in central London.

Maybe my friend and his son are on to something new!

Dr. Abdullah Shibli lives and works in Boston.

### TRAVEL WRITING

## Looking for Pir Shah Jalal



SHAKIL RABBI

Te were in Sylhet as a part of an office retreat in a job I had some time back. On that particular afternoon there were four of us in the car: our office driver Helal, myself and two of my co-workers, Minhaz and Shafik. We were on our way back from Sylhet university where our team had gone on a workrelated visit. While the others had gone ahead to the resort in a separate van we had decided to check out the city markets.

"I definitely want some Satkara aachar," said Shafik. "My mom and sister asked for it. My uncle used to bring us some jars when he was posted in Sylhet some years ago. They're delicious!"

We looked for a store that carried the aachar. When we found one, we stopped across the street from it. I found that became confused when I tried to cross the street: unlike Dhaka, the traffic here ran along organized and disciplined lines. I actually had to wait -- a wholly new experience -- for the signal to change before I could cross.

Shafik had already found his Satkara, exclaiming: "This is the good shit!" That made both Minhaz and I to also plunk down our cash for a couple of jars -- later I found the same jars neatly stacked in the bottled section of the PQS across the street from my home in Dhanmondi.

It was on our way back to the resort that Minhaz suggested we go for ziyarat at Shah Jalal's mazaar. "It might be interesting. What do you guys think?"

"I hear that there are those fishes that he turned into Muslims," said Shafik. "It would be interesting to see them."

"I'm in," I agreed, even though I did not know anything about Pir Shah Jalal, other than his name, and that it was considered bad faith to come to Sylhet and not visit his mazaar.

"What do you say, Helal bhai?" Minhaz asked our driver. "Do you want to drive over there? Do you think we might be able to find it?"

Oh, it would be fine thing. It would be a great moment in my life if I were able to offer some prayers at the mazar," Helal bhai answered. He looked quite excited, his eyes

sparkling with expectancy. "Of course we will find it. Don't worry. I believe the Pir will guide us there." "And this is Sylhet," I interjected.

"I'm sure anyone can point us in the general direction." "Good. We can ask that policeman for directions," Minhaz said

pointing to a sergeant talking into his walkie-talkie. "Pull up next to him, Helal bhai." "Excuse me, bhai..." Minhaz

began, trying to get the sergeant's attention. "The mazaar is three kilometers

straight that way. Go straight down to the roundabout, and take a right; another two kilo down from there. There are signs along the way." "Thank you," replied Minhaz. He was taken

aback that the sergeant knew we were going to ask about Shah Jalal's mazaar even before we actually did. He laughed about it, but I thought it must be obvious that we were tourists.

Shah Jalal's mazaar was easy to find; there were indeed signs directing us all the way there. However, Helal bhai did have trouble driving through Sylhet traffic; true to his Dhaka habit, he kept trying to swerve out of his lane to pass other cars. But the roads were too narrow and whenever he tried he faced oncoming traffic and soon gave up.

The avenue leading up to the mazaar was much wider than any other road I had yet seen in Sylhet. Cars were parked in a row along the middle of it as opposed to the sides: a system of parking I had never seen before. Stalls were set up along the sides, which made the outside of the mazaar look more like peddler world than the ascetic shrine the word mazaar conjured up in my mind.

Helal bhai rushed off as soon as he had parked, saying, "If I hurry I can make Asr prayers. Oh, what a dream!"

"Wait ... " Minhaz said to his fast-retreating back. But Helal bhai was moving too fast, and even if Minhaz had gotten a chance to say anything I don't think the former would have heard a word of it. He was in raptures.

"How much do you guys know about the mazaar?" I queried the others.

"Nothing really," replied Minhaz. "Me neither," said Shafik. "All I know is that there are those fishes that come if you call out to them. They're hundreds of years old. They're supposed to be Muslim; converted by Shah Jalal."

The mazaar compound was large. The floor was white tile, with a number of date trees standing tall here and there. The pond holding the fishes was in the south corner, with children tossing bread pieces into the water to feed them. In the center was a brand-new building, which housed the mosque and the mazaar, set against the cut hill that was the huge burial mound.

The steps of the building ran up steeply, following the natural slope of the mound. The mosque was on the first terrace, in part cut into

the hill with pillars buttressing it. The entire

facade was

painted a soft pastel pink. As we passed I thought I saw Helal bhai in the front left-corner; he must have missed the jamaat because he was praying by himself; others around him were sitting about listening to the Imam speak. The mazaar was another level up. Shah Jalal's grave was in a separate chamber, made completely of marble. It was topped with a solid slab and covered with a cloth with inscriptions in Arabic. Lined up by its side were four other graves of his closest companion followers. The place hummed and buzzed with lamentations and prayers recited out loud. Shafik and I both slipped out, since we did not know what we were supposed to do or offer. But Minhaz stayed and prayed with the rest of the crowd.

"You know," said Shafik, in a completely matter-of-fact way, "they say that the pir left for home before he died. That this isn't even his grave; it's empty.'

Other graves, of Sylhet's famous khadems, lay on the northern face of the hill, each marked by a marble border and headstone with etchings also in Arabic. Shafik and I walked through the cemetery and waited for Minhaz to come out. The open ground was full of excited children running around.

After Minhaz came out we all went down to the stalls. They sold all sorts of trinkets, plaques, decoration, souvenirs, and plastic baubles. They did not seem to have anything at all to do with the mazaar other than being set in the same place.

"I think this might as well be New Market," I

"I know," replied Minhaz. "And even though I prayed up there, I didn't really feel spiritual at all. It was too packaged; it's like a theme park."

"It's a tourist trap," agreed Shafik. "It's good business, though. I bet most of the people that come here aren't even Sylhetis. Look, they have Satkara here, too."

"You should have waited to buy it from here," I said. "It's probably blessed and holy." "It's the same jar as I got. They're probably all

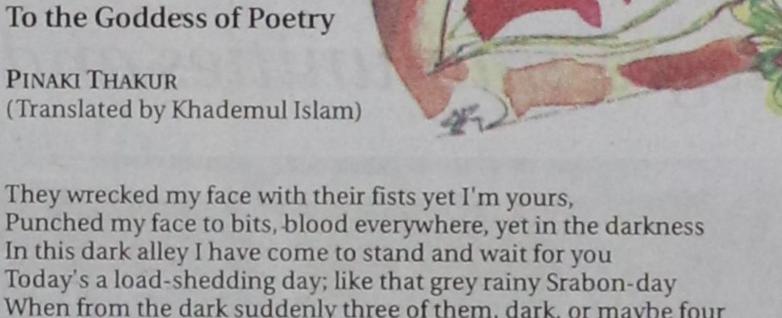
"Oh look, here comes Helal bhai," said Minhaz.

I saw our driver coming out of the gate and all thoughts that I had had about the bazaar being tinsel and crass left my mind. Helal bhai was positively beaming, looking as if he had been touched by something supernatural. I had to wonder what the place meant to him and that what he had seen was completely beyond us.

Shakil Rabbi is a student of English at Dhaka University. Names have been changed for reasons of privacy.

## To the Goddess of Poetry

PINAKI THAKUR (Translated by Khademul Islam)



Punched my face to bits, blood everywhere, yet in the darkness In this dark alley I have come to stand and wait for you Today's a load-shedding day; like that grey rainy Srabon-day When from the dark suddenly three of them, dark, or maybe four Slammed me beside the wall with its 'Vote for Ladder' slogan That was the first time, so they let me off easy thank God In the rain, darkness, they were beating me up, why I didn't know until one snarled through gritted teeth: "Bothering our Binny, eh, you bastard, if ever In this neighbourhood we see you again..."

Broke my face; today's again a load-shedding day, no rain though, From exactly 7:15 on in this lover's lane for you I wait, not with a poem in my hands but a question in prose I don't want to hear anything, just answer oh just answer me Those whose fists broke my face, who sent them? Your father the businessman? A powerful lover?

I can't believe it yet I've to ask, oh Heaven forbid! was it You?

Khademul Islam is the literary editor of The Daily Star



**Foolish Sunshine** 

RUDRA ARIF

Foolish Sunshine, listen:

When I delete your name from the story, I perceive I've erased a deathtrap bus from this traffic-jammed city, with its

Foolish Sunshine, after erasing more faces

stained flying-smile like a street hawker

Trucks

Traffic jams Residential hotels and crowds from my canvas, Then sowing a pretty Bonsai in there, I watch: Touching your face, I then envy you, as like shining hilsa fish, All dust and crows of this city lose their lives...

Rudra Arif is a young poet and film-maker.