

NON-FICTION

Stimulus Package for Bookstores?

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

My 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.

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!

I protested weakly, "But the last line was asking the follower to buy flowers, phool kinye niyo 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 job at my frugal 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.



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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.

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.

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 scurrilous turn of mind, and his adventures still resonate with me.

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.

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.

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.

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.

In a recent study of all major US cities, Boston, my home town, ranked 47th, well behind Las Vegas, in the number of book-

stores 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'?"

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.

"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.

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

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.

"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!"

"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.

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.

"I think this might as well be New Market," I said. "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 a good business, though. I bet most of the people that come here aren't even Sylhetis. Look, they have Satkara here, too."

"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.

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.

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"You should have waited to buy it from here," I said. "It's probably blessed and holy."

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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)

They wrecked my face with their fists yet I'm yours, 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? Or, 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 stained flying-smile like a street hawker

Foolish Sunshine, after erasing more faces 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.



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