

WHAT'S ON THIS WEEK

Ekushey Book Fair
Venue: Bangla Academy
Date: February 1-28
Time: 3pm-9pm



Cultural Programme

To mark Amar Ekushey
Organiser: Shammito Sangskritik Jote
Venue: Central Shaheed Minar premises
Date: February 8-21
Time: 4pm onwards



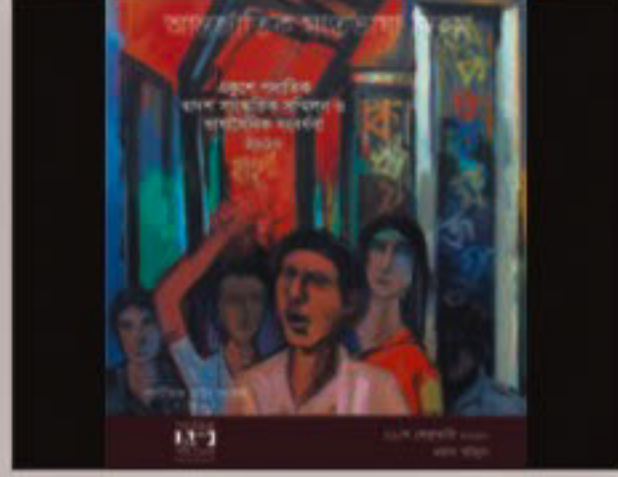
Musical Soiree

To mark Amar Ekushey
Organiser: Chhayanaout
Venue: Chhayanaout Sangskriti Bhaban, Dhanmondi
Date: February 21
Time: 6:30pm



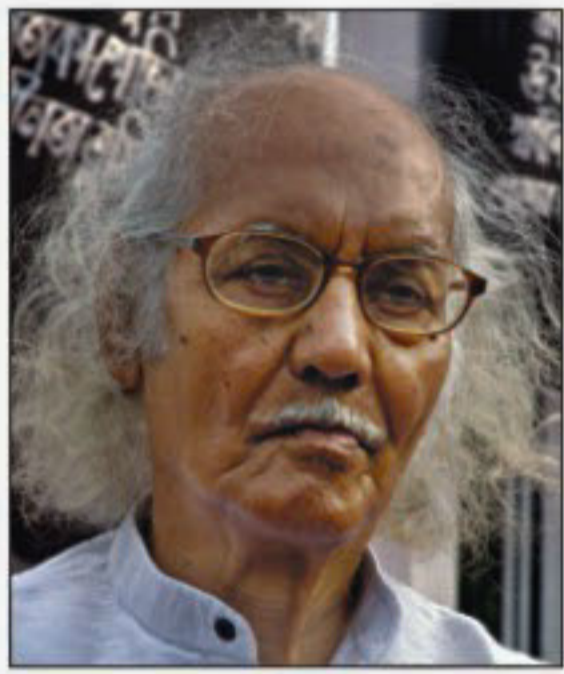
Cultural Programme

To mark Amar Ekushey
Organiser: Padik Natya Sangsad Bangladesh
Venue: Ramna Batomul, Ramna Park
Date: February 21
Time: 9am onwards



Boi Mela thoughts

Musings of wordsmiths



Kabir Chowdhury



Zillur Rahman Siddiqui



Sirajul Islam Chowdhury

A CORRESPONDENT

With Ekushey February, the *Boi Mela* (book fair) at Bangla Academy is drawing to a close. The Daily Star caught up with three of the leading writers and educationists of the country. Here's what they had to say about the book fair:
Twelve books by National Professor Kabir Chowdhury are available at the ongoing Ekushey Book Fair. Among the books are: a collection of essays "Many Colours: Aeschylus to Syed Waliullah" (published from Adorn Publication); translations "Tushar" (Orhan Pamuk's "Snow"), "Nirbachito Pamuk" (published from Vidha Prakash), "Joubon-er Golpo" (original by South African writer John Maxwell Coetzee and published from Samoy Prokashoni) and "Lauho Manab" (Coetzee's "The Age of Iron").
Chowdhury says, "I always try to go to the book fair, though now it is very

difficult to browse books in an overcrowded atmosphere. My suggestion is that the fair needs to be expanded."
Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui's collection of essays, "Rochona-Tritio Khando" (published from Ananya) is now available at the *boi mela*.
About the fair, the scholar says, "The space is hardly adequate, considering the stature of this month-long event. The current atmosphere is not at all favourable either. I did not go to the fair this year. Last year, I went there once. The main intention should be to bring the bookworms in the vicinity of books. In Kolkata, prior to the book fair, reviews are published in daily newspapers, magazines and journals. Consequently, interest in new publications is generated among the readers. Our newspapers publish lists of latest books but there are not enough reviews. Readers are not provided with sufficient information that would help

them make smarter choices. An average reader only buys books by popular writers.
Latest editions of Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury's books are available at the ongoing Ekushey Book Fair. A collection of essays, "Probandha Shamagra-Panch" (published from Bidya Prakash); Lincoln-er Bishonno Mukh" (published from Annesha); an autobiography, "Dui Jatra-e Ek Jatri" (published from Pearl Publication) and "Homer-er Odyssey" (published from Annesha) are books written by Chowdhury that are available at the book fair.
About the book fair, Sirajul Islam Chowdhury says, "The fair should definitely be expanded. Shops that are not selling books at the fair are a strange phenomenon. It looks like a run of the mill market. People, who don't seem interested in books at all, come here with their families and friends."

"Key to national progress lies in our folk traditions"

-- Saymon Zakaria

KARIM WAHEED

"The decision to research and explore Bangladeshi folklore wasn't instigated by some vested interest -- I wasn't seeking academic recognition or financial gains from it," says playwright and researcher Saymon Zakaria.
Zakaria, who is also the manuscript editor, Folklore Department, Bangla Academy, received the HSBC-Kali O Kolom Award 2008 (for young writers and poets) for his book "Bangladesh-er Lokonatok: Bishoy O Aangik Baichitro".
Sitting in his office on the second floor of Bardhaman House, Zakaria went over his roots and explained how his 15-year spanning research started off as an effort to trace and understand his identity. The setting was certainly interesting: at the heart of Ekushey Boi Mela, devoid of the usual crowd, the hustle and bustle (it was before 3pm when the mela starts).
"I was born in Kumarkhali, Kushtia -- where Lalon and Tagore's influences are strong. Kushtia is also the home district of litterateur Mir Mosharraf Hossain and revolutionary "Bagha Jatin" (Jatindranath Mukherjee). Kushtia has always been spiritually, culturally and politically aware. The maternal side of my family is from Shailokupa, Jhenaidah -- renowned for Gazir Gaan," Zakaria says.
"I grew up listening to Gazir Gaan. I remember shapurey (snake charmers) coming to my grandparents' home on the occasion of 'Behula (the snake goddess) Puja'. My grandmother named two of my cousins after Gazi Pir and his brother Kalu. Gazir Gaan narrates the story of the saint, Gazi, and his brother Kalu. This folklore is a great example of religious harmony in rural Bengal. Gazi is identified as a Muslim saint and his brother is Hindu (Kalu or Kalachan is a synonym of Krishna). Gazi marries a Hindu princess, Champaboti...the whole legend centres on inter-religious relationships.
"Seeds of inter-religious understanding were sown through these cultural experiences and I believe the forte of our



Saymon Zakaria

PHOTO: MUMIT M.

cultural traditions are these practices that originated from diverse religious beliefs. One has to keep in mind that prior to the mass Islamisation, Bengal was predominantly Buddhist and then Hindu. And I also believe that one's religion may change but culture doesn't. Through evolution, culture -- heavily inspired by everyday customs -- remains the key aspect of one's identity.
"Unfortunately, when I went to school [and college], I found no reference of my rural cultural heritage in the textbooks. I didn't sever ties with my roots; I kept going back. Eventually, I started to consider documenting these experiences. That's how my research on folklore and indigenous performing art forms started," says the scholar.
"As I got more into my research, I realised that in-depth studies on our folklore had pretty much stalled since Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah. There was no groundbreaking discovery, no remarkable fieldwork. So, I concentrated on the latter. Certain realisations were awe-inspiring.
"I realised that as a nation, our progress -- economic, educational, social and religious -- lies in our folk traditions and

roots. People, who want to label Bangladesh as a 'fundamentalist Muslim country,' should be exposed to our indigenous theatre forms, music and dances. Outside sources indicate that around the advent of Islam (600 AD), Bengal was a prosperous kingdom boasting a sophisticated culture.
"Cultural exchange between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal has been immense. Versions of the 'Ramayan', mostly folklore-based performances, are still enacted in rural Bangladesh. 'Ramayan' is interpreted as a social comment exploring the ideal relationship between husband, wife and other members of the family," Zakaria says.
"Sita'r Agniporikkha" -- a monodrama in the 'Kushan Gaan' (a tradition indigenous to northern Bangladesh) style -- written by Zakaria, has been staged by Shadhona in Bangladesh and India and has won the playwright much acclaim. The play sees the epic heroine, Sita, in a new light.
Sita's "Agniporikkha" (fire ordeal), in the rural Bangladeshi context, is interpreted as the tribulations of the average woman, who is subjected to tests both at her father's home, in-laws' house and in the conservative social setting of the villages that still frowns upon gender equality and freedom, explains the playwright.
Zakaria's other notable works are: "Na Noyramoni" (a Dhaka Theatre production) featuring songs from "Charyapada" (the earliest known example of Bengali poetry); "Jugantor Ropalo Nach" on adibashi (indigenous) issues and "Mohamanob Shonghita" on leftism in culture.
Zakaria, along with dancers Lubna Mariam and Warda Rihab, recently went to Nepal to study an ancient Buddhist dance form that is mentioned in "Charyapada". According to the researcher, this dance form "went from Bengal to Tibet and Nepal." An upcoming dance-drama titled "Bodhidrum" (a Shadhona production) will highlight this style.
In the process of tracing his identity, Zakaria has seemingly tapped into a major source of national pride and inspiration.



On the eve of Ekushey, Dhaka University campus was abuzz with preparations -- artistes were putting last touches on their artworks and designs at the Central Shaheed Minar area. Meanwhile, the *boi mela* (book fair) at Bangla Academy saw a record turnout. Added attractions at the fair were: artistes making portraits for a small fee within minutes and face art.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

