

THE MAKING OF HAY IN HEMONTO

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This is a promising month for all things literary as we anticipate three intellectually tantalizing days of Hay Festival Dhaka 2014 on 20-22 November 2014 at the Bangla Academy. So, for November, SLR will be solely devoted to different aspects of Hay Festival Dhaka.

Founded around a kitchen table in 1987, Hay Festival has become one of the world's top literary festivals. It started in the Welsh book town of Hay-on-Wye. There are now Hay Festivals in Bangladesh, Colombia, Hungary, Ireland, Kenya, Lebanon, Maldives, Mexico, Nigeria and Spain. Over the last three decades, Hay Festival's audience has grown from 1,000 people to up to 250,000 visitors.

For 27 years Hay Festival has brought together writers from around the world to debate and share stories. Hay celebrates free exchange of views between poets and scientists, lyricists and comedians, filmmakers and musicians, novelists and environmentalists; and the power of great ideas to transform our way of thinking. This meeting of minds makes the Festivals inspirational on personal, political and educational fronts; propelling attendees to shift perspectives and make room for a wider horizon - to "Imagine The World" as the Hay tagline aptly puts it.

"The Woodstock of the Mind" - former US President Bill Clinton.

"One of the finest, most thought-provoking literary gatherings I've ever attended" - Junot Diaz, Dominican-American writer and creative writing professor.

HAY FESTIVAL DHAKA (2011)

In 2011, Hay Festival Directors Peter Florence and Lyndy Cooke got together with renowned Bangladeshi author Tahmima Anam and poet Sadaf Saaz Siddiqi, along with British Council, to hold a one-day pilot Hay Festival on the grounds of British Council at the Dhaka University campus. It brought together writers and thinkers from Bangladesh and Britain to share stories and ideas in the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore on his 150th anniversary year.

Over 700 visitors were treated to a programme of readings, book launches, and literary panels. The series of events included a lecture by BBC anchor Nik Gowing, a discussion on the art of translation with Welsh writer Jon Gower, and events that celebrated the rich literary heritage of Bangladesh. Well-known Bangladeshi novelists Selina Hossain, Fakrul Alam and Niaz Zaman shared a stage with British and Welsh authors Jon Gower, Tiffany Murray, Andrew Miller and Jan Blake.

Many attendees spoke about their love of literature and their excitement at having an international panel of writers whom they could engage with. The Festival opened up a much-needed dialogue about books, how they thread our historical past with the urgent present, and how Bangladesh can become a significant nucleus for world literature.

At the end of the day, both audience members and writers were left wanting more, thus inspiring the producers to return in 2012 on a bigger scale.



"This felt like an extraordinary moment and focus for the English language writers in Bangladesh and perhaps for post-1971 Bengali writing too; and it's a real turning point for the Hay Festival team. We've never had such a thrilling debut anywhere. I think we've all fallen for the city, and were captivated by the robust intellectual energy and joy of the audiences. At a stroke, it's leapt up the list of our international priorities and aspirations for development." - Peter Florence, Director Hay Festivals

HAY FESTIVAL DHAKA (2012)

In 2012, Hay Festival Dhaka was hosted on the grounds of Bangla Academy. As a hub of Bangladeshi cultural identity, it was the perfect venue for a literary fest. Writers came from the United States, United Kingdom, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan for lively discussions with leading local Bangla and English-language authors. For three days, litterateurs paid homage to the 'four greats' who had captured the essence of Bengal through their words, music and creative pieces - Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jibanananda Das and Lalou Shah.

The programme was a delightful menu of 54 events in more than 4 languages, including various regional literary forms, from Chakma recitations to "Kobi-Lorai", a form of oral poetry

sparring. There were book launches and discussions on themes of breaking silences and re-imagining histories; a need for good translations; the South-Asian obsession for cricket. There was a dramatic reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's avant-garde novella, "Sultana's Dream" as well as a bilingual version of "Hamlet" set in a Bangladeshi village, presented by noted actor Aly Zaker. More than 15,000 attendees flocked the beautiful grounds of Bangla Academy to interact with literary favourites such as Vikram Seth, Nandita Das, Selina Hossain, Mohammed Zafar Iqbal, Philip Hensher, Mohammed Hanif, Gillian Clarke, Syed Shamsul Haq, Kamila Shamsie. The Festival ended with a 'MusicFest' featuring Arnob, Shoeb and Krishnakoli at the lakeside amphitheatre of Rabindra Sharbar.

"I can't think of any event I've participated in during my 14 years as a published writer where I've felt greater generosity from the audience." - Kamila Shamsie, author

"Through the Hay Festival our 40-year struggle for Bangladeshi language and identity has found an international voice." - Aly Zaker, actor and writer

HAY FESTIVAL DHAKA (2013)

The following year, over 230 thinkers, writers, filmmakers, poets, artists and dancers gathered once more on the historical grounds of Bangla Academy to dwell on the fluidity of words, images

and fresh forms of expression. The programme included local and international authors, writers, graphic artists and activists including Hasan Azizul Huq, Syed Shamsul Haq, Eliot Weinberger, Nadeem Aslam, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Rosie Boycott, Romesh Gunsekera, Mario Bellatin, Aamer Hussein, Tahmima Anam, Peter Pannke, K Anis Ahmed, Florence Noiville, SJ Harris, Sarnath Banerjee, Rahul Bose, Karrie Fransman, Tishani Doshi, Pankaj Mishra, Arundhati Subramaniam, William Sieghart, Prajwal Parajuly, Shaheen Akhtar, Rimi Chatterjee, David Shook and Ned Beaman.

More than 75 sessions were conducted in the Festival, where 50 foreign guests from 11 countries and about 200 Bangladeshi writers and artists participated. There were panel discussions on varied topics such as the definition of world literature; tracing the spiritual path through different traditions, "Coup D'Etats" - both personal and political; and the plight of literary Debutantes. This year saw the launch of 19 new books by local writers.

After three days of frantic choosing between four simultaneous events at any given time, the 18,000 strong audience members were left breathless, not least by the dance finale performed by Shadhona showcasing the journey of 1000 years of mystical thought in the deltaic region of Bengal.

"Hay Dhaka is an experiment in literature's mattering, in its helping make sense of the world." - David Shook, Poet and Guest Editor of World Literature Today (special edition)

"This is also a unique opportunity for contemporary Bangladeshi writers, poets and critics to exchange views and opinions with their global counterparts." Shamsuzzaman Khan, Director General, Bangla Academy

HAY FESTIVAL DHAKA (2014)

And so it is, in another eleven days, 60 of the world's leading writers, poets, artists, philosophers and scientists from 13 different countries will gather with Bangladeshi writers and artists to discuss the politics of family matters, freedom of the mind; and pushing boundaries. There will be book launches; interactive creative sessions for children; poetry performances; medley of Shakespeare plays in translation; and much more.

The programme includes Aamer Hussein, Abeer Hoque, Asif Farrukhi, Daman Singh, Fatema Hassan, Gideon Haigh, Joelle Jolivet, John Ralston Saul, Jung Chang, Kaiser Haq, Kanak Dixit, Karthika Nair, Lucy Hawking, Manju Kapur, Marcus Du Sautoy, Maria Chaudhuri, Michael Puett, Mimi Khalvati, MirzaWaheed, Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Muneeza Shamsie, Namita Gokhale, Patrick French, Rafiq Azad, Rana Das Gupta, Selina Hossain, Shaheen Akhter, Shashi Tharoor, Syed Shamsul Haq, TJ Dema, William Dalrymple, Zia Haider Rahman.

Whether you are an avid reader or a budding writer; a pondering philosopher or a cognitive scientist; man, woman, young, old or age-undefined; this three-day literary festival is not one to be missed!

(Information compiled from official Hay Festival websites)

The Hay-Makers

We caught up with four of the key people who are instrumental in putting together Hay Festival Dhaka 2014. In between their multi-tasking and coordination across borders, SLR was lucky enough to get a quick word with them.

Question: As Director of Hay Festival Dhaka and a prominent Bangladeshi author, why is this literary festival an important platform?



TAHMIMA ANAM: Hay Dhaka brings the best contemporary novelists, historians, biographers, graphic novelists, short story writers, essayists, and publishers to Dhaka to meet our enthusiastic audience. It's a unique opportunity for writers who would otherwise only read about Bangladesh in the papers to get a taste of what Dhaka is all about - a vibrant, cultural city with great readers and a rich literary tradition. For our audience, it's a great chance to meet literary heroes and discover new writers. We are hugely enthusiastic about the project and are enjoying watching it go from strength to strength.

Question: As Director of Hay Festival Dhaka, what is your overlying vision for 2014 which is different from the last three years?



SADAF SAAZ SIDDIQI: The overall vision for Hay Dhaka 2014 is to give a wealth of literary experiences through different expression of ideas and words - from elegant and beautifully constructed prose and plots, to the simplicity of telling a good story. We want to push the boundaries of knowledge by exploring science, mathematics and philosophy, as well as spiritual enquiry. This year, more than ever, we want to stimulate the imagination and the mind; making it a feast for literature lovers, as well as the young student who will be inspired to pick up a book. The idea is to take literature beyond an elite few, and make it engaging, accessible and relevant to a wider audience.

Question: As Hay Festival Dhaka Advisor, what initiatives have you taken to make it relevant for the Bangla readers and authors?



K. ANIS AHMED: This year our panels will focus on the language of poetry in the digital age, on both sides of Bengal. I myself will be on a panel this time to discuss what it means to be bilingual. And also embrace contemporary expressions that are reaching multitudes; from 'bhuter golpo' on Radio Foorti to Bangla rap. We plan to give space to languages that are at this point on an inexorable path to extinction; to hear those voices before they disappear forever.

We want Hay Dhaka to become a platform for vital expressions and critical questioning that go as deep into ourselves as widely out to the world. As the Festival Advisor, I tried to help widen this focus on local culture.

Question: As Associate Producer, how do you think Hay Festival Dhaka carves distinct boundaries for itself on the Global Literary map?



AHSAN AKBAR: Bangladesh boasts a rich cultural and literary heritage that belongs to the broader civilisation of the Indian Subcontinent, but is also nourished by the unique history of struggles of the eastern half of Bengal. While Bangla literature enjoys an admirable richness, it has so far been under-engaged and under-represented in cross-border dialogues. Hay Festival Dhaka carves a distinct boundary by promoting Bangla literature on the Global Literary map, along with representing a generation of Bangladeshis who are now on the verge of asserting a new and more cosmopolitan idiom, through writing in English.

