



CELEBRATING BOIMELA



As we speak, a curious incident is happening at the Ekushey Boimela 2016. Boimela, the yearly rejuvenation of the Bengali literature and the wonderful reunion of the readers with sparkly new books, is adding a new twist to herself, becoming all the more alluring.

The change is evident even in the atmosphere. Until this year, the stalls at the fair were standing on rows and columns like schoolboys waiting for the assembly bell. While that made finding stalls easier, standing in front of a stall and admiring a book or reading a page or two was impossible with the crowd urging you to go to the next one.

This year is different. A lot of stalls in the Suhrawardy Udyan side of the boimela have dispersed with each one being a small island away from the sea of people.

The purpose of this design was perhaps to let in more people without the usual elbowing (which was mild of course) of hurrying bookworms and spectators. However, the advancing footsteps of technology in the boimela tell us there is more to that story.

Upon entering the boimela on the Bangla Academy side, you will come across a kiosk by the "Access to Information" (a2i) programme with all the information about boimela. You can see a map, a list of stalls, a short biography of the great writers of Bengali literature, and many more. Equipped with this knowledge, you can proceed further to witness the spontaneous blend of physical and virtual books.

Virtual or e-books are a new addition to the boimela. As Asker Ibne Firoz, Head of Business Operations, Bengal eBoi, has put it, "Our goal is to make proper e-books available to the readers at the lowest possible price. We are also raising awareness against piracy and we hope that the readers will reject pirated e-books once they can get legally downloadable Bengali books at reasonable prices."

Asker's comment shows both faces of the Bengali e-book problem. There is (more appropriately, there were) no legal Bengali e-books on the internet to satisfy the newly developed hunger for electronic books of the Bengali readers with tablets, smart phones and Kindles. On the other hand, a short Google search on a Humayun Ahmed book or a Sheba Prokashoni book will lead you to numerous scanned or even composed PDFs' of freely pirated books.

The readers, with means so easy to cheat the writers and publishers off of their rights, now face a dilemma. Will they go through the process of finding a hard copy of the desired book which is usually troublesome save for the time of boimela or will they just click the download button from the ease of their homes?

Bengal eBoi is trying to solve that dilemma for their readers with providing PDF, EPUB, and MOBI version of previously published books. They do it by acquiring permission and manuscripts from the writers and then composing the e-books and publishing them on their website. They already have talked to fifty-three writers who have agreed to let them publish around 150 books. These books are available on their website and are also accessible from the Bengal eBoi app with prices ranging from Tk10 onwards. The reader can also have a free trial of the experience for few chosen books on the website.

Shei Boi app is another such endeavour focusing on their application that allows the reader to sign up and buy e-books with minimum effort. They are also working with the writers to publish the electronic version of their

books. A few books that have the writer's permission or are past the copyright time are free for the reader. A very small number of hard copies of the books are on display in the store so that the reader can sense the quality of this new publication.

Journeyman Books is a publisher with a unique combination of the virtual and the physical. They publish not only the hard copy of books but also audio books and e-books. Situated on the Suhrawardy Udyan side of the



fair, this store accommodates a few kiosks having wonderfully new functions for the reader. One of them has an audio book with headphones attached to it. The listener can hear the audio book or to the collection of short stories and poems on the next kiosk. Another one has all the e-books published by Journeyman Books which are already available for Tk50 each; a small amount to pay for the ease of acquiring and the peace of conscience.

Making payments for the e-books is a con-

cern for many readers. However, the process has been made easy by these publishers with a range of payment methods such as credit cards, debit cards, BKash, UCash, etc. This is the case for the publisher of hard copy books also. As they are becoming more eager to help the reader buy without the necessary trouble of carrying money, they have added a new decoration on many of their stalls: a hanging sign reminding you that payment with BKash will guarantee 10 percent cash back.



Shei Boi app has gone a bit further with the ease of payment by offering a scratch card worth Tk100 that the reader can use on the app to buy e-books whenever they want.

While we talk about the digitalisation of the books, it is important to talk about changing the mindset of the reader as well. While we are visiting the boimela in flocks ever so excited at the whiff of the fresh scent of a new book, there are many who are not getting a chance to come and enjoy this festival of knowledge. Does that



mean they will be deprived of their rights to hold the sublime pages of a newly printed book? Rokomari.com strives to ensure that this does not happen to any yearning reader. Mehedi Hasan Rana, Mentor, Rokomari.com, shared with us their journey to becoming the largest online bookstore of Bangladesh.

"We started our company to spread the habit of reading around the country and to make sure that everyone, no matter where they are, gets any book they want to read." They have contracts with a large number of publishers in and out of the country and their own delivery system in the cities. For delivering books outside the cities, Rokomari.com uses courier services and delivers ordered books within the shortest period of time.

They are the pioneers of Cash on Delivery services in Bangladesh which still is the most used medium of payment in Rokomari.com. Thanks to Rokomari.com and other online bookstores, boimela is not confined to the city anymore. They now help a teenager in a remote village dream of buying a new science fiction at the same time as anyone else thus binding the whole country by the love of books.

We started with the news that boimela is spreading. Well, it is true. It is going beyond the spacious stalls of Suhrawardy Udyan, past Shahbag, throughout the country, and into the web. Now we can only hope that the spirit of '52 is spreading with it, engulfing us in our identity as one.