



One step forward, two steps back

SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

BANGLADESH'S vision of a knowledge-based society is shackled in the vicious cycle of falling readership and substandard publishing sector infested countless problems.

Every year, the spring festival gives Shahbagh, the intellectual heart of Dhaka, a dazzling appearance. The overflowing milieu of the Ekushey book fair with hundreds and thousands of visitors of all ages loitering around the bookstalls, the premises crowded with renowned and promising writers, poets and their fans will make anyone to think that Bangladesh must be the Promised Land for the publishers and booksellers.

With such abundance of potential readers it could have been the reality, however it is actually not. Rather, poor readerships, scarcity of resources and high production cost and due to utter negligence from the state, today, most of the book publishers in Bangladesh have been pushed to the edge of existence. Many age-old, renowned publishing houses have been closed, a few survivors can only make their ends meet

and young, budding publishers are struggling hard for survival.

The first fully-fledged literary book published from Dhaka was Nil Darpan (The Indigo Mirror), a Bangla play by Dinbondhu Mitra published on 1882. However, book publishing as a business started to thrive in Bangladesh after 1947. While book publishing at that time was limited to publish textbooks and related guide books only, some of the pioneering publishers like Nawroze Kitabistan, Ahmod Publishing House, and Maola Brothers began publishing creative literature.

In 1954, the United Front (Jukta Front) achieved landslide victory in the elections to the then East Bengal Legislative Assembly with a pledge to recognise Bengal as one of the state languages of Pakistan. According to the promise, Central Board for the Development of Bengali was established and under its patronisation renowned scholar Munir Chowdhury developed a Bengali keyboard called Munir Keyboard for typewriter. It was a groundbreaking progress for book publishing industry in Dhaka especially for publishing Bengali books which got a new pace after this develop-

ment. Besides, the continuous politico-cultural movement against the West Pakistani rulers in the late 50's and 60's gave birth to some of the significant literary creations by the Bangali poets and authors which also encouraged some of the notable publishing houses to emerge and flourish for instance Ahmod Publishing House (1954), Beauty Book House (1962), Khan Brothers (1966), Muktaadhara etc.

The development of Bangladesh's publishing industry in the post independent era is highly indebted to the introduction of Amor Ekushey Book Fair. On February 8, 1972 the legendary publisher and founder of Muktaadhara, Chittaranjan Saha arranged a simple exhibition of 32 books at the Bangla Academy premises that he published from Kolkata under the banner of Shadhin Bangla Shahitto Porishod (Free Bengal Literary Council) during the nine months of liberation war. This remarkable initiative is considered as the first stepping stone of today's festive Amor Ekushey Book Fair.

In the same year, from 20th to 26th December, Bangla Academy organised a book fair to commemorate the UNESCO's declaration of International Book Year.

Afterwards, till 1976 dedicated publishers like Chittaranjan Saha, Mohiuddin Ahmed of University Press Limited (UPL), and Ruhul Amin Nizami of Standard Publishers continued to run the book fair on their own. Finally, in 1978 Bangla Academy officially took the responsibility of organising the book fair every year and in 1984 it was renamed as Amor Ekushey Gronthomela which has now become the lifeline for Bangladeshi book publishers.

However, such dedication and hard work of those pioneering publishers, scholars and book lovers has not come into fruition yet. Publishers have been demanding for decades to recognise book publishing as an industry. Despite of repeated promise, government could not make it due to lack of proper planning and poor coordination between the related offices.

Khan Mahbub a researcher and owner of Palal Prokashoni (Palal Publisher) says, "Government has patronised every sector of art and culture except the publishing sector. For the filmmakers, state has granted loan up to five million Taka on a very small interest, however,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

Old Bangla prose

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Alongside the political, social and religious reasons for the development of prose-writing, there was also an environment which was facilitative of the development of language and literature. Due to the bloom of Bangla verse in the sixteenth century, Bangla had attained an ideal shape and become the medium of expression for the common people. This was the pre-condition for the development of prose-writing.

One of the greatest virtues of prose-in-verse is that it can be stored in the memory easily. As a result, prose can be composed in the mind, in the spoken word. But prose still had to wait to be taken on the written form, to be spread through duplication. In an age, when there was no printing machine, for the spread of literature, the help of the scribe was needed. From the abundance of penned manuscripts from the seventeenth century, it can be said that by that time, professional scribes were every-

where. Therefore, it was the perfect time for the spread of writing in the hitherto unknown form of prose.

In this context, the emergence of prose happened in the sixteenth century. First, there came prose in the form of verse. The infatuation with poetry and rhythm are not shaken off that easily. Besides, Sanskrit *champu* (that is prose compositions) was still present at its root. The amazing power of the poyar that had shadowed Bangla prose is undoubted. Therefore, only when the prose came out from within the verse, it assumed its own form. The influence of the Sanskrit Sutra style in old Bangla prose is also evident. One historian of Sanskrit literature had compared the style of the sutras with the style of language used in telegrams.¹⁵ That form of disjointed, sparse sentences can be noticed in many writings of old Bangla prose. After overcoming these influences, the simple and expressive local prose form developed.

Then, at the hands of anonymous writers

like Manuel da Assumpção and foreigners like Miller, developed a translation-tinged prose. We see the result of that in law books and religious writings. After that, the scholars of Fort William College devoted themselves to the composition of Bangla prose. The abundance of the new soon overshadowed the old. This happened in such a way, that it has now become necessary to remember that the new day for Bangla prose was not its first.

The writer is an eminent writer and educationist, is the Professor Emeritus at the University of Dhaka. He has received many awards in recognition of his contributions. He was awarded the Nilkanta Sarkar Gold Medal from the University of Dhaka, Dawood Prize for literature from the Pakistan Writers' Guild, the Bangla Academy award for research, and the Ekushe Padak, bestowed by the state, for his contribution to education. The original Bangla text of the essay was taken from the write's collection of essays titled Purono Bangla Gadya published by Mowla Brothers

The article was translated by Moyukh Mahtab

References

1. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Languages and Literatures of

- Modern India (Calcutta, 1962), pp 197-98, 204-5, 218-19, 236-37; C.E. Godakumbura, Sinhalese Literature (Colombo, 1955), pp 16-17; Sukumar Sen, Bangala Shahitte Goddo (Third edn; Calcutta, 1356), pp 3.
2. Kailash Chandra Ghosh, Bangala Shahitto (Calcutta, 1292), pp 70-73.
3. Kailash Chandra Ghosh, 'Bongio-Vaishnava-Kabi-Shomproday', Bandhob, Volume Seven (1289), Third, Sixth and Eighth Issue
4. Dineshchandra Sen, Bongobhasha o Sahityo (Calcutta, 1896), p 392.
5. Nagendranath Basu (Collected), Bishwakosh Part 18 (Calcutta, 1314), pp 188-208.
6. Dinesh Chandra Sen, Bengali Prose Style (1800-1857), (Calcutta, 1921), p 8
7. Siva Ratan Mitra, Types of Early Bengali Prose (Calcutta, 1921), p vii.
8. Sushil Kumar De, Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century (2nd edn; Calcutta, 1962), p 413
9. Sajanikanto Das, Bangla Sahityer Itihas, (New edn; Calcutta, 1975), p 8.
10. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language (Reprinted; London, 1970), I: 134.
11. Sukumar Sen, Bangala Sahityer Gadya, p 8.
12. Ibid p 3.
13. Shudangshu Tungo, Banglar Baire Bangla Godya Chorchha: Shorosh-Ostadosh Shotok (Unpublished manuscript)
14. Dinesh Chandra Sen, Bongo-Sahitya-Porichoy, Volume Two (Calcutta, 1914), pp 1641-43.
15. Arther A. Macdonell, A History of Sanskrit Literature (London, 1900), p 35

The first-ever bangla grammar ...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

"cazuaite" = to act on when one has an itch

Words like "kāwā" (crow), "kela" (banana), "ketha" (quilt), "bokri" (goat), "kairot" (pigeon), "khatta" (sour), "dadi" (grandmother), "salam" (salutation), "guna" (sin), etc. are rampant.

Manoel's expertise shows us the Portuguese legacy of creating a chapter on Christian literature in Bengal and initially

it started with the specific transliteration in Roman letters for Bangla. We don't like to enter into more details here but we would agree with Dr S.K. Chatterjee that the style and language of the *Vocabulario* was excellent despite the fact that the art of writing had no model at all. Also, we get a good example of the dialect of the Bhawalpur area near Dhaka, 20 miles north of Narayanganj, of some 281 years ago.

Hence, we feel that the controversies regarding the originality or importance of Father Manoel da Assumpção should be avoided; he should be given his due as the pioneer of Bangla prose writers, having compiled such good work to handle.

It is well-known as experts tell us that there exists over eight p.c. foreign words in Bangla and we have more than one hundred Portuguese words which are very commonly used. So, I would like to conclude by quoting

Dr. Muhammad Enamul Hoque: "The Portuguese influence on the Bengali culture is extremely overwhelming and deep" 6*.

The writer is Dean, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences GONO BISHWABIDYALAY

References

1. Published by Francisco da Silva from Lisbon in 1743.
2. Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V, Part 1, p.23
3. cf. S.K. Chatterjee, Op. cit; "Probeshok" (Introduction), p.15
4. Op. cit., p.96-97
5. Ibid., p.94-95