

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE AMAR EKUSHEY GRANTHA MELA

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PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS



As February begins, book lovers in and outside Dhaka get excited about the Ekushey Boimela, a yearly congregation of Bengali literature, and an incredible reunion of readers with the intoxicating scent of new books.

Unlike other public gatherings, one expects to meet similar minded people at the Boi Mela, coming together with a common passion in mind - their love for books. As you stroll through rows of bookstalls, you will meet bookworms carrying packets of books in both their hands. You will see people admiring a book or reading a page or two standing in front of a stall. In front of the children's section, you might see a parent trying to manage their whining children as they are begged to buy yet another one of those wonderful picture books.

While readers get ready with their shopping lists and double check their budget, other stakeholders - 450 publishers, law enforcers and Bangla Academy authorities also join the festive mood, completing all the necessary

preparations on time.

Unfortunately, the Boi Mela also brings a crowd who are not into books, but more into shoving, pushing, pick pocketing - like any other public gathering in our country. Incidents like these could not keep us away from going to Bangla Academy; in fact, whenever we go to the Boi Mela, we are well armed with our unique protection mechanisms.

But when on February 26, 2015, Avijit Roy, son of noted physicist Ajoy Roy and founder of Mukto-Mona blog, was murdered, and his wife Rafida Afrin Banya seriously injured, as some miscreants hacked them indiscriminately near TSC on the Dhaka University campus, the incident scarred the nation. On some level, it was hard to imagine such a nightmarish scenario could take place in



our hometown, that too at Bangla Academy.

After Avijit's murder, witnessed by many attendees of the Boi Mela, it felt uncomfortable to attend public gatherings. Regular attendees of the Boi Mela were terrified to visit the grand event, last year. It was impossible to shake that nagging feeling, "Could it happen again? If not to me, then to someone else?"

Following the incident, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) had taken fool-proof security measures in and around the venue to avert any unpleasant incident in the upcoming fair. As the spot where Roy was murdered was particularly dark, "enough" lights were also installed around the fair venue alongside other security measures.

Are we to live the rest of our lives in fear, avoiding the very public gatherings that celebrate our values of openness and acceptance? What can we do to stay safe when we are out in public without succumbing to the fear that our enemies so desperately want to instill in us?

As we take pride in hosting such a grand book fair celebrating our Language

Movement, excited book lovers like me will still visit the Boi Mela, but we also have some questions at the back of our minds. Are police and RAB also stationed outside the venue where two high profile attacks were carried out in the last one decade? Do the areas adjacent to the fair venue have enough security surveillance and backup power in case of power cuts?

We really hope that the 250 night vision cameras that are being installed throughout the venue will be adequate, not any less than promised. We hope they are not installed as an eyewash, but have great resolution and work properly. We hope that this year around, 3,000 uniformed and 2,000 plain clothes policemen who will be deployed for the security of the fair can actually make us feel safe. Let's hope that the special security for the foreigners coming to the book fair will help make them feel secure.

Like every year, we are looking forward to embracing this carnival that encourages knowledge and openness.

We want this fair to thrive and exist in all its glory.

