

As sunshine peered through one wintry morning, I found out my grandfather Nirmal Bikash Dasgupta breathed his last in his beloved motherland. He was the sunshine in the lives of many, leaving behind a myriad of memories in our hearts as a patriot, freedom fighter, civil servant, and last but not least, a devoted family man.

My grandfather was a Notre Damian of the 50s and joined Bangladesh Railway in the early 60s. He was already a father of three when the call for the Liberation War came. Without a second thought, he joined as a freedom fighter. Whenever he used to meet his children and grandchildren, he would share his memories of those billowy days.

On one occasion, he had had a head-to-head fight on a boat with the Pakistani military. He barely survived, while the enemy's boat was destroyed by a grenade. Another time, someone informed him that his fourth child was born, but he could not go back home to see her as the war was in full swing. He sent a message home to name her "Joya", as he believed victory was imminent. Bangladesh was liberated a couple of months later. He always shared with us that an independent Bangladesh was the best gift he had received and suggested we work hard to build this nation.

When I was born, my grandfather was a high-ranking official of Bangladesh Railway. My fondest childhood memory was when at the age of five my father went to China for a year-long training

cousin and me for debates on BTv. An avid fan of Rabindranath Tagore, he was a patron of many cultural groups and was the founder of Pallavi Shilpy Gosti, now a 40-year-old organisation. A lover of the serene Bangladeshi countryside, he decided to start an agrobusiness in Lalmonirhat, North Bengal. He had fallen in love with this place while in charge of the region as a railway officer. He established a poultry farm named "Gavi Griho" and started a rice brand called "Radhunipagol". He was a firm believer that agriculture was the secret to a nation's economic growth.



N B Dasgupta in his youth



N B Dasgupta a month before his death.

GRANDFATHER MINE

A freedom fighter's life

SHUVASHISH ROY

and my mother and I went to stay with my grandfather at his quarters in Chittagong. Travelling on trains with him, going to Dhaka in the salon compartment which seemed like an entire flat on a track, and fighting for the largest fried prawn fry with him—all these are just memories now.

He used to surprise us a lot too. I still remember my 12th birthday. We were living in Chittagong then as my father had been transferred there. My grandfather had taken the golden handshake and joined a World Bank project in Dhaka. I implored him to join my birthday at any cost, but when he could not make it, he saw to it that I got a surprise once I got home from school—a brand-new Avon cycle.

He was the beacon of our gang of cousins, shaping us to become good human beings. He would train my



At his office in Bangladesh Railway

Even though his business never quite grew into what he had envisioned, he never gave up.

My grandfather had a thirst for knowledge till the last day of his life. He had always wanted to be a lawyer, but

could never get to it earlier in his life. One fine morning, eight years ago, he informed us that it was his dream to earn an LLB degree and that was what he would pursue now. He got his LLB at the age of 69 and attended the convocation

with his much-younger batch mates. That was the kind of person he was—ready to overcome all odds and reach his goal. Till his last breath, he practiced law as an independent consultant.

We, the younger generation, can learn from him that age is not a barrier to learning. And my suggestion to the youth is to spend as much time with their grandparents as they can. Grandparents are living, breathing encyclopaedias whose legacies it is our duty to carry forward.

My last moment with my grandfather was on January 5, 2018. As a freedom fighter, he was supposed to get a plot of land which he did not get. So he handwrote a long letter to the authorities about his time in the war and in the civil service. He read out the entire letter to me, maybe because God wanted me to listen to his life story for the last time. Two days later he had a brain stroke and eventually left us on January 14. Here comes the end of the life of a brave warrior, a loving father and grandparent, and a patriot who hoped to breathe his last in his motherland. At his funeral pyre, I was gazing into the fire, my eyes full of tears, and a song by Rabindranath buzzing in my ears:

"Amar mukti aloy aloy, ei akashe,
Amar mukti aloy aloy,
Amar mukti dhulay dhulay, ghashe ghashe."

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TRIBUTE

BOI MELA

There is a definite excitement that comes along with the month of February, one that has to do with the beginning of Ekushey Boi Mela. The Boi Mela brings together thousands from every corner of the country; different people who share a common love of reading.

I confess. Having grown up in Chittagong, my foray into the world of Boi Mela was as late as last year. But once you're there, it's impossible not to feel the excitement of book-lovers as they scurry from stall to stall on a quest for new books. I asked seven people about their cherished memories, what excites them and what they're looking forward to in an effort to piece together our enduring fascination with the fair. No two answers were the same but all collectively capture the timeless charm of Boi Mela.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

7 PEOPLE ON WHAT BOI MELA MEANS TO THEM

MITHI CHOWDHURY

An advertising executive on the anticipation of new books

For Mashroor Hossain, a senior executive at advertising agency Kudoclass, the month of February comes with the promise of new books. "Since as long as I can remember, Boi Mela meant combing through the newspapers every morning and making a list of all the books I wanted to buy. The most exciting part was picking apart each stall one at a time, reading reviews and summaries of the newest publications, and then, leaving with an armload of books in my hand." While the works of Muhammed Zafar Iqbal and Humayun Ahmed are book-spree staples for him, Mashroor loves the impulsive purchases that come along with the discovery of new writers, explaining, "I really look forward to works by Horishonkor Jolodash, an underrated but brilliant writer of our time, and books on political history or the Liberation War that are added to the roster each year."

The seduction of Boi Mela isn't just limited to the high experienced from the smell of new pages and freshly-printed ink. "Browsing all the stalls is an experience in itself, especially Annyaprakash, Ananya, and Prothoma, with their exquisite designs which get exceedingly better each year," Mashroor adds.

A book-lover on the celebration of reading

Boi Mela draws in massive crowds but to many people, books aren't the only attraction. Tabassum Islam Susmi, a student of BRAC University, visits every

year but she isn't as enchanted by Boi Mela as she used to be. "These days, many people come for the sake of selfies, not to buy books. Moreover, I haven't been content with the collection of books available in the last few years," elaborates Susmi. Despite all that, she acknowledges that the power of Boi Mela to amass bookworms from all over the country is unparalleled. "It's the biggest gathering of enthusiasts who love books. That's why I keep coming back—the fair is a place where literature, art and the culture of reading are celebrated. That's something I look forward to," she tells me.

A business student on childhood memories

Meeting favourite authors and getting their autographs is one of the biggest attractions of Boi Mela. Sadia Nusrat Siddique, a student of IBA, DU, recalls, "Meeting Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Selina Hossain, and Shamsur Rahman will always be among my most cherished memories. They were the authors of my childhood," she reminisces. For many, Boi Mela is that time of the year they finally get around to purchasing the books they've been meaning to. "While I was growing up, a new Harry Potter book would be released every year. I would visit Onkur Prokashoni to buy the Bangla translation of that year's Harry Potter installment. Going to the book fair with my parents and grabbing those fat and colourful HP books will always be one of my best memories!" exclaims Sadia.

And who can forget the amazing bargains available throughout the month? "I can't wait to avail the 25 percent discount on all the books during Boi Mela. This is the best time to buy all those fancy collections and omnibuses," she adds.

A doctor on old habits and nostalgia

Dr Ishrat Jahan Mouri, a dental surgeon, and President, Platform Organisation for Medical and Dental Society, grew up on the premises of Boi Mela and used to spend the whole year in anticipation of February. "I've known the way to Boi Mela since the time I began to read and write. Growing up, books were my greatest friends; nothing made me happier than the sight of freshly-printed pages. The rhymes of Lutfur Rahman Riton and Aesop's fables were the soundtrack to my childhood. As I grew up, the works of Humayun Ahmed and Muhammed Zafar Iqbal took over. The memories of Misir Ali, Himu-Rupa and Deepu are still fresh in my mind," she recalls. Ishrat misses the older, small-scale Boi Mela that was limited only to Bangla Academy premises, saying, "I still visit every year by way of habit but I miss the intimacy of the smaller mela. It's not the same anymore. The passing of Humayun Ahmed has lessened the charm for me as well because he was my favourite writer. I hope I stumble onto new authors whose works hook me as much as Humayun Ahmed's did."

As Boi Mela continues to evolve, so does the reading habits of new generations. E-books have been incorporated into Boi Mela, with stalls such as Bengal eBoi, Sheibo, and Boighor offering hundreds of e-books available for download on-site. These days, reading on various gadgets is the new normal and I can't help but wonder what they'll be missing out on. "The emotions evoked by the smell of new pages are unlike any other. I'm unsure whether the next generation will be able to experience the pure joy of holding a book and reading it while lying sideways on one's bed," she comments.

A publisher on connecting with readers

For publishers, Boi Mela is the most important time of the year. Monirul Haque, the proprietor of Ananya Publishing House, says, "We spend the whole year planning for this, deciding

which books to publish." Ananya will be publishing 125 new books this year, and for the proprietor, Boi Mela provides a unique experience. "This is an amazing opportunity to talk to readers and find out what they want to read."

A mother on imparting the love of reading

Boi Mela presents a different opportunity for mothers—to share their love of reading with their children. Nasim Akhter, a retired NGO worker, and mother, has been taking her children to Boi Mela for years, saying, "I introduced my children to the habit of reading by taking them to the fair every year because I believed it would help them become better human beings." Nasim herself has been visiting Boi Mela for many years and shares one of her earliest memories with me—"Once, I saved up tiffin money to buy a beautiful book with a green cover for my younger brother. The name of the book was *Malachite er Jhapi*." (A Bangla translation of a Soviet-era Russian children's book.)

Nasim will be visiting again this year due to the "sheer variety of books found in a single venue."

A cartoonist on getting published

For writers, Boi Mela presents the most opportune time to release and publicise their works. Sharier Khan, prominent cartoonist and journalist, is widely acclaimed for his comic books. He will have his graphic novel published this year. "For me, the most exciting thing about the fair is having my work published. Boi Mela presents the biggest commercial incentive for writers to showcase their work. It also gives us a chance to see the works of other writers. Boi Mela isn't just a celebration of literature, it's a congregation of people who love reading. This is why Boi Mela still has such a significance in our culture."

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