

# WHAT ARE YOU READING?

As we are now in the final week of February, Star Weekend asked five writers in the country about the annual Boi Mela and which books they look forward to reading.

**Kaiser Haq**  
“I am looking forward to reading Ghulam Murshid’s biography of Kazi Nazrul Islam [“*Bidrohi Ronoklanto (Nazrul Jiboni)*”]. Dr. Murshid has an excellent track record as a scholar, and I have enjoyed his biography of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and his edition of Dutt’s letters. I hope the Nazrul biography will enable me to gain some insights into the rebel poet’s personality and the historical situations he had to deal with.”  
*Kaiser Haq is a poet whose most recent works are “Published*



**Selina Hossain**  
“I choose Izaz Ahmed Milon’s “*Attokothon: Bedona Amar Jonmo Shohodor*”. I picked this book for two reasons. First, the writer has the courage to challenge society and describes quite naturally the reality of his early years. Second, I believe his nuanced observations of his surroundings will lead to him becoming a socially-conscious writer. I was moved by his descriptions of his childhood years, which is a strength of this young writer. Milon upholds societal values and if the youth of the country model themselves after him, there will be less deterioration of societal values.”  
*Selina Hossain is a short story*



**Anisul Hoque**  
“I have already bought many books and started reading them as well —such as Kamruzzam an Kamu’s “*Ani Rohingya*” and Sumon Rahman’s short story, “*Niroporadh Ghum*”. I am also looking forward to reading Mohiuddin Ahmad’s “*Ei Deshe Ekdin Juddho Hoyechilo*”. As I am currently working on a book on Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmed, I buy any books I can find on them or on our history. So, I am mainly reading books on history, the Liberation War, and autobiographies for research.”  
*Anisul Hoque is a novelist whose books on the Liberation War*



**Imdadul Haq Milon**  
“I buy and collect books from the Boi Mela in February and start reading them from March. Usually, I buy in bulk starting after February 21, as most books come in by that time. I am looking forward to reading Ghulam Murshid’s “*Bidrohi Ronoklanto (Nazrul Jiboni)*” from Prothoma and Muntasir Mamun’s “*Hariye Jete Ney Mana*” brought out by Journeyman Books. I buy and read books mainly on history, particularly of the Liberation War, and autobiographies.”  
He advises readers to buy books on topics they like and not just what everyone else is buying. “Writers are not as important as the subject.” He also adds that readers should try to buy good books and look for substance, over style.

BOI MELA



There is not much to love about being a woman on the streets of Dhaka. Let’s call a spade a spade—Dhaka streets are not pedestrian-friendly, irrespective of one’s gender. Missing or broken pavements, gaping holes to catch you off guard, footpaths overtaken by hawkers, vendors, makeshift shops of all sorts, piled up construction materials, spilled-over garbage, bikers and even rickshaws carrying passengers looking to cut across heavy traffic—you name any inconvenience, the phenomenal streets of Dhaka has it. Yet, there’s no dearth of people on the street. Pedestrians, beggars, peddlers... even elephants adapt and claim the streets of Dhaka, but not its women.

The now iconic morning procession of female garment workers striding confidently to work, or women bikers of all ages reclaiming the streets of Dhaka might trick you into believing otherwise. After all, it’s a formidable sight—a spectacle in itself. The problem lies exactly here. Women, no matter how strong or weak, able and willing to walk, whether alone or in packs, are never a part of the street—they always stand out! The city streets exist as if in opposition to its women, and quite passive-aggressively so.

Yet, I, a woman, want to walk the streets of Dhaka. As unambitious as it may sound, all I want is to mind my business (or mind no business at all) on the streets. But women, idling around or simply loitering, is a social anomaly. Very often, I’m told that all I need is to reclaim my rights to the street, no matter what. Dear people, I invite you all to walk the streets of Dhaka with a woman, if not as one, to understand the futility of this zealous provocation.

Growing up in Dhaka, I have always lived a life of apprehension, anticipating the worst on the go. I remember making trips to a crowded Nilkhet or New Market during Eid with a bag, clutched close to my bosom to avert the slithering groping hands from apparently

## WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT WALKING IN THE STREETS OF DHAKA



CARTOON: E R RONNY

unsuspecting men in the crowd. This would surely enrage but not surprise me. Invasion of your private space in public is all but expected and you prepare yourself accordingly. Preparation is the key, I was told.

Alas! Even with all the preparations, a woman can only do this much: ward off the evil hand, not the evil eye! People on the street, it seems, feel entitled to stare at you. There are all types of stares—the inappropriately inquisitive kind, sheer disapproving kind, judging-you-silently kind, the leering kind, and the most common just-like-that kind. All of these are cast upon you without any discretion or secrecy, but with such confidence and relentless determination that it makes you question your right to the city.

My daily mandatory walks nowadays involve strutting to and from two offices of the university where I teach. As I walk past the motley crowd engaged in diverse activities centering a mini make-shift bazaar, complete with vegetable vendors, chicken, fish, fruit sellers, tea shop, food carts and an idlers’ corner, I feel an invisible, yet palpable weight on me. And I’m constantly reminded of my

What's in it for me?  
No! I don't want the equal rights to pee, defecate, spit or drill others with my piercing eyes when I'm out in public. All I want is to walk the streets

gender. Often, I increase the pace of my walk and take the street instead, avoiding the pavement altogether. The faces change, but not the stare. Once I remember feeling so uncomfortable that I had to take a sneak peek at my own attire to ensure everything was in place, and that I was not inviting the stares. “They are harmless and don’t really

do anything to you!” some would comment, invalidating my reaction as misplaced and excessive. It’s this widespread perception of staring as “non-action”—and a non-violent one at that—which indirectly endorses this pervasive practice. The perceived harmlessness derives from its comparison to the much graver “actions” that directly threaten woman’s safety, I soon realised.

Still angry and frustrated, and this time in a different neighbourhood, I decided to just avert my gaze and look sideways only to witness another nuisance—urinating men in public. I quickly looked the other way, feeling ashamed for being privy, however accidentally, to this display of a lack of civic sense. I was almost blaming myself for being present in the wrong place at the wrong time, while the man relived himself, and walked away at a leisurely pace, unperturbed as ever.

One may argue, citizens relieving themselves in public are a given, since there are not enough public toilets. Does the same argument hold true for women, as well? Of course not, you’d say. The city infrastructure is an indication that public spaces are primarily thought of as male spaces and hence not designed around the needs of women, making their presence as awkward as that of an unwanted guest.

The dilemma of being a woman in Dhaka streets is that the city won’t acknowledge you, yet it won’t let you dissociate from it. A woman always shows up against the city, even when she is at her best and apparently empowered self. Women whizzing past on scooties or bicycles are a happy sight, no doubt, but as I watch the watcher, gawking at them, my new found hope deflates. I follow the gazer some more, as they scan the women from head to toe for whatever is visible (and invisible) to the mortal eye. Women, in all their fierceness, still remain the spectacle in both their action and non-action.

Nowadays, talks on women-friendly cities are on the rise. It sounds all good, but with a caveat—the discourse starts and ends with issues of safety and violence alone. It gets women six to nine reserved seats in a public transport alongside children and disabled passengers, which is a surefire sign of our limited understanding of the gendered nature of the use of the city. I’m not saying that safety is unimportant, but I’m also concerned that in this clamour for safety alone, many other rights to the city and urban experiences that women are entitled to, are thwarted. This prioritisation helps naturalise the dichotomous positioning of public and private along the line of stereotypical gender roles. The city that comes out of such discourses is even more male than before. It’s time we make more effort to know in how many diverse ways women

### ENDEAVOUR

While Boi Mela sadly lasts only a month, what do readers in Dhaka and the rest of the country do the rest of the year? Buying a year’s worth of books in one go is hardly feasible. For those without the means to buy, reading for pleasure is a luxury. Readers, especially young students, require a well-stocked and diverse library in the vicinity of their home or where they work or study to encourage them to read year-round.

For those outside the cities, libraries can especially be few and far between and more importantly, scarce in quality books. A 2015 Education Watch report noted that only 12.1 percent of rural primary schools in the country had library facilities for their students. Of these, only one percent had a separate room for a library. Books were more commonly placed on a shelf in the teachers’ or principal’s room.

A comprehensive study of the library landscape in Bangladesh (conducted in collaboration among the British Council, the government, BRAC and the Bengal Foundation) found that 52 percent of librarians said that existing materials in their libraries were insufficient for their users. The study surveyed 136 public and privately-run libraries scattered throughout the country. Popular among readers were literary books and books on

## ADOPT A LIBRARY

Help revive a library culture by donating to institutions in need of books

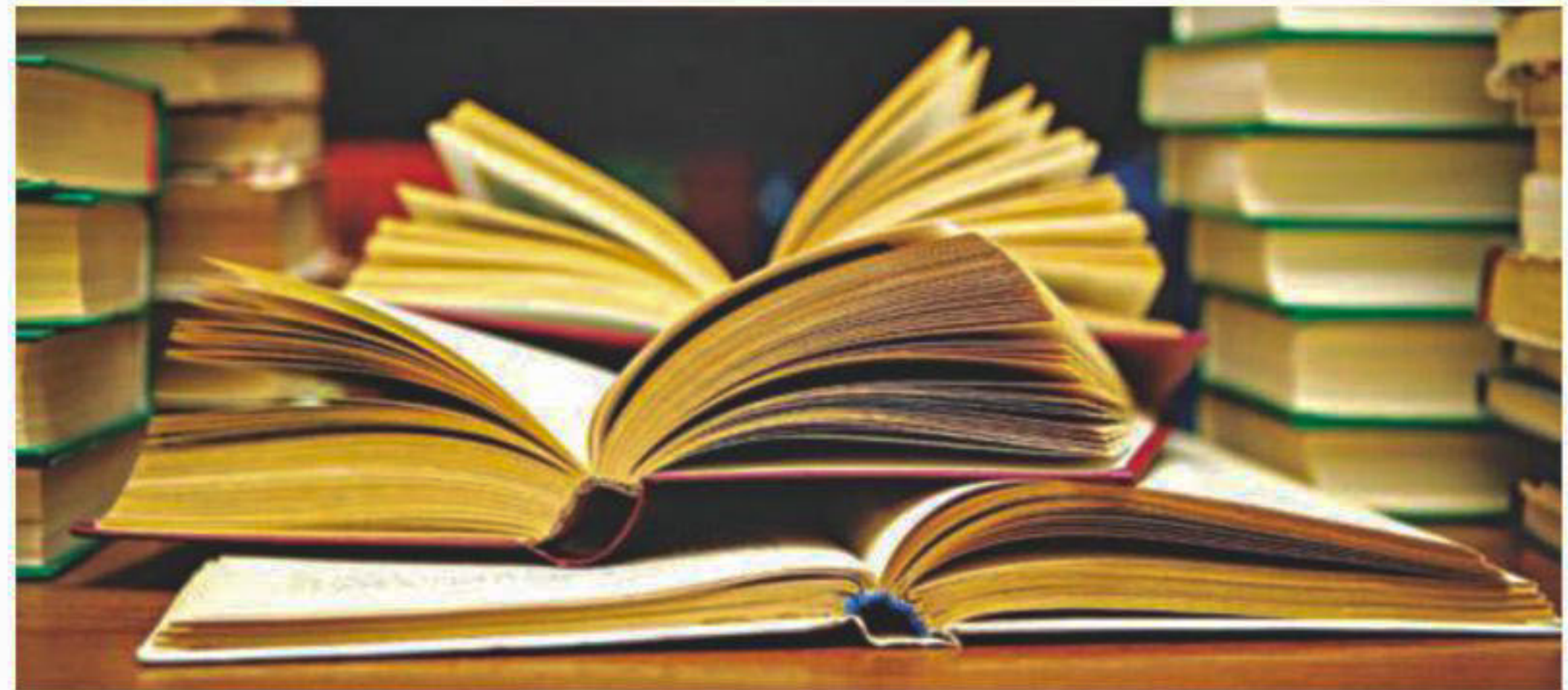


PHOTO: COURTESY

history, politics, and religion, according to the librarians surveyed. In a digital age, with information at their fingertips, it is difficult to encourage users when libraries cannot afford to stock quality books or update their collection to keep them relevant for readers.

The University Press Limited (UPL), a publishing house in Dhaka, launched the Adopt-a-Library programme last year to revive a library culture among readers.

The organisation first reached out to institution-based libraries, such as in schools and colleges, where a basic infrastructure already exists to house books for students. UPL screens the institutions requesting books and then gives them a choice of book-bundles to choose from. Each bundle of books consists of around 30 books of a variety of genres—mostly in Bangla, with some in English, and includes books for teachers.

The institution itself chooses which bundle it wants for its library. A bundle of books for a school library costs BDT 8,000 or USD 100 (ranging from the children’s book “*Swim Little Fish Swim*” by Niaz Zaman to Rabindranath Tagore’s works “*Chokher Bali*” and “*Chaturanga*”) while BDT 12,000 (or USD 150) buys a bundle of books for college libraries and stand-alone libraries (including works by Imdadul Haq Milon and a collection of women’s narratives of 1971).

Donors can choose which type of book-bundle they want to buy for a library—in addition to educational institutes, stand-alone public and private libraries can also be donated to. Once a donor confirms for a particular type of library, the books will be delivered to the institution.

A pilot conducted with bundles of UPL’s own books saw great demand from school and college libraries in particular, says Mahrukh Mohiuddin, director of operations and business development at UPL. “The idea has been well appreciated,” she says. UPL is currently seeking donations from both individuals and organisations, to help stock libraries around the country with the model it has developed. “After more than 40 years [of UPL in the publishing industry], it was our way of linking back with the community. We have produced