



PUBLISHERS PREPARE FOR THE BOI MELA

The annual fair is the nexus around which the publishing industry revolves



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PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

February is synonymous with a string of cultural events, but none perhaps as iconic as the Ekushey Boi Mela, a month-long commemoration of the 1952 Language movement that takes over Suhrawardy Udyan and Bangla Academy. What started out as a modest display of books by Muktohdara Prokashoni by the Bangla Academy south gate in 1974 has grown, over the decades, into the literary highlight of the year.

Not to suggest that this is unique to Bangladesh; the 2017 Global Book Fair report by the International Publishers Association notes that book fairs are necessary as a platform where readers and authors directly interact, publishers and retailers network, and the media pay attention. But while book festivals the world over allow readers to discover what has been published throughout the year in addition to the featured releases at the time of the event, the Boi Mela is unique in that it draws writers and publishers alike to plan specifically for the month of February.

BY THE NUMBERS

"I wouldn't say that the Boi Mela gets more response from readers than the rest of the year combined, but roughly 50 percent of our annual turnover comes from the month of February," says Farid Ahmed, publisher of Shomoy Prokashoni and president of the Academic and Creative Publishers' Association of Bangladesh.

Mashfique Tonmoy, publisher of Boshadupur Books, concurs, comparing their release of 50 books at Boi Mela this year to the five or six titles released throughout the rest of the year. You'd normally expect this to hamper business the year-round, but as Mashfique explains, their sales over the remaining 11 months is actually carried by the popularity of the titles released in February.

Ahmed Sarwerruddawla, managing director of Academic Press and Publishers Library (APPL), agrees that as publishers, their yearly work builds up to the fair. But, he says, sales are not as high as expected. "People come here in great numbers, but

they buy very little." His own publishing house saw approximate sales of BDT 3 lakh during Boi Mela last year while his overhead costs alone were around a third of that.

"It's not about how many books we brought out, but how many good books we brought out. There is an expectation that everything has to be released at the fair. That creates an unfair pressure on the publishers and authors," says Mahrukh Mohiuddin of University Press Limited (UPL).

WHAT SELLS?

"Some publishers who get good business at this time are those who have very popular writers. Others who see profit are where writers themselves invest to get their books published," says Hossain.

Sales also depend on the genre. Each year, the response from readers—the books they search for and the writers and topics they ask about at the fair—allows publishers to plan the following year's content.

