



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

The secret life of booksellers

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Petrichor is the word for when rain hits dry soil, releasing a fragrance almost impossible to describe—the earth smells wetter somehow; richer, browner, greener. It was petrichor I smelled as I roamed, shuffled, and tiptoed my way through rain-drenched parts of southern Dhaka this past Monday. But there's another scent that grows stronger (or so it feels) when the city is covered in rain. As I bookstore-hopped through New Market, Nilkhet, Mohammadpur and Tejgaon, the smell of the books' pages hung potent in the air. You could smell a whiff of something metallic from the grey textbook pages in New Market; Nilkhet's second-hand paperbacks released more strongly their musty odours, and both Charcha and Bookworm Bangladesh smelled of fresh paper that you knew would feel clean and crisp in your hands. Surrounded by this

aura on rainy Monday sat the curators familiar with every nook and cranny of these little stores, discussing passionately their love for the books they sell, for the respect and imagination and possibilities their work makes possible—the booksellers.

Why sell books?

Nizamul Huq, 38, one of the salesmen at Book Stall in New Market, earns only around Tk 15,000-16,000 a month from his job, where he works six days a week. Muhammad Zakir Hossain, 42, owner of a tiny stall full to the brim with books in Nilkhet, doesn't even keep a record of how much he makes each month. He just knows he has to pay rent by the 10th of each month and his daughters' school fees by the 9th. Every month, he hopes for the best, sometimes managing to extend the school fee payment by an extra week

or two. And Sabrina Islam, co-owner of Charcha bookstore in Mohammadpur, is constantly reminded of how niche a clientele her business serves, due to a serious dearth of book readers. All of these businesses were hampered by the arrival in Bangladesh of e-books, social media, online news portals and, in the case of Zakir whose business spans back decades, more television channels around 1998. And yet they all, situated across the city and the socioeconomic spectrum, assert the value of bookselling.

"I could have chosen to do anything else. But this work of mine has so much beauty, so much peace and discipline," says Zakir, who lost his father and with him their financial stability when he was in Class Two, going on to sell magazines on sidewalks before finally opening his store in Nilkhet after he moved to Dhaka and married. Setting up the store required an investment of Tk 200,000. Zakir had only Tk 20,000 cash. He borrowed from his brother, from cousins, repaying them once business took off—all memories from a time when Nilkhet was uncrowded, but the entrance to his store would be crammed with readers waiting for him to open up every morning. Sadly, the situation has reversed now. Nonetheless, Zakir explains: "When we go to buy something from the sidewalk, we all but snap at the



vendor. *Ai beta, eta de, oita de.* But my customers—students, professors and so many others—all call me Zakir Shaheb. A barely literate person such as myself caters to so many learned minds. We speak on the phone, I visit their houses to deliver books. The personal relationships you build in this line of work are beautiful."

Charcha, nestled in a homely corner of Mohammadpur, and Bookworm Bangladesh, whose original branch has become akin to a tiny landmark on the Old Airport road, were both born of personal ties. Sabrina and Sabbir Bin Shams conceived Charcha at the suggestion of the latter with the specific purpose of selling "rare" books, such as long-forgotten classics, quality translations of non-Anglophone literature, uncommon non-fiction titles and genres, and obscure titles requested

Continued to page 4



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