

STAR WEEKEND

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BOOK PUBLISHING IN TATTERS

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Shahbagh, the intellectual heart of Dhaka, becomes a meeting place for renowned and promising authors, scholars, poets, journalists, readers, and intellectuals from far and wide, at least twice a year. Once during the Amar Ekushey Book fair in February and once during the Dhaka Lit Fest in November. The overflowing milieu of these festivals gives one the appearance that Bangladesh must be a haven for publishers and booksellers.

With such abundance of potential readers, it could have well been the reality. However, it is not. According to publishers, poor readership, excessive cost of production materials, absence of a distribution system, and negligence of the state to mitigate these problems have all pushed book publishing in Bangladesh to the edge of existence. Many renowned publishers can barely make their ends meet while younger publishers are struggling to keep their businesses alive.

Our publishing industry has a long and eventful past. According to Mohiuddin

Ahmed, a veteran author, editor, and the founder of University Press Limited (UPL), the industry is closely linked with the emergence of Bengali nationalism in the late 1940s. In his book titled *Bangladeshe Pustak Prokashona*, Ahmed explains how pioneering publishers such as Nawroze Kitabistan, Ahmod Publishing House, and Maola Brothers began publishing creative literature that fuelled the movements in the 50s and 60s.

In 1954, the United Front (Jukta Front) achieved landslide victory in the elections to the then East Bengal Legislative Assembly with a pledge to recognise Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. According to the promise, the Central Board for the Development of Bengali was established and under its patronisation renowned scholar Munir Chowdhury developed a Bengali keyboard called Munir Keyboard for the typewriter. It was a ground-breaking progress for the book publishing industry in Dhaka, especially for publishing Bengali books. Besides, the continuous

politico-cultural movement against West Pakistani rulers in the late 50s and 60s gave birth to significant literary creations by the Bengali poets and authors, which also encouraged some of the notable publishing houses to emerge and flourish. Among them were Ahmod Publishing House (1954), Beauty Book House (1962), Khan Brothers (1966), Muktaadhara etc.

The development of Bangladesh's publishing industry in the post-independence era is deeply indebted to the introduction of Amar Ekushey Book Fair. On February 8, 1972 the legendary publisher and founder of Muktaadhara, Chittaranjan Saha arranged a simple exhibition of 32 books at the Bangla Academy premises, which he published from Kolkata under the banner of Shadhin Bangla Shahitto Porishod (Free Bengal Literary Council) during the nine months of the Liberation War.

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