



## The circulation of Bangla books

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The exchange of comments on posts, stories, and live sessions between bloggers and followers also allows for a more organic flow of ideas surrounding a book or author.

But while a search for #bookstagram brings up 56.1 million posts on Instagram at the time of my writing this article, #bookstagrambd brings up only 35,500 posts and variations of "bengalibooks", "banglabooks", and "bengaliliterature" bring up barely over 5,000 posts. And whereas podcasts, book clubs, and individual

profiles promoting literatures of colour from other parts of the world, even neighbouring India and Pakistan, boast tens of thousands of followers, few profiles featuring Bangla works exist to begin with, and their follower base is substantially lower. Here, too, access and mobility deter traffic—international giveaways by publishers and bloggers often leave Bangladesh out.

"I think maybe there is a language barrier," says Samira Ahmed popularly known as The Millennial Ma, among the most popular Bengali Instagram bloggers based in the UK, who also features books. "Indian or African readers

promoting local writers use mostly English to communicate. If people post bilingual captions, make most use of IGTV, reels, live sessions etc., it can work better."

If the Covid-19 pandemic had any positive effect on our lives last year, it was the drastic rise in the scale of conversations across communities. Unlike ever before in *The Daily Star's* history, each of our departments were organising live sessions with authors, publishers, artists, and politicians on an almost weekly basis, and unlike with print interviews, our readers and viewers could partake in those conversations

through live comments. This has only proven that boundaries of geography and logistics are porous and malleable, and with some enthusiasm on the part of both parties, circulation of literatures between Bengal—comprising Bangladesh and West Bengal—and the wider world is not an impossible feat. Assistance from businesses and governments could help ease the financial and logistical barriers. As always, writers, artists, and readers can take care of the rest.

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## The promise and challenge of Bangla in the digital age

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of Bangla in computers must go to the Avro word-processing software. Avro's masterstroke was to take a page from the word-processing rationale followed by languages like Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Word-processing in these languages present a difficult challenge. Chinese and Japanese, for instance, have thousands of characters. How does one design a keyboard for it? Software designers came up with a brilliant solution. Instead of using keys to represent script, why not use the QWERTY keyboard and spell out the words? In other words, use the Roman keyboard and spell the words phonetically in the Roman alphabet. This spared the user from mastering a separate keyboard. Anybody who used a computer was familiar with the QWERTY keyboard anyway.

To be sure, Avro was not the first phonetic Bangla software. But Avro had two things going for it. It was free and it was open source. What that means is the public-spirited designer made the source code freely available for further innovation. This has led other public-spirited software designers to constantly update and embellish it so that today it is a sturdy, extraordinarily user-friendly software that can be used on Windows, Mac and pretty much anywhere else.

As a Bangladeshi, I feel proud that Avro is the overwhelming favourite software for Bangla all over the world (I have no statistics, but my guess is Google input tools may be a distant second). Universal access to Bangla on the computer has led to prodigious Bangla content on the Web, and with acceptance of Unicode font as standard for Bangla, it is possible to search the Web in Bangla. The Bangla Wikipedia page is a growing resource.

However, universal access to Bangla on the computer is a means, not an end. The broader goal is to use this extraordinarily powerful digital technology to promote Bangla publishing. One critical area where Bangla has missed a trick is in the field of eBooks. An eBook is a version of the printed book that can be accessed on the laptop, smartphone or tablet or a specialised device expressly designed for the purpose of reading books, for example, the Kindle eBook reader made by Amazon.

According to the American Association of Publishers, 234 million eBooks were sold in the US in 2018 (this is 13 percent



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of total sales of a whopping 1.8 billion books sold in all formats). Given the dire state of the Bangla publishing industry—the average print run of a Bangla book is a paltry 300 books in Bangladesh—eBooks offer an especially promising avenue (the publishing industry in West Bengal is considerably more robust, but I worry about stagnation when I see authors who were in their prime several decades ago, some deceased, still on current bestseller lists).

The initial costs of publishing eBooks are minimal; storage, shipping and subsequent production costs are negligible, and its reach is global. Bangla readers, it must be remembered, are spread out all over the world with substantial expatriate communities in the US, UK and the Middle East. Yet, eBooks have an appalling record in Bangla publishing. None of the leading publishers in Dhaka or Kolkata published Bangla eBooks until last year, when Ananda Publishers in Kolkata, the heavyweight in Bangla publishing, launched eBooks on its customised app. In Bangladesh, Bengal Books was the only leading publisher that attempted a short-lived effort to publish eBooks, and now, only Adarsha Publishers publishes eBooks. Its website mentions a booklist of 157 books, but it's not clear how many are available as eBooks. In West Bengal, relatively smaller boutique publishing

houses like Parul, Guruchandali and Srishtisukh publish eBooks. The size of the booklist is modest.

Why have Bangla eBooks failed to take off? Is this a chicken-and-egg problem? Is it Bangla publishing that is reacting to reader apathy, or are readers scarce because a culture of reading Bangla eBooks has failed to develop due to the lack of eBooks? Are Bangla readers too old-fashioned to adopt the new technology of reading books online?

The Facebook group BoierHut offers a stirring rebuttal to naysayers. The group, launched in 2012 by an Atlanta-based Bangladeshi expat bibliophile, has grown into a global family of Bangla book lovers. A group of administrators from Bangladesh and West Bengal screen over 500 posts each day to maintain the Facebook group, which is dedicated to discussions exclusively about Bangla books and literature, exclusively in Bangla. It has over 165,000 members, drawn from West Bengal, Bangladesh and pretty much all over the world, and provides access to over 40,000 online Bangla books put up by members. Administrators say massive numbers of books are downloaded, though obviously the fact that a book is downloaded does not prove that it has been read.

BoierHut founders readily concede that making all these books available is an ethically grey area that raises copyright

issues. However, BoierHut has never made a cent on this, so the whole effort is towards promoting Bangla books and literature. The stunningly positive response from Bangla readers has apparently generated enough goodwill to soothe the qualms of publishers, because BoierHut is on excellent terms with publishers in both Dhaka and Kolkata. Last year, BoierHut took another historic step and started publishing Bangla books on Amazon's Kindle. There have been scattershot efforts before this, but BoierHut is the first to do it in a professional way. It registered as a company in the US and officially signed up with Amazon. It signed contracts with authors and publishers, pledging a commission on sales.

All told, there are currently over 70 titles with authors from Dhaka and Kolkata. Of course, it's a long, steep, uphill climb, and total sales are quite modest—around 450 eBooks.

This makes BoierHut's efforts all the more laudable—this is obviously far from a get-rich-quick scheme. Instead, BoierHut represents one of the loftier Bangladeshi traditions epitomised by organisations like Chhayanaut and Bengal Foundation—it is dedicated to the broader goal of promoting culture. There are caveats. Amazon supports purchases in India but does not support purchases in Bangladesh, so readers in Bangladesh have to find a workaround (the same titles are available on Google Play). Even more galling, Amazon does not support Bangla—although it supports Hindi and Gujarati. Bangla books, therefore, are in a grey area.

All of this goes to show that Bangla eBooks still have some ways to go. However, we can take heart from the fact that in the initial days, Bangla had a rough time entering the computer age, but ultimately weathered the challenges quite well. With hard work and dedication, a concerted effort is the need of the hour to build Bangla eBooks as a robust outlet for Bangla publishing.

Literature is the cradle of our culture, and it draws sustenance from the vibrant exchange of ideas made possible by books and periodicals. It is the essence of our identity, and its promotion is the most meaningful way to honour the memory of the martyrs of 1952.

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