

Boi Mela is bringing kids to books. We can take this further.



Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

LAILA KHONDKAR

“DURING school holidays, my coaching centre is closed. I encourage students to read books, play or do things they really enjoy. But most parents enrol them in some other coaching centres during their break,” says a schoolteacher in Dhaka.

Most parents in Bangladesh view success in exams to be the most important thing in their children’s lives. This is not conducive to their holistic development. Children are also spending a disproportionate amount of time online. Many are developing problems with their eyesight and experiencing delayed speech development. It has become common that parents are often busy with smartphones and hardly have time to pay attention to children even when they need it. In this context, it is a welcome relief that children are visiting the Ekushey Boi Mela with their parents and buying books.

Reading books is essential for developing children’s imagination, analytical skills, concentration, communication, etc. It can also be a joyous experience. Parents should start reading books to children when they are a few months old. Giving books as gifts during birthdays and festivals helps in developing reading habits from a young age. Children should be given the opportunity to read books that they are interested in, instead of being influenced to read texts of specific genres. Once they find reading to be a pleasurable activity, they will explore other genres of their own

accord. Any questions a child may have about books should also be encouraged and entertained.

Parents decide all aspects of their children’s lives including food, clothing, toys, leisure activities, etc. Hence, it is their responsibility to provide guidance to children on the optimum usage of electronic devices. In addition to reading, parents should engage children in sports and creative activities which will ensure the latter’s holistic development. Moreover, parents and adult family members must limit their own use of electronic devices. Children should receive uninterrupted attention from parents, without the interference of smart devices.

A lot of experimentation is going on worldwide with the size, shapes, illustration and overall production of children’s books. Some are being printed on soft cloth to help babies and toddlers become familiar with the experience. Traditional fairy tales are also being rewritten to make them more appealing to the children of today.

Some parents living in Dhaka have said that while their children read English books, they are not at all interested in Bangla books, as their content and quality fail to attract them. While it is important to read good-quality books published in other languages, we should ensure that children read books in their mother language as well. Children of different ages think and feel differently, and their reading speeds vary, too. New issues in society should be considered while writing books for children, so that they find them relevant and enjoyable. As such, books should be categorised by age. In addition to the content, the illustration and print must be of high quality. Children already have access to a lot of visual products, and books have to compete with digital imagery to appeal



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PHOTO: STAR/PRABIR DAS

to them. Writers, illustrators, editors and publishers thus have to perform effectively to create good-quality content. Though a few publishers are trying to improve the quality of their products in Bangladesh, many children’s books are of compromised quality.

Once publishers invest in improving the quality of children’s books, parents must be willing to buy those. These days, many parents are spending a lot on their children’s clothes, food, on eating out or for travelling. Why should they also not have a monthly budget for buying books, then? The right books can be just as rewarding and entertaining as a video game or a trip outdoors.

There are opportunities to make our Ekushey Boi Mela more child-friendly. Stalls’ layouts should be done in a way that children are able to browse through the books easily. There should be facilitators who will engage children

properly. The decoration of the stalls could also be done more creatively to appeal to them. Activities could be organised so that they can interact with their favourite and new authors.

The Boi Mela should offer a space to facilitate activities that will help children begin to love books. Events should be conducted where children can participate in writing and illustration activities, take part in storytelling, etc. They can also dress up like their favourite characters. But we should not have to wait for Boi Mela to promote children’s books. Storytelling sessions and interesting activities centred around books should be organised in bookshops and other academic, social and cultural venues all year round if we are to create readers for our future. School- and community-based libraries could also play a vital role in developing children’s love for lifelong reading.

Watch out for trouble in southeast Bangladesh



Lt Gen Mohammad Mahfuzur Rahman, PhD, is a retired officer of Bangladesh Army.

MOHAMMAD MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE southeast part of Bangladesh shares border with the Mizoram state of India and the Rakhine state of Myanmar. This part is covered with extensive hills ranging from 300 to 1,000 meters or even higher, with hardly any modern communication facilities in the tri-border area. It is also covered with a dense forest of mainly bamboos, making observation from ground and air fairly restricted. This is a perfect geophysical condition for insurgents—who can hide away quickly—and hence can be a nightmare for regular forces.

In this region, insurgents and separatist groups are hardly impacted by the borders recognised by Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. It’s also interesting that these three countries operate from differing political viewpoints: one being a democracy, another being a struggling democracy, and the third being a military autocracy. So, reaching a political consensus is challenging. However, the separatist groups can collaborate with each other or peacefully coexist, and take advantage of the porous border when facing pressure from security forces at home or the host countries.

This tri-border area is sparsely populated with various ethnic communities who primarily survive on

shifting cultivation. They are generally antagonistic or indifferent to the administration. In his book “Troubled Periphery,” Indian journalist Subir Bhaumik writes that the young boys here are absorbed in 3Gs (Girls, Guns, Guitars). Though India claims to have a peace deal with the separatist groups in Mizoram and Tripura—bordering the Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh—it’s not all that peaceful. And it’s the same in case of Bangladesh where, though a peace deal has been in place with the PCJSS since December 1997, there are now PCJSS, PCJSS (Reformist), and UPDF armed groups.

In the Chin and Rakhine states of Myanmar, there are also groups like the Chin National Army and the Arakan Army. A peace deal was signed in Myanmar too, but now the Arakan Army is significantly powerful and thus a serious headache for the junta. The Arakan Army runs a parallel administration in most parts of Rakhine, while the junta mostly controls the cities. Having a relation with one may antagonise the other. Above all, there are geopolitics of the regional powers and global powers involved. So, how Bangladesh should navigate this murky water is a complex question.

What are the chances of traditional threats (overt military challenges) to Bangladesh in its southeast region? Of its two neighbours, traditional threats from India are not expected for various reasons. However, traditional threats from Myanmar junta cannot be ruled out, especially to chase their separatist groups. The junta has been accusing Bangladesh of harbouring its separatist groups

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for long. The purpose of any military engagement would be to achieve a political aim, and Myanmar has exhibited her political aim quite clearly. So, it’s very important to identify what the “political end state” of Myanmar is.

What could be a non-traditional threat? What we are seeing now is a complicated combination of risks. Bandarban is the only district of Bangladesh that shares border with two countries. It is also possibly the only district where poppy and marijuana are cultivated with the patronage of groups operating there. Teknaf is the emerging hub of drugs. In addition, there are scopes for violent extremism and terrorism. However, these kinds of non-traditional security issues do not take place in a vacuum. Interestingly, they have the potential to destabilise bilateral relations and turn into traditional security threats.

Are there any threats lurking around the corner? The traditional and non-traditional threats to Bangladesh emanating from the secured environment in southeast are fairly easy to comprehend, as various agencies are more or less preparing to avoid surprise. It can be said that they are preparing based on what is happening now, and possibly not on what is lurking around the corner. There are more than 460,000 children growing up in the Rohingya camps inside Bangladesh without proper education, hopes and dreams. They have seen unimaginable horrors in their short lives. In 2017, many of them saw their mothers being violated. For them, there is no bottom line. By 2030, most will be adults—homeless, with trauma in their minds and hatred in their hearts.

Without education, hopes and dreams, it is unthinkable what monsters they might turn into if exploited, and if this issue is not addressed.

There are two options for us: we can address it now, or wait for it to be addressed later when it turns into a full-blown security situation. As a student of security studies, I understand that it is coming, and it is not going to be only Bangladesh’s problem. It will have regional and global ramifications.

So what are the choices for Bangladesh? To address all traditional and non-traditional security issues in the southeast, Bangladesh should be able to foresee what is coming and prepare accordingly, rather than “fire-fight” events when they occur. The situation in southeast, especially the Rohingya issue, should not be taken in a business-as-usual manner. A dedicated meritocratic specialist team should be designated to handle issues with Myanmar, because the Tatmadaw—Myanmar’s military—is a cunning, smart and meritocratic organisation. We have to read the military and political end state of Myanmar and devise appropriate courses of action.

India has its own interests that may not align with ours. So, jumping on the bandwagon with India may be counterproductive. Then, there are the geopolitical dimensions involving China and Quad. Maintaining a balance is equally important to ensure the synergy of all lines of operations—i.e. diplomatic, economic, political, cultural and military. In the military line, military diplomacy and developing a credible deterrence could be stabilising factors against the Tatmadaw’s misadventure, if any.

QUOTE
Quote

Emily Dickinson

American poet
(1830 - 1886)

Fame is a fickle
food upon a
shifting plate.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Boars' mates
5 Soccer legend
9 Partridge's cousin
11 Dead duck
12 City on the Mohawk River
13 Church feature
14 Maximum amount
15 Cable ride
17 Straight course
19 Atlantic fish
20 Essays
21 Finger count
22 Armistice
24 Compete
26 Main roles
29 Junior, to senior
30 Fleet owner

32 Special phone connection
34 Unmindful
35 Exemplary
36 Not napping
38 Cavalry stations
39 Soft drink buy
40 Muscle quality
41 Egg holder

DOWN

1 Young pigeon
2 Factory store
3 Loud lamenter
4 Attack command
5 Survey
6 Tempt
7 Apply pressure to

8 Misspoke
10 Less motivated
11 Stare in disbelief
16 Pancreas product
18 Lo-cal
21 Blue hue
23 Breakfast choice
24 Haitian practice
25 Hospital worker
27 Widen
28 Medusa's hair
29 Computer key
30 Isn't well
31 Bring to bear
33 Overdue
37 Take the title

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsoption@gmail.com.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

T E A S A G O D E S
U R S L A H E R O
B A S S P L A Y E R S
T H E M E
H U L A P A L E
D O N E B E H A V E
E N D C A D P E A
C O U P O N L E N T
R E A L M E L T
C O C O A
B A S E R U N N E R S
O M A R R E T A I L
G Y M S S T O R M Y

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

I'M HERE TO SEE GENERAL HALFTRACK
HE DOESN'T WANT TO SEE YOU
BUT I NEED TO SEE HIM!
SHHH... HE DOESN'T WANT TO HEAR YOU, EITHER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

0000-0000-000-000
SEE? THAT'S THE NOISE I WAS TELLING YOU ABOUT.
HEY SEARCH, WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN YOUR WASHER STARTS MAKING STRANGE NOISES?
IT USUALLY MEANS THAT THE WARRANTY JUST RAN OUT.