

OPINION

8 trips to the Boi Mela this year. Here’s what I thought.

On March 17, the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela 2022 ended... and along with it, my last month’s entire salary.



PHOTO: SARAH ANJUM BARI

KAISAR KABIR

This year’s Boi Mela was special to me. Growing up, I was never too sold on the hype around the fair—there were always too many crowds; I was never sure about which books to buy; had no idea how to filter out the good ones from the bad; and I just didn’t know anyone who would guide me in that regard. Fortunately, though, when I started hosting my radio show ‘Boi Pechal’, I got to interview many writers, publishers, translators, and readers. That increasingly piqued my enthusiasm for the book fair, because now, I had the necessary information to manoeuvre through my “ordeals”. And, I realised, the fair would allow me to understand the literary

scene better for the sake of my show—I would get the opportunity to explore more guests for the interviews, and I would get to know writers and publishers and their literary lives better.

But then, the pandemic happened. Last year’s Boi Mela was “lit”, so to speak—but more like a candle in the wind that was extinguished rather than the undying flaming torch it was always meant to be. And to make matters worse, my radio show was impacted too because there was no way of conducting one-on-one interviews during the Covid-19 restrictions.

Finally—evenually—the 2022 Boi Mela came. And that too just at the end of another wave of Covid cases. Things were uncertain but the fair took place from mid-February to mid-March without any major hindrance. This time, however, I did not have any professional impetus to go on; it was personal this time. I wanted to meet a lot of people I hadn’t met in a long time, I wanted to buy books that I knew were going to be good. I wanted to spend time with people who

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shared with me the common passion of anything and everything related to books—some of whom were publishers and writers; some, avid readers and reviewers; and some, bookstagrammers and booktubers—people who are connected to each other like pages of a hardcover by its spine.

It was this experience of meeting with these people, grabbing a bite and a cup of tea together, getting to know their ideas about newly published books, and candidly chatting with them about life, that ultimately made my visit worthwhile.

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any given moment. So I wanted to make the most out of this book fair by going there as much as I could. To reiterate, it was personal indeed.

It’s true that even during lockdown, I could order books online to read, but for me, nothing beats the experience of buying a book from a book fair stall and having it signed by the author, clicking a nice photo with them, and showing it off to fellow book-lovers. A visit to the fair is always met by the exciting question, “Hey, what book did you buy today?”

I went to the fair this time about eight times, and not once was I bored. The stalls could have been better placed, as they were confusing and difficult to find. It took me about three to four visits to just get an idea of the whole map. At first I thought it was I who had a poor sense of direction, but then I observed that a number of fellow bookworms were facing the same problem. It would have been easier to navigate the fair if the stalls had their serial numbers prominently displayed on their respective overhead banners in bold, legible text.

Then again, I couldn’t help but think that getting lost and seeking out a stall is an adventure all its own.

The highlight of the fair for me, however, was when I saw people exchanging books. Why do people do that? Why does it feel so good to give someone a book and receive one in return?

I cannot pinpoint a reason behind this. But I do know that the positive synergy that this gifting of books creates is something that is selfless, wholesome, and uplifting. I believe if you took a closer look at the book fair, you would see that in a world of short attention spans and screen addiction, books lovers keep on prevailing—the love for Bangla books keeps on burning bright and the capacity to inspire each other to read is as undying as ever.

Now that this year’s Amar Ekushey Boi Mela is over, I know I’m going to feel empty on the upcoming weekends. And even though a part of me is happy that I won’t go berserk over wanting to spend all my savings, I will dearly miss the experiences I had with the people I like and respect, who share the same passion for books and Bangla literature. It is now time to wait for the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela 2023.

Kaisar Kabir is a pop-culture enthusiast and a former radio show host currently earning dough in the content industry.

FEATURE

“Zahir in Kolkata”

ALAMGIR KABIR

17 April, 1971. I reached Kolkata from Agartala on the previous day. Word reaches me that Zahir Raihan has also arrived at Kolkata on the same day. I had grown quite bored in Agartala. The news of Zahir’s arrival gave me renewed energy. We had never worked together as a party, but I had gotten the chance to get to know him closely while working in the ‘Express’. I placed a call to Central Hotel. Zahir’s voice came through.

—Kabir, I hear you’ve reached. Please come over right away. There is something we need to discuss.

His voice brims with excitement. We meet up. It takes us about half an hour to set up a plan. Progressives have to be organised to cooperate with the provisional government.

—But what if the government doesn’t want our help? I ask.

—Then we have to force them. This war cannot be won without the formation of the National Front, Zahir says. His voice carries that ever-familiar cadence of confidence. We begin working.

I take a secret path and return to Dhaka in a few days for a special assignment, towards the end of April. By my own negligence, which brings me injuries, it is June by the time I can leave Dhaka again. A long, winding path through Bangkok finally lands me back in Kolkata on June 6. Upon reaching, I hear that my funeral has already been performed. Given the delay of my arrival, Zahir and other friends had assumed that the Pakistanis had killed me off. Significant amount of work is under way in Kolkata by then. Buddhijibi Mukti Parishad has been formed. Zahir is its general secretary. I join in.

Zahir is insulted
I had heard Zahir’s voice on the Bangladesh Radio while in Dhaka. In his strong, loud voice, he had been criticising Pakistani demonism. Upon reaching Kolkata and, upon the government’s orders, taking up responsibility of Shwadhin Betar’s English wing, I found out from the recording station that Zahir Raihan was no longer



Zahir Raihan at a protest meeting in Kolkata in 1971. Courtesy: Sangram theke Swadhinota/ Bangladesh on Record

participating in the radio. Why? No one seemed to know. I asked the authorities why Zahir’s powerful writing was not being put to use. I found no answers. I insisted on Zahir and finally found out. The authorities had requested Zahir to write a short piece on the history of Bangladesh’s Liberation Movement. He had spent 4-5 strenuous days on the submission. But one of the influential leaders did not like what he had written. That valuable document was not transmitted, and since then Zahir Raihan had not set foot around the radio station. Until the very end.

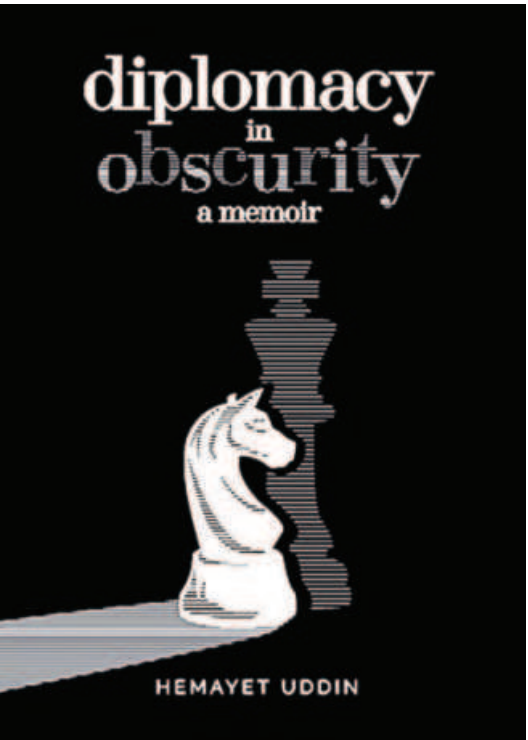
Stop Genocide
Bangladesh Chalachitra Shilpi-O-Kushali Swahayak Samity was formed in July, led and presided over by Zahir Raihan and under the tireless work of Hasan Imam. The Eastern India Motion Pictures Association (EIMPA), Kolkata, by setting up monthly payments, had sought to lessen the struggles of the family members of film workers in exile. EIMPA ardently requested Zahir Raihan to make a film.

Zahir rediscovered, suddenly, his infinite energy. Work began and took over our days

and nights—shooting, editing, narration, recording. At home his wife, Shuchonda, lay unconscious with fever. There was no one around to take care of Opu and Topu. But Zahir was unstoppable. Utterly free in the joys of creation. After six weeks of near-inhumane hard work—neither Zahir nor his co-workers took a single penny for this film—*Stop Genocide* was completed. Word spread around the studio neighbourhood in Kolkata. Critics came to watch the film in droves. They were stunned at the talent showcased by this small, slender man of 5’ 3 inches.

Shortly before *Stop Genocide* was made, the Bangladesh Chalachitra Shilpi-O-Kushali Swahayak Samity, with Zahir Raihan’s encouragement and Wahidul Haque’s tireless dedication, created a lyrical composition in tribute to Bangladesh’s movement for freedom. From these lyrics arose a new group of musicians who still prevail, who are still touring and performing across the lands of a liberated Bengal in various modes.

Translated from Bangla by Sarah Anjum Bari and Maisha Syeda.



BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

WHEN THE POSTMAN DOES NOT KNOCK TWICE

Lessons from the diplomatic roads not taken

IMTIAZ A. HUSSAIN

Neil Armstrong’s “giant leap for mankind” comes to mind while reading Hemayet Uddin’s *Diplomacy in Obscurity: A Memoir* (University Press Limited, 2021). His illustrious walk from a junior Foreign Ministry official to becoming this country’s Foreign Secretary and donning the Ambassador/High Commissioner’s hat reveals eight platforms in 20 chapters where Bangladesh’s contours could have been reconfigured. Did our own idiosyncrasies/fallibilities hijack our own “giant leap” as it flew by our window?

On one platform (India), chapters 3 and 4 narrate two misinterpreted moments—the 1975 Bangladesh-India Land Agreement, ratified only in 2015, and a bogus security ghost of the country as a security threat to India, given an Anup Chetia here or there; and two missed opportunities—the Myanmar-India gas pipeline through Bangladesh, and Ratan Tata’s 3 billion USD foreign investment proposal. Their fruition would hasten our “developed country graduation”, given us more infrastructures to show, and made South Asia bustle more; while settling the 2017 Rohingya influxes (second platform) could tiptoe the 1979 and 1991 successes.

A third platform informs us Bangladesh was present at the creation of the MDG summit in 2000, while a fourth in chapters 6 and 7 reminds us how European sensitivities over the treatment of our ethnic minorities and floods from the 1970s will never go away. Yet the cream of his work, and arguable “heart” of his professional duties, was his Washington platform. We were taken seriously because we (a) sent troops to evict Saddam Hussein in 1990, and (b) dug out nuances to make any run-of-the-mill diplomat shine (diplomat aspirants, please take note): influence “host” country policy-makers, learn of the “lunch culture”, join Douglas Coe’s National Prayer Breakfast (an evangelical setting where even a military general, Hussein M. Ershad, became a hero), indulge in “Beltway politics”, and even pluck out Bangladesh postage stamps and first-day covers to create an “Unsinkable” mindset. Not written in any diplomat’s “guidebook”, they paid so handsomely that none other than House Representative Gary Ackerman wrote, in the December 14, 1995 *Congressional Record*, of Hemayet Uddin as “an outstanding diplomat . . . [representing] his country with dignity, pride and warmth.”

A short “hop” and “skip” in Thailand and Cambodia led to his proverbial “jump” in China and where the “mighty ‘K’ word” dominates, Kim’s North Korea. Just as our diplomats strive for free-trade deals with not just Thailand, but across Southeast Asia today (as is crucial to “graduating” to a “developed country”), luck, skill, and a disrupted vacation helped Former Ambassador Hemayet conclude deals with Dr Thaksin Shinawatra, the celebrity millionaire-turned-prime minister, putting us right behind the steering wheel. His Beijing posting similarly helped us learn our Chinese name, *Munjala*, and how to host global-level summits. He almost brought the quadrennial summit of the world’s second largest international organisation, the Non-aligned Movement, to Dhaka, but fell too short of necessary infrastructures. One residue, the Bangabandhu International Convention Center, stands proudly.

Low-key he might have been, but the Former Ambassador’s front-seat view at the crossroads of several post-Cold War global affairs shows how close the steering-wheel can be, yet remain so far. By all reckonings, our “obscure” diplomat was more distinguished by his deeds than his acclamations. The true testimony may be how much more rewarding his volume is to those who follow in his footsteps. They have been alerted to doing their homework and supplementing routine wisdom with wit. If the country is to “graduate” from a second-fiddle into a sought-after player, how the Foreign Ministry opens desks and think-tanks to cultivate our youth so no future opportunity is missed can assure us of a vibrant future. Since no postman will knock twice if the mail falls on deaf ears, this book is a must read.

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In memory of the events of March 1971, when Bangladesh was taking up arms to fight for liberation, we translate and reprint part of an article written by Bangladeshi film director and cultural activist, Alamgir Kabir. Originally published in the Weekly Chitrani on February 2, 1973, Kabir, in this article, writes of his experiences working with novelist, writer, and filmmaker, Zahir Raihan in 1971, and of the conception of a historic film on Bangladesh’s liberation struggle.