

What's holding back Bangladesh's book industry?

Experts urge that the Jatiya Granthakendra be strengthened into a genuinely autonomous body, empowered to coordinate effectively with the education, cultural, and other relevant ministries. In countries such as India and Japan, where publishing has long thrived, strong central institutions have provided the backbone for growth—an institutional foundation that Bangladesh is yet to build.

MIFTAHL JANNAT

Long before the rhythmic clatter of printing presses echoed through Bengal, the story of its literature was written by hand—on palm leaves, burlap, or delicate sheets of parchment. Each manuscript was painstakingly inscribed by scribes whose careful hands preserved the words of poets, scholars, and storytellers.

Before British rule, book printing and usage were virtually absent in Bengal. The colonial rulers reshaped the education system to serve their own interests. With the spread of this new education came printed books—but initially, all publishing activities were concentrated in and around Kolkata. East Bengal, including Dhaka (then a mofussil town), saw this development much later and on a smaller scale, relying largely on Kolkata for books. Consequently, Dhaka's publishing scene grew slowly, lagging behind Kolkata by more than half a century.

writing, according to Dr Sen.

This situation persisted until the end of the nineteenth century. Muslim publishers mostly printed fiction, poetry, and religious books in *Musulmani Bangla*—a term coined by James Long to describe the variation of Bengali then in use, “a mixture of Urdu and Bengali, very popular among the Moslems in Calcutta and Dacca.” One reason for this slow progress was the Muslim community's initial reluctance to embrace Western education.

By 1870, a small yet determined Muslim middle class had entered the book publishing trade. In his article “Printing and Publishing in Dacca,” Graham W. Shaw notes that approximately 3,442 books were printed in Dhaka between 1857 and 1900.

The East Pakistan chapter

In the early years of East Pakistan, Dhaka emerged as the centre of rebuilding efforts, and small presses began to appear, particularly in

such as limited printing technology, scarce quality paper, and government censorship.

The growing assertion of Bengali identity, coupled with mounting tensions between East and West Pakistan, found powerful expression in print. Books became vessels of cultural pride and political defiance, laying the groundwork for what would eventually become the intellectual backbone of Bangladesh's independence movement.

Bangladesh's first steps

When Bangladesh emerged as a new nation in 1971, its presses were as silent as its war-ravaged cities. Yet, as the country began to rebuild, the book publishing industry—an often-overlooked pillar of culture—sought to find its footing amid the ruins. The decade that followed was one of

from maturing collectively.

Foreign assistance, once steady during the Pakistan era, also declined. Programmes such as Franklin Books and USIS, which had supported translations and textbook production, wound down by the early 1980s. Even when foreign aid appeared—such as UNICEF's funding for science books in 1970—it was piecemeal and short lived.

By the end of the 1970s, Bangladesh's publishing industry had certainly survived, but not thrived. It produced valuable work, nurtured readers, and gave rise to pioneers, but failed to progress collectively as a strong, interconnected ecosystem. In many ways, the story of publishing in that first decade mirrored the nation itself: resilient, ambitious, but still searching for structure, direction, and a shared purpose.

1994, and the then Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia formally endorsed it in March. The Ministry of Culture printed and circulated the policy as a guiding framework for all future book-development initiatives. Yet, despite its formal adoption, implementation was slow and uneven, hampered by longstanding structural and financial constraints in the publishing ecosystem.

The challenges now—and the way forward

Despite its long legacy, Bangladesh's publishing industry continues to grapple with many of the same challenges that have plagued it for decades—problems that stubbornly refuse to fade away.

“There is no research in our country on book publishing or the history of publishing, nor is there recognition



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

Towards a national book policy

In the face of decades long challenges in the sector, the National Book Policy of 1994 emerged as a landmark effort to bring coherence and direction to the country's literary and publishing landscape. Drawing on extensive consultations with writers, publishers, and cultural and educational institutions, the policy aimed to address structural gaps, harmonise book-related activities, and promote reading as a national habit.

The state assumed absolute control over the school textbook business, continuing a practice from the East Pakistan era, but now on a larger scale. This single move upended the ecosystem that had quietly sustained the private publishing industry. Publishers who had long relied on textbook contracts to fund creative works suddenly found themselves cut off from their main source of income.

In the private sector, a few determined ventures defied the odds. Muktaghara, led by Chittaranjan Saha, became the era's defining force. Born in exile during the Liberation

that this sector demands meticulous knowledge—most people simply don't know or care,” said Nazir.

“As an anecdote, I once had a young publisher approach me for advice on starting a publishing house. I asked him, ‘Whom do you want to emulate as a publisher? Books worth crores of taka have been sold in the last 15 years. Do you want to be that kind of publisher, or someone entirely different? Decide that first, and then come to me.’ He never contacted me again.”

According to Afsana Begum, Director of Jatiya Granthakendra (Naitonal Book Centre), our publishing industry currently lacks consistent editorial standards. “One month a publication produces a well edited book, and the next, another appears with little or no editorial oversight. Only a handful of publishers maintain rigorous editorial policies. It is a matter of great regret, because with such a long history and established practices, this industry should have thrived.”

The industry's stagnation reflects a deeper national problem—the absence of a coherent vision, according to Mahrukh Mohiuddin, Managing Director of The University Press Limited (UPL).

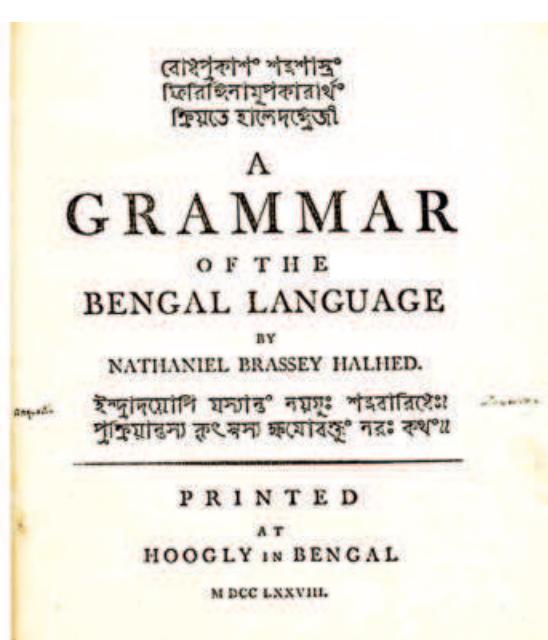
“The publishing industry cannot thrive without a favourable ecosystem,” she noted. “That ecosystem depends largely on government priorities, as education, research, and the country's intellectual atmosphere are closely intertwined with it. Successive governments have offered only lip service, without a unified roadmap for building a society that values expertise and evidence-based knowledge.”

She observed that the industry has long suffered from neglect and politicisation, with government-funded book projects often driven by patronage rather than merit. Compounding the problem, there are no effective mechanisms to curb widespread piracy, both online and offline.

Still, Mahrukh remains optimistic, emphasising that the draft National Book Policy remains “well-prepared, forward-looking, with detailed plans for implementation, which is still relevant today,” and that “just by reviewing and activating the National Book Policy, it is possible to bring about beneficial and necessary long-term changes in the sector.”

Experts urge that the Jatiya Granthakendra be strengthened into a genuinely autonomous body, empowered to coordinate effectively with the education, cultural, and other relevant ministries. In countries such as India and Japan, where publishing has long thrived, strong central institutions have provided the backbone for growth—an institutional foundation that Bangladesh is yet to build.

Miftahul Jannat is a journalist at The Daily Star and can be reached at: miftahul@thedadlystar.net



(L) Sir Charles Wilkins (1749-1836) was an English typographer and Orientalist, notable as the creator—assisted by engraver Panchanan Karmakar—of the first Bengali typeface. (R) Written in 1778 by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed and printed in Hooghly, A Grammar of the Bengal Language was the first grammar book of Bengali, and it also marked the first use of Bengali type in print.

Muslim footprints in publishing
When British rule began, the upper-class Hindus saw in it an opportunity to assert themselves, eagerly embracing the English language and Western education while building connections with the colonial administration. This swift adaptation elevated their social, cultural, and intellectual status and gave rise to the famed Bengal Renaissance.

By contrast, Muslims were late to enter this new intellectual domain. Before 1850, the printing of books from East Bengal was a rare occurrence, according to noted book publishing expert Badiuddin Nazir.

The first Muslim publishers in both East and West Bengal emerged around the 1850s, operating mainly in Kolkata's Battala, Mechua Bazar, Mirzapur, and Sealdah areas. Unlike their Hindu contemporaries, they preserved a distinctive aesthetic in printing, modelled on Arabic and Persian conventions—where books began from the right, and what would normally be the last page served as the first.

According to Dr Sukumar Sen, while Hindu presses had already begun operating in Battala by 1820, the first Muslim press, named *Mohammedi Machine*, was established much later in Sealdah. One of its notable publications was the second edition of *Bahar Dinesh* by Mohammad Miron, published in 1845.

While it is uncertain exactly when Bengali Muslim publishers began operating in Battala, evidence suggests their activity started before 1831. One of the earliest known Muslim publishers in Battala was a certain Safiuddin of Bhurshut. The Darjipara area later emerged as another hub for such presses. Writers and publishers there were primarily focused on a poetic form called *Sayeri*. Their preference for printing styles that followed Arabic and Urdu conventions—starting from the right-hand side—somewhat delayed their entry into modern prose

Bangla Bazar, which would later become synonymous with publishing in Bangladesh. After the Partition, Bangla Bazar became fertile ground for homegrown writers. Publishers like Nawroz Kitabistan and Student Ways lined its winding alleys, and many Bangla Bazar publishers—such as Mohammad Nasir Ali, Borkat Ullah, and poet Mainuddin—were writers themselves.

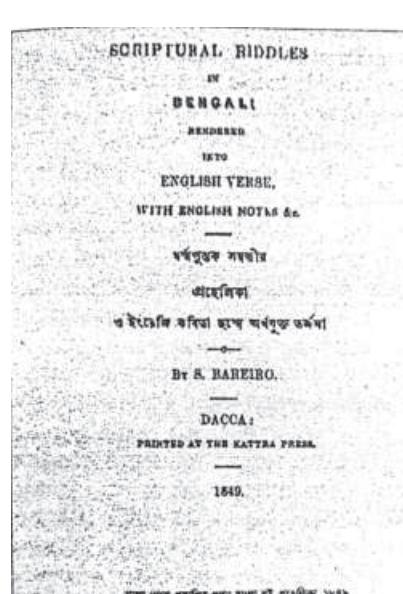
Essentially, the Pakistan period marked the formative era of our literary and publishing landscape. With the creation of a new nation came a distinct sense of identity. The country needed new textbooks for its education system, as the old ones had become outdated. In addition, the establishment of new government offices and administrative units created further demand for publications. This was, therefore, the defining period when publishing truly began to grow,” Badiuddin Nazir.

The 1960s saw a shift as textbook publishing gained prominence after the establishment of the East Pakistan Textbook Board. Beyond Dhaka, cities like Chattogram, Barishal, and Bogura also contributed, with Quran Manzil Library in Barishal and Sahitya Kutir in Bogura rising to prominence at this time. Institutions such as Bangla Academy, established in 1955, further shaped a distinct East Pakistani publishing identity—one that sought to balance religious and linguistic loyalties.

Publishing in Bangla became a form of cultural resistance, especially after Urdu was declared the state language, sparking the historic 1952 Language Movement. Many presses printed pamphlets, essays, and poetry celebrating Bengali culture and asserting identity. The 1950s and 1960s saw rapid growth in textbooks, political commentary, translations, and literary works, driven by rising literacy and the emergence of a new urban middle class. Some publishers also explored children's books and popular fiction, despite challenges



The cover of Badiuddin Nazir's *Bangla Sahitya Granthapakshana*, a seminal work that documents the evolution of book publishing in this region—from the British period up to 1994.



Title page of Prahelika (Scriptural Riddles in Bengali) — the first Bengali book ever printed in Dhaka, published in 1849 by Katra Press.
Source: Dhaka: Smriti Bismriti Nagari by Muntassir Mamoon.

War, it returned to Dhaka in 1972 and went on to publish 620 titles in a decade (between 1971 and 1980)—an extraordinary feat in such adverse conditions. Similarly, The University Press Limited (UPL), founded in 1975, ushered in a new era of professional publishing. By 1980, it had published 22 English treatises and research works, positioning Bangladesh in the global market for scholarly books.

Yet even these success stories could not conceal the industry's deeper problems. Paper shortages, rising costs, and import dependency crippled production. From 1973 to 1980, the cost of printing a book nearly doubled, forcing publishers to scale back output. Books became more expensive, readership stagnated, and enthusiasm faded. Despite the idealism of writers and publishers, the country's economic fragility and lack of coordinated policy kept the sector

The policy highlighted the crucial role of government and semi-government institutions in publishing—particularly in areas unprofitable for private publishers—and in providing textbooks and reference materials at affordable prices.

Key challenges identified included inefficiencies in textbook development, weak research infrastructure, poor printing and binding quality, uneven distribution systems, and insufficient focus on fostering reading habits, particularly among children and adolescents. The policy also called for specialised research into the mental, cultural, and educational needs of young readers, recommending dedicated initiatives through institutions such as the Shishu Academy.

Following extensive review, the cabinet approved the draft in February