

Problems of writers, and publishers

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Do we love books? Situation prevailing in the publishing business suggests that we are yet to develop a liking for books. High cost of paper and production has increased the price of books. The only solution can be a library movement with patronisation from the government.

Amazed to see a huge number of books lying heaped on the floor, tables and chairs at a friend's place, a gentleman suggested that some bookshelves were urgently needed for their proper care. Wearing a dismal look the friend replied, "You see, I can't collect books. This clearly indicates that the collector was a kleptomaniac and the method he employed in his bid to enrich his private library cannot be approved of. But there is at least one element in this story which deserves a little praise: the person had a liking for books."

Unfortunately, as a people we are lacking in a love for books. There is a kind of national apathy to reading. Even a large section of the educated public seems to be disinterested in books once they have finished their schooling and got a job. A survey conducted by Grantha Suhrid Samities or Book Lovers' Clubs under the guidance of Jatiya Grantha Kendra or National Book Centre shows that at least half the secondary school teachers just do not enjoy reading books.

But is the case any better with other professional people, that is, doctors, engineers, lawyers, businessmen, public servants and so on? Though there has not been any survey on their reading habit, presumably, they visit libraries once in a blue moon or go through hardly a dozen books or so a year.

WRITERS' PROBLEMS

One of the country's foremost poets, Mr. Shamsur Rahman gave a depressing picture of the sales position of his books. His books — usually printed 2,250 copies at a time — take 3 to 4 years to be completely sold out. The poet is of the opinion that members of the lower middle class do sometimes buy books of fiction but the upper middle class people seldom buy books. Poet Nirmalendu Gooen too corroborates this view.

Syed Shamsul Huq, a major writer of fiction in this country, whose books too are printed 2,250 copies each at a time and take usually two years to be sold out completely, ascribes the poor circulation of books to lack of proper marketing facilities. There is substance in his argument. Last

year 80 copies of his "Prachin Bangsher Nishwa Santan", a novel, were sold in Dhaka on the first day of its release which is indeed a record in our country. Similarly, in a matter of a week 300 copies of his narrative poem "Antargata" were exhausted last February. Mr. Huq, who extensively travels in the countryside, says that readers often complain about the non-availability of his books in the mofussil areas. Outside Dhaka and Chittagong there is hardly any sales network in the other divisional headquarters, let alone the district towns and urban centres. He, however, suggests that purchase by libraries can help improve the situation.

Dr. Tasaddoq Hossain, whose novel titled "Mahuar Deshey" (first published in 1960) was a success story in that it sold 3,000 copies in less than two years, feels that our readers suffer from a complex. "Any trash produced on the other side of the border is relished by them," he says. "Is-pater Mon", another novel by the same author, which, according to him, is a much more mature product, remains unsold even after three years of its publication.

A completely different picture can be had from India, our next-door neighbour. In the Grantha Mela (book fair) this year held at the Brigade Parade Ground in Calcutta, about 700 stalls were opened by different publishers of that country. "A buying spree continued till late in the evening and almost every visitor to the fair carried home not less than 30 kilograms of books", says an eye-witness, Kazi M. Arif of Marietta/Ideas of Dhaka, who attended the book fair. According to him, even a person with modest income — a petty clerk — bought books worth Rs. 2,000 for his personal collection and he put by this amount from his monthly income.

SOARING COST OF PRODUCTION

Now back to ourselves, consumption of paper is said to be an indicator of literacy, and in this respect too, compared to other countries of the world

we are at the bottom. The per capita use of paper including newsprint is only 0.5 kg in Bangladesh as against above 2 kg in India, 9 kg in China, 34 kg in the USSR, 134 kg in Japan and 273 kg in the USA. Against such a consumption rate, the price of writing and printing papers has been enhanced from Tk. 9,000 in 1977-78 to Tk. 23,000 per ton as of now. As for the newsprint, the price per ton is now over Tk. 11,000 as against Tk. 5,500 in 1977-78. Price hike of this basic raw material used in the publishing business has an adverse effect on the trade in the sense that the price of books too has increased at least three-fold. And it has now gone beyond the buying capacity of the readers.

This year the Bangla Academy, which is the largest publishing concern in the public sector, published 42 books in the month of February alone, which means bringing out one and a half books every day. Some publishers, however, do not term it a record event as they understand that the Academy released those books also in February which were due to be published in the later part of the previous year.

Quazi Manzure-Mowla, Director General of the Academy is of the opinion that two reasons are responsible for the stagnation prevailing in the publishing sector. They are: the high price of paper and printing and the printers' preference to accepting orders of job-work which fetches quicker and better returns.

PUBLISHERS' PROBLEMS

Mr. Chitta Ranjan Saha, Executive Director of Muktaadhara, the country's biggest publishing firm in the private sector, which produced about 800 titles over the past one decade, considers the 'social problem' to be responsible for poor sales of books. He attributes the lamentable reduction in the number of readers to TV's cheap fantasy series, trash movies and unbridled publication of offensive weeklies. "It is beyond any conscious citizen's comprehension why the government still hesitates to recognise publishing business as

readers

A. U. M. FAKHRUDDIN

had the following goals to achieve: to help form a reading habit among the public, to improve the quality of book production, to consider the problems prevailing in the publishing sector, to enable readers to get books at a reasonable price, to arrange book fairs, and to promote publication of more and more books. Many of the goals of the NBC are yet to be achieved because the problems of this sector are linked with the economic condition of the country.

While giving a background to this miserable condition obtaining in the publishing business, Mr. Fazle Rabbi, Director of the NBC, said that the process of degeneration began in the sixties when the sole responsibility of production and sales of text books was vested in the School Text Book Board.

Mr. Jahangir M. Adel, President of Bangladesh Publishers' Association, while corroborating this view, added that prior to the nationalisation of the text book business his firm (Islamia Library), besides publishing text books, used to bring out about half a dozen reference and other books every year.

IMPORTED BOOKS

Enough about books produced in the country. Now let us have a look at the business of imported books. Mr. Golam Mostafa of Hakkani Publishers, a major importer and publisher, finds it difficult to assess the taste of readers. Encouraged by the sale of fiction the previous year, he placed orders abroad for books of fiction, and by the time the consignment arrived the readers tended to buy books on history. Then, following the import of the same he found to his dismay, that historical books were gathering dust and titles on art and sociology were selling fast.

While commenting on the inadequacy of the import policy regarding books, Mr. Mostafa said that it ought to have been precisely defined as it was during the pre-independence days when there was unambiguous mention of restriction only on obscene, anti-religious and subversive literature. But now it becomes a frustrating hurdle for the importers to make the customs and airline officials understand

Contd. on page 6

an industry when even the 'big' manufacturing trade enjoys that status," he says. Because of this miserable status a publisher is not entitled to bank loans.

While suggesting remedies, Mr. Saha opines that the Ministries of Education and Culture should help set up libraries and reading rooms at Upazila level and see to it that books are purchased regularly. He further points out that every secondary school authority should, as a routine, allow the students of higher classes a period off every week to use the school library under the guidance of a teacher. "This will positively contribute to the forming of a reading habit," he asserts.

In India 10 per cent of the total production of paper mills is sold at a discount rate for the benefit of authors, students and publishers. He feels this system can be introduced in our country as well.

CONSEQUENCE OF FAULTY STEPS

Rolling out the cost elements as major factors responsible for the unsatisfactory circulation of books, Mr. Mafidul Huq of Jatiya Sahitya Prakashani also cites disorganised network of marketing as the prime reason for miserable sales position. According to him, the text book trade had been the backbone of book retailing business in the rural areas of the country. The trade suffered a mortal blow as a consequence of faulty steps taken by the previous regimes from time to time. In the mid-seventies it was decided to supply text books through post offices and prior to that the production of text books was nationalised. As a result of these the very existence of the retailers of books was threatened and the shock the book dealers — usually of modest means — received, will take time to be fully absorbed. As an outcome of these a large number of book shops were shut down over the past two decades.

Jatiya Grantha Kendra or the National Book Centre (NBC) was set up in 1963. It

Problems of writers

Contd. from page 5

at exactly the phrase 'standard reference books' stands and so they demand samples for their own satisfaction a certificate explaining their necessity from universities.

apart from the absence of bank loans for this trade there emerged another problem recent years. Suspension of licence for the last one and a half years has constrained the exporters to depend entirely on Export Performance Licence and Wage Earners' Scheme which enhances the price books to the disadvantage common buyers.

Again, direct import by institutional or academic libraries makes their struggle for licence harder still, he comments.

LIBRARY MOVEMENT

After the liberation of the country, in Dhaka alone a considerable number of bookshops have closed down at the Market, at Islampur and at Tuatooly Road. At the shopping centres like in Supermarket, Farmgate, ermarket, Shahbagh Supermarket, Tejgaon Airport Road, ermarket, Jahura Mansion, ina Bhaban, Baitul Mukar, or the New Elephant Road is not a single book shop. explanation is simple: as

there is no buyer so there is no seller. Meanwhile, however, Dhakaites have seen the mushroom growth of electronics shops during the last 12 years.

A cartoon in a Western book shows a donkey displaying a festoon which reads: "I do not read books". Education and books are synonymous without which man would not be what he is today. If even 0.5 per cent of our literate public — about half a million people — would get proper library facilities the

reading habit should have certainly improved and with it the overall scene obtaining in the publishing business and book trade. It is, therefore, imperative to start a library movement all over the country without further delay. To begin with, this can be initiated by social leaders and intellectuals. With fund from the government the responsibility of selecting titles may be vested on a committee of educationists, litterateurs, historians, social scientists, economists and scientists.

If this suggestion is implemented, then, hopefully, though we may not be a nation of book worms, we can certainly be one with a considerable reading habit.