

Ekushey book fair success and a few thoughts

AT A time when good news is hard to come by, it is indeed refreshing that the Amar Ekhushey Book Fair this year has broken all previous records in terms of both turnover as well as the number of titles. According to a report published in New Age on Thursday, till February 22, a total of 2,881 titles arrived at the fair, against 2,344 titles during the entire fair last year. Poetry seems to leading the tally in terms of titles, while most stalls point to novels as the most sold genre of books at the fair. Even the organisers, the Bangla Academy, also appear to have broken all previous records in terms of turnover.

It goes without saying that the importance of reading books, of cultivating reading habit, for an individual, society, or a nation, can never be stressed enough. Books and reading help create a more fulfilled individual, a more informed and knowledgeable society and more literate and, therefore, more emancipated nation. Most scientists and sociologists concur that books, more than any other art form or media carrying information, can contribute to both the emotional and intellectual well-being of a human being. Books can also help promote tolerance in society, by exposing inhabitants to divergent views. Books also essentially translate to greater knowledge and education and, besides all the social good it carries, it can also mean economic benefit to the nation in the long run.

So if indeed the Bangladeshi population are both writing and reading more, as the initial figures from Ekushey Fair would seem to suggest, than it certainly is good news. One can only hope that taking cue from this development, the government, as well as the organisers and conscious-sections of society will take further measures to further promote reading and writing habits amongst the general population by hosting more such fairs, by promoting reading sessions, writing contests, etc — generally making more investment in the art of reading and writing.

However, some of the concerns coming out of this rise in sale and titles cannot also be ignored. According to some writers and literary enthusiasts visiting the book fair, a number of the books hitting the fair are of very poor quality. For example, according to one enthusiast, some of the new poetry available in the fair lack any understanding of meter and do not essentially qualify as poetry in the aesthetic sense. Some renowned poets have also questioned the quality of publications, which apparently contain many errors.

While art and literature remain outside the domain of legal or strict academic standards and definitions, and should remain so, the authorities and practitioners would certainly do well to pay more attention to the general standard of publication coming out of the industry, by adhering to standards in literature and publication that have come down the ages. It would appear that one of the banes surrounding the book industry is that it is almost exclusively dependent on the fair. If writing, reading and sale habits could be spread out throughout the year, and throughout the country, then some of the problems of quality would certainly be addressed. Furthermore, given the growing success of the fair down the years, the organisers, as well as the government, would be well-advised to explore the possibilities of hosting an international book fair, of the standards available around the world, in the near future, to further promote this welcome rise in reading and writing habits.