

Kolkata book fair cancelled, symbolic one held

Book lovers are sad and angry following the Calcutta High Court's cancellation of the 33rd [Kolkata Book Fair](#) on environmental grounds. However, a symbolic fair was inaugurated in the city's Town Hall Tuesday night, high on polemics but sans books.

The symbolic book fair was inaugurated in the presence of West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya at the Town Hall to salvage a semblance of prestige before the foreign delegates.

But the ire of the city's political guardians against the judges was apparent.

While the chief minister juggled his words, Kolkata Mayor Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya was more open, and said: 'The dust particles have gone into the head (of the judges).'

The chief minister was no less sarcastic. 'I have no idea how can books cause pollution. We have to find a way out. It is as if a war has been waged against books,' he said.

Litterateur Sunil Gangopadhyay, known for his proximity with the chief minister, said: 'We want the book fair back in Kolkata's Maidan (from where it had to make an exit last year after a court ruling).'

'Lots of people will suffer because of the verdict. This is not justice. I cannot support a system that has stopped the fair which is such an important event in the life of Kolkata,' said Gangopadhyay.

'I am sure publishers must have planned hundreds of launches this year. We are shamed since a lot of foreign guests were either on their way or have arrived,' he said.

The decision of the Calcutta High Court has given a body blow to the Publishers and Booksellers Guild. But the residents and academic institutions around Park Circus ground where the fair was planned heaved a sigh of relief.

The book fair stood cancelled with the court Monday ruling against the organisers' decision to hold it in the Park Circus ground, which is surrounded by schools, colleges, hospitals and residential quarters.

A division bench of Chief Justice Nijjar and Justice Pinaki Chandra Ghosh, after hearing petitions filed by residents challenging the legality of holding the fair, ruled against the Guild.

The verdict said the 'The Guild cannot hold the book fair at Park Circus Maidan as it is in violation of environmental laws, noise pollution laws and constitutional rights (Articles 14 and 21) besides violation of the KMC (Kolkata Municipal Corporation) Act'.

'Some people may benefit from this order but it is a tremendous blow to the city's image. If pollution is the factor, then the high court should also be closed down going by the vehicular pollution around the area,' mayor Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya said.

Singer Usha Uthup is sad as well but feels there should be a permanent venue to end the impasse.

'There are theatres for movie goers and auditoria for painters, but sadly nothing for book lovers. The

book fair is part of our heritage. We need a permanent venue,' she said.

Eminent playwright Saonli Mitra is happy with the verdict. 'The Guild ignored the complaints of local people. I fully support the verdict,' she said.

For educational institutions around Park Circus, the judgement came as a big boon.

'It is a relief. Something so close to our heart is facing a problem every year. I don't know how in the very first place they chose the ground since the holding of the fair would have caused immense problems in the area,' said Sanghamitra Mukherjee, principal of Lady Brabourne College, located just across Park Circus ground.

One of the petitioners, Mehboob Alam, hailed the judgement as a victory for the citizens.

The court has directed the Guild that the park should be restored to its original condition with immediate effect at the Guild's cost.

According to the Guild officials, the loss from the verdict would be immense for each publisher. 'It can range from Rs.50,000 to Rs.500,000,' a Guild official said.

'It is a crippling blow,' said Guild secretary Tridib Chatterjee.

In a surprise move, Chief Justice S.S. Nijjar paid a visit to Park Circus after the Republic Day parade Jan 26 before passing the landmark verdict.

American author Paul Theroux was to inaugurate the book fair, scheduled from Jan 30 to Feb 10. The book fair is reputedly the largest non-trade book fair in the world. It is the world's third largest annual collection of books after the Frankfurt Book Fair and the London Book Fair.

The Guild had to shift the most-awaited cultural event of the city to Salt Lake last year after green activists won a legal battle to block the fair at Kolkata Maidan, the vast green acres considered as the city's lungs.

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