SILENT SESSION HOPES TO REKINDLE READING HABITS

Screens off, young minds pick up books

JHINUK MAZUMDAR

Calcutta: Phones put aside, a group of young people settled down for an hour of reading, each immersed in a book of their choice.

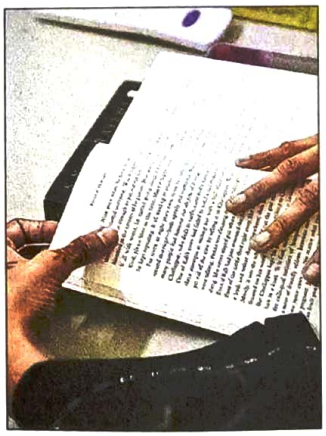
In a world dominated by screens, where 30 seconds can be enough to swipe past one reel and move to the next, staying with a book requires a different kind of attention. But silent reading is finding its way back into public spaces, from parks and cafes to community gatherings.

On Monday afternoon, a group of young people aged between 19 and 25 gathered at the Sabar Institute in Kidderpore for a silent reading session.

"There is no dearth of libraries, but there are hardly any readers. We want young people to read because that will help them sift fact from misinformation," said Sabir Ahamed, lead at the research institute.

"Young people talk about freedom of speech, but many do not know which article of the Constitution guarantees it. There has to be an interest in reading to find that out, and to learn about many other things," he said.





The reading session at the Sabar Institute in Kidderpore on Monday afternoon. Picture by Bishwarup Dutta

The turnout was modest, but those who came were keen to make the most of the hour. Participants could bring a book of their own or choose one from the institute's collection.

Ramyani Basak, 25, who travelled from Salt Lake, picked Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist*.

"Reading helps you think, challenge social norms such as patriarchy and broaden your outlook," she said.

The recent attack on bookstalls had left her distressed. Ramyani was among those who marched on Saturday with books in hand to protest attempts to demolish the stalls.

"Calcutta, known for its boipara, has nurtured a culture of reading. The recent incident was an attempt to attack a culture that teaches you to think, question and dissent," she said.

Thousands of Calcuttans had joined Saturday's march, carrying books to oppose the demolition of bookstalls and the attack on reading.

"The courage to question what is wrong and to express dissent peacefully but forcefully is what I have learnt from books," Ramyani said.

For Sumaiya Shahid, who completed her master's in political science from Calcutta University, reading has also become a way to reclaim time from screens.

"A year ago, my screen time was around 10 hours a day. I was losing sleep and feeling increasingly tired," said Sumaiya, who was reading Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

"I have taken to reading more seriously and managed to bring my screen time down to two to three hours. Sometimes browsing is still more tempting than turning the pages of a book, but I hope to overcome that eventually," she said.

The Sabar Institute is not expecting an overnight revival of reading habits.

"Not everyone will read a fat book, but we hope they will start with a few pages," Ahamed said.

Additional reporting by Samarpita Banerjee