**Reading trends**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2021-04-09

RECENTLY I received a call from Ali Mohammad Goth (in Jahoo Tehsil, population 40,033)in Awaran, Balochistan. Jahoo Tehsil has only two high schools for girls.

Scores of students from one of these schools had demanded books to read. This message was conveyed to me by their headmistress Ms Sabar-un-Nisa, courtesy Shabir Rakhshani, the education activist of Awaran. This made me jump up.

Ever since I started writing about book publishing in Pakistan 40 years ago, I have been told by representatives that Pakistanis do not like to read. This has been confirmed by my own sources. That has conventionally been advanced as the reason for the underdevelopment of the publishing industry. In 2019, a survey conducted by Gallup and Gilani, an affiliate of Gallup International, released the report of their survey on reading habits. It claimed that 75 per cent of respondents said they do not read books at all. The 25pc who read included those reading course books, religious literature and magazines. This should not have surprised me, considering our appalling literacy rate (59pc) and abysmal state of education that produces `une ducate d e ducate d`.

But I have begun changing my mind about our poor reading habits of children. It was a little girl from Mubarak Village, Sindh, who forced me to rethink the issue. I met her at the `Incredible Libraries` session at the Pakistan Learning Festival in February.

The Idara-i-Taaleem-o-Agahi has set up the Digi Kutubkhana in this village which has no phone or internet connectivity. Yet the library that stocks its books and a tablet in a steel trunk attracts the children though conventional wisdom holds that our children hate books. The Kutubkhana has triggered the process of transformation in their lives as I witnessed in the little girl who narrated before the audience the story she had read and then chatted with me confidently.

Now I believe that children with their innate curiosity and urge to explore take to books like a fish to water, provided the appropriate books in terms of language, illustrations and graded text are made available to them. Books stir their imagination and it has been proved they are the best teaching accessories.

Adults are the culprits. Most schools don`t even have a library and their stress is on course books generally dull and insipid.

Above all, the teachers are so focused on exams and results that the wealth of knowledge that books contain is denied to students. The biggest deprivation is that most librarians, if a school has one, do not engage with children in book-related activities.

In this context Ms Sabar-un-Nisa is remarkable. She chose to respond to her stu-dents` demands. Women like her will take the Baloch far.

Since we generally do no research on education we do not know the relationship between education and book-reading habits apart from making sensible assumptions.

How do children who are avid readers fare academically? How do books affect their personality and temperament? It would be worthwhile conducting such research. We, however, do learn from the book infographics released by the Australiabased Global English Editing recently that countries where books are read are faring better than us education-wise.

Here are some interesting highlights from the infographic. In 2020, the year of the pandemic, when the whole world was under lockdown, many people picked up a book to relieve their boredom. As a result, book sales worldwide went up by 35pc, though the sale of `physical books` dropped uncharacteristically. The total revenues mounted and the global publishing industry was worth $119 billion, withChina in the lead in book publishing and the Indians in reading. Children preferred to read printed books and the most popular genres were fiction (romance and mystery), children`s books, cookery and nature.Where did Pakistan figure in this scenario? Let me make it clear that in this country it is impossible to obtain accurate data on book publishing. We have a repository the NationalLibraryof PakistaninIslamabadthat is supposed to issue the ISBN for every book published in the country. But most publishers, especially those publishing in indigenous languages, do not even bother to apply for the number and there`s no question of submitting two copies of their publications to the NLP as required under the law. There is no machinery to enforce the law.

My random checking by telephoning major booksellers in Karachi yielded mixed results. Many said that in 2020 more books were sold than in 2019. For the importers business was down. Booksellers tell me that children`s book sales have been on the rise in recent years. Schools are requiring their students to buy books for supplementary reading. As more books are published in indigenous languages for children our hopes also rise. The f act is that when given a choice children read with relish books in a language theyunderstand.m www.zubeidamustafa.com