



A Visit to Pakistan

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John Dunne, Assistant County Librarian (Children's and Schools) for Hampshire County Library, reports on...

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My visit was organised by the British Council on behalf of the Government of Sind, Department of Culture and Tourism. My remit was to advise on children's library services and to run a course in children's librarianship. This meant visiting existing libraries and writing reports on them and running two courses for teachers and librarians, in Karachi and Hyderabad.

Pakistan has featured prominently in the news recently, largely because of political rather than cultural issues. Benazir Bhutto's coming to power in December hailed the start of a new era of democracy. The Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan brought attention to the role of the Mujihadeen, who were based in Pakistan. Finally, the proximity to Iran has inevitably led to a more fundamentalist approach in some quarters. This has been particularly evident in reactions to The Satanic Verses with demonstrations and attacks on the British Council.

However, as a guest of the Government of Sind, in south east Pakistan, I came to discover a different aspect of the country. The Department of Culture and Tourism, in its efforts to combat illiteracy, is introducing a far-sighted policy of library development. Children's libraries are being set up in major towns and a mobile library service is being introduced in rural areas. Library provision in general is good, with large spacious buildings. Use of the wellstocked libraries is free, but books may not be borrowed, so adults and children come to sit in the library to read. A healthy library service depends on access to good books and it was this aspect of provision which provided the most interesting insights into the book trade in Pakistan.

In the two children's libraries which exist at the moment - Karachi and Sehwan Sharif- a large proportion of the stock is in English. This reflects the fact that English is a common language in many schools, together with Urdu. In some schools almost all subjects are taught in English and children take 'O' and 'A' levels, so the demand for books in English is high.

Children's publishing in Urdu is buoyant at present with a good range of children's fiction being published in paperback, at reasonable prices by local standards, i.e. between 30p and 50p. These books have illustrated covers, are printed on good paper and contain coloured illustrations. There is also an interesting range of magazines for children of similar quality. The gap in the market is in the non-fiction areas where, apart from home economics titles, there is a dearth of material. However, publishers are anxious to acquire rights to translate English titles into Urdu, especially in science and other areas. There was also a lot of interest among publishers and librarians in dual-language books and this may be a further area for development.

One of the great problems for colleagues in Pakistan is the absence of library suppliers and, although many publishers

act as booksellers as well, the task of seeing a wide range of materials is difficult. Similarly, the opportunity for librarians and publishers to get together is rare. One such meeting was specially arranged for me and proved very useful for both parties. The occasional large book fairs held in Karachi do however provide an opportunity to see a wide selection of stock. During my visit, the American Book Fair took place in the YMCA grounds with American and local booksellers exhibiting. The Fair was opened by the Vice-Chancellor of Karachi University who made three interesting points in his opening speech: there were not enough good books in Urdu; there was a shortage of good writers; and the education system did not seem to foster the habit of reading. He went on further to extol the virtues of his own education, in pre-independence days, when there was a strong emphasis on reading good literature.

The respect given to British culture was evident in many cases. The high regard in which the British Council is held is another example of this. The British Council library in Karachi provides a wide range of books, adult and children's, for loan. There is also an excellent reference library and periodicals room. Membership of the library is available for a small subscription (55 rupees/80p) and for this members have access to the best collection of books in English in Karachi.

The bombing which took place there at the end of February was therefore a travesty against the Pakistani users of the library, rather than the British Council itself. As the local English-language paper, 'Dawn', made clear in its editorial, the bomb killed a Pakistani guard, prevented Pakistanis from using the library and all supposedly as a protest against a book (The Satanic Verses) which was already banned. Fortunately the library is open again and is continuing to give good service to its members.

As a librarian I discovered that librarianship is truly international and that my colleagues in Pakistan struggle with problems similar to those we face in Britain. One of the aspects of children's librarianship I discussed with colleagues was storytelling, and this resulted in one of the happiest memories of my courses there. Having arranged a visit to the children's library at Sehwan Sharif, I decided to do a practical storytelling session. Looking frantically through the Picture Puffins for something with a flavour of the subcontinent, I found an old favourite, The Tiger Skin Rug by Gerald Rose. The familiar words and pictures took on a new meaning as I read the story, but the enjoyment of my audience was that of people anywhere in the world responding to the magic of a good children's book. .

The following titles provide useful background information on life in Pakistan:

We Live in Pakistan, Mohamed Amin, Wayland 1984, 0 85078 474 3, £5.95. Descriptions of different people's working lives which provide an interesting insight into the country.

Pakistan, David Cumming, Wayland 'Countries of the World' 1989, 1 85210 055 9, £7.50. A highly informative book which covers all aspects of Pakistani life. The illustrations are particularly good.

At Home and Abroad with Amar and Zarqa, Steve Harrison, Macmillan Education 1986, 0 333 38612 4, £5.70. Two children, born in England, return to the land of their parents and discover both new and familiar experiences.

Junaid in Lahore, Ailsa and Alai Scarsbrook, A & C Black 'Beans' (1987), 0 7136 2850 2, £4.50. A very readable story of a young boy's daily life in Lahore.

Pakistani Village, Ailsa and Alan Scarsbrook, A & C Black 'Beans' 1979, 0 7136 1976 7, £4.50. A good introduction to village life as seen through the eyes of a young boy.

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