Children's Literature Festival

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The School Of Writing

12-13 September 2012
Balochistan Boy Scouts Association Premises, Quetta
“Keep safe and keep working and believing in children and writing and literature.”

This was the last line of the last email I got from Dixie Goswami, my teacher, mentor and friend - Director of Bread Loaf Teacher Network, Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College, USA.

“Keep safe” was something I wanted everyone to wish me for my trip to Quetta. For a moment, I also thought to myself if I was being overly worried about going there because of the current security situation in the province. “Nope!” was the answer I got from within me – I think I was justified in thinking the way I was thinking, especially after what we all hear in the media about Balochistan in general, and Quetta in particular.
As a reader I need your help answering a question: at this particular time in the history of this province, if I asked you to associate five words with Balochistan, what would they be? My guess is that most of us Pakistanis would begin with insurgency, trouble, chaos, unrest, mass killings, fear, instability and the likes of these words, wouldn’t we? How would one react to reading, writing, literature, music, theatre, arts and a lot of fun? You might say; “You are kidding me!” Well, I am not – at least not for the two-day “Zehgani, Lubzaanki, Bahaargah” or the Children’s Literature Festival. Would have been easier for people to believe me if they had also been part of the Festival in Quetta from September 12-13, 2012 and had seen more than 5000 kids from 125 schools celebrating and enjoying literature.
Right from the word ‘go’, CLF 2012 in Quetta came banging on our heads, reinforcing our conviction that the ideal way to initiate positive change in the society is through providing alternative opportunities to the masses, especially children. Reviving the aesthetic spirits in a community that has long-standing traditions of arts and literature, that have co-existed through centuries with other facets of life, and re-weaving it into the larger social fabric through children must be the first step towards positive societal change.

Children are children – the same promise, the same curiosity and the same level of confidence as one would see in any other setting in any other part of the world. Never for a minute did anyone feel that these kids were any different in terms of their eagerness to learn and participate in the creative activities that were on offer at the festival. Within minutes of the inaugural ceremony, kids bubbling with ideas oozed out of their cocoons flying all over the festival site as gorgeous butterflies exploring nature. And I purposely use the word ‘nature’ here – because at a certain level, what else can we term as more natural to human beings than the arts and literature?
Famous literary, art and media figures Fehmida Riaz, Ghazi Salahuddin, and Khalid Anum, and intellectuals like Dr. Qurat-ul-Ain Bakhtiar and Zubaida Mustafa along with theatre professionals put a fresh breath in the terror-stricken air surrounding the city. Both private- and public-school children participated in the festival listening to readings and music, singing songs, writing poetry, developing digital stories, exploring indigenous literature and performing and acting on the stage. Painting and other arts and craft were running themes, along with puppet shows and book displays. There was something for every child interested in any form of literature – from creative writing workshops by the School of Writing or a display of artifacts by the Museum and Art Gallery of the State Bank of Pakistan.
The most pleasant and striking CLF reality was the level of commitment and unconditional support extended by local partners including the provincial Department of Education and the Female Education Trust, Balochistan. Equally heartening was to see former Federal Minister of Education, Zubaida Jalal and the current Secretary Education – not as figure heads or chief guests but attending sessions and being with the children for two days. He even announced that these festivals will now become an annual part of the Department’s mandate and will be held at the district level in Balochistan through government’s funds – in all districts.
My guess is that CLF 2012 must have raised some eyebrows. I can’t resist appealing to the powers that be to rethink their solution packages for the fantastic people of Balochistan. A land with so much promise, children with such bright light in their eyes, and groups committed to bringing a positive change in the society, it is very difficult to go wrong.

Thank you Idara Taleem-o-Aagahi and Oxford University Press for organizing CLF, and for further strengthening our belief in children, writing and literature.
The School of Writing participated in the Children’s Literature Festival, Quetta Balochistan. We are now gearing up for the National Children’s Literature Festival in Peshawar, Khyber Pukhtunkhwa on November 14-15, 2012.

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