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The 12-day Sharjah International Book Fair successfully concluded in the UAE on November 13. A large number of award-winning authors, writers, novelists, intellectuals, artists, creators and other well-known personalities from across the world participated in the event.

The first-ever Sharjah International Book Fair was held 40 years ago in 1982 by the ruler of Sharjah, Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, who understands the importance of the power of the pen and the significance of book reading. Due to his personal interests – he is a writer and intellectual – this event has continued to raise new flags of popularity. Today, it is considered as one of the world’s biggest book fairs.

One of the prominent features of the Sharjah book fair is its theme. This year’s theme was ‘Spread the Word’, which aimed to highlight the importance of words for development. Past themes include ‘Read More’, ‘Open Books Open Minds’, and ‘The World Reads from Sharjah’, and attracted the attention of book lovers.

The Sharjah book festival also reminded me of a column I wrote four years ago, in which I described the power of the pen as a historical fact. Isn’t it surprising that while the name of Socrates, an ancient philosopher from Greece, is, and will remain, alive even after thousands of years, those who sentenced him to death are lost somewhere in the darkness of history? I had argued that his student Plato played a pivotal role in archiving the philosophy of Socrates in the form of books.

Similarly, Aristotle, Confucius, Chanakya and many other ancient philosophers are still popular because their teachings are saved in the written form. Shakespeare still enjoys the status of a great drama writer and author due to his writings. People honour great scientists such as Newton and Einstein for their ideologies which are duly preserved in books.

In the modern era of the 21st century, there have been significant changes in human societies; now most people prefer to use social media applications on their mobile phones. However, the interest of people in developed countries in book reading is much higher than those in other countries. During my foreign trips to Western countries, I saw people reading in buses, cars and public places. They are aware of the fact that reading books is directly linked to the development and prosperity of the country, and nations that strengthen their relationship with books, instead of wasting their time in useless activities, always lead the race of development.

As a writer, when I review our situation here, I feel that Pakistani society is oracy-based, where people are more interested in speaking than reading and understanding. Contrary to this, literacy-based societies of first-world countries focus on reading and writing. In developed countries, children are exposed to book reading at the school level. The study of quality books is not only essential for moral development and educational training but also helps in keeping oneself updated with the demands of the modern age.

In my view, the regular holding of the International Book Fair under the patronage of the ruler of Sharjah for the last 40 consecutive years is a great effort to promote a culture of reading in a society that is well informed, tolerant, creative, intellectual, and conscious of preserving knowledge.

I would like to conclude my column with English philosopher Lord Francis Bacon’s words: “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.” I also believe that if one has valuable knowledge, but he/she cannot express it and present in the form of book, then it is indeed a great loss to humanity.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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