**Cursory knowledge**

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A BOOK is a human mind compressed between two covers. A library is an orderly arrangement of books. And a virtual literature festival is an aggregation of authors, on screen, without their books.

Covid-19 forced the Lahore Literature Festival to go virtual this year. Since its inception in 2012, the LLF`s intellectual vitality has contributed to its home city being recognised by Unesco as the `City of Literature`in Pakistan. LLF 2021 helps one understand why.

This year, its founder Razi Ahmed and his intrepid team, undaunted by the virus, brought together a spectrum of successful writers, savants, discussants and experts from frozen Saskatoon in Canada to smogshrouded New Delhi. LLF 2021 delivered authors into our homes. For four days, we luxuriated in their company as pampered couch potatoes.

Fortunately, this virtual format excluded the time-consuming Q & A postscript. Unsupervised, they often generate more opinions than knowledge, more heat than light.

Touchingly, LLF 2021 honoured the memory of Shamsur Rahman Farugi (the doyen of Urdu modernists) and Asif Farrukhi (a co-progenitor of the Karachi and Islamabad LitFests).

ItincludedluminarieslikeNewsweek`sFareed Zakaria and Wendy Doniger, whose book The Hindus: An Alternative History caused a controversy in 2009. Her keynote address `The Neighs Have It: Mythology of Horses in Pakistan` might almost have described the negativism inherent in our asinine politics.

Inevitably, the strength of LLF 2021 lay in the quality of authors who, in more than 14 dedicated sessions, launched their books or spoke about them. Two interviews were particularly unforgettable. One was with Yann Martel, the author of the best-seller Life of Pi.

He talked about the craf t of writing, likening each journey in a new country to turning a fresh page of an unwritten book.

The second interview was with Richard Ovenden, director of Oxford`s Bodleian Libraries. The Bodleian Library has an unrivalled collection of ancient papyri, manuscripts, 13 million printed books, etc., accumulated over 700 years. Since 1662, by law, a copy of every publication in the UK has to be deposited with the Bodleian.

In his book Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge (2020), Ovenden describes how, throughout history, libraries `dedicated to the preservation of knowledge` have been wilfully desecrated by vandals: in Ctesiphon (637 AD), Avicenna (1034 AD), Constantinople (1204), during the English Reformation (1530s) and by the Nazis (1940s).

The most recent `cultural genocide` was perpetrated in 1992, when Serbs targeted Muslims in Sarajevo and torched their heritage. Ovenden quotes its fire chief KenanSlinic who with his brigade risked their lives to save books and paper. He explained: `They are burning a part of me.

Private libraries and archives are as vulnerable. The explorer Richard Burton`s precious travel notes were destroyed by his prudish wife Isabel. The writer Ted Hughes trashed the papers of his tortured poet-wife Sylvia Plath. King Edward VII, on succeeding his mother Queen Victoria in 1901, ordered the incineration of hundreds of letters she had written to her Muslim munshi Abdul Karim.

Closer to home, in 1977, Ziaul Haq`s minions ransacked Z.A. Bhutto`s papers in 70 Clifton. Periodically, the land records of the Punjab have been torched by the land mafia.

In the 1990s, a bonfire was made of an irreplaceable archive of cloth maps prepared during the Land Settlement of 1876. Books such as a valuable Persian lughat autographed by Sufi Tabassum could be bought for the price of an ice-cream from the footpath in Anarkali bazaar.

`A good book,` John Milton once wrote, `is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit,embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

Of all the books in his custody, Ovenden identified one favourite-theCoder Mendoza, written in Mexico in the 1520s by a former Aztec priest on ancientAztec social customs. Written in pictographic language, Ovenden found it `full of extraordinary stories, incredible colour, incredible beauty, an incredible kind of glimpse into a lost civilisation`.

That manuscript worked its way through history hijacked by French pirates on its way to Spain, sent to the royal library in France, traded to a British lawyer who then donated it to the Bodleian. It enjoyed `a life beyond life`.

Inevitably, physical libraries like the Bodleian feel threatened by modern technology.

The investment made over centuries is now freely available, at the click of a cursor, on the internet. Ovenden understands why Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison wants to bring predatory supra-nationals like Google, Facebook and Wikipedia within its fiscal jurisdiction. Morrison is not alone. Many other governments feel equally uneasy at the unbridled power of these Midas-touch monoliths.

LLF 2021, by going virtual, has demonstrated that, unlike the dinosaur, it can adapt to a changing environment. The writer is an author www.fsaijazuddin.pk