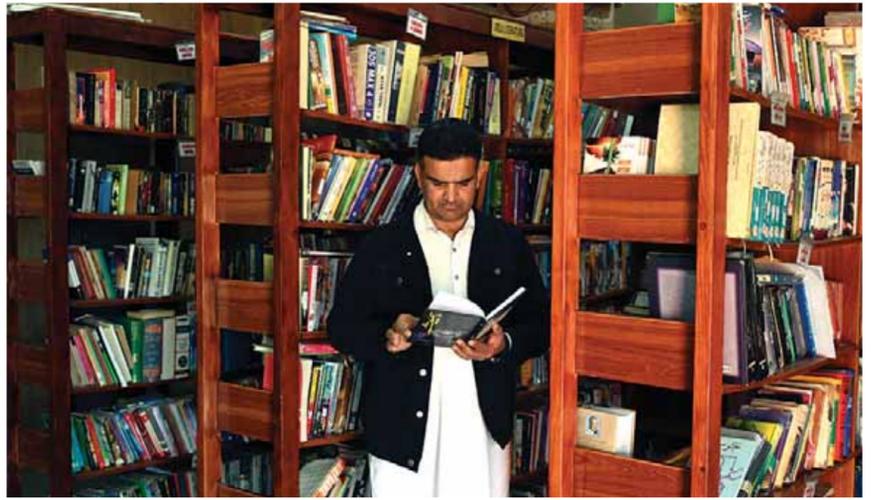




In this photograph an arms dealer Hakimullah Afridi puts a locally-made automatic gun on display at his shop in Darra Adamkhel, some 35 kilometres (20 miles) south of Peshawar.



A former arms dealer and founder of Darra Adam Khel Library, Raj Muhammad looks at a book inside the library in Darra Adamkhel town.

# LIBRARY THRIVES IN PAKISTAN'S 'WILD WEST' GUN MARKET TOWN

When the din of Pakistan's most notorious weapons market becomes overwhelming, arms dealer Muhammad Jahanzeb slinks away from his stall, past colleagues test-firing machine guns, to read in the hush of the local library. "It's my hobby, my favorite hobby, so sometimes I sneak off," the 28-year-old told AFP after showing off his inventory of vintage rifles, forged assault weapons and a menacing array of burnished flick-knives. "I've always wished that we would have a library here, and my wish has come true."

The town of Darra Adamkhel is part of the deeply conservative tribal belt where decades of militancy and drug-running in the surrounding mountains earned it a reputation as a "wild west" waypoint between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has long been known for its black market bazaars stocked with forged American rifles, replica revolvers and rip-off AK-47s.

But a short walk away a town library is thriving by offering titles including Virginia Woolf's classic "Mrs Dalloway", installments in the teenage vampire romance series "Twilight", and "Life, Speeches and Letters" by Abraham Lincoln. "Initially we were discouraged. People asked, 'What is the use of books in a place like Darra Adamkhel? Who would ever read here?'" recalled 36-year-old founder Raj Muhammad. "We now have more than 500 members."

## Tribal transformation

Literacy rates in the tribal areas, which were semi-autonomous until 2018 when they merged with the neighboring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are among the lowest in Pakistan as a result of poverty, patriarchal values, inter-clan conflicts and a lack of schools. But attitudes are slowly changing, believes

soft-spoken 33-year-old volunteer librarian Shafiqullah Afridi: "Especially among the younger generation who are now interested in education instead of weapons."

"When people see young people in their neighbourhood becoming doctors and engineers, others also start sending their children to school," said Afridi, who has curated a ledger of 4,000 titles in

47 at the door but keeping his sidearm strapped on his waist, and joins a gaggle of bookworms browsing the shelves. Alongside tattered Tom Clancy, Stephen King and Michael Crichton paperbacks, there are more weighty tomes detailing the history of Pakistan and India and guides for civil service entrance exams, as well as a wide selection of Islamic teachings.



People read books inside the Darra Adam Khel Library in Darra Adamkhel town.

three languages - English, Urdu and Pashto. Despite the background noise of gunsmiths testing weapons and hammering bullets into dusty patches of earth nearby, the atmosphere is genteel as readers sip endless rounds of green tea while they muse over texts.

However, Afridi struggles to strictly enforce a "no weapons allowed" policy during his shift. One young arms dealer saunters up to the pristinely painted salmon-coloured library, leaving his AK-

## 'Education not arms'

Libraries are rare in Pakistan's rural areas, and the few that exist in urban centres are often poorly stocked and infrequently used. In Darra Adamkhel, it began as a solitary reading room in 2018 stocked with Muhammad's personal collection, above one of the hundreds of gun shops in the central bazaar. "You could say we planted the library on a pile of weapons," said Muhammad-a prominent local academic, poet and teacher hailing

from a long line of gunsmiths. Muhammad paid 2,500 rupees (\$11) for the monthly rent, but bibliophiles struggled to concentrate amidst the whirring of lathes and hammering of metal as bootleg armourers plied their trade downstairs.

The project swiftly outgrew the confines of a single room and was shifted a

150 rupees (\$0.66) a year, while students enjoy a discount rate of 100 rupees (\$0.44), and youngsters flit in and out of the library even during school breaks.

One in 10 members are female-a figure remarkably high for the tribal areas-though once they reach their teenage years and are sequestered in the home male family members collect books on



Gunsmiths work in an arms shop at Darra Adamkhel.

year later to a purpose-built single-storey building funded by the local community on donated land. "There was once a time when our young men adorned themselves with weapons like a kind of jewelry," said Irfanullah Khan, 65, patriarch of the family who gifted the plot.

"But men look beautiful with the jewel of knowledge, beauty lies not in arms but in education," said Khan, who also donates his time alongside his son Afridi. For the general public a library card costs

their behalf. Nevertheless, on their mid-morning break schoolgirls Manahil Jahangir, nine, and Hareem Saeed, five, join the men towering over them as they pore over books. "My mother's dream is for me to become a doctor," Saeed says shyly. "If I study here I can make her dream come true." — AFP



School students walk past the Darra Adam Khel Library in Darra Adamkhel town.



An arms dealer Muhammad Jahanzeb checks an automatic gun at his shop in Darra Adamkhel town.



School students read books inside the Darra Adam Khel Library in Darra Adamkhel town.



People read books inside the Darra Adam Khel Library in Darra Adamkhel town.



An arms dealer Hakimullah Afridi reads a book at the Darra Adam Khel library.



US-Australian actress Cate Blanchett poses in the press room with the Best Actress award for "TAR" during the 28th Annual Critics Choice Awards at the Fairmont Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

## Blanchett slams 'patriarchal' awards shows after accepting best actress prize

Cate Blanchett criticized the "patriarchal pyramid" of Hollywood awards shows as she accepted a best actress gong from the Critics Choice Association in Los Angeles on Sunday. The Australian actor and Oscars frontrunner, whose performance as an ambitious, morally dubious conductor in classical music drama "TAR" is sweeping awards, told a packed ballroom that she wished the whole "structure" of awards shows could be changed. "It's like, what is this patriarchal pyramid where someone stands up here?" she said, collecting her

prize from North America's largest critics organization.

"Why don't we just say there's a whole raft of female performances that are in concert and in dialogue with one another, and stop the televised horse race of it at all?" "Because can I tell you, every single woman-whether it's television, film, advertising, tampon commercials, whatever-you're all out there doing amazing work that is inspiring me continually. "So thank you. I share this with you all." Blanchett has previously accepted two Oscars for her work in "Blue Jasmine" and "The Aviator."

She won a Golden Globe for her performance as a fictional lesbian conductor in "TAR" last week, but did not attend that ceremony. Several other awards shows, including the Film Independent Spirit Awards, the MTV Movie and TV Awards, and music's Grammy Awards, have switched to gender-neutral acting prizes. The Critics Choice Awards, like the

Oscars and most other Hollywood shows, still divides its acting prizes between male and female categories.

## 'In the wilderness'

Blanchett's comments came moments after Brendan Fraser gave a highly emotional, choking speech in which he thanked voters for his best actor prize for "The Whale." Fraser, a major Hollywood star in the late 1990s and early 2000s with hits such as "The Mummy," had endured a long fallow period before his performance as a morbidly obese teacher in his new drama drew widespread acclaim. "I was in the wilderness. And I probably should have left a trail of breadcrumbs. But you found me," Fraser told director Darren Aronofsky.

"If you-like a guy like Charlie who I played in this movie-in any way struggle with obesity, or you just feel like you're in a dark sea, I want you to know that if you too can have the strength to just get to

your feet and go to the light, good things will happen," Fraser said to a standing ovation. The Critics Choice Awards are one of a raft of major award shows in the build up to the Oscars, which take place this year on March 12.

Surreal sci-fi "Everything Everywhere All at Once" won best picture at Sunday's high-profile critics awards, boosting its hopes for the top Academy Award prize. The film finished the night with the most film wins on five, including best director for Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, best original screenplay, best editing, and best supporting actor for Oscar favorite Ke Huy Quan. Among the night's television prizes, the sixth and last season of "Breaking Bad" spinoff "Better Call Saul" finally claimed its first best drama series win, as well as best actor for Bob Odenkirk and best supporting actor for Giancarlo Esposito. — AFP