

The Old USIS library: searching for a different America

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Time to check the shelves, I told myself, back in Dhaka after a longish spell in the United States. Amble down to the USIS library at Dhanmondi Road Number 9, flip through the pages of the New Yorker and Harper's, peer at the spines of books and see if the Yanks were keeping us up with the times, displaying the younger crop of American writers. But a shock awaited me at Number 9. No USIS. As they phrase it in the Big Apple, like, man, nothing, zero, zip, zilch, nada, nyet. Just black metal gates, firmly barred. Khalid's house next to it was there, where twenty-five years back all of us would park our backsides on the dividing wall and watch the movies the American Cultural Center screened for a short while in their backyard. Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, weird documentaries, Steve McQueen on a slow boat in China, couple of whodunits, and once, Stagecoach. Robert Mitchum, large as life, beneath the equally deadpan Dhaka geckos. The field in front was still there, the same rickety clubhouse on the other side. But the USIS lending library had vanished into thin air. I trudged back home through the throng of peanut sellers and lovebirds by the lakeside, disconsolate. All dressed up and nothing to read.

So where's the damn thing, I asked my sister. Oh, I-o-o-o-n-n-g gone, she said. I don't know, she continued, but maybe you could try Adamjee Court. The American embassy moved to Gulshan and I think the library shifted there.

But nope, not there either.

So when I met Fakrul Manzoor bhai, and Sudeep a couple nights later I asked the same question: where the hell's the darned thing? Furrowed brows all around, squinty eyes that folks get when they try to recall long-dead great-aunts and where they're buried.

"Oh, no, no, no," came back the collective answer, "that closed a long time back."

"What do you mean?"

"They closed it. There's no USIS library."

"You're kidding me."

"No."

"So where do I get American books?"

"Well, they left the collection with the DU library. That's there if you want..."

"But what about a revolving library? What about current stuff?"

"No, that you don't get. Not much stuff after the '80s."

And there they left the matter. No USIS, no source of current American fiction/nonfiction, this is

Dhaka, live with it. Sorry.

When my family first came to Bangladesh in 1972, the USIS library was on the corner of Topkhana Road (appropriately enough, since it was a khana, a place, which housed latter-day *topes*, or cannons, i.e. books). I have a dim memory of a cavernous, high-ceilinged place where sunlight from big windows fell on the ranks of newspapers to the side. Real wood, generous shelves, a hushed air. But before I could really get to know it, Nixon bombed Haiphong harbour (remember the Vietnam war?), and students promptly marched to the USIS and set fire to a few chairs. The police fired on the demonstrators, and free, independent Bangladesh's first civil protest deaths occurred. In the ensuing shock and furor, the Topkhana Road library closed its doors, never to open them again.

But the city, and we who live in it, are diminished by it.

It resurged in Dhanmondi Road Number 9 after almost a year, or maybe a bit more, in a residential house that was bizarrely tiny, cramped and tight in comparison to the old library building. It had just four small rooms on the ground floor for fiction, reference and textbooks, tables, magazines, journals, blue-cushioned armchairs and library desk. Yet it was recognizably the USIS library. I discovered Kermode and Gore Vidal there, in the pages of New York Review of Books. Pauline Kael's movie reviews. Plath, e e cummings, Lowell, Anne Sexton. The Trillings (Diana's *Come Let Us March My Darlings* made me forget lunch for a day). Then the Jewish heavyweights: Bellow, Malamud, Mailer, Roth, after which it was time to work backwards, to Faulkner and Fitzgerald, to Nathaniel West and Pound. Mark Twain on his trip to Kolkata. Madmen's letters and war correspondence. Gertrude Stein and Gregory Corso. The old Esquire magazine, back when it thought nothing of putting Greer, Talese, Tennessee Williams, Mailer, Burroughs and Ginsberg in a single issue. All these and more.

What's left today of the old USIS library is in Banani. That's right, all the way out there. A retreat, both symbolically and physically, from the daily tug-of-war of Topkhana Road, or the hustle of Dhanmondi, far from the reach of the common man. If I was a kid all over again, I couldn't get to it. Not on a regular basis anyway. An American retreat, dictated no doubt by Dhaka's dirt, political passions, overpopulation, their security and budgetary concerns, changes in official policy, plus the fearsome local greed, common sense, caution, staff cuts.

Over the last couple of months I have had the following conversation, or a variant of it, quite a few times. First would come the question (invariably leading off from a conversation on books and bookreading in Dhaka): "I heard there was a piece on the USIS library in your page?" Or else, a little more frequently, "Didn't Fakrul Alam (or 'Fakrul sir' on a couple of occasions) write an article on the British Council?"

"Well, yes, which..." I begin to reply. Almost always to be interrupted. "I never got to read it. The thing is, just the other day I was in the British Council library and it..."

At which time I'd usually try to slide in with a, "Well, um...one of these days I..."

"...and so I think you should run it again. Besides, you should also do..."

"Yes, yes, yes. Of course..."

And so here they are, in perfect tandem. You want 'em, you get 'em!

But aside from the requests of readers--of whom we have acquired a whole new set since we re-wired this page from the beginning of this year and who have obviously missed out on the beginning stuff--there is another equally

important reason to reprint these two articles from January 25 and February 8 respectively. And that is that the issue of libraries in Dhaka, indeed in the whole of Bangladesh, must be kept alive for our readers, indeed, for all of us.

Framed in the most narrowest of terms, it is because if literature pages in English dailies are to survive, and eventually prosper, then we need an environment where these institutions--libraries with ample, ready stocks of English literature, fiction, nonfiction, prose, verse, classical, modern, travel writing, translated works, the whole caboodle--exist as a natural part of our daily lives.

And framed in the broadest of terms, it means that those of us who want to, who aspire to learn English in the most natural and effective way should have every opportunity to lay our hands unhindered on the widest range of books in English--from Chaucer to Martin Amis, from translations of The Iliad to Li Po--that it is possible to assemble here. It is the right of free access to books, the right to shape one's mind according to one's desires, the right to know. Knowledge is power. So are libraries.

---Editor, Literature Page

Very uncool scene, poor return on investment, too much damn bother, fuss and headaches, so cut your losses and get out while you can.

Understood, well understood, I thought. But still, how could they have heaved the whole thing overboard without so much as a by your leave? The heart of the American cultural presence here had always been the lending library, the whole package really. The building, the books, the shelves, the current stuff, the magazines, the journals, the easy access, in like Flynn, the movies, a waystation where you could also just hang out, or, Dhaka being Dhaka, it was also a place where you could rendezvous with women, put your left ankle on your right knee, watch the wall clock and fume: where is she? Just what is it with women and time?

And once, after I had waited for what had seemed an eternity but could not have been more than fifteen minutes, one of them had turned up. Hair all mussed up, a torn sandal and red shalwar muddy at one knee.

"Good God, what happened?"

The rickshaw had taken a little tumble.

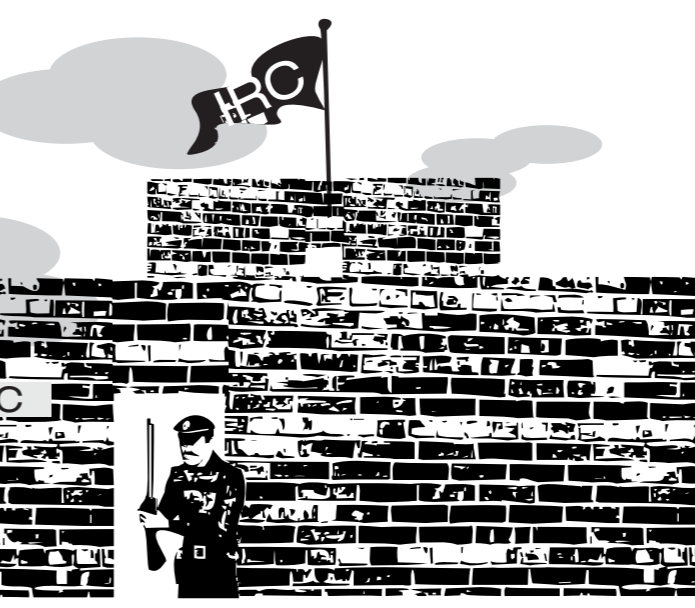
And lo and behold, one of the staff got her a glass of water, and had murmured soothingly, "there, there, everything will be all right..."

And it was.

So, what is the American presence here, in Dhaka, the face of United States as Bengal see it? It is the forbidding official redbrick pile of the US embassy in Gulshan, the mighty USAID people, the consultants, the consular and visa stuff, the stone-and-mortar visage of American officialdom and power, loaded with all the trappings of red tape and big cars and visa denials and incomprehensible forms and misery and frustration of long lines and neocolonial inequality and the smell of money and attitude that makes you want to grind your teeth and lose faith in divine ordination.

Absolutely no human touch anywhere, no hint of the fact that there is a different United States, of books and poetry and authors and thinkers and artists and anti-Establishment academics, a terrain really, like any other with its own narratives and tales of the twisted human heart. Then I discovered, tucked away in the American Embassy website, something called the IRC, Information Resource Center. My heart sank. IRC! Sounded like the dank dreamsong of a bureaucrat. As far as you could possibly get from the good old UDID (U Donkey I Donkey, from U Ass I Ass, USIS, get it?) I had grown up with. IRC sounded like a con job, silicone implants, the kind of place one fobbed off on an unsuspecting public, something designed to disguise the absence of a real library. Heap bad medicine, big chief, cold rice, rotten curry, no cha-cha, no tango...

So I got into my mom's rinky-dink little maypop Suzuki Maruti and went to Banani to check out the joint for myself. A nice enough house, but getting inside was tough. The bereted guards outside were unused to visitors.



superpolite custodian behind the desk, meaning of course fiction, poetry, memoirs, novels, history, biographies, lit crit. You know, the real deal, the sound and light show.

"Of course we have books," he replied, and showed me the reference books neatly arrayed on the wall. Keesing's Archives, Facts on File, encyclopedias, dictionaries. All stiff and new, nothing used, nothing dog-eared. No adult material. No Paine, Tocqueville or Dos Passos, no Garry Wills expounding on the Gettysburg Address. No Baldwin or Langston Hughes, or any of the current class of fine African-American writers. Where was Arthur Koestler, his Darkness at Noon, that had raised my hair on a summer day decades ago? Nabokov's Pale Fire? And the women I liked. E. Anne Proulx, Mary McCarthy, Cristina Adam, Rebecca Lee? No Catcher in the Rye or On The Road, Mr. Sammler of Sammler's Planet, or even Alex Portnoy.

"No, no, I mean books," I said again, knowing the answer yet insisting, a Dhaka beggar at a car window, the fates stacked six-deep against me.

The British Council Library: the new East India Company?

FAKRUL ALAM

KHADEMUL Islam's "The Old USIS Library: Searching for a Different America," (Star Literature page, January 25), on the disappearance of the USIS library has made me wonder: where have all those libraries gone?

Back in the '70s, in-between classes, adda, and sports, I used to spend most of my time in the USIS, British Council, or Dhaka University libraries. I would go to USIS for its collection of magazines and fiction, and to Dhaka University Library for almost everything else. Despite the dust, the load shedding, the noise, the frequent closures of the university and the missing pages within the books, it was a splendid place for both adda and study. Some of my friends and acquaintances lamented that somehow I had lost interest in "fielding" and had turned into a bookworm, but every book that I read made me thirst for more treasures of English literature.

And then there was the British Council Library. Perhaps memory always rose-tints the past, but it seems to me now that it was the friendliest part of the city then. The lush green lawn and the open spaces that surrounded the library, the access to stacks and stacks of books, the periodicals that you could leaf through, anything from the latest cricket news to reviews of books, the abundantly stocked reference section that was a source of special delight for me, the rows after rows of books that you could explore -- here was God's plenty! The Dhaka University library had no doubt a much richer collection, but inside the British Council Library you could occasionally experience the bibliophile's ultimate thrill: leafing through yellowing pages of a fairly

old book, only to set it aside for another one; or merely reading surreptitiously through a page or two, secure in the knowledge that not all books are to be swallowed, chewed and digested, that at least a few are to be tasted, and that was what the British Council Library was for! I would take a book or a periodical on a lazy day, sit down in one of the chairs, and then dream away, secure in the feeling that "there is no frigate like a book/To take us lands away, /Nor any coursers like a page/Of prancing poetry!"

Everything about the British Council of this period seemed to be inviting. You got to know the staff after a few visits and they were all very friendly. I was still a student when I was on a "first-name basis" with the expatriate assistant representatives and librarians. In the middle of the decade, though only a lecturer at Dhaka University, I could claim the Librarian, Graham Rowbotham, to be a dear friend. In retrospect, and especially compared to the library decor and staff now, everybody and everything associated with the library seemed to be amateurish in a way that was endearing and conducive to aimless browsing and long hours of lounging. Book of verse or criticism in hand, I loved spending my mornings here, although "thou" would be a few desks away, and to be glanced furtively in an essentially one-way traffic!

New books kept coming fairly regularly and were ordered by people of catholic tastes and wide-ranging interests. But most importantly, membership was cheap. I can't remember what the membership fees were but it must have been ridiculously low since even in those cash-strapped days I never seemed to have been bothered about

renewing my membership from year to year. And yet you didn't have to be a member to go in and browse, although I always preferred to be one so that I could always have books to take away and read at home.

Returning to Bangladesh after six years in Canada, I found the British Council of the '80s not that different from the inviting, relaxed place I knew in the '70s, although by now incoming books had slowed down to a trickle. Towards the end of the decade, I think, the library added a video section, but, on the whole, the Council seemed to be cutting back on everything. I had also heard that the library was going to be restructured; apparently, the "Iron Lady" was bent on making the British Council less of a burden on the British economy and more of a self-sustaining, income-generating unit.

But the full effect of the restructuring of the British Council into a self-sustaining, charitable organization was obvious only to the middle of the '90s. The Thatcherite assault on the arts, a heightened British concern with security after the Gulf War, and unrest in Dhaka University all must have played their part, for in 1995 the British Council decided that they would leave the campus for the security of the Sheraton Annex.

The first casualty of what was surely an ill-conceived decision, like USIS's move to Banani (no doubt dictated, as Khadem put it, "by Dhaka's... political passions... their security and budgetary concerns, official policy, plus the fearsome local greed, common sense, caution, staff cuts" etc.) was the British Council's wonderful collection of books. Row after row of books were given away for free. Indiscriminately. Thoughtlessly. Even some reference books and bound periodicals were distributed gratis since it was felt the

Sheraton British Council would have very little space.

Thankfully, the British Council abandoned its move to the Sheraton, but the Fuller Road library never recovered from the book-giving spree. Instead, the library was redesigned to give it a contemporary feel on the outside as well as the inside, security was beefed up, and everything about the library redone to give it a "new," packaged look. A cyber center was installed to make you feel that the ambience was au courant, and impressive graphics brightened the walls, but what is a library without stacks and stacks of books? The British Council was always the repository of the best in British culture, but this one seemed to be as anemic as the foreign policy of present-day Britain and nowhere representative of the nation's past cultural glory. Indeed, where were the Booker prizewinners, the Nobel laureates, the Poetry Book Society

choices, London Magazine, Granta, The New Left Review, The London Review of Books? Where were the bibliographies, the reference books that you could use to track an idea or pursue a stray thought to an ever-widening world, so that even within the confines of a library you "felt like some watcher of the skies/when a new planet swims into his ken"?

The British Council has leased the best piece of property in town from the University of Dhaka. And what does it offer the university's students? Forced to generate revenues for its upkeep, it had become, as Manzoor Bhai put it so memorably, the New East India Company, making money any which way it is able to. Thus the Council was now more bent on offering exorbitantly-priced language courses and all sorts of examination services, trading on its Englishness and cashing in on the dismal state of our educational system set back by excesses of linguistic nationalism, than on stocking books that represented the best in British culture and that could be made available to the largest group of people. Library fees are ridiculously high -- which middle class family can afford to make its children members at Taka 1300 a year? And entry to the library itself is restricted -- you have to be a member to browse! In fact, everything about the present British Council Library reinforces the feeling that it serves almost exclusively two groups of people: the upper class of Dhaka and people desperate about going to Britain for higher studies!

Significantly, the British Council Library now has remade itself as the Library & Information Services. What services? I stopped becoming a member in 1998 when I realized that the membership fees, which I could barely afford even then (current fees

"Yes, here they are, books," he replied patiently, pointing again at the dictionaries.

I gave up. And smiled. He smiled back.

There were magazines, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, etc. Journals like Current History and Orbis, a fair amount of them. Crosshatched into neat, antiseptic rows and columns. Not one out of place. Every cover uncreased.

"So what happens to the old issues of the Atlantic and New Yorker?" I enquired, thinking about snagging a supply of discarded volumes.

The custodian smiled again and leaned forward to click on the intercom, pleased at having to use it. Everything on his desk was perfectly aligned at 45-degree angles.

There followed a brief consultation with a tinny voice.

"We ship them to Chittagong," he informed me. And smiled again.

For a second I thought of asking if they were going to screen Stagecoach out on the front lawn some evening, but didn't. I walked out into the live hum of the street, amid the dim cries and the paper trash, wishing the Yanks would just rent some beat-up, double-storied house somewhere back in the heart of Dhaka, and stock it like they used to, and there the kids could walk, or come in buses and rickshaws, and just waltz in and borrow and read and loaf and flirt like they used to. But I know the Americans won't. Or can't, I guess. Policy is policy, and as the cliché goes, it is a changed world we live in nowadays. And besides, bureaucrats are loath to let go of an acronym, and IRC must be such eye candy on all those memos and dispatches: "Our IRC operation in Dhaka is exceeding expectations. The latest statistics show.00000099 percent attendance on a daily basis..." they must be writing to their bosses back in Washington D.C. But in that expensive, lovely, lifeless IRC house only the ghosts of the dead from Banani graveyard right next door must show up on any kind of regular basis. I got the distinct feeling that it was their kind of club.

Dhaka's mind has shrunk. There is a lot more money than used to be, but a lot less books. There are a lot more shiny cars, but a whole lot less depth to its mental makeup. There are a lot of young people chasing after the English language, but ending up with junk, the utilitarian, monosyllabic English of manuals and self-help tapes, of tone-deaf journalese, an English without nuance or breadth. I feel like telling them: if you guys really want to learn English, sooner or

later you have to go to the good stuff? Even cut-rate Shakespeare,

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.

Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I

will teach you like nothing else will, while the good Shakespeare:

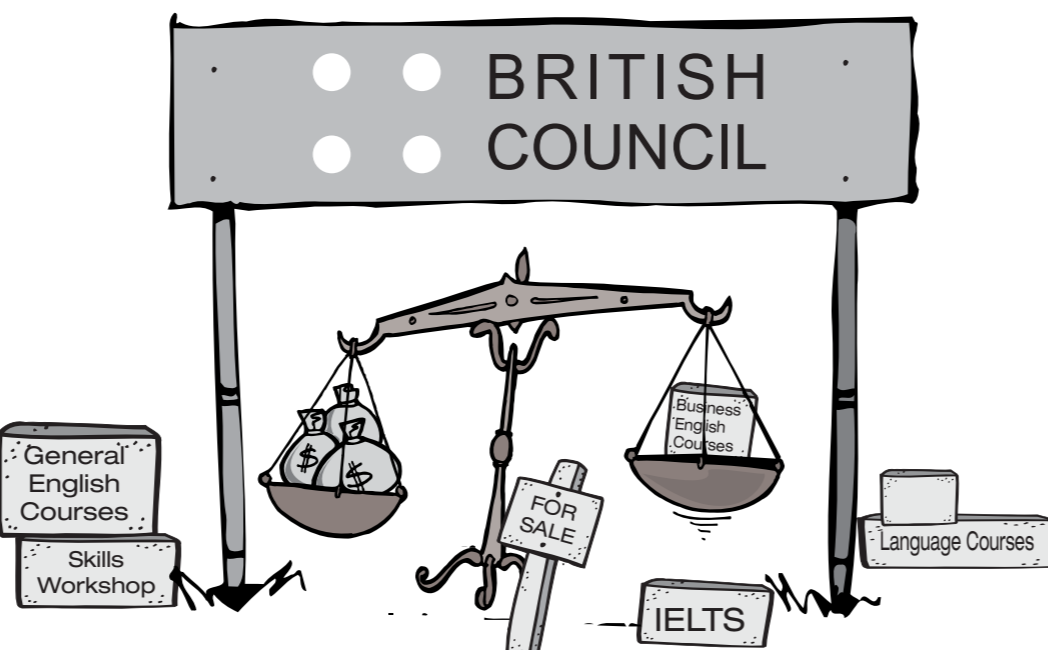
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed

That rots itself in ease on Lethé wharf

will make you tingle. Persist, and soon you will find yourself inhabiting the language from within. But then, we all have to ask, where is the good stuff? Which libraries can they go to? It is the same everywhere in Dhaka. The city has no libraries worth mentioning. They are all either attenuated, bone dry (pages sliced out, dust, humidity and mould choking them) or just plain jokes. And so it is fat times for the English tuition racket. But you can only go so far beneath the dull-eyed gaze of an overworked grammarian. The rest is you, hunger, and a few thumping good libraries.

It may not seem much of a loss, but the effect can be insidious, as over the long term we come to accept an absence of books and well-stocked libraries in our lives as natural, as reading and the slow absorption of ideas give way to MTV, or its Asian variants, to an irreversible appetite for television, film magazines, slickness, gloss, common clutter, car commercials, ludicrous shopping malls, tinsel and glitter. The outside world will of course intrude, inevitably and completely, and it should, but it should come in with books as well as trash, with Ashberry and Auden as well kitsch and neon schlock. These poets and writers, those books, are where we learn about different standards of taste and sensibility, and therefore can successfully redefine and extend our own, and which provide some real guarantees against the corruptions of the soul that lead to the various degradations that are endemic in our public life. When libraries fall, an invisible but necessary social check-and-balance goes. When nobody mourns the absence of books and their decline in peoples' lives it signals a particular kind of a fall, a fall from a place where there exists a certain kind of order, beatitude and sanity. All of us who live here in Dhaka should be keenly aware of it.

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