**Lock those books away?**

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Of the more soul-searing discoveries that I made about our contemporary cultural milieu on my trip to Lahore last week was this: no one under any circumstances is allowed to take out a book from the locked bookcases of the library of the English Department (now rather grandiloquently called something like The Institute of English Language and Literature) of The Punjab University, at its sixty year-old New Campus, right across that fabled nahr aaala pul, that bridge on the canal turned into a cultural meme by Noor Jahan.

The library at the English Department at our oldest institute of higher education is an impressive, high-ceilinged room large enough for a class of fifty or so students. As I entered, I found dozens of old bookcases, all polished to a sheen but depressingly, if somewhat understandably, secured with formidable locks, their shelves lined up neatly with classics and contemporary literature. Much to my dismay, I learnt that not a leaf out of any book was available to anyone, repeat anyone. That moment, suffused in grief and indignation, is the subject of this impromptu screed.

The absurdity and the dissonance inherent in this bizarre discovery, the bathos of the moment from the sublime to the ridiculous, under the gaze of a life-size picture of the founder of the department, the legendary Professor Sirajuddin, left me somewhat disoriented.

The déjà vu moment yanked me to another one, about half a century ago, when in the late 1977, upon entering what used to be a happily buzzing bar at the Quetta Club, I found the defining constituents of the bar, any bar, sadly locked away, thanks to the new martial law regime of Ziaul Haq.

As a professor of rhetoric with somewhat exaggerated notions about my persuasive skills, I regrouped myself, straightened my tie, cleared my throat and approached the the librarian with all the respect that is due to a Pakistani apparatchik during their official chair hours. The lady who was clearly busy with some important phone call in her air-conditioned glass kiosk was clearly not amused at having to step out of the chilled kiosk into the reality of Lahore at 36 Celsius that felt like 48 C.

Instead of getting access to the keys, I suddenly found myself out of my depth, at the receiving end of a voice shrill and loud enough to be that of a successful, professional auctioneer. She will not, she told me decisively, let me have a book even to browse, even if I let her keep my national ID card, driver’s licence, and/or my passport as a guarantee for not absconding with the OED or the day’s copy of Dawn.

In fairness, I found out she was under instructions. Since circumstance had condemned me to spend an hour or so at the library, bereft of choices, I requested the librarian to call a certain senior faculty member (whom I indirectly knew).

I had assumed, in my naiveté, that the rules were either being misinterpreted or the matter would be resolved by the member of the senior faculty with a nod and, perhaps, awash in some pablum with some hint of apology, a faint promise to change the debilitating ethos. That, alas, was not to be, either.

The senior professor, a revolutionary poet in the evening, seemed on the verge of apologizing but resoundingly concurred with the librarian that as per the rules of the library, as promulgated by the director of the institute (not the HOD, note), under no circumstance can any of the bookcases be unlocked, much less a book taken out of them. The concept of reading a book seemed alien to the librarian – I sort of resigned myself to that – but I was shocked and amused by the reigning ethos of the place where the faculty was immune to such a dispiriting situation. All of this at the Punjab University, the nurturing cradle for thousands of our scholars, judges, scientists, and poets for more than a century!

Among the universities in which I studied in the US was the University of Oklahoma where the Bizzell Memorial Library was our jewel. It held millions of books, journals, and papers, had scores of trained staff keen to help out and where, as graduate students, we could have a kiosk of our own with personal access, with books and papers strewn for semesters, a sacred space where, during exams etc. we could have extended hours deep into the night.

So, perhaps, I was too inebriated with the notion of browsing through books in a library for hours, choosing a few, hauling them home in order to read, imbibe, and interpolate those in my own work. This notion of having the curiosity and courage to be exposed to the canon and to acquire tools to interrogate it and, perhaps, create a new body of knowledge suddenly seemed like a quaint notion, an anachronistic idea – even borderline a criminal one.

Looking at the episode as one more instance of the degeneration of the institutions of the country, I threw back my reading glasses in my bag, ambled out of the venerable institute, and headed over to the old dhaaba in its backyard which is still festooned with blaring ads for Coca Cola and Lays but, more mercifully, still serves a mean cup of dudh-patti.

The place sizzled at well over 20 C more than the air-conditioned, glass enclosure of the auctioneer/ librarian – but served what it promised.

The writer is a freelance contributor.