

Libraries disappearing fast

Emran Hossain

NOBODY came to the historic Northbrook Public Library in old town's Lalkuthi in the capital for reading a book in last three years — not at all a surprising matter for the lonely librarian.

'We never buy books and most of our collections date back to the 1800s or even earlier,' said the librarian, Zahidul Amin, pulling out of the bookshelf two dusty books at random.

Published in 1784 and 1786, the books, their covers long lost and the pages worm-eaten and turned blackish from being old, have bent. And every time a page is turned, a column of dust rises.

Currently, the library is being moved to a new building, Lalkuthi Community Centre, raised on the premises of the old one.

Till now, only a wooden bookshelf, which is no less ancient than its books, has been shifted to the new structure. A zamindar is

said to have donated it when the library was set up in 1882.

Placed in a corner of the huge 1800-sq-ft room of the city community centre, run by Dhaka South City Corporation, the shelf creaks

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A man wipes the bookshelves clean at Northbrook Public Library, Lalkuthi in the capital. The photo was taken recently.

Payez Uddin, 55, of village Chandipur under Derai Municipality, was beaten by a group of supporters of the municipality mayor Mosharraf Miah on Thursday evening after he had filed a complaint with the upazila nirbahi officer protesting at irregularities in distribution of VGF cards.

In his complaint, Payez alleged that the municipal mayor had included some of his own people in the list made for distribution of the VGF cards keeping out names of affected farmers.

Derai upazila nirbahi officer Tawfiquzzaman acknowledged receiving the complaint and said that steps would be taken if the allegation was found to be true.

Talking to New Age, Jiban Miah, a farmer at village Ramgha of Chardani union under Dharmapasha upazila in the district, alleged that names of many of the ultra-poor farmers of his village were not included.

The local ward member had mostly included in the list his relatives and supporters, he complained.

Former chairman of

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under the burden of a thousand books.

'We have 11 more similar shelves containing more than 2,500 books that could not be moved from the library's old building declared derelict by the city corporation one and a half year ago,' said the librarian.

The old building is a part of Northbrook Town Hall, considered a heritage site. It was abandoned in 2015 after cracks showed up in its walls. Entering the building was restricted. Stray dogs roam the premises all day long.

A large part of the premises that was once frequented by those visiting the library is now occupied by the community centre's kitchen and a large water pump set up there.

Still, the Northbrook library's condition is better if compared with the other six under the south city corporation.

Rokonpur Public Library in Kaltabazar is a few minutes rickshaw ride from the

Northbrook library. It takes one to climb 72 stairs to enter the library housed on the fifth floor of Rokonpur Community Centre.

A bookshelf, barely 3ft/3ft and having only 70 books, and a reading table are what the 80-sq-ft library room has. The registrar shows only eight people who came here for reading books ever since it was opened in June, 2010.

The librarian is in constant fear of losing the few visitors who come here to read newspapers as her high-ups do not like spending much on newspapers. The library subscribes to only two newspapers.

'The city corporation libraries are of no use if they do not have books and newspapers. This is why the number of libraries in the city corporation has dropped to eight from 23 over the years,' the librarian, Jharna Akter, vented her disappointment.

Of the eight libraries, seven are under the DSCC and one is under Dhaka North City

Corporation.

The only fund the libraries get regularly is their newspaper bills — Tk 800 for two newspapers and a magazine.

Besides the city corporation libraries, there are community-based libraries across the capital, which are also disappearing fast.

In a span of 12 years, more than half of the Dhaka-based community libraries, registered with National Book Centre, the national body to look after the libraries, have been closed.

Their number came down to 27 in 2014 from 76 in 2003. About 20 of the libraries received between Tk 20,000 and Tk 60,000 as donation from the NBC last year.

Trying to save the day, libraries still in operation mostly resorted to cutting expenditures on book purchase. Some did not spend a penny for buying books for years.

People involved in running the libraries are not sure how long they will survive as they

keep losing their patrons — readers and sponsors.

Let alone introducing innovative ways to attract readers, the half a dozen libraries the New Age has visited in parts of Dhaka do not have enough chairs to fill its spaces.

Buildings lack proper ventilation while walls are damped, with plasters coming off.

Dust covers floors, shelves and books alike. The attendant or the cleaner is the only person taking care of the library, doing everything from issuing books to sweeping dust. Having access to internet or wifi is a thing not to be thought of.

'This is an unfortunate situation. But it happens when everything, even knowledge, is valued against its capacity to earn money,' lamented prominent educationist Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Chowdhury.

'Ignorance is where it would eventually lead the society to,' he noted.