

Memories of the British Council library in old Mumbai

I was very saddened to read that the British Council is “selling everything” in order to survive (Report, October 28).

For my generation, growing up in India just after it won independence, the British Council library was one of the jewels that the British left behind. In a country bereft of the type of libraries common in Britain we all wanted to be members of the British Council library. Such was the demand that there was a long waiting list and

you had to be 16 before you could join. As soon as I became 16 I rushed from my Jesuit school to the library near Mumbai’s Marine Drive to read the British newspapers and borrow books.

I had never seen such a stack of wonderful books and what a contrast it provided to the library of the United States Information Service. I recall few of us wanted to be members of the USIS library where the books were mainly about why collectivisation in the Soviet bloc was not working, which

– as you can imagine – held little interest for a teenager.

The British Council library in contrast, offered enticing fiction and non-fiction. It was here that I read biographies of the great British sportsmen I had long admired and my first political biography, that of Aneurin Bevan by Michael Foot. I was enchanted by the picture it presented of a pre-second world war Britain, something I knew nothing about, and the quality of Foot’s writing surpassed

anything I had ever read. To think that such an expression of British soft power is now being extinguished reflects no credit on our present UK leaders. The British Council speaks eloquently for Britain abroad and should be helped to carry on its splendid mission.

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