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On the Margins of the USIS Archive in South Asia: Histories of Media and Politics

Layli Uddin (Queen Mary University of London) and Lotte Hoek (University of Edinburgh)

To explore the archive of the USIS in South Asia frequently means stumbling across a USIS officer, film screening, or library book on the margins of an archive dedicated to other institutions, histories, or principles. The USIS rarely appears in South Asian professional repositories or personal collections as a primary focus. Instead, when we, a political historian (Uddin) and a media anthropologist (Hoek), encounter the USIS in archives in South Asia, it appears to us in a different guise than in the archives created by and for the USIS in North America, and mostly part of explorations not centrally focused on the USIS. But there they are.

We often compare our finds, mostly via our phones. Layli sends a picture of a tour diary of the American Consul General, Archer K. Blood, from the 1960s. The typed sheet describes Mr. Blood making his way through what was then East Pakistan (today Bangladesh). “Dinner (again chicken and rice)”, it notes the monotony of his diet, alongside venues visited, people met, and his attendance at USIS film screenings of *Northwest Passage* and *Electing a President*. Lotte sends back a smiley face, “again chicken!” Lotte texts Layli a screenshot from the Pakistani film magazine *Eastern Film*. It shows four USIS officers standing alongside Malik Bari, legendary film producer and owner of Bari Studio in Lahore in the early 1960s. The picture accompanies a small news item titled “USIS Film Producer in Town” (Figure 1). While Layli’s document was recently declassified, Lotte’s screenshot was from a popular film magazine. “Similar itinerary?”

Neither of us have set out to research the USIS. Layli writes on the social and political history of Bangladesh and focuses on the thought and practice of Islamic socialist leader Maulana Bhashani.¹ Lotte is a media anthropologist who writes about cinema culture and history in Bangladesh using ethnographic methods. Repeatedly, USIS officers and activities emerge in snippets of text, interview, or image as we look for other

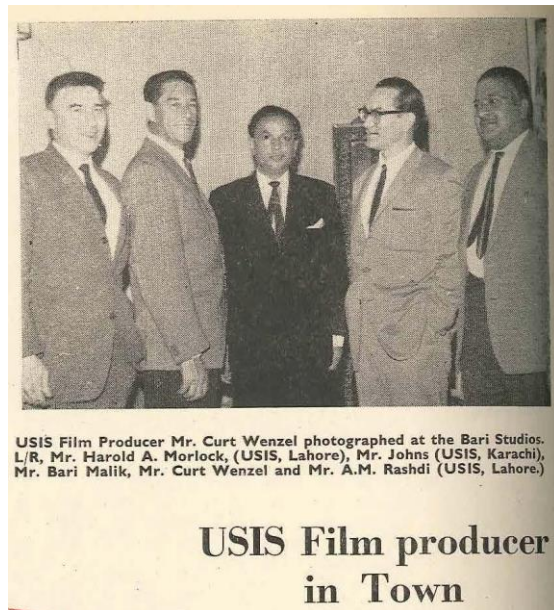


Figure 1: The USIS in Eastern Film, May 1963
[“USIS Film Producer in Town,” *Eastern Film* (magazine), May 1963]

things. And then we text each other.

“We actually have very little idea what Bhashani sounds like.” Layli has been trailing the AP archives to find traces of his voice, his image in motion. Bhashani was a charismatic political and spiritual leader whose personal and political trajectory crossed India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Despite his long and significant life (1880-1976), there is very little known audiovisual material of Bhashani. But there were USIA trained cameramen in East Pakistan, who produced footage locally of politically significant events from the 1950s onwards. Events in which Bhashani would have participated. Lotte’s ethnographic fieldwork in the Bangladesh film industry has allowed her to speak to cameramen with long and prolific careers in popular cinema. Among the oldest generation, there are those who trained with and worked for the USIS; those who were first given the opportunity to shoot newsworthy events in color because of the USIS.² In this way our work across social history and media anthropology intersects where traces of USIS activity emerge.

"The archival and historical trace of the activities and personnel of the USIS in South Asia appears in repositories that are not focused on the USIS. We find them repeatedly in the archives related to cinema and to politics."

The archival and historical trace of the activities and personnel of the USIS in South Asia appears in repositories that are not focused on the USIS. We find them repeatedly in the archives related to cinema and to politics. Lotte finds them in the records of the East Bengal Film Censor Board (when the regionally empowered film censor board refused to let diplomatic missions show their films without regular clearance)³; Layli sees them in police and intelligence reports at the National Archives and the Special Police Branch in Bangladesh. There is a fertile USIS paper trail that is not produced by the USIS itself nor

held in American repositories. Instead, the record of USIS activities is highly dispersed, and traces of its presence in the political and media history of South Asia pop up in all sorts of unexpected places: from popular film magazines to film studio memorabilia, in police records, parliamentary debates, and bureaucratic records of the East Pakistan state.

Of course, the presence of the USIS in records not particular to the USIA is not surprising. In East Pakistan alone, a relatively small territory in South Asia, the USIS had no less than seven libraries a mere three years after the USIA was established in the USA by Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953. In their report to Congress in 1955, the warm reception they received in Pakistan is mentioned: “plans to open six USIS reading rooms in East Pakistan were so warmly approved that very good buildings—sometimes the best in town—were offered for Agency use.”⁴ With the generous housing came an impressive arsenal of media extensions, including library books, gramophones, film projectors, and exhibition space. They produced films locally, dubbed into Pakistani languages. Like the Pakistan state itself, USIS used mobile publicity units to take its sounds and sights across the country. We tend to think of these as vans, bringing to mind images from the Colonial Film Unit and its magazine *Colonial Cinema*⁵ (Great Britain, 1942-1954). But in the riverine environment of deltaic Bengal, vans were often impractical. Instead, USIS films and other artifacts, as well as personnel, would frequently travel by boat and barge, reaching waterlogged areas and inhabited river islands. The 1958 USIA report states how 300 filmstrip projectors fueled by kerosene were used to reach rural East Pakistan, where electricity had not yet arrived or was in low supply.⁶ With this capillary presence so quickly established, it is no wonder we stumble across the USIS so frequently in our respective research projects.

Sometimes our work intersects more directly, and political and media history intertwine via the presence of the USIS. Parliamentarians raised objections to the USIA presence in East Pakistan

in the legislative assembly in 1954 and wondered whether USIS officers were directly involved in supporting candidates in recent elections. During the political uprisings in 1969-70 immediately preceding the war and genocide that would result in independence for Bangladesh, and in which Bhashani played a crucial role, students in Dhaka attacked the USIS mobile publicity unit. When our projects approach one another through the figure of the USIS, it allows us to ask what the role of the USIS was in reshaping the cultural and media landscape of Pakistan, and how the trace of USIS visual and media material can give us insight into the political landscape of East Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The USIA archive in and on South Asia enables scholars to transgress, expand, and connect across disciplinary and thematic boundaries. The USIS provides a quilting point that can be used to connect our investigations into fields as divergent as popular film and political uprising. The USIS holds out the potential for plugging some of the gaps in our knowledge around both the political and the media history in South Asia. Political imperatives and changing requirements mean that certain files do go a bit patchy in the 1960s. Similarly, a lot of visual material from, say, the 1950s in East Pakistan, is inaccessible for a host of reasons. That is to say, for us the USIS is not merely an object of investigation. More than this, it is a means for organizing our material *comparatively*. By connecting through the figure of the USIS officer or film screening, we find a means of triangulating our political and media histories.

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To connect through the figure of the USIS in staging our political and media historical research requires collaboration. Collaboration allows stray archival fragments to become visible and meaningful. The tour diary of a political officer illuminates exhibition practice; the photo opportunity in a popular film studio connects to diplomatic efforts. The visual image can tell us something about the political moment that's not available in the archive. Simultaneously, the political archive tells us something about media history that is not available in the image and media archive alone. And, finally, when you encounter the USIS in archives in South Asia, it appears in a different guise than in the archives created by and for the USIS in North America. The USIS rarely appears in South Asian repositories as the main focus. The "archival grain"⁷ is different, too. On the margins of the archives in South Asia, the discovery of the USIS personnel and activities also sheds new light on the stories contained within American national repositories. This, then, is what we do when we share our snippets of material over the phone. A form of collaboration, triangulation, and comparison across disciplinary, archival and thematic boundaries that helps to illuminate each.

About the Authors

Layli Uddin is a social and political historian of modern South Asia. Her research focuses on histories of the Left during the Cold War, Islamic Socialism, and social movements across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. She is currently completing her first book project, *Land of Eternal Eid*, offering a subaltern account on the making of Bangladesh. Her article on subaltern joy appeared in *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and a microhistory of industrial riots in East Pakistan in *Modern Asian Studies* (2021). She is Lecturer in Politics and International Relations of South Asia at Queen Mary

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Lotte Hoek is a media anthropologist whose research is situated at the intersection of cultural anthropology and film studies. Her current research focuses on the art film and modes of non-theatrical exhibition as grounds for political contestation in Bangladesh since 1948. She is the author of *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh* (Columbia University Press, 2014) and co-editor of *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories* (Bloomsbury, 2021). She is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh.

¹ Layli Uddin, "A view from the roof: space and politics in South Asia," *Issues* 3, no. 1 (2020). For more on her work, see layliuddin.wordpress.com.

² Lotte Hoek, "Mirrors of Movement: Aina, Afzal Chowdhury's cinematography and the interlinked histories of the cinema in Pakistan and Bangladesh," *Screen* 57, no. 4 (2017), 488-495.

³ Lotte Hoek, "Films in the Diplomatic Bag: Sovereignty, Censorship and the Foreign Mission Film in East Pakistan & Bangladesh" in Ravi Vasudevan (ed.) *Media and the Constitution of the Political in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage, 2022), 23-50.

⁴ United States Information Agency, *5th Report to the Congress, July 1-December 31 1955* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Press, 1955).

⁵ "Great Britain. Colonial Film Unit. 1942-54," *Colonial Cinema: A monthly bulletin issued by the Colonial Film Unit for distribution in the Colonies*.

⁶ United States Information Agency, *11th Report to Congress, July 1-December 31 1958* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Press, 1958).

⁷ Laura Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and the Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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