Development of the libraries in the British period of Sri Lanka: a historical study

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Abstract

This research delves into the historical development of libraries in British Colonial Sri Lanka (1796-1948), emphasizing qualitative analysis of secondary data from sources such as Ferguson's Directory, Ceylon Almanac, and Ceylon Blue Book. The study identifies reasons behind the systematic library system's emergence, explores their locations, delves into oriental libraries, and examines prominent British-era libraries. Initially catering to British civil servants, libraries expanded to encompass diverse communities, including planters and missionaries. Notable libraries, such as Colombo Museum Library and Jaffna Public Library, emerged, laying foundations for the present Sri Lankan library system. The research concludes that the British period spurred the transformation from traditional pirivenas to a systematic library network, fostering educational and cultural evolution. Presently, these libraries continue to thrive, offering automated services, diverse collections, and widespread accessibility, showcasing the lasting impact of British-era developments on Sri Lanka's library system.

Keywords: British period, Library development, Library history, Sri Lanka, Subscription libraries

Introduction

The main objective of this research was to study the historical development of libraries in the British period in Sri Lanka. The other aims were to explore the usage of libraries, explore the distribution of libraries, and study the historical sources in the British period.

This is qualitative research. This research was based on secondary data, and data was collected through historical sources namely, Ferguson's

Directory, Ceylon Almanac and Ceylon Blue Book. The British period in Sri Lanka was a selected period (1796-1948). The qualitative data was analyzed accordingly. The findings of the study are as follows.

Objectives

- To identify the reasons for the development of systematic library system in the British period of Sri Lanka.

- To explore the places that libraries were developed in the British period.

- To identify the oriental libraries which were developed in the British period.

- To study about popular libraries which were developed in the British period.

In 1796 British came to Sri Lanka. After British captured Kandy kingdom, Sri Lanka became a British colony. In the British period libraries were built to fulfill needs of the British civil servants. These libraries were called subscription libraries

In 1850 libraries were distributed in Galle, Trincomale, Kandy, Negombo, Chilaw, Kalutara, Rathnapura, Hambanthota, Mannar and Jaffna. After the development of the planting sector libraries were built for planting communities use. Thus libraries were built in Nuwaraeliya, Hatton, Gampola, Kegall, Tangalle and Matara. Accordingly, libraries were built with the establishment of missionary organizations. For example, Colombo Catholic library, Batticaloa Catholic library can be considered.

Native peoples reading habits were also improved in the 19th century. Even native peoples started to built oriental libraries like Kandy oriental library. The change of the Sinhala literature style and the development of printing presses also affected.

In 20th century libraries were built with higher education institutes such as law libraries, medical libraries, research institute libraries and government department libraries.

Colombo museum library, Royal Asiatic society library, Colombo public library, Jaffna public library, Kandy public library, Jayawardhanapura University library can be considered as the leading libraries which were built in the British period.

The foundation of the present library system of Sri Lanka started as subscription libraries in the British period. British civil servants and army officers used these libraries. To get library services users had to pay a little amount of money. Accordingly, only Europeans could access to the libraries. The library built by Loughton Michael, a businessman in Colombo can be considered as the first library which is built in the British period. (T.G. Piyadasa, 1985)

In the first half century of British period libraries were limited to main cities such as Colombo, Galle and Trincomale. Afterwards libraries were built whole around the island.

In early 19th century most of the libraries were started in Colombo area. There were three significant libraries in Colombo, United Service Library (1812), Colombo Pettah Library (1829), and Colombo Library (1842). Information about these three libraries can be found in Fergusons Directory, Ceylon Calendar and Ceylon blue book. According to 1832 Ceylon Calendar the governor Horton and major

general J. Wilson were the patrons of the United Service Library. Colombo Pettah library was formed by a well-educated Burgher group. The British government has given 500 Rupees of fund annually for this library. (Ferguson, 1866-1926) In 1874 July 1st United Service Library was merged to Colombo Library. The new building was situated in no25, Queens Street, Pettah. (De Silva, 1987)

Galle Pettah Library was established in Dutch Period. Therefore, this library can be considered as the first systematic library in Sri Lanka. In 1845 the governor William Gregory named this library as Galle Pettah Library.

Royal Asiatic Society library was formed in 1845 with the establishment of the Ceylon branch of Royal Asiatic Society. The patron of the library was the governor. The first librarian of this library was J. Clapper. (T.G. Piyadasa, 1985)

British established subscription libraries as well as oriental libraries. Many of the British were interested in learning Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit language. They collected many palm leaves about religion, literature, medicine, etc. It proves that British government also interested in establishing oriental libraries by forming government oriental library in 1869, and forming Kandy oriental library in 1895.

The pirevenas that formed at the end of the 19th century can be considered as the climax of Buddhist education. As a result, in 1873 Hikkaduwe Sumangala thero lead to form Vidyodaya pirivena. The information about Vidyodaya pirivena library can be found in 1880-1881, 1927, 1929 and 1947 Ferguson's Directory.

In 1877 Colombo Museum library was established. The first librarian of this library was Richard Van Culenburgh. He built the library collection

to 2200 books. (T.G. Piyadasa, 1985) The governor sir William Gregory patronized Colombo Museum Library.

At the end of the 19th century public library system of Sri Lanka started. In 1920 Kandy Municipal assumed Kandy Central Town Library. This library can be considered as first public library in Sri Lanka. According to 1927 Ferguson's Directory this library was named as Kandy Municipal free library.

The Colombo Public Library was established in 1925 by merging Colombo Library and Colombo Pettah Library. According to Sir James Fernando Chandrasekaras testamentary a building named 'Siri Nivesa' in Edinburgh Crescent was chosen to form the Colombo Public Library.

In 1934 K. M. Chellappa, a social worker in Jaffna formed a library in his home. In 1934 a committee gathered to discuss about forming a library in Jaffna. As a result, Jaffna public Library was established with a collection of 844 books and 30 magazines and newspapers. K. M. Chellappa was named as the secretary of this library.

Today in Sri Lankan libraries which were built in the British period can be considered as significant libraries among other libraries. These libraries have developed their collections, services and user crowd.

Galle library which was built in 1837 is now a tourist attraction point in Galle/ Also it is greatly funded by Netherlands SOS Velsen foundation.

Royal Asiatic Society library have a collection of 11000 volumes at present. Also 117 periodical titles and rare palm leaves of 17, 18 centuries included to the collection. which referes to Sri Lankan history, religion, language and literature too.

After 1959 Vidyodaya pirevena (1873) is named as Sri Lanka

Vidyodaya University. Today it is Sri Jayawardhanapura University. This University library have more than 200 000 collections. University collection includes online databases, online books and online periodicals. Also library have OPAC, laptop lending, user education, photocopying, inter library loan and many more services.

Colombo museum library claims Sri Lanka's largest library collection. Museum library have a 12 million collection including palm leaves collection, text books, periodicals, government publications, manuscripts, maps, stamps, arts, photographs and rare books.

Sri Lanka's first public library, Kandy municipal library is now known as Kandy D. S. Senanayaka memorial library. The library collection is near to 300 000. More than 1500 users access the library for a day. There are main 7 sections in the D. S. Senanayaka memorial library. Additionally, it has a India corner and a American corner.

Colombo public library is the prominent public library in Sri Lanka. Now it has 40 000 – 50 000 members. This library annually accepts new books around 5000 – 6000. There are 13 branches in Colombo public library.

Jaffna public library is the largest library for Sri Lankan Tamil community. In 1981 the library had 95000 collections, when it was on fire. After reconstruction library have six sections and five branch libraries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the British Period Sri Lanka's education, literature and culture has been modified. Therefore, the library system in Sri Lanka also changed. Instead of pirevenas a systematic library system was developed. At

present these libraries are automated including Sri Lankan valuable rare collections. Most of these libraries have branch libraries and provide many services. Also many users access the library daily.

Hence Sri Lankan library system is systematically developed in the British period.

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