

Subscription libraries in Ceylon in the 19th century: special reference to the Colombo Library, the Ceylon United Service Library and the Colombo Pettah Library

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The contemporary library system in Sri Lanka systematically started with the establishment of 'subscription libraries' during the early nineteenth century of the British governing period of Ceylon. These subscription libraries were established to fulfill the reading and recreational requirements of the British Government and Army officers worked in Ceylon under the British Government. The library service extended to their family members as well.

The aim of this study was to explore the subscription libraries functioned in the 19th century. The study mainly focused on the three prominent subscription libraries existed during the nineteenth century, namely the Colombo Library (1812), the Ceylon United Service Library (1813) and the Colombo Pettah Library (1829). These were the first set of subscription libraries established by the British in the Colombo city limit during the early years of their governing period in Ceylon. There was an annual grant received by these subscription libraries from the British Government in Ceylon. These grants were mainly used for the maintenance and functionality of libraries. Library users had to pay a small subscription fee for using the library.

Qualitative research approach was adopted and study was mainly based on the secondary data. Secondary data were mainly gathered from the secondary data sources such as 'The Ceylon Calendar', 'The Ceylon Blue Book' and 'The Ferguson's Directory'. Data was comparatively analyzed and arranged under the name of libraries.

The study revealed that these three subscription libraries rendered a good service to its users throughout the 19th century. However, with the difficulties faced with regard to maintenance and functionality these libraries were amalgamated with other libraries to carry out a better library service to its patrons.

As a result of the user demand for these three libraries, the government set up number of subscription libraries in the country covering main provinces such as Central, Southern and Northern by the end of the final quarter of the 19th century.

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