

Public Libraries in Sri Lanka During the British Period

Prof. Piyadasa Ranasinghe* & R.A.A.S. Ranaweera*

Abstract

The modern public library system in Sri Lanka started with the establishment of the 'Subscription Libraries' in the British regime during the nineteenth century. These Subscription libraries were established to fulfill the information needs of the expatriate British worked in Sri Lanka. The United Service Library (1813) and The Colombo Pettah Library (1829) were the first subscription libraries established in Colombo by the British.

The initial idea of establishing subscription libraries in Sri Lanka had gradually changed during the early twentieth century due to the growing user demands of the general public. The establishment of the Colombo Public Library in 1925, marked a new dawn in public library system in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Public Library, Subscription Library, Library History, Public Library Movement, Colombo Public Library

Objectives of the Study

The history of public libraries in Sri Lanka has not been a subject for a detailed and systematic study although a century has elapsed from the establishment of the first library in Sri Lanka in 1813. Also, the history of Public libraries in Sri Lanka is highly unreported. Therefore, it is important to build up the systematic history of public libraries in Sri Lanka. Hence the main objective of this research is to study the history and gradual development of the public library system in Sri Lanka.

Secondly, it aims to study the historical reference sources, Institutions and human sources related to the history of Public Libraries in Sri Lanka.

*Prof. Piyadasa Ranasinghe, Senior Lecturer, Dept. Library & Information Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Dalugama
e-mail: piyarana@kln.ac.lk Tel. 011-2917712

*R.A.A.S. Ranaweera, Assistant Librarian, University of Kelniya, Dalugama
E-mail: achala@kln.ac.lk Tel: 011 2903178, 0 11 2911918, 071 8669771

Research Methodology

As this study is a historical research, the primary data source such as questionnaires or survey methods were not feasible in collecting data. The study was mainly based on the historical and archival data and as such they were mainly obtained from the secondary data sources available in the National Archives Department and the Colombo Museum Library in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

The establishment of the modern library system in Sri Lanka has a connection with the western influence. The European rulers such as Portuguese, Dutch and British came to Ceylon in 1505, 1656 and 1796 respectively. Ceylon has become a Crown Colony of the British Empire in 1801 administered by a Governor under the control of the Secretary of States for Colonies. The British took complete control of the country by capturing the King of Kandy in 1815 (De Silva, 1972). During their governing period in Ceylon, British had control and changed the social, political and economical situation of the country in many ways and at the same time they possessed almost all the top positions of the country. It is because of this reason that there were a considerable number of expatriates residing in the country.

During the early British period in the nineteenth century the Government started a library system named as 'Subscription Libraries' in principal towns of the country to fulfill of information needs of the British Government officers and Army officers who worked in Sri Lanka (Corea, 1975, p.12). The purpose of these libraries was to provide books for leisurely reading. These subscription libraries were mainly used by the British government officers and their family members and, users had to pay a subscription fee for using the library. Simultaneously in England also there was a great demand from the public for libraries in England and that would have influenced the establishment of libraries in Ceylon.

British Period : 19th Century

Details of early subscription libraries set up in Ceylon were documented at the government publications such as 'The Ceylon Blue Book', Government Administration Report' and 'The Ceylon Calendar' or The Ceylon Almanac and Ferguson's Directory.

According to the above mentioned information 'The Colombo Library' is the first subscription library of Sri Lanka established by the British government.

This was established on 13th August in 1812 (Ferguson's Ceylon Directory 1863, 1864, p.10). Mr. Dionisiuse De Neys was the first librarian of the Colombo Library which post he held till 1846 (The Ceylon Calendar, 1816, p.112).

The United Service Library established in 1813 was considered as one of the oldest subscription libraries in Sri Lanka and the armed forces were the main users of this library. Due to maintenance difficulties this library was merged with the Colombo Library in 1874 (Corea, 1975). Mr. John Titley, Mr. Michael Jordan, Mr. George A. Bruce and Mr. Ebenezer were the Librarians of the Ceylon United Service Library.

According to the Ferguson's Directory another subscription library namely as the 'Pettah Library' was instituted by a group of learned Burghers on 11th of April 1829 and the library was reorganized on 1st of September 1836 (Ferguson's Ceylon Directory 1863,1864, p.6). This library also served the English speaking educated elite in Colombo as in the previous two subscription libraries.

Until 1838 subscription libraries were situated only in the Colombo city area. But in 1839 subscription libraries were spread out from Colombo to other major cities in the country. Also, these subscription libraries were opened for the English educated elite of the society such as lawyers and civil servants (Corea,1968,p.11).

By the year of 1850 there was a wide network of subscription libraries spread in almost all the major towns of the country such as Galle, Trincomalee, Kandy, Negombo, Chilaw, Kalutara, Rathnapura, Hambantota, Mannar and Jaffna. Subscription libraries were also opened in the towns such as, Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Gampola, Kegalle, Tangalle and Matara for those expatriates who worked in the plantation industry in the up country and southern parts of Sri Lanka.

In the latter part of 1880 subscription libraries were formed in Negombo, Kalutara, Rathnapura, Kegalle, Matugama, Matara, Point Pedro, Baddulla, Trincomalee and Anuradhapura.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the British Government in Ceylon was able to realize the value of services rendered by these subscription libraries and its popularity among its users. As a result of this, the Government decided to grant some sort of financial support for selected subscription libraries in the country and during this time subscription libraries were also open for the native subordinates who assisted the British in their administration work.

The users had to pay a small fee for using these libraries and the government also gave a certain amount of money as a donation. These government grants were

mainly used for the acquisition of reading material and maintenance. Since 1872 onwards the authority of the subscription libraries was under the Department of Public Instructions. The Report of the director of the Public Instruction in the annual administration report of Ceylon gives important information about subscription libraries in Ceylon such as financial grants and functionality and sometimes the number of subscribers. The government grants to the libraries were recorded in the 'Administration Report of Ceylon' under the heading of 'Donation to Libraries, Book Clubs and Reading Rooms' in the section of Public Instruction from 1878 to 1914. The grants received ranged from Rs.100 - Rs. 500.

According to the information available in the administration reports it is clear that the Assistant Government Agents in each district of the country, had reported the conditions of the libraries in his district along with other matters.

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a well established network of libraries and reading rooms in Ceylon. Some of these libraries were well organized and gave a continuous service to its readers but some of the libraries had to be closed due to various issues such as financial difficulties, problems with maintenance and sometimes due to less user population. The government gave a significant support to the subscription libraries which functioned during the nineteenth century. These libraries and reading rooms marked the initial step of forming public libraries in Sri Lanka.

The formation of the Government Oriental Library in 1870 was a major landmark in the history of public libraries in Sri Lanka during the British period. The idea of Public Library in modern Sri Lanka was initiated with the establishment of the Government Oriental Library (Piyadasa, 1985). The key idea of establishing this library was to collect and preserve a collection of oriental literature on Buddhism in Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhalese. Mr. Louis de Zoysa, Maha Mudaliyar, the Chief Translator to the Government was appointed as the librarian (Piyadasa, 1985, p.57).

British Period : Early 20th Century

The preliminary idea of establishing subscription libraries in Sri Lanka had changed during the early years of the twentieth century. Due to the First World War the government subsidy for libraries was cut and there was a great demand for the free library system from the English educated natives in the country. The discussion for a free library system in Sri Lanka began and the establishment of the Colombo Public Library in 1925 by amalgamating two historical libraries marked that new evolution.

Colombo Public Library

The establishment of the Colombo Public Library was a significant event of the public library system in Sri Lanka. The Colombo Public Library was inaugurated in July 1925 by amalgamating the earliest subscription libraries in Ceylon, namely as Colombo library (1824) and the Pettah library (1829). The United Service Library established in 1813 was merged with the Colombo library in 1874. These early subscription libraries were mainly used by the armed forces and the government officers. These libraries were merged due to the problems with regard to providing the subsistence during World War I (1914- 1918).

The Colombo Public library was established by using the funds of Sri Chandrasekera Fund. Mr. James Fernando Sri Chandrasekera was a great Sinhala Philanthropist and he left his wealth to the Government to help charitable institutions and public libraries. As the public library was an urgent necessity, the public library was set up in a building name 'Siriniwasa' in Edinburgh Crescent which belonged to the Trust (Corea, 1975,p.16).

The Colombo Public Library was opened on 1^{of} July 1925 and all members of the public above 14 years of age, residents or employed in Colombo were eligible to join as members of the library (Report of the Librarian for the year 1925, 1926, p.115).

The library had three departments as Reading Room, the Lending Library and the Reference Library. The reading room was open to the public from 10th August. The Lending and Reference sections had approximately 16,000 books in English. There were no books in Sinhala and Tamil. The newspapers and periodicals were in the Reading Room and also were in English to cater to the taste of the English educated elite who patronized the library at that time (De Alwis, 1989, p.26). At the beginning, there were 94 borrowers who were using the lending library and 84 books issued in the Reference library. These figures were increased over the years due to the ever growing demand for the Colombo Public Library. By the end of 1947 there were 99208 books borrowed by 7648 borrowers.

Conclusion

Due to the National Movement during the pre independence period there was a significant socio-cultural change can be seen in Ceylon. Introduction of the free education system in 1945 led to the spread of a free education around the island. As a result of that a considerable number of new Central Colleges (Madhya Maha Vidyalaya) were established throughout the country to give educational

opportunities to students who lived in rural areas of the country. Free education directly contributed to the development of a new group of readers. This group preferred reading in their mother tongue, Sinhala or Tamil. This new reading culture positively influenced the libraries and librarianship in Sri Lanka. The public library was considered the best place to get reading material free of charge. Growing demand for reading requirements compelled the establishment of new public libraries throughout the country.

By the time Ceylon gained independence from the British on 4th February 1948, there was a wide network of public libraries set up in Ceylon covering most of the principal cities of the country.

References

Corea, I. (1968), **The Colombo public library**, *Ceylon Library Review* , 3(1)

Corea , I (1975), **The Colombo public library system**, in Corea, I. (ed.) , *Libraries and people: Colombo public library 1925 – 1975. a commemorative volume*, Colombo Public Library, Colombo

De Silva, H. (1972), **Printing and publishing in Sri Lanka**, Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO, Colombo

De Silva, W.A. (1938), **Catalogue of palm leaf manuscripts**, Government Press, Colombo

Piyadasa, T.G. (1985), **Libraries in Sri Lanka: their origin and history from ancient times to the present time**, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi

Report of the Librarian for the year 1925, (1926), in *Ceylon Government sessional Paper* , Government Press, Colombo ,p.115

The Ceylon calendar 1815, (1816), Government Press, Colombo

The Ferguson's Ceylon directory for 1863,(1864), Ceylon Observer Press, Colombo