

83rd anniversary in July 2008

Public Library Colombo: A national heritage



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The Treasury of Wisdom of the Colombo Municipal Council, better known as the Colombo Public Library will commemorate its 83rd anniversary this month.

The Colombo Public Library, which is more or less, a Peoples University has already become a property of National Heritage. It has quenched the thirst for knowledge of the people of all walks of life, from the childhood to old age irrespective of Race, caste and other social differences.

The origin and convention of library services in Sri Lanka happened to be long one, as much as the Country's long history.

The rise of the religious literacy work with the recording of the 'Helatuwaa' in the 3rd Century B.C., is considered as the commencement of the long history of the library service, while the writing of 'Thiripitaka' in the 1st Century B.C. by the Sinhala King Walagamba, is a landmark event in the long history of our country's library services.

As pointed out in 'Mahawamsa', there had been a library convention known as 'Pothgul Vihara', which had existed in the earlier centuries, in the country.

But, printing of books and papers, which commenced in the 19th Century and the arrival of the Britons in Sri Lanka was marked as the birth of the Colombo Public Library.

The Colombo Municipal Council, at its meeting held on 1st October 1924 had decided to establish the Public Library by amalgamating the Colombo Public Library and the Library in Pettah.

Accordingly, a building known as 'Srinivasa' in the Edinborough Crescent was selected to house the Public Library, and the Colombo Public Library was established there in July 1925. At the time of commencement, there were 07 members in the Staff. Mrs. S. C. Block served as the Chief Librarian.

At that time there were about 16000 books in the lending section and in the Investigating sections, and steps also had been taken to open Sinhalese and Tamil Sections. As the readership increased, day by day, Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa, the late President of Sri Lanka, who was then a Member of the Colombo Municipal Council, representing the Cinnamon Garden Ward, pointed out the necessity of a new building to provide a better library service. Mr. Vincent Perera, the then, Mayor of Colombo, laid the foundation stone on 30th October 1965 for the new Public Library building. Thereafter, the construction work continued amidst much obstacles and controversies and finally it was able to open to New Public Library on the 17th December 1980.

The Main Public Library is housed in a three storied building in a picturesque block of land adjoining the Vihara Maha Devi Park bordered by the Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawata. The total area of the new Library building covers 100,000 square feet, and it consists of an Auditorium with seating accommodation for 500 persons, and the adjoining study hall provides seating accommodation for 750 persons.

The statue of the Swan erected inside the pond, as you enter the Library Premises reminds any one, of the role of the messenger, played by a Swan in the Hansa Sandesaya. The clay murals found on either side of the entrance to the Library, depicts the literary art existed in our country, in the past, and also reminds valuable letter carvings on granite, and Ola Leaf book culture

which existed in our country in the early centuries. Any person who enters the Library from the main entrance, will see the large erection displaying the theme, of reading books and the prevailing undisturbed silence.

On the Ground Floor, of the building, one would find the member enrolment counter, cash collection counter, and the book issue counter. In addition, information guide centre, exhibition hall, the newspaper section, the Mobile Section, lending section as well as the Sinhala, Tamil and English Binding Sections

are maintained.

The children's section, magazine section, conference hall, the administration office, the office rooms of the Chief Librarian and the Deputy Chief Librarian are in the First Floor, while in the Second Floor, the investigation unit, special collection unit, audio-visual section and the book-box sections are maintained.

In the first year of the Public Library (1925), there were 94 members in the lending section, and the above number had increased to 1,49064 members on the day, the Library completed 83 years service. In the very first year, the Public Library had issued 687 books to readers, while the number of books issued to members in the previous year were 2,42,658.

At present, the Public Library purchases 37 Local and Foreign papers and Magazines and 139 periodicals for the above sections. The children's Section, which was established in the year 1972, has a membership of 28,251 by the year 2008.

The Investigation and Research section, which is used regularly by readers who conduct research and study activities on subjects such as Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, manuals of books is an important wing in the Public Library. Nearly 32,000 readers have made use of the above section in the previous year for research and study purposes.

Some of the most precious books written about Sri Lanka are preserved in the Collection Sections, which is known as special collection section, which is known as Special collection section. In the above Section, readers will be able to make use of books and valuable letters, written so far, about Sri Lanka.

Several books and letters for the first time, about Sri Lanka are held in the above section. For example book written by Report Knox one of the early travellers to Sri Lanka, at ware held in the above section. For example, book written by Robert Knox, one of the early travellers to Sri Lanka to Sri Lanka, titled *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon* is available in the Book Collection Section. In addition, a reader would be able to make use of valuable publications preserved and kept under titles, Fine Arts, collection, the Sri Lanka Collection, Local and Foreign book printed and published about Buddhism, collection of Ola leaves books, Government publications, UNESCO publications, Japanese publications, collection of Indira Gandhi's works, and Arthur C. Clarke collections.

In addition, the Mobile Section of the Public Library, which was established in 10th July 1975, is conducting a valuable service by catering to the need of readership at their door step or at various selected sports in the City. They serve the readers at Government offices, Housing complexes, Sunday school and Prison yards and other selected places. There are about 60 such issue centres within the city, at which, the Mobile Section operates. There are 9970 members enrolled in the Mobile Library Service since its inception on 10th July 1975.

The Public Library, with much interest considers the possibility of reaching areas inaccessible to the Mobile service vehicle, where the need of the children in slums and houses in under-

privileged areas and narrow lanes. Accordingly, Book-Boxes are sent to children living in such areas, who are under 14 years of age, by using small vehicles. There are 62 such centres maintained, presently and a nominal Membership fee is charged from members. There are 14,300 children, who have joined the Book-Box project. Fines on delays are not recovered, by considering the low income received by their families. The Children are able to collect books once in two weeks, when the van which arrives at the Centre near their houses.

In addition to the services provided by the Main Library, there are 14 branch Libraries, which render immense service to the reader public. More than 18 thousand members enrolled in Branch Libraries at Kotahela, Kirulapona, Peterson Lane Wallawatta, Pedrick Park, Gunasinghe Pura, Sri Sucharita Mawatha, Mihindu Mawatha, Belmont Street, Keththarama, Elliot Place Borella, Mattakkuliya, Bounavista Road, and Seevali Lane. News Papers and magazines are provided for the benefit of readers, of all the above branch Libraries except a few.

Similarly, books are issued from Branch Libraries to readers, who have obtained membership tickets from the Main Library. All citizens who reside within the City limits of Colombo are entitled to obtain membership of the Public Library by paying Rs. 100/- as the Membership Fee. Those who live outside the City limits, but who are employed or study in the Colombo City may enroll as a member of the Public Library by paying Rs. 200/- as membership fee, and by keeping a surety, who is a resident of Colombo. In addition to the above, any citizen of Sri Lanka will be able to obtain membership of the Public Library, by

paying a Fee of Rs. 500/- and by keeping a Surety who is a resident of Colombo according to a decision taken to provide library facility to any citizen of Sri Lanka. If it is not possible to find a Surety by any person who is desirous of getting a membership, could make a refundable deposit of Rs. 2000/- and Rs. 500/- membership to obtain membership of the Public Library.

There were several distinguished citizens who patronised the Public Library from the time of its inception, and among them are several Heads of State. Mrs. Iswari Corea, who had a distinguished career and who had served in the Public Library for 36 long years as the Chief Librarian, has written down in her personal note book, what she still remembers that Mr. J. R. Jayewardene, who later became the 1st Executive President of Sri Lanka, attended the Public Library, and conducted studies of various Buddhist books and Chronicles, and Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who later became the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, had arrived in the Public Library to get some books, and patiently waited in the queue for his turn. Mrs. Iswari Corea reaches her 83rd year in her illustrious life at a time when the Public Library complete 83 year of its existence, and it appears a very rare coincidence in the History of the Public Library, and wish Mrs. Corea a long life.

The entire nation should pay due respect to the Public Library, which provides intellectual requirements of the people of Sri Lanka from generation to generation in an unending mission.

The Colombo Municipal Council on its part plays the role of forerunner, extending encouragement and support and by spending lot of its resources, in the past, present and in the future.



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