

# Mrs. S.C. Jayasuriya

Former Librarian, University of Colombo  
(1989-2011)



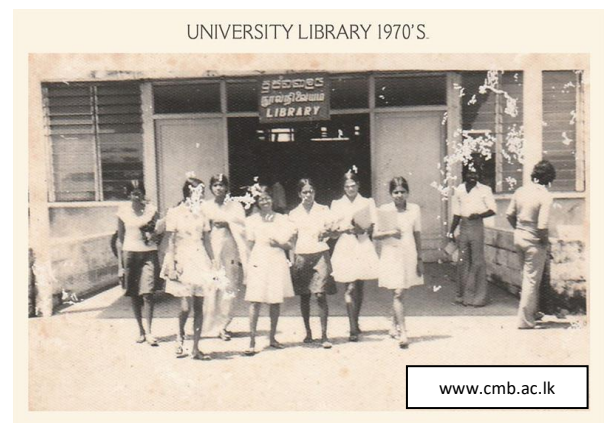
## Colombo University Library: Its journey from 1921 -2021

The establishment of Colombo University library could be traced back to 1921 when the University College officially opened in 'Regina Walawwa' (now College House) and the library established in one of the rooms of the same building. The collection was moved to "Villa Venezia" a more spacious building in the vicinity in 1938<sup>1</sup>. Mr. R.S. Enright was appointed the first Librarian in 1925 and served the University until his demise in 1952. At the formative years, the University Library was fortunate in having a committed, dedicated Librarian who had a vision of providing high quality service to the community. This library housed oriental and arts collections.

University of Ceylon was established in 1942 incorporating Ceylon Medical College and Ceylon University College. A decision was taken to relocate the University in Peradeniya as a residential University and several building complexes were to be constructed before the move. This decision not only affected the building programme of the Colombo University but also affected the development of library collections. When the Faculty of Arts was moved to Peradeniya in 1952, oriental, law and arts collections were taken to Peradeniya. Science collations remained in the departments and the medical library at Kynsey Road premises. The move to Peradeniya was halted half way and the University of Ceylon functioned at two sites: Colombo and Peradeniya.

With the commencement of the second Faculty of Arts in Colombo in 1963, Arts and oriental collections were transferred back from Peradeniya to the Grand Stand of the Race Course. With the transfer of the Faculty of Law in 1965 to Colombo the law collection was moved back in College House. The library collections were scattered in several locations and as a solution to this problem the arts, law and science collections were transferred to the 'National Pavilion' built for the Industrial exhibition in 1962. This became the main library while the medical library functioned as a branch library. From 1963 to 1967 the library functioned as a branch library of the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya.

The main library building a semi-permanent structure had two floors: the ground floor accommodated staff rooms, law



<sup>1</sup>Marrs, R. (1939). Part IV.- Education, Science, and Art (B). Administration Report of the Principal, University of College, for 1937-1938. Ceylon Government Printers.

collection, science collection, Ceylon room, two reading rooms and lending section while the reference section and reading rooms on the first floor. The upper floor could not accommodate many book shelves as the floor could not carry a heavy load. There was no room for expansion. During the rainy season the floor became damp and needless to say that the conditions were unfavorable for collections. The Nijhoff collection which was considered only rare collection in Asia was also kept on the ground floor. At the time the Colombo University was more concerned in the construction of buildings for faculties of Arts, Law and Science, hence the library building received low priority in the building programme. The library had to remain there with all the short comings for a considerable period.

In 1967 the University of Colombo was granted autonomous status and Mrs. Violet de Souza was appointed as first Librarian of the Colombo University in 1969.



As the first Librarian of University of Colombo she had a herculean task of developing the collection and also get a custom built building for the library. Attention was paid to develop the Ceylon collection, reference collections, periodical collections and under graduate collections. I joined the library as a junior Assistant Librarian in 1971 and I remember the times that we went visiting book shops every Thursday to collect material for the Ceylon Room, reference collection and books for students. Arrangements were also made to purchase private collections. When the valuable collection of late Dr. C.A. Hewawitharne came up for sale we were able to purchase the collection. This collection which had very rare books on Ceylon and Buddhism formed the nucleus of the research collection. Agreements were entered into with foreign universities for the exchange of University of Ceylon Review, Ceylon Journal of Medical Sciences and later Colombo Law Review. The library also received books from the Asia foundation, British Council and many other embassies as donations. These books and magazines provided a variety of reading material for students.

Plans for a new building were drawn up during 1969/70 period was not realized due want of funds. As the conditions were deteriorating the library had to be moved to the ground floor of the Law faculty building in 1986. The science collection in the main library and the departmental collections merged to form the science library also in the same year. Science library was housed in the old Physics building.



Plans for a library building were drawn up again in early 1980s when Dr. Adrian Senadhira became Librarian, but did not get off the ground as there were other building programmes progressing. I became Librarian in 1989 and the most important task was to secure funds for the building. It was only in 1997, we received funds from the Government. By this time the collections and the number of



students have increased and the space provided in the plan drawn in the early 80s was not sufficient. I had to negotiate with the architects to revise the plans and I remember with gratitude late Vidya Jyothi Professor V.K. Samaranayake who on my request came for all the meetings with the architects and convinced the architects to revise the plans. Construction commenced immediately but there were delays due the site been located in a high security zone at the time. Finally, our gypsy existence came to an end in 1999 when we moved into one of finest library buildings in the country.



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I retired as Librarian in 2011 September and I am very happy to note that the Science library which occupied the old Physics building is moving into a fully equipped new building on 21 January 2021, when the University of Colombo is celebrating its 100 years of existence.



Library Staff - 2011