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The Place Where My Romance for Books Began

First sight: As I gathered from my memory, the Main Library of the University of Colombo (then Colombo Campus) which I first used as an undergraduate from 1973 to 1977 was housed in a building built for the Industrial Exhibition held in 1965 together with other surrounding buildings such as the Planetarium. It had a fine architecture that I could not find elsewhere except the Planetarium which stood close to each other. On the very first day in my university life as an undergraduate, I went closer to the main library, only to the front yard because I was first asked by my seniors to worship the lion erected in that premises and then climb and sit on it. It was my first sight of the library from the top of a stone lion but, however, thereafter I basically lived in the library for all my four years of undergraduate days. I reckon the Main Library has been always a sacred place to me.

Air-conditioned without Air-conditioners: It was the first time I saw a building in Colombo which was designed and built in such a manner that it has a free flow of wind coming from the sea and going through windows. Therefore, the upstairs of the library where most of the books on humanities and social sciences were placed with the reading facility, felt as if it were fully air-conditioned when the large glass windows were opened. Unlike today, there were no high-rise buildings in Colombo in the 1970s. This allowed the cool breeze coming from the seaside of Bambalapitiya to reach the Library and provided us with a comfortable environment.

No-smile Face: I was in fact wondering how the librarians are being selected because I saw one common feature among every librarian at all levels that I have associated with, that is, everyone had a very serious non-smile face. My mother's sister was also a librarian at Peradeniya University and once I asked whether you smile with your patrons, but I did not get a satisfactory answer. I raised the same question at the Library Committee of the University of Colombo when I chaired that committee as the Vice Chancellor, but I did not receive an adequate response either. They always have a very serious face when dealing with library users, maybe, they want to show that they are very tough and no leniency with library borrowing policy and also to prevent unaccepted behaviour in the library.

Extensive Referencing: I started referencing literature related to lecture notes from my first year of undergraduate studies because I wanted to obtain a wider knowledge of the subjects. Therefore, almost every day I used to go to the main library and search for related books for referencing and write small notes on the lecture note itself. This practice helped me not only to do better in my undergraduate studies but also to do well in subsequent graduate studies and my research work. Referencing became part of routine activities which helped me to enjoy my studies while gaining new knowledge. This referencing experience went beyond the main library because when the library was closed, I used to visit the Public Library when I was at home during holidays, I even went to

my Town Council Library in my hometown to do the referencing with whatever available materials. This exercise provided me with much mental stimulation and satisfaction, as I gained knowledge that allowed me to progress well with my subjects. In other words, it was like you go to a restaurant when you are half hungry and then eat until your stomach is full.

Ceylon room: Although the number of books was limited, I was fascinated by the collection of books available in the Ceylon Room, especially Ceylon History. It was a very small space covered by two cabinets. I occasionally visited that room because most of the time I could see Professors from the Department of History were frequenting it. One frequent visitor that I could remember was Professor Tikiri Abeysinghe. Therefore, I, most of the time felt uneasy to sit with them in that room as they were my teachers.

Round Canteen and the library: Most of the staff and students do not have a memory of the famous Round Canteen which remained behind the library. Whenever we felt tired after reading books, we would spend some time at the Round Canteen to have a cup of tea, chatting with friends. To me, the Round Canteen was an ideal fit for the Main Library because it relieved the tiredness of spending long hours of reading and studying.

Hiding in the Law Section: sometimes, I found it was very difficult to concentrate on reading upstairs where the Social Science collection was placed due to the noise and also movements of other students. During this time, I suddenly came across the Law Section which was housed on the ground floor and was very silent and disciplined. Therefore, I started finding a place in the Law section, whenever I wanted to go through my lecture notes. The only drawback was to hide from the sharp eyes of the Law Section Librarian Mrs. Kularatnam who did not want other students to occupy seats in that section. She used to walk up and down in that section so I sat near the wall so I could not get noticed. Her sight was scary because she had thrown out some non-law as well as law students when they were loud or unruly. The Law Section was a little darker but ideally suited for studying without a single sound, especially because of Mrs. Kularatnam. I reckon she was a great librarian in my time.

Sight of my Fiancée: Some said my visit to the library was accelerated when I met my girlfriend in my 3rd year. She also used to come to the library, even during weekends because she was boarded at Longdon Place Hostel as well as a private boarding house at Jawatte, later. In fact, remembering this I wrote one sentence in the first song which I wrote for Amarasiri Peris, '*Oba Ruwa Mevina Pothgula Poth Pitu Athara*', which became very popular among the university students. I had the opportunity to take her home and keep her with me forever as my wife. I still think what a sweet memory that I have with the Main Library.

To be Truly an Intellectual: I find that one cannot be truly an intellectual if he/she does not read frequently. I reckon, reading and thus learning will never end until we die. We should not confine our reading only to subject disciplines that we learn in the universities, but more importantly, it is very essential to read about anything that is available for you to read and interested in that particular time that you will be encouraged to read. More and more reading will make you a well-rounded person, which will help you to be more rational, analytical, and constructive with all your decisions concerning life-related decisions. I still read every day, and this may be the reason that my colleagues recognize me by commenting on me as a widely read academic researcher.



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Learning Commons, moving away from silent library concept:



As I can gather, I was able to influence our Main Library to move away from some aspects of the silent library concept and to be innovative to provide adequate space for students to discuss and share their learning experiences in the library by introducing the 'Learning Commons' on the basement of the Main Library in 2017, which has been made with a very colorful environment. I should thank Dr. Predeepa Weeratunge, the present Librarian for taking this project forward and making the library a very attractive place for the students. Whenever I visited the library, I found the 'Learning Commons' was full of students. This was based on one of my experiences with a UK University while I was on my sabbatical leave as a Visiting Professor. We need to be innovative to bring students back to the library in this ICT Age where the digital library is becoming the main mode of reading books and other materials through the internet.



Lifelong Learning and the Library: Lifelong learning has become one of the main features in the education arena. Now, people do not stop learning at a given point of age but continue to learn even at an elderly age. This is mainly because more and more people have a chance to live longer than before and hence, those who are retired have greater opportunity to get involved in further education or related activities. Worldwide, this has become the trend. Therefore, the Main Library has to offer this facility by allowing its alumni to use the library. I have a feeling that alumni of the University of Colombo will love to come back to the library to reminisce of their days spent there, and at the same time to read books at their leisure. The Main Library can be used as a bridge between the alumni and the current students because of the noble alumni that the University of Colombo will have much to offer to the current students in various ways. On the other hand, the Main Library will be creating a social space in the library to bring back its past students.

Human library: I was really inspired by the introduction of the human library concept at our Main Library because it provides a fantastic platform for the students and staff to share their learning experiences. At the same time, students find that they have read many books during a given time duration by even talking to one well-read, world reputed academics drawn from the University of Colombo. Even despite my busy schedule, I was able to manage only once to be a human library in 2018, and I really enjoyed that experience which I have boasted on many occasions about arranging such an event every year by our library staff. Students were really interested in asking questions from various fields to improve their knowledge on world matters. I believe, this event ignites the enthusiasm among students about moving to the library and enjoy what it offers onsite.



Resource Centre for the Visually Impaired: Opening of this center in 2018, was a touching experience for me as the then Vice Chancellor because, I always have a big heart for the disadvantaged children/people, thinking we are obliged to take care of their welfare. I could see their feelings on the faces on that day, which gave a huge satisfaction and I humbly pay gratitude to the library staff and those involved in establishing this facility. This is one of the rare memories that I can never forget.

Cyber Library is the Future: Since we are in the 21st century ICT Age as well as in the 4th Industrial Revolution, our Main Library also should have a vision for this century to adjust its landscape to conform to the desires of the 'smart' learners. Many believe that the physical facility of the library will be fading away gradually with the digitization of libraries around the globe. Personally, I do not visit the library now for reading but I browse through the Internet every day and visit many libraries in the world to gather whatever reading materials I want to read. Today, we live in two spaces: cyber and physical. However, we know that we move between these two spaces frequently and we find that these two spaces heavily depend on each other for their survival. In other words, one cannot survive without having dependence on the other. This means there is a strong interaction between the physical space and the cyberspace. As human beings, we prefer to float in both spaces and enjoy what they offer to us for our living. This fundamental has to be accepted and applied to establish a strong link between the physical space and cyberspace of the libraries. These two spaces are already available in the Main Library but what is needed is to find an attractive way to create its own cyberspace for students to get involved including visiting the library. Although cyberspace is virtual, this virtual space can be approached from anywhere and/or within the library premises. Students can be attracted by providing access to materials other than just books and journals in this cyberspace. One good example is the learning materials available through Youtube and other similar apps. Think and innovate.

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