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## **The Science Library: My Companion of Four Decades.....**

When I was asked by our Librarian, Dr. Pradeepa Wijetunge, if I could pen some words about the Science Library, I imagined it was to supplement an article with information regarding the Science Library. When I realized that this was about my memories of the Library, I wondered whether I was actually “qualified” to do so, except for being one of the oldest members in the Faculty at present.

I entered the Faculty of Science in September or October 1979. There were two things uppermost in the mind; one was of course "ragging". We had heard so much about this terrible phenomenon that was supposed to take place in the universities and so were wary of what was to come. Of course, we need not have worried because there was not the slightest of bullying. The seniors left us completely alone. The second problem in entering the Science Faculty was that the study program was going to be in English. Having studied in the Sinhala medium up to Advanced Level, I was wondering how the transition to English would be. In school, at Visakha Vidyalaya, although the subjects were taught in Sinhala our teachers would often provide explanations in English. Yet it was a challenge now to study entirely in English. The first lectures in the Old Biology Lecture Theater (OBLT) on Plant Diversity and Cell Biology were taken by Prof. Raja Fonseka and Dr. Mano Sabaratnam – later we dared call them “Fonny” and “Sabby”, obviously not in their hearing..! Both were experienced teachers who knew how to use "chalk and board" very effectively. There was no dictation of notes and we soon realized that while following the lecture we had to take down our notes. There were no handouts, no printed material but only good old advice to go and read in the Library. At the end of term, with exams around the corner, when turning the pages of notebooks we found that our note-taking had been far from perfect. So it was a case of marching to the Library and referring up Campbell's Biology or Odem's Ecology until the gaps in the notes were satisfactorily filled, while truly appreciating the "extra benefit" of being able to better understand concepts that come with wider reading around a topic. It was in these early days that the basics of library use were explained to us. Before sending us to the Library, Prof. Fonseka would ask if we knew how to locate a particular book on the shelves. Then he would go on to explain that first, we need to check the card catalog using the author or title index to identify the classification number of the subject after which the search can be narrowed down to the specific shelf on which books of that discipline are arranged. This was my introduction to the classification numbering system used by libraries..! The recommended textbooks covered many topics. Another very useful hint from Prof. Fonseka, to quickly find a topic of interest from a bulky volume was to search the index (which is found usually at the back of a book along with the glossary) using a keyword. Until then I had been laboriously scouring through the "Contents" that appear at the front of the book to locate the page numbers on which the topic is found. I still make use of this method to quickly search specifics within a textbook that covers a wide subject matter.

In the 1980s each academic Department of the Faculty had its Library. As Biology students, we used mainly the Botany, Chemistry, and Zoology Libraries. The Botany Library was situated in the old Botany section. A wide corridor gave access to this single-story block and the first two spacious rooms were used as the Botany Library. Just outside this building was the well-manicured Botany lawn which made for very pleasant surroundings. The books were neatly arranged in two-tiered polished wooden cupboards with glass doors that lined the four walls of each room. A long wooden table with several chairs was placed in each room, providing a quiet reading space. At that time the Botany Library was manned by a Library Assistant by the name of Ms. Maya Damayanthie. She was a friendly soul who would become quite chatty with new students. While being very helpful in locating books she would also engage students in friendly banter and so we discovered later that her creative talents laid not so much in Botany or Science but elsewhere. She was a "Visharadha" of classical Sinhalese music. The boys in the batch often approached her during cultural events such as Tamashas, to connect with important classical singers and radio artists whom they wished to invite for these occasions, more than to seek her assistance for library use...! Some of the early works in possession of this Library included the precious collection, the "Trimen series", a compendium of five volumes by Henry Trimen titled "Handbook to the Flora of Ceylon" and I remember being sternly warned to handle the volumes with care.



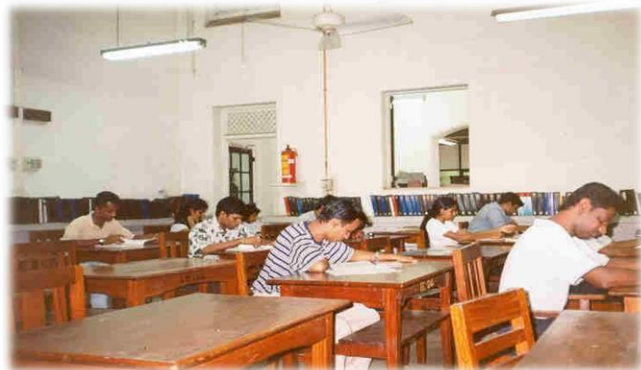
The two rooms that housed the Botany Library

The Chemistry Library was situated in a room in the old Chemistry block. The Zoology Library was housed on the ground floor room just inside the entrance to the New Biology block, the room presently occupied by the Field Ornithology Group (FOG). Being a Botany Special student my time was spent more in the Botany Library and memories of the Chemistry and Zoology libraries are somewhat hazy. However, while talking to some of my Chemistry Special batch mates, they recounted stories of "special characters" such as Sirisena in the Chemistry Library. He had been one of the support staff who could identify any book by its cover and would know exactly the book/s that was recommended for a course conducted by a particular lecturer. Closer to the examination period, he would carefully observe the books borrowed by the lecturers and provide the "hint" to students, and lo and behold, questions had appeared from sections covered in these texts..! There were also recollections of some books in the permanent reference section "going missing" from their assigned shelves. This happened when a selfish student would deliberately "misplace" a book that was currently in demand on the wrong shelf. Such incidents rarely escaped Sirisena's hawk eye and he would replace the volume in the correct shelf much to the disappointment of the culprit..!

These Departmental Libraries were used by students during term time, mostly to borrow books or for quickly going through referencing material to complete tutorials, etc. The rooms were quite small and did not have sufficient seating space. Therefore, during study leave and examinations, Science students would walk over to the Main Library which was situated across Reid Avenue in the Arts Faculty to study. There were the “regulars” who patronized the Main Library while some preferred to study at home. The advantage of using the Main Library was that textbooks were at hand to supplement our lecture notes. The Main Library was a two-storied temporary building. The first floor contained the Science section with bookshelves on two sides and a few rows of desks & chairs placed in the middle for individual study. We would have to queue up early before the Library opened to reserve a desk..! The upper floor was for studying as well but there were distractions as "couples" were regular visitors there. Thus, the upper floor served more than one purpose well...!

When I returned to the Faculty in 1990 after completing my postgraduate studies I found that the small Departmental Libraries had been amalgamated into one Science Library and had been shifted to the fourth and fifth floors of the new Chemistry building. Unfortunately, the Chemistry building did not have a lift in working order and the trudge to the library felt like climbing Adam’s peak...! Students, being young and energetic, would gallop up the stairs. But I, although still relatively young, found it a strenuous climb particularly when clad in a saree. So, my visits to the library were generally restricted to the beginning of the term and I would borrow the required books for lecture preparation and carry the heavy volumes down. Later, around 1993, the Science Library was shifted to the old Physics block. Although this was a shabby place with little ventilation at least it was located conveniently on the ground floor. During this time, a Library Committee was set up in the Faculty and I had the honor of serving as its first Chairperson. Together with Ms. Chandrani Kuruppu, the Senior Assistant Librarian of the Science Library at that time, Ms. Sajeewani Somaratne, the young Zoology Special graduate who was recruited to the Library staff and took over from Ms. Kuruppu as the Assistant Librarian in 2005, and academic representatives from all academic departments, we tried to implement improvements to infrastructure and acquisitions. The meager allocation of funds to the Science Library was divided among the academic departments and priority was given for acquiring textbooks for undergraduate teaching rather than for research. The escalating cost of international journals forced the Library to curtail subscriptions, and purchases were limited to one or two journals per subject area. The widely read “Scientific American” and “New Scientist” were continued while the more costly “Nature” magazine had to be dropped. Not only were the journals expensive, but their procurement also took a long time. Quite often the lag time between the date of publication and shelving was nearly a year by which time the usefulness of the journal had diminished. To overcome these constraints E-resources were introduced to the Science Library in 2002. Although people in the Science Faculty were eager to use the E-databases subscribed to by the Library there was no infrastructure to support this. Recognizing the need, the Science Library in its proposal to develop IT infrastructure, drew up plans to provide network cabling and power supply for 32 desk computers in 2004. However, due to lack of funds, it was not until 2007 that the E-resource center of the Science Library could be established and this with only 14 computers. In the same year, the entire collection of books in the Science Library was bar-coded and electronic circulation of Library material commenced. The old card catalogue system was replaced with an online catalogue which allowed the users to not only search Library material but also identify the loan status of books. In 2005, the Science Library Development Fund was set up based on the recommendation of the Library Committee, and the library fees paid by post-graduate students were collected in this account. In the first year of operation 71, postgraduate students paid Rs. 1,500/- each.

With the ongoing expansion of postgraduate programs in the Faculty, it was envisaged that the income from the Library Development Fund could be utilized to provide improved facilities for its users. In 2007, a much-needed face-lift to the Science Library was carried out. The walls were color-washed after 17 years, the old metal bookshelves were replaced with new wooden shelves and the layout changed to make it more functional and to provide more study space. We had to make do with these small improvements until the dream of a new library building with modern facilities became a reality.



The study area of the refurbished Science Library

That dream came true in 2021 as we celebrate hundred years of academic excellence in the Faculty of Science. Indeed I consider myself very fortunate to have witnessed the inauguration of the grand Information and Learning Center (the new Library building) in January 2021 as part of the centenary celebrations of the Faculty of Science. Reaching up to seven floors and with central air-conditioning, the new Information and Learning Center (ILC) is a far cry from what we had as Libraries during our undergraduate days. In addition to providing the usual library facilities, such as the lending of books and access to referencing & E-resources, space in the ILC has been cleverly utilized to support different learning styles of students by including zones for casual reading, quiet study, collaborative and interactive study. Furthermore, the "skills lab" and the "studio" are wonderful new additions that are set to transform student learning. In the open foyer at ground level, there is even a modern coffee shop...! ILC is the realization of the dedication and hard work of many individuals. I hope those generations of students to come will realize how fortunate they are to have such a valuable resource and make the best use of it for the advancement of Science.



The new Information and Learning Center, Faculty of Science

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