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## University of Colombo Library – Some Memories

I began to use the library at the University of Colombo as soon as I joined the staff as a temporary Assistant Lecturer in Political Science in December 1981. The library was housed in a massive building that was a part of the building complex constructed for the Industrial Exhibition of 1965. The Colombo Planetarium, an iconic building and an architectural marvel which still survives, is also part of that building complex. The Department of History and Political Science was at that time headed by Professor Tikiri Abeysinghe, who was an avid and regular user of the library, particularly its Ceylon Room. His successor, Professor G. P. V. Somaratne, carried forward the tradition of frequently visiting the Ceylon Room as well as the National Archives, which was located very near to the university. So, I was glad that I had some distinguished role models among senior academics. When the library was later shifted to the building where the Faculty of Law is housed now, its spacious ground floor had been allocated to the library. Located in the upstairs of the building were departments of History and Political Science, Sociology, and the Faculty of Law.

One of the first things I realized during my early encounters with the library, the Librarian, and the staff was that efforts were being taken to rebuild the library. During the 1940s, the only university library was the one in Colombo. When the University of Ceylon was shifted to Peradeniya, its library was also shifted there. Then, in 1965-66, the Colombo Campus of University of Ceylon was set up and a new Campus Library was also established. That is how the library of University of Colombo began its second life.

The early years of the library's second life were probably not very smooth. As a result of the reorganization of Sri Lanka's university system during the early 1970s, there have been shortfalls in the allocation of resources to procure new books and journals for the library. Since I had been used to a fairly resourceful library at Peradeniya during my undergraduate student days, I thought that Colombo library needed special attention from the government to secure more financial allocations for its development. As I learned from the Librarian, Mrs. Sumana Jayasuriya, and various Vice-Chancellors and Deans, getting more allocations of annual government funding to develop the library had been an uphill task. Liberalization of the country's economy, curtailment of public expenditure due to the rise in defense expenditure amidst the ethnic war, and the lack of policy priority for university development were factors that halted the rapid expansion of the library during the 1980s. Meanwhile, procurement of new books through limited government allocations as well as private donations made to the library by well-wishers and alumni had enriched the stock of books quite significantly.

Another contrast between Peradeniya and Colombo university libraries I noticed was the relatively low presence of the university teachers in the reference section of the library, at tables reserved for the academic staff, or in the Ceylon Room where the very valuable Sri Lanka collection was housed. Lecturers would come to the library primarily to return and borrow books. Their presence at the periodicals room was also noticeably sparse. The Ceylon Room was most popular with the postgraduate students of the Faculty of Education. The lack of presence of retired academics in the library has also been quite conspicuous. The absence of strong research and learning culture among the academic staff as well as post-graduate students and also the fact that Colombo is a non-residential university would have contributed to this unwarranted state of affairs.

The university library maintains a record of books that are borrowed by university teachers. Kept in a drawer at the reception desk, this was a rather wide, white, double-ruled Bristol board sheet. The number given to the teacher by the library is written prominently on the top of the sheet. If my memory still serves me right, the number I got was 664. Each sheet could record probably about one hundred book entries on both sides. I often thought those days that when lecturers applied for confirmation or promotion, forwarding these records for information of the Selection Committee would have been quite interesting. Or else, the relevant sheet or sheets could have been gifted by the Librarian to each academic upon retirement as a valuable memento.

The relocation of the library to a new and spacious building of its own marked the most significant turning point in the transformation of the library into the university's foremost resource center for learning and research. The shift of all material – books, book racks, furniture, etc. to the new building within a short deadline was a massive task achieved by the exceptionally dedicated Librarian and the staff of all grades. I recall how both the male and female library staff, including the senior staff, was physically carrying loads of books from the old premises to the new building to meet the deadline.

Computerization of the library, digitalization of the library catalogue, facilitating access to electronic and internet resources, improvement of reader services as well as staff-student relations are the other significant achievements that the library has made during the recent years. Inaugurations of a series of new programmes to build and sustain close relations and interaction between the library and undergraduate students have also contributed to popularize the concept that the university library is not merely a collection of books in the conventional sense, but essentially a user-friendly resource and learning facility.

I am proud to acknowledge that the university library has contributed immensely to my professional and personal development as a university teacher. It is also gratifying that new initiatives have been undertaken by the library staff to serve students and the faculty members, making use of new advances in ideas, technology, and communication.

Finally, I sincerely hope that the Library of the University will sooner than later open its doors to independent researchers outside the university community. It is too valuable an asset to be kept isolated from the intellectually oriented, non-university citizens of the country.

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