



Review Article

Origin and Development of the Library System in Sri Lanka: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This study evaluates the university library system in Sri Lanka based on a review of existing literature. The analysis highlights five key aspects essential for understanding the academic library system: the aims of Sri Lankan universities, the role of university libraries, the origin and development of libraries, the structure of public university library systems, and the contributions of librarians and libraries to higher education. These factors collectively establish the significance of university libraries as academic organizations. Academic libraries play a crucial role as integral components of higher education institutions, serving as multi-functional information hubs that support research, teaching, and learning. Their functions extend beyond resource provision, encompassing knowledge dissemination, skill development, and digital access to scholarly materials. Additionally, academic libraries contribute to the broader educational framework by facilitating access to diverse information sources, fostering research collaboration, and enhancing students' academic experiences. The study underscores the evolving role of academic libraries in Sri Lanka, emphasizing their connection to educational processes at all levels. With advancements in technology and shifts in academic needs, university libraries must continuously adapt to meet the demands of a dynamic learning environment. Strengthening library infrastructure, integrating digital resources, and enhancing librarian expertise are crucial steps in optimizing the effectiveness of Sri Lanka's university library system. By recognizing the pivotal role of academic libraries, this study highlights the need for continued investment in library development to support higher education and research in Sri Lanka. Future studies may further explore innovative strategies to enhance library services and their impact on academic success.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The necessary information about the beginning and development of libraries can only be obtained from existing literature. For this research, detailed historical literary information was collected. Furthermore, the study aims to examine historical reference sources, as well as institutional and human sources, related to the origin of libraries. As this study is a systematic literature review, primary data sources such as questionnaires or surveys were not used for data collection. The study was mainly based on historical and archival data, which were primarily obtained from secondary sources available in the literature.

A. Library System in Sri Lanka; Its Origin and Development

Libraries were introduced to Sri Lanka with the advent of Buddhism from India in the third century BC. However, according to the recorded history of the country, libraries in the modern sense of the term were not known prior to the British rule (1796 AD to 1948 AD). Early temple libraries, called "Potgul," served as repositories for Buddhist religious works. These Potgul were associated with main temples that functioned as educational centers, such as Mahaviharaya, Abhayagiriviharaya, and Jethawanaviharaya at Anuradhapura, and many other principal temples scattered throughout the country. These libraries primarily housed sacred Buddhist texts written by the Sangha (monks) (Kamaideen, 1991).

However, according to Lankage (1989), Piyadasa (1985), Corea (1991), and Wijetunge and Willson (1998), the introduction of modern libraries to the country began early in the nineteenth century. “During the early British period, a few voluntary libraries were started in the principal towns of the country. In 1801, there was a circulating library in Colombo... in the year 1839 the following subscription libraries were functioning: Colombo Library, Galle Reading Room, Military Medical Library and Museum, Pettah Library, Point the Galle Library and Jaffna Library.”

“Some of these libraries started for the benefit of members of the armed forces” (Piyadasa, 1985). The most significant development in this regard was the establishment of the Government Oriental Library in 1870 AD. “The period between 1870 and 1885 is generally considered to be the period when the foundation of modern library development in the country was laid. In 1870, the first library with national-level responsibilities was established. This was the Government Oriental Library, whose main purpose was to collect and organize Pali, Sanskrit, and Sinhala manuscripts which were scattered about the country” (Amarasiri, 1991).

As further described by Amarasiri (1991), the establishment of the National Museum Library in 1877 was another very important landmark of that era. The National Museum Library is still in many ways regarded as the *de facto* national library of the country due to the strength of its Sri Lankan historical material collection. It developed by incorporating the collection of the old Government Oriental Library (1870-1877) and by accommodating local publications received under legal deposit legislation. This legal deposit legislation was first enacted in 1885, marking Sri Lanka as one of the first countries in the Asia region to establish a legal deposit system.

Nevertheless, as the twentieth century began, this gradual development of libraries positively affected the country’s library network both qualitatively and quantitatively. In this era, most missionary schools in the country had started their own libraries for both teachers and students. Later, this involvement holistically impacted school development and school library development. In addition, “the introduction of free education in 1945, and the attainment of independence by Sri Lanka in 1948, led to a rapid expansion of educational facilities in the last four decades, with remarkable increases in the numbers of schools and in student enrolment” (Kamaideen, 1991).

According to Amarasiri (1991), another crucial period for the Sri Lankan library movement was between 1955 and 1970. Within this period, several committees and commissions deliberated on library matters. Furthermore, the arrival of foreign library advisors and their participation in locally conducted international seminars resulted in the planning and

development of a national library for Sri Lanka. The establishment of the Sri Lanka National Library Services Board in 1970 was another landmark in the history of the national library movement. The final goal of these activities was achieved with the opening of the National Library of Sri Lanka in 1990.

With the establishment of the University College of Colombo in 1921, university education was introduced to this country. As mentioned earlier, with the introduction of free education in 1945 and the attainment of independence in 1948, Sri Lanka transitioned towards a more knowledge-based society. In this regard, the development of primary, secondary, and tertiary education significantly helped in achieving expected outcomes related to education in the country. As a result, Sri Lanka now has eighteen universities with resourceful libraries, more than 4,000 permanent school libraries, 155 permanent private and international school libraries, and more than 600 permanent piriven libraries (Kuruppuarachchi, 2005).

“There are nineteen libraries attached to technical colleges and another nineteen attached to teacher training colleges. Some 800 large, medium and small size public libraries are scattered throughout the country...” (Kularatne, 1998). The public libraries in the country are maintained by local authorities with assistance and advice from the National Library Services Board, while school libraries are managed by the schools with the assistance of the Ministry of Education and the National Library Services Board. Furthermore, special libraries attached to research institutions and government departmental libraries are also scattered throughout the country and are managed and maintained independently (Kularatne, 1998).

B. Library System in State-Owned Public Universities in Sri Lanka

Each university in the country has its own library to cater to the information requirements of the university community. According to the management hierarchy of academic libraries in Sri Lankan universities, the chief executive officer of the library is the Librarian. “In Sri Lankan universities, the Librarian has the same status as a dean of a faculty and academically enjoys the equivalent position of a professor” (Wijetunge, 2002). Besides, there may be Deputy Librarians (equivalent to Associate Professor), Senior Assistant Librarians (Grade I and II), and Assistant Librarians (confirmed or probationary).

These positions report directly to the Librarian and are regarded as academic positions, equated to university faculty, and are given the same salaries and other privileges. Junior professional staff (Assistant Librarians) are recruited based on the rules and regulations implemented for recruiting junior teaching staff of universities. According to the Establishment

Code of the UGC, they must have acquired a first- or second-class honors degree in any discipline and are required to complete a master's degree (MA, M.Sc., or M.Phil.) in Library and Information Science (LIS) within six years of recruitment.

A Senior Assistant Registrar or Assistant Registrar in library services is considered an administrative post. This officer must act under the supervision and guidelines provided by the Librarian. Paraprofessional staff (Library Assistants, Library Technicians, clerical staff, etc.), Library Attendants, and minor staff are included in the non-academic staff and should report to their section heads in their day-to-day duties.

Though the (chief) Librarian is the main administrator of the academic library, the university's library committee acts as the primary body of the library, with the right to make most important decisions regarding library development, such as administrative issues, new acquisitions, cadre preparation, and other critical issues. According to the university act, each university should have a library committee that meets every month of the year.

The chairman of the committee should necessarily be the Vice Chancellor, and the secretary to the committee should be the Librarian. The other members consist of Deans of all faculties, Senior Assistant Librarians, Assistant Librarians, and the Senior or Assistant Registrar in the library services. Some universities have only a main or central library which provides services for all disciplines taught in the university, while others have several branch libraries that serve different faculties and campuses in addition to the central library. Internal operations of academic libraries in Sri Lanka are handled by separate sections. Sectional divisions may include a reference section, lending section, periodical section, rare (collection) section, and sometimes an e-learning section, an electronic reference section, acquisitions, serials control, cataloging and classification or technical services, reader services, and a binding section. In many cases, reference and reader services are headed by well-experienced Senior Assistant Librarians due to their very complex nature. Similarly, other functional and divisional services are also usually headed by Senior Assistant Librarians or Assistant Librarians in Sri Lankan university libraries.

C. Role of the Librarians and Libraries in Higher Education

It is cumbersome to discuss the role of academic librarians as a single entity without also addressing the role of academic libraries. This is because there is a strong mutual relationship between the two; one cannot be separated from the other. Furthermore, the role of a librarian sometimes represents the role of the library, and vice versa. Therefore, this section will discuss both topics together.

As explained earlier in the chapter, the university (chief) Librarian in a Sri Lankan university holds a position equivalent to that of a professor and has the same status as a dean of a faculty. "As one of the few top officials of the university, the librarian has access to a wide range of internal information relevant to the university's activities and carries the necessary authority to exert pressure on the other senior executives in the university" (Wijetunge, 2002). Similarly, academic librarians, with their subordinate staff, should provide the required support to members of the university community, including academic staff, students, and researchers. The term "support" necessarily reflects the major role or key aspect of an academic librarian's duty: facilitating and assisting the academic community in acquiring knowledge by developing library and information skills. Within the university system, the library has been considered the most important element that facilitates a suitable environment for teaching or discussion related to library or information skills. Librarians, in this regard, serve as teachers by guiding students in various research and research.

Typically, academic librarians are the people who acquire, organize, evaluate, and disseminate information. Additionally, the role of academic librarians encompasses the divisional and functional duties of the library. In other words, academic librarians must necessarily be responsible for the smooth functioning of the different sections of the library. As Wilson and Halpin (2006) described, most academic libraries today are hybrid libraries. According to them, hybrid libraries can be "...described as 'the continuum between the conventional and digital library, where electronic and paper-based information sources are used alongside each other.'"

Consequently, the librarians working in such libraries become 'hybrid librarians.' Garrod (2001) described the necessary key skills for hybrid librarians, such as training, liaising, marketing, and team-building skills. According to Hyams (1996), individuals who wish to become librarians in this information age must possess certain necessary skills, including presentation skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, research and analytical skills, up-to-date IT skills, flexibility, and lateral thinking. These are the most valuable skills that help academic librarians play their academic role, not only within the library but also within the university. As described by the UK's official graduate careers website (http://ww2.prospects.ac.uk/p/types_of_job/academic_librarian_job_description.jsp), The job description of academic librarians must consist of the following areas:

1. Managing and developing collections of books, journals, and websites.
2. Managing buildings, furniture, and equipment.
3. Managing staff, which may involve recruitment and selection, appraisals, disciplinary action, staff rotas, and training, as well as day-to-day management.

4. Managing budgets and, in some cases, purchasing resources.
5. Maintaining relationships with external bodies, such as suppliers.
6. Contributing to academic course development and liaising with academic departments.
7. Managing books for reading lists and allocating loan periods.
8. Creating, updating, and managing information resources—both electronic and printed, selecting, acquiring, and cataloging information using library and information software.
9. Assisting researchers with literature searches using databases, printed resources, and the internet.
10. Delivering information and learning skills courses for students and staff.
11. Dealing with user inquiries, which may involve one-on-one advice sessions.
12. Keeping up to date with relevant debates in the library sector.
13. Participating in professional groups or networks.

Consequently, an academic librarian should be a member of academic boards within the university. In this regard, relevant academic policies should be formulated by the appropriate authorities. Librarians are therefore asked, invited, or selected to be present in senate, faculty, departmental, and other committees (Revill, 1981). This is very important because only then can the librarian engage more fruitfully in the planning and development tasks of the institution. Furthermore, this involvement helps the librarian contribute to the achievement of the institution's educational objectives and to the educational decision-making process by virtue of their wide knowledge of students' information-seeking and gathering behavior in an academic library environment.

Furthermore, the role of an academic librarian should include academic collaboration. The librarian should have frequent contact with academic staff, particularly with department heads. "The absence of the closest links between library and teaching staff can result in failures in the library regardless of the efficiency of library staff and the standard of provision" (Revill, 1981). The closest collaboration among academic librarians and faculty (especially among subject librarians and teaching staff) will significantly enhance the academic librarian's role in the university. This collaboration provides mutual understanding between these two parties, which in turn helps librarians understand the current academic requirements of students. Based on this, they can develop library instructional and teaching activities for their clientele more fruitfully. On the other hand, another most important role of academic librarians is user education. By connecting academic librarians and teaching staff, they can successfully introduce needs-based library education for students. In addition, this collaboration can be successfully applied to

other library development activities such as planning, managing, acquiring, and disseminating information.

Furthermore, the academic librarian must necessarily maintain an ongoing awareness of the institution's curriculum development and the building and maintenance of a quality and relevant library collection, as well as the design of proper services. Similarly, for their contribution to the research development of the university, the academic librarian must frequently ascertain the research interests of academic staff to ensure that sufficient information is available to researchers. "Libraries are now universally recognized as important social institutions for the diffusion of knowledge and information. No community, institution, or organization is considered complete without the support of a library and its effective services. The gradual spread of the concept of democracy, extension of education, intensification of research activity, rapid industrialization, continuous increase in the production of recorded knowledge, both in print and non-print form, and advancements in information, computer, and communication technologies have contributed to the growth of libraries and information centers to develop user-oriented services" (Gupta, 1992).

At the university level, the role of the library is to be a partner with the academic schools, faculties, and departments of the university in meeting teaching, research, and learning requirements. On the other hand, university librarians and the library must play a major role within the university to raise its academic quality. The goal of the library should necessarily be directly supportive of the university's objectives, such as teaching, learning, research, and community services. This reciprocal relationship between the library and the university, in turn, helps students to improve critical thinking and ultimately lifelong learning in this advanced society. "The duty of the academic library to contribute toward the success of learning, the effectiveness of research, and the preparation of the clients of higher education for a dynamically advancing industrial/information society should be a given expectation" (Owusu-Ansah, 2001).

The success of the university in achieving targeted outcomes through its objectives shows to what extent its library has become supportive of the university in providing information resources and services. This clearly reflects how the university library helps the university achieve its excellence. The increasing development of modern information technology (IT) has directly affected the most obvious changes in library services, particularly in university libraries. "In the world today, information is constantly changing in terms of its volume, the technical aspects of its storage and retrieval, and in the way it is communicated. This situation has not only increased the amount of information available to users but has also created an environment that is complex for them in terms

of finding, accessing, selecting, evaluating, and handling information” (Lwehabura and Stilwell, 2008). These electronic library products necessitate expertise in the use of new (IT-based) services, which has changed the face of library instruction.

Library clients, including students and faculty, are required to be trained on how to use web resources and computerized or digitized library and teaching environments, such as electronic library classrooms and methods. So, this situation presents a challenge not only for librarians but also for contemporary library clients because of the complexity of information’s appearance. When compared to this tremendous challenge in academic libraries, there is no argument that it has increasingly affected the change in the structure of traditional library instruction and the way in which it is delivered and presented. Further, when considering these changes affecting academic libraries, it is well understood that they mainly affected the information literacy movement.

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