

Pirivena (Buddhist Monastic)/ Temple and Personal Libraries

Forgotten treasures of knowledge in
Sri Lanka

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Background

- Pirivena (Buddhist monastic) libraries are the oldest forms of libraries in Sri Lanka.
- They came into being with the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE.
- The purpose of these libraries were : 1. collection and preservation of palm leaf manuscripts (mainly the Buddhist scripture and commentaries , also manuscripts on other subjects that are useful for general education)

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- 2. Organization of such manuscripts and 3. Provision of access to such materials to a selected few.
- The first monastic library was known as *Ganthaakara* meaning the treasure of books, and it was a section of the chief Buddhist monastery known as Mahaavihaara.
- These monasteries were the centers of education for Buddhist priests as well as laymen of high ranks.

Contd.

- The monopoly enjoyed by this monastery ended with the establishment of two more schools namely Abhayagiriya and Jetawanaarama.
- All these schools had their branches all over the country and all such branches had libraries for educating clergy as well as laymen.

Contd.,

- These institutions were commonly known as Pirivena (college of a monastery).
- Libraries were integral parts of these colleges.
- Although with many ups and downs .this library tradition thrived till the advent of Western powers to the country in 16th century.
- During the period of Western powers these colleges became the oriental seats of learning. Renowned local scholars were the direct products of such institutions.

Contd.

- The British rulers recognized the value of these institutions and to some of them they made annual grants even.
- It is to be mentioned that the University of Kelaniya and the University of Sri Jayawardenapura had their origin in two famous Pirivenas namely Vidyalankara and Vidyodaya.

Present situation

- At present there are nearly 600 pirivena colleges throughout the country. Each of them has a library They provide education to Buddhist priests as well as lay students.
- Thus as an educational institutions or schools all of them have libraries .
- Importance of these libraries lies in the fact that they have ancient palm leaf manuscript books in their collections as well as early printed books which are not available in other libraries.

- Thus they can be considered as ancient treasures of knowledge and thus important cultural heritages.
- Although these institutions receive government grants the libraries are neglected.
- No trained librarians.
- They are not in the fold of SLLA or any other library organization.

Temple Libraries

- Sri Lanka has thousands of Buddhist temples throughout the country.
- Each and every temple has a collection of books for the use of its residents.
- Out of these temple libraries, according to a recent survey done by us, at least 1000 temples have palm leaf manuscript libraries. These manuscripts belong to a wide range of subject categories, Buddhist literature, Sinhala Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Burmese, Thai, Telugu, Malayalam manuscripts on various subjects, medicine, Astrology arts and crafts to name a few.

- Our rough estimate is that these temples have nearly 2000 original manuscripts and their copies.
- Out of these temples libraries only very few have taken at least a slightest effort to preserve these manuscripts for future.
- Some manuscripts are totally destroyed due to insect attacks and harsh weather conditions.
- Usually access to these manuscripts are restricted.

- No librarians to take care of these libraries.
- The annual maintenance done by the Department of National Archives in some of the temple collections is not sufficient for long lasting preservation.
- No training on preservation and conservation is provided by any of the responsible institution to incumbents of these libraries.

Personal Libraries (Collections)

- Some people in remote areas of the country such as physicians and astrologers have very valuable personal collections of palm leaf manuscripts.
- They are generally not known to others, and usually protected as family treasures.
- These personal collections are also not properly maintained. Owners have no idea of preservation .

Conclusion

- All these libraries/collections are not only a part of our cultural heritage but treasures of human knowledge also.
- Immediate preservation and provision of access to them is needed as they are in a deteriorating condition.
- Mere compilation of bibliographies does not serve the preservation purpose.

- Librarians are not much concerned about palm leaf manuscripts and their importance.
- Furthermore they do not have training on such matters.
- Government agencies time to time obtain grants from foreign organizations for preservation of manuscripts. But these funds have not been properly used.

- It is high time for Sri Lankan Library Profession to think and act immediately to preserve this unutilized treasures of knowledge.

- Sukhii Diighaayukoo bhava! (May you all be healthy and live long!)