

Subscription Libraries in Ceylon in the 19th Century: Special Reference to the Colombo Library, the Ceylon United Service Library and the Colombo Pettah Library

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Abstract

The contemporary library system in Sri Lanka systematically started with the establishment of “subscription libraries” during the early nineteenth century of the British governing period of Ceylon. These subscription libraries were established to fulfill the reading and recreational needs of the British Government and Army officers worked in Ceylon under the British Government. The library service extended to their family members as well.

The aim of this study was to explore the subscription libraries functioned in the 19th century. The study mainly focused on the three prominent subscription libraries existed during the nineteenth century, namely the Colombo Library (1812), the Ceylon United Service Library (1813) and the Colombo Pettah Library (1829). These were the first set of subscription libraries established by the British in the Colombo city limit during the early years of their governing period in Ceylon. There was an annual grant received by these subscription libraries from the British Government in Ceylon. These grants were mainly used for the maintenance and functionality of libraries. Library users had to pay a small subscription fee for using the library.

Qualitative research approach was adopted and study was mainly based on the secondary data. Secondary data were gathered from the secondary data sources such as “The Ceylon Calendar” “The Ceylon Blue Book” and “The Ferguson’s Directory”. Data was comparatively analyzed and arranged under the name of libraries.

The study revealed that these three subscription libraries rendered a good service to its users throughout the 19th century. However, with the difficulties faced with regard to maintenance and functionality these libraries were amalgamated with other libraries to carry out a better library service to its patrons.

As a result of the user demand for these three libraries, the government set up number of subscription libraries in the country covering main provinces such as Central, Southern and Northern by the end of the final quarter of the 19th century.

Key words: *Library History, Subscription Libraries, British period, Ceylon*

Introduction

The Portuguese came to Sri Lanka in 1505 and gradually conquered the Western, South-Western and Northern maritime areas of the island and held it until they surrendered to the Dutch in 1796. During the period of 1796-1801, Ceylon was governed as a part of the possessions of the East India Trade Company and was under the government of Madras. But a few years after in 1801, Ceylon was elevated into a separate Crown Colony of the British Empire under the control of the Secretary of State for Colonies. Due to the British conquest of the Kandian Kingdom in 1815 the educational and cultural set up of the country was changed.

The modern library system in Sri Lanka started with the establishment of 'subscription libraries' by the British in the early 19th century.

These subscription libraries were established to fulfill the reading and recreational needs of the British government officials, specially the armed forces and the civil officers in the early nineteenth century. Also, these subscription libraries were opened for the English educated elite of the society such as lawyers and civil servants (Corea,1968,p.11). There were two subscription libraries established in Colombo namely, 'Colombo Library' and 'Pettah Library' in the early years of the nineteenth century (Block, 1967). These early subscription libraries were subsidized by the Government.

There was a well spread network of subscription libraries in the country covering areas such as *Galle, Trincomalee, Kandy, Negombo, Chilaw, Kalutara, Rathnapura, Hambantota, Mannar* and *Jaffna* by the 1850. Also subscription libraries were opened in towns such as *Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Gampola, Kegalle, Tangalle* and *Matara* in the up country and southern part of Sri Lanka to serve for expatriates who worked in plantation industry such as tea and cocoa.

The first library that was established within the city limits of Colombo during the British period was 'the United Service Library' and, it was built in 1813 (Corea,1975, p.14). Along with this there was another library that was started in the Central Postal Exchange building in 1824. The 'Pettah Library' was established in 1829 and the gradual increase of libraries showed the popularity of the library system.

At the initial stages mostly in the first half of the 19th subscription libraries were limited to Colombo city area only. However in the century final quarter of the century subscription libraries were set up in the main cities of the country

covering cities such as Kandy, Galle, Jaffna, Negombo, Kalutara, Rathnapura, Kegalle, Matara, Point Pedro, Badulla, Trincomalee and Anuradhapura (Piyadasa, 1985, p. 74).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the British Government in Ceylon was able to realize the value of services rendered by these subscription libraries and its popularity among its users. As a result of this, the Government decided to grant some sort of financial support for selected subscription libraries in the country.

Subscription libraries are the foundation of present public library system in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately research on early subscription libraries in Ceylon has not been done in a systematic manner. Also there is a considerable gap in the library science literature on libraries functioned in a British governing period of Ceylon. The present study is important within this context.

The aim of this study was to explore the nature of subscription libraries functioned in the 19th century.

This study mainly focused on the three prominent subscription libraries functioned during the nineteenth century, namely the Colombo Library (1812), the Ceylon United Service Library (1813) and the Colombo Pettah Library (1829).

In Sri Lanka no comprehensive study has yet been done on the history of public libraries or its gradual development from the 19th century to the present day. Related literature on libraries, reading rooms and book clubs are available from various sources under different headings. But this information is scattered and the main aim of this study is to bring that scattered information together to build the history of public library movement in Sri Lanka.

Information on early subscription libraries were recorded in the government publications such as 'The Ceylon Blue Book', 'Government Administration Report' and contemporary statistical compendiums such as 'The Ceylon Calendar' or 'The Ceylon Almanac and Ferguson's Directory'.

The information relevant to this study was collected mostly from government publications, administration reports, government records which are available in the National Archives Department and Museum Library of Sri Lanka. Among these publications; 'The Ceylon Calendar' an annual publication published from 1815 – 1863 includes statistical information and general information on Ceylon and it provides information on subscription libraries available in Ceylon in the nineteenth century under the heading of public institutions. The first edition of

this publication gives information on the committee members and the librarian of the Colombo Library, the first library established in Ceylon in 1812.

The information compiled in the “Ceylon Blue Books” is also useful for this research. Blue Books contain statistical information on various activities of the country and submitted to the British Government by the Governor of Ceylon through the Secretary of State for Colonies every year. The Ceylon Blue Book was published from 1821 to 1938, but due to the poor physical condition of the available copies it is very difficult to read the information in the Ceylon Blue Books from 1821-1862. The Ceylon Blue Books for the year 1864 onwards contain the information on libraries, specially, the Government grants for the libraries, mode of support to these libraries such as public subscriptions and the number of members attached to some of the libraries operated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the section of charitable and literary institutions.

Another valuable source for this research is the Ceylon Government Administration Reports available from 1864 at the National Archives Department. The Report of the Director of Public Instructions included in the Ceylon Administration Reports provide the information on financial aid and donations to libraries which functioned in the country. This information appears for the first time in the report for the year 1878 and continued till 1914.

In addition to the above mentioned government’s administration publications, “The Ceylon Directory: Calendar; and compendium of useful information” or simply known as Ferguson’s Ceylon Directory compiled by A.M. Ferguson, the editor of the Colombo Observer gives useful information on libraries, reading rooms and book clubs since 1865. The Ferguson’s Directory records information on libraries established in Ceylon from 1865. Information on libraries organized under the section of institutions in the directory, includes details about library collections, number of users, year of establishment, profile of committee members, names of library staff etc.

All these publications mentioned here give various aspects of information on libraries in Ceylon during the British regime. Based on that information it is clear that there was good support given by the government to the libraries and at the same time the demand for the libraries from the public was very high. As a result there was a wide network of libraries spread out in the country in almost all main towns in Sri Lanka by the mid nineteenth century.

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Book’ and ‘The Ferguson’s Directory. Data was comparatively analyzed and arranged under the name of libraries.

The Colombo Library

Based on the information and evidence available in sources such as ‘The Ceylon Calendar’, ‘Ferguson’s Directory’ and several other government publications in the early 19th century ‘The Colombo Library’ was the first subscription library of Sri Lanka established by the British government. This was established on 13th August in 1812 (The Ferguson’s Ceylon Directory for 1863, 1864, p.10).

The Ceylon Calendar since 1815 to 1862 gives information about the libraries reading rooms and book clubs under the heading of ‘Public Institutions’. The Ceylon Calendar provides information on the Colombo Library from 1815 to 1846. The Ceylon Calendar for the year 1815 includes information about the Committee members of the Colombo Library. There were thirteen members appointed to the Colombo Library Committee and the names of the members are as follows;

Honorable John Rodney	Honorable J.W. Carrington Esq.
Hardinge Giffard Esq.	Colonel T.W. Kerr
A. Cadell Esq.(Treasurer)	John Deane Esq.
Jas Sutherland Esq.	Rev. G. Bisset
Captain Cleather	J. Seratchly Esq.
J. Britch Esq.	J. Boustead Esq.
S.D. WilsonEsq. (Secretary)	

(The Ceylon Calendar 1815, 1816, p.112)

Mr. Dionisiuse De Neys was the first librarian of the Colombo Library till 1846 (ibid). According to the information available in the Ferguson’s Directory for the year 1907-1908, Mr. D.W.O. Dias also worked as a Librarian in the Colombo Library (The Ceylon Calendar,1909, p.953). The following table shows the number of Committee Members of the Colombo Library from 1815to 1832.

Table 2.1 : No. of Committee Members of the Colombo Library

Source: The Ceylon Calendar 1816-1833

In the year 1832 there were two persons appointed to the Colombo Library as patrons. Sir R.W. Horton (The Governor) and Major General Sir J. Wilson were the first patrons of the Colombo Library. Afterwards the Governor of Ceylon appeared as the patron to the Colombo Library as an honorary member.

The Colombo Library was incorporated with the United Service Library established in 1842 to provide a better service to the readers on 1st July of 1874 (The Ferguson's Directory 1876-78, 1879). There were 220 subscribers at the

Year	No. of Committee Members	Year	No. of Committee Members
1815	13	1824	16
1816	11	1825	15
1817	9	1826	16
1818	10	1827	16
1819	10	1828	16
1820	12	1829	11
1821	11	1830	16
1822	15	1831	16
1823	15	1832	17

library when the library was amalgamated in 1874. The new library was housed at No. 25, Queens Street, Fort and the library was opened from 6 a.m to 5 p.m. daily except Sundays .On Sundays the library was closed at 1 p.m., and no books were issued or received (ibid,p.640). The Ferguson's Directory gives the details about the no. of subscribers of the library from 1880 to 1911.

Table 2.2 : No. of Subscribers of the Colombo Library for 1880- 1924

Year	No. of Subscribers	Year	No. of Subscribers
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1880-1881	284	1909	152
1885	153	1910-1911	150
1886	262	1912	146
1885-1886	265	1913	120
1887-1888	260	1914	110
1889	227	1915	103
1892	230	1916	180
1893-1894	150	1917	173
1895-1896	140	1918	185
1896-1897	140	1919	213
1900-1902	210	1920	197
1903-1904	200	1921	218
1905-1906	200	1922	227
1907	170	1923	245
1908	162	1924	202

Source : The Ferguson's Directory 1881-1898 and The Administration Report 1900- 1925

The library was opened for the subscribers for the monthly subscription of Rs. 2 and Rs.10 was charged as the entrance fee (The Ferguson's Directory 1901,1902,p.PB2). According to the Ferguson's Directory for the year 1903-1904, the library was situated at the Old General Post Office, Fort. During the period of 1920-21 there were 160 subscribers using the library (The Ferguson's Directory 1920-21, 1922).

The Colombo library received a certain amount as a Government grant for its maintenance. However after the First World War, Government support was withdrawn. During these lean years the members of the library decided to hand over the management of the library to the Colombo Municipality. But this plan could not be executed due to lack of municipal funds (Piyadasa, 1985, p.91). A

few years later in 1925, the Colombo Library merged with the Pettah Library to establish the Colombo Public Library.

The Ceylon United Service Library

The United Service Library established in 1813 was considered as one of the oldest subscription libraries in Sri Lanka and the armed forces were the main users of this library. Due to maintenance difficulties this library was merged with the Colombo Library in 1874 (Corea, 1975). Mr. John Titley, Mr. Michael Jordan, Mr. George A. Bruce and Mr. Ebenezer were the Librarians of the Ceylon United Service Library and Mr. G.A. Cherrington, H.C. Perera and Mr. E.Ruston were the Assistant. The Ceylon Calendar from 1852 to 1862 gives details about the members, collection and subscribers of the library and those details are given in the table below.

Table 2.3 : Details of the Collection, Committee Members and Subscribers of The Ceylon United Service Library for 1851-1871

Year	No. of Volumes in the Library	No. of Committee Members	No. of Subscribers
1852		De-jure 77 Honorary 50 Total 127	
1853		De-jure 71 Honorary 44 Total 115	
1854		De-jure 72 Honorary 51 Total 123	
1855		De-jure 70 Honorary 52 Total 122	
1856	No. of works in the library : 4,328 Comprising : 10,438	De-jure 70 Honorary 55 Total 125	
1857	No. of works in the library : 4,609 Comprising : 10,868	De-jure 69 Honorary 61 Total 130	

1858	No. of works in the library : 4,660 Comprising : 10,949	De-jure 79 Honorary 53 Total 132	12
1859	No. of works in the library : 4,785 Comprising : 11,153	De-jure 91 Honorary 65 Total 156	11
1860	No. of works in the library : 4,872 Comprising : 11,275	De-jure 84 Honorary 53 Total 137	
1861	No. of works in the library : 5,027 Comprising : 11,512	De-jure 85 Honorary 52 Total 137	
1862	No. of works in the library : 5,165 Comprising : 11,700	De-jure 72 Honorary 46 Total 118	
1863-1868	No data available on the United Service Library		
1869	5000		120
1871	6000		108

Source: The Ceylon Calendar 1852-1862 and Fergusons' Directory 1870-1872

The Pettah Library (The Colombo Pettah Library)

According to the Ferguson's Directory in the year 1863, the Pettah Library was instituted by a group of learned Burghers on 11th of April 1829 and the library was reorganized on 1st of September 1836 (1864, p.6). This library also served the English speaking educated elite in Colombo as in the previous two subscription libraries.

The government administrative publications such as the Ceylon Blue Book, Government Administration Report and statistical compendiums such as the Ceylon Calendar and the Ferguson's Directory give details about the collection,

no. of subscribers and the government donations received by the Colombo Pettah library. The table given below shows such information about the library.

Table 2.4 : Details of the Collection and No. of Subscribers of The Colombo Pettah Library for 1851-1897

Year	No. of Volumes	No. of Subscribers	Year	No. of Volumes	No. of Subscribers
1851	2340	169	1859	2611	164
1852	2419	178	1860	2783	185
1853	2419	178	1861	2783	185
1854	2611	164	1862		2950
1855	2611	164	1863-1868 no data on CPL		
1856	2611	164	1869	2884	202
1857	2611	164	1871	2900	182
1858	2611	164	1896-97	140	

Source: The Ceylon Calendar 1852-1862 The Fergusons' Directory 1863-1898

The Government Administration Report gives details about the government grants to the libraries under the report of the Director of Public Instructions in the miscellaneous section. Since 1878 to 1909 the Colombo Pettah Library received Rs. 500 from the Government as a donation and in 1910-1911 the Government increased this grant up to Rs. 750 and again in 1912 it was reduced to Rs. 500 (Administration Report 1879-1910). Mr. James Pereira, Mr. A. Felsing, Mr.M.L. Joseph, Mr.Edgar VanTwest were some of the librarians of the Colombo Pettah Library. The following table gives details about the no. of subscribers of the Colombo Pettah library from 1900 to 1923.

Table 2.5 : No. of Subscribers of The Colombo Pettah Library for 1900-1923

Year	No. of Subscribers	Year	No. of Subscribers

1900	155	1915	177
1902	174	1917	188
1907	291	1918	188
1908	270	1919	237
1909	290	1920	280
1910-11	255	1921	308
1912	262	1922	310
1913	254	1923	315
1914	203		

Source: The Ceylon Blue Book 1901-1923

During the year 1924 the Colombo Pettah Library merged with the Colombo Library to set up the Colombo Public Library

Conclusion and Summary

The study revealed that these three subscription libraries rendered a good service to its users throughout the 19th century. However, with the difficulties faced on maintenance and functionality these libraries were amalgamated with other libraries to carry out a better library service to its patrons.

As a result of the user demand for these three libraries, the government set up a number of Subscription libraries in the country covering main provinces such as Central, Southern and Northern by the end of the final quarter of the 19th century.

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