

Conservation and Preservation challenges of Palm Leaf Manuscripts in the National Library and Documentation Centre of Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

The concept of the library goes back to the origin of the human civilization. When man began to make and keep written records, library came into existence.

After the renaissance and reformation in Europe, philosophy of the libraries underwent a change. The libraries were considered as store houses of knowledge from ancient time to middle ages. After the invention of printing and the dissemination of liberal thoughts, consequently the library became a dissemination centre of human knowledge. The concept of the National Library(NL) also emerged against this background.

The origin of the NL concept goes back to ancient libraries of the world. According to some librarians and historians, the library of Alexandria was a NL. It performed some functions, which the present NLs are carrying out. However there is no agreement about the origin of the NL concept.

Sri Lanka is an Island situated in the Indian Ocean and is situated about 645 km north of the equator and is separated from India by the Gulf of Mannar as well as the Palk Strait. The total land area of the country is about 65610 square kilometers.

The population of the country is about 20 million. The majority of Sri Lankans are the Sinhalese and other communities are Tamils, Muslims and Burghers. Literacy rate of the country is 94%. It is a multilingual and a multi cultural country. The main religion of the country is Buddhism.

With the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka our ancestors received the early form of Sinhala alphabet and they started writing on various materials. One of the greatest libraries in Sri Lanka was at Mahavihara, set up in the 5th century BC in Anuradapura which was the first ancient kingdom of Sri Lanka. From time to time the kingdom of Sri Lanka was transferred to various regions all over the island due to socio-economic and geographical reasons.

Sri Lanka has a very old writing tradition and early Sri Lankans wrote on Palm leaves. As such there were wide spread Palm leaves manuscripts all over the Island. In 1870 the Royal Oriental Library (ROL) was set up. One of the main objectives of this library was collecting the documents written in Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit languages, to one specific place for the use of future generations. This is a basic function of modern national libraries as well. So the establishment of the ROL in Sri Lanka can be considered as the first step of the modern NL of the Island.

The NLDC of Sri Lanka has the third largest library collection of the country. The largest collection of the country located in the National Museum Library because it was set up in 1877. The National Library of the Sri Lanka is a newly established library in the country in 1990.

Ancestors of the country used various materials for writing purposes. Palm leaves have been a major writing material of Sri Lanka since ancient times. Writing on palm leaf is a scientific method used by ancient Ceylonese (Sri Lankans). There are palm leaves Collections Island wide, particularly in ancient temples. Besides these, there is palm leaf collections kept in major libraries in the country. The largest collection is kept in the National Museum Library and the second largest collection is maintained by the University Library of Peradeniya. The palm leaf collection of the National Library is the third largest collection in the country. Some of these collections run the risk of deterioration & decay due to lack of proper preservation systems. Although some libraries have collected a number of palm leaves they don't have records of these

collections. Therefore, it is necessary to form a centre at the NL premises for palm leaf collections of the country.

Objectives of the Research

- To identify the existing collection of Palm Leaf Manuscripts in the National Library
- To identify barriers and challenges which affect the conservation and preservation
- To investigate possible areas of collaboration to promote the conservation and preservation activities of the National Library
- To introduce a new model for the National Library of Sri Lanka to preserve Collection of Palm Leaf Manuscripts

Methodology In this research the author intended to use qualitative approach to test the outcomes of the research.

Outcomes The outcomes of the research will be useful to different groups of people in Sri Lanka, mainly those who are working in managerial positions and members of the Directors of NLS. Secondly, the outcomes of the research will be useful to academic groups in the Library and Information Science (LIS) segment as well as in the field of Organizational Management. Scholars, researchers and students in these disciplines and related disciplines may also be advantaged.

Keywords: National Libraries, Palm Leaf, Conservation, Preservation National Library Sri Lanka