

ROLE OF THE LIBRARIES TOWARDS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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The Speech delivered by
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Let me first thank you for inviting me to your 35th Annual Sessions. I notice that your Sessions this time want to examine and discuss a number of matters relating to library development in the country.

Sri Lanka Library Association, founded in 1960 and incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1974, is the only professional organization in Sri Lanka which is committed to library development and information science. Your Association, as a collection of professionals with internationally recognized qualifications, is committed to the promotion and improvement of library services in Sri Lanka and yet another objective is to set up professional standards. No organization, in my view, can function, for the benefit of a nation, unless it adheres to certain standards of behaviour. It is my view that your Association, from the very inception, made a noteworthy contribution to library development in the country. Today, there is a wide network of libraries in the country; these are the National Library, University Libraries,

Public Libraries maintained by Local Government institutions, Research Libraries of various organizations in both the private and public sector and School Libraries. Yet another centre is the age - old Temple Libraries which contain ancient works including ola material and then there are libraries owned by individuals who, during a life- time, make a collection of books. Such men are rare today, but in the past there were such men who, owing to their own interests in reading, collected books including first editions.

Still the library development is comparatively poor in Sri Lanka. Local Government Libraries are poorly equipped, and school libraries are totally a neglected sector. There is no Library Policy as far as the school library development is concerned, and the absence of a proper Library Policy, of which aimed at the expansion of schools library facilities, was the main reason. In the context of the educational policy changes which we intend to bring about in this country during the period of our regime, we intend to

give some priority to a scheme of school library development.

Sri Lanka has a very literate population, the national literacy rate is nearly 96%. This is a tremendous achievement when compared with the status of other countries in South Asia. Sri Lanka has a school going population of nearly 4.3% million. But our reading habits have declined in the past two decades; there is a decline in the reading habits among school children. This is due to two factors: one being the highly competitive examinations and structured material related to the syllabi, and nothing outside it attracts them because they, in their own view, do not help them to pass an examination. Next impediment to the growth of a reading habit is the tuition industry and the tuition related publications which are available in plenty. In my view, examination - oriented reading and over-concentration on subject wise reading has resulted in an overall decline in the reading habits of young people. In the Universities, the undergraduates make no use of the vast library resources in the Universities. I have discovered, in the course of my teaching experience which runs to thirty years, that some relevant texts have not been borrowed for years by the students. Language deficiency is one important barrier; apart from that, there is not much of an interest among the present day under-graduates to acquire knowledge. I do not know whether this is an extension of the same deficiency or the decline in reading habits which we witness among the school children. It is my own experience again at Peradeniya that library gets filled up only at the eve of the annual examinations, and this is not for the purpose of consulting major work on the subjects; they come there to read the notes.

I have already referred to the level of literacy in Sri Lanka. How many books are being published in a country which has the highest literacy rate in Asia? For 1992, 6855 titles have been published; 599 periodicals have been published. This I mentioned in order to say that our publishing industry is in a poor state.

There are some aspects which your Association, as one committed to the development of library facilities in this country, needs to examine during the course of your deliberations.

I see some of my friends from the Universities-people who man the libraries in the universities. University librarians are not a new tribe within the intellectual community of a university. We must accept that university is a place of culture; it is the culture of learning that we need to promote in our universities. Librarians as members of an expanding intellectual community, must contribute to the process of learning in the Universities by producing research in their own professional fields. Take, for instance, Mr. Ian Goonetilleke, who, as the doyen bibliographer of this country, produced a monumental bibliography on Sri Lanka. This is a work which every researcher in and out- side Sri Lanka has to consult if one wants to do research on Sri Lanka. He was prevented from continuing his work at Peradeniya by a group of academics who did not see eye to eye with him on matters political; yet this great bibliographer manages to keep his interest in bibliography alive even at the late age. He is the unique type of librarian-cum-intellectual which the university needs today. What I am trying to emphasise is that mere professionalism is not enough, one must get himself embedded in the intellectual life of a university. In the universities today, there is an absence of critical and creative thought and the role of the universities the critic of contemporary society is now confined to a small group of students guided by a nondescript ideology. University intellectual must guide the changes in the contemporary society; for which more research needs to be done on contemporary social, economic and political issues.

I thank you again for inviting me, to speak on the occasion of your 35th anniversary. Your Association, as a professional organization, has contributed a great deal for the betterment of your tribe, the size of which is certain to improve with the provision of better-facilities for library development in this country. Information Sciences, with the new technologies now available in the world, can play a vital role in the development of a country. I am sure that your Association, with its responsibilities, can make a contribution to the process of development that is now taking place in the country.

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