



ECOLOGY,CULTURE AND SOCIETY: ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TRIVANDRUM PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Abstract: Knowledge is the basis of human process. Cultural development of a society large depends upon the skill of the people in reading and writing. Ecological consciousness is created among the masses through the gift of books. Libraries in this sense play a vital role in making the public conscious of their rights and duties. Trivandrum public library is the oldest and the largest public library in Kerala. It, right from the time of its inception has been playing a vital role in the life and culture of the people of the capital city. The consciousness that the natives of Travancore express now is the out come of the influence the public library had on the residents of the region.

Key Words: education, civilization, ecology, education, Manifesto, civilization

From time immemorial man's inquisitiveness towards knowledge is well known. So from cave walls to clay tablets man always tried to record his thoughts. It was later evolved as printed books, audios and visuals with the development of technologies. All modes were focused on the preservation of the material for future purpose. When we examine the activities of libraries through time and space, we see that the basic function in which all kinds of institutions which we have to call libraries even though they were not known by the term were engaged is collection, preservation and dissemination of knowledge and a sense of consciousness about ecology and nature. Many movements for preserving nature are the out come of the role played by books.

The Public Library is defined by The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and UNESCO as "the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups". It also expands it further as "It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment".

UNESCO firstly published the Public Library Manifesto in 1949 and later published revised second edition in 1972 and a third edition in 1994. The Manifesto incorporated the changes that should be included in Public Library in its revised editions.

The functions of Public Library can be summarized as follows :-

- i. It should encourage education.
- ii. It should promote culture.
- iii. There should be proper provision for providing knowledge to all.
- iv. It should promote entertainment.
- v. To function as Community Information Centre.

Along with these functions, it is supposed to perform certain services apart from academic and cultural upliftment. The fundamental services are of course providing books and knowledge to all age groups. It should provide resourceful reference section for students and research groups which will encourage fruitful studies in future. Other services include collecting rare periodicals and books, separate section for age groups and subjects, social services which aims for cultural activities and skill development and healthy discussions on contemporary issues which help people to create a political view and understanding of present scenario. The libraries always played a vital role in every regions' historical moments and political shifts. They were once centres of national awakening in independence struggles. At that time, only libraries could subscribe newspapers and periodicals which gave information regarding world affairs.

Turning now from the general to the particular, we may take up the Trivandrum Public Library which is unique and oldest in our State.

Historical Background of earlier Travancore

The second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Kerala witnessed many remarkable changes in all walks of life. The influences were from the western ideas, preachings of missionaries and educational and literacy policies of the British. And also from the luminous national movement and enchanting as well as sparkling speeches of national leaders and the reform movements for identity and equality and their fierce efforts to eradicate the injustices prevailed in Travancore and so on. It made a great shift in all aspect of state.

From the reign of Gouri Lakshmi Bhai to Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Travancore witnessed various developments in the field of education and printing. The spectacular development was reached at its maximum in Swathi Thirunal's reign.

Beginning of Public Library

His Highness Sree Swathi Thirunal Maharaja, a great scholar and patron of art reigned Travancore from 1829 to 1847. In the book "Military Reminiscences", Colonel Welsh who visited Trivandrum in 1825 refers to the studies of the young prince Swathi Thirunal. This reference will make clear that Swathi Thirunal was a friend of books .

Welsh says: "He read a chapter of Malcolm's Central India; the Governor-General's Persian letter on the capture of Rangoon; a passage in Sanskrit; another in Malayalam and seemed equally clever at each. He then took up a book of mathematics, selecting the forty-seventh proposition of Euclid, sketched the figure on a country-slate; but what astonished me most was his telling us in English that Geometry was derived from the Sanskrit which was 'Jaw meter,' to measure the earth, and that many of our mathematical terms were also derived from the same sources, such as hexagon, heptagon, octagon, decagon, dua-decagon, etc."This is

a pointer to the possibility that Swathi Thirunal had at his disposal a library which had a collection of books ranging from history and literature to western science. No wonder that during the first year of his reign (1829) a library was established in Trivandrum .

Though he was traditional in his core heart; he always welcomed the best from western thoughts. He wanted to provide his people the benefits from both systems. So he encouraged various welfare oriented reforms in Travancore. It was in 1829, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal of Travancore made a historic movement by establishing Trivandrum Public library. It is historic in the sense that during its establishment the concepts of 'public' and 'library service' were beyond the imagination of a feudal king at that time and also in India there were many libraries but none were meant for the public. So it was a milestone in the history of Travancore. He also made another move by giving grants for the public library in 1937 for the first time in history.

The Kerala District Gazetteers describes the history of Public Library as follows,

“In view of the great traditions associated with the Public library Trivandrum it would be relevant to give a brief account of the origin and growth of this institution. This library is the oldest of its kind in India. It was started in 1829 by the then British Resident Col Edward Cadogan, the grandson of Sir Hance Sloane, the founder of the British Museum. The Maharaja and the British Resident took an active interest in the affairs of the library. The former being the patron and later the president. The library was managed by the association known as Trivandrum public library committee”.

Swathi Thirunal was easily impressed by the idea of an institution like British Museum from Resident's words. The Resident also gave his suggestions and necessity of a library and schools in Travancore. So by joining together they established the library in 1829. There is still confusion over the establishment of the institution. As per the royal edict in Ola or palm leaf of September 1836 it is clear that the library was begun in or at least before 1836 during the reign of Swathi Thirunal Maharaja. According to The State Manual of Travancore by V. Nagam Aiya published in 1906 states that it was begun in 1836 and his statement should be considered because he was also a member of the old library committee. But the printed Annual reports of 1963-64 confirm that the library was established in 1829 .

V.K.N. Menon states that, “from the minutes of the Library,(which we now have only from 1877, and some of them are copies at first),it is clear that the founders were a few private individuals, names now unknown except for that of Col. Cadogan (if we accept the statement in the Annual Report),mainly Britishers, civilian and military, and perhaps also a few Indians, resident in Trivandrum, both, having a status entitling them to be invited to the 'darbars' of the Maharaja, They managed it as a private club” Even though it was restricted to the selected Englishmen or the Darbaris as mentioned before, it was later opened to natives with a membership fee. They were only allowed to read the books by paying Re 1/- as monthly subscription. At that time it was too much to afford. When the government made a grant of 500 rupees, fees was reduced for them in 1844. J.Robertson was library's first Secretary. A committee was also functioned for the library at that time. The British residents were functioned as presidents from 1836 to 1898 .

The wholehearted encouragement from successive Maharajas and English Residents played a major role in the development of the library. They sincerely worked for the betterment of the library and were eager to extent the services to the maximum. The Public Library aimed for an extensive collection of books including rare and classic works which could be used for academic purposes and also it will help to mould an enlightened generations for the country . Initially some books for the library were received as donation. Some valuable scientific books were donated by observatory in later period.

The Development of Public Library.

The original location of the library remains unknown. In 1847, some land was acquired for the construction of the Public Library. By that time the members of the library organized as “Trivandrum Public Library Samajam” and drafted its constitution, rules and regulations. In 1856 that state had recognized the library and started giving an annual grant of 131 Rupees. In the same year, government hired the building for Traveller’s Bungalow and the library was shifted to the gallery of the newly constructed observatory .

After a brief period, in 1876 the library was then shifted entirely to Mrs. Mead’s Bungalow. In the same year, Major Thompson who was the Library Secretary wrote the government about the pathetic condition of the building and requested for a new building. In 1877 also Major Davison the then Secretary of the library, demanded a portion of Napier Museum along with other amenities for the functioning which was accepted by the government. As per that a new building was constructed in the Museum compound in 1886. Later, the Resident Hannington who was also the president of the Museum Garden requested the Dewan Ramarao to shift the library from there. Consequently in 1889, the Dewan ordered the Traveller’s Bungalow to return the building to the library. So the Public Library completely shifted to its original place in 1892.

Emergence of Trivandrum People’s Library

During 1852-65, the then observatory director John Allan Broun FRS initiated ‘People’s Library’ for commoners and students. The library sought the government for financial assistance and a site for its building. As a result government allotted site in the Palayam ground (now the Chandrasekharan Nair Stadium) along with a grant of 600 rupees Allan Broun donated 200 towards the library and also the Dewan granted 50 rupees as assistance. They started functioning in 1865. The membership fees were four annas . Government extended its support by giving another annual grant of 6 rupees which was revised later as 10 rupees. But from 1886 onwards government revoked the grant and asked the library to become self- sufficient thereafter. They had a Managing Committee consisted of Managing Secretary and a Librarian who were elected by the members of the library. Allan Broun was the first Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the library. The prominent writer, Rev. Samuel Mateer was also elected thrice as the Secretary.

Public Library with a new building

The Public Library Committee requested the government in 1891 to provide a new building for its smooth functioning and pressurized the government for the same in 1895 also. The slow progress regarding the Library made the then Resident Mr.Grigg to advise the Library Committee members to formally register it as a society . By 1894, the Public Library Samajam was registered as a Joint Stock Company . In 1897, Trivandrum Public Library Committee entered into an agreement with the Government that it would erect a suitable building in commemoration of the Sixty years of Queen Victoria’s reign for a new library for the benefit of the public and to that end provide a well stocked furnished reference library and should undertake the maintenance of the same in a suitable manner under such regulations as may be best calculated to carry out the end in view. So the Public Library got a building with enough facilities at that time in regard with the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The books from Mrs. Read’s bungalow were taken to the School of Fine Arts. The new building was fully constructed in 1902 and books shifted to the new building in the same year .

Public Library was then adopted by the government in 1898 which was registered under the Travancore Joint Stock Companies Regulations. Later during the reign of Sree Moolam Thirunal the doors of the library were opened to the general public . It is described as “Thus in 1898 fifty years before the dawn of

independence, the common people of Trivandrum were allowed entry into the temple of knowledge, during the reign of Sree Mulam Thirunal, which is an event as unique as the Temple Entry Proclamation ”.

At that moment, People’s library was at a fix and requested government for its merging with the Public Library in 1899. Government merged both libraries and the new building was named as Diamond Jubilee Library. The government constituted a committee which consists of a President, a Secretary and other four members. From 1898 to 1921 British Residents functioned as Presidents. Membership fees were re-fixed. When Travancore University was established in 1937, Public library was transferred as University library. It completed in 1938. The committee was reconstituted by the government with the Pro Vice-Chancellor of the university as the President and the University Librarian as the Secretary. The committee was given full powers to manage the affairs of the institution. The transfer of this institution met with resentment and protest from the public. The newspaper voiced the grave concern of the library conscious public. The apprehension was that following the transfer of the library to the control of the University, the library may not be as accessible to the public as before and the usefulness of the rich library might be reduced, restricted or limited. The resentment was expressed through various meetings and in some cultural functions. The Library was functioned well in preceding year and discontinuation or the change in its service was too disheartening for the people. In response to the growing criticism, the government had taken steps to extend the usefulness of the library even to rural areas. Later in 1948 a resolution was passed unanimously stating that the Government should take over the institution. Within two years, half a dozen libraries from northern border to the southern border of the state were affiliated to it.

By 1942, Kerala University started its own library yet, the Public Library functioned along with that till 1949. Later in 1948 a resolution was passed unanimously stating that the Government should take over the institution. In the next year it was retained as Public library by the Government. Following that they revised the rules and regulations, membership fees and functioning etc. In 1935, a Reading room for women and children were constructed. Before 1955 a section for Children was also started functioning.

As State Central Library

In 1955, The Library Committee submitted a report to the Management which included some important suggestions. Some of the suggestions included the following :-

1. Conversion of Trivandrum Public Library as the State Central Library.
2. Making this library as the ‘reservoir of books’ for other libraries.
3. Provide copyright provision to the library.
4. Developing the library as a model to other public libraries in the state
5. Provide training facility for the staff working in the public libraries of the state etc.

In 1956 Kerala State was formed on the basis of State Reorganization Act. In the same year it the library was included in the planning scheme and spent about seven lakhs and converted it into as the State Central Library in 1958 and the distributing library for Trivandrum district. It also constituted a committee which included the State Minister for Education as its Chairman and State Librarian as its Convener along with an Advisory Committee. The Public library celebrated its Platinum Jubilee in a big way in 1974 . In the year 1992, Government declared Malayalam as the official language of this department. Then in the year 1988, the library was given the status of a minor department under the administrative control of Higher Education Department with the State Librarian as Head of the Department.

A heritage model building was built for children section in the library compound. Later L.I.C donated a Children’s Park of 10 lakhs towards public library. In 2009, as per the direction of the Kerala government,

the donated books from British Council library (closed down now) were arranged in the Public library as a separate section. From 2010 onwards it is distributed to members using Public Library's membership card.

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