

Public Library Systems in Ancient South India

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The paper puts forward and substantiates the view that the concept of free public library service goes back to ancient times. Governments of those days were aware of their role to a great extent. The paper evaluates the free library service systems that existed in ancient South India, evaluates the collections, access, services, the professional status of librarians and the laws relating to them.

1 INTRODUCTION

The origin of libraries and the customs, traditions, rules and laws relating to this social institution are almost lost in antiquity. Generally speaking, one can say that with the recording of human thoughts, started also the concept of library, an institution which could preserve thoughts for future use. When the prehistoric man drew the pictures on the walls of the safest portion of his cave, or his successors dried clay tablets on the banks of Indus or Sumer, they were doing in effect, the same thing that our modern information scientists do now. Although the present day information scientist will be using a key board to feed information, which is to be preserved for future use, to computer memory. From primitive cave walls, medium for storing information evolved through clay tablet, papyrus or parchment rolls, the illuminated manuscript, the vellum codex, the incuna-

bula, the printed book, audio and video cassettes, microforms, culminating in the computer maintained data bases. The customs, traditions, rules and laws relating to storing of information for use also have a parallel development.

Looking back through time and space, we find that the essential functions of almost all libraries, even though they have been called by different names, have been collection, preservation and dissemination of knowledge. In this sense not only library, but even the concept of public library is as old as civilization. These ancient social institutions were libraries or public libraries not by their names but by their functions. None of the ancient libraries ever remained mere store houses as is alleged in some quarters. From the time of the first prehistoric cave drawing, users of information have always existed. However, until very recent times their number has been

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small. But the stored information was being put into effective use and was always active in the society.

2 ORIGIN OF FREE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The concept of public library is to a large extent related to the principle of access rather than with the considerations of size, content or organization of the collections¹. The history of public access to library collections is also a long and continuous one. Hence, the theory that free public library is a relatively recent phenomenon, as put forward by most works in library history appears to be erroneous. The following discussion is intended to show that the principle "libraries are for all" had existed down through the ages. Many of the ancient libraries were open to most users and evidence of public access to libraries are there from the earliest period of human history.

With the pre-historic man's first attempt to store information, for the use of others, in the cave walls in the form of pictographic inscription; the related customs, traditions, rules and procedures for information storage and dissemination also started taking shape. These rules and procedures ultimately culminated in the modern concept of library legislation. Ancient libraries were public libraries only in the sense that they were at the service of those who could use them and who cared to use them. These libraries welcomed all those who really were in need of the information stored there.

It is obvious that establishment libraries is preceded by recording of thoughts. The oldest system of writing known to us is

the cunei form and the people of Sumeria and Indus Valley practiced this as early as 3000 BC. Thousands of clay tablets in which they recorded their religious thoughts, details of rituals, legends, lores and transactions relating to trade and commerce were excavated from Sumeria and Indus Valley. They constitute man's oldest literature and in both of these civilizations huge collections of records existed. It has been reported that one city in ancient Sumeria, namely Tello, had a collection of about 30,000 such clay tablets².

Ancient Egypt also had a number of libraries. A very big library existed at Gizeh in 2500 BC and about 1250 BC Ramses II established a library at Thebes and at its entrance he had inscribed "medicine for soul" which proves it was open to all.

3 AWARENESS OF GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBILITY

Perhaps, the most important and largest collection in the ancient world was established by the Assyrian king Assurbanipal at Nineveh in the seventh century BC³. His library contained more than 20,000 clay tablets, besides huge collection of leather scrolls and papyri. He undertook a systematic collection of all recorded information – religious, historical, geographical and scientific knowledge from all parts of the known world. They were classified, catalogued and arranged in the most useful order. The plan of library, the specialized equipment and staff and the liberal provision for the use of stock can be compared with those of many well organized present day public libraries. According to Jules Oppert, the Assyriologist of last century, Assurbanipal had expressly organized this large collection for the purpose of instruc-

tion of his subjects and his collection of documents was open to all the people⁴. Here is an instance which suggests that the government of the land was fully aware of its responsibility to disseminate recorded information to its people.

Pliny in his natural history describes the public library planned by Julius Caesar and established by his friend Asinius Pollo in 39 BC. Pliny tells us that Asinius Pillo had made men's talents and mental powers a public possession⁵. The principle that 'library should be for all' was very dominant during those times. In Alexandria Ptolemies established in 3rd century BC a library with magnificent collection of 700,000 volumes⁶. This library was headed by many great scholars like Aristophanes and Callimachus. Callimachus devised a catalogue with author, title and subject entries. This library allowed free access to the people. At Pergmum another library with two lakh volumes existed which Antony gifted to Cleopatra. In Rome the idea of a public library with large collection of volumes meant for common use first found practical realization in the time of rest Roman Emperor Augustus who ruled between 63 BC to 14 AD.

4 ANCIENT INDIAN LIBRARIES

India also has got a very ancient history of library systems, techniques and laws. Right from antiquity, Indian culture, philosophy and religion occupied a place of pride throughout the world and the neighbouring countries were all under the magic spell of its splendour and magnificence. Thousands of scholars from all over the world took hazardous journeys to use the huge collections of our recorded knowledge arranged in the most helpful manner

in our ancient seats of learning⁷. They were open to all, irrespective of caste, creed or religion for any length of time. Even free boarding and lodging facilities were given to the serious users from far away places. The great libraries at Nalanda, Taxila and Pataliputra, even though attached to academic institutions had more free public library character than any of the present day libraries of their size⁸.

5 EDUCATION IN ANCIENT KERALA

Kerala, the secluded southern corner of India also has got a library history parallel to that of India. The beginning of educational and cultural activity in Kerala may also be traced back to very ancient times. In ancient period Kerala as an integral part of the socio-cultural unit called Tamilakam formed part of the educational system of Tamils. As in other parts of India, in Tamilakam also religion influenced all aspects of life, especially education. Theology laid down the law and the rules of conduct. Among them was the belief that free gift of knowledge and its carrier, the book, as charity that would earn merit for the giver and that this merit could be exchanged beneficially in the life after death. For example according to Manu, the ancient codifier of law in India, free book service would earn even more of merit than the gift of the whole earth. Thus religion was one generator of force leading to free book service in those ancient days⁹.

When we search through the sources for study of education and library system in ancient Kerala, in the Sangam works composed during the first four centuries AD, we come across instances which reveal that collections of recorded information formed an integral part of the education system in

Kerala from very ancient days. The places where collections of manuscripts were maintained were considered as the most important centers of learning. There is an ancient Sanskrit saying 'Kosavan Acharyah' which means that to have a library is to be an educator. This gives us an idea of the prestige, privilege and responsibility of one who possessed a library.

Many stanzas of the Sangam work Purananuru tell us that in those days the common people were very much aware of the importance of education and collection of manuscripts. Stanza 312 of Purananuru, a classic of Sangam period, states that it is the duty of father to educate his son so that he will become virtuous. Education was not considered to be a too formal process limited within any age group or other boundaries. Avvaiair the most revered Sangam saint poetess advises to the young, "learn while young; letter and number, claim esteem, avoid ignorance, covet to be versed in knowledge, learn all sciences and cease not to learn." During those days there were facilities to study in any division of knowledge in an informal manner by any one who had interest.

6 SCHOLAR HOME PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The nature of the ancient libraries of Kerala was intimately related to the educational system of the people. The teaching learning methods followed in ancient Kerala were similar to those practiced in Gurukula System of education throughout India at that time. In ancient literature of South India there are copious references to teachers who would arrange for the teaching and maintenance of boarding and lodging of students. The great scholars

moulded their family situations in such a way that it would blend with teaching learning process which they were to undertake. This resulted in hereditary specialization by families in specific subject fields. There were families in Kerala which specialized in particular subjects like Thaikkatt Illam in Architecture¹⁰. In Ayurveda, Indian system of medicine, there were eight great families, who were the hereditary custodians of the science and practice of medicine and were well known throughout India¹¹. In martial arts, in astrology, and even in literature their families maintaining such tradition. These houses could be compared to the subject departments of the present day universities or specialized research institutions. Access to them was more free than the present days. Admission to these houses was on the basis of merit and devotion. Life and work in them was more strict and tough than we find in our present day situations.

It goes without saying that these scholarly houses possessed great wealth of manuscripts on their topic of interest for the use of teachers, students and the interested users who came searching for them. Each of the generations added their contributions to these collections. These collections of knowledge were undoubtedly neatly classified and catalogued and preserved in the best possible manner with reverence by persons who had familiarity with the thought content of these documents. Even today, Kerala maintains this tradition in some subject fields like martial arts, music, Ayurveda, dance etc and in these ancient houses large collections of valuable manuscripts are available.

This was the library situation of ancient Kerala after manuscripts and other ancient

forms of the book became popular. They could be considered as public libraries for they were open to all. The only difference they had from our modern public libraries was their specialization which gave them an academic library character. But their services were available to all seekers and not limited to students only. Moreover, different collections of various subjects that existed in a region, formed something like a network. In their totality they formed a system almost like our modern public library system.

7 LIBRARY SERVICES BY GOVERNMENT

South India was also familiar with large recorded collections like Assyria or Alexandria. There is a tradition about a big library established by the a king of Madura in the Sangam age two thousand years ago¹².

Apart from scholarly houses, in course of time, temples and Government entered into the field of education and organization and dissemination of knowledge. Temples became centres of all cultural activities and naturally educational institutions formed part of the temple establishments. When the great centres of advanced learning and their libraries flourished in Nalanda, Vallabhi, Vikramasila etc in North, institutions similar to them existed in Kerala. They were commonly referred to as salas or chalas. Usually they were attached to temples. Most important of them were Kandaloor Salai, Parthivasekarapuram Salai, Sreevalabapuram Salai, Tiruvalla Salai, Tirunelli Salai and Kottarakara Salai¹³. Most of them were very much like post-graduate institutions which imparted higher education in special subjects¹⁴. All expenses of

education including food and accommodation were met by temples. Kandaloor Salai was an ancient institution, known as the Nalanda of the South and it was considered as a model by the people of that time. In Kandaloor Salai even a martial art department was there. It gave training to young who opted for military service. This made the Salai prone to enemy attacks from the Cholas. There were all facilities for students to get instruction in any subject and proceed to higher branches of knowledge. Their collections of manuscripts were vast and varied. These centres of learning played important part in propagating knowledge and culture and their libraries contained books in all branches of learning which were being copied from time to time¹⁵.

8 PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF LIBRARIANS

Librarianship was also considered an esteemed profession in ancient Kerala. In the scholarly home libraries, and Salais only highly educated persons could work as librarians. The person who kept the documents had to be knowledgeable about the thought contents of the documents in his care. This tradition of scholar librarians continued upto the medieval period. The copper plate grant of king Trailokyamalla, a Chalukyan ruler, in 1058 AD furnishes details of an educational institution maintained by him. It was equipped with a library with six Saraswathi Bhandarikas (librarians). The inscription further furnishes details regarding distribution of land which tells us the dignified and honoured position the librarians had in temple colleges and other cultural and educational institutions. It states, "35 matter of land under the dam Aratura and Diggavige at

Nagavaer to the expounder of Butadar-sana, 30 matter of land to the expounder of Nyaya, 45 matter of land to the expounder of Prabakara and 30 matter to each Saraswathi Bhandarikas.”

The importance which the ancient people gave to the collection and dissemination of recorded knowledge and the importance which they gave to the library in the educational system contributed to the academic excellence of those times, fruits of which are the ancient classics which have come down to us from those days. Kural, the classified and neatly arranged little works said to be a mustard seed containing the whole universe of knowledge, Purattirattu a book of about 2000 abstracts of all the important works of the South and many other works which in their way of referencing footnotes etc outshine present day research works, had taken birth at that time due to the merit of the system¹⁶. In modern times such works rarely appear. Any qualitative assessment of contributions to knowledge made during the ancient days, in comparison with the present day contributions will reveal that our ancestors were at a higher level than us.

The glory was short-lived, as the Cheras were followed by the Pandyas who destroyed most of the educational institutions and libraries. The Aryans who started migrating into Kerala from 8th century slowly gained upper hand in Kerala society. This resulted in the introduction of caste system and loss of access to educational institutions for some classes. In the next centuries free major kingdoms of Kerala took their shape, as they fought to establish their authorities and extend their boundaries. All that was remaining of the traditional schools, libraries etc got disturbed or even disappeared. Before the rulers could

settle for their socio-political and administrative reforms there came the foreign intervention with the landing of Vasco Da Gama. As a result of all this confusion and the diversion of interest, rulers and people turned away from educational and cultural spheres of life. More and more people became illiterate¹⁷.

9 FREE ACCESS TO ALL

Almost all works on history of public library consider it an institution of recent origin, that of the nineteenth century. So, there are many arguments against considering these ancient libraries mentioned above as public libraries. Mostly, ancient libraries existed as part of academic institutions and so we usually classify them under academic libraries. But as we have seen in the case of Kerala, in ancient days all those libraries were freely open to all and were able to give authentic and efficient information service to the public. In our present day also distance education, which can reach only 75 per cent of the common people who cannot approach formal system, is using public libraries as their study centres. So, libraries have always been related to education. Another argument that ancient libraries were mere storehouses, also cannot be accepted. The fruits of their activity are still available in our culture. The fact that most collections were owned privately, is also not a matter of great concern, for, as we saw in Kerala's scholar homes they were maintained for the people.

Even in these days of mushroom growth of new institutions, it is the principle of access – as Unesco defined, open for free and equal use of all members of society – which differentiates public library

from other libraries. The common view about the ancient libraries is that they were not accessible to the common people in general. They did not have, therefore, any direct link with and impact upon the lives of the people. But, the study of ancient Kerala's libraries shows that the view is not true. In ancient Kerala, education as well as access to houses of recorded knowledge was open to all and there was a high level of literacy¹⁸. That acquiring knowledge was not a privilege confined to any class or caste is proved by the fact that scholars of the Sangam period were drawn from all walks of life and from all tribes of ancient south. According to an estimate, among the 192 Sangam poets, there were 13 kings, 29 brahmins, 57 vellalas, 36 women, 17 hill-men, 13 foresters, 7 vaniyars, 7 artisans, 1 shepherd, 1 potter etc¹⁹. Paranar and Kapilar the great Sangam poets of Kerala, and Avvayar belonged to the Pana caste which is a lower caste in the present society. If we consider the present day situation 90 per cent of the scholars will be found to belong to the upper strata of society. In ancient days it was not like that. Even female education was not neglected. There are the examples of several scholarly women who contributed much to the cultural life of their times. Purananuru mentions about 15 poetesses by name, most of them belonging to castes now considered inferior²⁰. So, in ancient Kerala education was more democratic and all the collection of records maintained with educational institutions were available to the whole society.

10 ORIGINS OF LIBRARY LEGISLATION

It is true that some rules and restrictions were there for use and access to the ancient collections. An inscription of

the Kerala king Karunandakan (857-890 AD) tells us the existence of strict rules inside the Salai's of Kerala²¹. But even in these days we cannot find any library which is open to us without any rules and restrictions. Without some prescribed rules and procedures, no institution can exist. In ancient days these restrictions were more severe, as they were meant to protect these manuscripts and the information contained in them. Books in the modern sense were unknown and all that those libraries possessed were manuscripts copied with infinite care and patient labour and often at considerable expense. Most of them existed in originals only and if they were lost or destroyed the knowledge stored was also lost for ever. So, rules for their preservation and restrictions on their use were strictly enforced, but judiciously. The manuscripts were made available to all the genuine seekers of knowledge. In the ancient customs and rules created and adhered to maximise the utility of the graphic records, we find the primitive stages of library legislation.

Eventhough the terms 'library' or 'public library' were not in existence, the social institutions which gathered, preserved and disseminated knowledge existed in Kerala along with the men who could communicate with the users. They reached their most active period when the scholar homes and Salais existed in Kerala. When we evaluate those ancient libraries, keeping in view the limitations of those times, one conclusion is inevitable that those libraries were efficient and suited the society that created them. Even then, as said by Thompson, it is too strange to have to argue that library systems, their basic rules and principles have by and large been established over a very long period of time.

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