

Impact of culture on Parliamentary Library of Sri Lanka

Cultural Foundation

The Word culture taken in its general sense, represents human civilization. Encyclopaedia Britannica identifies culture as the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour¹. This definition seems to be too wide to be treated in a paper aimed at a limited purpose. I feel therefore that it would be pertinent to narrow the meaning of the word to a particular nation, its language, religion and heritage.

Culture of Sri Lanka in its present context is composite, complex and cosmopolitan. The apparent reason for this perhaps is its being an island located in the India Ocean, along the ancient Silk Route from East to the West, in close proximity to the Indian Subcontinent. Beginning and the thriving of the Sri Lankan culture was illustrated in early Chronicles written in about 5th century A.D.

The most famous of these chronicles is the Mahawansa. According to that the Sinhala community was founded by immigrants from North India in 5th Century B.C. It says that they were a highly cultured people who built and lived in cities with the help of an advanced system of administration. Introduction of Buddhism, which is the religion of the majority even today, in 306 BC added a new aspect to their culture. Giant irrigation works sustaining a elaborated system of agriculture, vast religious and social monuments, and an ancient Aryan language with a very considerable literature in the form of rock and other inscriptions and Ola leaf books are what the country has inhabited from them.

The Tamils who subsequently migrated from South India from time to time, co-existed with the Sinhalese from early times. Their religion Hinduism had its own place also among the Sinhalese Buddhists, despite occasional contrary incidents. Ancient monuments of Hindu culture found in most parts of the country are evidence in this regard. During the 15th and 16th centuries AD., Arabs found their way to the Island on their trade missions and settled down along coastal areas, establishing the Islamic religion. Because of the fact that they came here from the Malabar Coast of South India they used Tamil Language familiar to them as means of communication and gradually it turned out to be their language. Three European nations who came to the East for the main purpose of trade were able to establish themselves in strategic areas along the coastal line of the Island. Along with them, they brought the Christian religion to the country. They also replaced the legal system of the country with a system akin to the system followed in their countries. With the fall of the last native kingdom in 1815 the whole country became a Crown Colony of the British Empire.

The picture of the Island's culture has been painted by Prof. J.B. Dissanayake in one of his books very charmingly- "The Sri Lankan cultural heritage is one of the richest and most colourful in Asia. It is a culture enriched by four ethnic groups - the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Muslims and the Burghers; by four of the main religions - Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam; and by two modern national languages - Sinhala and Tamil, and two classical languages - Sanskrit and Pali (pronounced Pa:li).² These were the main streams of our culture till the emergence of Western power in our society at the commencement of the 16th century.

Authoritarian system of Government that prevailed over several centuries in course of time was replaced by a system of representative government. The concept of representative government and democratic political institutions have existed in Sri Lanka from ancient times. There is evidence in early Chronicles relating to the demarcation of village boundaries,³ highlighting the idea which was closely associated with the concept of "Gam Sabha" or village councils⁴ where people assembled and took decisions on their day to day affairs. Even the early kings in Sri Lanka were elevated to kingship by common consent. The rulers had to be

contended with the powerful nobility. Besides, there were self-governing bodies such as monasteries and trade guilds. Such organizations had extensive immunities. Moreover, there was a set of norms governing the conduct of rulers, which clearly laid down that rule must be for the benefit of the people. The rulers of ancient Anuradhapura period (A.D. 67 - to A.D. 993) did not possess despotic powers. There was close association between Buddhism and the State. The rulers were influenced by Buddhism, which more than a religion, is a philosophy encompassing a way of life based on truly democratic principles. However, later the position of the kingship was strengthened, and by the fifth century A.D. the King was elevated to superhuman levels. Thus the king became an authoritarian ruler. But the people's desire for representation and democratic way of life might have remained always in their conscience as embers under ashes. There were instances of protest waves raised by the people whenever the rulers turned too despotic, as shown in the history. This tendency would have influenced the freedom struggle against Western power in the later stages of the history.

Soon after it became a crown colony, establishment of the Legislative Council in 1833 on the recommendation of the Colebrooke Commission which had been appointed by the crown to examine a system of administration for the new colony, was the first step which indicated the tendency of the colonial Masters to administer the new colony in a more liberal manner. Undergoing several changes from time to time, the legislative council existed till the next radical changes which took place in 1931. The Legislative Council on the recommendation of the Donoughmore Royal Commission was replaced by a State Council. Glimpses of representative government could be seen in these political reforms as the majority of the members to the State Council was elected under universal suffrage from territorial constituencies. Sri Lanka was the first colony (other than the elite settlement colonies) to enjoy this privilege.

In the annals of the constitutional reform introduced by the British the last one was the reform recommended by the Soulbury Commission. The main recommendation of the commission was that dominion status to be granted to the country.

Accordingly, on 4th February 1948, Sri Lanka, Ceylon as it was known then, became an independent country, practicing the Westminster type of Parliamentary system. Under the various stages of constitutional reform adopted by the British, no attention was given to the island's culture. This may be due to the fact that learned persons who drafted these constitutions did not have a proper insight to the cultural heritage of the country.

A new Constitution was adopted in 1972 by which the country became a Republic. This was followed by another Constitution promulgated in 1978 changing the hitherto practiced Westminster System into Executive Presidential System. In both these Constitutions the nation's culture was given a prominent place, inevitably because these were drafted by the indigenous people of the country. In the first instance, the language of the majority, Sinhala was constitutionalised as official language of the country. Prominent place was given to the Tamil language too. Use of these two languages was comprehensively detailed, and the required legal provisions were made.⁵

Buddhism, The religion of the majority was given the foremost place by the State. It was the duty of the state to protect and foster Buddha Sasana, while assigning due protection to other religions as well.⁶ Under chapter vi of the Constitution of 1972 religious and cultural independence of each and every citizen was secured. This situation was further strengthened in the subsequent Constitution promulgated in 1978⁷ titled the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. This Constitution made provisions to make both languages, Sinhala and Tamil as official as well as national languages.⁸ In addition, the English Language which is widespread and popular became the link language. Both National Languages became medium of instruction in education and language of Administration.⁹ Provision has been made that all laws

and subordinate legislation should be enacted and made and published in Sinhala, Tamil, together with a translation thereof in English.

Apart from the constitutional provisions above there are number of Ordinances, Laws and Acts securing social status, religious activities etc. especially of minorities that have been enacted by the legislature throughout its tenure up to now. "Tesawalamai" which protects the rights and inheritance of Tamil community, "Muslim Marriage and Divorce Ordinance" to govern the Muslims in accordance with the Muslim religious law and the "Kandyan Law" which protect certain rights of the Kandyan people are examples. There are many such laws which could not be cited due to lack of space.

Unesco of the United Nations has agreed to fund the preservation of culture and heritage of the country through a project called "Cultural Triangle Project" which involves the excavation, restoration and preservation of number of archaeological sites which are world famous.

Parliamentary Framework

1978 Constitution has created a Presidential system of Government within a Parliamentary framework. In the Republic of Sri Lanka, Sovereignty is in the People and is inalienable. Parliament and the President who exercise the People's sovereignty are the supreme instrument of State power. Parliament exercises the legislative and judicial powers of the People, and the President the executive power. The judicial power, how ever has to be exercised by Parliament through Courts, tribunals and institutions established by the Constitution and by law.

Parliament as the supreme legislative authority in the country, has power to make laws, including repealing or amending any provisions of the Constitution or adding any new provisions thereto. Parliament is consisted of 225 Members elected through Universal Franchise for a period of six years. Parliament while making laws scrutinize government policy and administration. It has full control over public finance and it alone authorises taxes and duties to be levied, and various objects of expenditure and amount to be spent thereon. Proclamation of emergency and Promulgation of emergency regulations by the President under his executive power have to be communicated to Parliament and obtained its approval within a certain period of time.

The Executive President directly elected by the people at presidential election is the Head of the State and also the Head of the Executive. Constitution requires him to appoint the Prime Minister and the Ministers from among the Members of Parliament. He is responsible to Parliament for the due exercise, performance and discharge of his powers, duties and functions. The statement of government policy is made by the president before Parliament. He presides at the ceremonial sittings of Parliament and has the right at any time to attend, address and send messages to Parliament.

Parliament is a separate and independent institution in the context of its nature and administration. The traditional Head of the institution is the Hon. Speaker but as the Office of the Speaker is not continuous (as in the case of certain countries) the Secretary General of Parliament who is appointed by the President plays an important role as the Head of the Parliamentary Staff. Staff of the Secretary-General is appointed by him subject to the approval of the Hon. Speaker. Secretary General and his staff function as a separate service which is regulated by an Act of Parliament called Parliamentary Staffs Act. To deal with the matters pertaining to the Parliamentary Staff there is a Committee of Parliament called the "Staff Advisory Committee". For the convince of administration the staff of Parliament is categorised into several departments. Administration, Serjeant-At-Arms, Hansard, Catering and House Keeping and Co-ordinating Engineer's are the main departments of the Parliament. The library is section which comes under the

department of administration and the librarian's place in the hierarchy is next to the Director, Administration who is the head of the department. Thus the librarian is answerable to the Secretary General through the Director, Administration in all his activities.

Parliament library is an integral part of the Parliamentary Secretariat. Though it comes under the administrative department, it functions as a separate unit due to the professional skill required in the operation of its activities. Librarian is the head of the section on whose hands lies the responsibility of the general administration and maintaining other professional services expected of the section. According to the nature of service rendered by the library the recognizable main units are the reference division, lending division and research division. It is appropriate to mention here that there is no hard and fast divisional margin when it comes to serve the Members, as most of the time the whole staff has to devote their skill in all the spheres that matters.

The mission of the library is to meet all informational requirements of the Members of Parliament which they need in their capacity as MPs. They may need facts and figures in relation to the laws, resolutions, motions etc. before Parliament, which are to be debated in the light of policies and principles applicable to each member. They need information in regard to the problems and grievances faced by the people who elected them. When they travel abroad to represent the country at various Seminars, conferences, delegations etc, enlightening information on these events as well as the countries they visit, is essential. Sometimes, they are called upon to present papers on these visits on appropriate subject matters. Parliament library is the place on which they rely to obtain all these information.

The Parliament library is exclusively for the use of Members of Parliament. They can make use of the library by themselves or they can employ their personal research staff to use the library on their behalf with the prior approval of the Secretary General of Parliament. The Secretary General and his deputies have the privilege of using the library as Members do. The staff of the Parliament can use the library in connection with their routine duties. The staff of the Hon. Speaker's office also have the same privilege. More over, it is a general practice to consult the library whenever matters relating to the practice and procedure of the House are involved. The apparent reason is that the library keeps and maintains tabulated records. Apart from this direct responsibility to the legislature, Parliamentary library has some obligations towards Ministries, Government Departments and Statutory Bodies who often seek assistance of the library for their various information needs. Social obligations are also not forgotten by the library. The academics who pursue genuine research and studies and who are unable to find relevant material elsewhere, may also be allowed in for their limited purposes, for which they have to obtain the approval of the Secretary General. The reason for this type of openness is the fact that the Parliament library is one of the few libraries in the country which holds materials with archival values.

Professional Preparation of Parliamentary Librarians

Library education in Sri Lanka is fairly a new development. People who worked in libraries before sixties had to obtain their professional training abroad. United Kingdom and India were the promising destinations. Soon after the formation of Ceylon Library Association in 1961, it started a course of professional training for the people working in libraries. This three staged course planned to be completed within three years, was able to fill the lacuna in the field of library education, to ascertain extent. Library education found a place in the curriculum of the tertiary level educational institutions for a brief period in 1968-71. During the period of 1961-65 the oldest university of the country, the University of Peradeniya conducted a post graduate diploma course in the field. Significant break through was the commencement of undergraduate course in library and information science at University of Kelaniya in 1973. Under the Faculty of Social Science of the University Department of Library and Information Science was established for this purpose.

This is the only establishment within the university system of Sri Lanka reserved for producing library professionals. General and Special degree courses were offered under this scheme. Meanwhile the ground work for the establishment of Sri Lanka National Library was started in 1967. This was the result of a chain of conferences, seminars and workshops organised under the patronage of Unesco for the region of Asia. An Act was passed in Parliament in 1970 to establish the National Library Services Board which was entrusted with task of forming the national library. In 1998 this Act was replaced by the National Library and Documentation Services Board Act, as the task entrusted had been completed by then. National Library also has started some training courses for the personal engaged in the profession. Reason for prompting the National Library to take this course of action was that vast number of Public and School libraries scattered all over the Island were managed by persons without any basic knowledge and training in the field. They were deprived of the opportunity of following courses conducted by other institutions due to certain difficulties. Hence the National Library offers distant education and postal courses for the benefit of this type of persons.

Kelaniya University expanded its undergraduate course to the post graduate diploma in 1974 and it was further extended up to Masters Degree programme in 1997. Prior to this the Kelaniya University started a three year Higher Certificate Course in library and information science targeting especially the university dropouts who wish to join the profession. Another university, University of Colombo also started a Master course in the same field in 1992 under its Faculty of Graduate Studies. Prior to this it had conducted a diploma course in this field which lasted for several years.

Thus, the library education in Sri Lanka has advanced significantly within a considerable period. Almost all these educational programmes are recognised by the government raising the morale of the people engaged in this field. Sri Lanka Library Association has taken steps to felicitate the professionals with associateship and fellowship in recognition of their services in the field. It has also started computer training and Information Technology courses to up grade the use of modern technology in the field of library services. Higher education opportunities are opened to desired people. National Library and Documentation Centre which was a long awaited dream has become a reality. These are the milestones of the library profession of Sri Lanka.

All these development in the field have direct influence over Parliament Library also. The scheme of recruitment in relation to the staff of parliament Library was amended on line with this new development in 1982.

Preservation of Legislative Heritage

Aspects of preservation of cultural heritage has been already discussed else where in this paper. Legal provisions for the preservation of legislative heritage is closely associated with the concept of preservation of printed media in the country.

Printers and Publishers Ordinance enacted in 1885 and still in force and the National Archives Act of 1973 and its subsequent amendments are important pieces of legislation in this regard. According to the provisions of Printers and Publishers Ordinance, printers and publishers are directed to sent certain number of copies of every publication they produced to the Director of National Archives for the preservation and distribution. One copy is registered in the Archives and others are distributed among listed institutions for the use and preservation. Non compliance with this provision has been made a punishable offence to ensure the strict enforcement of the law. National Archives is the custodian of printed cultural heritage of the Nation. Director of National Archives has been granted wide range of powers to ensure the safe custody of every public and private document with cultural values of national interest. Among other responsibilities of

the Director, National Archives are the safe custody of documents originating from the Presidential Secretariat, official documents from various Ministries and government departments. Necessary rules and regulations have been framed in addition to the provisions of the Act in this regard.

Another relevant legislation is the National Library and Documentation Services Board Act of 1998 in which provisions have been made for the preservation of national cultural heritage of the country through the establishment, development and maintenance of a national collection of library and documentation materials, published in or relating to Sri Lanka. Central Cultural Fund Act and National Museum act also have some bearing on this field.

Parliamentary/Legislative documents which are in printed form are preserved in several places as mentioned above, i.e. National Archives, National Museum, National Library etc. Apart from these, every Parliamentary/Legislative document is preserved in Parliament Library. Thus, Bills, Acts, Order Papers, Order Books, Hansards or Official Report of the Proceedings of the Parliament, Certified minutes of the Proceedings, Standing Orders, Parliamentary Series, Oaths or Affirmation Papers of the Members of Parliament are preserved in the Library for the use of present and future generations. Though there is no legal obligation on the part of Parliament library in this regard, it shoulders the responsibility of preserving these documents as a tradition and long standing practice. More over, it has been the responsibility of the library to collect and preserve these in order to provide necessary information to the legislators. Other important and relevant Parliamentary documents are preserved in the Record Room of Parliament especially established for this purpose.

When considering the impact of culture on the Parliament Library of Sri Lanka, one cannot ignore the library tradition which prevailed over the country for centuries beginning from the early period of its civilization. References can be found in early Chronicles regarding well established libraries¹⁰ most of which were affiliated to the famous educational and cultural institutions in the past. Mr. T.G. Piyadasa who was the Librarian of the University of Kelaniya and one of the founders of library education in the country, in his publication on Libraries of Sri Lanka gives a detailed description of the literary tradition and the ancient libraries in Sri Lanka.¹¹ However, the present concept of library is rather different from that of the past and by and large closely associated with Western culture/philosophy. This position applies to the library, established in 1927 to serve the Members of the Legislative Council which continued to be the Library of Parliament. It was set up to serve the particular class of people served as Members of the Legislative Council who had their education in English medium and sometimes in Western countries. Inevitably, as the case was, the resources collected in the library and the services rendered were influenced by the Western traditions. The ideas concerning national culture and heritage started playing a visible role in politics only after 1956. The culmination of this was the Constitution adopted in 1972 by which the languages and religions of the majority peoples of the country found the due prominent place. After this remarkable turning point, necessary changes and adjustments required for the realisation of ideals behind the change had not taken place. The case was the same with regard to the Parliament Library. In relation to the impact of culture on Parliament Library the main problem faced is its organization. As the legislative documents are found in all three languages used in the country, i.e. Sinhala, Tamil and English, three separate sections have to be maintained in the library for an effective service for the Members of each cultural background. Qualified and competent persons in each of these languages, or in all three languages, are required for the library staff if an effective service is to be rendered to the Members. Lack of sufficient reference and informational materials in Sinhala, and Tamil, is another drawback. This fact has surfaced very clearly as the present legislature is composed of quite a number of MPs who had their education solely in Sinhala or Tamil medium. A vast number of volumes of Ordinances and Acts passed prior to the enactment of the language provisions of the Constitution of 1972 are still in the English language. Action has not been taken yet to translate them fully into the national languages. There are other official documents which are of

interest to legislators, in the same category. Major part of the library resources are consisted of these documents raising acute difficulties with regard to the use of them by certain class of Members.

Development plans of the library is not hampered by the effect of culture as the culture of Sri Lanka is hospitable to new trends with its long standing experiences. Computer technology was introduced in the library few years ago. Now it is being used in numerous library functions to expedite and regularize the services rendered by the library. Application of computer technology for the preservation of year old paper documents is under consideration. It is awaited that the technological advancement in the field would assist to overcome many difficulties faced by the library now.

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