

Siri Vajirarama Library and its collection

Just as the Siri Vajiraramaya temple in Bambalapitiya is known to all in Sri Lanka and in many countries overseas, its library too will be better known and its vast and valuable collection made accessible to scholars.

The Vajiraramaya temple was founded and inaugurated as a place of worship and residence for monks in 1901, by the Most Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thera. On September 6, 2009, the government of Sri Lanka declared it a Sacred Site.

Imperative it is to record a few facts about this venerable monk, though his life story is well known. He was born in Pelene, a village in Weligama in the District of Matara, on July 28, 1878, and named Aron Pandita Gunawardene. His father was Muhandiram Don Andiris Tudawe Pandita Gunawardena, an Oriental scholar of repute. At the age of 15, on July 20 1890, he got ordained under the tutelage of Weragampitiya Sri Revata Maha Thero and in 1897 he was admitted to Vidyodaya Pirivena. He was residing at Siri Suvusuddharamaya in Wellawatte. Meanwhile, the Buddhists in Bambalapitiya formed the Dhamma Samagama and built a hall for *bana* preaching in the site of the present Vajiraramaya temple. Persuaded by the Dhamma Samagama to reside in a small *avasa* built for the purpose, Ven Pelene Vajirañāṇa Thera acceded to the request.

He was elevated to the position of Head of the Amarapura Siri Dharmarakshitha Nikaya on August 05, 1918, and had a host of pupils who would shine forth as erudite, disciplined, dhammaduta monks who introduced a new and more popular style of *bana* preaching and travelled across the oceans spreading the word of the Buddha. Mentioned here are just a few of them: Venerable Narada Maha Thera, Ven. Piyadassi Nayaka Thera, Ven. Madihe Pannasiha Mahanayaka Thera and Ven. Ampitiye Sri Rahula Maha Thera. Ven. Ñāṇavīra and Ven. Ñāṇamoli were foreign students among others at Siri Vajiraramaya.

As made clear, Ven Pelene Vajirañāṇa Maha Thera was a scholar and collector of books. It is recorded that very early in life he developed an insatiable desire to read and thus his love of books. He inherited his father's library and later was gifted books on Buddhism and related subjects by relatives and well-wishers. Books printed by the Pali Text Society were gifted by the colonial government. His collection soon was around 2000 and that became the core of the present vastly expanded collection of tomes in the present library.

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Old Library Building Picture

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New Library Building Picture

The Library

The Oriental Library of Vajiraramaya temple, with Head Monk Ven Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Maha Thera, was formerly declared open on July 15, 1924, by Colonial Secretary Hon. Cecil Clement. Mr and Mrs G J Silva were chief benefactors. By then the 100 volumes of the Head

Monk had increased vastly. To quote a then published weekly newspaper, *The Searchlight*, Saturday July 19, 1924: “The collection of 2000 odd books of rare value and importance, the gift of the learned High Priest, ought to, as Mayor Reid remarked, ‘be a source of enlightenment and good to the citizens of Colombo’. The generosity of Mr. G J Silva in providing an excellent building and furniture to enable those books to be housed for public inspection and reference is an augury for the future of Buddhist learning in Ceylon.”

In the early and mid-20th century, the chief contributors to the collection in the library were mainly Ven. Narada Maha Thera and Ven Piyadassi Nayaka Thera, both distinguished scholars, linguists, expounders of the Buddha Dhamma and active in Dhammaduta missions – introducing and teaching the Dhamma to very many overseas countries: United Kingdom, USA, Japan, India, Burma, Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, China, Vietnam, Laos, Java, Bali, Australia, France, Africa, Greece, Denmark, Italy, Poland, Belgium, and Germany. They were prolific writers on Buddhism mainly, and philosophy too. Thus, their published books, comprising sizeable collections, well preserved, greatly enhance the present library collection. The collections of Ven. Narada Maha Thera and Ven. Piyadassi Nayaka Thera comprise a wide range of books.

Insert Photograph of Ven Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Maha Thera

Library Collection

Epithets that can justifiably be used to describe the collection in the Siri Vajirarama library are vast, mixed, scholarly, and valuable; many being rare, wide and varied subject-wise, and distinctive

The descriptive word **vast** is used because the library now holds approximately 10,000 volumes, some very rare and ancient. Thus, in monetary terms and antiquity-wise, they are very valuable. Examples being the collection of Ven Pelene Vajirañāṇa Mahanayaka Thera’s father’s books bequeathed to him and a part of the core collection around which the vast library collection grew. Ancient tomes from the British Pali Texts Society (PTS) publications, the *Unpanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Dhammapada* and the monumental *Tripitaka* (printed in Siamese character) gifted by his Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Siam) are some of the library’s proudest possessions.

The next descriptive word used is **mixed**. Yes, the collection is widely varied both in subjects treated, in format, language, and purpose intended for. Buddhism is the main subject; but along with it is Buddhist philosophy and pure philosophy. Tomes on Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan and Zen Sect Buddhism are also included. Other religions are included. Literature is another subject, both Sinhala and a few other languages. History, too, is an inclusive subject, whether the history is of Buddhism, its inception and spread, or general history. Pleasantly surprising is it to note that within the collection are books on subjects as diverse as medicine, math, physics, economics, social science, education, comparative religions, yoga, deities, social practices, festivals and customs.

Another very significant fact of the library, being mixed in its collection, is that with published books and journals (*Bosath, Bauddha Lamaya, Viduru Pahaṇa*), a collection of 210 ola manuscripts enhances the richness and worth of it. The ola manuscripts are of Buddhism and contain suttas and such like. Ayurveda medicine is another subject covered by the ola scrolls or flat ola books with wood covers; so also, grammar and linguistics of Sinhala mostly. The pièce de résistance of the ola manuscript is the one that contains all 550 Jataka stories.

The collection is **scholarly** since most of its collection is not to be read for information or recreation but in research, when referencing facts. The library is targeted to be a research library and with electronic access being made available, visits to the library will not be necessary, online searching (OPAC – Online Public Access Catalogue) using Koha would be facilitated.

The collection is undoubtedly **valuable**. Not only are rare books within it but many out of print books may be possessed by only this library. Additionally, the collection of publications by Ven. Narada Maha Thera and Ven. Piyadassi Nayaka Thera are available.

Insert Photos of some Books
Written By Ven. Narada

Insert Photos of some
Books written by Ven.
Piyadassi

The books are **varied** in format and purpose of use too. Many dictionaries, encyclopedias and grammar tomes are included, from ancient ones including Sanskrit and Pali to more modern bilingual dictionaries - English, Sinhala, Tamil, German, Pali. There surprisingly is a sprinkling of fiction too, both in Sinhala and English. Massive tomes, leather bound volumes, paperbacks and soft covered books are shelved separately; so also journals and pamphlets. Various Collections include Collection of Most Venerable Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Maha Nayaka Thera, Collection of Ven. Narada Maha Thera, Collection of Ven Piyadassi Nayaka Thera and Collection of Ven. Ñāṇamoli Maha Thera.

The last epithet used to describe the collection that needs justification is **distinctive**. The Vajirarama library collection is unique as it is a collection following the distinguished and ancient *vihara pothgul* – temple collections. *Pothgul* literally means “place to store books.” We know the Tripitika, Teachings/Suttas of the Buddha, or Pali Canon were set down in writing in Aluvihara, Matale, on ola scrolls and buried within the three large rocks of the temple. This was in the 1st century BCE, during the reign of King Walagamba. The temple traces its origin to the 3rd century BCE - built by King Devanampiyatissa who was the ruler when Arahat Mahinda came as an emissary bringing the teachings of the Buddha to Lanka. Since then, temples sprang up all over the island, concentrated during the Golden Age in the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Once writing was a practiced skill, these ancient temples had *pothgul* – spaces or rooms containing ola manuscripts or writings on stone walls.

Insert Photo of an Ola leaf

The Siri Vajirarama Library has been ‘re-organized’ and will gain in fame and usage too. Praise has been showered on it previously, through the ages. Mention is made here of just a couple of famed persons who spoke or wrote complimentarily on it: Most Ven Balangoda Maitriye Maha Thera, Kalukondayave Pragnāsekara Maha Thera, W A Silva and Prof G P Malalasekera.

Towards Digitization

Siri Vajirarama Library is in a transitional stage from being a traditional to a digital library. There is today a shift of libraries from offering information using electronic and print media towards providing access to full texts of documents digitally. Not only recent publications, but also many historical library holdings are being digitized. These electronic collections allow users from anywhere, at any time, to access material without doing any harm to fragile documents.

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