

## **Tsunami Affected Libraries in Sri Lanka: Rebuilding Process and Challenges**

**Open seminar on the documentary heritage damaged by the Indian  
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## **Background**

Sri Lanka, a tropical island situated at the southern tip of India, has been well known throughout history for its natural beauty, earning the praises of ancient travellers as ‘Pearl of the Indian Ocean’ and ‘Serendib’, a land akin to heaven. Similar to many other countries in the Asian region, Sri Lanka too is well known for its early civilisation and vast developments in its economic and cultural fields. The country’s population of approximately twenty million comprises of three major ethnic groups, Sinhalese (70%), Tamils (20%) and Muslims (8%) while the balance 2% is made up of other communities.

## **The Catastrophe**

The earthquake which occurred near the island of Sumatra on 26 December 2004 created a tsunami tidal wave that caused colossal destruction to a number of countries in Asia, namely, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Maldives and Bangladesh. The waves then travelled as far as East Africa affecting Somalia, Tanzania and Kenya. According to available records this was the first time a significant tsunami occurred in the South East Asian region though it is a common occurrence in East Asia and the Pacific region.

## **Damage Caused**

### **General**

The tsunami severely affected 60% of the coastal area of Sri Lanka with a death toll exceeding 38,000. It also destroyed or damaged 80,000 houses, 182 schools, four universities, three advanced technical training institutes and ten vocational training institutes. The damage to roads, railways, telecommunication facilities, electricity supply, water resources, tourism and fishing industry is quite significant. In addition the damage to sand dunes, lagoons and coastal vegetation has resulted in significant environmental destruction.

The public sector not only suffered loss to human lives and infrastructure facilities but also had to contend with the loss of many valuable and vital records and documents. These included the entire electoral registers of the densely populated Southern Province and 600,000 deeds from the Surveyor General’s Department. Private citizens lost valuable documents, e.g. legal documents pertaining to land and building, identification papers, bank documents and education, birth, marriage and death certificates. The loss of assets and damage to infrastructure facilities in Sri Lanka is estimated at US\$1,000 million or 5 percent of GDP while the loss of employment is estimated at 275,000.

## **Damage to the Library Sector**

### **School libraries**

Of the 9,790 schools in the country 182 schools were affected by the tsunami. School libraries were either destroyed or severely damaged. In addition, 282 schools also suffered damage after being used as refugee camps for victims of the disaster. It is estimated that approximately 1.2 million volumes of books and other reading material in school libraries were lost due to this catastrophe. It is not possible to determine the exact quantum of library books and other material lost as accession registers and library card catalogues have also been destroyed. Destroyed library material include books, periodicals, newspapers, audio-visual material and in some schools computers, diskettes etc. Some of the affected school libraries were those assisted by the recently concluded school library development and modernisation project carried out by the government in collaboration with a multi-national aid agency.

### **Public libraries**

Of the 950 public libraries, 62 have been affected with 28 libraries being completely destroyed. Consequent to the establishment of the first public library in 1825, Sri Lanka has over the years developed a reasonably good public library network. The public library service in Sri Lanka is run by three types of local authorities, namely, municipal councils (for urban areas), urban councils (for semi-urban areas) and pradeshiya sabhas (for rural areas). Early introduction of adult universal franchise (1931), establishment of a parliament democracy, people's participation in administration at every level, high literacy rate (95%), free and compulsory education and the establishment of the National Library and Documentation Services Board (NLDSB) (1970) have contributed towards the development of the public library service in the country.

### **Community libraries**

In Sri Lanka voluntary organisations such as youth clubs, readers' circles and village development societies have their own community libraries. Though all of them are not professionally organised and managed, these libraries provide a valuable service to the community in terms of encouraging the reading habit among the people they serve. The tsunami destroyed about forty such libraries.

### **Temple libraries**

A number of Buddhist temples situated in close proximity to the coast were also damaged along with valuable library collections consisting of old palm leaf manuscripts and other

rare materials including material on the indigenous medicine system referred to as Ayurvedha.

### **Other libraries**

In addition to the categories of libraries mentioned above, a few research libraries attached to the National Aquatic Research Agency, Sri Lanka Harbour Authority, Sri Lanka Navy and National Maritime Museum were also destroyed by the tsunami waves. A large number of private libraries have also been washed away.

### **Nature of the Damage**

According to eyewitness accounts two powerful waves hit the shore within the space of a few minutes. The velocity was such that the waves either levelled the buildings to the ground or severely damaged them. The buildings that were able to withstand the power of the first wave were destroyed by the second wave, which was more powerful than the initial one.

Another feature of the tsunami was the inward and outward waves created by it. The gush of water that came from the ocean rolled back to the sea at such a force creating an inward wave from the land to the ocean. This retreating water not only caused damage to already weakened structures but also took away books and other items to the ocean. The fishermen who were returning from the sea that day reported seeing massive amounts of floating bodies, furniture and other debris in the sea.

### **Rebuilding and Rehabilitation**

The Sri Lanka Disaster Management Committee for Library, Information Services and Archives (SL DMC for LISA) was formed to face the challenges posed by this unprecedented emergency. The National Library and Documentation Services Board, National Library, National Archives, Sri Lanka Library Association, National Science Foundation, major library training institutes and the relevant ministries are members of the committee.

### **Task forces**

A number of task forces have been set up to assist the DMC in the areas of *immediate relief, library furniture and building planning, ICT planning, education and training, conservation, selection of library material, school library development, public library development, general library sector and twinning*. Each task force consist of 8-12 members from library, IT, government and other relevant fields to advise and plan the assigned work. Through these task forces it has been able to ensure a wider participation of librarians and experts from relevant fields.

## **Community involvement**

The National Library is in constant touch with the grass root level in planning and reconstruction of libraries and has invited all library committees, readers' circles and other groups attached to libraries to be involved in this process. Where library committees are non-operational, librarians and library authorities are instructed to establish such committees on a priority basis. Some libraries have reported that formation of new library committees was necessitated as some members of the previous committees had perished in the tsunami. The National Library and the DMC conducted a number of seminars with relevant officials, librarians and others to plan remedial measures.

## **Status of the general rehabilitation**

The government and non-government organisations (NGOs) responded to the disaster in three stages, viz. immediately after the tragedy, during the transitional period and the permanent rehabilitation. Main activities implemented during the initial stage immediately following the tragedy was the provision of temporary shelters, food, medicine and health facilities, psychosocial assistance and assessing the extent of damage. Provision of transitional houses, repairs to damaged infrastructure facilities - e.g. roads, railways, electricity and water were undertaken during the transitional period. During the third stage, which deals with permanent rehabilitation, it is planned to build permanent houses, schools, hospitals and roads and also restore the ruined livelihood of the affected people. Today almost after one year of the destruction Sri Lanka is in the second and third stages.

## **Challenges of Rebuilding**

### **Scarcity of land**

This is one of the major problems faced by both the government and local authorities under the rebuilding programme. A large extent of new land is required to build houses, schools, libraries, hospitals and other necessary infrastructure facilities. For reasons of safety the government has introduced a regulation prohibiting the construction of new buildings within 100 meters from the coast and this has aggravated the situation. The problem is acute in the heavily populated western and southern provinces as most of the land area outside the buffer zone has already been built up or is under commercial crops. The displaced communities too are reluctant to move far away from their original places due to obvious reasons. This situation is aggravated by the unrealistically high prices demanded by landowners outside the buffer zone and this has frustrated not only the government but the foreign donors as well.

### **Trauma of librarians**

The loss of libraries, library collections, known library users and sometime even their own relatives and friends created a deep psychological impact in the minds of librarians serving in affected libraries. Some had to find a temporary location and commence services from scratch, while others were required to get the damaged building repaired and restore damaged collections and furniture and equipment. Since library authorities such as schools and local councils were reeling with numerous problems also caused by the tsunami, librarians faced an extremely gruelling time when restoring services. Even the rescued library material caused health hazards to both users and librarians and became an additional burden.

### **Conservation of damaged library material**

The other special feature of the tsunami is the difficulty of conservation and preservation of damaged library materials. Due to the disruption of the seabed the water was mixed with mud, sand and probably even minerals along with other substances. Tests carried out at the conservation laboratory of the National Archives of Sri Lanka reveal that these papers consist of more acidic components than normal seawater affected papers. Therefore, it is necessary to study this uncharted area further and find special treatment for tsunami-affected material.

### **Working with the government bureaucracy**

One of the challenges encountered in the rehabilitation exercise is working and interacting with the government bureaucracy. Immediately following the disaster government officials in affected districts had to work very hard and most of them won the appreciation of the public and the international community. But when this unprecedented rebuilding effort requires decisive action and remedial measures these same officials act as a bottleneck by trying to follow government rules and regulations to the letter. To overcome this situation the government formed a special authority named Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN) to co-ordinate reconstruction activities and also to act as the facilitator in the rebuilding effort. Yet officials at the grass-root level have a substantial role to play.

### **Working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**

Large sums of assistance have been received by non-governmental organisations to undertake relief and rehabilitation work. The general distrust towards helping governments has led to the proliferation of NGOs in the aftermath of the tragedy. Frequently government machinery has been considered inefficient, bureaucratic, corrupt and non-people friendly. Although these are not necessarily true in the Sri Lankan context, the general opinion prevails. Some NGOs have used this opportunity to collect funds and use them for their own purposes. Since there are no rules and regulations to

check the activities of the NGOs such unscrupulous organisations continue to thrive on the misery of the people.

### **Interaction with politicians**

Politicians at national and regional levels play an important role in rehabilitation and reconstruction activities. The politicians at national level, especially if they are in the government party, have a substantial say in the decision making process. At times politicians of parties in the opposition complain of step-motherly treatment for their areas.

### **Keeping libraries on the agenda**

In the post-tsunami era the primary concentration of the government, international organisations, NGOs and others has been on the immediate needs of the people and in reconstruction of infrastructure. Hence, as both the government and NGOs have constantly reminded us, library development and reconstruction cannot be considered a priority. Within this environment it is a continuous struggle for the National Library and the DMC to include library reconstruction in the larger picture.

### **Internal conflict**

Presently the biggest obstacle in implementing the reconstruction phase is the two-decade-old internal conflict in Sri Lanka. While it has divided the country into two segments hampering the implementation of a single national plan, political problems also hamper the otherwise would be smooth flow of foreign assistance at this hour of need.

### **Reconstruction**

#### **Rebuilding of school libraries**

For obvious reasons reconstruction of damaged schools has been given top priority and this endeavour has been undertaken by various national and international organisations with 163 memorandums of understanding already been signed between the government and donor agencies. According to the blue print developed by the Ministry of Education, the minimum cost per school is approximately Rs40 million (US\$400,000) and includes science laboratories, a multi-media unit, a fully fledged computer learning centre, a large library and a gymnasium. All new schools get either a separate school library building or part of the new building will be designated as the library.

#### **Rebuilding of public libraries**

As public libraries come under the local authorities there is no central plan or mechanism similar to that of the school library sector to rebuild damaged public libraries. On the other hand when the local authorities faced with a number of larger issues such as providing houses for the destitute, rebuilding libraries is not a priority in the agenda. Due to this special situation, the NLDSB is currently concentrating on helping the public library sector. A number of foreign NGOs have extended their support for rebuilding and

re-equipping some of these libraries. The NLDSB has provided books as well as library furniture for some of them and is also in the process of providing this assistance to the rest as well.

### **Library building plans**

The National Library and the Disaster Management Committee are eager to develop new library building designs that are economical, attractive and functional. Some librarians are canvassing for tsunami resistant library buildings - e.g. buildings on pillars. Already designs of buildings in coastal areas have begun changing taking into consideration the effects of the tsunami. The UNESCO has agreed to provide the services of an architect specialised in designing library buildings to assist us in this endeavour.

### **Relief activities Implemented**

#### **Provision of books and other reading material**

The affected libraries are in urgent need of books and other library material. Part of this demand was met by various donors such as school children, publishers, booksellers, well-wishers and relief agencies. The NLDSB too supplied a large collection of books and Sri Lankans living abroad and other concerned parties from the overseas also sent a consignment of used books for distribution.

#### **Provision of book boxes**

The National Library provides reading material in a lockable box and with instructions on how to operate a basic lending service to the relief camps and transitional housing schemes. This service is considered a temporary measure to provide reading material for inhabitants of refugee camps and transitional housing schemes. Persons to function as librarians are selected from among the inhabitants of such places.

#### **Supply of furniture and equipment**

As pointed out earlier in this paper, vast amounts of library furniture were lost due to the tsunami and these items are in great demand from all types of libraries. Apart from losing furniture due to the collapse of library buildings, being washed away by the waves and theft and vandalism after the incident, instances of refugees using school furniture as firewood has also come to light. During the past seven months the National Library managed to provide basic library furniture such as reading tables, chairs, book cupboards and bookracks to a number of libraries, helping these institutions to restart basic services. Rs7 million (equivalent to US\$70,000) worth of library furniture has already been ordered for the second phase of distribution.

#### **Seminars, workshops and training courses**



The NLDSB has already conducted a number of seminars, workshops, meetings and training courses for librarians, school principals and officials of local authorities. The purpose of this exercise is to provide necessary psychological help as well as impart the necessary know how for them to face this unforeseen situation. The workshops and seminars on conservation and preservation of library material helped librarians in the effort to restore the affected library material.

### **Twinning**

With a view to ensuring the long-term sustainability it is intended to twin each affected library with two other libraries. The ideal would be to twin an affected library with one overseas library and one local library. We hope that this new triangular model of twinning will lead to close co-operation of libraries at global level. The two supporting libraries are required to provide professional, material, monitoring and general assistance in any possible form within their existing capability.

### **Publication programme**

A number of programmes have been initiated with the aim of publishing books suitable for tsunami-affected children. Recently, the National Library launched a programme titled Tsunami Children's Book Project to publish fifteen high quality children's books (seven in Sinhala, five in Tamil and three in English) and authors have been requested to submit suitable manuscripts for consideration for assistance. The objective of this project is to produce high quality children's books on themes such as courage, determination and overcoming life's obstacles. Already a large number of manuscripts have been received from the authors.

### **Conclusion**

In general it can be stated that Sri Lanka is still struggling to cope with the tsunami disaster. The main attention in the re-building efforts has been focused on providing houses; restoring the livelihood of affected people and re-construction of schools, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure facilities. As an integral part of the school system, school libraries have received priority treatment, while other library sectors too have received substantial assistance from the NLDSB and other sources. For a successful conclusion of the project the overall development goals of the government including building new cities, new villages and supporting structures should be completed. This will to a large extent depend on the smooth flow of the agreed international aid, the ability to use this aid meaningfully and a stable and conducive environment prevailing in the country.