

Noolaham Foundation
Project Report



Project Title	Sri Lankan Tamil Who is Who Pilot Project
Project Number	NF/PG/2015/0003
Project Location	Jaffna
Sector	Reference Resources
Implementing agency and contribution	Noolaham Foundation (NF)
Grant Agency and Contribution	Vidivu Australia Limited and Noolaham Foundation
Total Budget and Expenditure	Total budget LKR 354,000.00 Total Grant received from Vidivu LKR 221,000
Project Period	2013-2014
Responsible Stakeholder/s	Vidivu Australia Limited, Seran Sivananthamoorthy, Kopinath Thillainathan, Volunteers of NF

Summary

The **Sri Lankan Tamil Who is Who Pilot Project** was carried out by Noolaham to initiate a biographical reference resource about personalities from the Sri Lankan Tamil communities. Even though a small number of biographical dictionaries and family histories exist, there are no comprehensive biographical reference resources about Sri Lankan Tamils. By starting this initiative Noolaham Foundation expects to fill that information gap.

Entries about 612 personalities were created during the project period. Even though the initial target number of entries was not met, Noolaham Foundation successfully tested various strategies to collect information about people and verifying such information. A Mediawiki platform was created to continue updating the 'who is who' entries. As a pilot initiative, this project has paved way to create a vast collection of biographical reference resources.

Introduction and Background

Who is Who databases are important sources of biographical information. In depth who is who collections are used not only to study about particular individuals but also to research the history, culture and social aspects of their communities.

The first biographic works from the Islamic world appeared in the 9th century. After the printing press was introduced, the western world began to produce biographical reference works as well. And over the years, numerous who is who sources were compiled and updated. Now most of the developed countries have unbelievably in-depth biographical reference works.

Unfortunately, there are no such comprehensive biographical publications or databases on Sri Lankan Tamil speaking communities. Only a few short biographical dictionaries and a few family histories have been published over the years. Publications about villages, memorial publications, souvenirs, publications about institutions and periodicals carry vast amount of data about various prominent individuals. But they are not compiled into comprehensive reference sources.

Noolaham Foundation is a non-profit, charitable organization (GA 2390) founded to provide enhanced access to information sources and foster knowledge-based development in Sri Lanka. It maintains an online digital library, facilitates information preservation programs, provides financial assistance and technical guidance for digitization initiatives, and actively participates in awareness-raising campaigns. It also co-ordinates a range of fund-raising activities and collaborates with other organizations and individuals.

The Noolaham Foundation has documented over 12,000 publications (2013) related to Sri Lankan Tamil communities since 2005. These documents carry lots of biographical data and if that data is extracted and compiled as a reference source, it will become a useful reference source.

Objectives and Achievements/Results

The aim of this project is to create index of names and the details of publications which carry information about them. The library assistants went through each publication documented by Noolaham and find out whether they carry any information about any individuals. For each individual a separate page was created with a short introduction. And then the reference sources were listed. Each page was categorized as well so that the individuals can be identified via browsing as well.

Over 2,000 references were identified and 612 individuals were indexed. The who is who categories included School principals, Journalists, Researchers, Writers, Poets, Song writers, Social Workers, Siththars, Drama Artists, Novelists, Pandits, Publishers, Pulavars, Kings, Translators and Doctors.

Other benefits of this project include:

- First step of in depth biographical reference sources: This project is the first phase of creating an in depth who is who reference collection by the Noolaham Foundation. From 2015 onwards more resources will be allocated towards this initiative by Noolaham Foundation to collect and document further.
- Free access content: All the content created by his project is made available under Creative Commons - Share Alike license so that anyone can use the content provided they use the same license. (Please visit the following URL for more details: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)
- Enhanced usage of Noolaham Collections: The indexed resources of Noolaham Digital Library are more visible and expected to be used more. Digital opportunities i.e. using new technologies can be utilized efficiently towards research activities.

Challenges and lessons learned

- Identifying suitable library assistants was not easy as trained staff with library science background always look for government jobs because of job security. As private libraries are rare in Sri Lanka, library professionals are not used to the idea of working for a private library.
- The initial plan was that about 2,700 separate entries will be made. But the library assistants could not achieve their target entries. The number of entries on the same persons was quite more than what was expected, and thus resulted in very low amount of records.
- Vidivu has agreed to donate approximately AUD 2700 towards this project. Only the first installment of AUD 1700 was received. As the project was delayed and the number of entries was quite low, we could not request the reminder of the agreed donation.
- Even though thousands of persons have contributed significantly towards the Tamil speaking communities of Sri Lanka, bibliographic records of them were quite inadequate. Thus indexing the holdings of the Noolaham Digital Library alone was insufficient to build an in depth who is who data base
- Initially we planned to conclude the project within the year 2013 but it ran into 2014 as well because of staff issues.
- Creating a separate CMS for organizations was challenging as there were no practical open source solutions catering to the requirements of this project.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- Noolaham Foundation should develop a long term strategy to recruit and train library science professionals in order to maintain a highly efficient knowledge and information services service.
- The second phase of the Who is Who work should be planned considering the realistic and achievable goals.
- The bottom up approach of indexing the collection has not worked very well. Thus a top down approach should be followed as well. i.e. collecting details from villages, institutions etc. and documenting all individuals related to that place or institution. A hybrid approach is expected to be efficient to build up a vast database.
- Noolaham Foundation may consider collecting details about places and organizations simultaneously while collecting details about people. Thus a comprehensive reference collection will be built and overall project costs will be quite low as all data collection at a particular place will be done at once.
- Reference resource about 1. People, 2. Places and 3. Organizations should be accumulated in one content management system so that the information can be efficiently used. The CMS should be linked to the other databases of the Foundation and a single search interface should be developed to further enhance the usability of Noolaham Foundation's collections.