

Burning of the Jaffna Public Library (1981)

The destruction by fire of the Jaffna Public Library on the night of 31 May–1 June 1981, during the presence of government ministers and uniformed police in the city, destroying approximately 97,000 volumes including irreplaceable Tamil ola-leaf manuscripts.

The Jaffna Public Library was, before its destruction, one of the largest libraries in Asia and the single largest repository of Tamil-language manuscripts in Sri Lanka. The fire on the night of 31 May–1 June 1981 took place during a District Development Council election period in which two cabinet ministers were present in Jaffna town and uniformed police and Special Task Force units were deployed in strength. The Sansoni Commission and successive Sri Lankan governmental inquiries produced no prosecutions. The library has since been physically rebuilt; the materials destroyed — including primary ola-leaf legal manuscripts referenced by the Recorded Legal Memory Desk — cannot be replaced. International scholarship treats the event as the canonical late-twentieth-century example of state-adjacent libricide alongside the National and University Library of Bosnia (Sarajevo, 1992) and the Mosul University Library (2015).

§1 What was lost

Approximately 97,000 volumes were destroyed. The collection had been built up over nearly half a century from 1934, with significant expansion under chief librarian Rev. Fr. H.S. David from 1959 and again under K.M. Chellappah. Among the irreplaceable holdings were palm-leaf (ola-leaf) manuscripts in Tamil and Sanskrit, the only known copy of the **Yalpana Vaipava Malai** (a 1736 history of the Jaffna kingdom compiled by Mayil Vaakanaar, of which the Brito English translation survives but the Tamil original primary copy held by the library does not), bound runs of nineteenth-century Tamil newspapers, scholarly journals, and rare colonial-period administrative records.

The official record of the library itself, maintained today at jaffna.dlp.gov.lk under the Sri Lankan Department of Library and Documentation Services, acknowledges the destruction and confirms the rebuild. It does not name perpetrators and does not contradict the international fact-finding record.

§2 Independent fact-finding

Virginia A. Leary's 1983 mission report for the International Commission of Jurists, **Ethnic Conflict and Violence in Sri Lanka**, documented the burning of the library within the wider pattern of state-tolerated communal violence in May–June 1981. Paul Sieghart's 1984 follow-up ICJ mission, **A Mounting Tragedy of Errors**, returned to the question of accountability and recorded that no prosecutions had been initiated despite the public record.

Amnesty International's 1982 mission report covering the same period documented arrests, deaths in custody and the burning. S.J. Tambiah's **Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy** (Chicago, 1986) and A. Jeyaratnam Wilson's **The Break-up of Sri Lanka** (Hurst, 1988) treat the event as a turning point in the political consciousness of the Tamil population of Sri Lanka.

§3 Comparative frame — libricide as a recognised category

Rebecca Knuth's **Libricide** (Praeger, 2003) names Jaffna as one of four twentieth-century instances of regime-sponsored library destruction, alongside the Nazi book-burnings, the Cultural Revolution destruction in Tibet, and the destruction of the Sarajevo National and University Library. Cheran Rudhramoorthy's 2016 essay 'Poetry after Libricide and Genocide' in **Indi@logs** situates the event within Tamil literary memory. Fernando Báez's **A Universal History of the Destruction of Books** (Seven Stories, 2008) and Richard Ovenden's **Burning*

the Books* (Harvard / John Murray, 2020) both treat Jaffna 1981 as a canonical reference point.

András J. Riedlmayer's work on the destruction of the Sarajevo library (1994, 2007) and Enes Kujundži's first-hand account in **The Library Quarterly** (1996) provide the closest documented parallel. Ann Marie Thake's 2018 SSRN paper analyses the question of intentional destruction of cultural heritage as a possible genocidal act and crime against humanity under existing international law, including the UNESCO Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage adopted by the UNESCO General Conference on 17 October 2003 — a Declaration that post-dates Jaffna 1981 and does not have retroactive effect, but which articulates the normative principle the destroyers violated.

§4 Reconstruction and what cannot be reconstructed

The physical library was rebuilt and reopened. Anadolu Agency's wire report 'Burnt, Rebuilt: Jaffna Library Reminds of Sri Lanka Conflict' and the BBC World Service feature 'The Burning of the Jaffna Public Library' both document the reconstruction. Kalpana Chandrasekar's 2013 **Library Philosophy and Practice** article surveys the broader Jaffna District library system today.

The reconstruction is real. The replacement of destroyed primary manuscripts is not. The British Library Endangered Archives Programme has since funded EAP1260 (Digitisation and Cataloguing of Sri Lankan Tamil Palm-Leaf Manuscripts, led by Thillainathan Kopinath for the Noolaham Foundation), EAP1450 (Caste, Land and Labour in Jaffna, project-managed by Stephen Kanagalingam) and EAP1551 (Sri Lankan Tamil Palm-Leaf Manuscript Library) — partial recoveries of the ola-leaf manuscript tradition from holdings outside the destroyed library.

§5 Why the case file records this article

The case file does not adjudicate criminal responsibility. It records the structural fact: a major Tamil cultural institution was destroyed on the watch of the state, in the presence of state ministers and uniformed force, and no prosecution followed. That structural fact bears on the legitimacy of subsequent state claims to be the sole guardian of Tamil heritage, on the Recorded Legal Memory Desk's reliance on external custodians for Tamil legal manuscripts, and on the standing of the 1981 Vaddukoddai mandate-holders as the elected representatives of the affected population.

Sources

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What this is not

- This article does not name individual perpetrators. The Sansoni Commission and subsequent state inquiries produced no prosecutions; TLTE does not adjudicate criminal responsibility.
- This article does not assert that the destroyed Tamil ola-leaf manuscripts are recoverable in full from external archives. The BL EAP recoveries are partial and do not restore the destroyed primary copies.
- This article does not apply the UNESCO 2003 Declaration retroactively to 1981. The Declaration is cited for the normative principle, not as enforceable law for the 1981 event.
- This article does not aggregate casualty counts in TLTE voice — the broader May–June 1981 violence is documented by ICJ, Amnesty, Tambiah and Wilson, who remain the source of record.