



British Tamils Forum United Kingdom

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

45th Anniversary Remembrance of the Burning of the Jaffna Public Library 1994–1995 peace talk agreement to retain ruined building was breached to erase history

Today marks the 45th anniversary of the burning of the Jaffna Public Library—one of the most devastating acts of cultural destruction in Sri Lanka’s history and a deeply painful chapter in the collective memory of the Tamil people.

The Tamil people have long placed profound value on education, research, and the preservation of knowledge. Across the Tamil homeland, libraries were established not only in major towns and cities but also in villages, reflecting a deeply rooted cultural commitment to learning and intellectual advancement.

The Jaffna Public Library stood as one of South Asia’s most distinguished libraries. It housed nearly 97,000 volumes, including rare books, historical records, newspapers, palm-leaf manuscripts, and invaluable literary and cultural archives. It was not merely a public institution—it was a symbol of the intellectual, cultural, and historical heritage of the Tamil people. The destruction of the library was therefore not simply an attack on a building; it was a deliberate assault on Tamil identity, historical memory, and cultural heritage.

The burning of the library took place on 1 June 1981, during a period of escalating violence in Jaffna in the lead-up to the District Development Council (DDC) elections. Following a shooting incident at a TULF election rally in Nachchimaar Koviladi on 31 May, police and paramilitaries went amok, initiating a three-day pogrom. The head office of the TULF party and the residence of Jaffna MP V. Yogeswaran were destroyed, and four people were pulled from their homes and killed at random.

This formed part of a wider pattern of state-sponsored violence over several days in late May and early June 1981, during which homes, businesses, a Hindu temple, and the offices and printing press of the *Eelanaadu* newspaper were attacked and destroyed. Tamil cultural and religious statues were also vandalised or defaced.

Numerous accounts and subsequent investigations have concluded that the violence was not spontaneous, but a premeditated act. The library stood in an isolated area in close proximity to the main police station and an army camp. On the night of the attack, during a strict curfew, the library was burned to the ground by Sinhalese mobs brought to Jaffna under the leadership of two UNP government ministers, with the active support, participation, or acquiescence of security personnel stationed only metres away. Yogendra Duraiswamy, then Government Agent (GA) of Jaffna, urgently requested bowsers of water from the Navy base in Karainagar and the Municipality to extinguish the fire. However, the Municipal Office was closed, the water tower locked, and the city virtually deserted. While a Navy bawser eventually arrived, its capacity was woefully inadequate to douse the roaring fire. No citizens dared to come out that night.



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The late Rev. Fr. Dr. Hyacinth Singarayar David, a respected Tamil priest, scholar, and linguist, is remembered with particular sorrow; he reportedly witnessed the flames from his room at St. Patrick's College and died from shock soon afterwards. Former Jaffna Municipal Commissioner C.V.K. Sivagnanam also recorded how access routes were deliberately blocked to the general public and fire brigades to prevent emergency assistance from reaching the site.

The cruelty of burning thousands of irreplaceable books and manuscripts—including centuries-old palm-leaf documents—was an act of cultural genocide. For many Tamils, it remains one of the clearest examples of systematic efforts to erase Tamil history and heritage.

[Kamalika Peris in Lankaweb of 20 September 2021](#)

Unbeknown who the gunman was, three policemen were killed by unidentified gunmen on 31 May 1981 night at a massive pre District Development Council (DDC) election rally in Nachchimaar Koviladi, held by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), about two hundred police personnel present there went amok and burnt boutiques, shops, houses, cars and 'commercial establishments' and these attacks were the worst that the people of Jaffna had experienced so far, reported the media.

That night, police and paramilitaries began a pogrom that lasted for three days, said Wikipedia. The head office of TULF party was destroyed. The Jaffna MP V. Yogeswaran's residence was also destroyed. Four people were pulled from their homes and killed at random. Many business establishments, a Hindu temple and the office of the *Eelanaadu*, a local newspaper, were also destroyed. Statues of Tamil cultural and religious figures were destroyed or defaced.

Yet, forty-five years later, no individual has been held accountable. As noted in 1982 by Mr. Orville H. Schell, Chairman of the Americas Watch Committee and head of an Amnesty International fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka:

"It is regrettable that the government did not institute an independent investigation to establish responsibility for these killings and take measures against those responsible. Instead, one police officer involved was promoted and emergency legislation was introduced facilitating further killings."

The absence of accountability remains deeply painful. Like many other grave violations committed against Tamils, the burning of the Jaffna Public Library has become emblematic of a longstanding culture of impunity. The failure to establish truth and justice has further eroded confidence in domestic accountability processes and continues to reinforce the perception that crimes committed against the Tamil people remain protected by state structures.

The Shattered Agreement: From Memorial Plans to Historical Erasure

During peace negotiations in 1994–1995 between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, there was discussion on preserving the ruins of the destroyed library as a memorial while constructing a modern library nearby. As this was provisionally agreed by both parties, Tamil representatives prepared and submitted architectural plans. That agreement was shattered when the Liberation Tigers lost control of the peninsula and the Sri Lankan government rushed to refurbish the ruined Jaffna Library building and hid all evidence of their genocidal act.

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For Tamils worldwide, the burning of the Jaffna Public Library remains a powerful symbol of cultural genocide, historical erasure, and the broader struggle for justice. It demonstrates that whatever political differences Sinhala politicians may have during intra-party rivalries—whether UNP, SLFP, or others—they maintain a united stand in protecting a supremacist agenda that destroys Tamil identity and aspirations. The BTF, among its many pursuits at the UNHRC, has submitted evidence of “Burning of the Jaffna Public Library” as an important element substantiating with evidence to the ongoing OHCHR’s Sri Lanka Accountability Project (OSLAP).

As we remember this solemn anniversary, we honour the cultural heritage that was lost and reaffirm the importance of preserving collective memory for future generations. ***The destruction of the Jaffna Public Library is a stark reminder of the urgent need to securely preserve books, manuscripts, historical documents, audiovisual records, archives, evidence, and testimonies across multiple physical and digital locations around the world.***

The British Tamils Forum continues to highlight the burning of the Jaffna Public Library as an important act of cultural genocide requiring justice, accountability, and international recognition. We reiterate our call on the international community to support credible international accountability mechanisms and to ensure that justice is not deferred or denied.

Forty-five years on, remembrance remains not only an act of commemoration, but a commitment to ensuring that such heinous crimes are neither forgotten nor repeated.

Justice must prevail.

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Notes to Editors:

British Tamils Forum exists to harness the skills and the knowledge of the members of the forum, well-wishers and significant others including mainstream decision makers in the UK with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the Tamils community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self-determination within a democratic frame work under pinned by international law, its covenants and conventions. For more information info@britishtamilsforum.org and/or visit: www.britishtamilsforum.org