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Destroying a Symbol: Checkered History of Sri Lanka's Jaffna Public Library

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Abstract

Despite (or, in some cases, because of) modern revulsion for book burning, the destruction of libraries in the last century has continued unabated. My new book, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (Praeger, 2006) probes the dynamics of library destruction and devotes significant attention to the disturbing phenomenon of ethnic biblioclasm. As occurring in post-colonial countries, library destruction has tended to be the violent product of social flashpoint as well as political calculation. Thrown off balance by rapid secularization and urbanization, poverty, a lack of economic and social safety nets, and polarization along ethnic and religious lines, perpetrators have been schooled to believe that their group's physical and cultural survival is under threat. Seeing themselves as defenders of a beleaguered people, extremist groups (such as religious nationalists), execute book and library destruction as a high-stake, high-affect tactic in battles over clashing belief systems. With their own community sanctioning their actions, perpetrators operate with relative impunity. Extremism, however, breeds extremism. In Sri Lanka, the destruction (by the Sinhalese) of the Jaffna Public Library, the Tamil minority's primary cultural institution, led to full-scale civil war. The shattered library served and still serves as a symbol of violation and ethnic violence.

Tamil and Sinhalese conflicts emerged after decolonization. When the British took over control of the region they called Ceylon in 1796, they administered the Tamil areas as a separate entity. But by 1815 they had conquered the whole island and set up a centralized government in Colombo. The British enforced supremacy for the English language and Christianity. In the late nineteenth century, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was revived in the south, and in the north the Tamils maintained group consciousness by retaining their own language, culture, territory, and Hindu faith (Wilson 2000, 1).

The Jaffna Public Library began as the private collection of the scholar K.M. Chellapha, who began lending books from his home in 1933. In 1934, a committee set up a formal library, with Chellapha as secretary. Initially, 1000 books, newspapers, and journals were kept in a single room, but soon the collection was shifted into a building on Jaffna's main street and was opened to subscribers. The library was so popular that a cross-section of prominent members of the community began raising funds to build a permanent, modern building. A noted architect designed the new building, and prominent Indian librarian S.R. Ranganathan served as an advisor to ensure that the library was held to international standards. Educated members of the community donated books. The main building opened in 1959. The children's section and an auditorium were added later.

The collection became well known internationally and was popular with Sinhalese and Tamil intellectuals, as well as the general public. It became the major repository for all known literary source materials of the Tamil people (Sivathamby 2004). By 1981, it had almost 100,000 Tamil books and rare, old manuscripts and documents, some written on dried palm leaves and stored in fragrant sandalwood boxes. Some books were literally irreplaceable: the *Yalpanam Vaipavama*, a history of Jaffna, was the only existing copy (Peris 2001). The library held miniature editions of the Ramayana epic, yellowing collections of extinct Tamil-language newspapers (Dugger 2001), and microfilms of important documents and records of the *Morning Star*, a journal published by missionaries in the early twentieth century ("Civilization and Culture..." 2003). It held historical scrolls, works on herbal medicine, and the manuscripts of prominent intellectuals, writers, and dramatists. Indeed, one could think of the Jaffna Library as a national library even though a Tamil nation had not yet come into being.

With privileged-minority status assured by the British, the Tamils, although only one-fifth of the population, were well represented in the government until independence in 1948. Before leaving Ceylon, the British established both Sinhalese and Tamil as national languages. But the postcolonial government was increasingly dominated by Sinhalese Buddhists who operated on the “fact” that Sri Lanka was “inherently and rightfully” a purely Buddhist and Sinhalese state (Nissan 1984, 176). In the face of intense competition over economic opportunities, education, and political power and representation, Sinhalese officials saw their role as rectifying perceived inequities by directing resources away from the Tamils and towards their own ethnic group (Senaratne 1997, 21). In their eyes, decreasing Tamil influence was a necessary part of fostering Buddhist cultural renaissance (De Silva 1986, 178). Language policy became a vehicle for cementing preeminence as Sinhalese-only policies undermined the Tamils’ ability to secure and retain government and professional positions. Politicians diverged from this path at their peril: In the late 1950s the Buddhist prime minister declared Sinhalese to be the only official language; upon vacillating in the face of Hindu protests, he was assassinated by a Buddhist monk who considered him to be a traitor to the faith (Haught 1995, 108). Buddhism became the state religion.

The Sinhalese claimed power in Sri Lanka on both demographic and ideological grounds. Their destiny as an ethnic group was inseparable from their religious beliefs (Obeyesekere 1984, 155). Though Buddhists are generally perceived as pacifists, the Sinhalese believed that their charge of preserving the “true” Theravada Buddhism justified violent measures (Fox 2002, 78). Post colonial anti-Western sentiments fueled Buddhist nationalist claims that the Sinhalese *jatiya* (race or nation) had been weakened by the influence of Christianity, modern lifestyles, and foreign commerce (Roberts 1994, 191). Throughout the 1970s, ethnic conflict was aggravated by the breakdown of traditional norms and the population’s frustration with inflation and economic problems. Authoritarian measures used to maintain control pitted the government not only against the Tamils but also against civil society, liberalism, and moderation in general. United National Party (UNP) politicians and merchants hired gangs of “thugs” (a term that was common parlance in Sri Lanka) and used state-owned buses to transport them to sites where they broke up political meetings and protests and harassed opposition parties, trade unions, workers, and public employees. The thugs threatened judges, artists, and writers. They beat up Sri Lanka’s best known dramatist Ediriweera Sarachchandra, who had satirized the decay of cultural values brought on by the government’s policies (Obeyesekere 1984, 163). No one was ever prosecuted or arrested for these attacks. Rather, paramilitaries and the police were empowered by legislation that outlawed “terrorism,” which was the word used to describe dissent in any form (Obeyesekere 1984, 174).

A renewed sense of national pride grew alongside of an opposition to pluralism (Roberts 1989, 70). Buddhist nationalism was constructed in direct opposition to the Tamils who were viewed as as “*parayo*”--foreign inferiors who had to be controlled or cast out if catastrophic disorder was to be avoided (Roberts 1989, 70). Buddhist extremists promoted the notion that Buddhism was under attack by the Hindu Tamils, who dominated the northern part of the country and the city of Jaffna (Peris 2001). “Threat” was magnified by the existence of millions of Tamils in nearby India. The Sinhalese propaganda recast the Sri Lankan Tamils as long-standing enemies and the Sinhalese as chronically having had to fend off Tamil invasions (Obeyesekere 1984, 155). The violence that erupted was cyclical: when the Tamils balked at Sinhalese-only and other discriminatory policies, whether through

peaceful protests or isolated terrorism, the Sinhalese government and people responded in a “mood of savage paranoia” (Spencer 1984, 193). The Sinhalese targeted the Tamils in violent riots in 1956, 1958, and 1977 ((Das 1990, 6). These riots were similar to pogroms in that they were semi-organized and instigated as a frenzied response to atrocity stories and rumors that spread quickly and elicited first horror and then retribution (Roberts 1994, 323).

Systematic discrimination plus mob violence in turn radicalized many Tamils (Wilson 2000, 5). During the 1970s, a budding culture of resistance, expressed first through literature, became increasingly politicized. In 1973, at its 12th Convention, the major Tamil political party, the Federal Party, invoked the recognized principle of the right to self-determination and resolved that the Tamils were fully qualified to be regarded as a separate Nation by virtue of their language, culture, history, and territory (Wilson 2000, 105). In the second half of the 1970s, civil disobedience by Tamils increased. Youth groups embraced terrorism as a method of self-defense and viewed themselves as engaging in a holy war against the Sinhalese state (Wilson 2000, 125). They confronted the government with guerilla tactics and through murder and robbery. They were not well organized, but the desire for a separate state had moved from the “lunatic fringes” into the center of Tamil political calculations and events were building to a showdown (Arasaratnam 1979, 516).

Flashpoint arrived in Jaffna in 1981 during long-awaited elections in which Tamils hoped to redress a lack of political representation. The Sinhalese UNP party, however, was determined to control the results and sent a contingent of police, paramilitaries, and thugs to intimidate Tamil voters. On Sunday, May 31, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) held a rally at which three Sinhalese policeman were shot, two fatally. That night the Sinhalese police and paramilitaries began a pogrom that lasted three days. The TULF headquarters was burned, as were the offices and press of the Tamil language newspaper. Statues of Tamil cultural and religious figures were defaced and demolished (Peris 2001). A Hindu temple and over one hundred Tamil-owned shops and homes were looted and torched. Four Tamils were taken from their homes and killed. Late on the first night, eyewitnesses saw uniformed police and Sinhalese gang members set fire to the Jaffna Public Library (Peris 2001). Two Sinhalese Cabinet members who watched it burn from the verandah of the nearby Jaffna Rest House claimed that it was “an ‘unfortunate incident,’ where a ‘few’ policeman ‘got drunk’ and went on a ‘looting spree,’ all on their own” (“Remembering the Jaffna ...” 2001). National newspapers did not cover the event or the pogrom that accompanied it. Sinhalese politicians expressed no regrets and used subsequent parliamentary discussion to drive home the message sent by the library’s destruction: if the Tamils were unhappy, they should leave Sri Lanka and return to their homeland, India (Destruction of Jaffna... 2004).

The Tamils reacted to the loss of the building and collection with intense grief. Immediately afterwards, a journalist found a “heartbroken” local lecturer wandering through rooms thickly carpeted with half-burnt pages: He quoted him as saying “The Sinhalese were jealous of the library” (Wheen 1981, 13). Twenty years later, the mayor of Jaffna, Nadarajah Raviraj, still grieved at the recollection of the flames he saw as a college student (Dugger 2001). For the Tamils, the devastated library became an icon of the “physical and imaginative violence” of Sinhalese extremists (Nesiah 2003). For Tamils who had come from the “arid, hardscrabble north” and risen to prominence in the professions and civil service through a devotion to education, the attack was an assault on their aspirations (Dugger 2001), value for learning, and traditions of academic achievement (Nesiah 2003). The attack convinced many that

the Sinhalese intended to extinguish Tamil culture and race in Sri Lanka (Dugger 2001). Group loyalty solidified, and the secessionist militancy of Tamil radicals was affirmed (Wilson 2000).

After the attack on the Jaffna library, the Sinhalese government accelerated its long-standing pattern of muzzling those who favored compromise. For moderates within both groups, the burning of the library brought home the horrors of ethnic conflict, with its renunciation of liberal traditions in the face of concerted efforts to maintain violent emotional reactivity (Nesiah 2003, Sivathamby 2004). The attack on the library ultimately benefited all those, Tamil and Sinhalese alike, who wished to foreclose a robust civil society and arrest public debate (Nesiah 2003). The demise of the Jaffna Library facilitated a power shift among the Tamils. Radicals gained power and attacked not only the Sinhalese majority but also Tamil liberals, who until that point had maintained at least some influence. In an increasingly polarized atmosphere, both Sinhalese and Tamil extremists seemed bent on negating any definition of Tamil identity that centered on a pluralistic culture of learning. Moderate Tamil liberals, as a result, were forced into exile. Some of those who remained and witnessed the ensuing civil war would become profoundly despairing. In 1990, a Jaffna poet, Sivaramani (2001), made a bonfire of her poetry and then committed suicide. Her poem, "A War-Torn Night," mourns the brutalization of Tamil culture and renunciation of critical thinking.

The pogrom of 1981 was followed by violent outbreaks in 1983. Hindu guerillas ambushed an army patrol and triggered another anti-Tamil riot in which Buddhists massacred hundreds of Hindus. Then, in turn, the fanatical Tamil Liberation Tigers launched terror campaigns with bombings and executions. Armed Hindu groups attacked Buddhist holy sites and shot Buddhist monks in line-ups. In one incident, 173 people were killed (Haught 1995). Counterexecutions and retaliatory cycles of violence led to full-scale civil war in which an estimated 65,000 people died and 1.6 million were displaced (Aryaratnam 2003). Jaffna was controlled by the Tamil Tigers from 1990-95. It was captured by the Sinhalese government in 1996, whereupon Norway brokered an uneasy cease fire.

In May, 1982, a year after the library's initial destruction, the community had sponsored Jaffna Public Library Week and worked together to collect thousands of books. Repairs on parts of the building were near completion when war broke out in June, 1983, and the library building was damaged by bullets, shells, and bombs (Thuriarajah 1996). Partially restored rooms were reopened in 1984 only to be caught in the crossfire yet again in 1985. When Tamil rebels attacked a police station near the library, a librarian was able to negotiate safe passage for the staff and students. But that night Sinhalese soldiers entered the lending room and set off bombs that shredded thousands of books. The library was finally abandoned and its shell- and bullet-pocked walls, blackened with the smoke of burnt books, haunted the city. In 1998, the government began renovating the library in response to international demands for a negotiated end to the war. It was an effort to win back the confidence of the Tamil people (Francis 2003). The media minister publicly lamented the destruction of the library as an "evil act," the product of hatred and misguided politics on the part of the previous government (Peris 2001). One million dollars was spent and 25,000 books in the Tamil and English languages were collected. By 2001 a replacement building was finally built. The opening was to serve as a step for healing the wounds of two decades of warfare, but political conflict over its opening highlighted the mistrust that lingered (Beck 2003). The opening ceremony in 2003 was postponed after twenty-three members of Jaffna's town council resigned in the face of threats by Tamil Tiger

insurgents (Aryaratnam 2003). The immediate fate of the library, of course, depends on the longevity of the tenuous brokered peace. Its long-term survival is linked to whether the government can manage tolerance and intellectual freedom and whether the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples can learn to live together in peace.

Destroying a library is a satisfactory way to lash out at a despised group and express contempt for its purpose and goals. The violence contributes to a repressive environment in which the perpetrator's exclusivist goals can be profitably pursued. A government does not have to be directly involved in the destruction of culture to be complicit: politicians merely have to stand by and let it go unpunished. If the government and central belief system accommodates pluralism, then books and libraries are fairly secure. If, however, the state is captured by an exclusionist group, then books and libraries enter the danger zone. Inflamed by ideology and possessing far too much power, an extreme regime may conclude that ethnic cleansing is justifiable. A case can be made that ethnic cleansing, including the destruction of libraries, is the logical end of ethnic conflicts that have been intensified exponentially by grievance, greed, and power. When rivalry fuels hatred and clashes over beliefs spawn extremism, violence visited upon the bodies of the enemy is also visited on their texts.

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