



Enduring flames of ethnic hatred

The destruction in 1981 of the Jaffna public library by Sri Lankan security forces led by government ministers remains an act of cultural vandalism. The story of the library reflects the history of ethnic relations in the island since independence, writes **Amuthan Ponnambalam**

THE SRI LANKAN government appeared to have been taken back by the sudden trend in the plundering of archaeological wealth in the south of the island. Ancient monuments and artefacts have increasingly been targeted by a new kind of robber seeking hidden treasures in ancient structures.

The government has sought to address this by increasing the punishment that can be meted out to vandals by up to a hundred-fold. The destruction of a 700 year-old old statue of Buddha in the hillcountry in a recent attack was reportedly the last straw. To many, the government's reaction is understandable: the destruction of cultural heritage would dismay any but the most hardened of Philistines.

Ironically however the past coincides with the time that Tamils in the island remember the deliberate and organised destruction by the Sri Lankan state of one of their cultural treasures. May 31 marked the twentieth anniversary of the torching of the Jaffna Public Library by Sri Lankan security forces, led by Sinhalese government ministers.

Established in 1841 in a rented room, the library moved to its permanent location in 1959. Built in the ancient Dravidian architectural style, with a statue of Saraswathy, the Hindu goddess of learning adorning its forecourt, it was one of the biggest in Asia.

It housed 95,000 irreplaceable Tamil manuscripts, parchments, books, magazines and newspapers. Its most valued treasures were, however, the ancient and rare palm leaf (Ola) writings. Housed in two floors, its auditorium was also the host to many seminars, lectures and cultural performances.

Protesting Tamil MPs were told "not to disturb the sleeping Sinhala lion"

being the mammoth Jaffna Library.

During the District Development Council elections in 1981 senior Sri Lankan ministers arrive in Jaffna. Arguably none of the locals could have imagined the single-minded act of cultural vandalism that occurred.

According to Nancy Murray the western author, "with several high ranking Sinhalese security officers and two cabinet ministers, Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake (both self-confessed Sinhala supremacists), present in the town (Jaffna), uniformed security men and plainclothes thugs carried out some well-organised acts of destruction."

"They burned to the ground certain chosen targets - including the Jaffna Public Library, with its 95,000 volumes and priceless manuscripts...no mention of this appeared in the national newspapers, not

even the burning of the library, the symbol of Tamils' cultural identity. The government delayed bringing in emergency rule until 2 June, by which time the key targets had been destroyed."

According to several reports, the two Sinhala ministers had booked themselves into the famous Subash Hotel, which overlooks the library, for that night. Many claim it was so that they could witness the bonfire they had planned.

The Movement for Interracial Justice and Equality in

officials present on the spot, a racial and venomous vendetta was launched against them by Sinhala parliamentarians. The Tamil party charged "the government did not have the confidence of the TULF."

The MP for Panadura, Dr Neville Fernando, called for the Tamil MPs to be punished by the traditional death penalty of the ancient Sinhala kings, namely "tear the offender's body limb by limb." Other Sinhala MPs told the Tamils to "go home to India" if they wanted to protect their culture and advised the Tamils "not to disturb the sleeping Sinhala lion."

The government went a step further with the farcical and incredulous act of bringing a vote of no confidence in turn against the TULF, claiming they "did not enjoy the confidence of the government." It is said to be the only occasion in the world where a ruling party has brought such an action in a legislature against a party in the opposition.

The committee preparing the United Nations Genocide Convention included a provision for cultural genocide; whose definition specifically included 'destroying or preventing the use of libraries, museums, schools, historical monuments and places of worship.' The proposal was not adopted in the final text of the Genocide Convention for fear of being capable of inviting the risk of political interference in the domestic affairs of states. Nevertheless, the destruction of cultural icons, structures and material was recognised as an integral part of the destruction of a people, the act defined by the word genocide.

The Jaffna library, now an empty, scorched shell with the forlorn figure of Saraswathy surrounded by overgrown bush, was deliberately left undisturbed by the Tamils to remain as a monument to Sri Lanka's cultural genocide against their people.

In fact, the plans drawn up by the Liberation Tigers

for the development of Jaffna town and partially implemented during the days when they held Jaffna included another library to be built - adjacent to the original structure. This is in line with the global norm of leaving such evidence of man's hatred for man untouched as monuments of remembrance. One well-known example of this is the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

The present government of President Chandrika Kumaratunge attempted to erase the powerful influence of the Jaffna library by having it demolished and replaced by a new library. It has finished structural repairs and is in the process of interior repairs. Once complete it plans to move a collection of 25,000 volumes from a temporary building to the new library.

But as one retired Jaffna university lecturer told this paper, "this library cannot be replaced unless its original contents are once again made available," an impossibility as many of the manuscripts were unique.

However, the government's efforts are not even along that line of thinking: there has not even been a token effort to gather from elsewhere the Tamil works that were catalogued pre-1981. Instead the Sri Lankan public was urged to "donate books" for the new library.

Three years ago, the government even attempted to exploit the latent distress caused by the attack with a curious effort to win support amongst the Tamil Diaspora. Whilst it is not clear who dreamt up the initiative, it was undertaken by Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadrigamar. During his visits to cities in the West where large concentrations of Tamil expatriates - many of whom fiercely back the Liberation Tigers armed struggle - Kadrigamar attempted to meet some Tamil leaders to propose a scheme to "rebuild the Jaffna library."

Perhaps the Minister felt that roping Tamil expatriates into funding the project, he could save his government the cost of the exercise, and assuage their anger on this issue - and hence limit the financial support flowing to

Tamil guerrillas. An ambitious plan, which could have reaped his boss, President Chandrika Kumaratunge, a propaganda bonanza whilst amusing the Sinhala supremacists, who would delight in their foes forking out their money to replace their ruined literary treasures with tacky fiction, it failed to fly, despite the indefatigable efforts of Sri Lankan missions in the West.

The emotional impact of the library's destruction runs to depths that many in the West might find curious. As the Jaffna University lecturer says: "the Sinhalese were always jealous of our library, so they torched it. With it they destroyed a part of the Tamil history and shattered the learning prospects of generations of students. It [the burnt library] stood as a monument to their hatred of the Tamils. Now they are trying to delete their crime from the history books. But the scar will remain forever in Tamils' hearts."

Sri Lanka's destruction of the library, the refusals to genuinely address the cultural loss and the shabby effort to exploit the issue as part of its international propaganda

drive sits in stark contrast with the concern being shown to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Presidential Advisor talked of Sri Lanka making a formal request to buy the rubble of the destroyed statues from the Taliban in order to erect similar ones in Sri Lanka. Sinhala Buddhist groups have asked the United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to declare a day of mourning to mark the destruction of the statues. There are no reports of any acts of mourning to mark the 20th anniversary of a lost treasure of learning much closer to home.

The Jaffna library's history reflects the story of ethnic relations in the island. Proud and cherished, it was destroyed by Sri Lankan state violence. Peaceful efforts to seek redress were met with threats and racial bile. And when the government called on the public to donate books for the new library, the first book was reportedly handed over by a young student in the south: it was written in Sinhalese.

Cultural vandalism and Genocide

The term genocide is only a recent one, having been coined in 1945 by Raphael Lemkin, lecturer on comparative law at the Institute of Criminology of the Free University of Poland and Deputy Prosecutor of the District Court of Warsaw. Since then, it has become a crucial term for understanding events, particularly ethnic violence, in the world.

LEMKIN defined genocide as "a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves."

He said that the objective of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups and the destruction of

the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups.

For Lemkin, "genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group."

Whilst genocide has come to be associated with the concentrated killings of large numbers of people,

such as in a few bloody month in Rwanda recently or during the years of the Holocaust of WW2, Lemkin's concept is just as valid if it happens over decades.

Furthermore, the destruction of a people's culture, whilst not given particular attention in the massive bloodletting which has characterised the well known instances of genocide, remains an integral part of the crime as Lemkin saw it.

"An attack targeting a collectivity can also take the form of systematic and organized destruction of the art and cultural heritage in which the unique genius and achievement of a collectivity are revealed in fields of science, arts and literature," he wrote. "The contribution of

any particular collectivity to world culture as a whole forms the wealth of all of humanity, even while exhibiting unique characteristics."

"The [perpetrator] causes not only the immediate irrevocable losses of the destroyed work as property and as the culture of the collectivity directly concerned (whose unique genius contributed to the creation of this work); it is also all humanity which experiences a loss by this act of vandalism."

"In the acts of barbarity, as well as in those of vandalism, the asocial and destructive spirit of the [perpetrator] is made evident. This spirit, by definition, is the opposite of the culture and progress of humanity."