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Pirapaharan, Chapter 23 Who Gave the Order?

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published December 17, 2003



23. Who Gave the Order?

Who set the fire?

Three questions arise about the burning of the Jaffna Public Library.

Who burnt it?

How was it burnt?

Who gave the order?

Pirapaharan watched with defiant, angry eyes the leaping flames that consumed the Jaffna Public Library, the cultural treasure of the Jaffna people.

"*Kalasara Pererippu*," he muttered, "Cultural Incineration."

Hundreds of others also stared, helplessly, at this vile vandalism, the third destruction of a priceless library in South Asia. The first was in the 12th Century, when a Central Asian horde under Khilji burnt the famous Buddhist Nalanda University and its Library. The second was in 1619, when the Portuguese captured the Tamil Kingdom in South India, and the Commander of the Portuguese Army, Filipe De Olivera, burnt down the Saraswathy Mahal - the oldest library of the Tamils, that had precious and valuable historical documents regarding the origin of the Tamils and their Dravidian ancestry. He razed over 500 Hindu Temples in the region, leaving the Tamils without any authentic documents of their antiquity. The third library was burnt in a Buddhist country ruled by a Buddhist president.



Jaffna Public Library

Around 10.30 on the dark night of 1 June 1981, an agitated anonymous person telephoned Municipal Commissioner C. V. K. Sivagnam and informed him that the library was on fire. Sivagnam called Jaffna Government Agent Yogendra Doraisamy, but his wife answered the call. She said she was unaware of the burning, but would check and get back. She rang back a few minutes later and confirmed the information. Sivagnam rang the Municipal Guard Room. The guards, too, confirmed the burning. They told him that the policemen were setting the fire.

Sivagnam ordered the six guards on duty to take the two water bowsers and douse the fire. The Jaffna Municipal Council had no fire engine. "Stop it from spreading to the other sections," he ordered and rushed to the spot.

He was prevented from going to the Library or the Municipal Council. Police guards blocked him and ordered him back. Police also stopped the municipal employees from going to the library. "If you get on to the road, we will shoot," the men manning the barricade opposite the Municipal Council barked.

"We begged them to allow us," one of the municipal employees told reporters of the Colombo-based Sinhala weekly *Aththa* who accompanied Communist Party leader Pieter Keuneman who flew to Jaffna to investigate the burning. "One officer shouted back: Let the entire thing perish," the employee added.

Keuneman was told that the police had erected checkpoints and deployed guards to abort any attempt by the public to

douse the fire. Entry to the library was barricaded with iron railings and heaps of old tires.

Sivagnam contacted the Navy Commander at Kayts and pleaded with him to save Jaffna's pride monument. The Navy Commander sent his men, but when they reached Jaffna the library had perished. The entire building was aflame. The historic Jaffna Public Library was reduced to ashes.

Jaffna, as in many other fields, was Sri Lanka's forerunner in the library movement. It opened the island's first reading room, Naguleswara Reading Room, in Keerimalai on 27 December 1915 and its first public library in Jaffna on 1 August 1934, a year before the Colombo Public Library was inaugurated. Jaffna, as usual, reacted to international events and developments, this time to the Public Book Movement, a movement that took the reading habit to the people. The movement caused the printing of cheap editions of books, especially the paperbacks which appeared in the mid-1930s. Before that movement, books were collector's items, preserved in universities, religious institutions and in the homes of wealthy or intellectually-bent families. Books were written on vellum, bound in calf and decorated in gilt.

The origin of the Jaffna Public Library was the Reading Room Jaffna Court Secretary F. C. Grainier started in 1842. The Assistant Government Agent, Sir William Twynam, developed the Reading Room into the Public Library in 1848. In 1933 Court Secretary K. M. Sellappah interested the youths of Kantharmadam to collect books for the Jaffna Library. Then, on 11 December, he issued a public appeal in English and Tamil headlined: 'A Central Free Tamil Library in Jaffna.' It evoked a ready response.

A meeting was held on 9 June 1934 at Jaffna Central College Hall,



Jaffna Central College

with District Judge C. Coomaraswamy in the chair, to elect a committee to establish the Public Library. Coomaraswamy was elected chairman of the Jaffna Public Library Committee and Rev. Dr. Isaac Thambiah its vice chairman. Advocate C. Ponnambalam and Sellappah were elected joint secretaries.

The Library was inaugurated on 1 August 1934 in a rented shop building opposite the Jaffna Electricity Station on Hospital Street with a collection of 844 books and 30 newspapers and periodicals. The Jaffna Town Development Board, the local government body in Jaffna, took over the library on 1 January 1935 and the Jaffna Municipal Council is now running it. The library, as it grew in size, was shifted to bigger buildings and in 1952, the Jaffna Municipal Council, at the instance of Mayor Sam Sabapathy, decided to build for it a new building. The location was selected by Urban Development Officer Weeratunga and the foundation stone was laid on 29 May 1954 by the Mayor, R. Viswanathan, Fr. Long, the backbone of the movement to build the new building, and envoys of Britain, the United States and India..



Statue of Fr. Long

Two Indian experts, Dr. S. R. Ranganathan, a well-known authority on Library Science and K. S. Narasimhan, an authority on Dravidian architecture, provided the plan for the building and the arrangement of the library.

The library was ceremoniously opened on 11 October 1959 by Jaffna Mayor Alfred Duraiappah after its first stage was completed. Subsequently, the other stages were also finished. It was the second biggest in Sri Lanka, next to the Colombo Public Library, with a total floor space of 15,910 square feet. It comprised seven sections - Lending section, newspaper and periodicals section, children's section, auditorium, reference section, art gallery and study room.

When the Library was burnt it had a collection 96,000 books. The lending section had the highest number of books. The reference section, which contained 29,000 books and documents, was also the repository of ola leaves of historical value, memoirs and works of writers, dramatists and politicians and works of reputed practitioners of indigenous systems of medicine. The only existing original copy of *Yalpana Vaipavamalai* (The History of Jaffna) was also there. The children's section, the biggest in Sri Lanka, contained a collection of 8,995 books.

S. M. Kamaldeen, a well-known librarian, who investigated the brutal burning, concluded: It is clear that **the sole objective of those who entered the library on that frightening night was to destroy all the books. They did not leave a single book unburnt. All that could be saved was a small package of half-burnt books.**

How was it burnt?

The scorching operation was precisely planned to burn all the books and destroy the building completely. Groups of sturdy men, short-cropped and dressed in khaki shorts and white banyans, left Alfred Duraiappah Stadium shortly after 10 p.m. with cans of petrol, axes and crowbars, crossed the road to the library standing stately just opposite. They trudged to the front door and chased away the lone guard standing close to the Saraswathi statue, the symbol of the Goddess of Learning. They cut open the door with the axes.

"It was a meticulously planned martial operation," the guard who watched it from a distance described.

The men split into groups. The first entered the lending section, walked along the rows of bookracks, sprinkling petrol. The second went to the newspaper and periodicals section, piled the wooden furniture in the middle and drenched them with gasoline. The third went to the reference section, where irreplaceable records and ola leafs were carefully displayed, and poured petrol on them. Children's section and the other sections received similar ritualistic bath of petrol.

"The entire building was burning almost simultaneously," the guard told his boss, Sivagnam.

"Why did they do it to us?" sobbed Chief Librarian R. Nadarajah whom Keunaman interviewed a week after the burning. She could not bear the shock. She could not hold back her tears. For Fr. David, a famed etymologist, the shock was fatal. He saw the flames jump up from his room at St. Patrick's College Hostel, shivered, collapsed and died.



Jaffna Public Library with bomb shell holes

The *Aththa* story said the books were still smoldering when Keunaman visited the library. "Some parts of the building were so hot we could not enter them," the reporters wrote.

Francis Whelen, of the *New Statesman and Nation*, who visited Jaffna on 17 July, wrote: Today its rooms are thickly carpeted with half burnt pages, fluttering in the breeze which comes through broken windows.' He also saw the walls shorn of their plaster by the intense heat generated by the burning books.

He wrote that he met a heart-broken lecturer from the local teacher training college while inspecting the charred remains of the library. He asked him why this was done.

"The Sinhalese were jealous of the library," he said. "I used to come here every day to prepare my lectures and tutorials. Now I shall have to go to Colombo and some of the books aren't available even there."

"Jealousy is not the main cause," Jaffna Mayor R. Viswanathan told reporters later. "The Sinhalese want to subjugate the Tamil people. They did not want the Tamils to have anything which they could proudly brandish to the world as proof of their great civilization, their distinct identity."

The burning was also organized carefully to keep the world in the dark of this devilish deed for about a week. *Eelanadu*, Jaffna's provincial daily, was burnt about the same time the library was torched. A separate group was sent to burn the press. This group surrounded the *Eelanadu* office and ordered the staff to go outside.

Gopalaratnam, the *Eelanadu* editor told me: "I had just finished the editorial criticizing Sunday's (May 31) atrocities of the police and had sent it for composing. The editorial staff was busy with their last minute report of the police atrocities that had commenced a few hours earlier. We had just completed printing a page of photographs showing the demolished statues of Tamil cultural and religious figures erected at the main road junctions in the town. We also hear bursts of sporadic gunfire and it was rumoured that ministers were directing these operations. Just then, a police party, after surrounding the building, burst into the office and chased us away. They poured petrol and set fire to the printing press and the office building."

"They abused us in Sinhala saying that we had reported extensively the previous night's incident. Now, how will you report the burning of the library?" they boasted, a journalist told me.

Telephone lines were also cut after the torching of the library.

The world came to know about the dastardly act of cultural annihilation only after *Aththa* broke the story. Chandrahasan exposed the burning later at an international press conference he held in Chennai. There he released several photographs of the burnt library which were smuggled out of the country. They were used extensively by the international media.

Opposition parties also took up the Jaffna incidents in parliament and outside. They issued a joint statement in the second week of June. It read:

More than 100 shops have been broken, burnt, looted; market squares in Jaffna and Chunnakam look as if they have been bombed in wartime; several houses have been looted and badly damaged; the house of the MP for Jaffna has been reduced to ruins; several deaths have occurred at the hands of the state armed personnel; the headquarters of the Tamil United Liberation Front in the heart of Jaffna has been destroyed; the public library in Jaffna, the second largest library in the island with over 90,000 volumes, has been reduced to ashes.

Even more reprehensible are the facts that these outrages have taken place when cabinet ministers and several leaders of the security services were personally present in Jaffna directing affairs, and that a section of the security services, which was sent there to maintain law and order, was directly involved.

The destruction of Chunnakam took place on the night of 31 May. Policemen from Chunnakam Police Station went to the market, broke open the shops, looted and torched them and some private houses. A similar orgy of destruction was let loose around the KKS police station. An army unit surrounded Sivasithamparam's office in Jaffna and opened fire. One person standing outside was killed. Police records show that five persons were killed during these days.

The Mystery

The opposition parties made a specific charge that a section of the security forces sent to Jaffna was directly involved in the burning of the library and other selected buildings. Amirthalingam also made this charge in the letter he wrote to President Jayewardene on 2 June (See Annex below) and in his speech in parliament on 9 June. The government never made an attempt to deny it. Jayewardene and others tried to show that those violent acts were not state-sponsored, but were the natural reaction of enraged policemen when they saw the bodies of policemen shot by "terrorists."

The opposition statement said the fact that these outrages took place when cabinet ministers and several leaders of the security services were personally present in Jaffna was reprehensible. The ministers present at that time in Jaffna were: Mahaweli Development Minister Gamini Dissanayake and Industries Minister Cyril Mathew. The leaders of the security services present were: Defence Secretary Col. C. A. Dharmapala, Cabinet Secretary G. V. P. Samarasinghe, IGP Ana Seneviratne, Army Chief-of-Staff Brigadier Tissa Weeratunga, and DIG Edward Gunawardene.

The two ministers who were in Jaffna were powerful "J. R.'s men." They were chosen by Jayewardene to lead the UNP's trade unions. Cyril Mathew headed the dread Jathika Seva Sangamaya (JSS) and Gamini Dissanayake led the powerful Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU). Both unions provided the UNP muscle power, whenever needed.

Both ministers took to their thug squads to Jaffna. They were transported in a fleet of state-owned buses.

Here, it is appropriate to quote from an article, "President J. R. Jayewardene and the Sri Lankan Tamils," by A. J. Wilson, the then go-between Jayewardene and Amirthalingam, printed in the *Lanka Guardian* of 15 March 1995.

The relevant portion:

'The incidents relating to the burning of the library throw interesting light. Gamini Dissanayake (It may have been at the President's request) explained to me on the phone what happened. However, Gamini himself may have volunteered to do this, for he was a good friend of my brother-in-law, Samuel Chelvanayakam Chandrahasan, with whom he developed a lasting friendship commencing from their Law College days. All that I know was that while Gamini talked to me on the phone, the President was by his side. I heard his whispering details which probably escaped Gamini's memory.



Jayawardene and Dissanayake

Gamini told me that the police were "enraged at the killing of their comrades." On the night of the burning, they, the police, had gone "mad with anger" and were determined to wreck vengeance. He did not explain the reason for Mathew's intervention in the election. He only said that when the President learnt of Mathew's plans to go to Jaffna with his fleet of CTB buses, he told Gamini "have an eye on Cyril." I cannot understand why he did not order Mathew to stay in Colombo.

Gamini said the police and some in the army had that night "looted liquor stores" and boozed themselves to a fury. He, Gamini, was in the front line with the security personnel both alongside and behind him, straining at the leash. He tried to restrain the policemen. These were his words: "they were full of rage." He tried to stop them and failed. For the first time in "my life," he said, "I was never so close to death as on this occasion." He instinctively felt that, if "I uttered one more word of caution to these men, they would have turned on me and done me to death without any hesitation." He had no option but to let them move forward. He never expected them to commit the horrendous act of incineration.

He concluded by saying that what he said was the truth. The President, who met me the next day, confirmed that what Gamini had said was exactly as it happened.'

This statement admits:

1. The policemen burnt the library. Note the sentence: He had no option but to let them move forward.
2. Gamini was in the front line.
3. Burning was the result of the rage. Policemen were determined to wreck vengeance.

Rohan Gunaratne, in his book, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka*, quotes Inspector General of Police, Ana Seneviratne, as saying, "one visiting Deputy Inspector General of Police and at least one cabinet minister fuelled the sentiments of the angry policemen and participated in the burning of the Jaffna Library." (Page 72)

Gamini Dissanayake had insisted that he was only trying to restrain the "enraged" police and not fuelled their sentiments. Jayewardene, too, was trying his best to rub off that image from Gamini. But, as Gamini himself had admitted to several Tamils including Prof. K. Sivathamby, he had to live with that scar.

In 1991, when Gamini and Lalith Athulathmudali mooted the move to impeach him, President Ranasinghe Premadasa revived the Jaffna Library burning matter. Speaking at a meeting in Zahira College, Puttalam on 16 October 1981 he said:

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During the District Development Council elections in 1981, some of our party members took many people from other parts of the country to the north, created havoc and disrupted the conduct of elections in the North. It is this same group of people who are causing trouble now also. If you want to find out who burnt the priceless collection of books at the Jaffna Library, you have only to look at the faces of those opposing us.

Three days later, on 19 October 1991, speaking at a public meeting in Kandy, Premadasa named Gamini as the person who was responsible for the burning of the Jaffna Library. He said:

Mr. Gamini Dissanayake was responsible for the burning of the Jaffna Library, which was one of the best in Asia, according to the slain TULF leader, A. Amirthalingam.

I was in the group of Colombo journalists covering Premadasa's 4-day tour of Jaffna in the second week of May 1981. He wound up his tour with a public meeting at the Open Air Theatre, next to the Jaffna Library. He was at that time the Prime Minister and Bradman Weerakoon was his secretary. I was seated in the front row, next to Bradman. Pointing to the library with his hand, Premadasa said:

Look at that stately building. That is the Jaffna Library. I was told that is Jaffna's priceless possession. People of Jaffna are proud of it. We too should be proud of it because it is a Sri Lankan Library. It is not only your possession. It is our possession also. We are all Sri Lankans.

Gamini Dissanayake reacted to Premadasa's Kandy accusation which was reported prominently in the *Sunday Observer* of 20 October. He wrote a 5-page letter to President Premadasa and sent copies to the media. A copy of it was sent to the Editor, *Daily News*, who sent it to me, as I was covering the impeachment issue, to write a story for the next day's paper. I wrote the story and kept the original with me. I still have it.

In his reply Gamini gave three arguments to clear himself of the charge of responsibility. They were:

1. He was not in Jaffna that day as his itinerary showed he was in Bandarawela and Welimada that day.
2. Amirthalingam, in his speech in Parliament, did not accuse him of being party to the burning.
3. Premadasa himself defended him when some parliamentarians tried to implicate him in the incident.

Premadasa ignored these arguments in his reply on 26 October and repeated his charge that Gamini was responsible for the burning of the Jaffna Library. He revealed another secret. He said that, when the District Development Council scheme was discussed in the cabinet, Gamini opposed the bill.

The others who opposed the bill in the cabinet were Mathew and Gamani Jayasuriya. They argued that the government should not give in to the demands of the Tamils.

The Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) sent a delegation to Jaffna to investigate the burning. It reported:

After careful inquiries there is no doubt that the attacks and the arson were the work of some 100-175 police personnel.

The MIRGE delegation had recorded this revealing incident:

A Sinhalese priest on his way from Kandy to Kankesanthurai to purchase cement was attacked two miles from Jaffna by a group of three persons in banians and trousers behind whom was a policeman in uniform. They smashed the windscreen with a rod, hit the driver who fell unconscious, and assaulted the cleaner. When the group finally believed their victims' claim that they were Sinhalese they drove off in their jeep...in Jaffna police refused to take down his complaint... in the hospital doctors and nurses, all Tamils but for the Sinhalese matron, were extremely kind. From the hospital the priest saw Jaffna ablaze.

A strong demand for the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry to find out the guilty policemen, for the prosecution of those officers responsible for the burning and for the compensation of the victims of this violence arose, both locally and globally. Jayewardene killed it deftly. He ordered an internal police departmental inquiry. The inquiring officer, Kingsley



Lionel Fernando

Wickremesuria, recorded evidence, held an identification parade when 187 policemen were identified and detained. That was the end of the enquiry. As was the practice in the Jayewardene regime, all the detained policemen were rewarded with promotions and transferred out of Jaffna.

To stifle the compensation cry Jayewardene appointed Lionel Fernando, a respected former Government Agent of Jaffna, to recommend compensation. Fernando recommended the state to compensate the Jaffna Library with one million rupees.

Jayewardene waited silently for about a year and on 10 June 1982 inaugurated a National Fund for the Rebuilding of the Jaffna Library. He only paid a tiny portion of the sum Lionel Fernando recommended from state funds.

Annex

This is the text of the letter Amirthalingam wrote to President Jayewardene on 2 June 1981.

Parliament,
Colombo.
2nd June 1981

His Excellency J. R. Jayewardene, Esq.,
President,
Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,
Colombo.

Your Excellency,

TERRORISM IN THE NORTH

There seems to be a completely wrong assessment of the events taking place in Jaffna from the evening of Sunday 31st May. There is no doubt that the events were triggered off by the senseless shooting of some police officers at the TULF meeting resulting in the death of Sergeant Punchi Banda and the injury to three other police officers. I wish to state that the TULF dissociates itself from this mad act of terrorism which we unreservedly condemn.

The incidents that followed cannot bring credit to the police force of any country. Policemen in civil clothes and some of them in uniform broke open A. Subbaiah and Sons, a liquor shop in Jaffna, and having consumed large quantities of liquor had gone on a rampage. They had gone to Nachimarkovilady, the venue of the meeting where the shooting took place. They had entered the temple. Damaged the lamps and vahanams, tried to set fire to the chariot, entered the neighbouring houses, assaulted the inmates and set fire to a number of cars and a number of houses in the vicinity. About forty of them had taken a bus and had gone to the TULF headquarters at Main Street, Jaffna and shot at the lock and opened it, broke up the doors and windows, piled them up and poured petrol and set fire to the entire building which had been completely gutted down. Some houses in the neighbourhood were also burnt. Armed policemen stood guard with guns to prevent anyone putting out the fire.

A group of drunken policemen had gone to the house of Mr. V. Yogeswaran, M.P. for Jaffna, and entered the house by shooting the lock and tried to get hold of the MP, who escaped their clutches and ran away scaling the rear compound wall. They smashed up the house and set fire to it. It is completely burnt.

They had set fire to several shops in the grand-bazaar and the Jaffna market. Five shops in the Chunnakam market were also burnt by these men. I got news of it when I was at Trincomalee and contacted Mr. Ana Seniviratne, IGP, on the telephone. He confirmed the shooting and the subsequent rampage by the policemen who had been brought to Jaffna for election duty. I also contacted the District Minister Jaffna, Mr. Wijekoon, and requested him to act fast to put an end to the vandalism of the police.

What is most shocking is that on Monday the 1st, when the IGP and other top officials were in Jaffna, these same policemen had started their acts of arson, looting and destruction at 9 p.m. They had set fire to the Jaffna Public Library, the press and the office of the daily *Eelanadu* and a number of shops in Jaffna.



Jaffna Public Library with boys who could be reading there

There is fear that it may be repeated today also. Traders were trying to transport their good to places of safety. I just received information that policemen in uniform are looting goods which were loaded into vehicles for transport. I request immediate action to stop this terrorization, to bring the offenders to book and to pay compensation to the people who have

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sustained heavy loses.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely, Sgd. A. Amirthalingam,

Leader of the Opposition

Authors Note.

The President did not even acknowledge the letter.

Terrorization continued even on the next day.

Offenders were not brought to book. They were promoted.

Compensation recommended by the Lionel Fernando Committee was not fully paid.

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Chapter 24. Tamils still back Moderates

To be posted December 31



Print "Pirapaharan, Chapter 23
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