

Jaffna Public Library: Quenching the Thirst for Knowledge



The impressive Jaffna Public Library. The statue of Goddess Sarasvathi is in the foreground

It is hard to miss, this colossal building that is a landmark in Jaffna. A centre of knowledge and intellectual gathering, the Jaffna Public Library holds a special place in every Sri Lankan's heart.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

Today...

We entered the main gates, and walked towards the building. We all became quiet, absorbing the surrounding tranquillity and beauty of the well-kept garden. The statue of Goddess Sarasvathi, the Hindu deity of knowledge, music and creative arts gave a sense of spirituality and calmness for those entering the premises.

Everyone has to remove their shoes before entering the building; as a sign of respect as well as for the ease of maintenance and protection of the books. The reception is spacious and the first thing that draws your attention is the sculpture of the renowned South Indian sage, Thiruvalluvar.

On either side of the reception is the periodical section and the lending library. As it was morning, many were seated in the periodical section reading the daily newspapers. This section has both local and international publications in Tamil and English. The lending library contains books on subjects ranging from Library Science, Law, Music to Zoology and Poetry. The ground floor has both front and rear entrances, which are connected by a corridor with access for differently-abled visitors. The rear section has the Archive room, with an impressive collection of preserved periodicals and other publications. Archiving of publications are done at the Jaffna Library itself. The children's section is also at the rear of the building and is a colourful and happy space, ideal for young children. Various programmes are organised for the young ones so that their minds are stimulated. The room just beyond the rear reception holds a 3D lab, which shows the various dimensions of information.

The displays include interesting items such as ancient printing blocks, tools, handicrafts, books on the same subject and biographies; that is information materials, realia and artefacts of a specific subject.

The first floor consists of the reference library, which has been refurbished recently. There were students studying in this section and you could just feel the combined power of concentration in the room. The collection included past exam papers, international books on various subjects as well as local publications. The room right opposite the reference library housed the Special collection, which included many old manuscripts, publications as well as microfilms. We were able

to see the microfilm of the first Tamil newspaper, Morning Star—a copy from May 19, 1842. The books are of English and Tamil predominantly, though Sinhala publications are also available.

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The passageway that connects the front and rear of the first floor of the building is the study area, where study tables have been provided so that students are not disturbed. The rear section has the multimedia centre on one side and the auditorium on the other.

We ascended the steps to the top most floor and was overwhelmed by the view from above. The small room on top would soon be a space for artistic expression including a collection of paintings on exhibition. The S J V Chelvanayagam memorial, which is an ornately decorated pillar can be seen from this level.

A little bit of history...

The history of the present Jaffna Public Library began on August 1, 1934, by K M Chellappa who was the founder of the Jaffna Free Library Movement, when the library was relocated from his home to a building on Hospital Street. The year 1936 saw the library being relocated twice to a spacious building owned by the Puthur Mallavarayar family. The real development of the Library happened upon the election of A Sabapathy as the first Mayor of Jaffna. He decided that a separate modern building should be constructed to house the Library. The Jaffna Library Association was formed with Mayor Sabapathy as the Chairman and Rev Fr Long, rector of St Patrick's College, Jaffna as the Vice Chairman, whose contribution to the Library was immense.

The foundation laying ceremony was held on March 29, 1954, where Mayor A Sabapathy, Rev Fr Long, Sir Cecil Sayers - British High Commissioner, Philip Grove - US Ambassador and Siddhartha Chari - First Secretary to the Indian High Commission laid the foundation stone. The foundation stones laid by each person has been placed at various locations of the building and can even be seen today.

To reflect the culture and tradition of the people of the area, the design of the Jaffna Public Library was of Dravidian architecture. This is evident by the characteristic domes and pillars of the building. The first stage upon completion was ceremonially opened on October 11, 1959 by Alfred Duraiappah, Mayor of Jaffna.

A replica building of the original Jaffna Public Library was built to form the rear of the current building.

While the front or main entrance is on Esplanade Road, the entrance of the replica building (new section) opens to Kankesanthurai Road. The foundation stone for this building was laid by Mayor Raja Visuvanathan on February 7, 1982 and ceremonially opened by Opposition Leader A Amirthalingam on June 4, 1984.

The most recent restoration work was completed in 2002 and since then the Jaffna Public Library has been a source of knowledge for all those who enter through its doors.

Hopefully the day is not too far away, where the Jaffna Public Library will yet again be one of the finest not only in South and East Asia but in the world...

Reflection...

Once considered to be one of the finest libraries in South and East Asia, due to its invaluable collection, the Jaffna Public Library is today steadily progressing in that direction yet again. Hopefully the day is not too far away, where the Jaffna Public Library will yet again be one of the finest not only in South and East Asia but in the world.

"A Library implies an act of faith."

- Victor Hugo

