



# Black July



EDITED BY GROUNDVIEWS



# introduction

The following articles were first published on *Groundviews* in 2008 and 2013, respectively the 25th and 30th commemoration of Black July. As noted in [Wikipedia](#),

“Black July is the common name used to refer to the anti-Tamil pogrom and riots in Sri Lanka during July 1983. The riots began as a response to a deadly ambush on 23 July 1983 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Tamil militant group, that killed 13 Sri Lanka Army soldiers. Beginning in the capital Colombo on the night of 24 July 1983, the riots spread to other parts of the country. Over seven days mobs of mainly Sinhalese attacked Tamil targets, burning, looting and killing. Estimates of the death toll range between 400 and 3,000. 8,000 homes and 5,000 shops were destroyed. 150,000 people were made homeless. The economic cost of the riots was \$300 million. A wave of Sri Lankan Tamils fled to other countries in the ensuing years and many thousands of Tamils youths joined the militant groups. Black July is generally seen as the start of full-scale Sri Lankan Civil War between the Tamil militants and the government of Sri Lanka. July has become a time of remembrance for the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora community around the world.”

The articles published in 2013 generated tens of thousands of views in the last week of July alone and were shared widely on Facebook and Twitter. Many of the articles in 2013 were from producers *Groundviews* commissioned for a project to commemorate Black July. The project brought together leading documentary filmmakers, photographers, activists, theorists and designers, in Sri Lanka and

abroad, to focus on just how deeply the anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983 has shaped our imagination, lives, society and polity. The resulting content, featuring voices never captured before, marrying rich photography, video, audio and visual design with constitutional theory, story-telling and memorialising, had no historical precedent. The project was also an attempt to use digital media and compelling design to remember the inconvenient, and in no small way, acts of daring, courage and resistance during and after Black July.

More details [here](#) and the dedicated project website ('30 Years Ago') can be accessed [here](#).

All of the articles published in this book can be read online [here](#), where you can also leave your comments. Due to the very nature of a website, with new content added frequently, not all the articles available online are reflected in these pages.

Cover photo by Sachini Perera, take for [30 Years Ago](#) project.

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Located at the [Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) in Colombo, Sri Lanka, [Groundviews](#) is a citizen journalism website that uses a range of genres and media to highlight critical perspectives on governance, reconciliation, human rights, the arts and literature, democracy and other issues. The site has won two international awards, including the prestigious Manthan Award South Asia in 2009. The grand jury's evaluation of the site noted, *"What no media dares to report, Groundviews publicly exposes. It's a new age media for a new Sri Lanka... Free media at it's very best!"*

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# Remembering the riots

## Voices for Reconciliation



June 2013 saw violent clashes between small groups of Sri Lankans at cricket grounds around the UK. Although barely reported by the mainstream media, for

members of Voices for Reconciliation (VfR) – a peace-building network that facilitates dialogue within and between every Sri Lankan community in the UK- these altercations served as a potent reminder that communal divisions still run deep. In July 1983, exactly 30 years ago, the fire raged much longer and harder, ending countless lives and disrupting many more. Even three decades later, the impact of ‘Black July’ continues to reverberate, as it is constantly invoked at our reconciliation-focused events. It was an outbreak of anti-Tamil violence so defining and shattering for Sri Lankans that, even now, the terms ‘Black July’, ‘the riots’ or simply ‘1983’ can still stir or silence a room.

Three decades on, how has July 1983 affected different groups within the multi-faceted diaspora that its events helped create? How has it affected second-generation Sri Lankan Britons? How do we explain the significance of 1983 today to Sri Lankans and non-Sri Lankans? These are the questions that motivated this project, ‘Remembering the Riots’, for which we interviewed a wide range of Sri Lankans living in the UK, of varying ages and ethnicities, about their first-hand memories or their second-hand knowledge and awareness of the riots, and its role in their lives and their perceptions of the island. Our hope was that this simple snapshot might allow us, and others, to better understand 1983’s lasting impact on the Sri Lankan diaspora. From this greater, more nuanced understanding, we might then be able to distil the wider relevance of those events. July 1983 was clearly part of a complex chronology of history and cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider Sri Lankan context; nevertheless, we felt it important to reflect on this particular period’s significance, and its implications for the future. In this article, we share what we have learnt from the project: about the diaspora, about Sri Lanka and about ourselves.

### **Loss and remembrance**

We expected diversity of opinion amongst the diaspora, and we found it along every dimension; often within the same ethnic group, and sometimes even within the same family. To some, the term ‘Black July’ served as a haunting and humbling memory, a painful reminder of loss, escape, or migration; to others, it invoked an unfathomable story heard from an older generation or the media; to all, it was a fear-inducing warning of what is possible in a divided society.

Loss resonated in the words of our interviewees; Tamil, but also Sinhalese and Burgher individuals who lost or fled their homes during the riots. For many, the most indelible memories were of the “little things”; cherished personal objects lost forever, and small details of home.

*I remember I had these little cars, even at 23 I still valued them. And we lost it all. Little things like that. My books, my toys, whatever memorable things. Compared to others my loss is nothing. But you still feel what is yours.* - Sinhalese aged 53, whose home in a mixed area of Colombo was burned down

Even for others who were not there in 1983, amidst tales of great tragedy it was small details that struck them most powerfully. Yet some second-generation Sri Lankans who did not feel their families had been affected by the riots questioned their right to speak of the events of that July.

*So in terms of magnitude, (the loss) may be different. We weren't affected at all.* - Sinhalese, aged 30

Other second-generation Sri Lankans believed that awareness about July 1983 had grown amongst their peers thanks to the shadow of war being lifted, and thanks to the opportunities of the digital era for individuals to share stories, in words and pictures, with others across the globe and come together in collective remembrance. Many participants, first and second-generation alike, expressed a need to commemorate the riots; some viewed remembrance as a key prerequisite to preventing future outbreaks of violence, whilst others felt it was required for communal grieving.

*I think it's a way of mourning, and mourning is really important in terms of moving on. You need to be able to grieve, and I think people are still grieving.* - Second-generation Tamil

But a physical sense of loss was clearly not the only lasting effect. For many individuals directly affected, the riots were transformative on a personal and political level, shaping their views and relations with other communities.

*I've probably become more of a nationalist because of the riots. That doesn't mean I've become racist, because I grew up amongst the Sinhalese, and many remain my good friends... but I*

*became more convinced than ever that no Sinhalese can ever understand the Tamil point of view, because their mind-set is totally different to ours.* - Tamil, aged 65

The first-hand testimonies of individuals who experienced the events of 1983 provided a valuable insight into the Sri Lanka of their youth. We discovered a fascinating duality to reminiscences of the pre-riots period. On the one hand, participants expressed nostalgia for a more harmonious era, recalling a time of warmth and cordiality amongst Sri Lanka's different ethnicities. Often simultaneously, however, they revealed memories of brewing racial tensions that rendered the events of Black July unsurprising. The deep complexity of pre-riots Sri Lanka was evident.

*I used to stand in front of the mirror and imitate what I thought was Tamil! Because I loved the sound of it. It was just grand, in terms of the respect and the friendships that we had. ...[but when the riots broke out] I think the feeling was unsurprised...we [had] started to see the writing on the wall; I remember as a child in the 1970s already feeling very nervous, there was a sense of rather menacing thuggery that you could witness in the neighbourhood, there was a lack of tolerance.* - Burgher

### **What story is being told?**

This complexity is epitomised by the terminology surrounding July 1983. Many participants felt that the common designation of the events of 1983 as “riots” was problematic, and proposed a varied set of alternative terms. More than once, the violence was described as a ‘pogrom’; a term that some interviewees found not only more accurate in conveying the ethnic dimension of events, but also their severity and the bitterness left behind.

*These words are used interchangeably but actually riots and pogroms are two completely different things. I mean we had riots in London, right [in 2011]. Those are riots. What we had in Sri Lanka was actually an anti-Tamil pogrom... systematic killing of certain people and people seeking them out. For me, when I actually made that connection, that was when something clicked in me to say ‘Aha! Now I can see the anger’.* - Muslim, aged 35

The historically anti-Semitic connotation of the term ‘pogrom’ was not lost on several participants, who referenced the persecution of Jews when describing the violence against Tamils. A comparative approach was common, with many

interviewees drawing parallels with other conflicts, such as that in Bosnia in the 1990s, thereby placing Black July within a much wider context. Yet, despite assertions of the ethnic nature of the events of July 1983, many interviewees also highlighted differences in class, education and economic opportunity as drivers of tension.

*If I was an average Sinhalese person, I would have felt that the Tamils got what they had coming to them, because it is a fact that Tamils had more than their proportion of public sector jobs, and were in so many positions of power compared to the ratio in the population.* - Tamil, aged 65

One of the most controversial topics, touched on by everyone albeit in different ways, concerned the role of the Sri Lankan authorities in the violence. Many interviewees remain shocked and disturbed by alleged official complicity in the events of July 1983, whether by politicians, the police, the army or other authority figures. Some saw the government as key instigators and the violence as being “politically sanctioned”.

*They [were] looking for particular households, they had electoral lists and they knew exactly where Tamil people lived. And when we asked, you know, what are you doing, I remember, I particularly remember one of the rioters saying “well we’ll chase the Tamils and give one of the big houses to you, you can have one of those”.* - Sinhalese, aged 53

Some saw the police and fire brigade as neglectful in their lack of action, or opportunistic in joining the wave of looting. Others, in contrast, perceived the authorities as quite separate to the ‘mob’ perpetrators; as a protective force, albeit one that failed to prevent the violence escalating.

*It escalated into something it shouldn’t have...it should have been stopped... that’s what the authorities are there for.* - Sinhalese, aged 30

On one issue all participants who experienced the riots were in agreement; they took place amidst a grave lack of information where uncertainty and false rumours -for example of imminent LTTE attacks on Colombo- spurred an atmosphere of panic and chaos. Several interviewees spoke of a level of propaganda and bias on all sides that began in the aftermath of July 1983 but that has continued unabated to the present day, exacerbating and entrenching divisions. Almost everyone interviewed spoke of the need to piece together

information from many, sometimes conflicting, sources to find any semblance of the ‘truth’ they sought. A concern raised by many, however, was that the views and knowledge being passed down to subsequent generations is partial, and misleadingly incomplete.

### **1983’s long shadow**

Many of the relevant factors thirty years ago- the juxtaposition of ethnic harmony and discord, socio-economic disparities, political inflammation of tensions, and a lack of unbiased media sources- remain pertinent today. Other, more recent, developments were also highlighted by our participants. A commonly expressed view was that one could “draw a very straight line” between anti-Tamil feeling in 1983 and anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka today. In this light, July 1983 was viewed as an ominous foreshadowing of potential violence to come. The prevailing opinion amongst participants was that the lessons of 1983 have not been learnt, and that communal violence could well erupt again.

Some encouraging signs over recent months, such as popular online and offline campaigns against intolerance in Sri Lanka, show that there are many who will stand against such violence. Yet lingering division and discontent, and sparks of violence –such as that in June within the diaspora, and recent episodes targeting Muslims in Sri Lanka- are worrying portents for the future. Whilst we profoundly hope that Sri Lanka never again experiences the events of July 1983, it is vital to remember what happened. In part, we remember simply to reflect on both the barbarity and the humanity on display. The last week of July 1983 was a week of collective madness in Sri Lanka: neighbour turning on neighbour, people being burnt on the streets, family heirlooms and family businesses being gutted for sport. Yet there were also so many stories of solidarity and courage on the part of all communities: neighbour sheltering neighbour, monks and churchmen and citizens arguing with mobs intent on violence, friends helping friends rebuild their lives.

We also remember in order to reflect on the key lessons for today. Firstly, we must never ignore society’s ability to rapidly descend to barbarity; it only takes a relatively small number of frenzied individuals to band together and cause wide-scale destruction, although it is the silent complicity and tacit approval of many

others that facilitates such activity. Secondly, words matter, and while political leaders, religious leaders, and ordinary Sri Lankans may not literally pour petrol on one another today, when we use hateful, stereotyping words we may as well do so, for the ideology behind such actions is provided by these words. Finally, 'ethnic' riots may in part be driven by a genuine prejudice against a particular group but, more often than not, this is only part of a complex mix of economic, social, and political grievances. Until both hate-based rhetoric and these underlying grievances are addressed, a repeat of such violence surely cannot be ruled out. The murders, assaults, arson, and looting of July 1983 were directed at one specific community, but the lessons are universal and bear remembering by every policy-maker, community leader, and citizen, in Sri Lanka and beyond.

*1983 is a black mark in Sri Lanka's history. And this is something that we need to be reinforced with; that we never again allow ourselves to be so blinded that we are able to commit the crimes that we did.* - Muslim, aged 35

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Voices for Reconciliation would like to thank all those who participated in the 'Remembering the Riots' projects. We unfortunately could not include all of the insights that were shared with us, but we are very grateful to every participant for telling us their stories.

Image courtesy [\*Thuppahi's blog\*](#)



# On the 30th Anniversary of the Pogrom of July 1983

Dr. Devanesan Nesiah

I was GA and District Secretary Jaffna at that time, and was not directly a victim of the pogrom, but was very much involved with the care of around 60,000 victims who moved into Jaffna in the days and weeks following the pogrom. But that is not all. My story starts earlier, around 1980, during the time that I was posted to the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration. I had an unexpected visit from Prof. A.J. Wilson and Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam. I did not know it then, but the pogrom was already in the making.

The objective of the visit of Wilson and Neelan was to inform me that the island-wide District Development Council (DDC) elections were likely to be held soon, and that I was likely to be posted as the Government Agent and District Secretary of Jaffna immediately after those elections. They were keen that I should accept the appointment and help to develop the Jaffna DDC as a model for all others. I expressed my opinion that the DDC scheme provided for little or no devolution and that any decentralization was to the District Minister, Hon. U.B. Wijekoon, an admirable man but who was appointed by, and answerable to, the President and

not to the District Councils. They agreed, but said that the President had promised them that if the scheme proved to be viable, substantive powers would be devolved to the District Councils. That was why the Tamil leaders were keen that I should be Jaffna's Government Agent and District Secretary.

I asked them if they believed in that promise. They confessed that they too had reservations, but that in addition to the unconvincing carrot of future devolution, the President had referred to a compelling stick in the form of a pogrom planned by unknown persons, of which the President came to know of. He had suggested that the way to avert the pogrom was to sustain an ongoing political partnership between the Sinhalese and Tamil leaders. In the circumstances, I agreed to accept the appointment if and when I received it.

Some months later, some tragic events occurred in Jaffna on the eve of the scheduled DDC elections. Two senior ministers, Gamini Dissanayake and Cyril Matthew, had arrived, presumably to secure the election of pro-government candidates by hook or by crook. The Tamil militant groups, who were at that time working together as one, killed two pro-government candidates and two policemen. The regular police were under the direction of the highly respected D.I.G. Mahendran. But after the killings, a large number of police reservists arrived, taking orders from another D.I.G. sent specifically to deal with the militant groups. These reserve policemen went on a rampage, burning down the precious Jaffna Public Library with 90,000 manuscripts, highly valued by all of Jaffna. They also burned down several other buildings and killed or attempted to kill several persons, including the popular MP for Jaffna, V. Yogeswaran and his wife. Fortunately, the Yogeswarans escaped, but much later, under changed political situations, they were killed by the LTTE along with many others. It does not appear that either Cabinet Minister was responsible for these killings, but when the officer in charge of the Navy in Jaffna (Sandagiri) attempted to save the public library by dousing the flames, it is believed that they ordered him to desist so as to avoid conflict between the Navy and the police.

Our election laws and procedures as well as our record of conducting elections had been excellent up to the 1981 DDC elections, which marked the 50th anniversary of universal adult franchise, introduced to Sri Lanka by the

Donoughmore Commission in 1931. Sadly, the 1981 Jaffna DDC elections were blatantly rigged, with the meticulously trained polling staff dismissed when they came to collect ballot boxes and ballot papers and replaced with untrained and unruly personnel brought in from outside the district by the two cabinet ministers. The then Government Agent went along with the rigging and, under the direction of the two cabinet ministers, signed the letters sacking the trained polling staff and appointing untrained, unruly personnel in their place. This was blatantly unlawful, because under our election laws, it was the Government Agent who was the returning Officer, and, in election matters, outranked everyone else, including Cabinet Ministers. To his credit, the young elections officer, Jayaratnam, after discussing the matter with the Commissioner of Elections in Colombo, refused to cooperate. The District Minister too was not party to the rigging. In the event, the rigging of the election was so badly bungled that the Federal Party won all the seats and Chairman Nadarajah became the head of the DDC. All this I learnt a few days later when I took over as Government Agent and District Secretary. I consulted hundreds of public servants and civil society leaders, all of whom agreed on the basic facts.

My first few weeks in Jaffna were spent in day-to-day administration, in getting to know the Secretariat staff and Members of the Council and in setting up the trappings of the DDC (Council chambers, flag, mace, etc.) while coping with recurrent violence involving the armed forces, police, Tamil militant groups, and the public. I established a practice of visiting the scene of each incidence of major violence as quickly as possible, visiting the casualties at the scene of the violence or in hospital, together (whenever possible) with the District Minister and the Chairman of the DDC. This helped to contain the violence. I also recorded and followed up on each of hundreds of complaints of political violence. These practices not only enabled me to get to know many of those involved, voluntarily or involuntarily, on all sides, but also helped to build up goodwill, which proved to be critically important throughout my tenure in Jaffna and, in particular, in the events relating to the July 1983 pogrom and consequent in-migration of over 60,000 IDPs into Jaffna. I took particular care to build up and maintain good relationship with the leaders of the armed forces. Happily, I had the unstinted

cooperation of the public services in Jaffna and also the goodwill of both the District Minister, Hon. U.B. Wijekoon, and DDC Chairman Nadarajah.

In the meantime, Chairman Nadarajah and all Council members, disillusioned with the lack of devolution, had decided to resign, effectively putting an end to the Jaffna DDC. Cabinet Minister Gamini Dissanayake heard of this and flew in to dissuade Chairman Nadarajah. Minister Dissanayake expressed agreement on the need for real devolution and invited Chairman Nadarajah to Colombo for talks on this matter with President Jayawardene, Prime Minister Premadasa, Minister Lalith Athulathmudali, and others. Chairman Nadarajah insisted that Mr. S. Sivathasan, Director of Planning for Jaffna, and I should participate in these discussions and this was agreed to. The three of us made several trips to Colombo and had many meetings. We were told again and again that much more money would be allocated to the Jaffna DDC and to DDC Members than hitherto, and that there would be major development projects for Jaffna, such as very substantial expansion of Jaffna Hospital, a well-equipped sports stadium for Jaffna, etcetera. But Chairman Nadarajah kept saying that, more than such development, he wanted devolution. After many fruitless meetings, he was told that more money could be allocated to Jaffna, but there would be no meaningful devolution.

Chairman Nadarajah sought one more meeting with President J.R. Jayawardene to hand in his resignation. The President fixed the date, time, and venue (President's house in Colombo Fort) for that meeting. We did not at that time realize the significance of the date, time, and venue. This we discovered when, in the course of that meeting, the Secretary to the President came in to announce that the Vel Chariot was outside the gates and awaiting the blessing of the President. The President invited Chairman Nadarajah to join him to receive the Vel Cart. This was a newsworthy photo opportunity—perhaps a last-minute attempt to influence Chairman Nadarajah. But it did not work. The letter of resignation was handed over and reluctantly accepted by the President. The next day, we left by car for Jaffna.

On arrival in Jaffna, we heard details of an ambush by a group of militants of an army vehicle, resulting in 13 soldiers being killed. By the time the army reinforcements arrived, the militants, as usual in such cases, had vanished from the

scene. Army personnel, in retaliation for the 13 soldiers killed, went round the peninsula killing people at random and burning their bodies. The dead bodies of the 13 soldiers were dispatched to their respective villages for cremation and funeral rites, but under a Presidential directive that many found to be inexplicable, all the bodies were transferred to Kannatte for a common funeral and cremation. There were fiery speeches made at the funeral, and these sparked off the July 1983 pogrom. It was then that I realized the significance of what Wilson and Neelan told me three years earlier about the existence of a blueprint for a pogrom. This was a well-planned diabolic plot. Chairman Nadarajah's resignation was seen as severing the cooperation between the Sinhalese and Tamil leaders, and triggered the planned pogrom. Clearly, if the Tamil leaders had continued to go along with the DDC farce, they could have delayed, but not averted, the meticulously planned pogrom.

That there were civilian deaths in Jaffna related to the ambush of the 13 soldiers was public knowledge and could not be denied. Accordingly, the state media put out the story that there was a shootout after the ambush, and some 20-odd persons, mostly terrorists, were killed in that shootout at the scene of the ambush. I was extensively questioned by the local and foreign media as well as High Commissioners and Ambassadors on what really happened. I told the truth, which flatly contradicted the state media reports; I estimated that the number of deaths was at least 50 civilians, spread over the peninsula and therefore unrelated to the ambush except as revenge killings. This was carried by foreign media.

The state response was prompt. I was told that I was going to be interdicted and served charges for spreading misinformation. I knew that once I was interdicted and charges were framed, it would be very difficult for me to prove that what I had said was correct. I quickly went round the peninsula, personally checking on the dead and burning bodies and sent a message to Colombo that my statement was correct. I further said that I was conducting a quick survey of the events and that within a day or two I would give them a full list (well over 50) of the civilians killed: their names, gender, ages, the location of their burning bodies, and other relevant data. My message reached Colombo before the order for interdiction came and the charges for spreading misinformation were framed. The response of

the state, again, was prompt. I was asked to desist from carrying out the survey and assured that there would be no interdiction and no charges. As far as the state was concerned, the file was closed. Clearly, the last thing the state wanted was documentary evidence of the widespread killings of civilians. I accepted their order to desist from carrying out the survey because my priority at that time was to look after the thousands of IDPs who were streaming into the peninsula and for this I needed the cooperation of Colombo. Although I was informed that the file was closed, I knew that it was not, that my days/weeks/months in office in Jaffna were numbered and that I was likely to re-enter the 'pool'.

The immediate problem that I had to resolve was to find a way to cope with the unprecedented influx of over 60,000 IDPs in the context of extensive shortages of resources and supplies. Many came on their own, by walking through the woods with bleeding feet, or in private vehicles such as buses and lorries, or, in the case of a few affluent persons, by air. A very large number remained in IDP camps in Colombo and elsewhere. They were fed by the state in those camps but received little else. There was virtually no privacy and bathing facilities were utterly inadequate. Many had fled in their nightclothes and had no change of clothing for weeks. Moreover, these camps were susceptible to attacks and the IDPs occupying them lived in constant fear. I was told that they would be transferred to Jaffna by sea, but I informed the President's Secretariat that I was not in a position to accept them. This upset the President's Secretariat and, quite naturally, the IDPs concerned as well as the Tamil political leaders. Many thought I was being indifferent to the concerns of the IDPs.

I was in fact very much concerned about the welfare of the new batch of IDPs but had very good reason to take the position I had articulated. The government had virtually stopped the import of petrol and diesel into Jaffna on the grounds that they would be used by militant groups. Medical supplies were also cut to the bone on the same grounds. Most of these items were available to the public only in the black market at prices which were far in excess of what all but the very rich could afford. Without the fuel, the IDPs transferred to KKS harbor would be stuck there indefinitely without shelter, medication, or means of access to any place where they would be sheltered and safe. I would then have thousands of IDPs in my

charge, dying on my hands. This would have been even more cruel than keeping them in IDP camps in Colombo.

The President summoned me for a meeting with top security personnel, top Petroleum Corporation management, and others concerned. I explained my position on what needed to be done to prevent large-scale deaths of IDPs sent to Jaffna. The President kept silent, except to ask the officials one by one to explain why the items I wanted sent to Jaffna, especially petrol and diesel, could not be sent. He then closed the meeting. After the meeting, I informed Wilson and Neelan, who had originally persuaded me to accept my appointment as GA and District Secretary of Jaffna, that I would rather quit the public service than preside over IDPs in my charge in Jaffna dying in the thousands. The next day, Professor Wilson informed me that President J.R. Jayawardene wanted to see me again. I met him, but this time he was alone. I repeated what I said on the earlier occasion, but he now seemed to understand. He told me that a full fuel train would be sent to Jaffna before the IDPs arrived. I then informed him that the IDPs would be well-received at KKS Harbor and transported promptly, either to IDP camps in Jaffna or to the homes of their choice.

Fortunately, all concerned, from the District Minister to the DDC to the public servants of Jaffna to the local population, were very supportive. It was agreed that the IDP camps would not be run by the public servants (as elsewhere), but by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Accordingly, NGOs were invited to offer their services to run IDP camps. There was an abundance of offers, and we had to choose the most suitable. The NGOs would get the (meager) government per capita rations for the IDPs in their charge, but they were all welcome to find additional resources so as to supply superior services. In fact, they all found resources and donors to supply special meals from time to time and also special services, such as TV sets, clothing for those who needed it, toys for children, etcetera. India had offered a fleet of luxury ships to transport all the IDPs from Colombo to Jaffna, but the Sri Lankan government did not want to be over-dependent on India in the treatment of IDPs, and had accepted only one luxury ship called Chithambaram. Thus, most of the IDPs were sent in ramshackle cargo ships used to transport coal, with no cabins, no proper toilets, no privacy, and no

facilities for freshly cooked meals. Those who arrived in these cargo ships after two very rough days at sea were in pitiful condition, mentally and physically. In contrast, those who arrived in the luxury ship had comfortable cabins, three course meals and waiter service. They were all received at Kankesanthurai by a mixed group of officials and community leaders. I was present whenever possible. The IDPs were provided with facilities for washing and changing, followed by a good freshly cooked meal. They were then requested to board any of the fleet of buses assembled there to travel to the place of their choice: the homes to which they wished to go or the IDP camps they were assigned to.

Those who went to their homes received appropriate daily rations, as did those who ran the camps. The camp officials had complete freedom to operate them as they thought fit, subject to certain rules set out at the outset. These rules included equal treatment of IDPs, and in particular no class or caste distinction; no political indoctrination; high standards of hygiene, etc. There was some monitoring by government officials but no interference, and even the monitoring turned out to be superfluous, because the camps were run even better than specified.

A sad fallout of this program was that the military rounded up the Sinhalese settled in Jaffna and took them south—all but a few Sinhalese who refused to leave. Perhaps this was a wise precaution, but as far as I know, none of the Sinhalese civilians in Jaffna were attacked or hurt. It was particularly sad for me, because the Jaffna I grew up in during the 1930s and '40s had a strong Sinhalese presence and an even stronger Muslim presence. I cannot remember a single incidence of communal tension in those days. The evacuation of the Sinhalese by the army in 1983 and the expulsion of the Muslims by the LTTE in 1990 reduced Jaffna to a virtually mono-ethnic peninsula—much less rich and less lively than it was. It is my hope that the Sinhalese who were evacuated and the Muslims who were expelled will return before long. I also hope that the thousands of Tamils who were displaced or who fled Jaffna will return. To be realistic, not everyone who was evacuated or displaced or expelled will return, but at least a partial reversal will be most welcome.

As a footnote, my own transfer from Jaffna followed a few months later in 1984, but I managed to find a place at Harvard University and the funding to follow,

although at that time I would have preferred to continue in Jaffna. In retrospect, my entry into Harvard University opened up opportunities for me and brought me unforeseen benefits. But to this date the fate of those displaced to Jaffna and the suffering that I witnessed weigh heavily on me.



# Forgetting Black July

Iraj de Silva

I was born ten years after Black July. I am a Sinhalese. A week or so ago, as the thirty-year anniversary approached, for curiosity's sake, I did a small experiment. I asked some of my peers a question: "What do you know about Black July?" Of twenty-two Sinhalese, eighteen did not know what it was. I asked eight Tamil friends, all of whom knew, and had family experiences to share. Here are a few of those responses.

[For those readers who may not be able to listen to the clips: The accounts of those who remember consist of the received memories of the sufferings of two Tamil families, and the reflections of two non-Tamil youth. Forgetting happens in many stages. One response references the violence but is unsure of the event, while another mixes it up with the JVP insurrection. A few say that they do not know of Black July at all.]

All this forced me to reflect on my own background.

I had known very little about Black July till, in my late teens, I read Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. I was horrified by both what I learnt, and my own ignorance of these events. Of course, our history books do not cover it as they conveniently end at 1948. However, it had not really been spoken of at home either. In contrast, I had heard many a gruesome tale from the times of 'JVP troubles' of 1971 and 1987. (It is worth noting that quite a few of the Sinhalese respondents believed that 1983 was also a JVP insurrection.) My family was

neither involved in nor was closely affected by either of these two events. Yet we remembered one and not the other. Of course the argument can be made that the JVP insurrections were more widespread, or that 1987-89 was closer to my time than 1983. However, I believe that this disparity is due to a matter of ethnicity.

Those that look to the future of our country, call for progress, speak of *moving on*, and above all emphasise a Sri Lankan identity. '*We are all Sri Lankan*'. Though this is absolutely true, this does not make us all the same. One of the key divisions that exist is along ethnic lines. We cannot let ourselves believe that any Sri Lankan yet living has ever really escaped the paradigm of ethnicity. Depending on the communities we grow up in, the languages we speak, the religions we practice and the festivals we celebrate, our notions of identity become intrinsically linked to ethnicity. A key aspect of this is what I shall call our communal histories. These are the oral narratives, the tales of our origins, our family histories, the memories that are passed down, the jokes that are cracked, and of course our present experiences. This all comes to form what we remember and forget, concerning our lives and the life of our community.

There are many histories of the island. But given the moment at hand let us look at Tamil and Sinhala narratives of history. The Sinhala kings from the Anuradhapura to the Kotte period, and the Tamil kings of the Jaffna Kingdom, play their part in these separate histories. But these diverging narratives are not merely derived from the distant past, but depend more on the recent and present experiences that actively shape communal histories. And acts of violence cause deep divisions in these histories. Due to the events of Black July, where the violence was deeply embedded in ethnic identities and ideologies, radically different communal narratives emerged. The experiences of that fateful period were decided principally by one's ethnicity. And so Tamil narratives of the period naturally differ widely from those of the Sinhalese. Through thirty years of war, ethnic conflict, racially charged rhetoric and widespread militarisation, one can only assume that the divide between these groups of narratives has only widened. How can we deny that the experiences of living in Sri Lanka, over the last fifty years, have been decidedly different for Tamils and Sinhalese?

These communal narratives are among key foundations of our notions of ‘Sinhala-ness’ and ‘Tamil-ness’. They influence the way we view our communities place on this island: as the sole owners of a home, as equal partners, complete outsiders, or whatever else it may be. We can only transcend narrow communal interests to forge a Sri Lankan identity, by understanding the narratives of other communities. A crucial aspect of this is that, it is only through confronting the alternate narratives can each community fully reflect on itself.

Black July taught me several things. One, that ethnic cleansing does not exist only in the strong-room of history, in distant Germany, or the Punjab. Two, that even after thirty years the wounds of 1983 remain tender. Hence, hoping that the lacerations left behind by a thirty-year will fast slip into history, so that we can move on, is a pretty delusion. And also, that I am Sinhalese. I speak the language, I am set in its cultures, and I grew up enmeshed in its rhetoric. From my experience, for those who speak from podiums and sermonise from chairs, being Sinhalese, involves being the ‘oldest’ and largest ethnic group on the island, of it having warded off the foreign ‘other,’ and possessing particular traits such as resilience, courage etc. However, when I read personal narratives of the Tamils who lived through Black July, I saw the other side of ‘Sinhala-ness.’ How it can easily unleash horrendous violence. Though the heroism of those Sinhalese who defended their Tamil comrades does shine through, I cannot ignore the fact that this violence sprung from Sinhalese notions of identity and entitlement. If I accept the acts of Sinhalese heroism, then I must also accept the acts of Sinhalese violence. After thirty-years of war, I believe that, along with courage, hospitality and kindness, a propensity for violence towards the ‘other,’ lies at the heart of ‘Sinhala-ness.’ If ‘never again’ is to be anything more than a futile dream, I must accept it. If not the spectre of hate could all too easily slip in to our homes and hearts. And given the recent rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiments lead by the likes of the BBS, that spectre is still very much amongst us.

None of us can just shed our ethnic identities and don a Sri Lankan identity. The decades of violence created chasms that divide our communal narratives.

Understanding the narrative of the other is the key to reconciliation, in that it is

both an exercise in empathy and repentance, but also in that it is the narratives of the 'other,' which show us the faults within our own narratives and ideologies.

July of 1983 is as important a day for a Sinhalese as it is for a Tamil. The events of that year, and how deal with it, can teach us far more about ourselves than any victory parade or origins myth. If 'never again' is to be anything more than fleeting hopes, we must all remember, think and see our reflections in the carnivorous smoke that blotted the *Sri Lankan* sky, that fateful July in 1983.



# A moonlit walk

Devaka Seneviratne



July 1983 was four years after I was born. Like many in my generation who were not directly affected by the events that took place, memories are hazy and disjointed. Black July is mostly remembered by faint memories such as the closing up of Lanka Medicals in Kandy, a shop that in those early days had a steady stock of Matchbox ‘dinky’ cars. My Uncle’s house in Bandarawela where we would spend holidays, had a neighbor whose car was set on fire. As a Sinhalese it is

something that has at the back of my mind, made me ashamed to belong to the same people that were capable of such horrors, horrors that I only recently have fully come to know of and understand. Spending large parts of my childhood on tea estates surrounded by Tamils and going to a school where we had a mix of Tamils and Sinhalese in the same class made it so normal for us to believe that we were all just Sri Lankans and not divided by petty politics and race.

Black July in later years was when you learned to be extra careful going around Colombo as it was usually marked by some act of violence by the LTTE. The shame and knowledge that nothing could match what happened in 1983 however, was always prevalent.

My personal memories of 1983 also involve leaving our cosy estate Bungalow in Balangoda and going for a moonlit walk with my mother, brother and domestic help while my father stayed back home. Being told that we were going to Aunty Jean's, on the neighbouring estate for a meal (event though it was late at night), hiding in a ditch and staying quiet and finally seeing our Peugeot 403 and getting in to it along with our family and those of the driver and the cook.

When I was asked to write a piece about 1983 as part of a photography project for *Groundviews* I thought I'll ask my father about what exactly happened back then. So I emailed him, turns out 'my' 1983 was actually an year earlier. His email is below:

*... back to Pettiagala, Balangoda – what happened here was a like a 'dry run' – one year before the '83 riots – it was in August 1982.*

*Pettiagala was from the late 1940s owned by SJV Chelvanayagam – the father of Federalism. In fact my classmate Mohan Ellawela who lived in Balangoda used to refer to Pettiagala as 'Punchi Yapanaya' as from the Superintendent down to most of the staff, were hand-picked relatives or associates of SJV Chelvanayagam.*

*By 1982 the seeds of communalism had taken root around Balangoda – especially anti-Tamil feelings that were running high. We soon got wind that groups of young men had taken lodging in and around Balangoda to create mischief – it was more than mere mischief. Some trivial skirmish [they were waiting for something to 'start the ball rolling'] sparked off*

*a mini-riot around Ratnapura and within next to no time spread to Pelmadulla – from Pelmadulla it was a mere hop step and a jump to Balangoda.*

*That night marauding Sinhala fanatics [said to be from ‘outside’] set fire to the Superintendent’s bungalow at Upper Balangoda whose estate adjoins Lower Division of Pettiagala also known as ‘Bombuwa’ Division. Upper Balangoda Estate was a proprietor owned plantation whose owner Superintendent was a Tamil. He was perhaps in his early 60s then, dignified and never spoke a harsh word to anyone. We were dumbfounded as why anyone should harm that gentleman. His entire bungalow was reduced to cinders; fortunately he was in Colombo at time of the incident as otherwise the mob would have surely harmed him too. As soon as I heard about the torching of the Superintendent’s bungalow I rushed to Upper Balangoda estate – it was too late – it was a massive fire and no one could even get close to the raging inferno – the heat engulfed the area. The mob by then had retreated after their vile deed.*

*I went back to Pettiagala and got my SDs and staff to plan ahead for that night as I had a feeling that the rioters would target Pettiagala next as the general perception was that Jaffna Tamils still owned the estate. That evening my Transport Agents [also Tamils] got my permission to park two of their lorries in the sports ground around 150 meters from the factory.*

*I also engaged ‘watchers’ along the perimeter of the estate as well as got my ‘town catchers’ to inform me if they got wind of an attack; yet my gut feeling was that they would stage an attack not by coming along the lone road, up the famed Pettiagala hill but from the south via Samanalawatte Estate.*

*My main concern was the protection of people – my staff, workers and my family along with the estate bungalow and the tea factory. Pettiagala was by then recording the highest tea prices in the country and its yield per hectare was nudging 2000 kg/ha.*

*The protection of the factory and bungalow was foremost in my mind. By the time my watchers rushed and gave me the grim news of an impending attack we were ready. But an ‘advanced party’ of the mob – just 4 to 5 of them had stealthily got near the two parked 5 ton lorries and had thrown petrol bombs – as the flames rose up I ran to the bungalow and got you – the baby – packed into the 403 and quickly got the rest into the car – servants, driver and their families and ours. There were more than a dozen packed into the Peugeot*

*403 and driver Anton was instructed to take the Field No 23 road that cannot be seen to the factory – I also told him to switch off his lights and with the aid of the moonlight get to the higher located fields and get all of you to hide inside drains in the tea field.*

*I stayed put in bungalow alone [can't remember where Snoopy was] and readied myself with my loaded shotgun; switched off all the bungalow lights too. In the meantime my faithful Sinhalese watchers had recognized some men from the mob that were walking towards the factory and had implored them not to do any harm to the factory as it was all owned by Sinhalese people now and by the State. Anyway the first petrol bomb was hurled at the factory – my staff were ready with fire extinguishers and promptly saw to it that it was extinguished.*

*In the meantime the two empty lorries were ablaze – no one could get near the lorries.*

*I am told that at that time, someone shouted out that an armed Police party was coming along with me – I had a bit of a history of being a tough character as I used to thrash some errant workers when the occasion demanded it. Firm but fair was my credo. Anyway the mob suddenly ran away as if by magic – no further damage to the factory and the bungalow was untouched – I thank God for saving us! With the coast clear I sent word for Anton to bring back all of you to the bungalow. I then got to know how all of you had hidden inside a lateral drain under the tea bushes.*

*My frightened workers however – mostly female pluckers had run away to the surrounding jungles and did not return for at least a week thereafter – my quest of notching 2,000 kg/ha was severely affected as the morale was low with the workers thereafter.*

*The next morning I took some pictures of the burnt out remains of the two lorries. I later packed all you – Rajiv, You [as a baby] Ammi and the servant girl and headed to Colombo after making entry at the Police Station.*

*That fateful night when the mob came to attack and set fire to the two lorries at Pettiagala, they also set fire to two line rooms near the location where the lorries were destroyed – that is what prompted the workers to flee in their numbers to the surrounding jungles.*

*You wanted to know about Snoopy – now I remember – I set her loose in the garden whilst I remained inside the bungalow with my loaded shotgun. Snoopy being an alert dog, I felt would warn me in advance by her barking when any intruder got near the compound.*

*Brig. Dennis Hapugalle was given the task of restoring order in Ratnapura / Balangoda. He sent a young Army officer Lieutenant Angelo Peiris to look after Pettiagala – he was a fine young officer and spent many days and nights with me – whilst all of you were in Colombo. It was no surprise when Angelo quickly rose up in rank – until he was tragically killed by the LTTE at the battle of Elephant Pass later.*

*Brig. Dennis Hapugalle deftly sorted out matters and within literally weeks Ratnapura / Balangoda was back to normal. Perhaps that may be the reason why, when the ‘Black July’ of 1983 burned much of the country, the Ratnapura District was relatively quiet – maybe because they had a dose of this senseless killing, looting and burning of property a year earlier in 1982.*

*When we heard of the chaos in Colombo, we – at Balangoda, Ratnapura etc were vigilant – there were no serious incidents like at Bandarawela, Badulla etc. In fact my friend*

*Fr Augustine Phillips [now the late] who was a Tamil had to literally flee from attackers who had come to ‘finish him off’ at Badulla. As soon as he had got wind of an impending attack he had managed to run away using a side entrance with his family and some friends [all Tamils] who piled into his small van and drove away as fast as he could – well he drove on and on until he reached Balangoda when he had stopped at a shop and called me. Thankfully I was in the Bungalow and answered his call. I told him that my place was open and he and his party were most welcome. What a sight it was to see their terrified faces, although Fr Augi was seemingly calm. They stayed with me for around ten days until the situation was calm and later they proceeded to Colombo. But I was told that they had to stay in some Refugee Camp in Ratmalana as all their relatives’ houses had been torched at Wellawatte – it was almost a case of from the ‘frying pan to the fire’. Later many of them had emigrated to both Australia & Canada.*

30 years is a long time and I hope we will never go back to a Black July as the country has gone through enough turmoil in our recent history. The events that took place however, should never ever be forgotten lest we make the same mistakes again.



# Pursuit of Revenge is Not Path to Justice

Maheesan Niranjan



In our favourite bar on the afternoon of the 21st this month, I was having a beer with my usual drinking partner, the Sri Lankan Tamil fellow, Sivapuramam Thevaram. “That was a horrific photograph, no?” he started the conversation. He

didn't have to be more specific. I knew instantly that he was talking about the photograph taken thirty years ago at the Borella bus station, supposedly by Atta / Raavaya employee Chandraguptha Amarasinghe. The photograph was of a naked Tamil boy surrounded by dancing thugs who, in all probability, went on to murder and burn the boy. In which order, we have no way of knowing.

That “Black July,” has a certain effect worth mentioning here. Have you heard the story of two Englishmen shipwrecked on an uninhabited island? They never spoke to each other because they had not been properly introduced. Such an issue does not arise for Tamils of a particular age range. They start talking about which camp they spent that week in, and of their journey by ship to Kankesanthuray. So, you can appreciate why Chandraguptha's photograph got us into spontaneous conversation.

Thevaram relates to the plight of the young man with strong emotion. “It could have been me, you know – or my brother,” he says. “I was a kilometre away from that unfortunate young chap and it was the presence of mind I had to jump off a second floor balcony that saved me. My brother came even closer escaping because he spoke fluent Sinhala,” he recalls. “Our two guardian angels were doing overtime, while that of the young boy in Chandraguptha's photograph had gone for an early evening in.”

This easy topic of conversation centred round the year 1983 is etched deep in the minds of some people. It is now hard-wired in their hippocampi.

“But, just because something is in memory, does not mean you can always retrieve it without impedance,” Thevaram claimed. “See, it is a bit like the light coming from stars. It is light that left the star several million years ago you are now looking at. It must have gone through transformations – reflections, refractions and phase shifts before reaching us, no? Similarly, neural signals that come from that permanent dent I have in deeper brain, when I pull them up to the working brain, travel through other stuff also stored there.”

“Oh, cut the rubbish and get to the point,” I said, not at all in tune with some weak analogy he was trying to build.

“See, what happened post-1983 is important. We got ourselves into a cycle of mutual destruction over these 30 years, didn’t we? One side said the only way to save the Tamil people from 1983-like pogroms, was to accelerate the process of separation, and to achieve it by force – a perfectly justified line of thinking, some would say. Equally, the other side thought that the all-important goal of maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country — so men of importance may sleep stretched full length — was to put down the rebellion at any cost – that, too, is an argument with merit, some would say.” Following that comment the two of us went through the well-rehearsed exchange of chicken and egg scenarios.

We went on a killing spree: Anantharajan, Amirthalingam, Yogeswaran #1, Yogeswaran #2, and so on... so that no Tamil may suffer another episode of that Black July. All in the pursuit of justice, some say. We went on a killing spree: Pararajasingham, Ponnambalam, Raviraj, and so on... so that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country may be maintained. All in the pursuit of justice, some say.

We carried out indiscriminate bombings, didn’t we, of the Maligawa, of the airport, the Dehiwala train and so on... so that no Tamil may suffer another episode of that Black July. All in the pursuit of justice, some say. We carried out indiscriminate bombings, didn’t we, of the Naval church and of every square kilometer of the landmass between Kilinochchi and the Eastern sea and so on... so that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country may be maintained. All in the pursuit of justice, some say.

We massacred people – innocent men, women and children at Anuradhapura, Aranthalawa, Keppitigollawa, the Kathankudi mosque and so on... so that no Tamil may suffer another episode of that Black July. All in the pursuit of justice, some say. We carried out massacres of innocent men, women and children on the Nawanthurai boat, the five boys in Trinco, the dozen aid workers and so on... so that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country may be maintained. All in the pursuit of justice, some say.

We threw thousands of Muslims out of their homes in Jaffna, so that no Tamil may suffer another episode of that Black July. In the pursuit of justice, some say, and you might believe they have a point. We threw hundreds of people out of their homes in Valikamam and we dumped people from Keppapilavu in the middle of a jungle, so that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country may be maintained. All in the pursuit of justice, some say, and you might believe they have a point.

And all along, we ignored as minor detail that the social class from which the fighters were drawn was rather different from the one from which the decision makers came from.

And when people tell us about justice, according to Thevaram, we should challenge them. “Push their arguments a little and see what sort of grounding those arguments have. And by doing that so many times,” he emphasized, “I have discovered a universal formula.”

“What is it? What is it?” I asked in excitement.

“It is a spelling issue, you see. I ask them to spell the word ‘justice’, and you know how they spell it?” “How,” I ask.

“‘aar’, ‘eee’, ‘vee’, ‘eee’ ‘en’, ‘gee’, ‘eee’.”

“Very poor spelling indeed,” I am sure you will agree. We can blame it on 1956 and all that.

Let’s fast forward to the endgame that was reached in May 2009. An asymmetric end, some continue to complain, but being the grown-up man he is Thevaram wants to move on. Shortly after that end game, he had made a promise – a promise to his old man Sivapuram, that he will come back often to Sri Lanka, to engage and to contribute in small ways.

Now we all know how easy it is to make promises, and not keep them. A bit like New Year resolutions, we could say. Take me, for example. I promise to become a vegetarian, to cut down on beer, to go regularly to the gym etc., on the first day of every year. Ten promises I make to myself, but never really keep them. Nowadays I

only make nine promises. The tenth one is reserved. It is to review the previous nine on 15th January.

But in the case of this Thevaram – Sivapuram Pact, the promise cannot be broken. It is a contract between two parties with only one signature on the document, one in which trust dominates over legality. For when the contract was signed, old man Sivapuram was already dead and was about to be cremated at the Kanatte cemetery, just about 50 metres from where Chandraguptha's photograph was taken. But unlike what happened to the boy, we know with certainty that Thevaram's lucky old man was dead well before the pyre was lit.

And so it was that Thevaram arrived at the HillTop University in the latter part of 2009, ready to engage. He met with a class of bright young graduates and spoke to them about many things. Advanced topics in molecular biology and why a person with mathematical skills would want to study that fascinating subject, tricks in Artificial Intelligence and its use in mining large and complex datasets and so on.

But something classic Sri Lankan (Michael Meyler, take notes) also happened in his meetings with the young people. When a man over 50 meets young people about half his age, he starts telling stories from the past. So did Thevaram, telling them stories about the electronic professor whom nobody understood, the professors in mechanics, soils and structures who were exceptionally talented in their subjects, the professor who studied the stability of power systems and did part-time politics from the extreme left end, the thermodynamics professor who cultivated a sense of social awareness among students with witty remarks, and the professor who got sacked for flying a black flag when President Pinochchio (yes, you got it, the guy whose nose became long because he told lies) visited the Hill Country. Thevaram also told them about the consistency of the toilets that didn't flush across the decades, and about recognizing the curtain hanging in the computer room being precisely the same as it was all those years ago.

A clever young lady in the class, whom I shall call Udarata Menike to hide her identity, decided to put a stop to these boring stories. "When did you graduate from here, Sir?" she asked politely.

“1982,” Thevaram replied, “Yeah, it was just a year before I left the country in 1983.”

Note he could easily have put a full stop after the “1982” to answer her question. Instead he chooses to calibrate, putting events in context by mentioning that 1982 was 1983 minus one. Oh Christ!

Young Udarata Menike offered him the badly needed perfect full stop, which subsequently was to become a driving philosophy of my friend’s political thinking on Sri Lankan affairs. Her comment helped him re-gain something stolen from him thirty years ago this week.

“Ah, Sir, I wasn’t even born then, no.”



# The Commanding Officer

W.S. Mendis

I remember going over to the house of a friend and trying to save the house from attack and destruction. I remember our failure to achieve that hope. A friend who I never counted as the ‘Other’. At that time, in our youth, we related to each other regardless of our ethnicity. We never asked if one was a Tamil, Muslim, Sinhalese or Burgher. I still never do. I stayed over there that whole week and we miraculously escaped assault and death as groups of thugs repeatedly forced themselves into the house. I remember sending members of their family over the boundary wall to safe houses.

I remember, July 29th. ‘Black Friday’. We ran for our lives. After the rest of the family was sent to safety, my friend’s brothers and a couple of friends sat down to a lunch we had cooked up – hot white rice and pol-sambol. We heard an uproar outside. We ran. A mob too large to count came charging at us and finally managed to burn the house down. I remember my friend’s brother hiding under the bed of a neighbour; escaping the sword of a thug, swiped under the bed in the room, by the sheer grace of God. I remember hiding from the mob in half-built houses, scaling walls and hanging on a ledge over a canal.

I remember a gun in my face stuttering to explain that I was not a tiger come to bomb SLBC and being let off by a Commanding Officer who was my schoolmate and providentially who recognised me. (If memory serves me right, he said he had orders to shoot the ‘tigers’ on sight). I remember walking back barefoot with the many others. I remember walking past burning cars and bodies charred beyond recognition.

The stench was awful.

I remember the day that changed my life forever. A day that made my friend’s siblings and their families all leave this country. A day that made all my siblings and their families also leave Sri Lanka. They all left hopeless. But for me, this was a day that made me (and my friend) choose to remain in Sri Lanka and do what we do despite all that we valued crumbling around us. Sadly, echoes of July ’83 return hauntingly when I see similar hate mobs and instigation by authorities and powers that be, using ethnicity and even religion to maintain their own popularity. The apathy and inaction of law officers who stood by and watched the mobs on rampage is not too dissimilar.

But I still hope.

I hope that what I do, though it may only be a drop, still fills the bucket. I hope one day it will be full and we would have made a difference. I pray that it we never have to face a Black July again. Our children must have a better future in this nation.

Sri Lanka must have a better future.



# The making of ‘The Brothers Shaikh’

Kannan Arunasalam

When the journalist Peter Savodnik asked me to collaborate with him on making *The Brothers Shaikh*, I said no. I was scared. This was my home. I knew that if I crossed some invisible line, there would be repercussions.

But then I changed my mind.

What convinced me was that *The Brothers Shaikh* was a story ordinary Sri Lankans could relate to. The story is not complicated by terrorism, or how the war ended or about emerging conflicts. It’s about a gang of men who committed the crimes of murder and rape against two individuals. Not because of their politics, their ethnicity or their religion, but simply out of rage and lust and a sense of power over the weak.

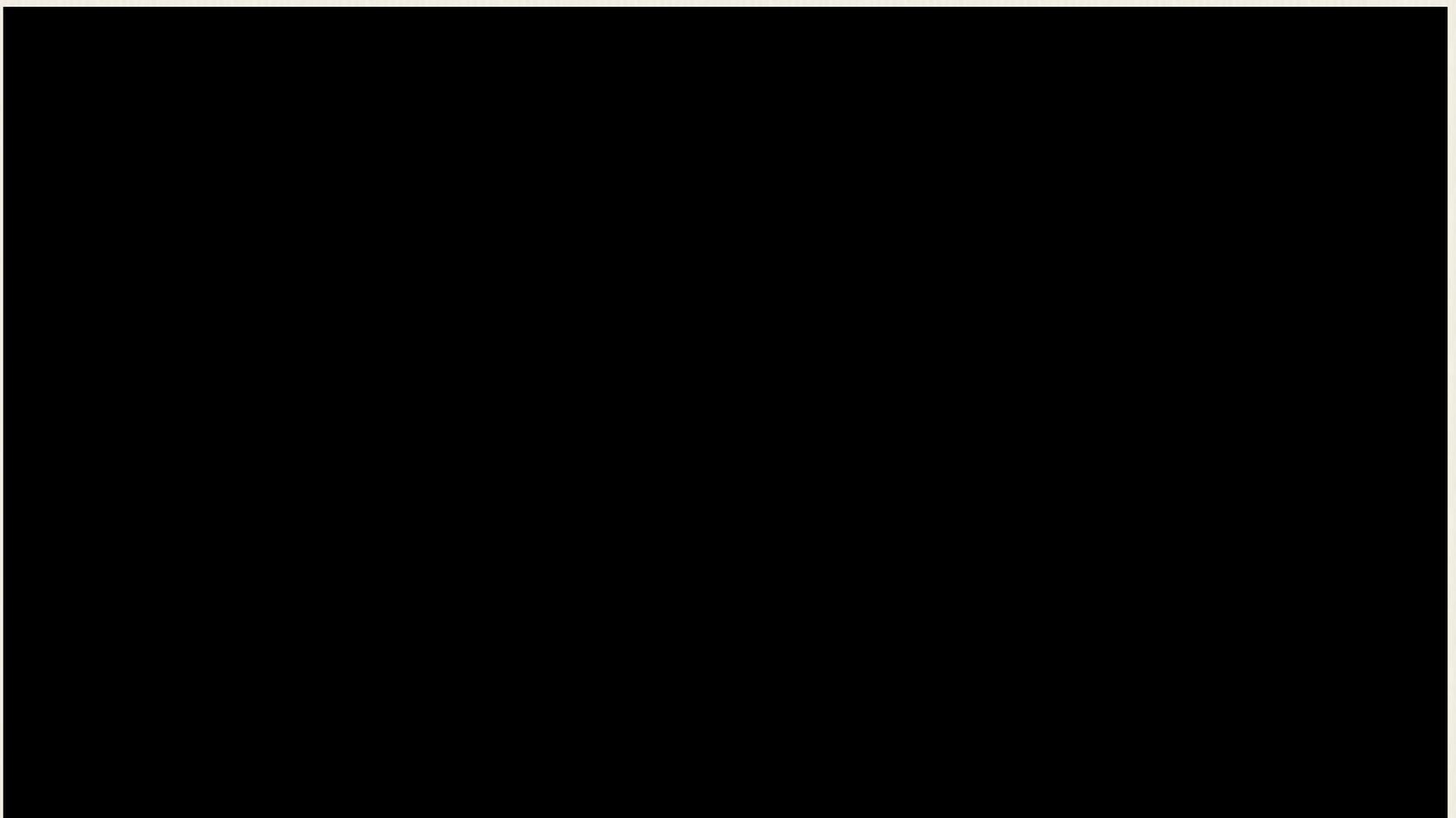
For me, Sri Lanka is a complicated, beautiful country. The government in Colombo wants the world to believe that everything is normal and that anything abnormal is the fault of outsiders conspiring against it. According to this line of thinking, there is no violence against women or Islamophobia; there have never been any serious human-rights abuses. These are, we’re told, fictions created by Western governments meant to destabilise the country.

I believe that Sri Lankans are decent and honest people who would be appalled at the behaviour of these men. About crimes committed against a couple who only really wanted to enjoy the beauty of their tropical island and the warm welcome of their people. Something I fell in love with when I made Sri Lanka my home 8 years ago.

But there is one thing in common between these crimes and the news reports about Sri Lanka that have filled the pages of media this week because of the anniversary of Black July: the idea that you can get away with it.

The film touches on many of the themes at the heart of Sri Lanka's identity crisis. I was fascinated by these themes, these ugly manifestations of our past and our fragmented politics and culture. I thought that if we could delve deeply into stories like that of Khuram Shaikh and his brother's quest to see that Khuram's killers are brought to justice, then we could begin to make sense of things, to understand how we arrived here — and, more importantly, to start building a better country.

The Brothers Shaikh, produced and reported by Peter Savodnik, directed and filmed by Kannan Arunasalam and Ed Perkins. The film was first posted on The New Yorker on 26 July 2013.







# The Perpetual Conflict: Part 3

Harendra Alwis

## **The Politics of Identity**

It seems all too obvious that the regular cycles of violence that have emerged in our recent history since 1915 are distinctly communal in character. Indeed, every battle of every war in our history has always been characterised as those between communities on either side of cultural or religious divisions. However, there are two problems with that conclusion. The first is that Sri Lanka is – generally – and ethnically homogenous country consisting of an ancient mix of North Indian, South Indian, Persian, Arabian and South East Asian ethnic groups that have lost much of their distinct differences. Vestiges of the diverse cultures that settled and mixed in this tiny cosmopolitan island that lay in the path of the busiest trade routes of the ancient world, can be found in the names of its peoples. The fact that Sinhalese has always been natively spoken uniquely in Sri Lanka bear testimony to the fact that we were never a distinct ethnic group that migrated to this island en-mass, but that our unique identity evolved as a result of the mixing of diverse cultures over hundreds – If not thousands – of years. Before the British built our modern road network and motorised transportation made it possible for us to traverse the length or breadth of this island in under a day, we only travelled long distances to migrate and settle. Much like the Sri Lankan migrants of today

who settle in foreign lands adapt the native tongue of those countries, those of our ancestors and their children who settled in Tamil speaking areas became Tamil and those who settled in Sinhalese areas became Sinhalese. That is why Sri Lankan Tamils share closer genetic ties with their Sinhala brethren than they do with their Indian cousins. Those from similar caste backgrounds inter-married and when Sinhalese kings could not find suitable brides from among their clansmen, they brought married Tamil princesses from South India.

Though the educated elites of a previous generation had used their privileged status to entrench their power and influence rather than to empower the masses, limited land ownership and the universal franchise has shifted political power to the masses even though the middle class still occupied the high seats of enterprise. But even as the politically irrelevant English speaking elite controlled much of the economy, the ‘sarong jonnies’ that they had sidelined and patronised, had become the power brokers in our fledgling democracy. Yet, the more our world changed in the decades after the end of the colonial project, the more it stayed the same. Reforms of the national language policy would give the native languages – Sinhala, and later Tamil – the prominence they deserved and empower the popular masses that had been disadvantaged by their lack of English language proficiency. But even though British were no longer our rulers, English was still the language of a different kind of hegemonic empire. American power and trade that shaped the post WW II world would not only retain but enhance the relevance of English as the language that would link their empire: or the global village.

To the extent that we think in words, those who could speak and read English would inevitably be transformed by that in ways that monolingual Sinhala and Tamil speaker weren't. On one hand, they were exposed to a broader flow of information; and on the other, they would absorb western liberal values and worldview. The masses who were the kingmakers in our democracy, spoke only their mother tongue for the most part. That not only shielded them from the liberal democratic values that are usually associated with a vibrant democracy, but also limited their ability to interact with and understand the diverse cultures and communities that constituted the modern state of Sri Lanka. From those early

years since independence, these socio-political imbalances and the persistence of feudal traditions of a sheltered and insecure society, stood in the way of meaningful democratisation.

Even though we have coexisted in this land from time immemorial, most Sinhalese and a large number of Tamils do not speak or understand each other's languages. Is that why the Sinhalese and Tamils went to war against each other? Well, it's not so clear that they did. Apart from the riots of July 1983, Sinhalese and Tamils not only coexisted but mingled with each other in the southern half of Sri Lanka largely on peaceful and cooperative terms. The tales we still hear about Sinhalese families sheltering their Tamil friends weren't aberrations of reality – those who did were merely acting on the natural impulses. Even through the riots of 1915, a majority of Sinhalese and Muslims got along just fine. Therefore, differences in language, culture and faith do not offer straightforward answers to questions about the causes of conflict.

The cycles of violent conflicts in post independent Sri Lanka are described in the language of identity politics, as “youth insurrections”, “race riots” and “religious tension”. Yet we do not pay attention to who was involved and who wasn't, why did some choose to fight while others chose not to? These are not easy questions to grapple with, let alone answer. But if we are to try sincerely and earnestly, we must pay attention to the details. First we must understand that the greatest burden that the British left behind was the useful, but nevertheless unnatural, idea of the modern state. In the many thousands of years that a myriad nationalities and tribes had lived side by side in the East, we never had state borders. Yet in the wake of independence, the various constellations of nationalities that the British had mixed and matched throughout the empire were hastily grouped together and state borders were drawn by novice barristers to contain them; where no river or mountain existed to mediate the conflicts that would eventually erupt among them. We must also acknowledge that the words ‘class’ and ‘caste’ have not lost their socio political relevance in Sri Lanka. They are often the ultimate arbitrator that determines the suitability of not only presidents and MPs who seek office, but even of principals, teachers, prelates and bishops.



# The Perpetual Conflict: Part 2

Harendra Alwis

## **Fault-lines**

Perhaps it is a tragic coincidence of our time; or maybe it was inevitable given the passage of generations, that we are marking the thirty year anniversary of Black July at the same time as we are approaching a centenary since the communal riots of 1915. With the escalation of religious intolerance and communal tension in recent months almost resembling the events of exactly century ago, we are faced with a peculiar question: what shall we commemorate? As much as the commemoration of our history is about preserving those memories for future generations to learn from and for its darker chapters never to be repeated, it must also compel us to be vigilant and pay attention to the history that is in making today. Are we an inherently violent people who are incapable of peace?

Of course we are not an inherently violent – but despite the significant influence of Buddhism on our civilisation, there is no evidence that we are inherently peaceful either. That is to say that ours is not unique among the ancient civilisations of the world and that we too adapt to our times and react to our environment like any other. Before European colonisation, our society was organised hierarchically along social classes and castes. It was inevitable that the

ancient civilisations of the East and the enterprising West of the renaissance years were eventually going to come into direct contact with each other. When that did happen on our shores, it was inevitable that our ancient social order which organised society in a stable – but broadly oppressive – caste based social structure would face direct competition from an alternative model for social organisation based on the egalitarian aspirations that the reformation has unleashed in Europe.

The late 19th century saw the emergence of an educated class of Sri Lankans who symbolised avenues for upward social mobility that had never before existed in the island. The colonial government and missionary movements were expanding opportunities for the locals to gain an education which would qualify them to serve the crown. The Ceylon Civil Service and other professions saw an influx of a new band of local elites. The avenues for social mobility would no longer be restricted to those with a birth-right. The number of unofficial local members in the Ceylon Legislative Council was expanded in 1889 to accommodate the growing appetite of locals for representative governance and ideas of social mobility that had penetrated the public conscience – if not the political discourse in our country for the first time. But local representatives to the legislative council were being chosen based on their ethnic and religious identity and the currents of democracy, as they flowed through the land, would divide the people along communal divisions. Those would eventually become the fault lines of a century of perpetual conflict.

But neither the colonial government nor the new local intelligentsia would challenge – let alone dismantle or undermine – the hierarchical social order of the old world. Instead, they would assume an elitist entitlement to their status in society and proximity to the power centres of government. The democracy we eventually inherited would tempt them to carve out the land along communal lines on which the unofficial representatives to the Legislative Council had been chosen by their colonial masters. The old order that stratified our society by notions of caste and class superiority, and the new order that fenced out each community, have since coexisted for well over a century. The democratic socialist republic we live in today has been shaped by competing political divisions that have clashed for power along each of those historical fault lines. That is why even

today, our political parties must balance communal interests and class or caste interests in the constituency; both to assume power and then to govern.

Education in colonial Ceylon; was designed to produce an efficient bureaucracy and disciplined professionals. It was not designed to produce leaders who could inspire the masses which may challenge the empire. The products of most elite missionary schools were accused of being ‘brown sahibs’ who thought and spoke like their imperial masters and far removed from their own countrymen and women who constituted the masses. Such accusations were not unfounded; nor were they broadly unfair. Students who spoke in a native tongue was often punished for it – and such punishment was accepted by parents who was adamant that their children must learn English – if they couldn’t wholly shed their own identity and learn to be English. This philosophy was not without its detractors and peculiarly enough, its dissenters were mostly found among the foreign educators. A. G. Fraser who became Principal of Trinity College, Kandy at the turn of the twentieth century was one of those few dissenting voices. Early into his tenure at Trinity, he wrote that:

*“A thorough knowledge of the mother tongue is indispensable to the culture of real thinking power. More, a college fails if it is not producing true citizens; and men who are isolated from the masses of their own people by ignorance of their language and thought can never fulfil the part of educated citizens or be true leaders of their race”*

*~ Fraser of Trinity and Achimota by W. E. F Ward, Ghana University Press, 1965 (p 49)*

Fraser’s views were radical then, and they remain at the fringes even today; even in the schools they built as among the aspiring middle class parents who compete to send their children to the same missionary established institutions. An ‘English education’ in an elite school still offer the surest – if not the only – avenue to the middle class of Sri Lanka. As Fraser feared half a century before Sri Lanka gained her independence; very few of the English speaking, cosmopolitan elite that inherited political power in the newly independent country were able to understand – let alone empathise with – the masses that they ruled. They represented, and rose to power, on the back of a powerful middle class that

dominated industry, land and enterprise. But starting with the land reforms of the mid 1950s, the tables would turn. Details of the subsequent social transformation may be analysed elsewhere, but today the English speaking middle class is too weak and not found in sufficient geographic concentration outside Colombo to be politically relevant. Vestiges of their traditions and memories of a glorious past notwithstanding, the leaders they vote for do not get elected and the thoughts and ideas they express – mostly in English – rarely penetrates the public discourse: and the irony of that realisation is not lost on me, and should not be lot on the readers of Groundviews either.

The tragedy of the middle class elite in Sri Lanka is not that they are politically or socially irrelevant. On the contrary, middle class Sri Lankans of all communities define themselves not on their communal identity but rather by the stated liberal values and progressive political outlook. The small and shrinking numbers of Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims and Burghers of middle Sri Lanka who listen to the same kind of music, watch the same movies, read similar books and discuss very similar topics have more in common with each other than with rural cousins from their own ethnic or religious communities. Yet they have never understood the communal tensions and class struggles of the masses that have torn the social fabric of our country for over a century – for the very reasons that Fraser had warned us about a century earlier.



# The Perpetual Conflict: Part 1

Harendra Alwis

## **The dark clouds of history**

When I look back, I do not see the black smoke rising, or the cries of hapless countrymen, women and innocent children – victims turning into victimisers, turning into victims – caught in a cycle of violence that has persisted beyond living memory. Whatever I have seen of that time and moment of our flawed history; I have seen through the eyes of others. The picture has at times blurred with their tears and at times its intensity has been sharpened by the raw emotions that still engulf those who bear them; who are still griped by what they experienced in the deepest and rarely visited corners of their souls. But I do feel the heat of those fires that were lit long ago when I was barely two years old. No longer a toddler but not yet a child, I had been born into the violence that erupted then and accompanied me well into my adulthood like a dark shadow that still tug me at my feet wherever I go. I do not know how the events of that July should be remembered, because the embers of those fires still linger in the world we inhabit.

Must we reassemble those columns of thick black smoke and smell of burning rubber and burning flesh from the collective memory of a forgetful nation? The rich and eventful lives of even the most unforgettable people are eventually

summed up in a short epitaph on a gravestone – if that. And so it is that the collective suffering, shame, pain and tragedy of the events of July 1983 has been etched in the gravestone of history merely as ‘Black July’; filing away the abridged events of preceding years and months that led up to the riots in a colour-coded folder in our collective memory. The mention of “Black July” evokes images of the sooty columns of smoke that would have risen up from the burning buildings, but the term also robs our imagination of the broad spectrum of colours that were lost in those fires. It says nothing of the vibrant lives that were consumed in that violence and the subsequent war that escalated. After thirty years, can we now hope to resurrect those vivid memories? Do we seek out the victims who have since lost their conception of ‘home’; picking up the pieces of their shattered lives in different parts of the world, trapped in places that cannot contain their memories and yet unable to return to where their journey began? Perhaps we should go in search of those dark faces of men who perpetrated the most heinous crimes in our recent history. We owe it to ourselves and all those who have paid the price for their mindless acts – to ask them and their loved ones whether they are proud of what they did back in July of 1983. Will their voices betray any guilt or shame? Are they haunted by the ghosts of their victims or troubled by their inner conscience?

But with each attempt we make at reconstructing those memories, we move away from their reality towards a constructed narrative and a new conception of how those events should be remembered. Because even the most intimate memories are never pure or uncorrupted – they are born tainted by the prejudices and affections of those who bear them. All our memories are continually reshaped for as long as we hold them – carved by emotion, chipped away by our biases and infused with other memories that cohabits the neural spaces they occupy. The actual history of the past three decades can never be fully reconstructed with fractured accounts of what happened in that fateful month in 1983. We must realise that even in their totality; all those accounts may never paint an accurate picture of those long bygone events. The narrative will inevitably evolve with each subsequent retelling, and if we are lucky, it will be retold more meaningfully and in ways that are relevant to their time and place.

Three decades on, as we seek to reconstruct the narrative in a way that is relevant to our time, perhaps we need to cast our nets in deeper waters and look beyond the events of 1983. Even though the smoke towers have dissipated long since, the trail of violence perpetrated by Sri Lankans on Sri Lankans extends for at least a century; well beyond ruins of July 1983. It is imperative that we recognise that the embers of that violence continue to burn today, undermining the very foundation of our society, four years after the end of a brutal civil war. Memories of the different cycles of violence have transformed and grown feeble with time, and resurrecting their fragile recollections from a century ago is going to be a precariously difficult task. Especially on emotionally charged days and anniversaries like these, we must be cautious not to assume that the recollection of historic milestones and anniversaries is the same as learning from our history's long and painful passage. Breaking this cursed cycle of violence that we have been born into, requires more patient analysis and introspection than the frenzy of penning a moving memorial to one of many watershed moments in history usually affords.

Having been born in the early 80s, my generation has endured a series of significantly violent events starting with the riots of July 83' and the insurrection of 1989. The war that raged in the 80s would escalate through our teenage years in the mid 90s and a great number of us would eventually be enlisted in the military or recruited to the LTTE in subsequent years. The remaining years of much of those recruits would be left to decay in the corrosive concoction of violent memories they bear. Yet for a majority of us – including myself, and I suspect, a disproportionate number of those who read this – are likely to belong to a demographic that could afford to distance ourselves from that physical mayhem, though not from the images of war. Hence, even though our entire lives have been engulfed and defined to a large extent by the events of 1983 and their consequences, we do not have any real experience of the violence that we were born into and grew up with. We must strive harder to broaden our understanding of how war and violence has shaped our thinking and expectations. The physical violence that ended in 2009 has left mental scars that will persist in our generation and influence the decisions that will shape our country in years to come.

But our generation is not unique by any stretch of the imagination. Preceding generations – for nearly a century – have all grown up in a vortex of violence that we have so far been unable to escape since the anti-Muslim riots in 1915. Every generation since, have inflicted and endured violence and conflict to the extent that we no longer have any living memory of peace. Having endured World War in the 1930s, a newly independent Sri Lanka was unable to resist the temptation of asserting the dominance of its majority on language policy in the mid 1950s, leading to the anti-Tamil violence in 1958. The generation that followed in the 1970s fractured both the North and South of the country. The northern conflict would endure for three decades while the south that ignited in the early seventies would flare up again in the late 80s. In the mid 1990s, war would resume with greater intensity, conditioning us to accept the loss of thousands of lives within the span of hours in single battles; not as some of the greatest tragedies in the history of our country, but as facts of daily life.

Indeed, at no point in the history of our tiny island have we known what a peaceful and equitable state looks like. Therefore we still do not know what to expect of one. It should have been clear to us even as we celebrated the end of war in 2009; that our collective imagination was unable to capture the true essence of peace. Because, for over two millennia, we have only experienced the subjugation of monarchs, the exploitation of empires, the coercive power of an insecure majority and the domination of a powerful presidential state that still unleashes violence to maintain its power over unarmed citizens as well as on the rule of law.

It is ironic that we take so much pride in being heirs to an ancient and rich history. Perhaps it is that rose-tinted perception of history that inspired us to celebrate in May 2009 – filled with optimism about the prospects of peace at the end of a thirty year war. But, not everyone who set off firecrackers in the streets on that bright and unforgettable day would have really understood the prematurity of their celebrations. As we look around today, it is quite apparent that the violence has not ended with the events of May 2009 – just as much as they did not begin in July 1983.

Given the pattern of events that have persisted for over a century, it is not altogether surprising that four years since war's end, we have allowed ourselves to loop back in time to an eerily familiar place. Where we are now is not too dissimilar from the events and collective mindset that led to the Sinhala-Muslim communal violence almost exactly a century ago. The details of those events need to be explored separately, but every generation since then have been offered unique opportunities on separate occasions, to recognise our shared identity. Each generation was invited to the high table of history, to conceive of a state (and a state of mind) that is broad enough to contain our rich diversity. But today, we stand among the ruins of our past, where each of those subsequent generations failed. May 2009 was our moment. It still is. Are we destined to falter like those before us who never understood their place in history, or will we be the generation that will be remembered for constructing a new history, and a successful alternative path to a more equitable future? But even as we reflect on that moment, the bountiful reasons we had to celebrate at the conclusion of war in 2009 are dissolving one by one, eroding away what little remains of any faith we may have had in our ability to escape this multi generational cycle of violence.

The responsibilities and burdens of history rest on our shoulders now; notwithstanding that ours is a generation that is at a greater disadvantage than any before us. If we are to succeed, we must first have the courage to reject the violence and intolerance that has conditioned us over a lifetime. We cannot afford to take the unprecedented bloodshed and rule of violence which engulfed the North and South, for granted as facts of life. The thirty years that has passed since July of 1983, is significant not only for the victims of those despicable acts of violence, but for our generation that was born into it, grew up with it and is not called to on to be the ones to prevent our country from relapsing back into the ever more familiar cycle of violence. The history of violence in Sri Lanka runs much deeper in our collective memory than we are able to recall as individuals. That is why we must now reconstruct our history not merely as Sinhalese, Buddhists, or both, but together – collectively in a space that is large and hospitable enough to accommodate all communities that make up Sri Lanka.

So far, we have been learning the wrong lessons from history. Rather than learning how to avoid making the same mistakes we have made in the past, we seem to have instead learned how to use history to inflame and repeat those mistakes more competently. Perhaps if we can understand our place in history better than previous generations were able to, we may yet hope to break the cycle that made events like those of July 1983 possible. That is not going to be easy – and the odds of history are stacked heavily against us. However, if we can understand this moment in our history, and succeed in disentangling the truth about our past and present from the myths and falsehoods that have taken root in our belief system; we will have reason to be optimistic.



# First, the colours

Channa Wickremesekera

First, the colours. My memories of July are full of dark colours, foreboding and angry. Grey dominates. Grey, the colour of the smoke that is everywhere, even in your tears. Then there is red, bright and angry, the colour of blood, like a crimson spray on the grey smoke. Lastly there is the orange of the flames, fiery and frantic, lapping up the blood and the groans of collapsing masonry, before disappearing into the smoke. Dark and sharp colours that daub the memories of the horror.

Then the crowds. I remember they were mostly young men, with crowbars and clubs. Knives too there may have been but the crowbars I remember well. Crowds of young men roaming High Level Road, gathering around the shops owned by Tamils. I also remember the crowds watching, some cheering, some puzzled but none intervening. Then came the flames, roaring and raging, enveloping the two grocery stores near the Kirulapona bus stand. And as the flames rage some men are seen washing the Sinhalese owned store next door with buckets of water. Men as eager as the men with the crowbars. Through the throngs of people a man is running, his white shirt and sarong drenched in blood. And the air begins to choke with smoke.

I also remember the police jeep, an officer getting out and pointing a pistol at the crowd, trying to intimidate the young men, and the indignation of the boys at the temerity of the man. Then comes the passing army truck, full of soldiers with guns. And the soldiers scream at the police officer to back off. The officer obeys.. 'Jayaweva!' the crowd roars and the soldiers raise their guns in salute before the truck moves on. 'Jayaweva!'

I also recall the body. The body of Mr. Mudiappa, a long time resident of Kirulapona. They set fire to his house and he died in the blaze, refusing to leave the house he had lived in all his life. The next day when the curfew was lifted, a man, a total stranger, took me to the burnt out house and showed me the body. We asked the fool to run he said. But he decided to die. Then he took me on a guided tour of a landscape littered with ruins. I remember the cars, burnt out, some overturned, the vehicles that belonged to either Tamils or to Sinhalese who refused to give the arsonists petrol. Here we burnt one alive the man said pointing to a car. And there two more. The bravado of a killer who had nothing to fear.

I remember the neighbours. Three of them, two men and a woman who had jumped from the rear balcony of their upstairs flat behind our house as the mob ransacked the place. They were not the most agile people but they had jumped to save their lives. And they came to our house. They never begged for refuge but they came hoping, probably because they felt we were different to the mobs that rampaged. Or they just hoped for the best.

And we gave them shelter, for several days until we found them a place in a camp. What happened to them after that we do not know. I hope they survived the war that was about to break out.

These are poignant memories. Refusing to go away. But they are not the most enduring.

When school reopened after several days my classroom was abuzz with mates chattering away about their own memories. Apart from me and one other friend no one else condemned the horror without reservation. It was horrible, yes, they agreed. But the bloody Tamils had asked for it. These were not kids who had been brought up in shanty towns from where we believed at the time most of the goons

had emerged. These were kids whose parents held good jobs, lived in comfortable houses and perhaps even had Tamil friends they had been to school with. And at that age, children still learn a lot from their parents.

I also remember another friend, a good mate whose family also sheltered their Tamil neighbours. When I visited them one day while the Tamils were still in their house I found them reprimanding the people who had sought their goodwill for what the Tamils had done to bring this upon themselves. I can only imagine the humiliation of those hapless people having to take refuge in a Sinhalese household only to be told it was their people's fault. Each time I hear a Sinhalese say the riots were only the work of a minority or ask what problems do the Tamils have, I remember this. Then I cringe.

But the most enduring memory is of my father, on that first night, as we settled down to dinner. He approached our neighbours who were still gripped with fear and invited them to dinner. My father, almost bent double, spoke in a soft, almost broken voice and asked them to eat first adding that we have not been able to prepare much due to the curfew. Anyone looking on without knowing the circumstances would have thought that my father was the victim. So humble was he.

For that night we were all humbled and broken. And we have not been made whole since.



# A card

Shanika Perera

A photograph of a birthday cake with purple, yellow, and teal frosting. The cake is decorated with a yellow circle containing the number '25'. The text is overlaid on the image.

*I am 25 years old. The events that took place 30 years ago are stories to me. Stories that are very real and very personal to many others.*

*Although I spent today celebrating the birthday of someone I shared the last 2 years with, I know some others would have spent it mourning the loss of loved ones.*

*I hope this project will make people- whether they were there or not- seriously take a look at themselves, as individuals and as a society, and ensure that history doesn't repeat itself.*



# Silk sarees

## Dushiyanthini Kanagasabapathipillai

As I recall “Black July” 1983 on 23rd July 2013, 30 years have quickly passed by, but my memories of “Black July” remain fresh and intact in my heart. On a Saturday morning, we heard the news about an ambush (13 army soldiers were killed) in Thirunelvely, Jaffna Peninsula on 23rd July 1983. As a family discussed the serious matter in detail. Following the official funeral of the 13 soldiers in Kanatte Cemetery in Colombo on 24th July 1983 (Sunday evening), we have received numerous phone calls via our land phone about the beginning of the pogrom on Sunday night. We were warned; we were concerned: and we were worried.

Nevertheless, we were attacked instantly and our houses were looted continuously. We were made refugees in our own land. Tamils who lived in Sri Lanka with dignity were forced to lose their identity and respect immediately. My parents have gone through loss, displacement and trauma for more than once in their life time with regards to anti Tamil violence in Sri Lanka. Our expensive pure silk sarees and gold jewellerys were snatched in front of our eyes. Pure silk sarees and gold jewellerys are precious to Tamil women. They are gifted from one generation to another, and worn as treasured gifts with affection. Especially these gold jewellerys included birthday and wedding anniversary gifts. I can recall that in my

family we never have thrown a pure silk saree or a pure silk dhoti, we kept wearing them until they have torn into pieces. Afterwards, we used to make silk skirts upto the angles, and matching blouse to be worn for weddings, special occasions and school functions. But, they all have been snatched away from our wooden almarahs. They were carefully dry cleaned, perfectly folded, and hanged and were ready to be used immediately for the next upcoming event.

We, Tamils are a resilient community. We, a dignified Tamil family were forced to lose everything, and start our lives from the scratch. As a result, my family had to work harder in order to regain what we had lost, except the lives and identities.

We have lost, we were displaced and we were made “compulsory refugees” in a land where we as Tamils were born equal at birth.

I, as a Thamizh woman carry certain values when I wear a pure silk saree, gold jewelleryes and jasmine garland on my short hair or little pony tail or braided hair and a pottu on my forehead. It is not easy to forget the still haunting memories. Especially when I travel through various places in Colombo where burning of Tamil civilians alive has taken place, shops and businesses belonged to Tamils for many generations were on fire and hurriedly set up refugee camps at Saraswathy hall and at popularly known Maanikka Pillaiyaar temple (also known as Sammaankodu Sri Maanikka Vinayagar temple) in Bambalapitya, my memories keep revisiting the haunting past of July 1983, but I cannot forget because they are woven with my heart.

It does not come as a surprise, whenever many of my relatives, some friends and colleagues cannot escape from asking me “Then why are you still living in Sri Lanka?”, “Why haven’t you thought of leaving the country?”, “Are you not afraid to live in the same place?”. My simple answer to them is “I have neither thought nor left the country not because I feel safe or I love my country, but I have a duty to perform being a citizen, despite my rights have been and still being violated!”.

It is sad to note that nobody has apologized in person or in public to the Tamils for “Black July”, instead we Tamils were made fun of by many.

With unconditional love, I remember my family members and friends who have been burnt alive in Colombo in July 1983. I will also cherish the memories of those you lost.



# The lucky ones

Sashi Selvendran

These memories still haunt me—even 30 years later. Pain clutches me, along with fear and trepidation. Now I look back and remember with tears of profound sadness at so many things that happened as a result of this fateful day 30 years ago. Things that tore a nation apart, threw my family to the wolves, forced us to leave....and yet we were the lucky ones. We made it out.

My family was just getting to a point where many young families feel comfortable. My father had a good job at Ministry of Ag, with a driver and important meetings that he attended representing Sri Lanka. My mother – she was some kind of important person in the Ministry of Tea Plantations. I knew this only because she had a big office away from the others.

As a result, I too felt important. I thought we were special—my sister and I. I had no idea how different we really were from everyone. You see, we aren't like all the others. Not because of our house, car, or nice flatware. But because we are a mix of two cultures – that didn't feel that different to us, but would come to define for the rest of our lives.

My father is Tamil, from Jaffna; my mother Sinhalese, from outside Kandy. They met as lecturers at Peredeniya University. They fell in love and got married (against the advice of their parents). They hoped to raise us in peace, safety, and

love. But they were not given the chance. The country that they both loved so much didn't want their kind... or at least not my father's kind. And now that my mother had married him – it was her kind as well. And for that, she would never be seen the same way. And after July 1983, never would her life be the same.

That Black July day 30 years ago, my sister and I were picked up early from Bishops. I was in kindergarten, or nursery, and my sister was in Grade 1. We were naturally excited and hopeful for some big surprise at home. But when the driver took us back, we saw things that still haunt me. I don't remember all of what I saw, but I remember how I felt. Fire, people running, mobs of people gathering. It felt scary. We were happy to get home and find that the house was okay. But there was fire everywhere. Even the house across the street was burning. I was so confused. My parents were on their way home to meet us, so I couldn't yet ask them what was happening.

And when I ran to our doghouse to let loose our little puppies, they weren't there. Not even Sheba, the mother. I asked Upali, the boy who took care of the house, what had happened. He said some bad men had come to the house and he had gotten them to leave. But they had taken the puppies and beheaded them. As scared as that made me feel, as horrible as it was, that was only a sign of much worse happening in other parts of Colombo.

I didn't understand then how incredibly fortunate we were. They had come for my father, for us, and had found nothing and left us alone, this time. But since it was the second time this had happened to my father, for whom the 1977 riots had been much worse, they decided it wasn't safe anymore. They would have to leave their homeland to start over somewhere far away from the madness.

That week continued to be filled with strange memories. I was young, so my memory is foggy, but I just remember how scared we were. My cousins were in some camp outside town—my cool cousins whom I admired so much. We went to the family of one of my father's friends; they were safe in some diplomatic housing. We squeezed in with them and their three children to wait it out. It would have normally been fun, except our parents were so scared and worried about us. Only later would I understand why.

The story of my family is, in the end, we escaped. We made it to the U.S. and we survived. We put the awful history behind us and never looked back. Except when, on occasion, I saw a burned-out building and felt sick to my stomach. Or smelled burning rubber – and suddenly wanted to vomit. Somewhere deep inside my child’s psyche, I knew what that smell was: burning flesh. Burning shops. Shops that we used to frequent. Shop owners who had lost everything—sometimes even their lives. Families torn apart. People who had everything, forced to start over with nothing but the clothes on their back.

I remember asking my mother during this time, “Why, Ammi, are they burning our local shop?” What is a mother to say to that? “Well, putha, it’s because the people who own those shops are the same as your father”? What kind of society had we become? We observed such hate, such obscene behavior, that we couldn’t even speak about it afterwards. And for all those who committed the heinous crimes, there were some who risked their lives to save others.

But how, after so long, have we found ourselves back in a world where we pretend as if this never happened? As if the crimes were not actually orchestrated at the highest levels? I still cannot believe that people who watched and applauded killing their own neighbors were never brought to justice. If we do not share our stories, we will just continue to forget. If the survivors are not able to tell their story, who will?

This was my story. We left Sri Lanka almost one year later, in July 1984. We never looked back, but we never forgot the painful lesson either. You never know when everything you have might just be taken away from you. In the blink of an eye. And we were the lucky ones...



# The absolute silence at home: July, 1983

Tanuja Thurairajah

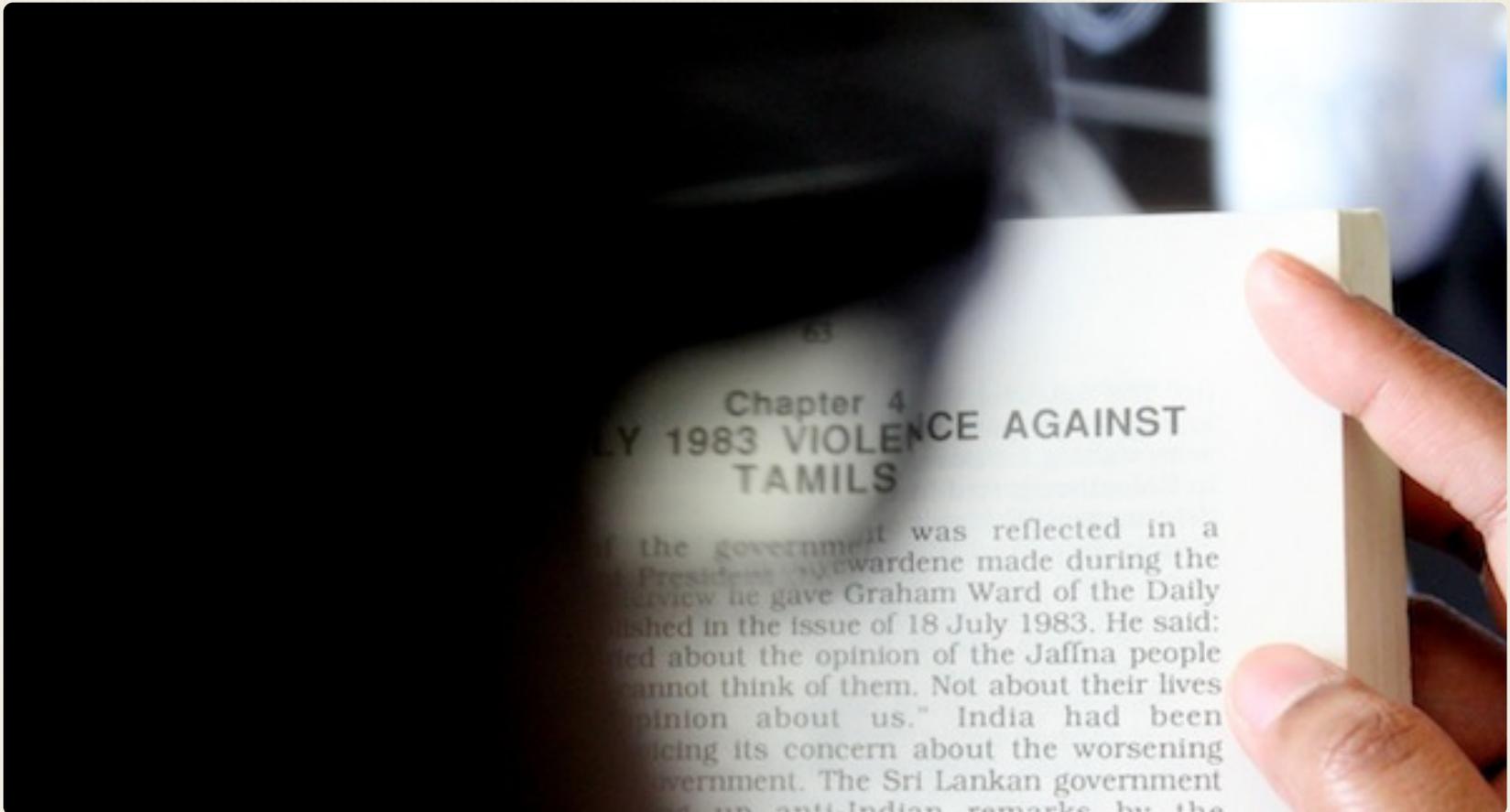


Photo by P. Vijayashanthan

The most vivid memory of violent conflict for me has been from July 23, 1983. I was 7 years old then, the same age as my twins today. Each time a word, something I read or hear takes me back to that day, the first image I see in my mind's eye are white-streams from broken milk bottles on the black tarred roads, as my uncle drove us home from school. It was the longest journey back home and at that age there was no fear, only bewilderment.

Once I got home everything was absolutely quiet. There was no excitement, no apparent fear, just an absolute silence. I remember my grandfather untying our dog and letting her out of the gate. She ran like lightening and disappeared around the bend of the road. My grandfather locked the house and all of us, my grandmother, mother, aunt and myself walked out of the gate in whatever clothes we were wearing as if to visit a neighbour or walk up to the beach that was so close to our home. Instead my grandfather led us to an open area in front of a neighbouring apartment block and we stood there together, waiting. I don't know what was going on in the minds of my family but it was at that point that I realised something was not right. We would have stood there for not more than five minutes when our immediate neighbour, a Malay lady, asked my grandfather what he was trying to do. He answered calmly, 'We don't want to be burnt down inside our home and if anything happens let it happen to all of us together out here in the open!'

In the days that followed we were hidden safely and taken care of. My grandparents stayed with a Sinhalese family and my aunt, mother and I with the Malay family; two families we will always remember with gratitude. Black smoke rose into the blue sky as houses burnt down Ramakrishna Road and on the other side of the neighbouring slums smoke rose from Dehiwela. Our area, ensconced between the Rudra Grounds and the slums, was cordoned off by the local boys who kept the thugs away pretending to 'deal with the Tamils on their own' but in reality protecting us from harm. Our dog had returned home a few hours later and waited for us to come back home, and to our lives.

In early 1984, my grandfather insisted that we leave for India until 'things get better' while he stayed back with our dog. Three years later we returned but things never got better; now 30 years later, I find myself many miles away, living a life in

exile with my husband and twin children who don't remember their birthplace,  
the homeland of their parents.

But, I still remain hopeful!



# I wasn't around in '83

## Anushka Wijesinha

“No one came to the house”, he said, “but I did get threatening phone calls in the middle of the night”. With so many Tamils staying in his house, I had asked him whether people came home to threaten him.

I spent my morning today (July 23rd) with my grand uncle, Sam Wijesinha, a former Secretary General of Parliament and a veritable encyclopedia of information. I wasn't around in '83 and as we marked thirty years today, I was keen to hear from someone who was. We sat in his reading room, talking about what those fateful days were like and the history leading up to it. As we talked, it occurred to me that thirty years ago this very room had served as a refuge from persecution. Like many Sinhalese in Colombo and beyond, Sam seeya had provided safe shelter to his Tamil friends. Around twenty of them had come and stayed with him, some for days and some for years.

He was recalling the days immediately after the violence began, especially one of the phone calls he'd got. “Death to all those who harbour Tamils!”, a voice had bellowed down the telephone and hung up.

The humble telephone has come a long way since 1983. Its use, along with other Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) like TVs, mobile phones and the internet, have become ubiquitous and pervading all aspects of Sri Lankan society.

This weekend I asked my parents, “*How did you hear about what was going on? What was the spread of information like?*”. Without mobile phones and internet, without SMS news alerts or Twitter, information about the unfolding carnage in July 1983 had spread mainly through word of mouth. My father recalled how rumours spread – “*Tigers have come to Colombo!*” – which led to Sinhalese mobs taking to the streets to “check” the inside of every vehicle entering the city. Maybe ‘word of mouth’ still wields immense power as a source of information, even in this digital age. But I would submit that thirty years on, the access to information is a lot



**Meemure village, Sri Lanka, June 2013. Aamina Nizar for The Picture Press.**

more diverse. Mobile phones have penetrated nearly every corner of the country and many Sri Lankans are accessing the internet for the first time on their mobile phones. It can be a force for good. More people can access a more diverse range of information from a more varied set of sources, and possibly form a more nuanced and measured view of things. But it could also be that with the rapid

spread of ICTs, spreading hatred is equally easier. What comes out on balance is something left to be seen.

Along with Aarthi Dharmadasa and Iromi Perera, I am part of the [The Picture Press](#) (TPP), a curated website of development-oriented photography that was commissioned by *Groundviews* as part of the '30 Years Ago' project. Through unique photographs and informative narratives, we are looking at how ICTs have changed the Sri Lankan context thirty years since Black July. In addition to taking our own photographs, we brought on board a few emerging young photographers to help us produce a set of ground-breaking photo-narratives that look at this from various angles.

When producing the feature for the Groundviews project, one thing that became clear to us is how ICTs – their presence and at times their absence – are influencing people, families, communities and an entire nation.

I wasn't around in '83. I am part of the generation that came after it, born into its aftermath.

Clearly, the war and post-war generations will have much greater access to information, to ICTs. Our lives and livelihoods would be influenced by it, while some may still be left behind, “disconnected”. Some may use it to benefit from it and multiply good. Some may use it to subjugate its benefits and propagate hate. To what extent this shapes our outlook on life and society, our actions in politics and economics, could play a decisive role in shaping the next thirty years.

(Text by Anushka Wijesinha, image by Aamina Nizar a photographer contributing to The Picture Press feature for the Groundviews '30 Years Ago' project)



# 30 years ago, today

Iromi Perera

Thirty years ago today, my parents were heroes. Until yesterday, I didn't even know this.

My mother who worked in Fort back then, saw buildings going up in smoke, tyres burning and the chaos. Her Tamil colleagues were given priority office transport and sent home first. One colleague, a Tamil lady with a nose ring and a large pottu refused to take it off despite everyone urging her to do so – for her own safety. My mother and her boss decided that it would be best if they dropped this lady off at her home in Kotahena themselves to be on the safe side even though my mother lived in Nugegoda and her boss in Ratmalana.

My father had a very close friend who was Tamil and lived in Wellawatte with his wife. He took them both to Ratmalana where a close friend of his, the chief priest of a large Buddhist temple, hid my father's friends in the temple and gave them shelter. Both Wellawatte and Ratmalana saw some of the worst of that July.

I was born after the 1983 riots so I have no memory of this dark time. Like many things that our school history books do not include, the 83 riots were never mentioned so I didn't learn about it in school. I learnt about it from books, from articles, from friends who did remember that time. But it always had an air of something that happened a long time ago and I, like many Sinhalese of my generation will never probably understand the gravity of Black July.

When Groundviews invited The Picture Press to be a part of the 30 years project, we accepted immediately. The main reason my co-curators Anush Wijesinha and Aarthi Dharmadasa and I started The Picture Press was because we felt the need to document the change and development we saw around us. We wanted to archive Sri Lanka through photography so that in years to come, we will remember that this is what we lived through, this is what we experienced, this is what surrounded us at this moment in time.



**Mullaitivu, Sri Lanka, May 2013. Seshanka Samarajiva for The Picture Press**

The intense research we put into the 30 years project in order to frame and conceptualise our features taught me one thing – that too much has happened in the last 30 years that we have forgotten, buried, not recognised, not given enough credit, not given enough importance – not remembered enough. It made me grateful for the digital age that I am a part of where remembering and archiving is not in the hands of a privileged few but in the hands of every citizen. If the events

had been photographed and documented that Black July with the same intensity that we see today through with our mobile phones, cameras, tablets etc – would we remember more? Would we know better? Would we feel the pain and suffering? Would there have been accountability?

I don't have the answers to these questions. I can only imagine what it was like to have experienced today thirty years ago – just like how it will be for those after me who will only know about the 27 year war which ended in 2009, the growing racial intolerance, the corruption and impunity that my generation was born into and continue to witness. It took me all these years to even ask my mother where she was and what she did 30 years ago. I don't know why I never thought of asking before. I don't doubt that I am the only one who is guilty of this – many in my generation are and this is what is scary. How will we know what to look out for, what to prevent, what to believe in if we have such little understanding of a very dark past?

Thirty years ago today, my parents' day could have ended differently and this article would have had a far darker story to tell. That is what I have to remember today – that thirty years ago it could have easily been my parents, my home and my friends that were attacked. That I should never forget what I didn't live through. That this could happen again.

Will I follow in the footsteps of the few before me who set the right example and do the right thing? Will I stand back and watch? Will I do anything to prevent it before it ever happens or will I be silent and believe I am invincible? Will I make sure my past and present is never forgotten by the next generation?

These are the questions for my generation and I hope that when the time comes, we choose the right answers.



# Much left to untangle yet

Sachini Perera



I took this photo 4 years ago, on the 18th of May 2009. On a day when I was out of words and could just about manage to write on my blog, much left to untangle yet. On a day when I had reached a boiling point at a home whose politics were not my politics. On a day I felt disconnected from the jubilation pervading the country.

I'm reposting it today, on the 23rd of July 2013. It has been 30 years since Black July.

Black July | කළු ජූලිය

Familiar words though I was born 3 years after the 1983 pogrom. Words that sparked off occasional discussions, words that came up in some of the books I read and most of all, stark images, some of which are permanently etched in my memory. And through it all, a refrain.

Never Again

A few months ago, I was commissioned by Groundviews to be a part of “30 Years Ago”. Together with Natalie Soysa, I began for the first time in my life, to consciously evaluate the past 30 years. To carefully consider the impact the 1983 pogrom has made on my life, if any. To talk to people, mostly women, about 3 decades during which our country has changed so much and yet not changed.

And today, I have come back to this photo. The refrain of “never again” is growing fainter amidst nationalistic rhetoric, amidst a mindset of winners versus losers, amidst a climate of fear and censorship.

Much left to untangle yet



# Home

Tehani Ariyaratne



This is the view from my home.

30 years ago, I was not even alive but if I had stood in this same place, looking in this same direction, I would have seen the black smoke choking the air, perhaps

seen flames rising from building and cars; I would have heard the screams of the tortured and the victorious cheers of the mob; my nose would perhaps have filled with the acrid smell of burning rubber and wood, and I would stepped indoors, into the safety my ethnicity afforded me.

For the last two months now I have been immersed in 1983; that week of mayhem and bloodshed and misery, and I have looked upon this view with a renewed sense of home. I have met an old lady whose eyes filled with tears as she spoke of lost wedding photographs; a young man who talked of his father patrolling their street to keep everyone safe; a woman who longed for home after she fled to India; a son who spoke of broken parents and a daughter who remembered midnight feasts with her friends who came to hide.

The reality of Black July is a horror I cannot imagine, and yet have, vividly, through the stories I've heard. I have tried to imagine what it must be like to stand in a burnt garden, staring at the charred rubble of what was once my home; to find bits and pieces of my belongings scattered in the winds. I have tried to envision moving on from that and cannot.

Some people made new homes. Some rebuilt, some relocated, some preserved, some forgot. And some never regained. For some, home is still an elusive idea, a faded memory of safety and belonging. For that, for taking away someone's home, their heart, their sanctuary, we must never forget.



# On Black July, I was 3 years old

Natalie Soysa



Thirty years ago today, on Black July, I was 3 years old.

I doubt I even knew what the difference between Sinhalese or Tamil or Muslim meant at the time. I am angered that the 30 years since has taught me otherwise.

I've spent the last 6 weeks, working with Sachini Perera who invited me to be a part of the '30 Years Ago' initiative that Groundviews had commissioned her for. Our specific project covers the stories of over 40 women we have been photographing and interviewing together. The experience has been a process of growth and insight for us both. Towards the last lap of our journey, we interviewed a mother of two young children. One point of her conversation has continued to resonate with me since; her young daughter had asked her recently what a bomb was.

When I was her age, I didn't need to ask.

Yes, we are at apparent peace now. The cost however, has been too dear, the aftershocks still echoing beyond the annals of history, reminding us that we're too stubborn a species to enjoy something as simple as peace.

Today I am a parent and it has completely changed my outlook in many senses. I am neither proud nor ashamed of my race, instead I've come to a place where I don't care what terms I use to identify myself at all. I want to bring my son up in an environment where each individual is held accountable for their actions and not an entire collective for the actions of a few.

For now, my son is growing up in a country with no apparent violence. He isn't exposed to daily checkpoints and guns, the constant possibility of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, watching bombs explode and scatter human limbs in front of his eyes; big, obvious signs of violence. Things happen at a far subtler level now. How do you protect your child from something that is less tangible to the naked eye?

I've often wondered how many instigators of violence are themselves parents. I feel we're responsible for raising the next generation and we seem to often forget this when we go about with our lives. I am equally guilty.

This morning, as I held my son in my arms, I was reminded of what his presence in my life has been doing for me, since his first flutter of a movement in utero; he has made me want to be a better person. All these grandiose notions of wanting to change the world I've had since childhood have boiled down to a simple fact; I can't change the world, I can only change me.

If you are a parent I ask one thing of you today. Go home and hold your child. If you are not with them, pick up the phone and make a call. Make contact and remind yourself of why you are here.

It could make all the difference to the next 30 years to come.

*(Words by Natalie Soysa, Photograph by Sachini Perera)*



# School closed early today...

Dilrukshi Fonseka

School closed early today. Amma was looking very jumpy when she came to pick me up, but she wouldn't tell me why. When we went to get Loku and Chuti, Chuti was nowhere to be seen. We walked all over school looking for him and finally found him running around with a chair in his hand looking to 'hit someone'. Amma gave him a good scolding. Serves him right.

On the way home we saw a group of aiyas dancing around an uncle whose hands were tied to the lamp-post. They were pouring bottles of talcum powder on him, and he was starting to look like a ghost. They were laughing. He was looking sad. I think he was the uncle who worked in the Pharmacy we sometimes bought our Multi-Sanastol from. Amma said it was better if we looked straight.

Lots of Aiyas. Lots of police uncles too.

Amma stopped to buy groceries. We asked for Icy-Chocs.

Later in the afternoon we found our neighbour's servant boy standing in our garden holding a siri-siri bag with his clothes in it. He was crying. Amma was angry, but she wouldn't tell me why. Sena, hoisted the boy over the wall back into

our neighbour's garden. Chuti thought we should have kept him on our side, because he could have been a fielder.

We weren't allowed to play cricket that day.

Thaththa came home with uncle Gnana, that aunty and their son. They were also looking sad. Thaththa was looking worried but he wouldn't tell me why. I had to give up my room for them. I wasn't happy. Seela was asked to make more string hoppers for dinner. She wasn't happy either.

We were allowed to stand at the gate for a bit. But I was not to tell anyone I had given up my room. I am not sure why.

I saw an Aiya removing a piece of glass from his foot. It was bleeding. There was a lot of blood. It must have hurt him alot. One of the police uncles gave him a ride in their jeep. That was nice of him.

Sena kept asking us to repeat the words 'Baldiya' for fun.

I am hoping we won't have school tomorrow.

*(July 1983. Unlearn. Relearn. Teach. Remember.)*



# A point of departure...

## Dushiyanthini Kanagasabapathipillai

July 1983 was a turning point for many Sri Lankan Tamils to leave the motherland, and seek refuge in various countries including India, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, United States of America, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, and so on. Tamils who have either lost their family members or properties during the 1983 July pogrom, were forced to leave the land with endless haunting memories. Many of my beloved and blood relatives (brothers, paternal aunts and uncles, maternal aunts and uncles, and cousins) too have decided to leave Sri Lanka after suffering losses (of lives, identities and properties), displacement and trauma. One such relative has agreed to share his unforgettable memories of Black July with me, although he lives in a western country, he misses his home, going through never ending nostalgia, and haunting memories which don't allow him to return to what he still calls a "home".

*"I remember the month of July 1983 every year and its horror in Sri Lanka 30 years ago. We as Tamils lived peacefully in Bambalapitty, Colombo since 1950. On a peaceful day on 23rd of July 1983, we got up early morning to our phone ringing, and warning us of a mob attack of Tamil shops and homes in Borella that night after the ceremonial funeral of 13 army soldiers who were killed in Thirunelvely, Jaffna. Although road blocks were set*

*up, and curfew was imposed, killing and burning alive of Tamils in the heart of Colombo, looting of Tamil houses and shops continued unchecked. Some Sinhala Catholics and Muslims extended their helping hands towards the targeted Tamil community, but a larger portion of people from other communities remained silent!*

*I have lost two of my closest friends including a shop owner. Despite fear and risk, I have decided to go and help the fellow Tamils who have sought refuge at a few camps set up in Hindu temples and halls in Colombo. I was the last to leave from Colombo to Jaffna by ship, because I was nursing a Tamil woman who was brutally attacked and injured. Her father was killed, and her house was razed to the ground by fire and mob attack. She was physically and psychologically unfit due to unexpected loss of her beloved father. I tried to console her, but it was far beyond even trying. I managed to accompany her to Jaffna by ship on a long journey. After having handed her to relatives, I went to my house and I lived in Jaffna for awhile. But, continued discrimination and suspicion towards the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and not equally respecting my identity as a “Tamil” made me feel as a stranger in the same land! I have decided to leave Sri Lanka, and settle in a foreign land for safety, security, equality, respect, and mutual understanding and respect for my own identity”*

It's noteworthy that many Tamils who have left the land or remained in Sri Lanka are reluctant to recall their memories of horror. These ghostly memories are beyond imagination!



# Home

Ameena Hussein

I walk at Independence Square a couple of evenings a week. A friend who walks with me, asked why the Buddhist Flag was hoisted on the flag pole. To tell you the truth, I had not noticed the large rectangle of blue, yellow, red, white and orange fluttering in the wind. On my walks at the newly landscaped area, I admire the root balled trees, appreciate the lights that come on automatically at 6pm, and in the fading light, take care not to trip on the granite paving squares that define the walkers' route. With my floppy hat jammed on my head, I do not get the chance to look at the sky often. So, while I knew there was a flag flying I believed it was the national flag and did not give it too much thought, after all we were at Independence Square, what other flag would be there?

The two flags – the Buddhist flag and the National flag – have very different connotations. The Buddhist flag is made up of five colours denoting, loving kindness, peace and universal compassion with the blue stripe; the middle path of avoiding extremes and emptiness with the yellow stripe; blessings of achievement, wisdom, virtue, fortune and dignity with the red stripe; the purity of Dharma, leading to liberation outside of time and space in the white stripe; and finally, the Buddha's teachings and wisdom with the orange stripe. It stands for values that all

of us, whatever our belief systems are, would treasure. Our National flag is also made of stripes and colours in addition to a sword saluting lion, but it means other things. For instance, the maroon background represents the majority Sinhalese people, the gold lion represents bravery and courage; the orange stripe represents the Tamil minority, the green stripe the Muslim minority. Finally, the four Bo leaves stand for the core principles of Buddhism: Metta, Karuna, Muditha and Upeksha. In theory both flags embody wonderful ideals, but in practice, they have become symbols of unease, oppression, tyranny, domination, injustice and inequality. It is not the fault of the flags – it is the fault of the people.

Writing at this time, July 2013, when I see the Buddhist flag flying at Independence Square, I am filled with a sense of foreboding. I find it hard to believe that those who fought hard for our independence would have wished any Sri Lankan citizen to have such a thought at any point of time. But these days, with seemingly perpetual unrest, many of us do. I had three chances to give up my Sri Lankan citizenship and become a citizen of three different countries – one American, one European and one on the Pacific Rim. I did not entertain that thought for even a minute. It is a matter of pride that my mother chose to give birth to me in Sri Lanka rather than England where she lived through her pregnancy, rushing back home for her confinement and thus continuing the line of my family being born in this country for many generations and many hundreds if not at least a thousand years. I was determined to remain a Sri Lankan at any cost. Through peacetimes and war times, like the Christian marriage vows, I was dedicated to my country in spirit even if not in service.

Post 1983, many of our Tamil brothers and sisters fled their birth-land in panic and terror. They felt quite clearly, and in many instances quite rightly, that this was no longer their home. It was no longer a place where they could live in peace and security. While I could empathize with them, I would never ever know what it really felt like. I could not even begin to guess because unless one has been there and gone through the suffering they did, one cannot know. For twenty-six years while the war fought on, the other minorities lived beneath the radar. If I am truly honest, perhaps there were even times when I was grateful the negative spotlight was on them and not on us. But I remember so clearly being told by one Tamil or

another: Just wait and see, you will be next. At that time I did not believe it. I would not believe it. I didn't want to believe it.

Today, there is another kind of war. It is fought on different battle grounds, but it is still a war. It is a war for the concept of home, and minorities don't seem to be anywhere in the blueprint.

If you look at our recent history, Sri Lanka has not been good to her minorities. A radical difference from how her ancient Kings treated visitors and residents of the island. Ibn Batuta, Marco Polo, Fa Hien, Marignolli and Odoric, are just some of



Photo by Nazly Ahmed (@nazly)

those who have come to this ancient island. They all speak of the hospitality and graciousness, generosity and prosperity of the country and its people. Colonialism brought us no choice. We were all under the white man, equal before his eyes as being his inferior. There was no difference between ethnicities, faith, colour or

language, the colonizers saw us as one homogenous people who were there only to be exploited and ruled. The fight for independence was by all Sri Lankans. There was a hope that they could create a land, where no-one would be a second class citizen, where all citizens had a say in the destiny of the country and its people. Oh how wrong we were. How short-sighted, how naïve we would be proven in that belief. After colonialism, when Sri Lankans were in charge of their country and their affairs, one of the first responses was against the minorities. First the Burghers, then the Tamils, then Sinhalese Christians, Malays and Muslims began the slow exodus to other lands. Included in this trickle, flow, flood and deluge were a fair number of Sinhalese Buddhists.

In the today and now of Sri Lanka I wonder what I should do now? I am certain it is a question that a Tamil citizen would have had to face since 1983 if not earlier. Now it is the turn of the Muslims and soon it will be the turn of all other minorities to ask and wonder what they do now?

It is not a comforting thought and forces me to ask another question. One directed at my fellow citizens who are Sinhalese and more specifically who are Sinhalese Buddhists. What is it you want from us – your minorities? Do you want us to be perpetual second class citizens? To cower down and bow whenever a member of the majority come close to us? To be grateful that we are allowed to live in this country and never forget it? To forget our own heritage and culture that has contributed so much to the collective culture, to remove our food from the menu, to change our names, to tape over our music and songs, to erase our books from the national libraries, to paint over our art, to dress differently and speak in only one tongue? Would that be enough? And if we cannot do that or more accurately if we do not want to do that, would you like us to disappear and where would you like us to go? Do the Tamils leave for Tamil Nadu, the Muslims for any other Muslim country, the Burgers for white Western countries and the Christians for any Christian country? Would you be happier then? I doubt it. Left with a homogenous country, infighting between classes, castes, professions, regions, towns and villages will continue. Of that I am certain.

Last weekend I went to Puttalam where I have my small piece of heaven. Where my Sinhala Catholic cook jokes and jostles with my Muslim labourer whom she

has known since childhood. Where the bulldozer I have hired for the day is owned and driven by a Hindu Tamil who after a short chat invites me to his little cultivated plot of land and gifts me two kilos of freshly harvested peanuts. When I am there, I am at the receiving end of innumerable little gestures that make me feel welcome and wanted and loved on a daily basis. I wonder am I making this up? Am I romanticizing and reading too much into encounters that don't really mean anything. Are they just being polite?

Almost daily, there is something in the news that makes me ask the question: where is my home? Is it where a Buddhist flag flies and where am I in it? Is it in Puttlam or any other small town or village where people live fairly amicably with each other despite their varying faiths, political affiliations and income levels. Or is it somewhere else? Is it with people who don't understand when I speak of being given a dead-rope by some-one or call my friend machaan? Is it eating bread and cheese which, whilst I love, makes me dream of kade paan, pol sambol and fried eggs? Is it trying my tongue around another language and accent desperate to be understood? Is it smiling at a brown skinned girl at the farmers market and wondering where she is from? Of seeing a television advertisement for a sun bleached beach and grey green sea while I shiver at a snow covered railway station, waiting for the train? Is it always somewhere else and never here?

I lay the blame of where we are now, squarely on the shoulders of the state. Not just the state we have today, but the state from the time of independence. We have always had a political culture of vengeance and pettiness that can only feel good about itself only if they and only they alone are top dog. A position which has resulted in the building up of one community at the expense of all others. A state that does not represent all its people equally and impartially is not a true democracy. Sri Lanka does not do that for all its people. Simple logic then says: Sri Lanka is not a true democracy. Someone tell me differently for me to have hope. Please.



# 30 years ago: A time for reflection

Sivamohan Sumathy

I write this as a response to [Concerned Citizen's comments on the public lecture and discussion on the Burning of the Jaffna Public Library led by Silan Kadirgamar](#) held at ICES a few days ago, recounting those pre-'83 days of terror and terrorism.

In order to break the silence that concerned citizen her/himself is propagating, I will write in one of my many names.

Concerned Citizen says that the discussion was paltry and diverted attention from any comparison with current political developments being drawn; one of them obviously is the issue of accountability as regards the last phase of the war. I had a very different experience sitting through the event. And that experience I would say is theoretically registered through a critical phenomenological mode.

For me the most important aspect of the lecture and discussion was what was unstated, but nevertheless poignantly implicit. It was not one of your regular forums full of the bizarre jargon fashionable among NGO and now government circles, like 'stakeholders,' 'civil society response' etc. When Kadirgamar narrated the story of MIRJE and its unpretentious beginnings, we began to ponder concerns regarding how everything needed to have a proposal these days before

one could act, about stakeholders, output and outcome. What his lecture in a way asked for at a deep seated political and theoretical way was: an intimate engagement with what's going on in conflict situations.

He spoke for himself, as a Tamil, an academic and activist. He did not speak for others. He spoke of the spiraling violence of those few days in which he became not just an analyst but a victim, a participant and an agent. He said with humility and introspection 'In the aftermath of those few days, from '81-'85, I wanted a Tamil Eelam.' There was no rage, pride or shame in his words. For him the situation demanded analysis for the questions and answers emanating from that situation reverberate to this day in multiple ways. What happened between 31st May to 3rd June 1981? What had happened to the state? And importantly, what happened to us? Later he said, in conclusion, 'we are all terrorists. When I contribute to state funds to bomb our households, do I become a terrorist?' For me, who saw family become actively engaged in nationalism and the LTTE, in the post-Public Library era, this triggered other critical questions.

These were the questions stated and unstated that I found most touching in the presentation. To go back to my initial articulation, it was the stress on the personal, the subjective and the witness account that made every person seated there, wanting to say something, yet feeling inadequate and overwhelmed. A woman seated near me said, 'I was there when it happened. I was a student at the University.' 'Why are you here?' she asked my friend from the south who would have been three-odd years old in '81.

Concerned Citizen says that several respondents deliberately diverted attention from the political and from the event's relevance to what is going on today. And I disagree. I did not think there was any deliberate attempt on the part of the commanding naval officer of that time who was present there to draw a red herring. He had a story to tell and he told it. In fact I must say I enjoyed listening to what he said. When Jolly Somasundaram intervened to say that there was a commission during Chandrika's time that looked into the events of the burning of the Public Library and a public apology tendered by the then President, he was not trying to white wash the involvement of the state in any way. There were others, like Mr. Sirithunge, who stressed the need to reflect on what is going on

now. With a chill I recall a loud assertion coming from the audience during discussion: Accountability! Accountability!

Overall, it was the poignant understatement of the lecture and its recounting of activism that kept the audience in thrall, silent and articulate. It is to Kadirgamar's credit that he did not push the parallels between the public library event 30 years ago and the current political predicament too much. For one, the lecture was about reflection on issues of accountability, on the part of the state and the individual. Secondly, for me, I am glad he did not use the event as a platform to air grievances, though he laid the blame for it all at the door of the state in quite unequivocal terms. He gave the heinous act of terrorism of 1981 its due place in history, without making it a handmaiden to our preoccupations today. And yet, precisely because he did not overemphasize the parallels between then and now, the poignancy and the event's relevance for contemporary events became greater.

Concerned citizen speaks of the silence of the audience. For me the silence was not born of fear. Nor was it a silence of disengagement and annoyance. It was a thoughtful silence. It is like when you had watched a disturbing film. You want to get away and think of its import. And credit for that goes to Silan Kadirgamar and his accomplices!



# Black July - My Story

RD

It was July '83.

I was seventeen, which you'll be surprised about if you've seen my youthful appearance and I was in Sri Lanka on one of those "extended" studenty type of holidays that we all wish we could have now. It was the summer between the first and second year of my 'A' levels and my parents had paid for me to go there and stay with my Uncle and his Australian wife for a couple of months.

My mother is Tamil, as were her parents, an incredible coincidence I know. I went to stay with her brother who was working for a couple of years in Lanka. He had left the country as a child with my Mother's family, had subsequently settled in Australia, then gone to Sri Lanka with his wife as an expat worker. He was an Australian citizen, but still a Sri Lankan and still a Tamil. I went with my maternal grandmother, a proud old Tamil who hadn't been back for a few years, and we were meeting my first cousin, one of my grandmother's other grandchildren, in Sri Lanka. That particular cousin lived in Denmark. His mother was my mother's sister and his father was Danish. It was his first time in Sri Lanka. They were confusing times indeed!

I'd had a few weeks in Sri Lanka before that day. I'd done some hanging around, some sightseeing and travelling, but it was all with people. Looking back I can see that I was a dependant seventeen year old much more than the independent backpacking type that many seventeen year olds are now. One of these excursions was a few days up country to see something to do with my family. I don't know the exact dates involved but we'd been up country, out of contact with most people, for a week or so. Then, on what must have been July 25th or so, we headed back to Colombo by car.

These were the days before mobile phones, satellite TV and many of the things we take for granted today. Computers were things that scientists used, mostly because they were the size of a room, the internet was unheard of and even Kottu was only in its infancy, version 2.0 or something.

We broke our journey in Kandy, where we stopped off at someone's house for tea and things. The first leg had been uneventful. There were five of us in the car; my Uncle who was driving, his wife, my Danish cousin (I'll call him DC), my grandmother and me. We had been chatting happily and watching the scenery go by with that sense of awe that up country Sri Lanka inspires in people.

Once we left Kandy things became different. The roads were quiet and there was a strange lack of activity. After passing Kadugannawa my Uncle and his wife became very concerned, it was all too quiet and too eerie for comfort. Shutter on stalls were closed, people were absent and the usual hustle and bustle of the Colombo Kandy Road was missing.

We turned on the radio and only then did we find out what had been happening in Colombo in the preceding days. It's important to remember that this was twenty five years ago. We had been up country and communication wasn't in any way like it is now. It was the first we'd heard of the rioting and looting, of the murdering and violence. It was also the first time we realised we were driving while there was a curfew on. A bit of a bummer.

I was in the back seat with DC and my grandmother. DC, being of mixed parentage, looked very western and not at all like a Sri Lankan. I, being seventeen and thinking I was some sort of fashion god, looked unlike the average Sri

Lankan. My hair was long and I had tried to dye it blonde so it had that reddish colour that blonde hair dye turns jet black hair into. I had an earring and wore clothes that made me look as if I was about to go on stage with a band. These days, when I do go on stage with a band, I look like I'm in a car on a trip.

My grandmother wore a white saree, as she had done since my grandfather had died many years before, not the same one every day though. I've never thought about it but I suppose clothes shopping for her must have been quite easy.

My Uncle looked brown, mostly because he was, but he was very western in his clothing and demeanour. His wife was white and looked like an Australian tourist.

I was very much a child in terms of my input to the conversations and plans that followed. I mean that I had no part to play other than to do what I was told. I didn't understand the conflict at the time and all I knew was that there was a big risk involved in being Tamil, seen to be Tamil or with a Tamil. My Uncle and his wife decided that the best course for us was to continue on our journey and get to Colombo as quickly as possible.

The plan, if stopped, was to say that we were unaware of the curfew and that we were tourists, except my Uncle who would be called the driver. It seemed like a good plan and we continued on the road. The eerie stillness followed us on our journey for some miles. It was like something from an episode of Star Trek when the crew have beamed down to an old abandoned planet.

Then we rounded a corner and almost drove headlong into a mob of people in the road. As mobs go this one didn't look like the friendly type. They were carrying guns, sticks, things on fire and others bits and pieces that were only going to do damage. My Uncle slowed the car, he had no choice as they were blocking our way. There must have been about a hundred or more people, or a hundred and five if you include us in the car.

We stopped the car and I thought we were going to die. I had never had the feeling before and I've never had it since. We were surrounded by the mob and one man was standing in front of the car with a gun pointed at my Uncle's head. To this day I can remember the look on the gun toting man's face. He was wide and red eyed, he looked wild, angry and like he'd shoot just for the fun of it.

It's funny what goes through your head during something like this. I guess many people face danger of this sort regularly and are able to think all sorts of rational stuff. I thought my Uncle would be shot and that we'd be killed and that bit, the bit about dying, didn't scare me. What did scare me was the thought that no one really knew where we were. We'd die and never get found, never be traced. I felt afraid of that.

The gun toter was evidently one of the leaders of the mob. He walked around the car to the driver's side. My Uncle wound down the window and a discussion in Sinhala ensued. The car was surrounded by people and I thought that anything could happen at any point. It was all well and good that my Uncle was talking to the one chap but anyone else around the car might have decided to smash a window and do something at any time.

The minutes of discussion felt like hours and during this period, while the conversation went on, the chap continued to point the gun straight at my Uncle's head. Everyone else in the car was quiet, not that I could have joined in even if I wanted to. After a while the mob let us pass. I don't mind telling you that, even as I type this, I feel nervous and jittery to think about what might have been. The mob had believed and "spared" us. They were happy that none of us were Tamil.

We carried on our way. I recall looking briefly out of the rear windscreen as we drove away. I looked at the mob and felt a sense of relief mixed with dreaminess. It was as if the last minutes had been a film or a fantasy and I'd just woken up again.

There were no more mobs on our route, there was no more direct danger but, as we entered Colombo, we saw the sights that so many others have talked about. The debris and residue of what had been happening, what was still happening, was everywhere. Buildings were burned, looted and smashed. Roads were deserted and filled with nothingness and the smell of fear.

We got back to my Uncle's house. It was a wealthy street and three or four of the houses, the Tamil ones, had been looted or destroyed. Ours was untouched and undamaged, perhaps because it was rented, maybe because it had been empty. Either way it's not the sort of scenario that fills you with feelings of security and

safety. By this time we knew what had been happening, that the mobs were going round looking for the “enemy”.

The next days were timeless ones. I can remember detail but not exactly when it happened. For about a week most of the household went to bed at night not knowing if we'd wake up in the morning. I remember lying in bed (I shared a room with DC) and we'd hear the shouting and raging of the mobs as they roamed the city. Me and DC spoke a lot and he was more scared than I was. He was right, I was wrong. I was filled with a mix of teenage naivety and youthful ignorance. He was older and understood more about the immediate danger we were in. I had one of those “It won't happen to us” mentalities. It was only some years later that I realised it so nearly did.

Staying in the country for my grandmother, DC and I wasn't a favourable option and my parents back in the UK were desperately trying to organise flights for us. Flights were limited and packed and it was only after a few days that they were able to get DC out. I look back and feel admiration and gratitude to my Uncle and his wife. They were in a state of multiple loco parentis and had to look after themselves, my grandmother and their two nephews. It was like going through the different stages of a computer game. Complete level one to get to level two and so on. But each person only had one life and starting the game again if you die wasn't an option.

I was dispatched to some good family friends to stay with, my grandmother went off to some cousins of hers and we reconvened some days later when we had been put on a flight. We stayed in one of the airport hotels the night before the flight, for fear of travelling during the hours of darkness, and were under strict instructions not to tell anyone our ethnicity.

My grandmother suffered from this. She hadn't been back to Sri Lanka for many years prior to this trip and she never went again. Two years later she died. I know that she felt immensely betrayed, as if her motherland didn't want her. Having to deny her identity was something she hated doing as she was so proud of her heritage.

My Uncle and his wife left to go back to Australia afterwards. They have returned many times since '83 and have mixed feelings about Lanka.

DC has never been back. I talked to him about it a while ago and he hasn't ruled it out at some time in the future, just not now.

Me?

I didn't go back for five years. I know I was one of the privileged and lucky ones. I had a home to escape to and I didn't have to leave my home to live. Tens of thousands of people, Sinhala and Tamil have suffered so much more in the last twenty five years than I did or any of my family did.

Living through those weeks and those events added something to me, to my passion for Sri Lanka. It was only a few years ago that I stopped thinking, every time I left Lanka, that I might not see it again. It's made me so determined to try to instil some of that passion for Sri Lanka in my daughters, so that they can love the country like so many of us do. I think I'm doing okay there.

My little story is only a drop in the ocean of stories that have been told already. Those that have been told are only a drop in the even bigger ocean of ones that exist.

[Editors note: A version of this essay is published on the author's personal blog, [London, Lanka and Drums.](#)]



# ‘Baaldhiya’ or ‘Vaaldhiya’: Two Wor(l)ds Separated by a Consonant

Nishan

I don’t think I had the slightest inkling of a problem between the sinhala and tamil people in Sri Lanka, until July 1983. But I should have.

In the heady days of the 1977 election, a good 13 years before I could vote, I remember my father quite nonchalantly relating a story: at some time and place in Sri Lanka, strangers accosted people on the street and forced them to pronounce the sinhala word *Baaldhiya* (meaning “bucket”). The tamil language wasn’t familiar with the “B” sound as a starting consonant. So a Tamil person would say *Vaaldhiya*. Tamils, thus identified, were beaten or killed. They were, literally, condemned by the difference of a consonant.

What I don't understand, even now, is why I have no memory of being shocked or distressed by this story and why it didn't make me acutely conscious of a deep malaise in Sri Lankan society – in my world.

The story of an LTTE landmine killing 13 soldiers in the north of Sri Lanka, on July 23, 1983, entered my consciousness in the same matter-of-fact way – as a story that stirred neither cheers nor outrage, neither joy nor sadness. It was simply something that had happened, in a world “out-there” from which I was thoroughly protected – the way that floods happened in Bangladesh or famines happened in Ethiopia, in the days before television.

On July 25, 1983 the two stories came together. They broke through the dikes of my insulated life and flooded my world. But not all at once. It was still many more years before I understood what had happened. I was still able to live for the moment, without having to worry about the future or the past – the extraordinary privilege of being a child and not being poor.

The first news I got that morning was good news: I didn't have to go to school. My mother and father had pitted their particular extremes of anxiety and nonchalance against each other and come up with a compromise: Sohan, my older brother, would be the only one sent to school. Nilhan, my younger brother, and I would stay back. I didn't dislike school, but I never liked waking up early morning. Sleep overtook the irrelevant concerns about why I was being allowed this indulgence.

By the time I woke up Premalal, our Sinhala driver, had gone to fetch Sohan back from school. The household was in agitated conversations about Sinhala mobs setting about burning Tamil shops and houses. A little later, when the Morris Marina returned home with Sohan it had a clubbed bonnet. Sohan had seen many of the familiar local shops in flames as they drove through the chaos of streets over-run by violence. The mobs had stopped all the cars and demanded petrol for their arson. But the Morris Marina was a diesel vehicle, and Premalal could say *Baaldhiya*.

Shortly after, we heard that the mobs were moving in the direction of our house. I took up position on the balcony, curious and nervous about what would happen.

We lived in Wellawatta, a locality in Colombo inhabited predominantly by tamil people. We had two sinhala neighbours; every other home and establishment surrounding us was owned by tamils. Because of this, what I witnessed from the safety of my “sinhala balcony” was all the more terrifying. The thirty foot wide lane that was Ramakrishna Road was chock-a-blocked with threatening people wielding clubs, iron rods, and knives, of various shapes and sizes. Even before we saw them we could see the signs: plumes of smoke rising from the tamil homes that had been set on fire further up the road. As we heard the eerie sounds of people screaming in fear, my mother started crying uncontrollably.

Our house, No. 35 Ramakrishna Road, was a hundred yards away from the sea, two doors from a small hotel called Hotel Brighton and opposite the front gate of the Ramakrishna Mission (a hindu religious institute spanning a large expanse of land). Like a disorganised army of ants, the tamil people on our road began running into the Mission and to the hotel to take refuge from the impending mobs. At some point I saw the Mission close its gates and padlock them. *Hotel Brighton* had locked its doors much earlier. But people were desperate. I watched a pregnant woman crawling under the one foot or so gap between gate and road to get in to the Mission. Suddenly, the gates of our house were pushed open and a middle-aged woman came running in with her teenage daughter, desperate for protection. My mother quickly escorted them to a back room in the house.

I remember these events from 25 years ago with a dream-like unrealism. I still can't quite believe that they happened and that I was there, a passive observer, safe on a balcony, while my neighbours' houses were being broken, looted and burned. “What happened to anyone who was found in the house?” I didn't even dare to think. The mobs surged past our house. The domestic staff shouted “*meka sinhala geyak*” (This is a Sinhala home). It was the protective mantra which spared us the collective fate of our neighbours. To be able to present oneself as credibly sinhala – the gaping divide between the wor(l)ds of *Baaldhiya* and *Vaaldhiya* – was once again, on that day, a matter of life and death.

My father returned from office. His car had somehow been stuffed with 11 people whom he had daringly driven to safety. In true fashion, he was to say that his main fear was not about being stopped by the mobs, but that the half million rupees in

his glove compartment (from a business deal) would be stolen by one of the passengers.

He quickly made enquiries about several of our neighbours. We knew that many of the houses around us were empty and the residents had taken refuge elsewhere. “What happened to the Subramaniam?” he asked (they were our neighbours living two doors away). Donald, our immediate sinhala neighbour, spoke from his balcony to ours: “I didn’t see them leave their house,” he said. My father hot-footed it to the Subramaniam’s house.

The mobs had already been there. The house was broken and looted, but it had escaped being set on fire. His repeated calls of “Mr. Subramaniam, Mr. Subramaniam” drew no response. But my father was never known to give up anything easily. When he returned to that house for the third time in half an hour, he heard a slight movement inside a small broom cupboard. He went close to it and explained who he was and that he had come to help. The door opened slowly and fearfully to reveal nine traumatized people spanning three generations, a third of them my age or younger. These nine people were to spend the next weeks of their shattered lives in our home.

The simple and portable possessions of the Subramaniam were moved into our house surreptitiously: first from their house into the house of our sinhala neighbour; then from his house to ours. All this over neighbourly walls, to avoid detection.

The mobs were now thinner on the ground with most of their monstrous work accomplished; but looting and burning was still an active sport and the street was as chaotic as ever. Directly facing our balcony was the home of Mr. Muruganathan, and it had been burning for many hours. Nilhan was feeling bad about an old prank of shooting a catapult on to his house and ducking under the balcony. Mr. Muruganathan’s house burnt ever so slowly. Its catapult-tested roof and walls would hold out till late the next morning before finally succumbing to the insatiable flames. A stream of thick black smoke from that house enveloped our sky: an artificial dusk and a visual testimony of the human depravity that unfolded beneath. Later, this would be known as “black July”.

One of the many paradigm altering observations for me that day was watching how the police and the army waded in through the thick of the mob, in uniform, and stood by comfortably as the carnage was being unleashed. On that day they had perverted their professions to preside over the en masse persecution of the innocent and the protection of the criminals. There they were, providing at best only lenient boundaries for the sinhala mobs, between the atrocities that were “permitted” and those that weren’t. Their orders “from above” seemed to have been minimal. On Ramakrishna Road, only the sinhala houses, the residential parts of the *Ramakrishna Mission* and *Hotel Brighton* were “protected”.

Sonny was one of the young Subramaniam. He was old enough to know better. But traumatized and dazed by the events, he ventured out on to the street, to take another look at his house and personally recover belongings. He was accosted by the police. My father strode out into their midst. The policeman turned his anti-tamil venom against my father. How dare we hide tamil people he asked? My father was too clever to claim the moral high-ground in front of perverted police power. He shrewdly cited his helplessness in the face of neighbourly obligations. “These people,” he said in sinhala, “when you give them an inch they will try to take a yard.” The policeman was slightly appeased by this show of disdain for tamils. Sonny was rescued. Nevertheless we were soon to receive a message from the police: our house had just crossed the dividing line between being “protected” and “permitted”.

On July 25, 1983, in the midst of all the atrocities being unleashed around us, it was my father’s characteristic lack of respect for danger that enabled us as a family to show a modicum of humanness.

For years before that day Sohan and I had been playing cricket with tamil children scattered through the neighbourhood. On Ramakrishna Road cricket had joined us together, as we commandeered the streets, inconvenienced motorists, and occasionally sent the ball hurtling through the window of an irate resident. But on that day, I didn’t and couldn’t know what had happened to those with whom I had so happily bowled and batted. On that day, in July 1983, all the young cricketers of Ramakrishna Road grew up very suddenly and found ourselves in different worlds – “us” in the world of *Baaldhiya* and “them” in the world of *Vaaldhiya*.

We never again played cricket.



# Memories of a Black Moon – the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka

Prasanna Ratnayake

More than two and a half decades later, one of my friends has asked to interview me about the '83 riots. I was ten years old. My family was from the Sinhala majority, with relatives who were strong figures in politics and the military. How could I reply?

## **July 1983**

My mind goes back to how thrilled we were when our teachers suddenly told us that school was going to be closed immediately. There was no explanation; we had no understanding of why this might be and no reason to wonder. We were happy that we would not have to wait till August for our holidays.

I was even more excited because my father had just given me a fantastic present: a Kodak 110 camera and three rolls of film. I didn't want to photograph my school or the hostel where I was staying. I wanted to do something interesting. So I had been hassling my father to know where we would be going on holiday in August.

My school was in the southern part of Sri Lanka. Established in 1870 when we were under British rule; it wasn't just a school, more like a little village. We had a farm, a bakery and about 60 acres of land on the side of a hill. When we got the news, we all ran down to our hostel to get ready to leave. I saw my father's car parking at the bottom of the hill. This was strange. I wondered how he had the news so quickly that we were being given a holiday.

As soon as I got to the car, before I had a chance to ask anything, Dad said, "We are going up country now". Mum and my sister were in the back and I was in the front seat with him, so we must be on our holiday already. On the way, I was so thrilled to be using my new camera for the first time. Although it was a long journey, my Dad was very patient and stopped anywhere I asked so that I could take pictures – waterfalls, landscapes, flowers, mountains, tree shadows.

We stayed that night at the famous Ella Rest House near the Ravana waterfall. It was dark and misty. The rest house was almost empty, only two families besides ourselves. We kids were playing but I could feel that our parents were tense. They were going inside from time to time to look at the television, but we kids were not allowed to see what they were watching.

Suddenly a police jeep arrived out of the fog. The inspector got out and spoke to my father, "Here is your permit. You don't have to observe the curfew; travel as you wish. If you need a backup vehicle let us know."

As we set off the next morning there was a fantastic sunrise although the mountain was still blanketed in mist. I started my photo journey again. There were fewer people on the roads than the day before. The small towns we drove through had a lot of police around and groups of people were clustered here and there.

I saw a car burning ahead of us. Dad stopped and told us to stay where we were. I watched him run up to the burning car and look inside. Some local people came over and spoke to him. He came back and said, "Let's go".

As we passed the burning car, he slowed down and stopped for a couple seconds to look again. In that moment I took a photograph. From then onwards, every few

kilometres police or army patrols stopped us and examined our papers before letting us drive on.

I kept asking my Dad, “What’s happening?”

“There’s a small conflict between Sinhala and Tamils,” he said. “They started to fight each other. But we spoke to your uncle last night and he said it will be sorted out in a few hours; not to worry.”

I knew that uncle was very big army person, so that was OK.

When we got to Nuwaraeliya – the area known as Little England because of its beautiful flowers and lovely climate – we saw buildings burning. My father’s face was getting anxious. I had seen a burning building two years before, but these fires were bigger and there were a lot of them.

We were trying to get to my auntie’s house but before we got there, a crowd stopped us. They were carrying sticks and axes. They asked my Dad in angry voices, “Are you Sinhala or Tamil?”

Dad said, “We’re Sinhala,” and told them where we were going.

“Are there any Tamils in this car?”

“Of course not, just my two kids and my wife.”

“Can you open the boot?”

They asked me and my sister: “Baba, are you Sinhala?”

My Dad went around to open the boot and said something to the gang I did not hear. The crowd got quiet and some of them came round to apologise to my mother for troubling us. They explained, “We have to chase these Tamils out of the country.”

When we got to auntie’s place all the adults were very nervous. The house was a big one that had been built during the British time. It had an attic and in the attic three Tamil families were hiding. They were absolutely silent, including their kids, and shaking. Mum and auntie took food up to them. We knew the kids and always

played with them when we came here but, we weren't allowed to go up and they weren't allowed to come down. Everyone was very quiet and upset.

Usually when up country at night, you hear the soft wind in the trees. Sometimes you can hear a car climbing up or going down the hairpin roads. But that night we heard terrible sounds: flames whooshing, heavy things crashing and falling, glass exploding, cracking and snapping sounds; noisy and scary. Nobody slept much.

Some groups of people came several times in the night looking for the Tamil families upstairs. They were suspicious that my uncle and auntie were hiding them because they knew they were friends.

“Bring them out. Bring them out.”

“Do you have any cans of petrol?”

“Give us some Arak.”

My Dad made a call to someone and after a while police came to protect the house. He was also on the phone to Colombo. Two of his tea lorries were still in the city after making a delivery. He told his driver where to pick up two Tamil families that were our friends, how to hide them in the back of the lorry amongst the tea chests and to take them immediately to our estate in Deniyaya.

After a few days the violence died down but the Tamil families that had been hiding upstairs were still terrified. They had the clothes they had fled in but everything else was lost; they had run for their lives and had no lives to go back to. The adults talked amongst themselves about how shocked they were, they knew all the people involved but what had caused this, why had this happened?

I too was asking why over and over again and I begged my Dad to take me out to see. We drove through Nuwaraeliya. The big wooden pillars of the old mansions were still smouldering; the air was full of smoke and unfamiliar smells. Where the estate workers had lived even the chickens and goats were lying around dead. When we got to the little town of Kandapola, there was nothing but charred rubble; it was completely destroyed. I didn't take any more pictures of flowers and landscapes.

When we were back at auntie's house, the television showed that Wellawatte, the mainly Tamil area of Colombo, had been burned to the ground, all of it. My Dad was very upset. He had studied at St Peter's school there and knew the district and lots of people who lived there.

After a few more days we went back to our home down south. The two tea chest families were still at our house. My Dad took me with him as he went around visiting our family's close Tamil friends. They were all staying with different Sinhala families and they had all lost everything. They were spending hours on the phone getting in touch with relatives in Canada, India and elsewhere, arranging to leave the country. My father told me, "Be sure you learn both Tamil and English or you will never understand this country".

I was pressuring Dad to let us leave with them. We didn't leave but all our Tamil friends did. The mothers gave their jewellery and other little treasures to my Mum to keep for them. For the first time in my life I lost a lot of my friends all at once; they had to go with their parents. We promised that we would always write letters and not forget each other.

I was impatient to see my photographs but had to wait until the shops opened again. One evening my Dad brought them back. I didn't look much at my landscapes and flowers. I was keen to see my burning buildings. But suddenly there was the photograph of the burning car. I had not seen at the time: the person inside, the person burning. From the moment I saw that image my life changed, I changed, everything changed. It dragged me across the boundary and I was no longer a child; from that moment I became an adult. That photograph stayed with me until 26th December 2005 when it was taken by the tsunami.

I've been trying to remember how all this occurred for my ten-year-old mind. It is difficult but a good exercise to try to go back into that sensibility. Of course, I already knew that for a boy with my family background there were only three possible careers. I would be a tea planter, a politician or a military officer.

But that photograph of the man burning in his car changed everything. From then on, I was focused on current events. Though still a kid, I went to the library to read adult newspapers and books. My friends were no longer my own age but all

older than me. I had to know what was happening and had to talk with people who were also concerned about what was going on around us. My teachers sometimes criticised me for not playing with other boys my age, not being interested in cricket, reading obsessively.

So my next effort is to reconstruct the events of July 1987, our Black July five years later; but not in a remembered teenage state of mind. From now on, I shall have to speak from here, from my mind of 2008.



# Mano Ganesan on his experience of the anti- Tamil riots in July 1983





# Some Reflections arising from Ethnic Riots

Somapala Gunadheera

Off and on, I write short stories, never anecdotes. But now I have to oblige Sanjana. He wants stories about our ethnic riots, the one that raged before he was born and the other when he was at school. Therapists say that anecdotes have a healing effect on ethnic wounds.

My experience about the 1983 riot was brief. Then I was the Chairman of the Ceylon Steel Corporation at Athurugiriya. Towards mid-day, I heard that Tigers had invaded Colombo and people were running away helter-skelter. The Aturugiriya Police had blocked the road opposite their station and were in battle array.

Later it transpired that the beginning of the turmoil was the sighting of a Tamil victim of the riot hiding on the roof of a building in the Pettah, reminiscent of the fable in which the entire animal kingdom took to its heels as the story spread that the world was crashing, as reported by a chick on whose back a large leaf had fallen.

Before the actual fact was known however, there was much excitement. The workers went home early and the staff bus was ready to take the officers away. But there was a snag. One of the officers was Tamil and it was considered risky to have him in the bus, as by now Sinhala chauvinism had taken control of the situation and there were mob checks at every junction.

I offered to take the Tamil officer in my vehicle hoping to exploit the status of my car in the area. For solidarity's sake a few others got in with the man under risk. On the way, we were blocked by a mob armed with clubs and knives at the Hokandara junction. I opened my window. The leader of the mob came up. "Ah, Sir, Chairman!" he said with a bow, "you are all Sinhalese, no sir?"

That was a situation where truth was homicidal. I smiled my sweetest in reply. Besides how could I answer that question with scientific precision, without the help of the best bio-analyst in the world, in the background of our long and checkered history?

My experience in the 1958 riots was far more dangerous. I had just returned from Jaffna after serving my cadetship. I could afford only a part of a house rented by a Tamil. One day there was mayhem up the lane with a mob attacking the Tamils, towards dusk. My landlord who was a leading Communist had gone to his headquarters, leaving his young wife and their son and daughter who were about two to three years.

There was not much time to act before the mob reached our house. I took the son in my hands and the mother took the daughter. Together we got out of the backdoor, crept through a barb wire fence and ran across a coconut property as fast as we could until we came to a cadjan hut. There was an old couple there. They were very sympathetic to the helpless trio in distress and assured me that nothing could happen to them in that out of the way place.

Satisfied with their assurance, I left my charges there and returned home to look to my old parents and young sister. They were alright. The mob had entered the house and the results of their 'linguistic test' being negative, they had passed on. Past nine in the night, I brought back my landlord's wife and children, the man still apparently engrossed in conference with the dynamics of ethnic conflict.

All was quiet now and we retired to bed. I slept in the front room and my parents and sister in the room behind. Around midnight, I was suddenly put up by a sound of crashing glass. It did not take long for me to realize that my front window was being attacked with stones. Some stones were falling inside the room. Before I could get up my mother was physically upon me covering her only son with her body. I struggled out of bed and took my mother to the inner room.

Soon there was the roar of an approaching motorcycle. The stoning ceased suddenly. The cycle stopped in front of our house. I came out to see it was a police officer, a cousin of my landlady. There was a large pistol in his holster. As the officer entered the house, I saw our front door neighbor closing his partly opened window and it dawned on me the attack was his punishment to me for helping the 'bloody Tamils'. His cowardice was now taking the better of his chauvinism.

Twenty-five years later, the protagonists of this drama keep coming back to my mind now. My Communist landlord died long ago. His bones might be turning in his grave to find that his successors are even now grappling with ethnic rivalry, even around the epicenter of his dogma. The old couple that gave shelter to my charges that night are very likely to be among the departed. The loving kindness they showered on their wards that night was more than enough to open the gates of heaven to them.

My mother is dead now and the mother of the Tamil children is supposed to be living abroad. The two mothers showed that a basic instinct like maternal sacrifice had no ethnic barriers. The two children must be well away in their new salubrious abode. Their childhood memory may be validating what communalists keep preaching to them about the Sinhala desperados. Perhaps they were too young then to realize that their survival had something to do with a different kind of 'desperado'. As part of the Tamil Diaspora, they may be assuaging with alms, their guilty conscience about leaving behind, their less fortunate, (more patriotic?) blood cousins.

My front door assailant is dead. As a believer in rebirth, I do not rule out the possibility of his being reborn a Tamil to pay penance for what he did to the Tamils in his previous birth. It is even possible that he is among the hundred

suicide bombers that are supposed to be in Colombo now, according to our authorities whose statistics are as efficient as their management of the ethnic conflict is deficient.

[Editors note: The author's first submission to *Groundviews*, [Jaffna: Retrospect and Prospect](#), on his experiences as a civil servant in Jaffna, has been read over a 1,000 times to date and quoted widely on the web. This article was sent in response to an email of mine calling for submissions remembering the anti-Tamil riots of '58 and '83.]



# Some Gruesome Experiences: Memories of July 1983

D.E.W. Gunasekara

*From my Diary Notes written in Cell No.1, Negombo Remand Prison, (July 31st-Sept 24th 1983)*

I had my own gruesome experience of the Black July. It was 29th July at midnight that I received a telephone call from my friend and party comrade AJMO Dr. Indra Kumar of his father's sudden death by a heart attack.

By then, Dr. Indra Kumar's wife was in the Thurstan College Refugee camp – the family was scattered – Dr. Indra Kumar was hiding in a private nursing home. Father and mother were isolated in a house at Kotahena. He was so desperate and helpless. He was unable to see the dead body of his father who died in Kotahena. The situation was so dreadful, the entire Colombo and suburbs were in flames. In the mean time, I got news that the son-in-law of the founding leader of our party, A. Vaithalingam was burnt alive together with an Assessor of Inland Revenue, a colleague of mine and several others at Kohuwela Junction.

At 5:00am I drove my Volkswagen to see Dr. Indra Kumar at Park Road, Colombo 5 to find all the cars belonging to doctors in the nursing home completely burnt and turned into ashes.

I drove straightway to the cemetery with Dr. Indra Kumar, a big risk, for a reservation in the crematorium. The caretaker was a little disturbed when I mentioned the deceased's name. However, using the influence of a party colleague who was an ex- Municipal officer I managed to make a reservation in the crematorium for 12' noon the same day. To take the body of the deceased involved a dangerous risk. The family insisted on a religious ceremony in a smaller way. So I with my party colleague W.I.R.D Hemasiri took the risk of bringing Dr. Indra Kumar's mother and a Poosari from Kotahena for the funeral rites. The burning, looting, killing was at its height in the area of Maradana. We managed to bring the mother a Poosari (Hindu Priest) only up to Rosmead Place.

I locked them up in a room at Lanka Soviet Friendship League at 103, Rosmead Place as goondas were round the corner searching for preys.

The body of Indra Kumar's father was removed to the crematorium by a few us, all Sinhalese. No member of the family could attend the cremation for fear of death.

In the meantime, curfew was declared. The caretaker at the crematorium vehemently refused to perform his duty as he wanted to rush home in Homagama since there was no public transport and the curfew was on.

In the circumstances, I was compelled most unwillingly to place a Rs. 50/- note to the hands of the man at the crematorium in order to put the body in the chamber of the crematorium. So, the cremation was over with -5 of us- with none from the family. It was the most distressing moment of my life.

Dr. Indra Kumar's family left for London for good and they continue to reside there, constantly thanking for all that we did.

On the 30th of July at 8:00pm it was announced that CP, NSSP and JVP were banned under Emergency Regulations for alleged complicity with the communal riots, instigated by some foreign powers.

It recurred to me that the next logical step by the government would be the arrest of Party leaders. As anticipated, I immediately got the news of the arrest of Comrade L.W Panditha our veteran trade union leader and senior Political Bureau member of the Communist Party. I expected my turn and prepared myself with a sarong and shirt in readiness for arrest. A former party comrade Victor De Silva (now in the United States), ex-UC member of Kotte phoned up and offered me a hiding place to evade arrest. I conveyed him the Party thinking that we should face arrest.

At 11 o' clock in the night a team of CID officers in uniform led by ASP Gunawardhena (now deceased) walked in and delivered to me the warrant of arrest signed by Colonel C.A Dharmapala, Defence Secretary.

I was straightaway taken to the 5th floor of the CID, strangely to my own room in the New Secretariat where I worked as an Investigating officer of Inland Revenue from 1964-1970.

By this time, K.P Silva (Party General Secretary), H.G.S Ratnaweera, Advisory Editor, 'Aththa', L.W. Panditha, Deva Bandara Senaratne of the SLFP, Prins Gunesekara, Colonel Prasanna Dahanayake had been arrested and were being interrogated in the 4th and 5th floors.

I was taken to ASP Punchi Banda Seneviratne (now retired DIG) who promptly identified me as an ex-Text man with his grim face but with a hidden smile and assigned me to a CID officer who is presently a senior SSP for grilling.

To be fair, all officers of the CID were quite courteous and humane for they knew that we were quite innocent.

After recording my entire life history from birth up to the time of arrest, he confronted me with a pointed question,

“Mr. Gunesekera, who was behind the riots?”

Unhesitating I replied, “It is J.R. Jayewardene”

He was taken a back, almost flabbergasted. He repeated the question sternly and I repeated the reply in a relaxed mood. I saw him to be a little disturbed and

nervous. I explained to him lucidly but seriously why I thought so. In turn, I asked him to ponder as to why the Head of the State, who is also the Head of the Government and the Commander of the Forces kept quiet for six long days, allowing the riots to escalate unless he had a pre-calculated plan of his own.

His pen ceased to move. I told him in no uncertain terms that I would not subscribe my signature to the statement unless he recorded my statement as I dictated. I tried to relax him by saying that I am prepared to face the consequences of my statement and he has only to perform his duty as a Police Officer.

So, he advised me to have a sleep on the table and went off to return the following morning for further interrogation, perhaps with advice from the higher officers. He readily recorded my statement (this statement running for pages is in the CID Records for verification of its veracity).

I, along with 13 others were put in Cell No. 1 of Negombo Prison – the cell earlier used as a stable in colonial days.

The first to arrive to see us early in the morning at 6 o'clock was Vijaya and Chandrika Kumaratunaga with biscuits, cheese, cigarettes, etc. However, they were not allowed to see us, for we were kept incommunicado. Fourteen of us, belonging to different political paths were kept locked up round the clock in a small dingy room with an open bucket lavatory attached to the cell. Our friends were only bugs, flies and mosquitoes. We donated them blood quite lavishly. I vividly remember a question asked of me by a CID officer, i.e. "Did you try to overthrow the government?" I replied, "I have not tried but I have a right to do so. But I shall not try to overthrow the state. The CID officer was perplexed. So, I explained him the difference between the state and the government. I sensed that he was inwardly enlightened.

By this time, there were over one thousand remand prisoners, suspects of murders, arson, loot but they were free in this compound but taken to the cells only for the night. We were political detainees and kept locked up. While suspects of murder, arson and loot were allowed to see their relatives daily and were allowed meals from homes, we were deprived of them all for one month.

Sarath Mutthuwegama, MP to Kalawane had to carry a relentless battle to get us food from home and allow our relatives to see us. (I must mention in this comment that Mr. Sirisena Cooray on the contrary was given all comforts during his detention under the P.A government). Post Script

Grilling continued for ten long days. Our visitors were only Prison Commissioner Jansz, his Deputy Delgoda, and Superintendent Jailors, not for providing comfort but to ensure the prevention of any possible escape.

Present MP for Kelaniya, Mr. Nandasena, SLFP organiser, was an inmate of the Remand Prison with whom I conducted surreptitiously a hunger strike in the Prison demanding good food. We waited till food was cooked and served. It was kept a top secret- even my party comrades in my cell were kept uninformed. In no time, we became popular leaders in the Prison.

I must reveal how the Private Secretary to the Deputy Minister from Puttalam district who was taken into custody for arson approached me to draft a petition to J.R Jayawardena seeking his release. I promptly obliged. Even though he was a UNP'er, the revealing thing that he wrote to the President, saying that he merely carried out orders of his Minister to set fire to a line of Tamil shops.

Response to the petition I drafted for him was so fast that he was released on the following day. Deputy Minister himself called on to take him away. That was how justice prevailed.

However, we were kept there for 56 days and released honourably exonerated. Next morning, after our release, J.R Jayawardena had the guts to telephone Pieter Keunaman and K.P Silva and invite them for talks, seeking advice on the solution to the ethnic problem. Of course, that was J.R.

His Excellency on that day was so gracious as to step out of his Ward Place House to greet them for his conscience would have pricked him to confess his guilt for what he had done in banning the Party and arresting party leaders for no reason. That was J.R's style of governance. Of all the misdeeds of J.R the blackest was the Black July for which the entire nation suffers to date.

I must recall what Sarath Muttthuwegama told parliament in his usual eloquence directing at Premadasa and Cyril Mathew, “You can charge my comrades for anything but not for being chauvinistic or communalistic”.



# Pricking the conscience on reminiscences of ‘Black July’

Austin Fernando

*In July 1983, my Accountant Mr. Vallipuram at the Cooperative Department lived off Castle Street where his neighbour was a notorious Sinhalese thug. Until ‘Black July’ Vallipuram once told me that, that thug was the ‘assailant select’ in his mind, whenever he feared a racial riot.*

When violent crowds ‘visited’ him early morning on the Day of ‘Black July’ around 3.30 a.m. he, his wife and son escaped through the back door in to the premises of the thug, as it was the safest. They hid behind some banana trees until the ‘Sinhalese nationalist friends’ disappeared.

Suddenly, who appeared in front of them? It was the nasty thug, the intended killer. They thought that that was the last of their breaths.

To their utter surprise, the thug invited Vallipuram and family in to his smoky slum for a plain tea, shelter and security. Vallipuram thought that the

instantaneous death was postponed. Yes, they were in the slum for about two hours until a Police Jeep from Borella picked them up. Vallipuram learnt that the message to the Police had gone from the thug, the ‘killer select!’ He was the saviour and not the killer.

### **Ms. Ponnathurai of Wellawatta**

I too had a similar experience on this ‘day of the great divide’ when I had to save the life of one Ms. Ponnathurai who was brought to my house at Pamankada by two Sinhalese gentlemen who were employees of either Richard Pieris or Browns. Ms. Ponnathurai was a co-worker with them and could not reach her house in Wellawatta because it was burning. When she was inside my house, hidden in fear of death, the ‘nationalists’ visited us demanding to know whether we were aware of any Tamils hidden anywhere. If we were found we would have taken our last breaths that day!

### **Looking back**

I narrate these incidents to show that there is unexpected humanity and reflection of justice, even in an underworld thug, whom one expects to be one’s worst enemy at a vulnerable moment and unexpected humanitarianism and reflected justice in civilians like me and those two Sinhalese gentlemen. Today, I reminisce on 25 years through this gloomy darkened tunnel of time and am reminded of the harrowing episodes faced by Vallipuram and Ms. Ponnathurai. I do not think Vallipuram ever met the thug after he left Colombo. I have not met Ms. Ponnathurai even once.

However, are we in the same frame of mind 25 years later to help others, if the same incident happens today? Will we be spared if we react in the same manner? Will I not be called a terrorist sympathiser if I do so today?

Twenty five years later, with the world open to us at the tap of a computer key or pressing a button on a remote control – while calling ourselves members of a global village / family, whom have we become?

Today, we are a society who practices hatred like a fundamentalist religion. We no longer are horrified when Tamil civilians are killed, abducted or disappeared. In

fact, some of our extremists may be thinking that it's worthwhile to kill them young as 'they will grow up to be Tigers.'

The sentiments of most LTTE'ers and even some extremist Tamil civilians cannot be different towards the Sinhalese, when innocent men, women and children are blown to pieces by suicide bombers in the South. Those blown up children may be the future Army soldiers according to them!

Concurrently, will Vallipuram today reciprocate that thug similarly in Killinochchi, if the latter is faced with threat to life by ethnically motivated Tamil nationalists? If he or Ms. Ponnathurai does so, will they not be called 'anti-Tamil stooges of the southern Sinhalese chauvinistic Government?'

### **Is there any solution against polarisation?**

All these threats will polarise us more. How long are we prepared to polarise like this? Has not Satan taken over our humanity?

Leave aside our brother or sister of a different community; we are unfazed even when one of our own communities dies in a bomb blast. Today, a LTTE blast is not fabulous enough, or newsworthy unless at least 10-15 innocents have died. By being numb to our brother's pain, we have instilled in ourselves how to be numb to our own pain.

For two decades, plus on numerous occasions, countless people from different walks of life have remembered 'Black July' at different levels of sadness, anger, loss and hopelessness. Very rightly, the politicians who allegedly engineered these atrocities, the thugs, the underworld, the Police have been blamed. Is blaming enough?

Twenty five years after 'Black July' we are more venomous, more polarised, and it's a part of life to sometimes silently (or at other times openly) celebrate the deaths of our brothers. For this, no politician can be singularly blamed, no government can be totally held responsible. It is we who elected them and we should share the major portion of the blame in that event.

Today marks one generation that bypassed 'Black July.' Anyway, are we going to carry on this blaming to another generation? As much as senior politicians and

Generals say that they don't want to carry on this war, can't we unitedly reverberate with one orchestration – that we will permit peacemaking and break the shackles of polarisation to the next generation or our successors?

This could happen the day we conceive that, as much as conflict or war is of national interest, peace too is of national interest. This message will never go down the throats of the people unless the politicians of all colours, public service, judiciary, and media and in the Sri Lankan case the LTTE, swear on this dire need. It is my dream?

### **Blame, blame and blame!**

Are politicians the only ones responsible for this erosion of our souls? Or is it the failing system? Are we a nation that has lost touch with our own conscience? I think each of us individually is to be blamed. We have become a nation that has failed to first understand the human realities in its totality. We have become a nation of men and women unable to have a decent relationship with this world of panoramic political and ethnic realities. In a sea of knowledge on coexistence and moving forward, we have become stubborn men and women who refuse to let go of hatred.

### **Learn from Emperor Dharmashoka**

Emperor Asoka killed ninety nine of his brothers and their male offspring to sit on the throne to be Chandasoka – the violent Asoka. But one nephew of his who escaped – Nigrodha Thero preached a higher truth to him and made him Dharmasoka. Centuries later in our heart we are still 'chanda'- violent. When will we stop killing our brother, with our thoughts, our actions, our words and sit on a higher throne as a nation? Do we just blame politicians- or do we take emotional and moral responsibility for this sinful behaviour?

If we swear to this Buddhist ideology, then it would have been worthy of reminiscing the dastardly events of July 23rd, 1983. Otherwise, reminiscing would be a silent reminder of sins!

*Author of [My Belly is White: Reminiscences of a Peacetime Secretary of Defence](#), Austin Fernando is a former Secretary to the Ministry of Defence.*



# July 1983: Looking back in anger and despair 25 years on

Michael Roberts

## **ONE**

What happened in mid-1983 and in the last week of July 1983 was obscene, a monumental atrocity, a disaster for Sri Lanka. In a context marked by the push for self-determination by the principal forces representing the Sri Lankan Tamils and an armed underground insurgency involving restive youth in the extreme north, government functionaries and elements of the ordinary populace took it upon themselves to unleash punitive attacks on Tamils living in the Sinhala-majority areas in the south. In both the towns and in several parts of the supposedly idyllic countryside Tamils were killed, assailed, maimed, terrorized and forced to flee or hide.

It was not an ethnic riot, a term left over from the British Raj and one that covers a wide array of affrays (inadequately, of course, because of its wide sweep). Nor was it a holocaust. It was something in between in the lexicon of assaults: a pogrom.

Apart from the immorality of the acts, whether viewed singly or collectively, the consequences were quite counter-productive even in terms of the thinking that inspired the various stirrers and perpetrators. The attempt to “teach the Tamils a lesson” backfired. The militant movement for separation gathered thousands of new Tamil recruits and a rejuvenation of commitment among most SL Tamils, as well a wave of support in international quarters. Sri Lanka also received pariah status on the world stage.

## **TWO**

One Easter weekend two years later I was on a bush walk in the Gammon Ranges of South Australia and woke up early. I did not stir out of my sleeping bag because it was bitterly cold and pitch black outside. My thoughts were as lucid as the night was black. They were lucid ‘black’: in my fantasizing mind’s imagination I lined up the whole of the UNP Cabinet and mowed them down with a machine-gun.

This because they had ruined Sri Lanka as I knew it — for it did not take a rocket-scientist to realize that an absolute disaster had been consolidated by the events of July 1983. The country, my Sri Lanka, was, as local slang would say, “now down the pallam” — and going, going down *pallam, pallam* yet further.

This utopian act of retribution by my hands there in the Gammons that dark night was not constrained by personality or friendship. I knew Lalith Athulathmudali as acquaintance and had participated in official dealings with JR Jayewardene in the course of my archival operations. No exceptions were made in the catholic sweep of my imaginary sten-gun.

This was a form of *paligannawa* (revenge, vengeance) in mind’s wish. I must be Sri Lankan to the core because Sinhalese, Tamils and others share this tendency in seemingly equal measure (read Obeyesekere on murder by sorcery practice).

### **THREE**

The focus on the UNP in my act of fantasia is a simplification. Let me render the tale more complex. The responsibility for the atrocities that July were/are not restricted to segments of the UNP. Grapevine stories suggest that Sinhalese from all political parties, all religious persuasions, all classes and walks of life participated in the acts of instigation and acts of assault. Women too stirred the assailants and were among the looters. Looting, of course, was opportunistic and could even include Tamils from slums and shanties targeting the homes of well-to-do or shops broken down and open.

Stirrers and assailants probably added up to a minority of the stunned Sinhala population writ large (otherwise the kill-count would have been much larger than the estimated 3000 odd). These were (are) also many apologists among those on the sidelines of action.

A particularly intriguing category of persons/families are the Sinhalese who provided refuge for Tamil neighbours and friends, or arranged for their protection, while yet instigating the pogrom. I have at least three anecdotal tales marking such instances, two of them UNP cabinet ministers. So here we see ambiguous categories of action, no less obscene and atrocious than the assailant work of the Tamil-haters.

Such stories of Sinhalese activism in generating Black July must be balanced by the many anecdotal tales of horrified Sinhalese, Burghers and others who assisted Tamils-in-strife, and those who worked tirelessly in the refugee camps. And we must surely salute the courageous few who rescued Tamils on the road from Sinhala killers and those who stood firm in their little streets and withstood bodies of assailants intent on battering mayhem against Tamil householders therein. All this information, I add, is based on first-hand or second-hand tales lodged in my memory bank and the occasional first-hand account in print.

### **FOUR**

As yet we do not have a comprehensive, or even a near comprehensive, study of Black July. Here, again, the pogrom of July 1983 cannot be viewed in isolation. There were attacks on Tamils prior to that. Apart from the relatively minor

instances in 1956, 1970, 1981, the two most significant were the mini-pogroms: those of mid-1958 and mid-1977. The former has only attracted brief or inadequate reviews (Vittachi, Manor), while the latter in August 1977 is largely unexplored terrain as far I am aware.

Though unexplored in depth by analysts both clearly remain inscribed in the minds of Tamils who were threatened or victimized by these acts of atrocity; while anecdotal tales of harrowing suffering would have circulated across Sri Lankan Tamil networks and also among the Malaiyaha Tamils of the plantations who were victimized in 1977. July 1983 compounded these tales thousand-fold.

## **FIVE**

Clearly, none of these atrocious events can be reviewed in isolation. They have to be set within a study of the complex political processes since 1931, a study that takes note of the political economy and social developments that interlaced with the structured political processes to gradually sharpen the competition between Sinhalese and Tamils to the point of no compromise. So, the story is complex and cannot be summarized briefly except, perhaps, to say it as a tragedy.

Arguably, albeit speculatively, if Sri Lanka had received proportionate representation in 1947/48 instead of a Westminster system of first-past-the-post, then, the political chasm may not have sharpened to the degree that it did, As I have contended long ago, the Westminster scheme within the peculiar demographic distributions in the island rendered it difficult for Sinhala-politicians to give concessions “ the problem was political/structural, though a lack of ideological vision did exacerbate matters (see my article in *Modern Asia Studies* 1978 reprinted in *Exploring Confrontation*, 1994).

While agreeing thus with the several Sinhala scholars who have attributed the fundamental blame for our present dilemma to the Sinhala peoples and their polity over the recent decades, a proviso must be entered. At various points of time the Tamil political leaders, from GG Ponnambalam to Chelvanayakam and the Federal Party personnel, seem to have contributed their mite to the sharpening of conflict “ through rhetorical excess as well as machination. This, let me note, is an impressionistic comment and not developed clearly in any of my writing.

## SIX

Thus contextualized, we can return to the present situation. The “1956 ideology” was rejuvenated during the last Presidential campaign and reigns again. “Ape Anduva” is commanded by four brothers who tell the Sinhala masses what is good for them. It is a new version of the cakravarti figure of old, the “Asokan Persona” as I once described this figure of the modern populist era (also in *Exploring Confrontation*). While presenting an amiable, moral face, the decision-making is top-down in its flow and provides the best returns to those subordinates who take a propitiating stance, a stance that thereby reproduces the top-down patronage-authoritarianism that is already in place. But one should not forget that this recrudescence of currents from “the 1956 revolution” has been made possible by the LTTE-cum-complicit-Tamil role during the last presidential elections, and by a longer history of LTTE obduracy and duplicity. This truism does not make this picture any less palatable.

This is to digress. Let me conclude by linking back to the themes arising from the “1956 ideology” associated with Sinhala cultural nationalism and its outcomes in May-June 1958 and July 1983 (see pictures). It is important for those attached to the Sri Lankan polity in its multi-ethnic form and its desire to appease those Tamils who are still Lankan in spirit that **BLACK JULY** should not be obliterated from memory.

That is what some Sinhalese alas, I have no statistics on their numbers or proportions “ desire. Recently in a cyber-net exchange which embraces me (unsolicited) one Bodhipala Wijesinghe asked a moderate Tamil gentleman Kathirevelu searching for compromise this question: “Tell me, in what way have the Tamils been bullied?” — truly an amazing question that, to my mind, revealed a monumental blindness. Wijesinghe, at least, asked the question with a desire to learn from Kathirevelu albeit with shutters already half-way up. Not so other obdurate Sinhala chauvinists: they remain in denial. Thus a few years back HLD Mahindapala wrote a review of politics in recent decades in his usual acid style in which the events of July 1983 did not receive one mention.

There is a measure of incorrigibility here that is as debilitating as a cause for despair.



# My name is Cedric. Do you remember me?

David Blacker

July usually passes me by without too much notice, beyond the vague worry that there might be a Tiger attack on Colombo, and a few flashbacks to that weekend in 1983. But this time it's been a bit different. I've found myself reliving that day a lot more this year. It isn't the fact that this is the 25th anniversary of the carnage which most people see as the starting point of our war, though that has been the focus of a lot of attention. What did it was a phone call a couple of weeks ago.

My mobile rang with an unfamiliar number, and an equally unidentifiable male voice asked for me. When I confirmed that it was indeed yours truly, the voice asked whether I was an old boy of Wesley College. I groaned inwardly, and confirmed this too, expecting to be hit by my school's OBU for a donation or offer of membership of some committee or whatever. However, it wasn't any of these things, and the next question blew me away.

My name is Cedric," he said, "do you remember me?"

And after twenty-five years, I did. Passing comic books around class, hidden in textbooks. Playing Starsky & Hutch after school with plastic pistols. Talking about the merits of British fighter planes versus German ones, as we exchanged egg

sandwiches for woodapple jam ones. I'd last seen Cedric in the sixth grade, when we were both twelve, just before the July riots. He was one of the very few boys in my class shorter than me, and was half Tamil, half Burgher, like me. But whereas my Tamil half came from my mother, Cedric's came from his father, so in peculiar Sri Lankan fashion, he was classed a Tamil and I a Burgher, according to the paternal line. Our class was a Sinhalese medium one, though at least a third of the boys weren't Sinhalese. The Tamil medium classes in our grade stayed away from us, and we looked at them with a bit of suspicion since they mostly spoke Tamil. Guys like Cedric, though, were one of "œus".

The thing is, Cedric disappeared in July '83. Vanished as if he had never existed, along with most of the Tamil medium, which shrank to just one class in our grade after the riots. When we came back to school after things had calmed down, Cedric's seat sat empty, and we never saw him again. Other boys in class told me that his home had been burned down by a mob, and that his family had fled to Jaffna. And I wondered if he had managed to save any of his comics or dinky toys.

In the months and years to come, as the war hotted up, a few of us sometimes idly wondered what Cedric was doing at the time. Some jokingly speculated that he might be now a Tiger. Maybe not so jokingly. Leaving school and joining the Army, I wondered whether he'd be on the other side. But there was no news, no letter, nothing. Until two weeks ago.

The events of Black July, and the days immediately after, are blurred in my mind, and not really in chronological order, flashes that vary in intensity.

School closes early with news of trouble in Colombo, and there is no way to contact my parents, so my nine-year-old brother and I decide to do what we do every Friday, and walk from Wesley College in Borella to the home of my grand uncle and aunt in Maradana. A Sinhalese classmate of mine joins us, as he does each Friday, since his home is on our route home.

Normally quiet Mount Mary, one of the quaint railway neighbourhoods of Borella is alive with tension, and people scurrying along. The three of us feel no tension or fear, however, having no idea of the magnitude of the event taking place around us.

Close to my classmate's home, a gang of fairly normal looking men stand around handing out ice cream to passersby. Normal but for the knives, machetes and axes they all carry. The ice cream is in huge gallon-sized lumps, frozen and wrapped in plastic bags. A block of vanilla ice cream is thrust under our tennis-ball-sized eyes, but obviously preferring chocolate we ask for it, and to our astonishment, another huge block of the favourite flavour is forked over. Unable to believe our luck, my friend and I sprint the remaining distance to his home with our loot, almost forgetting my younger brother who trots after us, complaining at our sudden turn of speed.

Choking black smoke rises over the trees further down the road from the looted ice cream factory now being burned to the ground.

After lunch at my grand aunt's, my father arrives on his Honda CG125 to take us home. He's much earlier than he is on other Fridays. I sit on the pillion, and my brother takes his customary spot on the petrol tank in front of my father for the ride across Colombo to Mutwal where my Tamil mother is alone at home. The city's in chaos. Gangs are breaking into shops all along Maradana Road and Armour Street, dragging out and smashing and burning everything that they cannot carry away. Armed police stand uncertainly at intersections, but don't do anything. The streets are carpeted in broken glass and my father worries that he'll have a puncture. Every so often a gang stops us and asks my father his name. Once they establish that we're not Tamils, they demand petrol to burn nearby buildings. Each time my father claims to only have enough in the Honda's tank to get home. They let us go.

My father normally buys us an Indrajal comic book "usually The Phantom or Mandrake the Magician" on the last Friday of each month, but today, the pharmacy on the corner of Armour Street is closed and shuttered.

As we approach the Kelani River, close to Grand Pass, the road ahead glitters with what looks like coloured marbles. As we get closer, we realize that the tar is littered with thousands of boiled sweets in bright colours, each one embossed with a star. Next to the road the famous Star Toffee factory is gutted and burning. My brother tries to convince my father to stop so that we can pick up some of the sweets, but

my father ignores him, weaving the bike across the dangerous surface of half-melted sweets and tar.

We cross the river and turn left at Grand Pass. Near the Muslim burial ground, the route ahead is a mass of orange flame tinged a strange blue. Oily black smoke billows up from a small intersection, completely obliterating the road. The fire smells sharp with chemicals and our eyes water. My father approaches to within fifty metres and stops, steadying the bike with one foot. A nearby factory manufacturing moth balls has been attacked; huge chunks of snow-white camphor have been dumped in the middle of the road and set alight. There's no way around.

My father revs the throttle, holding the bike on the clutch. He's wearing a full-face Stadium helmet with visor, so his face is protected, but my brother and I have open-faced Centurion helmets. Twenty-five years and I still remember those helmets. Telling us to hold tight, close our eyes, and hold our breath, my father pops the clutch and guns the bike down the road, straight for the inferno. Between the piles of burning camphor and the roadside ditch is a small gap, maybe two or three feet wide and my father is aiming for this spot. In spite of his instructions I keep my eyes open, determined to experience this movie-like adventure. I jam my face down against the back of my father's bike jacket, leaving a two-inch gap between his shoulder and my visor through which I squint. The bike hits the gap at full throttle, the world is all flame and smoke and there's an instant of heat on my bare arms and legs as we blast through, hearts pounding, sucking in clean air on the open road beyond.

Sunset. My father and I climb onto the roof of our home and watch the columns of smoke that blot the horizon of Colombo in all directions. A few hundred metres away a tire factory is being systematically gutted and looted. Everything that isn't nailed down is carried off. Every window is shattered. From our rooftop perch we watch Molotov cocktails thrown in and the flare of flames in the dim interior. The factory belches smoke, but doesn't really burn. The sounds of destruction go on through the evening and into the night.

At some point in that weekend the brand new house across St John's Way from ours is attacked and looted of every single piece of furniture and every fitting. Even the doors and roof tiles are stolen. The Indian Tamil family has already escaped. The house is built mostly of concrete and resists all attempts to burn it.

We hear that a former neighbour's home has been burned in Mattakkuliya. It had been the first house with a TV in the whole area, and all the neighbourhood kids – including my brother and I – used to go there to watch German football. It was the parents of some of those neighbourhood kids that attacked the house.

We hear that my mother's sister's house in Mt Lavinia's been attacked and burned with all of their possessions, but that she had escaped with her family and was safe. We later learn that the house was burned down by the landlord himself for the insurance. My cousin had one of the largest collections of dinky toys I'd ever seen, and that night I harbour thoughts of sneaking through the darkness to rescue all those cars and trucks.

The next evening our own landlord arrives at our backdoor, obviously agitated. He is a Sinhalese, and lives behind the house we had rented from him, and he tells us that a gang has sent him advance warning that they were coming to attack our home, since they knew his tenants were Tamil. They have assured him that they would only loot the place and leave the house undamaged. He begs my father to speak to the mob and establish the fact that he was a Burgher. The gang stands at our back fence, sarongs tucked up, shirtless, drunk. Knives and axes are jammed in their belts. They all carry heavy sticks and *alavanguwas*. My father faces them, equally shirtless, in old shorts, his arms thick with muscles, the image of the tough Burgher he's trying to portray slightly spoiled by the heavy spectacles he peers through. My mother is confined to the house, but my brother and I stand behind my father. The gang is confused by my father's obvious lack of Tamilness, but the electoral list they are armed with shows our house to be occupied by Tamils. The list is outdated, and my father tells them that we're the new tenants. The gang leader shrugs good-humouredly and they leave, looking for fresh victims.

Colombo burns.

Cedric and I are planning to meet for a drink soon. I've no idea what he looks like, for I haven't seen him since we were both little boys, twenty-five years ago, but I think it's about time.

*Sent by the author, with original post available on his blog [here](#).*



# TNA MP R. Sampanthan remembers the events of July 1983



Tamil National Alliance MP Mr. R. Sampanthan speaks of the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983.

Speaking of the “terrible experience for all Tamil people in Sri Lanka” he says that the riot was “premeditated pogrom... largely believed to be with the support of very influential forces within the then government”. He notes that there were Sinhalese friends who helped Tamil friends in distress and says that the riots were a “determined effort by some forces within the majority community with the support of the government to teach the Tamil people a lesson.”

Mr. Sampanthan ends by stating that only a political solution, not violence, will bring about an end to the conflict.



# AFLAME – Remembering Black July, 1983

Indran Amirthanayagam

What is a poem  
to a man hiding  
in the cellar  
of his neighbor's house,  
  
breathing the way  
his hostess spices  
lentils and mutton,  
while son and daughter  
  
keep quiet,  
not one word  
allowed  
in the mother tongue,

and wife strokes  
her neck,  
the golden wings  
of her thali,  
  
and across the lane  
a mob, ruffians,  
tontons macoutes,  
lynch squad, a few  
  
holy men, politicians  
in white vershtis,  
light rage  
and sew pestilence  
  
in summer fires  
that turn houses  
to foundation stones  
and stoke residents  
  
out to shelter  
at neighbors,  
St. Peter's College,  
the police station  
  
near Bambalapitya Flats,  
before three days  
voyage on a ship  
hungry to Kankesanthurai  
  
where soldiers  
have been swinging  
cricket bats  
and teenage boys  
  
have stopped  
playing cricket,

disappeared,  
coerced  
into resistance:  
this war, these  
flames burning  
every day since,  
and even before,  
50 years ago,  
1958, when mobs  
first enforced  
what was deemed  
the people's will.  
by unleashing  
latent and dark  
social energies,  
microbes that murder,  
that insist on power  
as well as alms,  
that circulate  
in the body politic  
and can only  
be diffused,  
diverted,  
distracted, educated,  
burned  
out of existence  
so Ceylon  
may take a bow,  
step out  
of retirement,

save the side  
with sixes,  
and at the  
victory party  
  
speak of boar  
and partridge,  
gottukola and  
other medicinal  
  
greens, traits  
of the veddah,  
and how  
good neighbors  
  
gave food  
gave shelter  
denied  
the goondas?

*July 16, 2008*



# Plus 25: Things we can't do because of “National Security” in Sri Lanka

Duckie

25 years after Black July, the term “National Security” is used to thwart lot of things. V from the movie ‘V for Vendetta’ said “I do, like many of you, appreciate the comforts of the everyday routine, the security of the familiar, the tranquility of repetition”.

At least he had that. We don't.

We can't nikang sit, walk around at night, carry our CDMA phones, visit TamilNet, buy remote controlled toys, visit Galle Face Greens, *nikang* stand, wear full-face helmets, fix crash-guards to our SUVs, take photos, talk about cessation of violence and a host of other things because they might supposedly impede upon the national security and the sovereignty of the country.

The country the (proud) Sinhalese stole from the native tribes. The supposed “our” country.

Unlike V, we have to suffer road closures, road blocks, naggy and rude cops, frustrating bodyguards, numerous checkpoints, humiliating body searches, annoying experiences of trying to explain to retarded policemen why the light on your notebook glows when it's on standby and that your 70-200 is not a bomb or some other worldly device but a mere accessory to your camera because you want a fast lens for portraiture.

Someone once said that a Government is nothing but a mere board of directors that the shareholders appoint to run this country. Thinking in the same lines, we're putting up with too much.

Maybe we should change the management no?