

# BRIDGES ACROSS THE ETHNIC DIVIDE

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The riots of 1983 in Sri Lanka launched by Sinhalese against Tamils have already been described and discussed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> We are primarily interested here regarding the issue of the relations between aggressors and victims in terms of the categories friends, neighbors, strangers, and enemies. Before addressing this theme, a brief sketch of the scale and course of the riots is necessary to provide context and frame.

Let me summarize what we know of the locations at which the arson and violence took place and the kind of participants—"the faces in the crowd"

The 1983 riots began in Colombo, the capital city, on July 24 and lasted until August 5. They spread to other parts of the country from this point of origin, especially to the towns of Gampaha, Kalutara in the southwest; Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya in the central tea plantation districts; and Trincomalee in the eastern province. The death toll was between 350 (the government figure) and 2,000 (Tamil estimate). Large numbers of refugees fled their homes; in Colombo itself the number of refugees ranged from 80,000 to 100,000. Arson and property destruction were extensive. In this account I shall limit myself to happenings in Colombo, because the worst damage was done there.

The proximate triggering event was the ambush of an army truck carrying eighteen (Sinhalese) soldiers in North Sri Lanka, and the traumatic and highly charged cremation of their dismembered bodies at Colombo's chief cemetery at Borella.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the mortuary rites, violence broke out in Borella, Thimbirigasyaya, Nugegoda, Wellawatte and Bambalapitiya, in the form of street thuggery, stooping traffic and physical attacks, and almost a whole day passed before the army and police were called upon to intervene. Subsequently the riots took on a form that was decidedly more destructive and homicidal and showed firm evidence of planning and direction, of participation of politicians, government employees (minor staff, laborers, technicians), and of the use of government vehicles and buses.

A conspicuous feature of the 1983 riots was that the mob violence, especially from the second day onward, was organized and for the most part purposeful. The crowds came armed with weapons, such as metal rods and knives, and carrying gasoline that was frequently confiscated from passing motor vehicles. Evidence of the rioters' prior intent and planning was their carrying voter lists and addresses of Tamil owners and occupants of houses,

shops, industries and other property. Moreover, the gangs frequently had access to transportation; they arrived mostly in government-owned trucks and buses or were dropped off at successive locations by the Colombo coast-line trains.

The following is a list of the locations and the kinds of property methodically burned, destroyed, and looted in Colombo:

1. Tamil houses in Colombo's middle- and lower-class residential wards of Wellawatte, Dehiwela, Bambalapitiya, and Kirilapona.
2. Tamil shops — groceries, textile shops, tea boutiques— lining Colombo's principal waterfront thoroughfare, especially in Bambalapitiya, and also in well established residential and business zones like Borella and Kotahena. In the most dense shopping district, called Pettah, Tamil shops and shops of Indian merchants, selling principally cloth and wholesale food stuffs, were targeted. Moreover, shops located in the city's newer and expanding residential areas such as Thimbirigasyaya and Nugegoda were also affected.
3. Textile mills, garment factories, rubber goods factories, coconut oil distilling plants at Ratmalana, Ja-Ela, and Peliyagoda, at the edges of the city, owned and managed by Tamil entrepreneurs and large businessmen.
4. Indian Overseas Bank, the principal bank of Sri Lankans of Indian origin, and of Indian citizens of Sri Lanka.

The victims in Colombo were Tamil shopkeepers; Tamil homeowners, especially of the middle class and administrative, clerical, and professional categories; large Tamil business capitalists and entrepreneurs; and Indian merchants, both Tamil and non-Tamil.

These facts clearly indicate that the locations affected were central market and business zones, sites of new industrial development stimulated by the new "liberalisation policy" in economic activities initiated by the Jayawardena government in 1977, and middle class residential areas. Arson in slums and working-class residential zones was practically absent.

We now turn to the all-important question of the participants. At the most general level the rioters on the Sinhalese side were all male and virtually drawn from the urban population of Colombo and its suburbs. Those



who engaged in acts of aggression, arson, property destruction and looting as well as those who actually took human lives and inflicted bodily injury, were typically drawn from the urban working class, particularly those in government factories, the laborers, small businessmen, and others employed in the congested bazaars and markets, secondary school students and recent school dropouts, the urban underclass of unemployed and underemployed, the residents of shanty towns.

It would be a mistake to exclude from the list of participants those whose involvements were less "visible" but important in the initiation, the organisation, and the direction of the riots. Certain Sinhala politicians and their local managers and bosses, entrepreneurs of organized crime and smuggling, small businessmen (the *mudalalis*) and their henchmen, figure prominently as the directors and manipulators of mass violence. Some of them could be described as "riot captains" who were experts at arousing a mob. We cannot leave out of account the role of some militant Buddhist monks in inciting crowd action, sometimes as active witnesses and orators. Nor can we discount the calculated support rendered by some businessmen who took this opportunity to eliminate their business rivals. Finally, it has been well attested that many members of the police force and security forces stood by during the 1983 riots — unwilling to restrain the rioters, showing sympathy for their actions, and in a few instances actively participating in the work of destruction.

## The Narratives of Middle Class Tamil Victims

Detailed information, concerning the relationships being considered here between aggressors and victims is not ample. The only information that is available to me is one published essay focussing on the detailed narratives of four victimized families.<sup>3</sup> I shall document here some narratives I have myself collected. As in the above-mentioned essay, so in my narrations, the voices are those of certain **middle class** Tamil victims.

As may be gleaned from my beginning sketch of the riots, unlike in the case of the Sikh-Hindu riots in Delhi, where the majority of the violent attacks took place in the poorer settlement communities and their nodal bazaars, in Colombo, aside from the businesses and industries targeted, a **conspicuous category of victims were middle class families**. While a certain number of physical injuries to persons, including homicide, and more rarely rape, did take place, the chief targets were homes and possessions, which were looted, disfigured and burned. (this accent on family property parallels the destruction of Tamil-owned industries, factories and businesses, and both actions confirm that the main objective of the Sinhalese aggressors was the reduction, and elimination if possible, of the economic assets of the

Tamils (and the physical and spatial displacement of Tamils) according to the perverse levelling down of "affirmative action" on behalf of the majority.

As indicated before, middle- and lower middle-class Tamils in certain of Colombo's residential wards, where they were a **prominent segment while co-residing with Sinhalese residents of similar social status**, were a primary target of violence and arson. But we should keep in mind this fact of urban ecology that shanty towns and enclaves of "slums" are ubiquitous and intermingle in Colombo as elsewhere in cities of the third world, whether it be Bombay, Calcutta or Bangkok.

This last point is relevant to bear in mind that in the Colombo riots of 1983, most Middle-class Tamil residents uniformly spoke of waves of rioters, often arriving in vehicles, "as outsiders" and "local thugs." Some narrators did also refer to "local thugs" in their vicinity as being involved together with the invaders. That in 1983 mobs, armed with Tamil addresses and names and with crude weapons, and mobilized and empowered by certain government politicians and their retainers, and given access to government-owned transport, wreaked the greatest amount of damage, is accepted widely by Colombo's intelligentsia, both Sinhalese and Tamil. Tamil victims' narratives are spiced with blackmail and bullying talk by "thugs," mobs breaking into houses and looting, destroying and setting fire, while the victims fled in panic or hid upstairs, scaled walls running into Sinhalese neighbors gardens, seeking shelter in their homes. In the midst of this general indictment of attacks by outsider-mobilized- marauding-mobs aided by some local "thugs," there were remembrances and recognition of heroic acts of protection and support by some local "slum" dwellers.

Middle class Tamil narratives frequently complain of the lack of police action to prevent mob attacks on property and person, and police tardiness to accept urgent telephone calls, let alone respond to their pleas.

In contrast, one matter which middle class Tamil narratives underscore and recognize with thanks is the help rendered them by many of their Sinhalese friends and/or neighbors: from giving them shelter and food until they could find their way to refugee camps, go by ship to Jaffna, or relocate themselves elsewhere.

Sinhalese friends helped to transport Tamil friends under curfew conditions. Among Sinhalese benefactors and concerned folk, Sinhalese Christians, especially the Methodists, figure conspicuously, Sheltering both fellow Christians and others. Most Sinhalese landlords similarly harbored their Tamil tenants, even if the latter's movable property were given over to mobs.<sup>4</sup> These Sinhalese benefactors took personal risks in doing what they did.

So this would be an appropriate place not only to salute and celebrate the charitable and heroic conduct of



Sinhalese friends and neighbors to their Tamil Counterparts, but also to make an important observation. Most accounts in discussing conflict between two or more opposed ethnic communities tend to do so in a language that globalizes the communities as though they are monolithic, single-minded, homogenized entities, all of whose members are mobilized to think in dichotomous terms as "we" against "them." This temptation to aggregate and collectivize (which has a certain rhetorical and argumentative effect and has applicability to crowds on the rampage) should be corrected, relativized and humanized, by salutary descriptions of **differentiation** within ethnic communities and categories — differentiation within ethnic communities and categories — differentiation with respect to involvement with, and belief in, the ethnically-phrased political issues, differentiation with respect to continuing solitary social exchanges and friendships with persons in the "other" ethnic collectivity with whom they may **politically disagree**, and differentiation with respect to conceiving of politics in "class" rather than in ethnic terms.

A certain theoretical and interpretive distinction — whose status is not without a grounding in our own empirical experience in everyday life — may be introduced here. In Sri Lanka (as in other societies of multiple ethnicities), especially among the urban intelligentsia filling certain occupations, such as the professions, administrative services, and more newly created higher echelon positions in corporations, etc., there occurs a fair amount of trans-ethnic or cross-ethnic socializing in clubs and associations, a shared lifestyle in dress, food, and any large degree translated into intermarriage and ethnic mixing.

A two-layered distinction to consider is this: while there exists between these multi-ethnic middle classes certain solitary patterns of social interaction and friendship, many of these same agents may in a situation of competitive politics, increasingly phrased and mobilized in emotive and visceral ethnic terms actually **vote** and support political parties with ethno-nationalist agendas. Unifying under an ethnic banner in the context of "democratic" mass politics, especially at election times, for the maximal acquisition of resources, occupational chances and cultural capital for one's own "ethnic community" does not erase or make invalid interpersonal and inter-ethnic social links, friendships, and gift exchanges which operate in the local world of quotidian family, kinship and friendship practices and sentiments. Middle class Tamils find Colombo the most congenial city to live in at the present time when the civil war in the north and east is at its fiercest.

I am here of course speaking of those relatively 'milder' or less fraught everyday conditions of both multi-ethnic tensions and multi-ethnic collaborations and understandings out of which at certain boiling points riots like the 1983 riots in Colombo or the 1984 riots in Delhi erupted, followed by an intense agony of a few weeks

to a gradual settling down to an unsteady state, which holds the possibility of a new eruption at some unforeseeable time. The relations, understandings, and exchanges between friends and neighbors of different ethnic "identity" and "affiliation" frequently may, and do, change dramatically in the direction of forced exclusiveness, mutual recriminations, and collective stereotyping, when ethnic conflict previously manifest as discontinuous riots deteriorates to a state of relatively enduring civil war between armed and paramilitary forces of a government on the one side, which also claims to represent the views and interests of a majority ethnic category, and on the other side, the armed insurgents and resisters or self-styled "liberation fighters" of a minority ethnic group, which sees itself as victimized and endangered. We need to explore somewhat different interpretive ideas than we have suggested so far to make comprehensible the current politics of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina between Serbs, Croats, and Slav Muslims, in northern and northeastern Sri Lanka between Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese, in the Punjab between Sikhs and Hindus, and in Kashmir between Hindus and Muslims.

With these preliminary remarks in mind, let us now review narratives of some victims of the 1983 riots in Colombo.

### The Voices of Some Middle Class Victims

**M**r Nathan (a fictitious name that the author has substituted), who was 51 years old in 1983, worked as a Senior Accounts clerk in a Colombo firm which was an overseas branch of a British company. He was additionally the honorary warden of the hostel of Hindu College, a school patronized by Tamil children, located in a suburb of Colombo called Ratmalana. A number of middle class Tamil families lived in Ratmalana and it was one of the sites of extensive arson. Mr Nathan, who became the warden in 1975, lived in a house on the school grounds. His family consisted of his wife, a son, 21 years old, and two daughters, 18 and 16. Nathan and his family had lived in Ratmalana since 1966 and they were fairly well-known in the area.

The following narrative account was given the author by Mr Nathan in July 1985 in Colombo. He spoke in English interspersed with a Tamil phrase or sentence to amplify a point. This kind of 'bilingual' speech is quite common among middle class Tamils.<sup>5</sup> It was an open-ended interview at which I asked him to recount what happened to him and his family during the riots of 1983 and afterwards. I would ask an occasional question, but on the whole he spoke freely, and I wrote down what he said.

On the 24th July I felt some tension in the air. My son went with his friend on a motorcycle to the Ratmalana market, and here some Sinhala



shopkeepers advised him to return home because trouble was anticipated. The bodies of 13 soldiers killed in Jaffna<sup>6</sup> were being landed at Ratmalana Airport.<sup>7</sup> So my son returned home via the airport road, and there he saw the polythene bags containing the bodies of the soldiers being unloaded. He said there were about two or three thousand people witnessing the scene at the airport.

There were at the Hindu College hostel in my care 30 students, all boys aged between 10 and 19 years, and four resident teachers. When I heard the news from my son, I immediately phoned the principal of the college who also lived in his quarters on the grounds, and I discussed the situation with him.

In fact we had warning of trouble a month earlier, when on July 10, Neptune Pharmacy, owned by Mr Rajadurai [a Tamil] was burned, and a government apothecary, Mr Ganesharajah [also a Tamil] was murdered. So I had already dispatched two suitcases and some valuables to the house of a Sinhalese friend for safe-keeping. I also took the jewelry of my wife and daughters and deposited it in the office safe of the firm where I worked.

The strategy we planned was that in case of trouble all of us at the hostel, would take shelter in the upstairs floor of the school.

A day later, on the 25th of July, news reached us at 4.30 a.m. that shops were being attacked and set ablaze in Narahenpita and Maradana. Two or three parents came and took their children away. The school principal, around 10.00 a.m., also removed his family to Wellawatte [a ward in Colombo where Tamils are concentrated]. I kept constantly telephoning to get more news of happenings.

Around noon I went to a shop to buy cigarettes, sugar and some other articles. The shop was owned by a Malayali [from Kerala, South India] who was married to a Sinhalese woman. While at the shop I saw three buses with alien route numbers [meaning that they were not buses which regularly ran on local routes] loaded with people pass by. While returning to the hostel, I became conscious of people looking at me. I saw a house on Fourth Lane belonging to Mr Muttiah [a Tamil] smoking. I hastened to the hostel.

At Tenth Lane I saw a big crowd of about 200 people assembled. Some of them wore sarongs, others wore trousers. At the hostel I quickly gathered the children, the teachers, the cook, my wife and two daughters, and took them to the

upstairs floor. I then went to the principal's quarters and from there I could see a mob. I telephoned the Mount Lavinia Police Station and asked for the Officer-in-Charge, a Mr Miskin. His assistant answered me in Sinhalese. Three houses in the neighbourhood were on fire and a crowd was collecting and I was making frantic calls to the police.

I saw on First Lane the crowd attacking the house of Mr Ponraj [a Tamil]. So I tried to run back to the hostel with a teacher friend who was with me, but we were cut off, so we hid among some thorny bushes in a marsh. We could hear and see the crowd attacking the school: doors and windows were smashed, but the crowd did not go upstairs. Then the crowd went to the hostel and broke up the furniture.

Hindu College Square is close to the Ratmalana industrial belt where are located factories such as that owned by Maharajah making polythene pipes (S-Lon pipes), and Ponds Cosmetics. They too were attacked and there was much smoke in the air, and pieces of paper were flying.

Between 3 and 4 p.m. there was a lull, but I and the teacher did not move from the bushes. Then around 4.30 p.m. a second mob arrived at the school. There is a temple in the school called Nadesan Kovil: the mob broke it up, including its statues, Then this mob climbed the stairs, and I became desperate and began to weep, and my fellow teacher kept me by force. I saw them emerge from the school building and feared the worst.

But later, around 5.30 p.m., we heard noises coming from the hostel...we heard Tamil speech. We saw the students and we rejoined them and my family. My wife told me that a group of some seven or eight Sinhalese boys who lived in the neighbourhood found their way upstairs. They found the children hiding in the Science Room. They had no intention of murdering them. They led them down the stairs, past the office which was burning, and took them to their hostel.

Just then another Sinhala crowd came back to the hostel, and said, 'You have no place here'. A few decent ladies suggested that we'd better go the Army Camp. I quickly got together bundles of clothes, bedsheets, and pillows. The Army Camp in question is the Kotalawela Training Academy [named after a former Prime Minister Sir John Kotalawela whose constituency was Ratmalana, where he had bought a large estate and home]. This camp was only a quarter of a mile from our school. Some of the local Sinhalese boys accom-

panied us, but we were nevertheless scared. The army sentry at the camp refused to take us in: he said he had no orders to admit us. Then the same boys suggested that we all try and find shelter in a nearby mosque called Talaiyan Bawa Shrine. On the way to the mosque my local Sinhalese friends smiled in recognition—perhaps they were forced smiles.

At the entrance to the mosque I met Mahasena Kotalawela, son of George Kotalawela, Member of Parliament for Avissawella and nephew of Sir John, Mahasena is 27 to 28 years old; he is a friend of mine. When he saw me he exclaimed, 'Uncle, what has happened to you?' He got the mosque opened, and my wife and two daughters were put in a small room inside (in the samathi).

I then offered 100 rupees to the Sinhalese boys who accompanied us to buy food for us (the hostel boys and teachers were with us). But they refused to take money from us, and went away promising to bring us food. They brought raw rice, dhal [lentils] and tins of sardines, and told us to cook some food. They also brought us tea and tins of condensed milk.

Soon afterwards Mahasena Kotalawela also returned. He had got tea made for us at his home, and also brought with him Carolis (Sir John's former chauffeur) and his wife to cook food for us. At about 11 p.m. the food was ready, and we had a meal. The local Sinhalese people also helped to serve the food to us. My son, who on the morning of this day had left early for work, managed to rejoin us at the mosque.

Actually, some hours before our dinner, while Mahasena was with us, a Sinhala mob did come to chase us from the mosque. But Mahasena scolded them and said that he would use his gun with 12 rounds of ammunition if anyone dared to attack us. He declared, 'I am here to look after them. I don't care if you kill me'. Some of his friends backed him when he took this stance. Mahasena then took with him my wife and daughters and they stayed in his house overnight as his guests.

I stayed at the mosque with my son and the students. I must have dozed off. At about 3 a.m. I was awakened by four men armed with sticks who were about to beat me. I screamed in fright, and some Sinhalese friends came running and told them to leave.

Then early morning at 5 a.m. news reached me that the Ratmalana Airport had been declared a refugee camp. After some tea was given us at the

mosque, I went with my party to the camp. The authorities there met us and took us in.

At the camp I saw about 400 other Tamils seeking refuge. The refugees ranged from people of top status, like doctors, engineers, accountants, and managers, to ordinary folk. There were also cases of Tamil men married to Sinhalese women and one or two instances of Sinhalese men with Tamil wives. This was the morning of the 26th of July.

On this day at the camp vans arrived to sell tea and bread and biscuits to the refugees. At about noon, a Government Milk Board van came and distributed milk. The Port Authority distributed parcels of rice and curry for dinner, but I was unable to eat because of stress. The Member of Parliament for Ratmalana, Mr. Athulathmudali [also a Government minister] paid us a visit.

On the 27th morning the Red Cross arrived. This was the day when refugees poured in — in CTB buses, police jeeps and trucks. Some of the refugees were injured. At night two of the airport hangers had filled up with people.

By Thursday, the next day, there were about 900 refugees. A Swedish Save the Children Organisation, called Redd Barna, took charge of the arrangements at the camp. (I think the officers in charge were Mr. Nilby[?] and Mr Wakeley.) Another organisation that also did relief work was Mr Ariyaratne's Sarvodaya. Both organisations provided facilities and provisions to make tea. CARE supplied biscuits and milk powder for distribution. Also on this day one had ready access to drinking water. From now on food parcels prepared by the Port Authority were distributed twice a day. Mr Noel Tittawela was the chief coordinator for the Government.

I stayed in the Ratmalana camp until August 3, but in the meantime I was able to send my wife and daughters to Jaffna by the first refugee ship which left Colombo on July 29. I was then transferred with my son to another camp at St. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. The Old Boys of the School, with the help of the Minister of Agriculture and Food, Mr Jayasuriya, organized this camp. For the first time in days I was able to have a bath. There were about 800 refugees at this school. I was well looked after: they gave three meals and served tea.

While at this camp I decided to go back to work with my firm on the 8th August. Passes to go out were given to those who wanted to resume work. The number of refugees at St. Thomas' was diminishing because many of them were leaving



by ship for Jaffna or by train for Trincomalee and Batticaloa [that is, the northern and eastern provinces where most of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees originated].

So when this camp closed two weeks later, I transferred to a camp located at Saraswathie Hall in Bambalapitiya, behind the Hindu temple. Since I was afraid of living outside, I continued staying in this third camp until the 6th of November [for a month and a half]. The camp was safe because it was guarded by army sentries outside and by police inside. Most of the refugees went daily to work like me. When a person's employer gave a letter of employment, the employee could get a pass subject to monthly renewal that permitted him or her to be absent from camp from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Even after I went back to work none of my co-workers at my firm visited me in camp, although many of them asked me about my circumstances. But my Sinhalese friends (none of them from the firm) did visit me at camp. My company, however, gave me a month's salary as compensation. I had lost property worth one and a half lakhs of rupees; but fortunately my car, which I had sent for repairs before the riots, was safe, except for the battery which was stolen.

On the 6th of November I decided to leave camp and live at the house of a Tamil friend in Dehiwela which had escaped damage during the riots. My eldest daughter came from Jaffna to join me. My son who too, was working went to live with his friends.

Although I had returned to work, I was still very unhappy about the riots and uncertain and fearful for the future. I therefore resigned my position with the firm, and went back to Jaffna. I was there for three months but I couldn't find work. In desperation I went to Malaysia to find work and residence. I was actually born there [Many Jaffna Tamils have for many decades starting with British rule found employment in Malaya]. But in Malaysia and Singapore too, after searching for a job for four months, I was unsuccessful. I was ineligible in Malaysia because I was not a citizen and I was not competent in the Malay language. For employment in Singapore I did not have proper professional qualifications. So I returned to Sri Lanka on January 19, 1985, and was able to find a job of cashier in a firm different from my former company. While my wife and second daughter are still in Jaffna, my son, eldest daughter and I are living in Colombo as lodgers in separate homes. I don't know when my family can re-group.

Mrs Sekaram's narrative: My informant for the next two cases is Mrs Sekaram (a fictitious name). She is a relative of my sister's husband, and on July 1985 I met her at my sister's house in Colombo, and she related to me these episodes that had happened.

(1) Mr Sekaram, his wife and three daughters, 17, 13 and 12 years, lived in an annex which they rented from a Sinhalese landlord who lived in the main house. The landlord, Mr Navaratne, was a retired school teacher. The house was located in a lane, in Dehiwela on the side overlooking the beach. Mr. Sekaram works as an executive in a firm that deals in the export of tea and rubber.

On Sunday July 24, 1983, the Sekaram family went in the morning by bus to Hendela, a town a few miles north of Colombo, to visit relatives. It was there that they heard about the killing of the 13 soldiers in Jaffna, and that trouble was brewing in Colombo.

The Sekarams then returned to Colombo, attended the evening service at Kollupitiya Methodist church (Colombo's best-known Methodist Church where Christians of all nationalities worship together), and returning home by bus, saw much agitation among the crowds attending the Vel Festival. [Although this festival is staged at the Hindu Temple and is attended by many Tamils, it has in past years attracted many Sinhalese worshippers who asked for favors and broke coconuts before the God, a manifestation of Skanda]. The riots occurred at the time of the festival which was abruptly stopped by the police. The festival was resumed two years later.

Next morning, as Mrs Sekaram was getting her children ready for school, a neighbor brought the news that rioting had already begun at Narahenpita and that she should not send her children to school. She took her advice. Fearing that curfew may be declared soon, she was preparing to buy provisions, when another neighbor who had been out informed her that some of the shops in Dehiwela junction were ablaze, and that they should all take preventive action.

Mrs Sekaram told the author:

The first thing I did was to pray. My husband who had gone to work, rushed back home in his office van, and we debated what to do. He said he had seen the burnings at Dehiwela junction. We decided to stay at home. Then as the van left, we saw the mob coming up the lane from the beach end. They were mostly young men, say 20 to 25 years of age, and there were about 25 to 30 of them. They came armed with sickles for cutting grass and sticks. Our house was the first at the beach-end, near the railway line. My husband, children and I quickly left our annex and sought refuge in our landlord's house.



Although our house was owned by a Sinhalese landlord, the first three houses on the opposite side of the lane, were owned by Tamils.

The mob went past our house, and broke the windows and wrecked two of the Tamil houses; in the third house there was a young woman alone; she was recently married. The crowd exorted 2000 rupees from her and left the house intact because a Sinhalese family had rented a portion of that house.

Not only us, but many of the Tamils down our lane took refuge in our landlord's house. Altogether there were six adults and eight children. Mr Navaratne treated all of us very well; he went marketing and had food cooked for us. He let the refugees stay in his house for some two or three weeks, and when the train service resumed, we left for Jaffna. We were able to return to our annex unharmed and all our possessions were intact.

(2) Mrs Sekeram, who told me of her family's experience in the narrative recorded above, also related to the experiences of some very close relatives of hers who lived in a small "colony" so to say, in Alwis town, Hendala, a town north of Colombo with predominately Sinhalese population.

In a complex of three adjoining houses lived four Tamil families. Let us call them (1) the Samuels, (2) the Handys, (3) the Gurusamys and (4) the Mahendrans (all made up names). Mr and Mrs Samuel lived in one house with two sons. Their married daughter and son-in law, the Handys and their two daughters, lived in a large upstairs-house, with Mrs Gurusamy and her two sons; her husband was away working in the Middle East. The Mahendrans had two children, a boy and a girl, and lived in the third house. A person living in the neighbourhood brought the news around 12.30 p.m. that he had seen a mob of about 300 people collected at the top of their street, and he had to detour in order to reach his home. Mr Samuel, his son, and son-in-law who had gone to work on July 25 had been quickly sent back home by their employers. On hearing that a crowd was coming their way, all four families abandoned their homes—they did not pause to collect any articles—and ran for shelter to the house of the nephew of Mrs Samuel, who lived at some distance from the main road. Let us call the nephew Navaratnam.\* In fact the crowd never got to this safe house.

After the mob had come and done their work and gone away, the families returned to see that the mob had broken window-panes, windows, doors and set fire to their houses, after looting the jewelry. Three motor cars and one motor bike were also burned. In the debris of one of the houses they found some molten gold (from the jewelry

that had been among the burning goods. The Samuels' daughter and son-in-law, who had lived upstairs, were unable to salvage some clothes, but the others were left with nothing.

The immediate Sinhalese neighbors told the victims that they had tried to put out the fire, but had been warned and threatened by the mob that if they intervened they would be given the same treatment. Some members of the mob were recognized as being of the area.

After a few days of staying at the nephew's house, the Samuels went to a refugee camp and from there took a ship to Jaffna. (in July 1985 they were still there). The Mahendrans also ended up in Jaffna in their ancestral property at Manipay. The Handys have been fortunate: they had insured their house and had by July 1985 rebuilt it and reoccupied it, with Mr Handy at his previous job. The Gurusamys, who, like the Samuels, had not insured their house, are rebuilding it with some government compensation. They hope to resume their former life in Wattala.

Other Narratives Concerning Victims of the 1983 Colombo Riots.

The next three narratives concern the experiences of three families who were victims of the riots. Their experiences were related by a close female relative of mine, who knew the families, had visited them, and heard the stories from the victims themselves.

(1) The Ratnam family lived in their own house in Wellawatte (This is a ward in Colombo where a large concentration of middle class Tamil families lived. Wellawatte was the focus of much burning and looting of houses in 1983). Mr Ratnam was an accountant; he and his wife had a daughter and two young nephews living with them (their son was away in England engaged in studies).

The first intimation of attack was when a crowd of about 200 people armed with knives and mammoties and carrying cans of petrol attacked the house of their neighbor, situated behind their own house, and set it ablaze. These neighbors, also Tamils, owned Brighton Hotel, and the lady of the house got into her car and managed to flee to the hotel.

The Ratnams—husband, wife, daughter and two nephews—left their own house and hid behind a water tank in the garden, and put the two boys inside it. The mob set fire to their house, and seeing the fire spread, the family ran down the lane. The shanty dwellers living in the vicinity on municipality land laughed and jeered at them while they ran. Then a slum boy tapped the shoulder of Mr Ratnam and asked him to follow him. This boy who had been a playmate of their son, now in England, proved to be their savior. He took them to his wooden hut,



pushed them inside and padlocked it. The family remained shut up until 10 p. m. that night. Mrs Ratnam fainted three times.

Late that night their rescuer came and let them out so that they could ease themselves and wash up. He then locked them up again. He then brought them cooked rice, dhal and dry fish curry and coffee.

Their house was entirely burned out—in fact all the houses of Ramakrishna Terrace where they lived—were similarly destroyed. They were taken to refugee camp, and then they left for Jaffna [in the north, their birthplace] by ship. Some months later they returned to Colombo. There was one small room intact in their former house. They were living in this room and attempting to rebuild the house. The two little boys slept on mats on the ground.

(2) Mr X worked as an accredited accountant at the Colombo branch outlet of a famous Indian manufacturer and distributor of footwear. He lived in Mount Lavinia, a ward of Colombo, on the city's main thoroughfare called Galle Road. He, his wife, two sons, aged 14 and 12, and a daughter, 9, lived in the main house, while Mrs X's retired parents, the father a heart patient and the mother with disabled limbs, lived in an attached apartment.

On July 25, the first day of the full-scale riots (which had begun the previous night), a truck full of thugs arrived at the house. The three children took flight and ran down the road to the home of a Sinhalese friend. Mr X stood in the rear of the house, and Mrs X solicitous for her mother put her in the bathroom and stood guard inside.

The thugs broke up everything, piled up the furniture and burned it. Debris was falling on the disabled mother and Mrs X tried to shield her head with towels. Mr X tried to stop them from their rampage of destruction, and they physically attacked him. Then they found Mrs X and stripped her of her clothes. She was in the last stages of menstruation, and so the thugs slapped her and she passed out. The family lost all their possessions and the house, and they all subsequently migrated to Australia. (The family of Mrs X's brother, a surgeon employed in Kandy also emigrated with them.) Mrs X's father died soon afterwards.

(3) Mr Nayagam [a fictitious name] was the Controller of Exchange, a superior administrative position in the Sri Lanka Government. He and his wife had two daughters, aged 18 and 21, and a son, aged 14. His house was located in Narahenpita (not far from Kanatte cemetery where the riots started on the night of July 24 after the exposure of the dismembered bodies of soldiers flown from Jaffna). The Nayagams owned their house, and their

immediate neighbors were Mrs Nayagam's own parents and unmarried sister who also owned their house. Let us call this sister Chandra.

In the morning on July 25, the Nayagams suddenly heard the noise of shattering glass. Mr Nayagam had left for work. The Nayagam children and their mother fled the house and were given shelter by a family living in a shanty. The crowd smashed up their house and effects but did not burn it. Mrs Nayagam's mother, an old lady, hid on the roof of the garage. Chandra then tried a ruse on the attackers by claiming to be a Muslim and not a Tamil. The crowd leaders then replied: "Alright, we will not do anything to your house now, but we will check your identity and if you are a Tamil, we'll burn your entire house". The crowd returned later and did just that.

#### Notes:

1. For example, Stanley J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)
2. The next seven paragraphs are excerpts taken from my account of the 1983 riots (Chapter 9) in my *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
3. See Valli Kanapathipillai, "July 1983: The survivors' Experience," in Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence, Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990). The author reports that she conducted a total of 30 in-depth interviews, and some of her concluding remarks draw from this larger pool.
4. As one case study presented by Kanapathipillai, *op.cit.*, shows, there were cases of landlords using the occasion of the riots to try and oust tenants with rights, so that they could charge higher rents to more ethnically "acceptable" tenants.
5. A parallel speech with Sinhalese expressions mixed with English is common among middle class Sinhalese.
6. This was the incident that is said to have triggered the 1983 riots. See Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1986, pp. 15-16.
7. Ratmalana is the location of Colombo's airport which is still in use for internal flights. Colombo's main airport at present is situated farther out in Katunayake.