

A free press existed in South Africa because of the steadfast resistance to censorship by the media over many years. Yet there were newspapers which were apologists for the government. There were also newspapers which were apologists of anti-apartheid groupings. As indeed there will be in the future South Africa. That would be their democratic right. But the role of the newspaper as a critical observer of the process of government and the way public functionaries carry out their mandates, will continue beyond our time.

Conclusion

In South Africa the difference between the 1970s, 80s and now is that our commitment to a cause has changed from liberation to commitment to democracy. We dare not surrender commitment to journalism. Any party that is in power or seeks election must be judged according to its principles, policies and actions.

If South African journalists were once shocktroops of the battle against apartheid, we must become the shock troops of democracy in a truly democratic post-apartheid South Africa. Even Mandela agrees. He has openly stated that a critical, independent and investigative press is the livelihood of any democracy and had to be free from state interference. He believes the press needs constitutional protection so it could protect the right of citizens. "It is only such a free press that can

temper the appetite of any government to amass power at the expense of the citizens".

However there are flashing lights which the media must guard. Journalists fear in South Africa that freedom of the press could suffer as much under a democratically elected government as it did apartheid. At the dawn of the new South Africa, press freedom is still a site of struggle. In spite of some important gains during the process of political transformation, there are battles that must still be won to ensure that the wider freedoms which underpin press freedom are upheld by the government of national unity and civil society generally.

Even within Mandela's democratic government which welcomes a free press, some ministers have advanced provisos that the press must be responsible, and its reporting must be factual and not malicious. These warnings presuppose that the press is subject to two separate disciplines: criminal and civil law and whatever authoritarian idea that might be going through the mind of a politician at any particular moment.

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HEMA'S STORY. A NARRATIVE WITHOUT PLOT?

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Introduction

The theme of this essay is the story of a Sinhalese widow. It is a story about a violent event. Unknown people abducted her husband from their home on the morning of 18 March 1989. A few weeks later his burnt body was found.

The story refers to a period of extreme and violent upheaval in Sri Lankan history. In 1987 the Sinhalese nationalist JVP (Janatha Vimukti Peramuna, or People's Liberation Front) had launched its armed offensive against the UNP (United National Party) government, and other political opponents who were labelled "Traitors of the Motherland".² The reaction of the UNP government was as desperate as cruel. The army and the security forces were in no position to deal with the 'subversives', as the JVP and its armed wing the DJV were called in official language, and the JVP had indeed come very close in reaching their aim of grasping state power. It was the appearance of death squads aligned with the army and politicians in power and with names like 'Black Cats', 'Green

Tigers' PRRA (People's Revolutionary Red Army) that precipitated the defeat of the JVP. Especially during the latter part of 1989 the counterinsurgency campaign was at its peak with the JVP at the receiving end. The arrests and killings of the leadership in November 1989 was the final blow. In the introduction of his book *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror*, Chandraprema (1991:4) suggests that "probably never before in recent world history has an organisation which gave out the impression of so much power been decimated so completely in so short a period of time".

The terror that came from both parties manifested itself in cruel assaults on people's lives and in a general climate of fear.³ For many Sinhalese the defeat of the JVP meant a waking up out of a state of shock. The extreme and massive character of the violence suddenly was no more. The number of political killings and disappearances decreased rapidly. The exposure of dead bodies on the roads was done away with.

Due to the violent and radical means with which it was carried out the sudden defeat of the JVP poses problems for writing history. The 'subversives' were killed and not brought to court as was the case after the first Insurrection of the JVP in 1971. Important knowledge about ideas, strategies and debates will be forever inaccessible. For the Sinhalese people the understanding of these years will be fragmented. As Chandraprema concludes his introduction: "The story of the insurrection 1897-1989 will have to be laboriously built up with bits and pieces of information as and when they become available". (Ibid)

Among these 'pieces of information' are testimonies. I regard Hema's story as such.

Hema's Story

"On the 18th March 1989 at about 8.30 in the morning there came a bus. It stopped and they got down. And they raided the house. I can't say who they were, and whether they were from the security forces. Some of them were wearing black shorts and some of them were wearing T-shirts. Everyone of them was armed. Some of them were in army uniform. By that time my husband was inside the house. At once they came into the house and called his name and took him.

I was sitting in the big room and talking. That day we had organized a *kiri dana* (an almsgiving ceremony). So, my *nangi* (younger sister) and my mother and other family members were there.

They grabbed him and questioned him and he told his name. Then they asked me to produce the identity card. I opened the drawer and while I was searching for the identity card they removed him to the bus. It was a CTB bus. Only that group was there in the bus. Some of the people (who came for the almsgiving) were on the road.

He was taken towards the camp. Then I ran to the camp and asked for my husband. They told me that they did not bring him. After that I went to the police station and then they said: no. After that I went to M. There also they said: no. After that I searched everywhere but could not find him. I went to the UNP MP's son. He promised to inquire. After that we went to Mrs. S (SLFP). She inquired. The police replied that there is no one by that name. (That was) after about two or three weeks.

I was not in mayd senses during that time. I didn't know what had happened to me at that time. During that time everywhere bodies were burning. His *malli* (younger brother) went to places where bodies were burning at the side of the roads. One day he came to know that one body was burned and that it was his brother's body. When I went there it had stopped burning. Then I went to the police station and informed them. they said: we can't do anything, we only can go through the paper and see. They said they will read the paper. If the name is in the paper we can tell you. (My husband's brother could

recognize that that body-it was burning at that time-was his brother's who was missing. I didn't know anything).

After that the police took a police report stating that my husband was missing. After that I gave particulars to the AGA's office to get the death certificate. They still haven't given it. We asked the AGA. Though they say they will issue that certificate they did not give a legal order to issue that certificate. I doubt (if I will get it). I have the number of the file. The AGA promised to issue, it but I can't say.

He (my husband) was doing business. He was doing paddy business and was doing cultivation also. (He also had a shop here in front of the house). I think because he was earning more than the rest of the village members (they took him). That is why enemies have given messages. Because he was the only person who collected grains. He took paddy and grains to M., G. and K. We, I didn't have (problems with the JVP. they also didn't come and ask for money).

He (my husband) was a member of the UNP. (He was) only a member. Most of the time he was in O. during the violence period. At that time there were some letters stating to get him down here by the JVP and... But I did not send a message to him. He (went there) to search for gems. That was why I am thinking that people have taken a grudge (revenge). (I have no idea who took my husband). I can't say anything except that. When I was running I saw that the bus was going into the camp. I saw the bus turning into the camp. I told (them). (But) they said: we didn't bring him' I could not (do more). They didn't allow me to go in.

(During that period) they arrested (more people). Some people were released. Some were missing. When (I and other people whose relations are missing) get together, we discuss; this is how my husband was taken. We discuss what has happened. During that time we had to go alone. During that period no one would assist. That was according to the situation. (loudly) I went alone. No one was here at that time. My husband's mother and *nangi* who came for *kiri dana* (almsgiving ceremony) were here. Only the children were here. The home people were here and the people who came for the almsgiving.

After one year I gave an almsgiving. I was waiting for some time and his brother also told that he saw his body burning, so after one year I gave *dana* (almsgiving ceremony) (on the date he was taken). On the first occasion I gave it on grand scale. We got down 15 priests and gave the almsgiving. After that I have been taking it to the temple. (The first time was on) 18th March 1990. I did not invite (the neighbours), but they came. I only invited my relations and my husband's relations. They came to hear *dhamma* (teachings by the monks).

(There is) a vast change (since my husband was taken). I had to give up the boutique). Even this land, some people are creeping in to settle down. Even what we grow in the garden or in the field we are not in a position to collect a real harvest. We have no way of increasing the living standard. I don't have any other help. My eldest daughter sat for the exam and also last month she got married. I am having a lot of difficulties.

They had a connection and I gave her in marriage. I finished that soon. Now, my eldest daughter is married. Another five children are here. My main ambition is to give them a good education. (They are still going to school). I am having two sons and four daughters. I tried best to give a good education to the eldest daughter, but owing to these troubles I failed.

In 1974 I came here. I came here in 1974 and in the same year I got married here. (My husband) he is from this area. When he was going for business there to K. we had a connection.

Now, I am living a poor life. Now, I am living by supplying food to the garage workers, and having a small poultry farm and two or three cows. And I do my paddy cultivation. If I don't have money I borrow money from the garage people and.. When I get my crops, I'll sell them and pay back the money. The rest of the money I'll keep for my purposes. (I don't get support from the government), except the government is giving Rs. 300 for orphans. But that is not enough. (I do not expect anything from the government) except to give a good education to the children. And to protect my future life. Without borrowing money from the neighbour to grow my paddy lands and to do my cultivation. (If there would be an election) I think of voting for the SLFP. After the violence I have no faith on this government".

Testimonies

In Sri Lanka there are many testimonies like Hema's which narrate events during the years of terror. These can be found in the files of human rights organisations.⁴ Testimonies, however, generally disappear in the margins of the political history of the insurrection. They make up an account which appears to be fortuitously rather than inherently linked to this history. This is clearly illustrated by Moore (1993). In his otherwise interesting article on the JVP he writes in a footnote (one should note the literally marginal position in his text): "The gross brutality of the methods of murder, torture and mutilation and display of corpses employed by both the JVP and their opponents is something that requires mention but no elaboration. It closely parallels the gory nature of much JVP propaganda. The story of the creation of anti-JVP 'vigilantes' is of more analytic interest". (Moore 1993:639)

Such a position vis-a-vis the subject of violence is not an exception in the academic community. Das (1985:5) has accused the intellectual community of stopping of labelling or categorizing violence and of ignoring the significance of the "gory details" in their analyses. Pandey (1991:559) has argued that "historical discourse has experienced very great difficulty in capturing and re-presenting the moment of violence. The 'history' of violence is therefore, almost always about context-about everything that happens around violence". According to Pandey the explanations of violence are generally given in terms of larger historical processes. Such a discourse leaves little room for agency, it is cleansed of contradictory perceptions and emotions and bypasses the problem of the representation of pain. As such, the demands

of academic discourse pose the danger "of sanitizing, 'naturalizing' and thereby, making bland and rather palatable what is intensely ugly and disorienting" (Pandey 1991:565).

Testimonies specifically have the potential to ugly and disorienting message. The problem, however, is that testimonies are generally considered to belong to a judicial discourse. Here they serve the purpose of getting at a judicial truth. Besides, these testimonies form the materials for the reports on human rights violations. In both cases, the testimonies of witnesses and survivors are instruments to establish guilt or validate claims for compensation (Srinivasan 1990:309), or, in the case of the reports on human rights violations, to accuse the government of abuse of power. What happens is, that in the process, the disorienting and unique message of each testimony is silenced. Political killings, arrests and disappearances are reduced to abstractions, disposed of context, and hence of meaning.

Thus, these are the problems that I am faced with. How could Hema's story be given the place it deserves? How could it be given a meaning? How could the problem of the representation of pain and ugliness be confronted? How could a disorienting event be understood without normalizing it? A crucial first step in any attempt to face these questions is the recognition of, what Srinivasan (1990) has called, the epistemic position of the survivor. If she is given the space to move centre and occupy the "unique and irreplaceable *position* with respect to what is witnessed" (Felman 1994:92, underlining hers), her account could gain "a significance beyond the personal and purely instrumental" (Srinivasan 1990:309).

This significance is not a given. It does not present itself in a clear cut way. On the contrary, to get the message through hard work is required from both the speaker and the listener. The survivors of the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 explained this when they addressed the field worker: "It is our work to cry and your work to listen". (Das 1990:346) How to listen? I struggled with this question for a long time. I interviewed Hema in February 1993 and I was allowed to tape her story. I left it at that for a year, unable to overcome my feeling of having failed to grasp the significance of what she had told me. Only by writing this essay did I begin to learn how to partly overcome and how to partly live with this failure. As it turned out writing this essay became an exercise in listening. What this exercise led to I will clarify shortly. However before I start doing this, I will reflect briefly on my encounter with Hema.

Meeting Hema

I was introduced to Hema by my interpreter, Mr. Bandara. He knew some people in the neighbourhood where she lived and where, according to him, the JVP had been very strong. Consequently, the number of people who were killed and who are still missing is very high. They had been victims of JVP killings as well as killings and abductions by death squads. Mr. Bandara was very eager that I would be able to hear both sides of the story. In this area, he thought, I would be able to get at 'the real truth'.

During the three days of our stay in this area we crisscrossed the roads in order to listen to the stories of the people in the neighbourhood. Our request to tell us about that period in their life was accepted with feelings which ranged from eagerness to polite reservation. A former member of the left opposition alliance⁵ was immediately ready to relate to us his experiences, and easily talked for hours. The reaction of a contractor was quite different: "Do you want me in a tyre?"⁶, he asked. Two days passed before he decided to speak out. The brother of a woman whom we approached replied: "Don't you think that this will help the JVP?" Some women who had heard that I was in the neighbourhood looked for me, eager as they were that I would listen to their plight. They had come to me with some hope that I, as a woman from the rich part of the world, would offer financial help to face the difficult situation in which they were living since the loss of their husbands or sons. One woman was very explicit: "I came here running while thinking that you were giving some aid, or something like that. The New Year is coming..."

The women were rather brief, formal and reserved in their accounts. They left me and Mr. Bandara with a sense of disappointment. On the surface their stories revealed very little and were quite similar. The women did recount what had happened, however something, I felt, was missing.

Narratives Without a Plot

Pandey (1991), in his article mentioned before, describes some problems that confront the student of political violence in her or his endeavour to collect data. According to Pandey (1991:563), the study of violence poses the paradox that violent acts by their very nature wipe out 'evidence' whereas at the same time they produce the necessity of evidence-gathering. Nobody can escape this urge of finding out who did what and why. It is the urge to look for missing linkages, "hidden processes and contradictions that we might normally prefer to ignore" (Ibid). As a field worker I regarded it as my task to collect evidence, or stories, as rich as possible.

However, most of the women with whom we spoke seem to have preferred ignorance about these 'hidden processes and contradictions'. They related their stories without linkages. It was as if they had recounted narratives without a plot. Hema was no exception. That meant I was left with the task of dealing with the gaps, the linkages which Hema had ignored. I had to contextualize Hema's story.⁷ This I came to realize, was what the exercise in listening amounted to.

During the three days in this neighbourhood I made linkages quickly and intuitively. I had visited Sri Lanka in December 1988 and in May 1990, and from those visits I had the feeling of what it meant to live in Sri Lanka during those years. It was this acquaintance with the national political context, which to a certain extent helped me to understand what Hema had told me. What I missed though was the local political context. That picture only began to surface on the basis of the stories that fourteen people in the neighbourhood had told us and which

I was allowed to tape. In three cases I kept a written record. Furthermore, some people gave additional comments in between the more formal sessions. These quite often referred to the gaps which had been left in the stories which we had recorded. Often people would ask us whom we had visited. This was soon followed by their view on what had befallen those people, thus those we had visited before.

Now, let me proceed by contextualizing Hema's story on the basis of evidence and insights available.

The National and Local Context

The abduction of Hema's husband took place on 18 March 1989. By this time the JVP was very strong. From mid-January onwards they had stepped up killings in a campaign to frighten people and to make people obey their order to boycott the Parliamentary Elections, which were held on 15 February. The order to obey the boycott could be considered an important event in the JVP's strategy to undermine the regime (Moore 1993). After the election violence continued. On 6 April 1989 I received a letter from a well-informed friend. He wrote:

The DJV went on a killing spree. They reacted by killing those who opposed them by going to polls. In fact this sordid trend started on the day of the elections or just before. The worst affected areas being parts of the Southern, North-Central and Central Provinces. These killings were not given much publicity and the State Security personnel countered with a spate of counter killing. The State has camouflaged their killings in many ways. There are armed units that operate on the sly and there are also other semi-official groups like the private security men of the Ministers and M.P.'s and groups of S.T.F. men in civilian clothes. But the worst is considered to be the newly emerged 'Black Cats'. It seems they are not controlled by any officer in any Province nor do they keep to a fixed area of operation. A well equipped and well funded group, they prowl where-ever they wish and resort to the same pattern of killings as the DJV; disfigured faces, mutilated bodies are left for the public to gaze with horror. (Personal letter, March 1989)

By that time it had become clear that both the JVP and the new government were strengthening their muscles. On 9 March 1989 the inaugural meeting of the new parliament took place. The JVP called for a 'protest day', which cost many people their lives (Gunaratna 1990:303). March 1989 saw a government that was keen to show that it was in control of the situation. The then Minister of State for Defence, Ranjan Wijeratne⁸ announced measures to strengthen the hand of the security forces (Sunday Island, 26 March 1989). It was also in March 1989 that Amnesty International (1990:14) began to receive regular reports that extra-judicial executions were attributed to pro-government vigilante groups.

This situation is reflected in the area where this abduction took place. Both the JVP and the army were prominently

present. The contractor in the neighbourhood related to us that the JVP had been operating in the area from 1983 onwards. "In the beginning", he said, "there was no trouble at all. They came to my garage for minor things they paid and went. The name of the JVP was spread all over. "According to this man the army followed soon. They opened a camp in a former school, and at a time when the JVP was not yet making their presence really felt, "the army was already running up and down". (cf. Gunaratna 1990:156-161)

In the area political rivalry abounded. There was a restless struggle going on for a political constituency, both between and within political parties. However, during the years 1987-1990 this local and regional struggle was superseded and disguised by the struggle between the JVP and the UNP-government at a national level. It had an extremely violent character. No longer was the struggle for power fought out by means of shaming and status exposure (cf. Warrell 1990). It had become a struggle of life and death. The contractor explained that local politicians have been killed, not because they were JVP, but simply because they were popular:

For example, let us say, you are a prominent member of the SLFP, and you have a lot of support from the people. I am trying to contest for the UNP and people do not support me. So, if I don't get rid of you I can not get the people who are supporting you on my side.

The guns also had put mutual obligations between leaders and followers under pressure. In the neighbourhood we spoke to a former member of the leftist alliance (United Socialist Alliance). He had fled to Colombo after he had been attacked by the JVP. By doing so he had left, besides his family, his body guards behind. What happened? The politician:

During the election period I was given two guns. There were two people to guard me. After I had been shot at, those people had no way of going anywhere. Then the JVP had told them to come and join JVP if they wanted to live. So, they joined the JVP. According to this man most people had joined the JVP out of fear, and in order to survive. The affiliation was highly opportunistic, however it did not prevent people becoming the targets of the army and police. The more the terror and counter-terror violence made people regard political identities as an instrument, the more these identities were regarded as essential by the "enemies". The contractor:

During that time real JVP members got caught. They punished those people seriously and they could get all the information from those people. When they torture him he would reveal all the persons involved in the JVP in the area, even the people who joined in name only.

Full time JVP activists on the other hand often did not publicly expose their political identity. As the contractor explained, there was a man in the neighbourhood who behaved "like us" during the day and did JVP activities during the night. This was a general pattern; political identities were in a state of flux.

Identities

Let me return to Hema's story. What had happened? A CTB bus stopped in front of the house and a group of men got out. They entered the house, called the name of Hema's husband and took him by the hand. It must have been a rather threatening situation. They were all armed. Hema, however, did not refer to any panic. The orders of the men were obeyed. Her husband told his name, and Hema herself went to look for his identity card. Nobody screamed or shouted, it seems. Hema also did not mention anything about a threat to herself, as I was told by so many other women. Nobody seems to have ordered her not to shout, neither was a gun pointed at her. Maybe she and her husband really did not resist. Only when they took her husband without waiting for his identity card, did Hema realise the state of affairs and ran to the camp in a desperate attempt to intervene.

Hema began her story: "On the March 1989 at about 8.30 in the morning there came a bus. It stopped and they got down. And they raided the house", Silence. Who were they? I asked. "I don't know, who they were". Hema only gave some indications. They were all armed. Some of them were clad in T-shirts and black shorts, others were in army uniform. They were the only travellers in the state owned CTB-bus. And finally, Hema had seen them turn into the army camp.

Hema's account strongly resembles the many cases on which Amnesty International (1990) based its report.

In a typical case, plainclothes armed men arrived at the victim's home at night, travelling in Pajero jeeps or Hiace Vans (which are widely used as "official" vehicles) or using vehicles which they had apparently borrowed or requisitioned. Sometimes they said they were members of the security forces and included someone wearing police or army uniform among them, but often they refused to identify themselves. Usually they gave no explanation for taking away the victim, providing no details of possible charges or of where the person would be taken. (Amnesty International 1990:15-16)

According to Amnesty International (1990:18) regular forces have been operating in plain clothes. Moreover, senior members of the ruling UNP had connections with the death squads. The signs-the CTB-bus, the men in army uniform-seem to be clear. They all suggest the involvement or silent approval of the army and the local politicians in power.

Who was the victim? Hema's husband was a *mudalali*, a trader. According to Hema he had a monopoly in the trade of grain to different parts of the country. He had some land. He had a shop as well, which gave him the opportunity to build up a position in the community. He handled money-quick money and a lot most probably-as could be concluded from his activities in the gem business. This man must have been a rather powerful person in the neighbourhood.

Due to his powerful position Hema's husband must have had contacts with the police and the army. Most probably he was a person who normally had power to negotiate or to bargain. It could be that he might have been willing to go with army men (people who have to be accountable)- confident of this position to negotiate, and of his chances to return from the camp. It could have been, but I don't know.

The mudalali was a member of the UNP, which was leading party in that area. What was his political power? "He was only a member", said Hema. He must not have been an important member, though. It would have not been worth this much effort. After the abduction Hema went to the UNP MP's son for help. This man promised to inquire, but it doesn't appear as if he actually did anything. Most probably the mudalali and his family were not on good terms with the leading party members of the area. Interestingly, Hema and her relations turned to the MP of the opposition party. These people inquired and by doing so had won Hema's confidence. If there would be an election, she said, "I think of voting for the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party). After the violence I have no faith in the government".

Why did the UNP men refuse to inquire? Had this man fallen out of grace? And if so, why? Had something happened with his political reliability and credibility? I have some indications that this was the case. Earlier I had already described the political situation in the area. Many people had joined the JVP. A prominent SLFP organiser in the region once explained to me that many of them were mudalali's. In order to save their business they were more or less forced to do so, he suggested. This could have meant that this man, though formally UNP, had turned into a sympathizer of the JVP.

What could have been his motive? Let me turn to the contractor in the neighbourhood, and the way he dealt with the different political powers that were present. Actually, his whole story had precisely this theme; how he managed to survive by an act of tight- rope walking, by keeping in touch with both the army and the JVP. The contractor:

I know those people (JVP: TO) very well. For a minor... thing they came to the garage and they paid and went.(...) Now, everywhere it was coming up. At that time I came to know the villagers. And I came to know the army people also. Now, when they pasted posters the army came and they scolded the people and removed them and now the trouble started. By that time they started to arrest people. The JVP members were taken into custody. The army and the police were in good terms with me. They (the villagers; TO) came and told everything in secret. If anybody had been lifted by the police or the army, they directly came to me.

Serving both parties seemed to have been the only option open to businessmen like the contractor and Hema's husband.

But is this all there is to say with regard to Hema's husband? Hema herself related more, when I asked her whether they had any problems with the JVP?

We I didn't have (problems with the JVP. They also didn't come and ask for money). (...) Most of the time he was in another place during the violence period. At that time there were some letters ordering to get him down by the JVP and ... But I did not send a message to him. He (went there) to search for gems.

The fact that JVP members had not come to ask for money suggests more than being just a sympathizer. And why did he flee to another place? Actually, rumours had it that he was a local JVP leader.

Most probably, the assertion that the mudalali was a JVP activist, or maybe even a leader, will be forever contested and might never transcend the domain of local knowledge, gossip and rumours. The man disappeared, and is assumed dead. His memory, and his widow as a result, are at the mercy of the power of those rumours.

At this point it is interesting to refer to the discourses on JVP identity at the time that I went to the neighbourhood. On the one hand there was the representation of the JVP as those who were responsible for the terror which had ruled daily life between 1987 and 1989. The late President Ranasinghe Premadasa portrayed this image intensively. The stage for this propaganda were the ceremonial openings of about 150 garment factories, which were part of a huge and populist project to provide jobs for the rural poor. The ceremony had a standard pattern. After the inspection of the factory and a cultural performance a political manifestation was scheduled. Besides speeches of local politicians, cabinet ministers and the President himself, there always were two speeches by two employees, mostly a young man and a woman. They always spoke about their personal plight: they were poor, and this often was attributed to the fact that the JVP had killed the breadwinner in the family; now, because they had a job, they were in a position to improve their lives and change this situation of poverty. By this propaganda the President not only assured himself of a constituency, he also, at the level of discourse, made the JVP his antagonist. They had been responsible for the chaos. He himself, and his UNP, were responsible for order.

On the other hand there was the representation of the JVP as the "misled youth". This discourse served to protect those youths who had surrendered themselves to the police, who had been rehabilitated and who had returned from the camps to their villages. For the relations of those who disappeared, however, this label of reconciliation and reintegration into society came too late. Local knowledge will remember them as JVP and as violent. The widows, mothers and fathers have no recourse. They are stuck in the past, with their relation to the present forever impaired.

Fear and Impunity

Why was Hema's husband killed? Some persons took him, apparently without any reason. I asked Hema what she thought was the reason they took him. She said:

I think because he was earning more than the rest of the village members (they took him). That is why enemies have given messages. Because he was the only person who collected grains. He took paddy and grains to different parts of the country." And later: "Most of the time he was in O. during the violence period. At that time there were some letters stating to get him down here by the JVP and...But I did not send a message to him." There he was searching for gems. "That was why I am thinking that people have taken a grudge (revenge).

Because the question why it did happen is linked to the question who did it, or who are responsible, I asked her again; "Have you any idea who took your husband?" Hema: "No. I can't say anything except this." And she repeated; "When I was running I have seen that the bus was going into the camp." Though Hema might have had her suspicions the attribution of any reason for having taken the mudalali will ultimately hang in the air, because there is nobody to attribute to. It is here that Hema's words resist¹⁰ contextualisation. It might be true that Hema really did not know who actually abducted her husband. But the question is: did she really not know who gave the order, and whom to accuse? I doubt. But then? If she knew, why didn't she say so?

Karuna lived further down. Her husband was killed in January 1988. Like Hema she told me that she didn't know who killed her husband. However, Karuna's words showed more clearly the fact that it was less a matter of mere ignorance than a matter of preferring not to know. She said:

After that one day about 25 soldiers came. They questioned: "*akka*"¹¹, the man who had been killed here, was he your husband? then I said "Yes". Then they asked: "Do you know who killed your husband?" Because I didn't know anything about that I looked down to the ground and I didn't speak. They said they had captured the murderers. They asked: We keep....and bring it here to show you. That fellow had killed five people including my husband I never replied and I kept my eyes to the ground.

Leela, who called at us while we were still at Hema's, knew who killed her son: "A JVP member. He may be a neighbour". Why was her son killed. Leela was very brief, "There is nothing to think." "Had he received death threats before he was killed?" I asked. "There were no death threats", she said, but he was living in fear because he thought that he was having enemies." Like Hema and Karuna, Leela refused to relate the 'full' story, the plot. However, as far as she was concerned it was not a matter of not knowing who had done it, but of resisting to tell her idea *why* her son was killed.

Why would these women resist to provide a full story? Because it was a secret? I don't think so. Knowledge about who had done what during those years of terror was public. The point, however, was that, as I felt it, it lacked any legitimacy. It was confined to the domain of gossip and rumours. Consequently, my urge to know made me a participant in this domain. This

was threatening, both to the women and men whom I talked to, as well as to Mr. Bandara and myself. I was already overtaken by it on my first evening in the neighbourhood. In my diary I wrote:

I realise that in a somewhat vague manner I am afraid and I feel insecure. All this talking, this urge to know everything from one and another, all the lies as a result of this, the vulnerability of existence. In times of instability all this knowledge can be used against each other.(Diary, February 1993).

While being in the neighbourhood I guessed that it were the feelings of fear and paranoia which were behind the reserved accounts of Hema and the other women.

Zur (1994) has recently brought these feelings of fear and paranoia in connection with the situation of impunity. In a situation of impunity, she argued, "concepts of innocence and guilt lose their meaning." (Zur 1994:12) However, by the same token nobody is accountable and punishable while nobody is innocent. In such situations life becomes unpredictable and very vulnerable. Moreover, it causes feelings of extreme powerlessness. During the days that they were looking for the mudalali Hema had lost her grip on the world around her. "I was not in a good sense during that time", she said. "I didn't know what happened to me at that time." After the conversation that we taped she told me that she was like a small child during those days: "My mother had to feed me."

The situation of impunity was still prevalent during the period when I had spoken with Hema. Proper investigations into disappearance have never been carried out. Perpetrators have never been brought to court. The reason why the mudalali was abducted has never been legally established. On the contrary, it was this situation of impunity which was legally codified.¹²

Fear which was a result of moral concepts losing their meaning makes reconstruction of meaning extremely difficult. Hema might have had suspicions about who had given messages. The problem, however, was that she could not get a finger behind it, since she did not have any procedures at her disposal to do so. The situation of impunity denied her legal devices, whereas the government propaganda, as I indicated before, denied her ideological ones.

The problems involving the reconstruction of meaning present themselves even beyond these two domains. In Hema's story this becomes manifested at the moment that she is confronted with the burnt body.

The Burnt Body

In her search for her husband Hema went to MP's to ask for their help. The MP of the opposition party, the SLFP, did inquire, but to no avail. How much time had passed before Hema turned to the MP of the opposition? I wanted to know. Hema: "After about two or three weeks. I was not in a good sense during that time". And she continued:

I didn't know what has happened to me at that time. During that time everywhere bodies were burning. His malli (younger brother) went to places where bodies were burning at the side of the roads. One day his brother came to know that one body was burned and that it was his brother's body. When I was going there it was finished (had stopped burning). Then I went to the police station and informed them. They said: we can't do anything, we only can go through the paper and see.

At this moment of the interview something interesting occurred. I became confused, as can be shown by quoting the rough transcription of the tape.

To: Through the paper? Which paper?

H: They said they will read the paper. If the name is in the paper we can tell you.

To: That was....I forgot...Who was this person who was there? Who was killed? Whose body was on the road?

H/Mr. B: My husband's brother could recognize that body-it was burning at that time-was brother's who was missing. I didn't know anything.

I was shocked. And it was the blatant indifference shown by the police officer which had caused this. I remember an image coming to my mind which portrayed a police officer casually going through some newspapers. "Through the paper? Which paper?" I asked.

The inert attitude of the police officer can be described to the situation of impunity. Indeed, if anybody were to be punishable, investigations by the police would not be necessary. It all seems quite logical, but the moment Hema told me, I just couldn't take it, I lost my grip on the story that Hema was telling me. I didn't know anything anymore, it seems. For a moment I even doubted who the person was and whose body had been seen on the road. Hema and Mr. Bandara repeated: "My husband's brother could recognize that body it was burning at that time-was brother's who was missing."

Had I mirrored Hema's state of not knowing? Did my failure to come to grips with this part of her story reflect Hema's own "not being in good sense"? It could have been. After she and Mr. Bandara had explained to me again that it was the mudalali's body which was burning on the road, once again she stressed: "*I didn't know anything*".

In fact, Hema was ambivalent in her reconstruction of meaning. Besides she had claimed more than once that she had not been coherent during that time and she also stated that the body had stopped burning by the time that she had arrived. Hema: "When I was going there it was finished (had stopped burning)." Could it be that she had meant: I was not able to recognise the body as that of my husband? After we had stopped recording her story Hema told me: "Every evening I put a garland of flowers on his photograph. I still can't believe that he is dead. Deep inside I believe that he is still alive."

However, from the moment she went to the place where her brother-in-law had found the body Hema has behaved as if

that burnt body on the road was the body of her abducted husband. One year later, on the date when her husband had been abducted, Hema organised an almsgiving for the spirit of her dead husband. But even here her words reflect her doubt. Her words suggest that she acted on the authority of her younger brother-in-law without herself fully believing it. Hema:

After one year I gave an almsgiving. I was waiting for some time and his brother also told that he saw his body burning, so after one year I gave an almsgiving (on the date he was taken). On the first occasion I gave it on grand scale. We got down 15 priests and gave the almsgiving. After that I have been taking it to the temple.

In spite of her doubt "deep inside", outwardly Hema's actions are clear. She went to the police officer and later to the office of the Assistant Government Agent (AGA). With both institutions Hema became involved in a power struggle. It is her "yes" against the "we don't know" of the police. It is her application for a death certificate against the refusal to be given it by the AGA. According to Hema, and like Hema herself, both institutions took some half-hearted action. Hema: "After that the police took a police report stating that my husband was missing. After that I gave particulars to the AGA's office to get the death certificate. They still didn't give it." I asked Hema for the reason of the refusal. She said: "We asked the AGA. Though they say they will issue that certificate they did not give a legal order to issue that certificate." Hema has the number of the file, but wonders if she will ever get the certificate.

The struggle with both institutions is a struggle for the continuity of life for her and her children. It is all focused on the death certificate. Unless a death certificate is given Hema will find herself "in a state of liminality, betwixt and between social categories, neither widow nor non-widow" (Zur 1994:15). A death certificate means the judicial confirmation of the fact that the mudalali is not among the living anymore. It means the judicial confirmation of Hema's social identity as a widow. It means that she is allowed to legally act, as such; that she, for instance, is allowed to draw money from the bank account of her husband, to receive the money that is hers, and to be able to give the future to her children that she and her husband had intended to do.

Surely it will help. But in the end a death certificate can never take away her doubt inside. It never can solve the question whether the burning body on the road was really her husband's. This is the silent plot in Hema's story. Life goes on as if the disorienting event has been integrated in it. But it hasn't and it will never be.

Some Concluding Observations

Let me conclude this essay with an indication of my position in the current debate on the question whether violence should be considered as meaningful behaviour. Ac-

According to Blok (1994) this should be the case. According to him violence should be studied as a form of historically evolved and meaningful behaviour. Hence, his plea that anthropological research should focus on the culture of violence, on the way it is acted out in a specific socio-cultural context. Another position is taken by Daniel (1991). He considers violence as a counterpoint to culture, as an excess that culture never can assimilate. In the end, it always evades it. I quote:

Violence, like ecstasy-and the two at times become one-is an event that is traumatic, and interpretation is an attempt at mastering that trauma. Such an attempt may be made by victim (if he is lucky to be alive), villain or witness. We who are forced or called upon to witness the event's excess either flee in terror or are appeared into believing that this excess can be assimilated into culture, made, in a sense, our own. (Daniel 1991:14)

In Hema's story the excess is manifested in the burning bodies on the road, and more specifically the burning body which she claimed was her husband's. Her resistance to contextualisation can still be understood in a context of impunity, but it is at the sight of the burning body that contextualisation and, hence, Blok's plea for the search for the meaning of violent behaviour has reached its limit.

This is the conclusion which I have arrived at by writing this essay. Writing about violence confronts us, interpreters, with the limits of the knowledge that we are aiming at. And paradoxically as it may sound, this limit is meaningful. The fact that it is impossible to fully understand violence is more than an analytically arrived at conclusion. It is a warning as well "to remind us that as scholars, intellectuals and interpreters we need to be humble in the face of its magnitude" (Daniel 1991:16)

Notes

1. I would like to thank Sirimal Abeyratne, K. George, Josine v.d Horst, Peter Kloos, Dick Kooiman, James Manor, Joke Schrijvers, P.L. de Silva and Peter Storck for their comments and suggestions on the earlier versions of this essay. My thanks also go to the participants at the staff seminar of the Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam.

2. The event which had triggered the open confrontation of the JVP was the agreement on the Indo-Lanka Accord, which was signed on 29th July 1987. The Accord was aimed at a settlement of the war between the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan army. It was especially the arrival of Indian troops in the Northern and Eastern Provinces that brought the JVP to label the proponents of the Accord as "Traitors of the Motherland".

3. The number of people killed can only be estimated. It must be around 40.000. Amnesty International (ASA 37/21/90) holds the government responsible for 30.000 and the JVP for 6.517 deaths. Chandraprema (1991) speaks of 23.000 killed by

the armed forces and their alliances and 17.000 by the JVP. The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances regards the number of 40.000 a conservative estimate. The Working Group itself verified 2.700 disappearances (United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*. E/CN.4/1993/18/Add.1, 8 January 1992).

4. The UN praises Sri Lanka human rights organisation for their well kept records: "(...) the cases of disappearances alleged to have occurred in Sri Lanka rank as the best documented cases among those from the 40-odd countries appearing in the Group's annual reports to the Commission on Human Rights" (United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*. E/ CN.4/ 1992/18/Add.1, 8 January 1992:37)

5. This was the United Socialist Alliance, an alliance of the SLMP, the Trotskyite LSSP, and the Communist Party (CP).

6. During the anti-terror campaign, and especially during 1989, dead bodies were dumped at the side of the roads, in most case burnt with a tyre.

7. In this endeavour I was inspired by Guha's (1987) essay "Chandra's Death". Guha employed the method of contextualisation in order to claim a historical truth concerning the death of Chandra, instead of the judicial truth, that was claimed by the colonial power.

8. Ranjan Wijeratne was killed in March 1991 by a bomb blast, presumably laid by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

9. During those years every MP and Provincial Minister was given arms for security.

10. Because it is not a matter of free choice here, I prefer to speak of resisting instead of refusing.

11. *Akka* literally means elder sister. It is also used by way of friendly addressing people, in this case a woman who is like an elder sister.

12. For more information on the situation of impunity in Sri Lanka, see Sri Lanka Information Monitor. *Special Dossier on Impunity 1993*.

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