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Leveling Crowds
Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia

STANLEY J. TAMBIAH
Two Postindependence Ethnic Riots in Sri Lanka

Between 1948, the year Sri Lanka achieved independence, and 1983, there have been some seven occurrences of mass violence unleashed by segments of the majority Sinhalese, who constitute 74 percent of the population, against the Tamil minority, who make up about 18 percent. The Tamils are subdivided into Sri Lankan Tamils (22.6 percent) and Indian Tamils (5.6 percent), but both groups have from time to time been victims of violence initiated by Sinhalese and have sometimes responded in kind.

The most significant of these riots took place in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983. In this chapter, I shall briefly deal with the first and last of the series: the riots that took place in 1956 are significant because they signaled the stirrings of the first postindependence conflict fueled by issues of official language and land-settlement policy as they affected ethnic group interests; the riots of 1983 are notable as the most violent and extensive of the occurrences, and they figure in the context of the early stages of the conflict that was escalating into a civil war between the armed forces of the state, dominated by the Sinhalese, and the Tamil insurgents, who had resorted to armed retaliation. The 1983 riots are also distinctive as the last instance so far of collective civilian violence; the ethnic conflict has since then developed into warfare between the armed forces and the insurgents, with the civilian population caught in between.

1956: The First Eruption

My own firsthand and indelible experience of ethnic riots happened in June 1956, when as a twenty-seven-year-old social scientist, recently returned from graduate studies in the United States, I took a team of thirty-three students (twenty-six Sinhalese and seven Tamils) to conduct a survey of some newly settled peasant colonies in Gal Oya Valley. The Gal Oya Multipurpose Scheme was Sri Lanka's first and largest postindependence development project, whose tasks were flood control, provision of irrigation for cultivating the "maximum acreage of land possible," and generation of electricity for domestic and industrial use. The Gal Oya Development Board, appointed by the Sri Lankan government in 1949, was modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Damodar Valley Corporation, but was actually more circumscribed in its structure and powers than these two giant corporations. The largest component of the board's agricultural plan was the settlement of landless peasants from depressed villages with families and some agricultural experience on small paddy and highland allotments. (Provision was also made for larger-scale cultivation, marketing, and processing of cash crops by cooperative agricultural and industrial undertakings.)

From 1950 to 1958, about 43 village units were created in what was referred to as the Left Bank, where most of the settlement had thus far taken place. The total number of colonists given allotments of land was 5,859. Of these, about 90 percent came from the board's "area of authority" in the Eastern Province, consisting of local Muslims and Tamils from the east coast and Sinhalese or Sinhализed Veddas from the interior jungle villages, who had been displaced by the dam and reservoir. The next major group consisted of "Kandyan" Sinhalese villagers from the Central Province (25 percent), the majority coming from the Kandy and Kegalle districts. The remaining 25 percent came from other areas, such as the Southern (8 percent), Western, and Sabaragamuwa provinces, and they were all Sinhalese. Although the colonists were ethnically mixed, the Sinhalese colonists were spatially separated from the local east coast Tamils and Muslims. The former were settled on the favored upper reaches of the Left Bank, immediately below the dam, and the latter were allotted less well irrigated lands at the ends of the irrigation channels contiguous with their original settlements.

A phalanx of officials, bureaucrats, and experts running the development program were locally housed in comfortable government-built bungalows in the administrative center, the fast-growing boomtown of Ampara, which was also the locus of a bustling bazaar of shops and of the roaming houses and shacks that accommodated hundreds of construction workers and transport personnel (who, if married, had left their spouses and families behind), as well as casual laborers and other young men in search of employment or making a living because the local mudaclalis (small businessmen) and other traders needed their muscle.
The Gal Oya scheme was located some 550 miles by road from Colombo, the island's capital, in a region that had previously been a jungle sparsely populated by slash-and-burn cultivators. By Sri Lankan reckoning in 1956, it was situated in the deep interior, and it was relatively inaccessible because of poor roads and transport facilities. Except for telephone and radio communications, available primarily to the elite officials and administrative offices, the valley had the air of being sealed off. The residents irregularly got news via the Colombo newspapers and from bus and truck drivers, traveling traders, and passengers in transit.

The 1956 riots—which, as we now know, were only the first and smallest in a series of Sinhala-Tamil civilian clashes from that time to the most recent in 1983—were the first ethnic riots in the island after Sri Lanka attained independence. There was a long gap of forty-one years separating these riots from the riots of 1915 between the Sinhalese and Muslims discussed at length in chapter 3. Although the last decades of British rule and the early years of independence since 1948 had seen labor disputes and trade union strikes, thuggery at elections, and other disturbances of the public peace (ranging from vendettas between traders and merchants and their respective retinues to armed robbery and homicide), there was nothing in scale, explosiveness, and novelty that matched the 1956 eruption (for 1915 was by then only a memory trace).

Prior to the 1956 riots, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike had been under mounting pressure from his own Sinhala Freedom Party to bring in a "Sinhalese Only" Bill, and it had been announced that such a bill would be introduced. Bandaranaike had said that provisions for the "reasonable use of Tamil" would come later, but he had also in his speeches maintained that unless a "Sinhalese only" policy were adopted, the Sinhalese "race, religion, and culture would vanish."

From the point of view of Tamils, certain ominous events that accompanied this projected legislation foreshadowed worse to come. In the year the government announced that the leading teacher training college in the country would be reserved for Sinhalese teachers only. Around the same time, the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (United Front of the Monks) mandated that persons educated in English or Tamil be prevented from taking public examinations until the year 1967.

The Federal Party, whose leader was S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, had a strong showing in the elections of 1956, especially in the north, as the dominant Tamil party. This result was in strong contrast to its showing in the 1954 elections. Its mounting success among the Tamils because it advocated that the Tamil language should have "parity with Sinhalese. What distinguished the Federal Party from other Tamil political parties, besides its advocacy of a federal constitution, was its launching of a campaign of noncooperation and civil disobedience along the lines of Gandhian satyagraha to exert pressure on the government. The most effective of these civil protests was staged in June 1956.

The Official Language (or "Sinhala Only") Bill, specifying that Sinhala would henceforth replace English as Sri Lanka's official language, was introduced on June 5, and the Bandaranaike-led MEP government passed it on June 14, 1956, by a vote of 56 to 29. The debating of the bill caused a buildup of tensions on both sides and the eruption of violence. James Manor notes:

Federal Party leaders had whipped up feeling against the bill for weeks and on June 5, the day that it would be introduced in Parliament, a complete "hartal" (suspension of normal business) was held in the Tamil-majority areas. The day before Chelvanayagam had written to Bandaranaike, "members of Parliament belonging to our party will lead a bunch of about 200 satyagrahis to sit on the steps of the western entrance to the House of Representatives and there they will remain fasting the whole day... I write to you asking you for your cooperation to ensure that the satyagrahis are not disturbed."

On June 5, the Tamil satyagrahis, who had been refused entry to Parliament, which had been cordoned off with fences and was guarded by policemen, staged a sit-down demonstration nearby, and this led to their forcible removal and signaled the riot. Some 200 Tamil protestors, including leading politicians, took part in this satyagraha rally on Galle Face Green. A crowd of Sinhalese collected, and several Tamil leaders and volunteers participating were physically injured and had to be taken to hospital. Meanwhile, a whole bunch of Sinhalese roamed through the city, looting shops and destroying a few vehicles. The next morning, more serious looting was perpetrated in the Pettah shopping zone. The official estimates of damage done after two days was 87 injuries to persons and 43 lootings of shops. Some 15 people were arrested.

The Tamil sit-down demonstration "led to bitter riots in which over 200 people were injured. In a few days, they had spread to Eastern Province, where Tamils and Sinhalese lived intermingled; in Batticaloa and the Galle Valley there was such violence that between 20 and 200 persons were killed, depending on which side was doing the looting," according to Howard Wriggins. "Sinhalese toughs—inspired as always by fantastic stories—seized government cars, bulldozers and high explosives and for a few days terrorized the Tamil minority in the colony," Manor writes. Many of Tamils, certainly well over one hundred, were massacred and
hundreds more were driven into hiding. The army was sent to quell disturbances." In Batticaloa, a mass demonstration by about ten thousand Tamils was fired on by the police, resulting in at least two deaths. In the Gal Oya Valley, violence on a scale hitherto unknown broke out some five days after the turmoil in Colombo, setting a precedent for even more destructive violence two years later.

If one wonders what the relationship between the official language controversy and ethnic violence in the Eastern Province might be, why the rioting leap from urban Colombo on the west coast to Gal Oya, a bustling enclave of horticultural development activity and peasant resettlement, the answer is that around this time, the language issue was also becoming intertwined with the government's policy of peasant resettlement in the less populous parts of the island. Just as the first issue had implications for the educational and employment prospects of the Tamils, so the second would be construed as causing demographic changes in Sinhalese and Tamil (and Muslim) ethnic ratios in the Eastern Province, and therefore as bearing on the politics of territorial control and of "homelands." In fact, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Federal Party in December 1949, its leader, Chelvanayagam, had warned that the government's colonization policy, whose beginning was evidenced by the Gal Oya Scheme, was even more dangerous to the Tamil people than the Sinhala-language policy. "There is evidence," he said, "that the government intends planting a Sinhalese population in this purely Tamil-speaking area."30

Like the officials and colonists we were interacting with in Gal Oya Valley, my students and I had virtually no intimation of the events taking place in Colombo, or any inkling of the explosion about to happen in our midst. After finding ourselves trapped in Ampara, we were quickly shipped out by the Gal Oya authorities as soon as the violence showed signs of subsiding. Upon my return to the campus at Peradeniya, the vice-chancellor of the university, Sir Nicholas Arygalle, requested that I write him a report on the happenings of Gal Oya as soon as I could, including if possible statements by students who were contactable—this was the period of the long vacation—because the riots in question were a new phenomenon and many people were uncertain as to what to make of them.

I submitted a speedily composed memorandum (together with statements by some of the students) to Sir Nicholas. A few years later, in 1966, I left Sri Lanka, and in the course of several changes of residence and workplace in three countries, Thailand, England, and the United States, I managed to lose my copy of the memorandum. In 1993, to my thankful surprise, Professor Kingsley de Silva of Peradeniya University sent me a copy of the document, which he had received from another professor, who had come across it in the university's archives. The student reports were not retrieved.

I have decided to reproduce my 1956 memorandum here with minimal changes, despite some interpretive shortcomings. One of its virtues in its pristine state is that it quite self-consciously conveys that the "narrative" was constructed out of various kinds of fragments—my own encounters and conversations, reports from students, newspaper accounts, reports of reports, and so on—which were arranged to provide a connected story. The authorial work is transparent.

A second virtue is that the narrative singled out themes such as the central role of rumors in triggering the violence and also in generating anger and panic among the participants, the slowness to act of the police (themselves drawn from the majority community), and the critical faces in the crowd—in this case, the mobile and volatile labor force and construction workers who unleashed the violence. More than three decades later, when I began my comparative study of riots, I would find these themes to be of recurring import. Some obvious prejudices about "the criminal classes" expressed in this text have been allowed to stand, since a text written many years ago is being reproduced.31

The third significance of this report, which is not underscored in the original writing, because it was taken not to be unusual for those times at the university, is that a lecturer of Tamil ethnic origin was able to lead a team of students, the vast majority of whom were of Sinhalese ethnic origin, to Gal Oya for sociological research. Moreover, it is a mark of the tolerance, friendship, and mutual trust of those times that when the riots broke out, the Sinhalese students took good care to protect me and the seven other Tamils in the team from any possible victimization. The university campuses are much different today.

THE GAL OYA RIOTS: A REPORT FROM A YOUNG ACADEMIC TO HIS VICE-CHANCELLOR

In writing about the Gal Oya riots, it would not be possible to give a meaningful and chronological account of the happenings if one were to confine oneself to only what one saw with one's own eyes. I am taking the liberty of presenting an account based on direct knowledge as well as indirect information elicited from persons. However, I shall carefully specify and differentiate between statements based on events witnessed by me and statements based on accounts given by others in the valley at the time of the riots. Care will be taken to state the sources of the facts narrated.

The Gal Oya disturbance cannot of course be treated as an isolated phenomenon. It must be viewed in the general context of communal tensions...
and political differences existing in the country and also as a continuation of disturbances that started in Colombo during and after June fifth. The account given here however deals only with incidents that happened in the Eastern Province.

The trouble started in the Gal Oya Valley itself on June 11 at Ampara. I remained in the valley for four days (June 11-14) and was evacuated to Batticaloa on the night of June 14. The events related here are those that happened during those four days; however, certain events in the Eastern Province that happened before the eleventh will be referred to in order to provide the necessary background.

**EVENTS IN GAL OYA AND THE EASTERN PROVINCE PRIOR TO THE TENTH THAT HAVE A BEARING ON THE RIOTS**

1. The setting fire to a Sinhalese shop in Batticaloa: a Sinhalese person inside the shop shot with a gun three Tamil persons in the crowd that had gathered to watch the fire (newspaper account).

2. Subsequently, the Tamils in Karativu on the Batticaloa-Ampara road stoned Gal Oya Board trucks. On the ninth I saw in Ampara town three trucks which had damaged windshields caused by stone throwing.

3. In Gal Oya Valley itself, the Danish Equipment Company engaged in construction work had labor trouble. From officials I gathered that they were on strike and that their work was discontinued (hearsay).

*Comment. These events indicate that:*

(a) Communal tensions (Sinhalese versus Tamil) had by now spread to the Eastern Province.

(b) Because the main supply route to Gal Oya was the Batticaloa-Ampara road, and because there were large numbers of Tamils concentrated in Batticaloa and in the colonized areas of the valley, and a large number of Sinhalese in the Gal Oya Valley, what takes place in Batticaloa and its hinterland would have repercussion in the Valley and vice versa.

(c) Because of labor trouble, there were certain elements in the Valley who would prove dangerous during riots.

**THE FIRST DAY OF THE RIOTS—MONDAY, JUNE 11**

**The Attack on the Tamils in Ampara**

At about 2 P.M., the University team left the hospital where they were housed to do field work in the colonized areas. The team was divided into two groups: (a) about 16 Sinhalese students travelling in a converted lorry and working in Unit 34, and (b) about seven Tamil students travelling in a land rover and conducting investigations in Unit 34.

On this particular day I went along with group (b), and returned to the hospital with them at about 10 o'clock in the night, when students came rushing to me and informed me about the communal clashes that took place that evening. Leslie Gunasekera, who was in charge of team (a) on the eleventh, reported that at about 8:30 P.M., when their bus was returning from the field, it was stopped by a mob who asked whether there were Tamils in the bus. On being told there were none, they were allowed to proceed (see Leslie Gunasekera’s account).

Immediately they returned home the Sinhalese students fearing that their Tamil friends in the team who had gone separately were in danger, formed in groups and stationed themselves at points on various roads to warn us of the danger. One such group of students who scouted the Ampara-Uhana road witnessed a mob setting fire to a canteen run by a Tamil (see P. N. M. Fernando’s and A. Andarawewa’s and T. D. J. Vishanara’s accounts).

Another group of three students reported that in the evening while they were having tea at Miranda’s (a restaurant and store run by Indian Tamils), a mob gathered outside and stoned the place (see M. L. Wijesekera’s and Manopala’s accounts of incidents).

That night victims of physical assault by the mob were brought to the hospital for medical attention. Because the doctor was short of staff, the university students lent a helping hand. I personally saw four victims—all of them were Tamils and two were dangerously clubbed on their skulls.

**The Rumor of the Rapist Telephone Operator**

The next morning (Tuesday) I was told by various persons about the incidents of the previous afternoon. Karunaratne and Podisingho (drivers of the land rover and lorry detailed for our use) said that on Monday afternoon one of the truck drivers whose vehicle had been stoned by Tamils in the Batticaloa-Ampara road, had come to Ampara and propagated the story that a Sinhalese telephone operator (girl) in Batticaloa had been raped and stripped and sent naked along the streets. (This story was later pronounced as untrue by the police and Government Agent—Newspaper account.) This rumor believed by the common people in Ampara inflamed their passions against the Tamils—hence the retaliations. Throughout the riots havoc and panic were created by rumors and in trying to understand the violence one must bear in mind that rumors of atrocities done by one group against the other created panic and fear in the people thus instilling them to retaliatory acts. The rumor of the raped girl is the first of the series.

On Tuesday morning Mr. Kuruthumpala (the Senior Statistical and Public Relations Officer) told me about the incident at the Chinese Cafe the previous night. Some of the Board Officials including Mr. Kuruthumpala—all members of the Y.M.C.A.—were celebrating at the Chinese Cafe. According to him, a mob collected outside and demanded that the Tamil officials and their wives inside be delivered to them, and that the Sinhalese officials refused to do so. Podisingho (driver of our lorry) told me that three Tamil ladies inside the cafe were stealthily taken through the back of the cafe to safety. According to Mr. Kuruthumpala, when he emerged out of the cafe told me that he was assaulted by the mob and the cafe of the officials were stoned. I also met Mr. Wijesekera (Assistant Commissioner of Local Government) on Tuesday morning, and he said that the mob entered his house, where Mr. Rajapakse (an official) also lived, assaulted the latter and stole some goods. In general, the assaults on Monday night were against Tamils in Ampara and less frequently against Sinhalese officials who protected Tamil officials.
In discussing the happenings on Monday with various persons I was told that the mob was spearheaded by irrigation and construction workers and truck drivers, etc., living in Ampara and nearby construction sites such as Palla Oya. I also got the impression that the police made no attempt to prevent the assaults and looting, and that they had looked on. The police force at Ampara and in the Valley was woefully small, but it appears that officers did not intervene where they were actually present at scenes of assault and looting. I must emphasize that this statement is hearsay.

THE SECOND DAY—TUESDAY, JUNE 12

On Tuesday morning the Acting Resident Manager, Mr. Abeywardene, phoned me that because of the previous day's troubles we should not go out into the field, and he requested me to come to the Circuit Bungalow. (This is the house in which top officials of the Board and other members of the Government reside during their periodic visits from Colombo.) I went there at about 10 A.M. and found the Chairman of the Board, Mr. Kanagasundram, and the other top officials conferring with persons who I was told were the ring leaders and spokesmen of the Amparai workers. From the conference proceedings that I overheard, I gathered that the latter were demanding that about 50 odd families of Sinhalese workers in Amparai were residing in Batticaloa and that the women and children there were in danger of attack by Tamils, and that therefore they should be transported from Batticaloa to Amparai. I heard the Chairman telephone the Government Agent, Batticaloa, and making arrangements with him for the transportation of the families. Soon afterwards I left for the hospital.

The Siege of the Circuit Bungalow

In the evening started the siege of the Circuit Bungalow. After the previous day's incidents in Amparai, I gathered that the Tamils in Amparai had gone to the police station and to the Circuit Bungalow to seek refuge. By the evening therefore the Circuit Bungalow was full of Tamils. This site had also become the headquarters of the officials who were dealing with the riots. Therefore it was a strategic place.

I have already referred to the chairman's agreement to transport the Sinhalese families from Batticaloa to Amparai. I gathered that the actual transportation was delayed, for what reasons I am not sure. By evening, a large mob had encircled the Circuit Bungalow which was under police protection. From Father Wickramasayke (who subsequently gave evidence to the Magistrate with regard to the shooting at the Circuit Bungalow) and Mr. Gooneratne (Agricultural Officer, Extension) I gathered that the police had used tear gas to disperse the mob but were unsuccessful. Then when the mob tried to stop a jeep bringing a Bren gun and assaulted the driver, the police opened fire. One man was shot dead through the bowels, another through his shoulder (he subsequently died) and the third was shot in the arm. All three were Sinhalese. Then the mob cut off the electricity and water supply to the bungalow, and a group broke into a dynamite dump at Inginiyagala and stole dynamite with the intention of blowing up the bungalow. Fortunately they could not lay hands on the detonators. The military arrived about 11 P.M. and with their arrival the mob dispersed. Early in the morning (5:30 A.M.) the mob set fire to Miranda's restaurant, and I saw the fire from the hospital.

THE THIRD DAY—WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13

On Wednesday morning I gathered that the Tamil refugees in Amparai were sent under escort to Batticaloa that morning.

I had repeatedly gotten in touch with the authorities requesting transport for us to get out of the valley, but they said they were unable to do so. On Wednesday morning at about 10:30 A.M. I went to the Amparai Police Station to make further requests. At about 11:30 A.M. when I was about to return to the hospital a lorry arrived with Sinhalese refugees from Bakiela, who said that they had been attacked by Tamil Colonists.

The Mythical Tamil Army

By noon, started the biggest scare which caused pandemonium in Amparai. The rumor spread like wildfire that a Tamil army, 6,000 strong, armed with guns and other weapons were approaching Amparai, having laid waste Uhana, and killed women and children there. Neither the Police nor the Army were able to counter in time this rumor or check its veracity. The panic was so great that a mass evacuation and flight of persons from Amparai took place.

The Seizure of Vehicles and Flight from Amparai

Many of the looters and rioters went to the workshop, took over the vehicles—lorries, mandators, exudils, etc. Some of the vehicles filled with armed men and carrying dynamite went to meet the mythical army which was supposed to be advancing. The others packed with men, women and children evacuated the valley through the Inginiyagala-Moneragala road. (From newspaper accounts we know the subsequent history of these escaping vehicles—many of them were seized by the police all over the country, and some of the looters caused trouble all along the coastal route of the Southern and Western Provinces.)

Fighting Spreads to Colonized Areas

As mentioned before, many rioters got into vehicles and went into the colonized area. At the same time, the Tamil colonists had taken the offensive in retaliation. That is to say that on the third day the fighting had spread to the colonized areas which had hitherto been peaceful. The marauding gangs in vehicles looted and attacked the colonized areas. The Tamil colonists retreating to their parent villages returned in large numbers armed with guns. Pitched battles began to take place in Bakiela, Valli Valli, Village Units 17, 16, 14, etc. In Amparai town the Cooperative Stores were looted. (See A. S. Jayawardene's account of men in vehicles on the rampage and the injured man brought to hospital in a mandator.)

With this turn of events the Sinhalese colonists now found themselves in great danger and started to flee in the direction of Amparai. On Wednesday
night, four Tamil students and I slept in the Circuit Bungalow which was
chocful of Sinhalese colonists seeking refuge there.

The Flight of the Officials

Another paralyzing effect of the panic created by the myth of the murderous
Tamil army advancing on Amparai was the flight of many of the Board
Officials from the valley. I gathered that many of them left the valley in the
Board's handcarves. Thus after the evacuation of the Tamil officials and the
flight of most of the Sinhalese officials, the civil administration was literally
reduced to a handful of remaining officials.

The Fourth Day—Thursday, June 14

On the fourth morning I was present at the Circuit Bungalow where a
conference between the police and all remaining board officials was held. The
bungalow grounds were swarming with Sinhalese refugees from the colonized
areas. Since an armed escort was leaving for Batticaloa I was able to send away
the Tamil students. In the afternoon the Sinhalese students were removed to
the Technical Training Institute. They left for Badulla in a mandor the next
day, and from there returned to their homes by trains.

Batticaloa became the scene of a reverse scare and rumor. The G.A.'s
bungalow was mobbed by many residents of Batticaloa who said that a
Sinhalese army from Amparai, armed and in possession of dynamite and
travelling in Board vehicles was the town. They requested the G.A. to issue
them with rifles and to give them permission to blow up the bridges. The basis of this scare was the fact that earlier in the day a marauding
party from the valley was sighted 10 miles from Batticaloa. No army invaded
Batticaloa that night.

ON THE BREAKDOWN OF THE ADMINISTRATION

Various press reports and statements by politicians refer to the breakdown of
the Administration, implying that the riots were not handled properly by the
officials. Such an allegation is a difficult one to examine, and the reader should
take these comments as being purely personal.

The question arises whether the Board could have foreseen the riots, the
atrocities and mob passions. Did the government foresee the Colombo riots?
Should the Board have anticipated riots in the Valley, after what happened in
Colombo a few days previously?

When the riots started the civil administration lost control, but then no
civil administration of officials is competent to deal with this kind of sudden
violence. A civil administration is ultimately dependent on the police force to
maintain law and order and meet violence with force. The police force in
Amparai was unparisonably inefficient on the first night. A show of force and
might might have made a difference, as vigorous action in Colombo
demonstrated, and as the army's toughness in Gal Oya proved. But then, on
the other hand, the police force in the valley was pitifully small and
understandably fearful of intervening against hundreds banded into mobs.

Regarding the flight of the officials, it is objectively true that many officials
deserted their posts. The Tamil officials were evacuated from Amparai and
many of the Sinhalese officials had left by the third day. Anyone who had
been in the valley would understand the terror aroused in many and the havoc
created by panic. He would be a brave man who was willing to endanger his
life and the lives of his wife and children for the sake of national interest. To
my mind the question arises as to under what conditions must a civil officer
stick by his post. Must a civil officer stick to it if he has reason to believe that
his life is in danger? It could be argued that where there is no security of life,
there ends occupational responsibility. Whether the flight of the officials was
understandable or reprehensible, the fact is that their flight in a sense
paralyzed the administration, for they themselves were the administration.
Their flight meant that there was no possibility of a volunteer force being
organized, and a serious lack of persons for organizing refugee work.

One serious error committed by both civil officers and the military was
their failure to demobilize the vehicles in the workshop. The fighting spread to
the colonized areas and rioters were able to seize vehicles and travel in
them. Marauding gangs were dangerously hostile and difficult to seize once
they were in possession of vehicles which enabled them to move and operate
in a large geographical area. The failure to demobilize the vehicles would seem
to be an administrative mistake and an error of strategy.

The Gal Oya flareup is a superb study of rumor—the panic it creates and
its magnification as it passes on from person to person. It is true that neither
the civil nor military and police was going to attack an effective and
timely denial of these rumors and to pacify the terror-stricken people. It is
of course debatable whether panic stricken and therefore at that moment
irrational people would believe official denials, when in this country official
denials are based on questionable veracity. Furthermore it is necessary to
remember that a rumor to be denied must first be investigated and proven
false, and this involves time; the time gap may be necessary but at the same
time fatal as we have witnessed in Gal Oya on the third day when the rumor
circulated that a Tamil army was advancing. I would like to convey to the
reader my own feeling that a more constructive approach to the riots is not to
try and see the rights and wrongs but to first understand the phenomenon of
civil strife. The rumors and their consequences clearly portrayed that in times
of civil strife normal methods of communication are useless and the
assumption of a reasonable man unreal. Furthermore, whereas the civil
officials are usually not trained to cope with riots, the military and police,
though presumably trained in war and defense, were for the first time engaged
in actual warfare, and therefore where there is no experience it might be too
much to expect precision and speed in action.

I have already referred to the probability that the rioting, assaults and
looting were spearheaded by irrigation and construction workers and that
subsequently the truck drivers joined in the fray. It is also suspected that a lot
of I.R.C.s (Island Reconvicted Criminals) had found their way into the valley.
The former persons if not criminal in background were criminally inclined
during the riots. They might not have been directly concerned with the
language issue, but the political issue and the wave of emotionalism prevailing in the country provided the opportunity and context for these elements to exploit the situation. The recent Colombo riots and the riots of 1915 showed that civil unrest could be exploited by criminal elements. Furthermore, it is very plausible that irritation and construction workers and truck drivers have a special stamp and possibly a special psychological make-up. In the valley, unlike the colonists who are a permanent population, they are transient and move with their mobile jobs. They are footloose, used to working in jungles, cut off from normal family relationships, and therefore prone to violence.

Ampara is an explosive town because it is very much like the boom town of the American West. Under these circumstances, foresight demands that these workers be carefully screened and selected. I am not aware of the system of selection practiced by the Board, but a more scrupulous system is recommended. Also, in the presence of such an inflammable population it is strange that a better policing system and a larger police force was not stationed in Gal Oya. Better police action at the initial stages would possibly have squelched the rising or at least mitigated its worst features.

Lastly, the riots demonstrated in sharp relief the geographical isolation of the valley and the paucity of roads leading in and out of it. The difficulty of rushing in police and army reinforcements was a grave problem. Since the major road is from Batticaloa through Kalmunai, which is a Tamil area, there was no possibility of sealing off and isolating the Tamil and Sinhalese areas during the earlier stages. Obviously several other roads leading into the valley and an air service are needed. Civil strife in a fringe area poorly fed with roads is naturally difficult to control.

THE COLOMBO RIOTS OF 1983: A SYNOPSIS

The course of the Sinhalese riots against the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka in 1983 has been documented by me elsewhere. Here let me summarize what we know of the locations at which the arson and violence took place and the kinds of participants—the faces in the crowd.

The 1983 riots began in Colombo 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 and Kalutara in the southwest; Kandy, Kegalle, Matale, Badulla, and Nuwara Eliya in the central tea plantation districts; and Trincomalee in the Eastern Province. Although the official death toll was about 470, it has been estimated that about 2,000-3,000 people were murdered, many of them in a brutal manner. Thousands were displaced from their homes, most of them ending up in about a dozen makeshift refugee camps. "Within the city of Colombo almost a hundred thousand people, more than half the city's Tamil population, were displaced from their homes, and many never returned to their neighborhoods or to their workplaces. Outside the country, it was estimated that there were about 175 thousand refugees and displaced persons." In this account I shall limit myself to happenings in Colombo.

One feature of these riots that I want to underscore is their actual beginning, which bears some resemblance to the inception of the Delhi riots of 1984, in that an incident of violent death had traumatic and emotionally heightening effects on a crowd and worked as a triggering event for acts of crowd violence, which escalated rapidly into large-scale, spreading ethnic riots.

The conventional story is that the most proximate triggering event was the ambush of an army truck and the killing and mutilation of thirteen soldiers at Tirunelveli, a place in the heart of Sri Lankan Tamil territory in North Sri Lanka, which had been under the occupation of a Sinhalese army for some time. The ambush was the work of Tamil insurgents belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This was certainly a moment of escalation in the ethnic conflict. India had begun to supply the Tigers with the Claymore land mine as a way of enabling them better to withstand the Sri Lankan Army (overwhelmingly Sinhalese in composition). Although skirmishes had taken place before, never before had so many Sinhala soldiers been killed at once. On July 23, certain elements in the army decided to bring the corpses in their mangled state to Colombo at the central Kanatte cemetery in Borella before giving them a military burial.

The preparations for the burial were complicated and plagued by adventitious and uncontrollable factors. One of the soldiers killed was a young second lieutenant, who had apparently been a popular student at Ananda College, a premier Buddhist school, located in Maradana. Many pupils of this school, together with their parents and teachers, gathered at the cemetery and awaited the arrival of the bodies.

In the meantime, the plane transporting the bodies to Colombo from Jaffna was delayed, and the waiting crowd, increasing in size, also became increasingly restless. After arrival, the bodies were to be taken to a funerary home next to the cemetery for preparation, but the delay also caused the police and army troops who had gathered in numbers at Borella to become emotionally agitated. And, as might be expected, the Sinhala media added further fuel to the mounting grief and rage. (There are separate Sinhalese and Tamil newspapers, radio, and television channels in Sri Lanka.)

In the end, the long delay in the arrival of the bodies at Ratmalana airport, the unruliness of the packed crowd at the cemetery, and the demand of the grief-stricken relatives of the dead that the bodies be handed to them so that they could conduct their own rites forced the authorities to cancel the official burial at Kanatte. The bodies were taken to army headquarters.
The crowd then erupted in spontaneous violence and surged into the streets.

Reviewing the trajectory of the riots, it seems plausible to suggest that they went through two phases. The first phase began in the vicinity of the cemetery in Borella, more or less as an overflow of heightened emotions on the part of the crowd gathered there—the schoolboys, friends, and relatives of the dead, some of the security forces, plus some of the local populace in Borella.

Soon after the mortuary rites, street thuggery, stopping of traffic, and physical attacks broke out in Borella, Thimbirigasyaya, Nugoda, Wellawatte, and Bambalapitiya, and almost a whole day passed before the army and police were called upon to intervene. This first phase of violence lasted one day; it was only after a short lull that crowd violence resumed in a form that was decidedly more destructive and homicidal, showing firm evidence of planning and direction, the participation of certain politicians (especially from the ruling party) and government employees (minor staff, laborers, technicians), and the use of government vehicles and buses.

A conspicuous feature of the 1983 riots was that the mob violence, especially in its second phase, was organized and for the most part purposeful. The crowds came armed with weapons such as metal rods and knives and carrying gasoline, which was frequently confiscated from passing motor vehicles. Evidence of the rioters' prior intent and planning was the fact that they carried voter lists and the 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 coastline trains.

Affirmation of these incidents comes from a senior official in the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador T. D. S. A. Dissanayaka, who has written a detailed and graphic account of the rioting in Colombo and elsewhere. He writes: "In the afternoon of July 25 the violence took a different turn. There was organized violence by gangs which were obviously trained and who operated with military precision. Their targets were the economic bases of the Tamils in Colombo and their homes." The kind of organized violence first occurred in Ratmalana, on the southern periphery of Colombo, which had the largest concentration of factories in Sri Lanka, and then it moved northwards into the city. It coincided with another organized operation: a train traveling from Galle was made to make unscheduled stops in Ratmalana, and then at each stop into the city, at Dehiwela, Wellawatte, and other places, "squads were dis-charged. . . . They demonstrated remarkable skill in destroying homes. . . . Tamil homes were identified with pinpoint accuracy using electoral lists. In attacking shops, the trained squads responded to three commands in Sinhala: 'kada [break], adha [haul], and gini [set fire]." At this phase of the violence, there was little looting of property, only systematic destruction of Tamil property and the eradication of the alleged affluence.

A well-informed friend of mine has pointed out to me that the "liberalized economy" introduced from 1977 onwards had opened up new commercial and business opportunities. Many shops selling imported and local goods had opened. New business premises and houses had been constructed in Colombo, and higher rents had become possible. At the same time, this had aggravated competition, and the riots gave some Sinhala businessmen an opportunity to wipe out their competitors, enabled some landlords to get rid of unwanted tenants, and so on. It has also been suggested that Cyril Mathew, the chauvinist minister of industries, was vociferous that Tamil businessmen in Colombo were working both sides of the street—collaborating with the government in Colombo and with the Tamil insurgents in Jaffna—and that they therefore deserved to be "taught a lesson." Matthew's ministry was a repository of knowledge about businesses, including details of their locations and owners. Its employees also provided the manpower for the government union called the Jatiya Sevaka Sangamaya, which was involved in punitive actions and thuggery. It was also the source for vehicles that were used for political purposes.

In a retrospective look at the manner in which events unfolded, it is plausible to suggest that there was a deadly confluence of two separate but complementary streams. Certain segments of the government, particularly Minister Matthew and his agents and client cohorts, had gathered information and made plans for punitive action against the Tamils in Colombo, and the ambush and killing of the thirteen Sinhalese soldiers in the north and the subsequent events at the Kanatte cemetery afforded the occasion for the prepared pogrom. That the army authorities and the minister of defense handled the deaths of the soldiers and their mangled corpses in polythene bags in a manner that would, whether intended or not, inevitably excite the emotions of the Sinhalese public at large is made even more problematic by the fact that news of the army's retaliatory violence on July 24 in Tirunelveli and Kantharmadu (in Jaffna), which resulted in an estimated 50 to 70 Tamils being killed, was suppressed from the media, both newspapers and radio, which in the meantime transmitted the inflammatory news of the dead Sinhalese soldiers and the conveyance of their dismembered remains to Colombo.
The victims in Colombo were Tamil shopkeepers; Tamil homeowners, especially of the middle class and administrative/clerical/professional categories; Tamil large 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 economic liberalization initiated by the new government of J.R. Jayewardene in 1977, and middle-class residential areas. There was practically no arson in slums and working-class residential zones.

At the most general level, the rioters on the Sinhalese side were all male and virtually all drawn from the urban population of Colombo and its suburbs. Those who actually committed murders, inflicted bodily harm, and engaged in arson, property destruction, and looting were typically drawn from the urban working class. A more detailed enumeration would include the following categories: wage workers in government and private factories and mills; transport workers, such as bus drivers and conductors, and workers in railroad yards and electrical installations; petty traders and market workers, including fish sellers and porters; small shopkeepers and salesmen in government corporations; hospital workers; high school students and the students of technical and tutorial institutes, including recent school leavers. The literacy explosion and the poor employment prospects of school graduates and leavers were potent factors in motivating the last category. Finally, there was the urban underclass of unemployed and underemployed shantytown dwellers.

It would be a mistake to exclude from the list of participants those whose involvement was less visible but nonetheless crucial to the hatching, organization, and direction of the riots. Certain Sinhala politicians and their local agents, organized crime figures and smugglers, and small businessmen seeking to eliminate rivals were all involved in directing and manipulating the violence. Some of these might be described as “riot captains” who were experts at “raising a mob” (to use expressions current in England in the nineteenth century). In addition, some militant Buddhist monks played a role in inciting crowd action, sometimes as supportive witnesses and orators. 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.

An intriguing question that some interpreters have grappled with is why, after a hiatus of some nineteen years since the last Sinhala-Tamil riots of 1958, a crop of riots of mounting violence should have occurred at
short intervals in 1977, 1981, and 1983. Since the last three upheavals took place on the watch of the United National Party, it has been asked to what extent the “liberalized open economy” and capitalist, market-oriented policies introduced by President Jayewardene created economic dislocations injurious to segments of the Sinhalese population, who might have sponsored, supported, and even participated in varying degrees in the spate of riots against the Tamils.

The Tamils were targeted for a combination of reasons: they were perceived as privileged and a suitable object of repressive action on behalf of the majority Sinhalese population, especially its poorer segments; because they were convenient victims, against whom aggression that could not be directed at the state could be displaced; and because Tamil business interests could be dispossessed or eliminated to the advantage of Sinhalese small-scale entrepreneurs and traders, who suffered most in the changeover from the state-regulated welfare and protectionist policy of the previously ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party to the capitalist, market-oriented, free-trade policy heralded by the UNP in 1977.

In sum, the 1983 riots were a kind of pogrom, which was motivated, purposive, systematic, and organized. Politically and economically, they were a punitive action against Tamils. Those who stood to gain most were, firstly, middle-level Sinhala entrepreneurs, businessmen, and white-collar workers; and, secondly, the urban poor, mainly through looting. Many of the latter were recent migrants from rural areas, whose living conditions had deteriorated as the open economy created and widened disparities of wealth and income distribution. Despite rising wages, their real incomes had declined as a result of inflation, urban housing scarcities, and the issuing of food stamps in place of the former subsidized rice program. Moreover, the measures taken to create an open-market economy caused short-term internal dislocations and imbalances, which were aggravated by pressure from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other international organizations.17

This chapter is primarily concerned with documenting the Hindu-Sikh riots that engulfed Delhi in 1984 and highlighting aspects of them that illustrate and illuminate the phenomenon of collective violence generated in the course of ethnic conflict.

The history of the Sikhs, the conspicuous changes and transformations in their religion from their first guru, Nānak (1469–1539), to their tenth and last guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), and thereafter; their golden age under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), who constructed the Sikh empire in the Punjab, with its capital at Lahore, and who is alleged to have realized the cry “The Khalsa shall rule!” (attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, who created the Sikh warrior order called the Khalsa); their shifting fortunes under the British; all this and much else has been treated by many scholars. It will suffice here as a backdrop to the riots of 1984 if I point to a few landmark developments in the religious and political affairs of the Sikhs in India, especially in the Punjab, from the 1920s onwards.1

THE SUCCESSIVE PARTITIONS OF THE PUNJAB

One set of developments to bear in mind is the succession of “partitions” that the Punjab has undergone. A unitary Punjab under British rule was first partitioned in 1947 with the formation of Pakistan. It is well to remember that the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 was done at a huge human cost: about half a million people died and around fifteen million people changed residence through migration. The Punjab as a whole felt the worst effects of the turmoil of Partition. There were twelve million refugees from the Punjab alone, and possibly two hundred thousand of its people were slaughtered. The killings began in March 1947, when Muslims