

## PART V

# DARK THOUGHTS, DARK DAYS

### Bogeys and Phobias

The Bogeyman is not a new idea. It has been there for ages in societies where children faced danger from child abductors and abusers, proverbial wolves in sheep's clothing so to say.

Bogeys, though false constructions fed to young minds by concerned parents are not without foundation, for do we not read of real life instances of such monsters in the newspapers- psychotic child killers, kidnappers and paedophiles walking amongst us, stalking their hapless little victims and having their way with their prey. The big bad wolf's at large and the sheep better beware; even nursery tales capture this frightening reality, subtly impressing on young minds not to trust every grown-up that comes their way.



*The Bogeyman has been there for ages*

In Sri Lanka in particular there were rumours circulating in the late 1970s, 1978 in particular, and substantiated to some extent, of missing children being lured by material inducements to a life of depravity by a gang operating a ring of vice. Many children also disappeared mysteriously in the east coast town of Akkaraipattu which at one time earned the epithet of 'Town of the Vanishing Children' suspicion here falling on an organized child slavery ring. There were also unsubstantiated rumours of children being used as *bili* or human sacrifices to placate demons so that fortune-hunters could lay their hands on buried treasure.



*There were rumours of children being sacrificed for bili poojas*

That bogeys should have been foisted on us is therefore not surprising. We were warned from our very young days, perhaps as early as five or six years, not to get too close to strangers as they might turn out to be a species of evil people

known as ‘kidnappers’. These came in many forms or so we were made to believe. First, there were the bumpkin types known as *gonibillas* who snatched little children wherever they could, tossing them into their *gunny bags* and spiriting them away to their hideouts or whatever, the little ones never to be seen or heard of again.



*We thought of gonibillas like this*

Then there were the more professional types who used toffees laced with sleep-inducing drugs or chloroform to knock out their victims before heaving them into their vehicles. The unfortunate kids, we were told, would be spirited away to *karavala vadiyas*, camps or working quarters where dry salted fish was produced, located in remote islands off Sri Lanka’s coasts whose whereabouts nobody knew, and forced to work like slaves under the blazing sun, producing the *karavala* or dry fish we ourselves took as a relish with our rice once in a

while. Indeed, so terrible was the treatment meted out to them, so we were told, that if any fell ill they would conveniently be tossed into the sea, much like the pirates of old who forced their hapless victims to walk the plank into a watery grave.



*A karavala wadiya like this was where we thought kidnapped children would end up, forced into a life of slavery*

The story was however not totally without foundation, for in late 1980 a joint naval-police operation was underway against ‘island slave camps’ said to have been in existence off the eastern and western coasts of the country. Rumours were then rife that boys in their teens were kept in these island camps and forced to work from dawn to dusk for big-time fishing operators; many of these boys, it was said, were kidnapped and taken to the slave camps while much younger, being forced to grow up in this fishy atmosphere.

The sea too mother looked upon as a potential danger and especially singled me out. A barber at a saloon we regularly patronized for our haircuts, Gabriel’s on Turret Road opposite the Colpetty Municipal Market, darkly hinted that I was vulnerable to drowning as I had a *suliya* or whorl in my head.

This, mother made me understand, meant that I should not venture too deep into the sea as at Kosgoda which we often resorted to during the holidays. The underlying belief then still common among superstitious Sinhalese folk was that a hair whorl increased one's chances of being sucked into a sea whorl, a whirlpool that formed in the water one frolicked in. Whether she actually believed in the superstition I cannot say. What I do know is that she had us believe it, me in particular.



*Me and my brothers with our cousins from Kenya, Kumeshi and Mirukshi near the sea in front of Sihina Beach Village*

Scarier still was the belief she put into our heads of the existence of sea-demons known as *diya-rakusas* who lived in the sea and emerging from out of the blues every now and then took down into their watery abode seabathers who happened to stray too far from the shore. This too reflected a well established Sinhalese belief in malevolent water spirits that haunted the waters, a belief which was reflected even in the aftermath of the death-dealing Tsunami disaster of more recent times which even the mainstream Sinhala media would refer to

as a sacrifice claimed by the water demon in strains like *diya rakusa bili gani*.



Diya Rakusas were believed to inhabit watery places

Such bogeys needless to say did not last long, for the evidence of their mischief was nowhere to be seen or to be heard of in the serious conversations grown-ups had. They would eventually give way to phobias, those ghastly, sinister often inexplicable fears, some fleeting and others longer lasting, people experience in diverse, sometimes even seemingly ridiculous, forms. Some are scared of heights, *acrophobia*; others of darkness, *nyctophobia*; and yet others, of blood, *haemophobia*; chemicals, *chemophobia*; dolls, *pediophobia*; fire, *pyrophobia*; trees, *xylophobia* and even of spiders, *arachinophobia*.

The phobias I experienced as a child were rather unusual. They came like a phantasmagoria, one after the other, from about the age of seven till I reached my teens before being overshadowed by the nascent felings of youthful sexuality, pleasant as always and certainly sufficient to dispel any lurking

fear that could morph into more monstrosities. First, there was *narcoticphobia*, the fear of addictive drugs; then *cancerphobia*, fear of that dreaded spreading disease cancer; *bubonicphobia*, fear of the then extinct but contagious bubonic plague and *sikhphobia*, fear of that turbaned Indian tribe known as Sikhs.

The earliest such phobia I experienced was the fear of narcotic drugs, especially heroin about which I had heard being discussed at school. The narcotic, believed to have been introduced to the country by way of Hippie culture in the Hikkaduwa coastal resort area was peddled by dealers in places like Slave Island and Khan Clock Tower in Pettah and had earned great notoriety in the early 1980s. What seemed most scary about it were its addictive properties. Once hooked on it, it was for a lifetime I was made to believe, though in reality drugs need some time to get hold of a victim, as the withdrawal symptoms following the initial high increasingly tell on the victim making him or her crave for more of the stuff to feel normal.

The fear was also fuelled by the telecast of a Sinhala teledrama *Ran Kahavanu* (Gold Coins) which told the story of this dirty drug pedlar whose son, played by well known actor Kamal Addaraarachchi was himself a junkie. Indeed so pronounced was the fear that I would cringe upon hearing the word *kudoo*, a Sinhala word normally used for a powder, but more colloquially for narcotics, especially that white powder known as heroin which was increasingly becoming a menace in the country.



*I had such a morbid fear of the mere mention of narcotics*

This naturally made me prone to jokes, especially by mother's cousin Gihan who happened to be a neighbour living next door. The fellow, who was a few years older to me, would taunt me, screaming *kudoo* just to enjoy my reaction. Even grandmother, Accha, used to wonder what it was all about, and once in all seriousness asked whether not it was a reference to the collection of chemicals we had, to which the term *kudoo* might as easily apply, these too usually being in powder form.

I was also morbidly phobic of cancer, perhaps as much as or more than grandma who was hagridden with it. She thought of it as a new disease, *alut leda*, which seemed all the more scarier. Not that cancer was a new disease. It had been there for ages; but its rising incidence was a modern phenomenon attributed to various factors including exposure to carcinogens or cancer-causing chemicals- chemicals that are not too obvious as in tobacco smoke which could cause lung cancer and the lime used in betel chewing which could trigger oral cancer, not to mention the various chemicals that go into the manufacture of processed meats which could give rise to bowel and other cancers if taken in excess.

Those were the days that even newspapers sensationalized the disease, intended perhaps more to scare people than raise

awareness. A weekend newspaper back in 1979 could thus describe the onset and spread of cancer in the following harrowing terms: *“It begins slowly, gently, almost, you look in the mirror anxiously to see if that funny little lump is showing. Satisfied that it is n’t you turn away, not knowing that during the very fact of turning away, millions of little vicious cells are multiplying inside your body, which will in the course of time turn it into a mere husk, with the innards a rotting, nauseous mess. When you die, it will be in the shadowy twilight of heavy sedation given to blanket the agony of the rotting wounds and the maggots eating away at it, and with your mind and body screaming for release and the blessedness of freedom from pain”*. To attenuate the pain of mind the article could cause to readers, the newspaper on the very same page carried a piece on ‘Guided missiles to fight Cancer’ on a new method of administering anti-cancer drugs to affected areas of the body while leaving normal tissue untouched. Whether it had the effect of easing one’s anxiety after reading the first piece could well have formed the topic for another story.



*Grandma or Accha as we called her with kids at the beach.  
She had a morbid dread of cancer*

Grandma's fear of our little chemical collection as potential carcinogens however did not rub off on me as these seemed such natural playthings- changing colours like a chameleon, giving out glows of light like the sun and spewing out smoke and fire like a volcanic eruption; innocuous stuff on the face of it. This view I would seriously reconsider as I matured into adulthood. It was the incurable nature of the disease and the fact that it could spread from one part of the body to other parts, which I imagined to be like the roots of a tree that particularly scared me. A story told by father's auction assistant Zeenia who had succeeded Zameen Auntie about a woman in whom the disease started as a mere dot no larger than a mustard seed before spreading wildly till it killed her, didn't help to allay the fear but only made it worse, for even mustard seeds sufficed to send me into deep thought, daymares, if I may say so, of the dreaded disease.

To make things worse, an old 1964 Sinhala film we watched on late night television with our paternal aunts during a visit to Brown's Hill, Matara, *Samiya birindage deviya* (The husband is the wife's god) which told the story of a cancer patient played by well known actor Dommie Jayawardene and his faithful wife played by popular actress Rukmani Devi, triggered another bout of cancerphobia. There was something so eerie about the monochrome film that it gave me the creeps from that very night I watched it; so much so indeed that in the weeks and months that followed, I would diligently try to avoid the sight of a chubby mustachioed man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Dommie while walking to school in the mornings.



*Film Samiya Birindage Deviya was shown on local TV*

Shaking off the dread took longer because something or other had to come my way to spark another bout of the phobia. Such as when I came across this sanitary pad lying on the pavement near the turn from Flower Road to Turret Road thrown or dumped there by some wench which I almost trampled while walking home from school. The strange-looking pad soaked in blood I supposed was some sort of sponge used to clean up the blood of cancer patients after a critical operation, and this, needless to say, sparked a further spell of the phobia as if what I had already been through was not enough.



*A sanitary pad somewhat like this, but soaked in menstrual blood sparked another bout of cancerphobia*

The dread even affected my dietary habits such as when I gave up on ice cream sandwiches, a dollop of rose-coloured ice cream delicately poised between two crisp wafers sold by bicycled vendors during interval. That was after the Principal warned us at assembly that it contained saccharine, a coal tar derivative several hundred times sweeter than sugar and claimed in all seriousness that it could cause cancer.

Things eventually got better when a little book on science for kids mother got us, something like a Ladybird book, assured me that radiotherapy was being used to treat cancer. I took it to mean that the disease could be cured with modern medical breakthroughs. Not quite really, for as mother would point out, to treat a disease did not necessarily mean that it could be completely cured, but rather kept at bay. Nevertheless it came as a relief and the phobia gradually subsided.

My spell of Bubonic phobia, though lasting for a shorter term, was triggered by watching the 1976 film *Cassandra Crossing* telecast on local TV. The story of a modern day outbreak of the plague on a transcontinental train with masked men in protective clothing using airtight coffins to seal the dead rekindled in me fears of yet another outbreak, the cause of the Black Death that swept through mediaeval Europe taking millions of lives. Though it subsided before long, there

were occasions I would almost get goose-bumps whenever I heard the word *mahamaariya*, which I took to be the Sinhala word for the plague, being discussed in the classroom.



*The film Cassandra Crossing sparked a morbid fear of plague*

I also had to contend with a short bout of filariaphobia, a fear of filariasis triggered by my learning of it at school. Rather than simply explaining that the mosquito borne disease could reduce one's legs to gnarled looking stumps, the lady teacher who was no doubt prone to stretch things a bit further, took great pains to explain to the boys that it could even affect their balls which would stretch and stretch, eventually drooping to the ground. I really didn't need to see such a sight to be

afflicted with fright. A couple of elephantine legs espied here and there did me the favour.



*Sights of filarial legs like this sparked a dread of the disease*

And then there was Sikhphobia, a hair-raising fear of that turbaned community of Injuns from Punjab which was triggered by a comment father once made when we were discussing the Sikh Ranjeet Singh who appeared in the British comedy *Mind Your Language*. The Sikh, played by Sri Lankan actor Albert Moses was often shown as a hot tempered fellow who often got into arguments with his Muslim classmate, the mild-mannered Ali, threateningly brandishing his *kirpan* or ceremonial dagger Sikh men are supposed to carry about in their persons. Shortly before we went to sleep, father remarked rather casually: *“Dirty fellows, when they take their knives out, they must draw blood!”*. This was of course a reference to the common belief that once a Sikh unsheathed his *kirpan*, it needed to taste blood. The remark sufficed to instill in me a fear of Sikhs as a bloodthirsty lot who could even be after my blood if I as much as stepped on their feet. Fortunately there were not many Sikhs around. The only time I ever saw one

was when mother took me to KVG bookshop in Fort. That was when I espied this burly bearded fellow with a bluish turban; I was seized with a dread and a strong desire to keep out of his sight, lest he do me harm with that dagger of his.

The fear did not last very long. Sikhs were only human after all. Besides, father who was unwittingly the cause of the phobia generally held Sikhs not in awe, but ridicule, even making them the butt of his jokes in his more waggish moments. He called Sikhs *Sardarjees* and related a story of how he once almost took them for a ride. That was when driving with a friend, he had come across a Sardarjee walking on the pavement and offered him a lift, crying out “*Hey Sardarjee, come, come!*”. Before he could get in, he took off, again halting the car ahead of him and beckoning him to hurry, and then took off again, leaving the poor fellow panting on the wayside. A wicked prank no doubt and maybe one told in jest, but one that also revealed the human side even of a fierce-looking Sikh who like the Jew has throughout history not been too kind to the Musalman. That I was much more prone to phobias than my siblings speaks much for my fertile imagination.



*The Sikh Ranjit Singh in Mind your language*

Grown-ups too had their fears, but these were more or less grounded in reality. One such occasion was when the American space station Skylab came crashing down to earth in

July 1979, sparking concerns that it would fall on Sri Lanka which lay in its orbital range. My parents would discuss the matter with both amusement and apprehension. An advertisement taken by a local insurer even had the nerve to proclaim *Skylab. Why Worry. Insurance Corporation of Sri Lanka will give you adequate protection.* It seems that some took the news very seriously, perhaps even as much as the ancient Gauls whose only fear according to one of our favourite comic books, Asterix, was that the sky would fall on their heads!

Skylab eventually did enter the earth, but not before disintegrating upon hitting the atmosphere into hundreds of fragments that were dispersed over a good portion of the Indian Ocean region and Australia where the debris even reached the gold mining town of Kalgoorlie.



*Skylab debris had a high price*

None of it found their way to our blessed little island, but had it, we would have probably seen a renewed spurt in treasure hunting with father joining in the rush, for even as much as a measly fragment of the space junk was worth a princely sum.

## Black July

Sri Lanka has had its black days, but it could not get any blacker than what took place within a couple of days in July 1983. It was in those few fateful days that unruly Sinhalese mobs, the froth and scum of this otherwise calm and forbearing nation, unleashed a barbarous pogrom against the minority Tamils, even worse than the *Kristalnacht* or Night of Broken Glass which Hitler and his blackshirts orchestrated against Germany's Jews in the 1930s. It would be, and remain, a dark blemish, an aberration, in the 2500 year history of this usually tolerant nation.



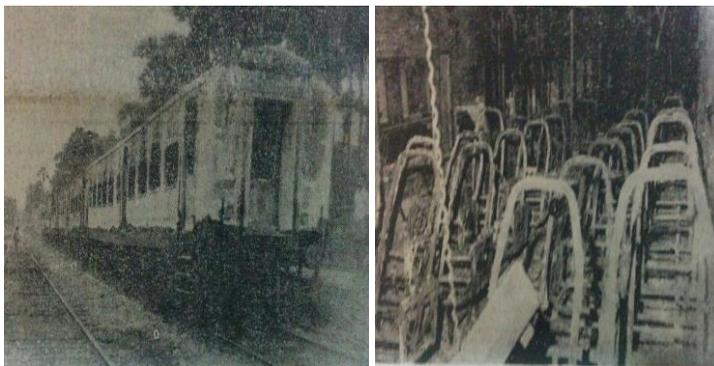
*Tamil shops in Pettah burnt to the ground. Even some Muslim shops were affected as a result of the fire.*

Trouble had been brewing for some time before the outbreak of the riots and its germs could be found in ancient Sinhalese literature such as the Mahavamsa, that great chronicle of the Sinhalese nation which faithfully recorded the many Dravidian invasions from South India that ravaged the island. The Tamil settlements in the north of the country including the Jaffna

Peninsula is believed to be the outcome of such invaders who settled in these areas and even got down their kith and kin to migrate from the mainland in vast numbers.

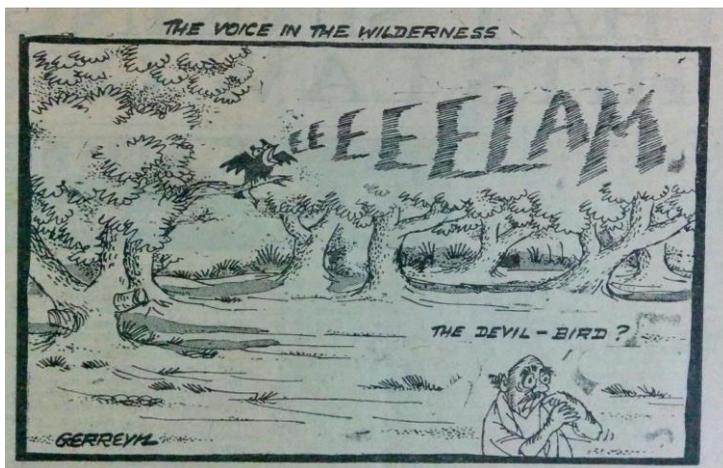
Thus there had been some ill-feeling between the generally fairer-complexioned Aryan-speaking Sinhalese and the swarthier Dravidian-speaking Tamils from very early times, so unlike the case of the Muslims whose settlement in the island as Arab merchants was a largely peaceful affair and consequently did not invite the kind of animosity the Tamils were subject to.

Despite this ill feeling, one hardly if ever heard of innocent Tamil civilians being massacred until independence from the British in 1948 when with the stirrings of nationalism let loose by the likes of nationalist leader SWRD Bandaranaike and those of his ilk, hostility towards the Tamil civilian population crept in with intermittent violence including bloodshed against them taking place in the 1950s and 1970s. The demand for a separate state for Tamils in the north and east of the island known as Eelam which was to be carved out of this little country, small as it was, by separatist politicians like Chelvanayagam and Amirthalingam fuelled the antagonism further, though the average man-on-the-street could not help but look upon the Eelamist antics in Western capitals with amusement and bewilderment. After all who would have thought that the demand for a Liliputian state could go so far. The burgeoning Eelamist movement, which was soon advocating violent struggle to achieve its aims, was unfortunately not taken too seriously even by the government of the day, such as when the Mayor of Jaffna Alfred Duraiappa was shot dead by Tamil militants as far back as 1975 or when CID detectives were assassinated in Mannar in 1978 by a shadowy group known as 'Liberation Tigers'.



*Train and carriages of Yal Devi burnt by terrorists  
Sun newspaper, July 6, 1983*

Even the media did not take it too seriously. A cartoon in the Weekend newspaper of March 1979 by Mark Gerreyrn titled 'The Voice in the Wilderness' had a black bird crying out 'EEEEELAM' and a man wondering whether it was the 'Devil-bird?'. This was obviously a pun on the Eelamists whose slogan of Eelam was compared to the cry of the Ulama or Devil Bird whose cry is believed by the Sinhalese to portend misfortune to those who hear it.



*Cartoon in Weekend newspaper by Gerrryn, 1979*

And then came July 23, 1983 when a patrol of 13 Sinhalese soldiers on an operation codenamed Four Four Bravo were ambushed and killed in Tinnevely, Jaffna with grenades and salvos of fire by a group of Tamil terrorists. Their corpses were brought to Colombo for burial the following day, it is said, in sealed coffins as the bodies were heavily mutilated. It did not take long for the tongues to start wagging, so much so that it even reached the ears of babes. I can still recall this classmate of mine at Mahanama College Colpetty rousing up his fellows with a rumour that the unlucky thirteen had been tortured and killed. There was also some talk at the time that the wife of a prominent Tamil separatist leader had gloated that she would one day wear slippers made of Sinhalese skin. If she had indeed, she was very likely inspired by the Bitch of Belsen, Irma Grese, the Nazi camp commandant who had the skins of her victims made into attractive lampshades. But slippers of skin had a certain mischievous ring about it. It was very demeaning really, especially for a proud race like the Sinhalese.

The mischief-makers were soon at work rousing up the mob, the kind that moves with the pack, unleashing an orgy of violence on Black Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July, slaughtering innocent Tamils in the streets, in their homes and in their businesses or workplaces, giving no quarter to any of their victims, men, women or even children.



*A mob gathers to create mischief*

There could be no imploring for mercy, for this word that figures so prominently in the Buddha's teachings as *Maitri*, a central Buddhist tenet, was lost on the mob. They would not even leave room for any weeping; so complete was the carnage that there was no one to weep for the dead. They were all dead or too scared to cry as fear had benumbed them of even their very basic emotions. Had even the heavens shed its tears those dark gloomy days, many innocents would have been spared the scorching fire that found its way to nearly every Tamil home in the city. But nay, it was not to be.

Their fates were sealed when hoodlums and slumdogs of the worst order numbering several thousands, assembled at the Kanatte, the Borella Cemetery where the soldiers were to be buried with full military honours. Before long they went on a rampage at Borella junction by smashing a Tamil business known as Nagalingam Stores and were soon turning their fury on other Tamil shops, looting and torching them, and killing its owners and workers, not to mention others, including any innocent bystanders they suspected to be Tamil, they could lay hold of.



*Police Superintendent Abdul Gafoor chasing away crowds at the General Cemetery, Borella July 24, 1983*

Black Sunday was followed by Bloody Monday. It was thought that the violence would have subsided and things return to normalcy by Monday July 25<sup>th</sup>, but it was not to be, for the violence continued unabated as the mobs ravaged Colombo and other major towns, combing the streets for Tamils to kill or burn alive. A Tamil-run boutique at the turn from Flower Road to Green Path which we often patronised was set on fire by a mob that day for the curfew imposed in the afternoon had come a bit too late after the worst was over. But still it helped control any further spiraling of the violence with the threat *Looters will be shot !* Within a short while, the army and police were in control of the streets and the violence slackened, never to raise its ugly head again.



*Even vehicles belonging to Tamils were not spared with these being set on fire with all those inside*

A few days later, while plodding to school, we chanced upon the *mudalali*, the shopkeeper, a plump, pleasant-looking fellow, squatting in the payment opposite his burnt boutique with a mass of large orange-coloured, boob-like nuts by his side. The poor man had been reduced to selling king coconuts! At least he was fortunate to have gotten away with his life. He was one of the few lucky ones!

In the interim we heard harrowing stories of how innocent Tamils had been done to death. Some of them, we were told, were burnt alive with their families after being herded into their vehicles which were then doused with petrol and set on fire; others were attacked in their homes, with the high impenetrable gates of the more affluent being torn down with bulldozers. The poorer sections, like it often happens, were the most affected, being hacked to death or burnt alive in large numbers. Even Tamil detainees at the Welikada prison were not spared, being massacred by their fellow prisoners while prison guards looked on or turned a blind eye.



*Kuttimani in prison van 1981*

It was even rumoured that suspected separatist leader Selvaraja Yogachandran of TELO popularly known as Kuttimani had his eyes gouged out while others were barbarously done to death before being heaped in front of a Buddha statue as a *pooja* or sacrifice. It could perhaps appease the bloodthirsty devils some

Sinhalese of the lower orders were used to propitiating in their exorcism rituals, but certainly not the great sage.



*Sinhala yako types at a bonfire of burning Tamil property*

It was no hard task for the mobs to target Tamils. Tamils in general tend to be darker than the Sinhalese with distinguishing traits like high forehead and snub noses, not to mention the peculiar accent of the vernacular-educated who may find it difficult to pronounce initial soft sounds like *b* which they tend to substitute with a *v*, so that even a simple Sinhala word like *baaldi* for ‘bucket’ they tend to pronounce as *vaaldi*, a shibboleth that seems to have been used to identify the victims as Tamils. Another means of identifying the victims seems to have been the voter lists the mobs were believed to have been armed with in order to target Tamil homes, which would suggest government complicity. Little doubt, the mob was well organized as they could even distinguish between Sinhalese-owned shops that housed Tamil businesses and Tamil-owned shops. In the case of the former, the goods were taken out and burned on the streets while in the case of the latter the buildings too went with the bonfire.



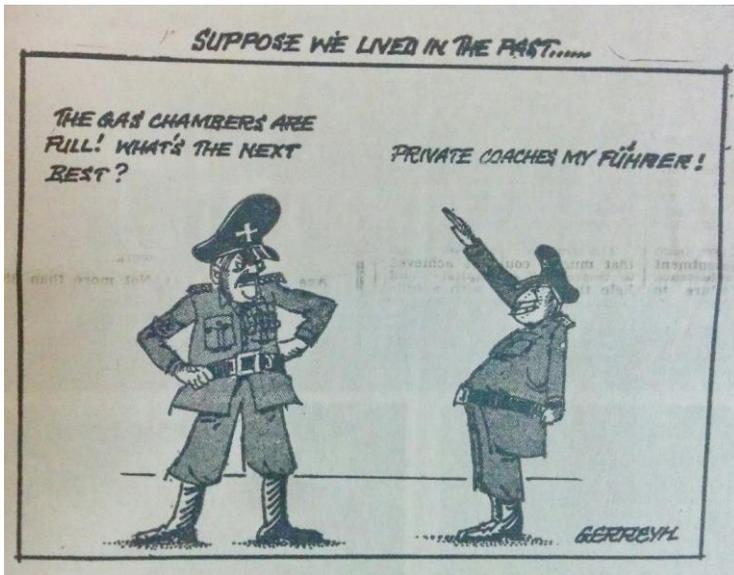
*Rioters at work, Black July 1983*

We even heard rumours that the government had given a blanket licence to kill and destroy, but not to loot, though very likely this was the work of a few miscreants holding top government positions like Cyril Mathew, a chauvinist of the darkest ilk who was later implicated in the riots. At the time the Police, perhaps to please the party bigwigs who did n't want their image tarnished, pointed the finger at the Marxist JVP who they argued roused the mob to create chaos and hasten a socialist revolution in the country.



*Scenes like this with smouldering shops were common*

A cartoon in the Sun newspaper in early July three weeks before the riots, again by Gerreyn, proved surprisingly portending. Hitler asks: *“The gas chambers are full, what’s the next best?”*. *“Private coaches my führer”* replies his aide. Though a pun on exploitative private coach drivers who overloaded people into their buses for monetary gain, when looking back one wonders whether not it was a portent of some sort.



*Cartoon in Sun newspaper few weeks before the July riots*

Although the official tally was 300 Tamils dead, the actual figure was probably ten times higher. A further 100,000 Tamils were rendered homeless. To add insult to injury, the President of the Republic, J.R.Jayawardane in an address to the nation three days after Bloody Monday, put the blame squarely on the separatists for provoking the Sinhalese people and had not a word of sympathy for those innocent Tamils who had suffered so much at the hands of the mob. To put it in his words "*Because of this violence by the terrorists, the Sinhalese people themselves have reacted*". Although the government did not know it then, it was the anti-Tamil pogroms in the Sinhalese-majority areas, and the killings in Jaffna of Tamil civilians by some unruly members of the the army in reprisal for the deaths of the unlucky thirteen that led to the outbreak of full-scale civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and Tamil separatist rebels.



*Bloody July strengthened terrorist groups like the LTTE*

Unfortunately neither our maternal or paternal clan could do much about it. Although mother's Sinhala Buddhist clan prided itself in its Aryan heritage, it was not altogether devoid of a Dravidian connection. Granduncle Bodhidasa had married a Tamil lady from Madras named Shrimati, daughter of business tycoon J.K.R.Chetty, thus fulfilling a prediction made by an astrologer when he was just four years old that he would marry one from across the seas- *muhudin etara*. When Bodhi got romantically involved with Shrimati while staying in the house of Chetty, a business associate of his father, it did not surprise the old man. His son Lakshman followed in his father's footsteps. Smitten by the charms of his cousin Hyma, Shrimati's niece, while studying in Madras, he married her, further consolidating his family's Dravidian links. And then there was aunt Sunethra who married a Tamil from Manippay, Jaffna, uncle Karu, to whom she bore three children, mixed breeds like ourselves. This lovely little family then in Kenya had plans to return to Sri Lanka to settle for good, but the riots changed all that. They stayed put and eventually settled in New

Zealand, depriving the country of some really fine people and us of some of our best childhood friends.

Fortunately, none of the Tamils we knew were harmed in any way. Joseph, our Tamil auction help from the upcountry escaped unscathed and continued to serve father with the unswerving loyalty he had always shown. Our neighbour, granduncle Sumanadasa whom we all called *Sudu Baappa* (White Uncle) had some Estate Tamils living in an annex in the rear portion of his house. These were *Botal-Pattara Karayas*, Bottle and Paper People involved in the recycling business, humble folk who themselves did not realize the important role they played in keeping the environment clean. Sudu Baappa made it very clear that his poor Tamils were not to be harmed in any way. He was known for a violent temperament if aroused, being often seen with bloodshot eyes and disheveled hair like a *Yaka* (Demon of Sinhalese pantomime) which even scared us. The message was clear, for here was a man who meant business. Nobody as much as laid a hand on his Tamils.

The days that followed saw many looted items sold openly on the streets of Colombo for dirt cheap prices. Mother herself could not resist the temptation and snatched up these cheap tins of cheese, not your usual pale yellow cheddar cheese, but a somewhat darker one with an orange tint to it, being sold in front of the Colpetty municipal market. Mahanama College in Colpetty, where I along with my siblings had our secondary education, was eventually converted into a refugee camp for those unfortunates who had lost their homes, one of 18 such relief camps in Colombo, among others being the Ratmalana Airport hanger, Gintupitiya Kovil, Good Shepherd Convent and St. Thomas College. A Sinhala medium school that prided itself on its Buddhist heritage, Mahanama College had been named after the 5<sup>th</sup> century author monk of that great Sinhalese chronicle, the Mahavamsa. It had a smattering of Muslim students, a good many from the Slave Island area with names like Doole, Riyaz and Imtiyaz, but hardly, if at all, any Tamils. Tamils unlike Muslims are jealously protective of their mother

tongue and have generally given a wide berth to Sinhala education, preferring to send their children to Tamil medium schools, and this was reflected in the student composition of our school.



*A hangar like this at Ratmalana airport was used to house displaced Tamils after the riots*

When the displaced persons numbering over 12,000 had left and the school opened its gates for its usual course of activities sometime in late August or early September, I was standing near a tap from which we boys used to drink water at interval time and was about to take a few draughts of it with my palms held together when I heard some boys of about my age discussing a slimy substance that had formed on the little pool of water below the tap, perhaps some sort of moss or frog spawn embedded in its gelatinous mass. One of them had already made up his mind as to what it was. *Demala jaraava!* (Tamil filth) he spat out while the others looked on passively.

Little did he know that it was exactly this sort of attitude that would fuel the cause of Tamil separatism for another 25 years, bringing in its wake nothing but death and needless suffering.

His people too would have a heavy price to pay for it. But little did he know it then, puffed up as he was, with the poison of racial pride his elders had pumped into his little head, just as the Tamil terrorists further north would brainwash their children to fight for a lost cause. A heavy price to pay – for a poison!