

Sri Lanka: Remembering Black July through 'Brotherless Night'

Saturday 17 August 2024, by [MASCRANGHE Divya](#), [THUSHAN Benislos](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2024).

"Imagine the places you grew up, the places you studied, places that belonged to your people, burned. But I should stop pretending that I know you. Perhaps you do not have to imagine. Perhaps your library, too, went up in smoke" - V.V. Ganeshanathan, 'Brotherless Night', 2023

Nirmala* was born to a wealthy Tamil family in Colombo. One evening in late July of 1983, her neighbour Arulraj* hurriedly called out to them over their short brick parapet wall at the rear end of the house, and frantically informed Nirmala's family that "13 soldiers had been killed. We have to be careful now".

Nirmala says this conversation was later followed by a young Sinhalese boy known to Nirmala's father visiting them, warning: "There is a mob burning Tamil houses," and asking Nirmala's family to remove the name board that was affixed to their front wall; a name that revealed their ethnicity. Nirmala's family quickly complied with the warnings and removed the much-loved name board, erasing all evidence of their identity. This name board has never been replaced. Nirmala and her sister were then rushed off to Wijetunga's* house across the road. They were forced to leave behind their mother and bedridden father in the care of a maid.

Nirmala recalls that as she ran across the street with her sister, she saw that "they had already started burning the shops at the top of our road". She remembers fearfully hiding in Wijetunga's house with her sister and watching a group of men slowly walking past with weapons.

"One of the men had a list with him," Nirmala recalls. Similar experiences of survivors show singling out Tamil homes, with widespread accusations of the attacks against them being "organised".

Nirmala says: "Wijetunga was standing outside his house. I could hear him repeatedly telling them (the mob) in Sinhala that 'there were no Tamils here' trying to convince the mob to leave."

Nirmala's story is one of 800,000 stories of targeted attacks in July of 1983, also known as Black July (as per the 2023 review on 1983 Black July by Al Jazeera).

What is Black July?

Often, historians, academics, pundits, and social commentators view the violent past of Sri Lanka through a one-dimensional lens, ignoring the chains of events, laws, and systemic discrimination that resulted in cycles of violence. One shouldn't make the same mistake when trying to understand the sheer cruelty of Black July, no matter how compelling such simplified 'cause and effect' theories may be.

After hyper-catalysing the tensions and resentments between the ethnic communities using divide-and-rule tactics, the British left the island in 1948, declaring independence and leaving behind a

determined majority and vulnerable minorities. The series of historical blunders and betrayals that occurred between the declaration of independence and Black July tells a different story than that of a one-dimensional cause-and-effect narrative.

The Sinhala Only Act in 1956, communal riots against Tamils in 1958, the negative effects of standardisation in the 1970s, communal violence in 1977 and 1981, and the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981, which housed almost 95,000 rare Tamil manuscripts, were some of the dark chapters that deepened the divides between the two communities while steadily escalating tensions and calls for a separate state.

With such a legacy of violence, betrayal, and systemic discrimination, our island nation was ripped with bloody, violent riots that targeted the Tamil community from 24-29 July 1983. Friday, 29 July 1983, is reported to be the worst of the attacks and is known as Black Friday. The 83 riots were the fourth major riot against this community since 1958.

Black July refers to the riots of 1983. The 1983 riot is widely understood to be a retaliation to the killing of 13 soldiers by members of a Tamil terrorist organisation. A report by the International Commission of Jurists says on 27 July 1983, *The London Times* published that three Tamil girls in the North had been brutally attacked by a small group of soldiers. However, this was not widely published locally, yet some believe this incident was the trigger for the killings of the 13 soldiers.

It is estimated that half of the Tamil population living in Colombo were left homeless. Approximately 800,000 Tamils were estimated to be displaced throughout the island after their homes were burned and looted in the 1983 riots. Official statements say 400-600 Tamils were killed. However, minority groups state that actual numbers are in the thousands. Large numbers of refugees were housed in temporary refugee camps while some refugees were shipped to Jaffna. The violence against the Tamil community was not only limited to Colombo but to other areas across the island which housed pockets of Tamils, such as in the up-country regions.

The riots have been extensively researched and written about by several journalists, researchers, and authors; 'Brotherless Night' being one of the most recent publications.

'Brotherless Night' by V.V. Ganeshanathan

'Brotherless Night' is a beautifully written novel by V.V. Ganeshanathan published in 2023. It won the Carol Shields Prize for Fiction as well as the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2024. While 'Brotherless Night' is brilliant fiction and history, it also sadly remains very relevant today, especially in remembering Black July.

In an interview with Waterstones, UK, Ganeshanathan talks of using witness testimonies which were turned into fiction by weaving them into the life of a fictional character Sashi. She says that the character tells a story; one that people think Ganeshanathan has the authority to speak of because of her ethnic roots, and also one that others in the room will not want to hear. She talks about how a lot of the history in Sri Lanka is contested and she thus wanted to surface these obscured narratives and "put that version back where people could see it".

Ganeshanathan beautifully portrays history through the narration of her fictional character Sashi; a 16-year-old girl from Jaffna who dreams of becoming a doctor. The story follows the lives of her family from 1981 in Jaffna to 1983 Black July in Colombo and follows historical events in her return to Jaffna until 1989. The novel then jumps to the immediate aftermath of the war towards the end of the book.

Ganeshanathan in 'Brotherless Night' depicts the experience of the displaced through the narrative

of Sashi and her neighbour Jayasinghe. These complex realities of ethnic conflict and armed struggle are expertly represented in 'Brotherless Night'.

Ganeshanathan talks of various persons pushing their stories and propaganda. She boldly acknowledges how one organisation claimed to be the sole representative of the Tamil people, and therefore she wrote something that was a counter to that narrative and "one which was messier".

Thus, while the lived experiences of the minority community share many similarities in terms of victimisation and struggle, there are several differences in the personal political stances and responses of the community.

Survivors' experiences

The experiences recounted by survivors of Black July often share some common themes; sadness or anger at the systematic discrimination of the Tamils by their own state; frustrations that peaceful attempts to achieve equal treatment continuously fell on deaf ears and the vicious riots in 1983 which became the straw that broke the camel's back; depletion of cultural identities among Tamil due to the fear of reprisal; loss of identity by opting out of traditional practices that shape a large part of cultural identity such as wearing 'pottu' or 'thaali' due to the fear of being targeted.

Nandakumar* who was a university student during the 1983 riots woefully recalls: "Many of the brightest students in my batch never returned to the university. I later found out that they had either joined the armed struggle or left the country. Most who joined the armed struggle were killed. If they continued to study, they would now be well-accomplished professors and PhD holders. But all these great minds are no more." It is believed that about 1.3 million Tamils fled the country after the 83 riots.

Personal stories and reports indicate that there was widespread burning of Tamil-owned businesses in Colombo and seizure of Tamils from their homes and looting and burning of their houses. The incidents are described as "organised".

Some factories burnt during the 1983 riots had English names from the pre-Independence era. Concerns have been raised that the ordinary public could not have possibly known the majority shareholding of these factories was held by Tamils at that time.

In 'Brotherless Night', the character Sashi speaks to her friend Hasna over the phone soon after the riots broke out in Colombo. Hasna tells her: "Sashi, in our neighbourhood, the houses that do not belong to Tamils are untouched. I can see the Tamil houses burning, and there is nothing I can do."

Through 'Brotherless Night', Ganeshanathan also encourages readers to confront and unpack the term 'terrorist'. She says, it is a dare even, to think in a more complex way about terrorism. She also talks about how this language for 'violence' is largely used for non-state actors, yet asks a crucial question, how do we address state terror? This question is relevant when addressing the incidents of Black July. Leaders of the time were criticised for failing to condemn the violence. No one has been prosecuted to date.

'Brotherless Night' beautifully unpacks the complexities, trauma, and bravery of the community during the period of 1981-1989 while truthfully acknowledging both the kindness of others as well as the atrocities by all parties involved up to the end of the internal conflict; those purporting to represent all Tamils, the state, and other 'protectors' of civilians. It showcases witness testimonies in the form of fiction while encouraging its reader to face uncomfortable truths that make up the fabric of Sri Lanka's recent history.

Moving forward

What is important today is that we acknowledge the lived realities of the citizens of Sri Lanka, even though they may be different from ours. It is crucial that while we must remember the incidents of Black July, the hopes shattered, the lives lost, and the events that unfolded afterwards, leaving a scar that cannot simply be ignored or overlooked, we must also relearn our histories and narratives through critical thinking, and learn from our mistakes, so that history may never repeat itself.

As we commemorate the haunting memories of Black July annually, as we seek to unpack and understand the bloody history of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, as we continue to search for answers for the inaction and ignorance of the state, as we long for closure from the impacts of cycles of violence and as we continue to search for our lost identities; it becomes more imperative than ever to say “enough is enough” to those who provide lip service to those who suffer, and read between lines as we gear up to vote in the consequential elections that are to follow.

***Names have been changed to protect their identity**

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