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Towards Recovering Histories of Anti-Muslim Violence in the Context of Sinhala–Muslim Tensions in Sri Lanka



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Vijay Nagaraj passed away in August 2017. Before his tragic and untimely death Vijay was the Head of Research at the Law and Society Trust.

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Introduction

This research paper intends to cast light on anti-Muslim violence over the past three to four decades outside of the North and East of Sri Lanka, episodes that have been masked, lost or suppressed in the commonly narrated recent histories of political and religious violence in the country. Violence against Muslims during this period, the historiography of which is overshadowed by the armed conflict and extreme polarization precipitated by Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms, is generally marked by references to massacres such as the ones in Eravur and Kattankudy or the mass expulsion of Muslims from the North, all events from 1990.

The post-war resurgence in anti-Muslim hostility is routinely attributed to the rise of Sinhala Buddhist actors like the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) but it is necessary that this is historicized and placed within the wider sweep of anti-Muslim hostility within Sri Lanka over the past several decades. The distinct experience of political and ethnic violence experienced by the Muslims in the context of Sinhala-Muslim tensions requires greater empirical attention and theorizing than it has received.

This research is also motivated by the concern that a deeper understanding of the temporal, spatial, political, economic and social dynamics of anti-Muslim violence can illuminate the broader conditions that generate and reproduce communal violence more generally. Indeed, throwing light on lesser-known episodes of anti-Muslim violence in the context of Sinhala-Muslim tensions assumes a particular significance in the context of ongoing discussions around transitional justice and reconciliation. In surfacing these “forgotten” episodes of violence, this research seeks to unearth experiences, memories and narratives concerning these episodes as held by affected persons.

This paper focuses on three episodes of anti-Muslim violence in the context of Sinhala-Muslim tensions—Puttalam in January–February 1976, Galle in July 1982, and Mawanella in May 2001. Consideration of such events in the literature on political violence or Muslim identity has so far been somewhat tentative and exploratory. This paper will contribute to this exploration and is a part of the growing literature that explores anti-Muslim sentiment and violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka. It draws heavily on victim narratives that are sometimes ethnic in their perspective; they are mostly from Muslim victims and community leaders who intervened in the aftermath. However, rather than view such violence as merely episodic or as driven solely by ethnic animosity, central to our approach has been to weave into analysis the political economic dynamics and context within which such violence takes place. Thus, apart

from its empirical and phenomenological value, we hope this research makes a methodological contribution by drawing attention to the value of developing a thicker description and understanding of the political uses of communal violence in post-independence Sri Lanka. This paper is written therefore in the tradition of research and scholarship that has consistently resisted an ethnicised narrative through which to understand Sri Lanka's difficult post-colonial past (See Bastin 2001).

In light of the post-war upsurge in anti-Muslim sentiment, many commentators have viewed the threat of violence against Muslims as episodic, and frequently referred back historically to the anti-Muslim riots of 1915. While many aspects of the violence in 1915 and the response to it remain to be researched, there has been considerably less written about violence against Muslims over the past thirty to forty years. Furthermore, while some drew parallels to 1983 (See Nesiah, 2014) there was no widespread attempt to understand this violence as historically similar to the many anti-Tamil "riots" that had taken place in post 1948 Sri Lanka or to situate the threat within a long history of state-mediated violence against Muslim communities.

Popular memory among Muslims, however, recount a much more frequent and widespread set of instances during which ethnic tensions have led to targeted violence.¹ This paper therefore was motivated by a need to unearth such memories and document them. Therefore our method has also been informed by a journalistic impulse to "find the story" as well and we have attempted to weave together narratives concerning the causes, happenings, effects and aftermath with respect to each of the three events that we are exploring—the details of which we were not aware of when we embarked on the project. For this purpose we have followed a method where we interviewed people affected by the violence, community commentators who had an opinion on the violence or an analysis about its causes, and those who had participated in the various attempts at providing relief and garnering redress for the victims in the aftermath of the violence. We also used newspaper reports through archival research as well as considered documentation generated by groups of persons in the area, and state records such as hansards from parliament and government inquiry reports that were shared with us. The different perspectives from which the stories were recounted to us therefore inform the narrative that is constructed.

The time spent in the three sites themselves was limited—two days in Mawanella and Puttalam respectively, and one day in Galle. These were followed up with interviews with some key actors now located in Colombo who played different role in these events. The nature of our inquiry was therefore initial, and our informants reflect this as well. We were introduced to leaders in the affected communities who were mostly male. Our attempts to interview women yielded a limited number of contacts, and conversations

¹ Anberiya Hanifa, formerly of the Ministry of Labour, and a co-founder of the Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum gathered a preliminary archive of paper cuttings of the various incidents that she herself noted over a long period of time. This research project grew out of Anberiya's files.

with wives of the men that we met did not produce sufficient information for a narrative that accounted for how the event was experienced by the wider community.²

Nevertheless, we believe this paper is an important step towards building a historical record concerning anti-Muslim violence and will contribute towards a more complex understanding of the “riot” and how it has been an important mode of engagement with minority communities by an ethnicised state apparatus colluding with other interested elements in Sri Lanka’s post colonial political history.

The paper is arranged into four sections. The first three sections focus on Puttalam, Galle and Mawanella respectively, rendering an account of the central episodes of violence, their toll, their aftermath and responses they attracted. Each section also attempts to situate the violence in both the local and larger regional and national context. The fourth and concluding part brings together some of the key overarching themes and issues emerging from the three case studies.

1. Puttalam 1976

In this section we present narratives concerning the events in Puttalam and surrounding areas in January and February 1976 that we unearthed over a two-day visit. One day was spent speaking to a number of people who gathered in the house of Dr. Ilyas, a medical doctor and coroner for Puttalam in 1976, and more recently a Member of Parliament. Having first attempted in vain along with others to ease the tensions that had been prevailing in the town for some time, Dr. Ilyas—with the help of his male nurse Abdul Hadi—had treated a number of those injured inside his own house. Many of the persons we spoke to had direct experience of the shooting in the Puttalam Grand Mosque on 2nd February. Their narratives were vivid and the experience of those troubling days seemed very present to them even after four decades. The stories of tension and fear were punctuated with great irony and humour as in for instance when they related how a young man called Thaha was cured of his hydrocephalic condition when a bullet lodged in his skull was removed, draining the excess fluid whilst leaving him relatively unharmed.

Strained ethnic relations

Several people interviewed in the course of the research noted that Sinhalese-Muslim relations in Puttalam began to deteriorate with a significant influx of Sinhalese from the deep South in the early 1970s. While many Sinhalese came to work in the Cement Corporation factory and in the Ceylon Transport Board’s bus depot, many others were

² In our interviews we received accounts specifically tailored to our inquiry about the violent events themselves. We missed out, due to constraints of time, on more in-depth textured narratives of the long-term effects of the violence, accounts that would reveal information about the differences at work within the Muslim community itself, and divergent narratives about the adequacy of state and community responses.

settlers who were given lands redistributed under the Land Reform Act. Thus, the Sinhalese gradually outnumbered the Muslims who were concentrated in Puttalam town and nearby settlements.

The influx in the 1970s was but a continuation of the steady Sinhalisation of Puttalam recorded by Cathrine Brun—just 39.2% of its population in 1901, the district was 82.6% Sinhalese by 1981.³ Brun documents local accounts of the process by quoting Muslims in the area recounting the dry zone colonisation launched by D.S. Senanayake⁴ that saw the establishment of new settlements through the rehabilitation of irrigation systems and allotment of agricultural land (Brun 2008). While the Administrative Reports for Puttalam District from the 1930s, 40s and 50s don't indicate the ethnic breakdown of existing settlements or the new settlers, Brun records popular memories from Muslims in Puttalam that recount many of these settlements being meant for Sinhalese populations.

We encountered a story through which these memories continue to echo in Puttalam in 2016. Related to us by Dr. Ilyas, the story concerns the Thabbowa colonization scheme, and goes like this: When D.S. Senanayake instituted the Thabbowa scheme, Muslims were given two hundred acres each while Sinhalese received only two acres each. When the latter complained to Senanayake, he is reported as having said, "You don't have the wherewithal to improve even the two acres each you have received but the Muslims can develop the two hundred each that they have. So, you improve your two acres by working for them but later on when you get the opportunity you beat them up and chase them away." When the Sinhalese from Thabbowa attacked the Muslim shops and properties during the violence of 1976, some of them had reportedly openly said that this is what D. S. Senanayake wanted them to do!

In the 1950s, S. H. Ismail, a local Member of Parliament, became the first Muslim Speaker of the Parliament and attempted to introduce new Muslim settlements as buffers between the town and the large new Sinhala settlements. But only a few of the many settlement schemes initiated were successful (Brun 114).

Speaking of the new wave of Sinhalese in-migration in the 1970s, Brun notes that many of the Sinhalese she interviewed during her fieldwork in 2000 recalled coming to Puttalam in the 1970s, seeking work and land at a time of economic depression. Sinhala schools too were established during that time and Brun notes, "Gradually the government officers in the district became predominantly Sinhalese, the Police became

³ Brun's is a rough calculation that takes into account the fact that district boundaries were different during the two years that she compares. It is used here to convey a rough idea as to the demographic changes that have taken place. While the manner in which Sinhala settlements were created in the North and East are well documented, it seems clear that a similar process were entered into in the Northwest as well.

⁴ First as Minister of Agriculture and Lands in colonial Ceylon's State Council and then as the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon.

almost totally Sinhalese and in the state-run bus services the majority of bus drivers and conductors were Sinhalese” (Brun 117).

How this Sinhalisation impacted ethnic relations in the 1970s is well captured in a quote by a Muslim man in Brun’s book:

Those days (1950s) 90% of all the government officers were Tamil on the Kalpitiya side. They had enough power to see to this territory and to allot crown land to people and settle disputes. But during the 1970s or late 1960s, everything changed in this area. All officers that came to this area were Sinhalese. Only the GS⁵ was Tamil or Muslim. But all the power went to the Sinhalese. The cement factory workers were Sinhalese. They (the government officers) supported the Sinhalese (Quoted in Brun 117).

When discussing what happened during the two months when tensions prevailed in Puttalam, people saw several ethnic fault lines, some of them seemingly small, as being connected to the violence in Puttalam. For instance, the fact that the Puttalam Sports Club was nearly 80% Muslim and that the president of the club was a Muslim were mentioned as significant, as these were seen as marking existing animosities that had a material impact on the violence. The Headquarters Police Inspector Edward, who played a key role in the tragic events of February 2, 1976, was a member of a rival club.

There were also stories of other rivalries that were related to us—especially between groups of young men in Puttalam town and youth from Sinhalese settlements close to the cement factory. One such story recounted a fight between a group of young Muslim men from Puttalam and some Sinhalese workers from the cement factory over a gambling incident. The Puttalam boys were beaten up at the cement factory and they in turn beat up the factory workers when they came into town.

Brun also refers to how Muslims resisted Sinhalisation of the area by restricting the access of Sinhala businesses to Puttalam town. We encountered a former Muslim administrator who described how he personally used various ruses to prevent a Sinhala presence in the centre of town through the establishment of a temple. The only Buddhist temple within the administrative boundaries of the town was 1.5 km from the centre and somewhat neglected; but attempts to establish a new temple in the town centre were effectively foiled largely by this official using a variety of methods.

⁵ Grama Sevaka or public official tasked with carrying out local level administrative duties. The voter registry is maintained by this official and character certificates and proof of residence letters for school admissions, job interviews, obtaining identification documents, drivers’ licenses, permits etc. are provided by this official for residents in the GS division.

1.2 Chronology of events

1.2.1 Proximate Triggers

In relating their version of what triggered the series of events that culminated in the tragic violence of February 2, 1976, people we interviewed generally pointed to two incidents. The first involved an altercation at the central bus stand between a Sinhalese bus conductor and Muslim *nattamis* (porters) that resulted in changing the location of the bus stand and the second revolved around a police officer kicking aside a sign diverting road traffic during Friday afternoon prayers at the main *Jumma* mosque.

The incident at the bus stand

While there are multiple narratives with slightly differing details, we start with one that begins with how Muslim *nattamis* would steal rice from Sinhala women vendors who were illegally transporting rice (Brun 2008). A food crisis during the depression of the early 1970s prompted the United Front (UF) regime's strict rules regarding the stockpiling and transportation of rice. No individual was permitted to transport more than two measures of rice out of their area.⁶ Almost inevitably this led to a black market in the trade and "smuggling". The carriers were mostly women who would discreetly distribute and place loads of two measures of rice each next to each set of seats on the bus, giving the appearance to anyone who does a visual inspection that each measure belonged to a different passenger. However, so well known was this practice that the *nattamis* who worked at the bus stand regularly stole parcels of rice from these women carriers who had no recourse to the law given that they were already in breach of it. The narrative goes that the Sinhalese women who were being robbed by the *nattamis* took their complaint to the local Buddhist Monk the Ven. Kolitha who in turn reportedly approached the Puttalam G.A., one Mr. Rajapaksha, who was described as an SLFP sympathizer but also as "very communal minded", by our Muslim informants. The two are seen as having played a role in the entire episode of having the bus stand moved and in catalyzing ethnic tensions further.

In early January 1976, an altercation between a *nattami* and a Sinhalese bus conductor whom he brushed against when unloading goods led to a general fracas with the Muslim *nattamis*. The staff at the bus depot, virtually all Sinhalese, went on a flash strike demanding the bus stand be moved away from the Muslim dominated town centre—a demand the Government Agent promptly conceded to.

⁶ The English term "measure" was used to describe the volume of rice that was named a "seruwa" in Sinhala.

The moving of the bus stand, which occurred while the NCGE Grade Ten O-level exams were on going, led to tensions that appear to have persisted until the outbreak of massive violence on February 2, 1976. The moving of the bus stand was significant for two reasons; firstly, virtually all the shops at the original bus stand were Muslim-owned and the absence of buses meant no business. Secondly, moving the bus stand was seen as having emboldened the Sinhalese who reportedly began stopping and rerouting Puttalam-bound buses at Palavi junction, a point further south of the town, along the Kalladi-Kurunegala main road through the Sinhala areas on the outskirts.

Events following the moving of the bus stand

Many of our informants recalled that incidents of Muslim passengers being taken off the buses and assaulted, especially near the cement factory, followed soon after the moving of the bus stand. In one instance, our informants referred to a person named Kareem who was taken off the bus, beaten up, cut up and burnt.⁷ We were told that another Muslim man, named Jabbar, was on the same bus as Kareem but was protected by a Tamil woman who pretended to be his mother after he took off his cap and feigned illness. He had recounted the incident when he returned to town.

People recalled that there prevailed an atmosphere of tension for the rest of January and that rumours were rife. For instance, one informant recalled hearing a widely spread rumour that Sinhalese workers from the Cement Corporation, the bus depot, and from Mylankulam were gathering and arming themselves to attack Muslims. One person—a Sinhala convert to Islam—had reported seeing lathes being made on the cement factory's machines in preparation for the attack. Youngsters were ready with sticks, another one of our informants recalled. Conducting interviews in 2016, we had no way of verifying these stories. We treat them however as attesting to the atmosphere of tension fuelled by rumours and specific and individualised episodes of violence whose exact details are hard to determine but which acquired a strong ethno-religious hue needed to mobilize ethnic violence.

In an atmosphere already thick with tension, the second proximate trigger occurred on 30 Jan outside the Mohideen Jumma Masjid. Established in 1938, it was then the only mosque in Puttalam to have *Jumma* or Friday noon prayers and hence attracted a large congregation from the town and nearby areas. Given the inadequate space inside, the Puttalam Urban Council, then headed by a Muslim chairman, had given permission for the congregation to spill out on to the main road in front of the mosque. Therefore for half an hour between 12.30 and 1.00 p.m. every Friday the road in front of the mosque was closed to traffic with two signboards placed in the middle of the road signalling the diversion of traffic for that half hour.

⁷ Dr. Illyas was the Coroner of Puttalam at that time and saw the body of the murdered man.

From the accounts of a number of respondents what emerges is that on the afternoon of 30 January, just before *Jumma* commenced, the Officer-in-Charge of the Puttalam police station, OIC Mel, kicked down the traffic diversion sign and having ordered a Tamil boy from a nearby shop to kick over the other drove through on the road in defiance of the traffic arrangement. OIC Mel's behaviour angered many of the worshippers gathered at the mosque and following a discussion after *Jumma* a decision was made to proceed *en masse* to the Police Station to lodge a complaint—an idea that was reportedly the suggestion of one Mahr Kareefa. A deputation of prominent Muslims, including Mr. S.S.M. Ibun, Chairman of the Puttalam Urban Council and Dr. Illyas led a crowd of more than a thousand worshippers to the Police Station.

Rather than address the concerns, the fact that such a large crowd arrived at the police station seemed to have been interpreted by the Police as a show of force and an attempt to intimidate them. A prominent politician from Puttalam we interviewed maintained that this entire episode further escalated tensions between the police and the Muslims. The police responded by moving the bus stand further south, outside of Puttalam town close to the Bauddha Madyasthanaya or Buddhist Centre. So people coming to the town would have to walk almost 3-4 kms. from the bus station through what was understood to be a Sinhala area in order to reach the town. The new location of the bus stand was not only extremely inconvenient but also left Muslims passing through the Sinhala areas on foot very vulnerable as tensions were already running high.

1.2.2 The events of February 2, 1976

Firing at the Jumma Mosque

The escalating tensions were coming to a head and over Sunday night and Monday morning, the 1st and 2nd of February, Sinhalese villagers had set fire to and looted some Muslims houses in the nearby villages of Thabbowa and Kottukatchiya. Our informants recalled that the following Monday morning, a meeting was called at around 9 a.m. at the *jumma* mosque to discuss how to respond to the situation. The mood, as recalled by those who were present, was angry and tense, and eventually three persons were deputized to go to the Police Station to discuss matters with the police. They were Dr. Illyas, a member of the People's Committee, M.H.M. Naina Marikkar, then a sitting Member of Parliament, and A.A. Latiff, SLFP organizer for Puttalam.

Dr. Illyas said that the delegation had gone to the police station in the hope of discussing what could be done to restore a sense of calm and security and met with Headquarters Inspector Edward, a Burgher. He recalled that their discussion was suddenly interrupted by a commotion—a Ceylon Transport Board bus arrived at the Police Station having been damaged by stone-throwing Muslims gathered at the mosque.

According to some of our informants, in a context in which fear and rumour were rife, a lorry coming to carry salt had already been stopped and attacked because Muslims had assumed it was carrying armed Sinhalese mobs coming to attack them. They also maintained that the bus itself had been stoned because while it was passing by the mosque some people gathered there recognized the driver as one who had participated in an earlier assault on Muslims near the Cement Corporation. They too recalled that several passengers were injured and the driver drove the bus straight to the Police Station and made a complaint.

While some of our Muslim interlocutors spoke of a long-running tension between the Police and the Puttalam Muslims, Dr. Illyas and others who were in the thick of the negotiations and the tensions did not attribute such animosity to the Police. They considered the police response to be a dereliction of duty that disregarded responsibility, and further as an instance of ethnicised policing.

One of Inspector Edward's immediate reactions was to say "We are not going to stand for it anymore," recalled Dr. Illyas. Saying, "We understood then that Edward was giving the shooting order," he continued:

"He (Edward) was not interested in listening to us at all. It was clear to us then that they had prepared to deploy force when they heard that there was a big meeting at the mosque. They should have baton charged, should have fired warning shots in the air. Given some sort of an indication. But they didn't do that."

In the meantime, Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) Ghafoor had reportedly arrived in Puttalam town to assist with minimizing the tensions.⁸ While the delegation from the mosque was at the police station, he was meeting with members of the Puttalam elite including a current member of parliament and his brother, the trustee of the Puttalam Grand Mosque, and other prominent persons—some of whom were interviewed for this study and confirmed being at such a meeting. What follows is a summary of what happened next drawn from the recollections of different people who were present at different places in Puttalam on that day.

Even as Inspector Edward ordered his men to arm themselves and move towards the mosque, A.S.P. Ghafoor hears of the shooting order, and leaves the meeting and rushes to the mosque. On arriving there he urges the community to disperse and was quoted by one of our informants as saying, "The shooting order has been given, only God can protect you now." J.M. Abdul Hadee who was at the mosque at the time recalls one Zafarullah telling ASP Ghafoor in response, "You go, we will look after ourselves."

⁸ It is important to note that ASP Ghafoor was a well-known police high-up from the Muslim community who may have been sent by the Prime Minister precisely because of his acceptance among the larger Sri Lankan Muslim community.

Dr. Illyas recalled that even as the police party prepared to leave the police station for the mosque, he along with M.P. Naina Marikkar and others who were at the Police Station immediately got in to Naina Marikkar's car and drove towards the mosque to warn the crowd and ask the crowd to disperse. But Naina Marikkar reportedly panicked and asked to be dropped off at home instead and did not join the crowd at the mosque.⁹ Some of the persons we interviewed were of the opinion that Naina Marikkar did not do enough during the riots to halt them or to find redress in the aftermath.

The exact sequence of events from here on, which unfolded very rapidly, in a matter of minutes in fact, is not easy to discern clearly. But by all accounts it seems that the armed police party proceeded towards the bazaar and the mosque and even as they got there opened fire in the direction of shops that were shuttered on the eastern side 100 meters before reaching the mosque.¹⁰ Inspector Edward himself reached the mosque and fired into the air to begin with; Mubarak recounts seeing Edwards hitting the telephone wires.

Virtually all our informants who said they were at the mosque said people started running into the mosque or into shops to escape the firing but almost immediately an armed police detail on the lagoon (western) side of the mosque directed their fire into the mosque. While it is clear they deliberately opened fire on the mosque from the western side—one of the windows on that side of the mosque still bears a bullet hole—some people explaining the event to us maintained it was perhaps because the police on that side assumed people in the mosque were firing on the police party who were on the eastern side. Mubarak recalls that when Inspector Edwards and others heard shooting coming from the west, i.e. the mosque side, which was really the police on the lagoon side firing into the mosque, they too turned their guns in the direction of the mosque. Shama, the police constable we interviewed stated that the police shot at the mosque because shots came from a shop close to the mosque. He did not subscribe to the government's story of that time—that the Muslims had fired from the mosque. "No Muslim will take a gun into a mosque," said constable Shama, now 90 years old.

Dr. Illyas said that having got off from Naina Marikkar's car, he had rushed to the mosque on foot: "I walked towards the mosque and a policeman pointed his gun at me. But Constable Shama, stopped his colleague saying 'this is the coroner!'" Dr. Illyas said, "A.S.P. Ghaffoor was on the spot, called me over and said 'Look, you Muslim people are shooting from the mosque and that is why we fired.'"

⁹ This information was shared with us by Dr. Illyas who was at the meeting. The information regarding Naina Marikka's car was told to us by Mr. Mubarak who was working as his assistant at the time and corroborated by Mohamed Navavi, currently a parliamentarian from Puttalam. Later, Naina Marikkar's car—a black 180 Mercedes Benz, 2 Shri 186—was sent to bring E.S.M. Cassim Marikkar, a land owner trapped on his property, into town from his estate outside of town. The car was stopped and burnt by one of the groups of assailants.

¹⁰ Persons we spoke to recalled that there are bullet holes on several doors of shops close to the mosque.

With bullets raining on the mosque from both the east and the west, 18 people were shot, two of whom died instantly. Many who were there recalled that one person, Ameen, was shot in the head and died on the steps leading into the mosque while the other died on the *mimbur*¹¹ inside. Soon six more died in the mosque as a result of their injuries. In addition to those shot, several others sustained other injuries as well.

1.2.3 Violence elsewhere in Puttalam district

We pieced together the following account regarding the spread of violence to the outskirts of the town in the aftermath of the mosque shooting. Mr. Mubarak, private secretary to Naina Marikkar in 1976 and a community leader in Puttalam today, related the story in the following manner. "When the news started spreading about the shootings taking place at the mosque, Kolitha Saadu (Ven. Kolitha) went to the cement factory and said Muslims had cut Sinhala students in half, and they had placed the upper half on the fence posts and the lower half on the railway track. He then went to the bus depot and asked them to release buses for Cement Corporation workers to come and attack Puttalam."

Dr. Illyas corroborated elements of this story by saying that when he was heading to hospital on his motorcycle he saw the Ven. Kolitha leading a large mob that was breaking into houses and destroying property on their way. From different accounts, it is clear that the only reason this mob did not reach further into Puttalam was because when they neared the house of one Baacha Marikkar, he fired shots into the air from his gun and scared them into turning away.

However as some informants noted, this only turned the mob to wreak havoc in a different direction, further south-west. They fell upon and destroyed the D.C.N. Oil Mill, owned by the family of a current member of parliament, Mr. Navavi. He recalled that the mill, built in 1937, was the first in the North-Western Province and that its workforce was 90% Sinhalese. Navavi said that the workers had in fact begged the mob not to set fire to the mill since it is they who will suffer, but to no avail.

The locus of destruction moved to Palavi where, according to many respondents, 279 houses belonging to Muslims and a mosque were destroyed. In addition 44 Muslim shops and businesses were destroyed in and around Puttalam and a further 26 in places such as Nikaweratiya and Nochiyagama.¹² People also recalled that a number of Muslims living in villages around Puttalam simply fled to the jungles in fear of further attacks.

¹¹ From where the imam gives his sermon

¹² Hansard, 8th April, 1976, column 1916.

In addition to the deaths in the mosque, our informants reported at least five other deaths. Two young Muslim school teachers who having alighted from a bus were making the long walk into Puttalam when they encountered a mob in Thilayadi. One of the teachers died while the other suffered a lathe cut to the head but survived—we spoke to the teacher who survived. Near the cement factory, redirected buses were stopped and at least one Muslim man, Rashid, was caught, assaulted and burnt alive while a Muslim security guard was killed in Sirambiadi. A Sinhalese man in Madurankuli wearing what looked like a Muslim cap was shot and killed.

1.3. The immediate response and aftermath

Eight bodies were taken from the mosque and formally pronounced dead at the police station and death certificates were issued. However, one of them was in fact still alive, Thaha, who was suffering from Hydrocephalus had a bullet lodged in his head and had lost consciousness but subsequently woke up in the police station, and managed to escape to Dr. Illyas's dispensary.¹³

There were also many narratives of how the police treated the dead and dying. We were told that the police just *threw* the bodies into a lorry and that one of them had even kicked the bodies. There was another narrative that when one of the injured who had been taken to the police station asked for water, a police constable had urinated on him instead, saying, "Here, drink this, This is good water." In actual fact, only the dead seem to have been taken to the police station and not the injured, excepting Thaha who had been taken for dead. But such narratives speak both to the circulation of rumours and the sense of disaffection that was being felt by the Muslims.

According to some accounts, with Mr. Naina Marrikar's intervention, the military were deployed to restore order. The injured, in the meantime, were all initially transported to Dr. Illyas's home-cum-dispensary and the more seriously hurt were eventually shifted to Chilaw hospital under guard as their safety in Puttalam could not be guaranteed.

The funerals of the 10 killed were held the next day with police protection but there was a weeklong curfew and the Muslims were not permitted to leave their homes. People we spoke to recalled that there were severe food shortages as well. People were not allowed to leave the town for many days; Navavi recalled that he was not permitted to visit his destroyed mill.

¹³ The story additionally recounted to us stated that it was P.C. Shama, who saw that he was alive, was worried for his safety and told him to run off and find Dr. Illyas. P.C. Shama however, did not remember the incident and said he was elsewhere at the time. Dr. Illyas's nurse managed to pull the bullet out of his head with forceps and the excess fluid in his skull escaped, curing Thaha of his condition!

On the 3rd of February, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike made a statement on the issue in Parliament. She began by alleging that the trouble originated when Muslims attacked a bus conductor following which the bus stand was moved. However, she also referred to a series of other incidents in the days that followed including an attack on a bus, as well as on three Sinhalese shops by Muslims in Puttalam, and Sinhalese setting fire to several Muslim houses in nearby villages. The Prime Minister also maintained that the Muslims at the mosque had been armed and had in fact fired upon the police, including as they retreated into the mosque.

Apart from reducing the violence in and around Puttalam to a law and order problem, she also latched onto the narrative that the “communal tensions could be the result of politically motivated mischief makers seeking to damage Sri Lanka’s image on the eve of the Non-Aligned Conference.” More often than not acts of omission and commission by agents of the State and the complicity of state machinery in communal violence have been explained away in Sri Lanka using some variation of the theory that “politically motivated mischief makers seek to damage Sri Lanka’s image”.¹⁴

The *Ceylon Daily Mirror* of 7 February 1976 carried the following headline “Fact finding team in Puttalam: petty dispute exploited by political spies”. The news report stated that the fact-finding team that flew to Puttalam by helicopter on the request of the Prime Minister had reported back suggesting the above. The team consisted of K.B. Ratnayake, Minister of Parliamentary affairs and Sports, S.K.K. Suriyarachchi, Minister of Food and Cooperative Development, I.A. Cader, Deputy Speaker and A.L. Abdul Majeed, Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting.¹⁵

The newspaper reported that, “a dispute over a bus halt had led to a series of unfortunate incidents and that certain unpatriotic citizens had used this to scare the people by spreading rumours.” The team had visited Nochchiyagama and Nikaweratiya according to the report. The report also mentioned that in the former location “several persons had abandoned their homes and that goods had been stolen from these places in the absence of the occupants.” In the latter area persons from outside the area had “set fire to certain buildings to create disturbances.”¹⁶

On 8 April 1976, UNP M.P. Naina Marikkar speaking in parliament mentions that this fact-finding team had committed to formulating a Commission of Inquiry to “find out the causes of the tragic incident.”¹⁷ But no meaningful inquiry was in fact carried out

¹⁴ See for instance, the manner in which J.R. Jayewardene dismissed the violence of July 1983 by calling it a communist plot. In Aluthgama in 2014 too, the damage to Sri Lanka’s image featured very strongly in the post-June 16th discourse. Some ministers baselessly described the incident as being instigated by Jihadists. See *Where Have All the Neighbours Gone? Aluthgama Riots and its Aftermath*, (2015) Law & Society Trust, Colombo.

¹⁵ *Ceylon Daily Mirror*, Wednesday February 4, 1976. p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ceylon Daily Mirror*, Saturday February 7, 1976.

¹⁷ Hansard, 8th April 1976, column 1917.

into the incident either by the United Front (UF) government—a coalition between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Left parties—or the United National Party (UNP) that came into power at the 1977 elections. A magisterial inquiry into the Police firing gunshots in to the mosque was instituted but returned a verdict of justifiable homicide.

Naina Marikkar claimed that the G.A., who initially promised to provide compensation, subsequently claimed there was no provision for compensation for such occurrences and only “acts of god” were to be compensated by the government.¹⁸ Eventually, our respondents told us that compensation of rupees twenty-five thousand for the dead and fifteen thousand for the injured was awarded to some but those whose properties were damaged received no compensation.

Difficulties related to post-violence displacement did not emerge very strongly in our interviews and neither did rebuilding. But speaking in parliament in April 1976, Naina Marikkar noted that the Muslims of Puttalam had been traumatised by “fear, violence and incendiarism”. He also noted that the displaced survivors were denied meaningful assistance and two-and-a-half months later were still living “without homes, [...] adequate food and clothing.”¹⁹

1.4. Situating the Violence in Puttalam

The local context and narratives

Those we interviewed pointed mainly to four forces whose collusion was central to the organising of the violence in Puttalam. These were the authorities at the CTB bus depot and the Cement Corporation respectively, Ven. Kolitha Thero who was in charge of the Buddhist Centre, and the Puttalam G.A. Mr. Rajapaksha.

While several Muslims we interviewed recognized the Sinhalisation process, referred to earlier and underlined by Brun, they also framed Sinhalese disaffection in class terms. The following were some of the issues raised by the Muslims we interviewed. They described the causes and effects in the following manner:

- a) The intimidation of Sinhalese vegetable sellers who brought their produce to the market by the Muslim *nattamis* who were also stealing rice from Sinhalese women “smuggling” rice.
- b) The extreme difference in wealth between the majority Muslim Puttalam town and the surrounding mostly Sinhala areas. Mr. Ghazzali of Puttalam said that

¹⁸ Hansard, 8th April 1976, column 1917.

¹⁹ Ibid.

while the Sinhalese were economically marginalized, the Muslims had a “lavish life”. “Our people were going about in limousines and motorbikes. We had a very lavish life here. They were suffering.” In fact, Mr. Ghazali said that parliamentarian S.H. Ismail wanted the cement corporation factory and the railway station located outside Puttalam town in order to ensure employment for poor Sinhalese.

- c) Others, such as A.R. Abdul Razik, an engineer and former employee of the Engineering Department, stated that there were smouldering tensions in Puttalam at the time, much like in Aluthgama prior to the violence against Muslims in 2006-7 and 2014. Referring to the exploitation of Sinhala labour by Muslim landowners He also said, “Our people may have behaved badly; may have treated them (the Sinhalese) as slaves.” We were told one story about a murder of a Muslim landowner by a Sinhala labourer because the former was having an “affair” with the latter’s wife.
- d) Razik also stated that the Sinhalese were relatively less educated and angry at the fact that their conditions did not improve even after the introduction of the ‘Sinhala Only’ policy.²⁰
- e) There was one person who told us a widely divergent narrative regarding the events. He worked at the Cement Corporation as an active trade union member and also a member of the Communist Party at the time. He suggested that the violence happened at the instigation of the UNP and that it was aimed at discrediting the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government and bringing about an election victory for the UNP. He supported his speculation by claiming that he later saw a UNP party member who was a known perpetrator of violence in 1976 being entertained at the Naina Marikkar House. When he had inquired about this from Marikkar, the latter had reportedly said that the individual in question was a loyal party worker and the past history of ethnic animosity had been forgotten. Our informant read volumes into Naina Marikkar’s statement and actions.

Their narratives were also reflective of the deep class-based fault-lines that existed in Puttalam in the 1970s and also reference similarities in Puttalam and other “riot” events. As in many other contexts in the country there was a mobilization of the Sinhala underclass in the perpetration of the violence. Further, many of the Puttalam elite spoke of the town as prosperous and doing well with people claiming to have a lavish lifestyle.²¹

²⁰ Sinhala Only refers to the act passed by the Sri Lankan government in 1956 making Sinhala the official language of the country. The act was seen to discriminate against the Tamil-speaking minorities of the country located largely in the north and east, but also in pockets in the south with significant concentrations in urban areas. The passing of this act was one important instance in the institutionalization of Sinhala supremacy by the post-colonial Ceylonese state.

²¹ It is interesting to note however, that contemporary statistics for the district indicate that Puttalam is among the poorest D.S. divisions in the country.

The broader context

The violence in Puttalam and the place of the police can be better understood through reference to the larger political context in Sri Lanka at the time. The historian K.M. De Silva refers to violence in Puttalam in 1976 as “the worst episode of communal violence since the Sinhala-Tamil riots of the late 1950s” (De Silva 552). This section of the chapter will devote itself to understanding the social and political economic backdrop within which this violence may be situated and understood.

The political economic context of the 1970s was heavily shaped by the UF that soundly defeated the UNP in the general elections of 1970. The UF won on the promise of establishing socialist economic policies in the long term and a commitment to reinstating the food subsidy dismantled by the previous government. However a mere eight months into power, compelled to confront serious balance of payment issues that had haunted the previous government, it resorted to unwelcome economic measures. The UF was unable to sustain the belief of the electorate and had to face a violent youth insurrection spearheaded by some sections that had supported the regime’s electoral victory.

The insurrection was controlled through very repressive measures by the state, institutionalized police and armed-force aggression. Furthermore, the state of emergency that was declared to deal with the uprising was maintained virtually for the entire duration of the regime’s time in power. When Puttalam happened five years later, the shooting orders for the massacre in the mosque as well as the declaration of curfew until 10th February was done under emergency regulations.

A.J. Wilson also claims that the UF had enough electoral ammunition due to the failing state of the economy and prevailing unemployment that it did not require mobilizing ethnic animosity for electoral benefit prior to the election victory²² (Wilson 1993, 38).

In the aftermath however, the UF government’s stance shifted. The government’s plans to bring about constitutional reforms in keeping with the commitment to non-alignment and post-colonial nationalism were also inimical to the parity aspirations of the Tamil leadership in terms of regional autonomy and greater political power. Sri Lanka’s first autochthonous constitution (1972) rendered Buddhism the state religion, enshrined Sinhala as the official language and Tamil as a language requiring translation and did away with the minority rights provisions provided by section 29 of the 1947-8 constitution (Wilson 1994, 115).

²² The halving of the rice ration, the scarcity of consumer goods, the rise in prices of essential commodities considerably aggravated by the devaluation of the Ceylon Rupee, the government’s failure to take steps to increase wages and salaries consonant with price increases in the daily items of food and clothing and widespread unemployment, all were sufficient, Wilson argues, to undermine popular confidence in the government’s rhetoric.

Ethnic tensions were heightened by the new constitution. S.J.V. Chelvanayagam leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) resigned from his seat, compelling the government to hold a by-election for which he campaigned on a rejection of the republican constitution. The government delayed the election by two years but Chelvanayagam nevertheless won a resounding victory, which he understood as the Tamil electorate rejecting the Sinhala government's ethnic politics. The ethnic animosity cultivated by the UF regime was such, that Wilson states that the general elections of 1970 spelt the beginning of the end for any hope of a meaningful Sinhala-Tamil reconciliation within a single island state (Wilson 1994, 113).

Additionally the UF government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike was brought to power with the radical promise to move the country towards the left, with land acquisition, state provision of welfare measures etc. But the government's increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic actions, included taking over of newspapers, and the extension of its term in office by two additional years by utilizing its overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly, eroded public confidence but also entrenched executive power. (De Silva 546). De Silva also claims that the institutionalization of unicameral legislature, a powerful executive with insufficient checks on the exercise of its powers, and the doing away with of judicial review of legislation were measures that would institutionalize the authoritarianism of Sri Lanka's state for the long term. The National State Assembly as the vehicle of the sovereignty of the people was entrenched through the rejection of judicial review (De Silva 546).

Moreover, the UNP's recovery from the electoral defeat in 1970 was also viewed with concern by the UPF government when the people turned out to mourn the passing of the UNP leader, Dudley Senanayake, in their hundreds of thousands (K.M. De Silva states that half the entire population of the country may have walked past Dudley's grave). The government, in response, became truly worried and banned UNP meetings for an entire year.

Other indications of the authoritarian actions of the government are Aboosaly's (Member of Parliament from Balangoda) description of the manner in which he was threatened by the Balangoda O.I.C. during a particular occurrence there under the Sirimavo Bandaranaike regime. Amirthalingam, soon to be Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, references repeated occurrences of ethnic violence spanning many years. These include the manner in which the police were found wanting in dealing with such disturbances.

The UF government was also under serious pressure during the week that the violence occurred due to ongoing political problems. By that time the LSSP, one of its close coalition partners, had already exited the government and there was a no-confidence motion brought against Minister of Finance and Justice Felix Dias Bandaranaike.

According to De Silva, the regime's handling of the insurgency of 1971 entrenched the powers of the police and armed forces and set the stage for the increasing authoritarianism of the regime in the face of eroding public legitimacy. The violent suppression of the rebellion was made possible by bringing in emergency regulations. De Silva claims that the emergency regulations were in place for far longer than was warranted by the incidents of 1971. They seem to have been used to control perceived Tamil opposition against the State in 1975 and then early the next year to quell what seems to have been perceived as opposition by Muslim groups in Puttalam.

Muslims in national politics: the importance of Puttalam.

The UF government had come into power in 1971 with the assistance of at least one minority community. Badiuddin Mahmud, secretary of the SLFP, mobilized the Tamil-speaking Muslim intelligentsia in support of the SLFP's socialist vision for the country. The Islamic Socialist Front (ISF) was an organisation composed of Muslim intellectuals from across the island that was convened by Mahmud and was successful in bringing about substantial Muslim community support for the SLFP in the 1970 elections. While A.J. Wilson argues that there is no evidence to support some Muslims' claim that the ISF had influenced the outcome of the elections, he does confirm that the traditionally UNP supporting Muslim voter was influenced by the ISF to vote for the SLFP. (Wilson 1975, 175; De Silva 552.) The violence in Puttalam was understood by many to have significantly eroded this phalanx of Muslim support for the SLFP.

K.M. De Silva attributes the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment and the violent outbreaks in Puttalam and elsewhere to Badiuddin Mahmud's politics:

In his hands his cabinet post became at once a political base and fountain of patronage to be used to strengthen the ties between his community and the party to which he belonged, the SLFP. Such success as he achieved in this was by its very nature transient. He was soon a controversial figure: his educational policy was one of the major points of divergence between the government and the Tamils. More significantly, by 1973 anti-Muslim sentiment was kindled among the Sinhalese by charges of favoured treatment of Muslims in the sphere of education. In 1974-5 there were sporadic Sinhala-Muslim clashes in various parts of the island with a dangerous confrontation in Gampola in the last week of 1975. If the timely intervention of the police prevented widespread violence at Gampola, the clash that occurred in early 1976 at Puttalam—a Muslim stronghold in the northwest of the Island—was up to that time the worst episode of communal violence since the Sinhalese-Tamil riots of the early 1950s. (De Silva 552)

During the course of the parliamentary debate on the imposition of Emergency in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim violence in Galle in July 1982, Haleem Ishak, a Muslim SLFP politician, brings up the fact that the UNP made an election promise to the Muslims that there would be an impartial inquiry into the incidents at Puttalam of February 1976 but that this had not been honoured.²³

What did you do? You made use of that incident. You went around the country, you went to poor Muslim villages, and said that our mosques were burnt down, our mosques were hit: you made all sorts of charges and promised the Muslim community an inquiry. I can assure this house that we will never come down to that level. ²⁴

Naina Marikkar, member for Puttalam and a then deputy minister in the UNP government that came to power in 1977 states in parliament that compensation for the victims—those who were killed and those who were wounded—was given only under the UNP government. He claims that compensation was given to those that suffered property damage and were driven out of their lands—but we found no reference to such compensation for loss of property or land grants from the government. Naina Marikkar also claimed that the UNP would look into having an inquiry into the shooting incident at the Puttalam mosque. In this debate he went as far as to reference and criticise Mrs. Bandaranaike's speech in the immediate aftermath of the incident where she claimed that the Muslims shot from the mosque and that the Muslim community was to blame for what had transpired. Naina Marikkar in fact claimed that it was the emergency regulations promulgated by the former government during which the police and army authorities were not properly controlled that led to the incident in the mosque. He also stated that he disagreed with the verdict of justifiable homicide that was given by the magistrate at the inquest proceedings into the deaths that occurred after the mosque shootings ²⁵

The UNP therefore undoubtedly capitalized on the incidents in Puttalam for its own electoral benefit. While there is no evidence to point to the conspiracy that our sole informant from the communist party had put forward, the play of minority votes in electoral politics must also be taken into consideration when understanding the different ways in which political violence specifically targeting Muslims becomes meaningful.

²³ Hansard, 5th August 1982, column 132.

²⁴ Hansard, 5th August 1982, column 133.

²⁵ Hansard, 5th August 1982, column 140.

2. Galle 1982

Violence erupted in Galle in July 1982. The violence—between Sinhalese and Muslims—began on July 26th and continued till the 31st. The six days of violence resulted in two deaths and millions of rupees in property damage. The rioting spread from Galle town to suburban areas with small Muslim concentrations, and had eventually to be controlled with the intervention of the military. The government declared an islandwide emergency and curfew was imposed within the limits of the Galle municipality. There were limits imposed on news coverage of the incident at the national level by the government, “in an effort to prevent the incident from spreading to other parts of the country.”²⁶

Given that the incident is not well known our investigation revealed only some very fragmented details about the event. The memories of July 1982 in Galle are somewhat faded among Galle Muslims who were perhaps not directly involved. It had not, unlike in either Puttalam or Mawanella, shaped people’s understanding of their own place in the area. Simply having contacts in Galle proved insufficient to identify groups of persons who either remembered the violence or knew of those who were affected by it. Given that there was no record of the specific areas, other than the bazar, that were affected, we were unable to visit those areas to interview affected persons. We in fact found it extremely difficult to identify those who remembered the violence, knew those who were affected, or knew of those who were active in providing support to the hundreds of families that were affected. Our Muslim contacts in Galle Fort had no recollection of the event and had not heard stories of it. (We later discovered that the violence did not enter the Fort.).

Some misunderstood our inquiries regarding the violence and thought that we were referring to July 1983 and were quite convinced that nothing like that happened in Galle in 1982. Some Muslims that we approached understood it as a clash between two rival groups—including one Muslim group that they referred to as a “gang” (The Maffan gang). However, there were others—including some Galle Fort residents—who did remember. What we could ascertain from the absence of any strongly narrativised memory of the event among Muslims in Galle was that it was not something that had become a part of multifaceted popular history of Galle’s Muslims, and further it was something that was perhaps overshadowed by the events of July 1983. Ultimately however, it is clear that our account must be treated as an initial foray into the event to be further complicated by more sustained fieldwork in the affected areas.

The section on Galle therefore is constructed out of a series of interviews with one community leader who was present at the time in Galle, one who intervened with the authorities during the violence, and a lawyer who was involved with the case. We also

²⁶ Daily Mirror, Thursday August 5th 1982 “Curfew in Galle Lifted”.

came across a document that listed the affected persons by village and the damages incurred. We have also used the previous research conducted by George Scott and Nethra Samarawickrema in making our arguments. This account primarily illustrates the organized nature of the event, police inaction in the face of violence, and the government response to and framing of the event as one that was brought upon by the leadership of the victims.

2.1 Situating the violence—the political context

The UNP had won the general elections of 1977 with what was understood by many Muslims as substantive support from a Muslim voter base. The election took place in the wake of the anti-Muslim violence in Puttalam in 1976, and also promised some easing of the depression-related economic burdens placed on the people in the early 1970s. These circumstances were considered to be pivotal to the UNP's election victory. Following the election victory, there was widespread violence in the country originating in post-election violence in Jaffna. The almost one month long period of violence that followed, to which the state response was minimal, mainly targeted up-country Tamils. It was a time that was seen by many—mainly Tamil minority politicians speaking in parliament—as a time where anti-minority sentiment intensified in the country. In the North, militancy by young Tamils directed against the state was growing and significant violent incidents began to be reported. Pivotal moments in the escalation of Tamil militancy, such as the murder of Alfred Duraiappah,²⁷ and the killing of Inspector Bastiampillai, the first acts of violence for which the LTTE claimed responsibility, occurred during the mid 1970s.

While the UNP won the elections on a platform accepting that the Tamils had legitimate grievances, it was soon clear that J.R. Jayewardene lacked the foresight to anticipate what measures may be required to resolve the issue. J.R. did not anticipate the escalation of Tamil nationalist militancy and was not in any way interested in accommodating what he saw as Tamil recalcitrance. The anti-Tamil violence after the elections of 1977 lasted over a month, and was a further reflection both of deteriorating ethnic relations and the state's chosen mode of engagement with minority demands.

The following is Jayewardene's speech in parliament two days after violence broke out in Jaffna:

“ . . . we are still one nation [and] this Government is elected to govern the whole Island . . . The vast majority of the people in this country have not got the restraint and the reserve that Members of Parliament, particularly those in the front ranks, have been used to. They become restive when they hear such remarks as that a

²⁷ See the Peace and Conflict Timeline at <http://pact.lk/27-july-1975/>. Also see **Antecedents of July 1983 and the Foundations of Impunity** (UTHR(J)) http://www.uthr.org/Book/CHA02.htm#_Toc527947383

separate state is to be formed; that Trincomalee is to be the capital of that state; that Napoleon had said that Trincomalee is the key to the Indian Ocean; and therefore Trincomalee is going to be the capital of the state . . .”

“Whatever it is, when statements of that type are said and the newspapers carry them throughout the island, and when you say you are not violent but that violence may be used in time to come, what do you think the other people in Sri Lanka would do? How will they react? “If you want to fight let there be a fight; if it is peace, let there be peace!”

After a prolonged applause by members of his party, Jayewardene added:

“That is what they will say. It is not what I am saying. The people of Sri Lanka will say that.”

“When this happened in Jaffna – I am not saying that you [members of the TULF] caused it. You are completely innocent of it. When Sinhalese boutiques are attacked, when government property is attacked – every railway train bringing people from there to the South spread the stories – all that caused the death of the most innocent Tamil people and Muslim people, which should never happen. I am very sorry that it should have happened . . .”

“But I say, be careful of the words you use . . . Such words can inflame people of other nationalities. And what has happened can happen in a greater degree if such words are used by responsible leaders . . .”

Jayewardene was attributing the violence to the rhetoric of the Tamil leadership and its anticipation of violent action against the state. “If you want a fight let there be a fight.” This irresponsible treatment of the issue by Jayewardene is a further reflection of the lack of responsibility taken by the government to address the law and order situation and the manner in which the state had not only ethnicised its own response to post-election violence but in fact utilized such violence to make a political point or “to teach the Tamils a lesson”.

At the insistence of the Leader of the Opposition A. Amirthalingam, M.C. Sansoni, a former chief justice, was appointed to a one-man commission to investigate the violence of 1977. The Sansoni commission report recounts that the state did little to halt the violence—by not immediately declaring an emergency for instance—and that there was evidence of the police colluding in carrying out the violence. Although the post election violence of 1977 erupted in Jaffna it spread throughout the country and as already stated, many of its victims were upcountry Tamils. Echoing Jayewardene’s words quoted above the Sansoni report faults Tamil politicians for their “duplicity” of asking for a peaceful settlement while threatening the dawn of militant violence in the pursuit of separation. According to Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, the Sansoni report accurately summarises its findings by stating that the violence “was organized by the police at the

behest of their new political bosses—the UNP.” The politics of the report however were faithful to the statist position regarding the event. According to Jayawardena, the findings reflect the premise that the Tamil political leadership was to blame for the violence committed against the Tamil people. Sansoni devotes the first two chapters of the report, a total of eighty-two pages, to establishing the culpability of the TULF leadership. “[T]he communal violence was retaliation for a section of the Tamil leadership asking for a separate state and fostering a militant movement.” This sentiment is repeated throughout the report and recommendations (Pinto-Jayawardena 2010, 12).

The nature of anti-minority sentiment in the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s must be clearly understood in order to appreciate the background to the violence in Galle in 1982. The manner in which such outbreaks of violence against minorities were normalised by various representatives of the state is an especially important factor. The violence in Galle in 1982, just five years later, and the state response to such violence too should be understood in the above political and economic context.

The proximate trigger

We encountered several different narratives regarding the trigger event for the violence. One centres around an altercation at Serenthukade junction close to the Galle bazaar, a predominantly Muslim area surrounded by Sinhalese, between a Sinhala fruit vendor and his Muslim neighbour during which the fruit stall was damaged and the neighbour stabbed. Another narrative centres around a Sinhala tenant who had not paid his rent for several years and was refusing to leave despite his Muslim landlord asking him to. He allegedly refused to leave unless he was paid and while all legal measures were being pursued by the Muslim landlord, he was unwilling to pay money to take his own property back. Then, we were told, one of the landlord’s men with some reputation for being a *chandiya* or a local tough in the neighbourhood, had driven a tractor into the building in question. This was read by the Sinhala population of the area not as a dispute over rent but as a Sinhalese being attacked by a Muslim. We heard that this landowning Muslim was later reprimanded by other Galle Muslims for his short-sightedness. Other Galle Muslims had advised him to pay the money and get the tenant out.²⁸

George Scott’s narrative based on interviews in the Galle Bazaar and the Alles Commission Report (discussed further below) formulates the trigger event in the following way:

According to the Alles Commission report the main immediate cause of this conflict began in the previous month as an organized attempt by some influential

²⁸ Interview with diamond merchant in Galle Fort.

and affluent Muslims of the area to gain control of the buildings there and make it a monopoly of the Muslim population and deprive some Sinhala occupants of their means of livelihood. (Scott Jr. 1989)²⁹

We spoke with a lawyer who appeared for the property owners and his account confirmed the story about the quarrel between neighbours. He said that the repairs to the damaged fruit stall were carried out without the landlord's permission. There was therefore a court case against the repairs. The court found in favour of the landowners.³⁰

Making changes to property without the owner's permission is something that causes great anxiety in the context of landlord tenant relationships in Sri Lanka. To us the dispute was presented in terms of this anxiety. It is interesting however, that one of these perspectives (and not both) is given precedence and the status of fact in the Alles Commission report.³¹

Both the altercation between the Sinhala and Muslim neighbours as well as the dispute with the landlord seem to have fanned ethnic animosity in the area and explains the reason for the month's delay between the altercation and the breakout of rioting.³² Many newspapers covering the event also referred to it as sparked off by a rental dispute that was then later taken advantage of by various "unsavoury elements". President Jayewardene also stated this at an event that he attended at Dharmarajah College, Kandy.³³

Over thirty years after the event people had different memories about how it started. Another narrative that we encountered stated that the Muslim landowner was stabbed by his tenant over the property dispute following which the landowner's supporters then burned the fruit seller's premises. Another version states that the man who destroyed the poor fruit seller's residence was a known Muslim thug and did so for no reason than his personal gratification.³⁴ It was in response to this injustice that the Sinhalese in the surrounding areas started to attack the Muslims.

³⁰ Interview with M.M. Zuhair. February 2016.

³¹ As we will discuss later, some of those involved in the event and the court case were aware of the report representing matters in this manner and had in fact asked for the report to be dismissed.

³² Galle Muslim Civil Society Organisations' document on the damages in Galle. (Tamil)

³³ We should live in unity with different ethnic groups. Emergency Laws will be lifted soon, President states. Dinamina, August 2nd 1982.

³⁴ This information is taken from Samarawickrema's unpublished paper entitled The Fort and the Riot: Problems of representing accounts of violence.

The Violence and its Impact

The following is a summary of a document formulated by community groups in Galle regarding the affected communities.³⁵

Dangedara, Maha Duwa Watte: Surrounded by Sinhala villages, Muslims living in this area were unable to leave the area between the 26th to the 29th of July 1982. The area came under attack on 29th July and was amongst those that suffered the greatest damage. Some 30 families were affected with houses looted and set on fire. Goods that were looted were later seen in neighbouring houses. A.C.M. Nazeer, A.C.M Basheer and A.H.S Meeran suffered injuries from lath cuts and were hospitalized. After the attack on 29th June, the people of the village were evacuated by the military to the Dangedara Jumma mosque. It was then that the houses were looted and burnt.

Osanagoda: The area came under attack between 5.30 and 6.30 p.m. on 30th July 1982. The Osanagoda Thakiya (mosque) was attacked—a petrol bomb was thrown into the mosque and the wall in front of the *Qibla* was damaged. Another petrol bomb was used against the *ziyaram* and the glass was damaged as was the *meezan*. Five houses suffered damages and O.L.M. Ibrahim, 75 years old, was beaten up by the mob.

Milinduwa: The area came under attack on 29th and 30th July and 1st August 1982. Five houses in the area were set on fire, some of them twice, and two cars were burnt. One other house was damaged while a shop was burnt. On the 29th, six Muslims travelling in a car were stopped and attacked in front of Pattadoowa School at around 2.30 p.m. As a result, A.W.M. Sabakath and A.I. Mohammed suffered injuries to their hands while Hassan Shafeek and Najimul Hussain suffered injuries to both hands and legs. A.L.M. Rabiyyudeen, of 4/2, New Road, Makkuluwa, Galle, suffered multiple cuts in both hands and legs and had one finger totally severed. A.C.M. Saleem, a teacher, was left with one eye damaged severely and injuries in the face and head. The car was set on fire.

Berawagoda: Eight houses belonging to Muslims were attacked, some were set on fire but failed petrol bombs meant others suffered less damage. However, one house was broken into and looted. A teashop was also burnt.

Makuluwa: Thirteen houses were looted/robbed and/or set on fire. One person, in fact a 17-year-old boy, A.H.S. Naleer, died due to his throat being cut.

Divapitiya: Attacks occurred from 27th July to 1st August. On 30th July goods sent by six members of a family who resided in the Middle-East were robbed and set on fire while some Muslims were attacked by a mob and had their wristwatches and money robbed at the Galle

³⁵ This information is gleaned from a document compiled by Galle civil organisations and given to us by a person who was a student at the Naleemia Institute in Beruwala during that time.

Railway Station. At least six persons were attacked and robbed at the Galle bus stand on the next day. In addition, eight houses were totally destroyed while one was partially damaged.

Haliwela: Hillside Estate in Haliwela, a rubber estate and bungalow belonging to M.A. Rahman built during the colonial era, was robbed and furniture, goods, clothes, and accessories stolen. Even the roof, doors and windows were removed. A Delica van belonging to M.N.M. Fawaz was set on fire by the mob on 5th August. A 17-year-old boy Imthiaz was shot and seriously injured while working in a paddy field. M.S.M. Iqbal suffered a lathe cut while M.H.M. Ilyas suffered gunshot wounds when he attempted to put out a fire.

Tadalla: Two houses were attacked and damaged and one person was robbed.

Dangedara: Five houses were attacked and damaged and one person suffered injuries.

Businesses in Galle: A total of 27 businesses were attacked. Eight of them were on Main Street and even lorries with goods in them were burnt. Some large businesses—such as the Thowfeek textile shop—were completely destroyed. The attacks on the shops in the various areas of Galle took place from 27th July to 1st of August.

Hirimbura: Five shops were attacked and robbed and five houses were demolished. One person received cut injuries that were only treated three days after the event. Most of the violence occurred on 27th July 1982 at 10. a.m. and was committed by two groups of attackers—one that arrived in a lorry and another on foot.

Gintota: Four houses were attacked.

The response

A perusal of newspapers from the period shows that Prime Minister R. Premadasa went to Galle on behalf of the President. While in Galle he promised assistance for repairing and rebuilding the damaged houses of those victimized in the riots and called attention to Duwawatte where 35 families in 28 houses and four families elsewhere deserved special assistance.³⁶ He is also reported as stating that there should be a commission of investigation and on Premadasa's recommendation, President Jayewardene eventually appointed retired Supreme Court Judge Justice Alles to carry out an investigation into the incident.

In a meeting convened at the District Ministry (Kachcheri) under his leadership, Prime Minister Premadasa had stated that establishing organisations of all faiths in the area was an urgent need and urged that the religious leaders of the three faiths—Christian, Buddhist and Catholic—do so immediately. He also stated (somewhat poignantly in

³⁶ One Man Commission of Inquiry appointed to probe Galle incident and compensate victims.

hindsight given July 1983 was a mere one year away) that it was the policy of the UNP government to establish unity, discipline (*sanvaraya*) and peace for all people in the country and not just one section of society. He also stated that the government will take steps to ensure that such unfortunate incidents are prevented from occurring not just in Galle but also anywhere in the country.³⁷ In the same coverage Premadasa is reported as also talking about the payment of compensation as a precedent that should not be established because people may cause riots just to access compensation.³⁸

The Alles report refers to the incident as a confrontation between two rival gangs. This report suggests some commensurability between the organised actions of the Sinhala and Muslim groups.³⁹

Scott's narrative taking the Alles report at face value, traces the underlying cause of the riots to economic rivalry between the Muslim traders and the up-and-coming Vahumpura business people in the Galle Bazaar who Scott identifies as having possibly instigated and provided the (costly) petrol for the arson to the Sinhala rioters. Scott states that while the Sinhala higher caste Goyigama and Karawa traders were arguably in greater economic ascendancy in Galle at the time, and were as powerful a set of competitors, the Muslims were an easier target. Muslim "difference" as well as what was seen as Muslims' manipulation of local authorities and power structures through bribes and other modes of informal patronage/exchange according to Scott may have motivated such anger. While all business engagements regardless of ethnicity probably entailed some amount of similar patronage, Muslims were considered much more adept at this and were thought to wield greater influence due to their wealth. To this date stereotypes regarding Muslims using bribery to get things done abound.

Both Alles and Scott reference the fact that the Muslims were the landowners and that it was also a property dispute. But the economic narrative of Muslims wanting to remove Sinhala businesses from the junction takes precedence in this narrative over the one of a tenant being irresponsible, favoured by the Muslims. It is possible to surmise that both elements were at play to some extent in the event. In the Alles narrative it is also evident that there is an attempt to deflect attention from the culpability of the police (which Alles did in fact document, according to Scott.). In a manner similar to the case of Justice Sansoni, Alles too reports the incidents of police failure but chooses to interpret

³⁷ Silumina, August 8th 1982. The Prime Minister's entourage consisted of District Minister for Galle Rupa Karunathillake, MP from Galle, Dr. W. Dahanayake, Major Montague Jayawickrema, Minister for Planning and Plantation Industries, Speaker of the Parliament Al Haj Bakeer Makar, Army Commander Major General Tissa Indrika Weeratunga, Major General Sepala Attygalle of the Ministry of Defence, and Secretary to the Prime Minister Bradman Weerakoon. The Mayor of Galle and the area military commanders of Galle and members of the Galle Urban Council also attended.

³⁸ Premadasa also states that if the SLFP agrees that compensation must be paid for the violence in 1982 then the UNP would consider compensation for the violence in 1977.

³⁹ Since it was never made public there is no official version of the Alles report. We know of it only from the reference made by George Scott. While there are records of the government commissioning Justice Alles, we could not locate a copy of the report itself.

them in a manner that respects the status quo and somehow blames the Muslim leadership for instigating the violence through their own poor judgement.

In both state-sponsored narratives—by Sansoni and by Alles—the “anger of the Sinhalese” through which the violence occurred is rendered legitimate through calling attention to the recalcitrant and irresponsible behaviour of the Tamil and Muslim minority leadership. This way of holding all those with a similar ethnic identity responsible for the political (and in the case of Galle, economic) actions of a few enables state support for ethnic violence.

Scott’s information as to who provided the petrol is important. This information as to who instigated the violence, provided the materials necessary for it to be carried out, is only available at the level of speculation by affected Muslims in our other case studies. In the case of Galle, in addition to a trigger event to which the violence can retrospectively be located, we have been able to unearth information as to the provision of resources to carry out the violence. The ease with which such violence is mobilized in such areas seems to require some forethought and organisation. Therefore while trigger events are important as a way of retrospectively locating a justification for the violence, research that unearths the manner in which other elements—provision of petrol, getting the authorities, especially the police, to suspend investigations—were dealt with will make clear just how the “riot” is periodically utilized for different political ends.

Scott describes the rival Sinhala and Muslim gangs in the following terms:

The main difference between these two gangs lay in the socio-economic standing of their respective members. Of the two the Muslims were far wealthier and more prestigious than the Sinhalese. Indeed the leader, and his sons were all prominent businessmen and property owners and . . . were not above using their wealth and influence to gain favours from the local authorities.

On the other hand the Sinhalese thugs had no such power, neither in terms of wealth nor of political influence, and prior to the 1982 disturbances they had been looking at the blatant ostentatious abuses of their Muslim counterparts with growing envy and rancour. But one thing they did have above the Muslims was numbers. And once the masses of angry disgruntled youth were recruited from the slums and outlying rural areas, the Muslims were in for quite a beating (Scott Jr. 27-28).

With regards to state culpability Scott references the following in the Alles report: “Alles cites as secondary immediate causes the corrupt collusion of some of the higher police officers in this attempt, their incompetence in dealing with the initial stages of the

conflict, and the depleted state of police and army personnel and equipment prior to the outbreak.”(Scott Jr.26).⁴⁰

The Muslims that we interviewed had a perspective that was quite different from that which both Scott and Alles espouse. During our research we also found a document prepared by a handful of local Muslim organisations that responded to the needs of affected groups during that time. This document commenting on the violence vehemently opposed the violence being framed as sparked off by personal animosities. They consistently stressed the targeting of Muslims by widespread groups of armed and equipped Sinhalese. They also drew attention to the fact that the trigger event that was being talked of occurred one month prior to the outbreak of widespread violence. They state that this time lag seems to indicate that the attacks were planned. They accused the police and prominent local Sinhala business interests of colluding in the attacks. (The report asked, if this was indeed the result of a personal animosity, “Why were people in other areas attacked? Why were mosques attacked? Why were unconnected people’s property robbed?”)

Ismathulla Cader who was active in the aftermath of the violence told us the following about how the authorities seemed to collude to find ways of holding the Muslims culpable for the violence unleashed against them: “DIG Joseph called us in Colombo and said, “Tell your people not to cause any problems. Then I knew that he had been fed by the subordinates.” This was after the violence had begun. There was also an incident where one Thowfeek Master, community leader and shop owner whose business was destroyed in the fire in the bazaar, was arrested on the charge of attacking a woman merchant in the bazaar. The trumped up charge was finally thrown out, but not before Thowfeek Master was arrested, thrown in jail and humiliated. Cader stated that Thowfeek Master’s arrest showed him the power that the Vahumpura business persons wielded in the area.⁴¹

The Muslim perspective on the Alles report

In 1982 M.M. Zuhair was a young lawyer who was engaged by affected Muslim businessmen in the aftermath of the violence. He had just resigned from the Attorney General’s department after ten years of service. According to Zuhair, lawyers from Colombo and Galle led the call for an investigation into the incident. While they were pleased with the involvement of Justice Alles, they felt, ultimately that Alles’ investigation did not do justice to the victims’ perspective of the event.

⁴⁰ Dahanayake M.P., for Galle, however was quick to defend the actions of the police when the issue was raised in parliament. He stated that the actions of the police and the armed forces during the seven days of troubles were exemplary. He also called attention to the fact that the police was under-staffed and reinforcements had to be brought in from Badulla and Ratnapura during the troubles. (As reported in the Dinamina, Saturday, 7th August 1982.)

⁴¹ Interview with Ismathulla Cader, January 22nd 2016.

Zuhair stated that the Muslims organized and collected information with regards to the affected persons. Retired inspector of Police Abdeen carried out an investigation into the incident, collected evidence and compiled a report. The lawyers group presented this information to Alles. It was clear according to Zuhair, however, that Alles' report was going to reflect the Police version of events. Zuhair stated that the Muslim lawyers group of which he was a part felt that the report would be a cover up, would attempt to whitewash elements of what happened and not accurately render the events that occurred during the seven days of violence in Galle.

This dissatisfaction with the report was also confirmed in our interview with Ismathulla Cader who was the secretary of a short-lived united Muslim organization that came together in the aftermath of the riots. Cader too stated that the organization was advised that the report would do more bad than good.

He stated that the Muslims had come together and taken a decision to ask powerful UNP politician and Foreign Minister A.C.S Hameed to get the warrant for the Commission to be withdrawn. The Commission report therefore, though completed, was never made public.

3. Mawanella 2001

3.1 Background

On 2nd April 2001, the town⁴² of Mawanella, in Kegalle district, and its immediate surroundings witnessed large-scale violence and arson targeted mainly at Muslims. One person was killed and several injured—all Muslims—in police firing. In addition to four mosques, over a hundred shops, businesses, vehicles and homes belonging to Muslims were destroyed or otherwise damaged.

The violence in Mawanella, which also spilt over into Maradana in Colombo, came at an especially turbulent time in the Sri Lankan political economic scene. In the year before, Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike had won a second term as President and her People's Alliance was returned to power in the parliamentary elections that followed, albeit having lost its majority. The late 1990s also saw a significant rise in the intensity of the war with the LTTE gaining Kilinochchi and Elephant Pass besides launching an attack on the *Dalada Maligawa*, the Temple of the Tooth, in Kandy in 1998 and an assassination attempt on President Bandaranaike in 1999.

⁴² Administratively Mawanella was considered a town until the Pradeshiya Sabha Act of 1987 saw its status being reversed, a change whose political consequences are considered further on in the text.

The '90s also saw the Sri Lanka Muslims Congress (SLMC), internal quarrels and divisions notwithstanding, becoming a key player in Parliament with its seats proving crucial to President Bandaranaike in forming a government in 1994. The late '90s witnessed rising tensions between Sinhalese and Muslims and several incidents of violence in which the latter were targeted occurred across the western, southern and central parts of the country. On the economic front, President Bandaranaike's government, after promising in 1994 to turn away from the open economic policies of the seventeen-year UNP regime, made a u-turn and accepted an IMF restructuring package. But economic growth stalled significantly and in 2001 the economy was to see negative growth for the first time since independence.

3.2. Mawanella – 30th April to 2nd May 2001

The proximate trigger

The immediate provocation for the events on 2nd May is generally agreed to be a violent confrontation on the night of the 30th April between two Muslim workers and some Sinhalese youth. According to one version of the incident, some Sinhalese youth approached one Mohammad Hisham for extortion money as he was closing down his eatery—one in a row of small shops and eateries by the bus stand—for the night.⁴³ The latter's refusal apparently prompted another one of the youth to demand a cigarette, the money for which he reportedly threw at the shopkeeper, abusing him while the shopkeeper served him his change. As the quarrel escalated, Fouzul Ameer, who worked next door intervened and a fracas ensued. But the youth left only to return soon with others and began to assault Fouzul, Hisham, and his brother.

Mr. Fouzul Ameer himself, now in his late forties, recalled the incident slightly differently. According to him, the youth began to abuse Hisham loudly while he was handing over the cigarette and the change and one of them, Asoka, held Hisham around his neck and hurt him with a key that he had clenched in his hands. Fouzul, then on a break from his job in the Gulf was working in his brother's shop right next to Hisham's, was alerted by the shouting and rushed into Hisham's shop. He said that he was so provoked by the sight of Hisham breaking into tears in pain that he, well built as he was, retaliated by attacking the Sinhalese youth. He maintained that there were about four of them. According to Fouzul the youth retreated under his assault but another shopkeeper, fearing for Fouzul, dragged him into his shop and downed the shutters. However, the youth returned along with others and forced the shopkeeper to open his shutters and attacked Fouzul.

What happened next is generally agreed upon by all sources. A struggle ensued in which Fouzul was badly beaten up and eventually dragged to the nearby Clock Tower and tied

⁴³ Report of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, available on file.

to its railings. The Sinhalese youth then began to beat Fouzul again, according to him now with a cycle chain, but decided to flee on seeing a police jeep approaching. However, as they fled, one of the youth slashed at Fouzul with a knife, which cut him on the left side of his face leaving him badly injured.

Fouzul said, “the culprits escaped but the police saw them well.” Bleeding and badly hurt—he still bears the scars—he was taken by the police to Mawanella hospital, where Hisham too was brought. In fact, Hisham and others had rushed to the nearby police station as soon as the youth had dragged Fouzul away. Later, he was transferred to Kegalle hospital under Army guard where he received treatment over several days.

Fouzul recalls being visited by the CID as well as journalists in hospital. While the costs of his treatment were met by the state, he did not seek compensation and returned to Qatar a few months later to resume his work. His case did go to court, where Adv. Thamseel appeared for him, but he got no further information regarding it. “I didn’t ask the lawyer about it,” he maintained, “the Government wanted to hide or close all these cases, promising victims that they will give compensation and their properties back.”

The events of 1st and 2nd April 2001

Mr. M.I.M. Ziyad, now the vice-principal of Zahira College, recalled that the news of what happened at the bus-stand spread quickly and tension prevailed in town the following morning. A large group of Muslims, especially agitated youth, gathered, by the bus-stand demanding the arrest of the Sinhalese youth responsible for the attack and some of them blocked the road and burnt tyres in protest against police inaction. Soon a group of Sinhalese youth too gathered and tensions between the Muslim youth and the police who had arrived threatened to escalate. Stones were thrown at the police breaking the glass of a jeep, recalls Ziyad, but notes that some of the elders were able to hold the tenuous peace after the police gave assurances that arrests would be made the next morning.

The following day brought no action from the police but once again Muslim youth from Mawanella gathered in the morning near the bus-stand in protest. In the meantime however it appears that rumours of Muslims converging in large numbers on Mawanella led to a large—some put the number at about a thousand—gathering of Sinhalese youth from several surrounding villages, some of whom were also armed with sticks and so on. A stand-off ensued near the bus-stand with the police sandwiched between the Muslim and Sinhalese groups.

From different accounts, it appears that tensions boiled over when some Sinhalese started to attack Muslim-owned shops, which led to Muslim youth trying to surge forward only to be stopped by the police who were stationed in the middle. This turned into a full-fledged confrontation between the Muslims who had gathered, now even more agitated at witnessing their shop being attacked, and the police. Even as this

confrontation escalated, the Sinhalese mobs, in the relative safety of being behind the police lines, began to burn Muslim shops. As the violence escalated, the police fired into the Muslim crowd. One Muslim businessman we spoke to recalled seeing a man—fifty-one year old Mohamad Saleem—who was standing, not far from him, shot and killed on the spot.

Over the next few hours, until the Army was called in, Mawanella burned and the arson and violence spread to nearby areas. Rumours, such as one that Muslims had destroyed a large Buddha statue in the middle of the town, spread fuelling more violence in and around Mawanella. Dr. Gamage, a medical practitioner, recalled his watchman claiming that Muslims had destroyed both of the main Buddha statues in town, whereas in fact there was only one to begin with; he also recalled someone else claiming that Muslim mobs armed with silver swords were attacking Sinhalese.

According to a survey conducted by the Mawanella Peace Building Committee, the violence and arson accounted for one death and 14 injuries (all due to police firing) and led to the destruction of or damage to four mosques, 148 shops, 81 houses, 24 vehicles, two garment factories, a rubber factory and a petrol filling station.⁴⁴ While most of this is damage that occurred in Mawanella town, it also includes Muslim properties or places of worship destroyed or damaged in surrounding towns and villages including Ganetanne, Hingula, Uyanwatte, Kappagoda, Dippitiya, Pattampitiya and Kadugannawa. While there are some differences in the figures offered by different sources, what is clear is that damage was significant and the Muslims suffered disproportionately—only 30 of the more than 145 shops destroyed reportedly belonged to Sinhalese,⁴⁵ at least some of which were affected because they were adjacent to Muslim shops that were targeted. All accounts confirmed that some of the biggest Muslims businesses were systematically targeted; these included prominent businesses like Ajantha Hardware, the Aroma Rubber Factory and the IFFCO petrol station.

Narratives of police complicity in the attacks on the shops were a recurring theme. The owners of one of the biggest shops that was attacked and burnt said that the police had shot open the locks and claimed that he had found bullet casings inside the burnt remains of his shop. The ACJU report in fact quotes an eyewitness who claimed that it was in fact a police constable (badge number—3636) who had actually set fire to the shop. Though it is not clear at exactly what point, a curfew was eventually declared but that did not stop the violence, which only gradually subsided after the arrival of the Army.

⁴⁴ A report by the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama tabled in Parliament on 4th May 2001 counts the destruction of two mosques, 147 shops, 83 houses, 21 vehicles, two garments and one rubber factory and the IFFCO petrol filling station. The estimates of losses drawn up by Silva et al. is that 67 shops, 4 places of worship, 64 houses, 6 vehicles and 3 factories were destroyed or damaged.

⁴⁵ Report of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama on the violence in Mawanella, available on file.

3.3. Considering the Immediate Responses

The highest-level immediate political response seems to have been led by the then Minister for Ethnic Affairs, National Integration and Mineral Resources Development, Mr. Athauda Seneviratne, who happened to be close-by in Galagedara.⁴⁶ Other Muslim Members of Parliament who rushed to Mawanella included Mr. Rauf Hakeem, himself then a Cabinet Minister, and Mr. Alavi Moulana and Mr. A.M. Fowzie.⁴⁷ Ensuring the Army quelled the disturbances and held the 'peace' was the initial focus.

A Mawanella Peace Building Committee was set-up to survey and document the damage and help with relief efforts.⁴⁸ Mr. Fowzin who was actively involved in these efforts recalls offers of help pouring in, including from Sinhalese, but also recalled the extreme sense of insecurity that had gripped many like him: "I felt humiliated, felt left in the lurch, felt like I wanted to migrate", he said.

The OIC was transferred and according to Adv. Thamseel, seven Muslim and about 10-12 Sinhalese youth were arrested though others claimed that an equal number of both were arrested. The youth were charged with unlawful assembly, arson, and damaging property and religious places. But Thamseel noted that eventually due to lack of evidence, there was virtually an out of court settlement and everyone was discharged. He also said that the enquiry into the police firing exonerated the police, in fact "there was no challenge to the police version" he said.

Demands for compensation and also a Presidential Commission were made and acceded to by the government. Several people we spoke to in Mawanella, including those whose businesses had been burnt, noted that compensation was indeed paid but it has not been possible to ascertain specific details regarding such compensation and what harms were covered and to what extent. Though it was announced that a Presidential Commission would be established to go into the violence,⁴⁹ we have not yet found evidence that one was indeed appointed or that it completed its task.

The role of the Mawanella police, and in particular the Officer-in-Charge (OIC) Sriyantha Pieris, was the first to come under scrutiny. Several people we interviewed in Mawanella were unequivocal that the OIC was "communal minded"⁵⁰ and that the police had acted in a very biased manner. Some also said that the police were acting "under political influence". All of these allegations were also repeated in Parliament by Rauff Hakeem himself, a point we shall return to shortly.

⁴⁶ Hansard, 10th May 2001, column 3457

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with Mr. A.K.M. Fowzin

⁴⁹ See

http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/EditorialReviews/erev200105/20010511editorialreview.html#EDITORIAL.%20DAILY%20NEWS

⁵⁰ Interview with Dr. Gamage

The President however saw the incidents in Mawanella as a conspiracy to destabilize the People's Alliance government. Addressing the country on the 5th of May, she claimed, "The *small* incident that took place at Mawanella was transformed into a clash of major proportions due to the *presence of an organised group* behind it. [...] The Government soon received information of efforts being made in different parts of the country to promote clashes and create a situation of violence. [...] It is clear from an overall view of activity, to confirm that that there is a force to attempting to create instability in the country today" (emphasis added).⁵¹

The idea of an "organised group" being behind the violence was and remains a view widely shared by many, except not quite in the way President Bandaranaike intended. The "group" most people pointed at was that of parliamentarian Mr. Mahipala Herath, also from Kegalle, and then a Cabinet Minister in the People's Alliance government. In a fax to senior government officials on 2nd May itself, parliamentarian A.H.M. Azwer claimed that a "Minister's gang carrying arms (sic) going on rampage in town." He was much more forthright in a letter to the President dated 4th May, in which he claims that "a Cabinet Minister and other top PA leaders" spearheaded the violence, claiming also that a local Ceylon Transport Board Depot was used to stockpile weapons. Within Mawanella, there is widespread support for the idea of Herath's supporters being involved though some were careful to suggest that they may not have been acting under his direct orders or even with his explicit knowledge.

3.4 Situating the violence in Mawanella

The violence in Mawanella needs to be understood in the broader national as well as more local political economic context. In fact, Mawanella marked a peaking of the steady ratcheting up of anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence through the mid-to-late 1990s due to a number of different factors, some national and other more localized.

The emergence of SLMC and projections of Sinhala political economic insecurity:

The rise of the SLMC as a key player in a context of fragmented electoral mandates enabled its leaders to project power well in excess of the scale of their electoral footprint. For instance, the SLMC's seven seats in the 1994 general elections proved vital to enable President Bandaranaike's to get to the required half-way number in Parliament to form a People's Alliance government.⁵² This gave the SLMC and smaller minority parties "unprecedented bargaining power and influence", so much so that

⁵¹ *The Island* Editorial, 8 May 2001, available at <http://www.island.lk/2001/05/08/editoria.html>

⁵² See A tiring battle, *Frontline*, 26 March 2004, available at <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2106/stories/20040326004211600.htm>; SLMC: Liability on the Muslim community, Latheef Farook, *The Daily FT*, 23 Dec. 2014, available at <http://www.ft.lk/2014/12/23/slmc-liability-on-the-muslim-community/> and Rendering the SLMC inconsequential, *The Sunday Observer*, 30 Aug. 2015, available at <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2015/08/30/pol06.asp>

Ashraff publicly claimed that the “SLMC has emerged as the kingmaker and without its support the government could not be formed.”⁵³

The mid-to-late 1990s was marked by a projection of Muslim political power from the East (in the form of the SLMC) and the LTTE’s military power from the North. This contributed or was mobilised to further fuel Sinhala majoritarian and nationalist anxieties. For instance, the dominant theme at a major meeting in January 1999 to mark the first anniversary of the attack on the *Dalada Maligawa* was the lament that the Sinhala majority was being held hostage politically by the Muslims and militarily by the LTTE.⁵⁴ It is no surprise that this period witnessed a wave of attacks against Muslims mobilised and perpetrated by Sinhala extremists. Of particular significance was the anti-Muslim violence and arson in the nearby town of Galagedara (Kandy District) in early 1998 that saw Muslim businesses, rubber estates, vehicles and houses being attacked and set ablaze with the police being accused of turning a blind eye by none other than Rauff Hakeem.⁵⁵

The late 1990s also saw a rise and consolidation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist organisations that rallied around opposing the idea of devolution and peace talks with the LTTE. This included organisations such as the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), Sinhala Urumaya, Sinhala Veera Vidhanya (Sinhala Heroes’ Forum, SVV)—a predecessor of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala-Buddhist right-wing political party, and the United Sinhala Traders Association (USTA). Many of these organisations had the involvement or blessings of an increasingly militant and politicised Buddhist clergy, and soon targeted the Muslims.

The SVV and the USTA, in particular, represented organised attempts at promoting Sinhala economic interests. Their rise must be seen in the context of the open-economy reforms initiated by President Jayewardene’s UNP government in 1977 that precipitated competition for dominance in business among the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese bourgeoisie, (Ali 2014) which in an already heavily ethnicised political context invariably took on racial overtones.

Predictably the public discourse of organisations such as the SVV exploited and built on a much older trope of Muslims being shrewd traders who prospered through “Shylockian methods”. The portrayal of Sinhalese as an “economically weak race” went hand-in-hand with giving wind to myths that “Muslims are an inordinately wealthy

⁵³ See SLMC: Liability on the Muslim community, Latheef Farook, *The Daily FT*, 23 Dec. 2014, available at <http://www.ft.lk/2014/12/23/slmc-liability-on-the-muslim-community/>.

⁵⁴ Buddhist clergy lament, “Sinhala community faces annihilation due to power crazy leaders”, *The Island*, 28 January 1999.

⁵⁵ Hansard 7th April 1998, column 982.

group”.⁵⁶ For instance, in April 1998 the SVV issued a statement claiming that a “majority of Sinhalese in Sri Lanka live below the poverty line.”⁵⁷

Indeed, widening inequalities and decreasing state support in sectors like agriculture actually precipitated one of the key initiatives launched by the SVV—buying paddy from Sinhalese farmers for Sinhalese traders at prices higher than the government-determined price. This was described by a Sunday Observer report as “an insidious campaign of recruitment in the villages by purchasing rice at a slightly higher price from Sinhala farmers, provided they join the SVV and endorse its policies of racial exclusion.” Narratives regarding Sinhalese economic vulnerability that went hand in hand with those concerning their cultural and political vulnerability invariably rubbed up against narratives of Muslim political and economic dominance. This catalogue of grievances and anxieties set the context for rising tensions and eventual outbreak of attacks on Muslim businesses and capital in many parts of the country.

The political economic context of Mawanella: In light of the broader context outlined above we are now able to foreground the many different local dimensions that are relevant to understanding and situating the violence in Mawanella. Historically, given its strategic location as one of the gateways to the Kandyan kingdom or Up-Country and other areas further south, Mawanella has been an important hub of trade and exchange. Muslim settlements here date back to the Portuguese persecution of Muslim traders that forced them to move in from the coast. As is now well known, the Kandyan kingdom extended protection to the Muslim traders as well as medical practitioners.⁵⁸ Over time, sections of the Muslim trading community acquired significant wealth and influence as well as control over market and trading networks.

Muslim trading communities were concentrated along the main travel routes while the hinterland was largely Sinhalese. Unsurprisingly, Muslim traders dominated the large and profitable bazaar in Mawanella. Their economic dominance, at least in relations of exchange, over a largely poor rural Sinhala (and mostly Buddhist) hinterland, continuously reproduced older tropes of accumulation by deception that had already been given currency by Sinhala Buddhist leaders like Anagarika Dharmapala in the early 20th century.

The political dominance of Muslims in Mawanella went hand in hand with their economic and demographic strength. Officially designated a “town”—until the Pradeshiya Sabha Act (PSA) of 1987 revoked this status—Mawanella’s Town Council was for long dominated by Muslims. In fact the general weekly holiday for the bazaar

⁵⁶ The State and the Muslims, Iseth Hussain, *The Weekend Express*, Saturday, May 29 - Sunday, May 30, 1999

⁵⁷ “Majority Sinhalese living below poverty line”, *The Island*, April 11, 1998.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Lorna Devaraja (1994), *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony, 900-1915*, Lanka Islamic Foundation.

still remains Friday, a legacy of Muslim pre-eminence in the bazar. But after Mawanella was designated a Pradeshiya Sabha, the “town” itself was subsumed within the larger demographics of delimitation within a Divisional Secretariat division and counted just under a third of its overall population Muslim. When Adv. Thamseel, referring to this change of status under the PSA, said, “We lost our power,” he was echoing a widely shared sentiment among prominent Mawanella Muslims.

But even prior to this, there was evidence that Sinhala state functionaries were diverting a disproportionate share of public resources away from Muslim communities. For example, Dr. Gamage recalled that when he was first posted to Mawanella in the late 1970s, he found that all three public health centres were in Sinhala dominated areas while the more densely populated Muslim parts had no public health centre. Even at the time of the violence many we spoke to recalled that the police and the Divisional Secretariat staff were one hundred per cent Sinhalese and spoke about Muslims being treated unfairly or discriminated against.

In some senses the violence in Mawanella can be seen as directed toward a forced redistribution of the local market and economic resources by outright destruction of Muslim capital. As Mr. Fowzin, a professional from a local Mawanella Muslim family stated, the violence was an attack “on the economy of the Muslim society”. Silva et al. suggest that at the heart of the violence in Mawanella was the resentment of emerging Sinhala entrepreneurs towards the domination of Muslims in the Mawanella bazaar. (Silva et al. 2001) Therefore the violence against Muslim businesses not only in Mawanella but also elsewhere must be understood in the light of increasing ethnicisation of economic as much as political competition. (Silva et al. 2003) But also significant in this context is the role of the prelate of a prominent Buddhist temple in Keeraminiya. Many respondents noted the patronage and legitimacy extended by the monk to chauvinistic Sinhala Buddhist interests, including during the violence, but we could not interview the monk in question.

A crucial aspect of the violence in Mawanella, reprised elsewhere including in Aluthgama in 2014, was the “recruitment” or mobilisation of “outsiders” to actually perpetrate the violence. As Ziyad claimed, “Those who were from Mawanella did not really play a role—people from surrounding areas played a key role” in perpetrating the violence. While many of those interviewed referred to the violence as criminal acts, there was also an unmistakable conjoining of such criminality with class identity. Labels such as “gallery people”, “grassroot level”, “ignorant sections” or “lower class”, “thugs”, and “third grade” were used to describe those who perpetrated the violence. This underlines two important issues that are at the heart of the analysis of this paper itself. First, how those on the political economic margins are mobilised in pursuit of the agendas of the powerful. And second, a tendency to shy away from a closer examination of distributive injustices that open socio-political ruptures and fault-lines, both intra- and inter-ethnic.

Another key issue that emerged from our interviews in Mawanella was the growing social distance between Sinhalese and Muslims in the area. While Sinhalese and Muslims maintained close business and economic ties, social interactions had gradually ebbed. It was pointed out to us that while at one point a significant number of Muslims students attended the Mayurapada Central College, most members of the community gradually removed their children to Muslims schools that were steadily expanding. Apart from regular schools like Zahira and Baduriya, this phenomenon has now acquired a new dimension with the establishment of an elite residential “finishing” school in Mawanella for Muslim girls that seeks to provide them a comprehensive education on the understanding that a “good [presumably Muslim] mother can produce good citizens”.⁵⁹ Speaking with concern over some of these trends, Mr. Nivas noted the critical importance of “integrating” and “blending” with society and “understanding the majority” and ensuring that being different does not translate into distance.

There was also an element of self-critique with several individuals referring to the “lack of organisation”, “lack of leadership”, “group think” or “lack of intellectual guidance” as having hindered the Muslim community’s ability to grasp, negotiate, and respond effectively to threats in the early stages when violence was imminent. A “lack of experience of having faced violence” was also cited as a reason for what appears to be considered a less than adequately organised response. Some of our respondents maintained that the lack of people, i.e., sensitive leaders with influence in both communities who could control and contain the situation and responses as a major reason for the violence.

Early warning signs of violence: There were in fact many signs that trouble was brewing in Mawanella. The first, widely reported by all our respondents, and also echoed in the subsequent debate in Parliament, pertains to the sustained harassment and intimidation of Muslims in the period running up to the outbreak of violence. The most common form involved so-called “thugs”, Sinhalese by identity, demanding *kappam* or protection/extortion money from small and large Muslim businesses alike or refusing to pay for food and drink consumed—this latter was the proximate trigger for episodes of anti-Muslim violence in other places too.⁶⁰ Besides this, hurling abuse at Muslims, harassing Muslim women, forcibly taking away the caps worn by Muslim men and so on had reportedly become routine. Each act was effectively both a provocation and a challenge as well as a signal of power.

One of our informants offered the following analysis for this harassment. He stated that the proportional representation system introduced in the 1980s requires that each parliamentarian mobilize a large contingent of community level supporters to garner

⁵⁹ Interview with Adv. Thamseel in Mawanella.

⁶⁰ This has also been documented by the Movement for Inter Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) in its fact finding report on Pannala, Kurunegala. Available on file.

votes for him/herself in the electorate that now includes the entire district. Therefore these community level supporters have a large amount of power and the potential for abuse of that power is high. The thugs who were in the pay of such parliamentarians were seen as instrumental in causing the violence and tension in Mawanella. It is likely that the harassment was directed not just at Muslims but also at any persons who may be politically vulnerable as supporters of the UNP. It is on this basis that many claimed the thugs were not necessarily working on the instructions of the parliamentarian but were basking in the power that he wielded and in the fact that they would therefore be protected.

The report of the Mawanella Peace Building Committee, issued shortly after the violence, notes that the “long-standing excellent relationship” between Sinhalese and Muslims had been “fast changing for the past six or seven years”.⁶¹ This puts the turning point at 1994, the year the UNP ceded power at the centre to the SLFP-led People's Alliance after a 17-year spell in power. That the Muslim population in Mawanella, largely tilted towards the UNP or linked (in narrow essentialised terms) to an increasingly assertive SLMC, meant they became obvious targets of Sinhala nationalist elements who felt emboldened by the SLFP coming into power.

And not entirely unconnected to the above, is a second factor, namely the violence in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2000. A number of serious clashes between supporters of the PA and the opposition UNP attacks left 70 people dead across the country during the campaign.⁶² According to Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), Kegalle district saw 90 out of the 147 incidents of violence in the Sabaragamuwa province but the two electorates of Rambukkana and Aranayake, both adjoining Mawanella, were amongst the top twenty in the country in terms of recording a very high concentration of complaints of violence.⁶³

Furthermore, three Peoples' Alliance candidates from Kegalle—Mahipala Herath, Lalith Dissanayake, and H R Mithrapala—were amongst 23 candidates countrywide against whom there were two or more complaints each. The most number of complaints amongst the three were against Mahipala Herath—six, including hurt, assault, threat and intimidation.⁶⁴ That there was a heavy concentration of Muslims in Mawanella, traditionally UNP voters, surrounded by a rural Sinhala Buddhist hinterland that was increasingly leaning towards the People's Alliance, meant the latter were clear targets.

⁶¹ Roots of Ethnic Unrest in Mawanella, Mawanella Peace Building Committee, Page 1, Available on file.

⁶² See Asian Human Rights Commission (2001) Sri Lanka: Election Manifests Serious Crisis in Democratic Institutions available at <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AS-01-2000> and see also Sri Lanka: Constitution and politics at <http://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/sri-lanka/constitution-politics>.

⁶³ Election Related Violence – General Elections 2000 ^[1] report by Centre for Monitoring Election Violence, 9 October 2000.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Speaking of those responsible for the violence in May 2001, Parliamentarian Fowzie complains in his fax of 2nd May that this “same gang terrorized voters last elections” and calls for action to secure “illegal weapons”. Moreover, that these elements enjoyed a high degree of impunity is apparent from the fact that when Fouzul Ameer demanded that those who assaulted him be arrested, the policemen who rescued him reportedly said, “If we arrest them now they will be released in an hour.” In other words, not only was there already an infrastructure, both human and material, in a place that could easily be mobilised but those in control of this infrastructure also enjoyed relative impunity. In other words, the conditions were ripe for violence to flourish.

3.5 The Political Aftermath

At a national level, the violence in Mawanella had significant implications. In a debate in parliament on the issue, on 10th May 2001, Rauff Hakeem raised questions about the role of the police and the failures to anticipate and respond adequately. His criticism of the state further aggravated relations with the President that were already fragile following a split within the SLMC. Just over a month later, the SLMC quit the People’s Alliance and crossed over to the opposition when President Bandaranaike stripped Hakeem of his ministerial portfolios over suspicion that he and his party may vote against the government on a no-confidence motion brought by the opposition.⁶⁵

4. Conclusion

The political and economic geographies in relation to Sinhala-Muslim tensions underlying the episodes of anti-Muslim violence discussed in this paper merit closer attention. Puttalam, Galle and Mawanella must be understood not merely as randomly localised violence against Muslims but as reflective of competition over political economic spaces. Puttalam and Mawanella were small towns, and Galle in 1982 was a relatively small city, but in all three cases the focus of the destruction were Muslim properties, in particular shops in the bazaar and homes. The Puttalam bazaar did not witness destruction only because the police had effectively sealed the town, not only preventing Sinhalese mobs from entering the town but also preventing Muslims from leaving the town, including to protect their properties that lie outside the boundaries.

The bazaars in Galle, and Puttalam and Mawanella more generally, were intense concentrations of Muslim trading capital surrounded by a large Sinhalese hinterland. In both Puttalam and Mawanella there were also pockets of Muslim small to medium manufacturing or industrial capital and in the outskirts of Puttalam also estate capital, all of which employed Sinhalese as workers. But these were also markets relatively

⁶⁵ SLMC-NUA quit PA coalition, 21 June 2001, *The Island*, available at <http://www.island.lk/2001/06/21/news02.html>

narrow and small and Muslims had a far stronger foothold in it. An emergent local Sinhalese bourgeoisie seeking to expand its economic footprint, with tacit or overt state support, had the greatest incentive in the erosion and displacement of Muslim capital by violence rather than its defeat through market competition.

The contradictions in the economic relations between the local Muslim bourgeoisie and the Sinhalese working class provided a crucial locus of mobilisation and incitement. One way to understand the instances of anti-Muslim violence is to see it as being driven by the ethnicisation of the vertical conflict between working class poor Sinhalese and the Muslim bourgeoisie that simultaneously induces horizontal conflict on ethnic lines within the working class poor and vertical alignment between classes on the lines of ethno-religious identity.

Also central to the mobilisation of the Sinhalese working class and poor, was the alliance or alignment, most visible in Puttalam and Mawanella, between the Sinhalese bourgeoisie and the temple or the Buddhist clergy buttressed by local Sinhalese political interests who commanded “muscle power”. The involvement of the local Buddhist clergy was critical in both legitimising anti-Muslim sentiment as well as in providing a physical and spiritual/religious locus for such sentiment and its eventual translation into violence. Indeed, Buddhist temples, like any other socially embedded places of worship, thrive on the capital accumulated by local Sinhalese Buddhists and as such have a vested interest in its expansion.

The involvement of the clergy, or the appearance that they condoned such acts just by turning a blind-eye or not condemning it, is crucial. Firstly, it provided a particular sense of legitimacy by lending morality to anti-Muslim sentiment, especially when a monk led from the front as in the case of Puttalam. Secondly, it also facilitated an alignment across all sections of the local Sinhalese Buddhists, from those in institutions of state to local politicians and the bourgeoisie to the working class poor. To put it differently, the clergy’s involvement, even tacit, enabled the reproduction of a certain social and moral impunity for such acts that could be construed as safeguarding Sinhala Buddhist interests.

Galle underlines that patterns of political economic power aligned with caste is another factor to be considered. Speaking about the Sinhalese as a socially undifferentiated group would mask how internal contradictions may acquire ethnic overtones. The Vahumpura caste has a particular interest in displacing or containing Muslim capital in Galle and the mobilisation of a broader Sinhalese or Sinhala Buddhist identity to destroy Muslim capital advanced those interests. This has been noticed elsewhere too, for instance in looking into Sinhala-Muslim violence in Kalutara in 1995, (Bastin 2001) shows how Muslims buying land from the Berava caste was a key “provocation” for non-Berava Sinhalese (Bastin 2001).

The protection of Sinhalese if not Sinhala Buddhist interests was by the time of Puttalam already fairly well ingrained into political competition. The feature of the early to late 1970s was state patronage, including through nationalisation, resulting in redistribution in favour of the Sinhalese that resulted in the displacement or erosion of the economic power of the Muslim elite. Certain measures taken by the SLFP-Left United Front Coalition Government that came into power in 1970, especially the establishment of the State Trading Corporation, the State Gem Corporation, Cooperative Wholesale Establishment, and the enactment of the Paddy Lands Bill, “all disproportionately and adversely affected Muslim businessmen and landowners. A number of Muslim business premises and residences were raided by the police and tax officials for alleged tax avoidance and financial misdemeanours”(Ameer Ali 2014). State patronage was leveraged to favour Sinhalese, which was no match for patronage extended by Muslim politicians in power to members of their own community. Not only did this enable Sinhalese to gain greater footholds in trade and commerce but also sharpened economic competition along ethnic lines. In Puttalam for example, the land reforms and nationalisation of estates saw new Sinhalese settlements emerge, generating additional stresses and tensions in the ethnic fabric (Phadnis 1979).

Political competition or its structure too was changing. By 1970 the number of independent candidates, of whom Muslims formed the majority, dropped sharply in the face of a polarisation between the SLFP and the UNP, with which Muslims had a long history,⁶⁶ becoming the central dynamic of the political landscape. The struggle for Muslim votes in the 1970s was also seen to have material consequences due to Mahmood’s mobilising of the regional Muslim intelligentsia in support of the SLFP. The reordering of the structures of political competition and state power also shaped ethnic tensions. The introduction of a district level multi-member proportional representation system was intended to safeguard minority representation. In the decade of the 1990s it did so and made Muslim minority parties like the SLMC “kingmakers” but this only served to sharpen ethnic tensions. At one level Muslims who did not support the politics of the SLMC and maintained their traditional alliances with the larger national parties became invisible in popular understanding. At the same time, with floor crossing in parliament becoming a norm and the concentration of power in the Executive President, “the PR system helped ambitious Muslim politicians to achieve power. It provided little or no leverage to the minority Muslim community itself.” (Thaheer 2010, 115). Similarly, the shift to the Pradeshiya Sabha system that saw several towns like Mawanella, whose local governments were Muslim-dominated, being reduced to an electoral ward in a larger Pradeshiya Sabha also weakened Muslim influence in the area.

The sharpening electoral polarisations and an era of unprecedented state repression, through the police but also other non-state elements, as well as the war in the North and

⁶⁶ The Ceylon Muslim League and the All Ceylon Moors Association were part of the deliberations that led to the founding of the UNP. See Urmila Phadnis 1979

the second southern insurrection (1988-90) all contributed to shaping a culture of violence that also permeated politics and played on ethnic fault-lines. The ability to organise, deploy and activate a “local” infrastructure of violence became increasingly crucial. A qualification is warranted here because amongst the actual perpetrators were often a significant number of outsiders, i.e., those at a greater social remove drawn from nearby towns and villages. The narrative of “outsider” involvement is a recurring feature of riots and communal violence across South Asia. Nevertheless, in the cases in question it is hard to term those from nearby villages or the immediate hinterland as outsiders *stricto sensu* because they were very much within the web of economic relations of the respective bazars.

But as is evident from the case of Mawanella and the electoral violence that preceded it, the infrastructure of violence was not necessarily purpose built i.e., to target Muslims, though it was definitely purposefully directed. The violence in all three locations was systematic and has since been reprised in other places—Muslims shops were attacked, their inventories looted or destroyed, and the shops burnt. Indeed, July 1982 in Galle would be reprised on a much grander scale exactly a year later in Colombo but with Tamils as the targets. The post-curfew violence and destruction witnessed in Mawanella and in Galle also came to be enduring patterns.

This leads us to the final crucial factor in understanding anti-Muslim violence in the context of Sinhala-Muslim tensions—the highly politicised and prejudiced nature of law enforcement and policing. Time after time policing and law enforcement failed or simply refused to protect Muslims and their property from attacks by Sinhalese mobs or even provoked the violence. Notwithstanding repeated demands, including in Parliament, there was little by way of credible investigation into the role of law enforcement agencies and no one was held to account for the violence in all Puttalam, Galle and Mawanella. For instance, a magisterial inquest had held that the police firing into the Puttalam mosque was justified, and as late as August 1982, five years after his own government assumed power, Mr. Naina Marikar admitted in Parliament that no further inquiry had been set up to investigate that incident and the violence. The near total lack of or very low numbers of persons from the minority communities holding key office in police and law enforcement at the district and national levels further catalysed and emboldened people to resort to violence and reproduced legal impunity.

However, generalised patterns can hide crucial local differences. Galle was clearly different in some crucial respects, for example, we could not find, as far as our research went, evidence of involvement of any Buddhist monks. While narratives of personal animosity spiralling out of control and evidence of violence perpetrated by Muslim criminal elements do present themselves, there also appears to be evidence of instigation (Scott Jr. 1989).

However, what is crucial from all of the above narratives, is also the larger picture in which the ethnic riot emerges as a primary modality through which various elements of the state and the Sinhala Buddhist polity ally to generate a specific form of relationship with the minorities. Indeed, the violence in Puttalam in 1976 was soon followed a year later by widespread violence against Tamils in 1977. Galle in July 1982 needs to be seen in relation to what happened against Tamils in Colombo almost exactly a year later. Apart from the modalities of violence—mobilising sections of the working class Sinhalese poor, planned and systematic destruction of economic capital and properties, collusion of the police, etc.— the infrastructures of violence such as those relating to enforcing electoral dominance or even thuggery, are malleable to achieve a state of “riot”. Finally, the “riot” as an ethnic frame often masks its political economic foundations and character.

Towards Recovering Histories of Anti-Muslim Violence in the Context of Sinhala–Muslim Tensions in Sri Lanka

This research paper explores three incidents of Anti Muslim violence in Sri Lanka- Puttalam in 1976, Galle in 1982 and Mawanella in 2001. This paper intends to cast light on anti-Muslim violence over the past three to four decades outside of the north and east, episodes that have been masked, lost or suppressed in the commonly narrated recent histories of political and religious violence in Sri Lanka. The history of violence against Muslims during this period is overshadowed by the armed conflict and extreme polarization precipitated by Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms. The incidents recorded are often limited to those in the north and east. It is necessary that the post-war resurgence in anti-Muslim hostility is historicized and placed within the wider sweep of anti-Muslim hostility within Sri Lanka over the past few decades. The distinct experience of political and ethnic violence experienced by the Muslims in the context of Sinhala-Muslim tensions requires greater empirical attention and theorizing than it has received. This paper is posited as a step towards addressing this lacuna. This research is also motivated by the possibility that a deeper understanding of the temporal, spatial, political economic and social dynamics of anti-Muslim violence can illuminate the broader conditions that generate and reproduce communal violence more generally.

Vijay Nagaraj passed away in August 2017. Before his tragic and untimely death Vijay was the Head of Research at the Law and Society Trust.

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