

ETHNICITY, MULTICULTURALISM AND VIOLENCE AMONG THE URBAN POOR IN SRI LANKA*

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The urban poor, the slum and shanty dwellers in Colombo and provincial cities in particular, have often been implicated in recent waves of civil disturbances in Sri Lanka including ethnic riots and political violence [1]. The services rendered by the gang leaders in the so called "underworld" for some political leaders in their campaigns to intimidate or even eliminate their competitors have come into sharp focus in mass media and in popular journalistic accounts of violence in Sri Lanka (e.g. Horatius 1993). Similarly the widespread participation of sections of the urban poor in the July 1983 riots, typically as mobs and armed gangs incited or even led by communally-minded national-level politicians has been highlighted in several social science accounts that will be briefly examined in this essay. These accounts however have omitted to consider a more permanent and at the same time a paradoxical feature of the society and culture of the watta-dwellers, a term applied to all categories of urban poor in Sri Lanka [2], namely the ethnic diversity and cultural heterogeneity of the communities in which they live and the peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups within the boundaries of slums and shanty communities (*wattas*) over a long period of time despite the intense competition for scarce resources that is intrinsic to living in these impoverished neighbourhoods characterized by lack of basic amenities, overcrowding and lack of bargaining power *vis-a-vis* other categories of urban residents.

Using data from a UNICEF funded study of four urban low income communities distributed in three cities in Sri Lanka, namely Colombo, Kandy and Negombo carried out in 1984, i.e. some 6 months after the 1983 riots, this paper examines the nature of their participation in the '83 riots taking into consideration some of the lasting features of their society and culture including ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism. Without losing sight of the facts that there were other actors besides the watta-dwellers in the nationwide July '83 riots and that the violence of the watta-dwellers can take other forms such as gang violence, we still need to understand the role they played in these nationwide ethnic riots and the factors accounting for their participation.

Following Gibson (1976) and Gollnick and Chinn (1986), multiculturalism is understood here as a set of ideas, policies and principles favourable to the development of a plurality of cultures that promote tolerance and mutual respect and a free flow of ideas and practices across cultures in ways that enrich them all without necessarily undermining each other. In this sense multiculturalism can be contrasted to "ethnocentrism" which holds that ones own culture is by definition superior to others as well as its political expression "ethnonationalism".

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The relative significance of class and ethnicity as competing factors in a person's identity formation varies according to circumstances. Hechter (1978), for instance, argued that in the United States the pattern is one where the lower the class position the greater the significance of one's ethnic or racial identity. According to this theory, the black doctors in the United States consider themselves doctors first and blacks second while the opposite holds true for the black unemployed. If we extend this argument to Sri Lanka one may expect a stronger ethnic identity among the watta-dwellers compared to the more affluent in the city for whom class identity may be more significant in their conception of self as well as in their day-to-day social relations. The participation of the urban poor in the riots of 1983 in turn may be seen as a manifestation of a stronger ethnic consciousness. The reality however is more complex and, as will be elaborated in this essay, the ethnic sentiments of the urban poor are aroused not so much due to factors internal to their communities or due to any long-term preoccupation with or any primordial attachment to an ethnic identity as due to pressures and cultural impositions from the higher orders in society including influences of the state. Any ethnic polarization currently taking place in the watta communities in response to prevailing national trends and processes must be set against the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment within which these communities have evolved.

Political Violence in Sri Lanka and the Role of the "Underworld" *(Pathalalokaya)*

In recent accounts of violence in Sri Lanka many authors have explicitly or implicitly referred to the role played by the urban poor as evident in the following quotes.

In the urban places and market towns, an increasing mass of largely **rootless and marginally-employed transient population** has congregated in slums and bazaars, constituting a ready pool to be mobilized for instant pay-offs (Tambiah 1986:52) [emphasis added].

Here it must be admitted that the data are few, but it seems that those mostly involved in the attacks on Tamils were the **relatively rootless urban proletariat and semi-proletariat** of Colombo (Nissan & Stirrat 1987: 23) [emphasis added].

Sinhalese gangs made up largely of **impoverished and unemployed youth (rastiyadu karayo, "aimless troublemakers")** attacked Tamils in their houses and shops, settling old scores and looting...The violence as turned inward among neighbours as well as outward to people known only as Tamil. Furthermore, the active rioters, looters and killers were most often from the **subordinated classes** within the political and economic order. They turned upon themselves, human beings subject to the same conditions of life, as well as upon those more politically and economically powerful (Kapferer 1988: 101-102) [emphasis added].

Practically all civil disturbances- post-election riots (endemic after the 1960s) and race riots-have occurred primarily in these **lumpen colonization schemes**, in the **anomic market towns** and in Colombo....One of the features of the politics of Sri Lanka since the 1960s is the use made by politicians of all parties of these **dissatisfied urban people** (Obeyesekere 1984: 159) [emphasis added].

In accounting for the increased aggressiveness manifested among sections of the urban poor, these authors have pointed to four sets of factors as discussed below.

First, increased class polarization and a related sense of relative deprivation among the urban poor particularly as an outcome of economic liberalization started in 1977.

Second, in these violent events the urban poor operate not so much as an independent force as mobs employed by rival politicians or rival businessmen.

Third, having moved from the orderly village society to the disorganized city the urban poor experience a rootlessness and a corresponding loss of identity which in turn make them look for an alternative identity in the form of a heightened ethnic consciousness.

Fourth, ethnic consciousness tends to submerge class consciousness making the subordinate classes as Kapferer puts it "turn upon themselves".

These explanations point to the need to examine the issues of ethnicity, ethnic relations and violence among the urban poor in Sri Lanka more closely. Most of these explanations utilize untested and, to some extent, pejorative assumptions like "rootlessness", "anomie" and "hopelessness" in accounting for the violence of the urban poor. In focusing exclusively or largely on the role of the urban poor in ethnic riots not only do they under-emphasize the macro processes contributing to ethnic polarization but also fail to address the issue of ethnic and cultural diversity among the urban poor and its effects on their ethnic identity and consciousness. While to some extent recognizing the role of the urban elite, there is also a tendency in some of these studies to attribute too much responsibility for violent eruptions in society as a whole to the individuals and groups considered marginal to the mainstream society.

The Setting and Methodology

The data reported here were obtained through intensive field research in four selected urban low-income communities in Sri Lanka. Detailed ethnographic research was conducted in two communities in Colombo, one in Kandy and one in Negombo (For details see Silva and Athukorala 1991). The four communities studied were Jude Mawatha and Swarna Mawatha in Colombo, Soyza Lane in Kandy (prior to its relocation in another part of the city in 1986) and Kamachchode in Negombo (see Table 1) [3]. The first and third communities were inner-city slums while the second was a shanty community. The fourth

community, Kamachchode, had a mixed character as it consisted of more or less equal numbers of slum and shanty type dwelling units.

Table 1: Basic information about the study communities

City	Community	Type	Population
Colombo	Jude Mawatha	Slum	302
Colombo	Swarna Mawatha	Shanty	275
Kandy	Soyza Lane	Slum	195
Negombo	Kamachchode	Mixed	554
Mean Population			332

The communities studied were purposively chosen with operational considerations mainly influencing their choice. An effort was made to include a range of urban low-income communities distributed in Sri Lankan cities of varied sizes. Under the supervision of the Principal Investigators (PIs), a trained male sociology graduate conducted ethnographic field research in each of the four communities studied for a period of six to nine months from 1983 to 1984. They recorded in field notebooks their daily observations concerning various aspects of community life. The two PIs monitored the data collection procedure by reading the relevant entries in the field notebooks every fortnight and instructing the field assistants as to what they should look for in the weeks ahead.

The qualitative data obtained through the above procedure was supplemented by the administration of a 22-paged structured questionnaire covering a variety of topics, including migration history, basic household data, employment, income and expenditure, health, community organization, literacy, recreational activities and attitudes. This household census covered all households willing to respond to the questionnaire in each community. Finally, informal discussions were held with the staff of the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA), relevant community leaders and municipal administrators in each city included in this study.

The Ethnic Composition in the Wattas

The ethnic composition in the communities studied is given in Table 2. Apart from Soyza Lane, all other communities have a sizable number of households belonging to ethnic minorities. Even in Soyza Lane the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist population have intermingled heavily with the Muslims in some neighbouring communities. While the sample communities may not be fully representative of the slum and shanty population at large with regard to ethnic composition, there appears to be a tendency towards over-representation of certain minority groups among the urban poor in all three cities included in the study.

A comparative analysis of the ethnic composition in Sri Lanka as a whole, in the Colombo city and in the study communities is given in Table 2. The Sinhalese representation in these communities is comparable to that in the country as a whole. However, relative to the Colombo city there is a higher proportion of Sinhalese in the study communities. There are much fewer Sri Lanka Tamils in the watta communities studied as compared to Colombo city and Sri Lanka as a whole. While Sri Lanka Tamils account for as much as 22 percent of the Colombo city population, their presence in all four communities studied is only four percent. Thus the findings of the present study suggest that the Sri Lanka Tamils may be considerably under-represented among the urban poor in urban areas outside of the Northern and Eastern provinces [4].

Table 2: Percentage distribution of population according to ethnicity: Sri Lanka, Colombo city and study communities

Ethnic Group	1981 Sri Lanka	1981 Colombo City	1983/84 Study Communities				
			JM	SM	SL	KM	Total
Sinhalese	74.0	50.1	79.5	51.0	91.0	71.1	70.2
S.L. Tamil	12.7	22.2	14.5	0	3.0	1.2	4.3
Indian Tamil	5.5	1.9	2.0	49.0	3.0	0	13.0
Muslim	7.1	23.4	4.0	0	3.0	26.5	12.0
Other	0.8	2.4	0	0	0	1.2	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	14,847,000	585,776	302	275	195	554	1,326

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JM = Jude Mawatha

SM = Swarna Mawatha

SL = Soyza Lane

KM = Kamachchode

In contrast, the Indian Tamil population in Colombo and other cities tend to be largely concentrated in selected slum and shanty communities. In addition to certain categories of urban workers of Indian origin present especially in certain inner-city slum areas from the colonial era (for details see Jayawardena 1972), in more recent times certain shanty communities in Colombo appear to have received a considerable inflow of Indian Tamils from the plantation areas. For instance, the bulk of the more recent migrants in Swarna Mawatha, constituting nearly a half of the total population in the community in 1983, were Indian Tamils originating from the plantation areas.

There is a significant Muslim population including Malays in inner-city slums in both Colombo and Kandy (Ariyaratne 1979) [4]. While there is a higher Muslim representation in the study population compared to the country as a whole, relative to their presence in the city population, the Muslims are under-represented in the study communities. Some important characteristics in relation to the ethnic composition of the four study communities are as follows.

1. Each of the study communities is multi-ethnic in composition. With the exception of the Sri Lanka Tamils, the minority ethnic groups are present in significant numbers in most of these communities. Given the limitation of space and overcrowdedness in these communities it is necessary that people of different ethnic groups maintain close physical contact. Given the significant presence of ethnic minorities in these communities, it is difficult to imagine that the majority ethnic group can totally dominate the affairs in these communities.

2. It is significant that the Sri Lanka Tamils, whose grievances are represented by the Tamil liberation movement in the North, are poorly represented among the urban poor in the major urban centres in the South. This has made it difficult for any significant sector of the urban poor to identify themselves in ethnic or class terms with the separatist movement in the North. At the same time during waves of ethnic riots this has made it possible for the urban poor to view the Sri Lanka Tamil residents in the respective cities as an exclusive and privileged urban elite ethnically unconnected or even unconcerned with the poor and the underprivileged. Although the importance of this factor should not be overemphasized, it can be seen as a background factor in events such as the July 1983 riots where the hostilities of the urban poor were directed against selected targets in the cities.

3. For a variety of reasons that will be described in the later sections of this essay, the ethnic identity within the watta communities tends to be weak relative to the society at large. A notion of a pure ethnic identity becomes untenable due to a relatively higher prevalence of mixed marriages as well as due to the openness and syncretic nature of watta culture to be discussed later in the essay. Despite their multi-ethnic heritage the wattas have been affected by ethnic polarization currently occurring in Sri Lanka as a whole.

Watta as a Community

Each watta is a named entity with clear physical boundaries. The inhabitants of a watta have a sense of belonging to a community operating over and above their respective households. The term "watta" is often used in describing their place of residence, e.g., *ape watta* (our neighbourhood), *eha watta* (adjoining neighbourhood). The fellow residents in a watta have a core of common interests including the use and maintenance of common amenities like communal latrines, shared water taps etc. There may also be some illegal or unauthorized operations like forcible occupation of crown land, drug peddling, prostitution or gambling where a significant number of people in the community may have a common interest in protecting themselves against law enforcement agencies.

Often there are factional conflicts and gang rivalries within and between the wattas but such conflicts rarely take ethnic or class lines.

Even though ethnic differences among the watta-dwellers are clearly recognized and ethnic ties with existing inhabitants in the wattas may be an important channel through which new migrants move into the watta communities as demonstrated by the Indian Tamils in Swarna Mawatha, group activities within the wattas rarely centre around ethnicity. While some of the country's minority ethnic groups may be present in large numbers in some of the wattas, residential segregation by ethnicity is rare. Of the four communities studied only the Muslims in Kamachchode showed some tendency towards residential segregation. People of different ethnic backgrounds often live side by side and under normal circumstances ethnicity does not serve as a barrier in social relations. Inter-ethnic marriages appeared to be quite common, particularly in the inner city slums of Soyza Lane and Jude Mawatha. In Soyza Lane an unknown number of Muslim youths of outside origin were reported to be living in Sinhala households as boarders. The gangs, an important social institution in the wattas and with which organized violence in the wattas was typically associated, were often multi-ethnic in composition.

This is, however, not to say that ethnic relations within the wattas were always smooth and egalitarian. For instance, in Swarna Mawatha, the oldest inhabitants who were Sinhalese unofficially owned most of the shanty houses and they preferred to rent them to Indian Tamil new comers in the neighbourhood as the latter were considered to be less demanding and less threatening as tenants. A Sinhalese woman named "Achchi" (grand mother) who owned a number of shanty units often openly abused these Indian Tamil tenants for being untidy and unhygienic especially in their use of public latrines. These Indian Tamil tenants resented these accusations but they were scared to argue with this old woman in fear of being evicted from their houses. Some Indian Tamil inhabitants of Swarna Mawatha reported to the research team that they were also abused by some of their Sinhala neighbours especially when the latter were under the influence of alcohol. Similarly two non-Sinhalese families in Soyza Lane felt that their grievances were not properly conveyed to visiting state officials by the community leaders who were Sinhalese.

These examples indicate that the ethnic minorities within the watta communities too may have some unresolved grievances in their relations with the majority ethnic group. These grievances however are only a minor part of the total grievances among the urban poor that arise from their multiple difficulties in life. The ethnic minorities within the wattas are in no sense "poorest of the poor" as their economic opportunities at the level of the wattas do not appear to be determined by ethnicity. The watta communities also have some capacity to resolve their internal conflicts including any potential ethnic confrontations among the fellow watta-dwellers through informal mechanisms like mediation by community leaders.

Multiculturalism in Watta Society

Depending on the ethnic composition in the wattas the watta subcultures were constantly enriched by frequent contact between different ethnic groups. In terms of cultural give and take across conventional ethnic divisions, the watta-dwellers can be described as one of the most multi-cultural of all sections of Sri Lankan society. The tendency towards multiculturalism, in the sense of evolving a pluralistic culture accommodating diverse ethnic groups, were particularly manifested in their language, religion and recreational activities.

As regards their spoken language many watta-dwellers were found to be bilingual, i.e. able to speak and understand both Sinhala and Tamil, a linguistic facility that is rare in the population at large in Sri Lanka. To some extent, Tamil may be seen as the lingua franca of the watta-dwellers in inner-city areas where there are heavy concentrations of Tamils and Muslims. Even in Soyza Lane, where a bulk of the people are Sinhalese, certain categories of workers, like load carriers (*natami*) and pavement hawkers, are essentially bilingual at work. While a vast majority of the non-Sinhalese in the four study communities do speak Sinhala besides Tamil, which is their mother tongue, many of the Sinhalese watta-dwellers too have acquired at least a smattering of Tamil. In this regard a special circumstance prevails in Kamachchode due to the fact that the Sinhalese in this area traditionally speak Tamil as a home language. The Sinhalese spoken in these communities has a number of special features. The frequent occurrence of words borrowed from Tamil and English languages is one such feature. As described elsewhere (Silva 1987, Silva & Athukorala 1991) Tamil words like "dorai", "natami", "kachal" and "tongale" and English words like "robbery", "scene", and "bomb" frequently occur in the Sinhalese spoken by the watta-dwellers.

All four watta communities studied were not only multi-ethnic but also multi-religious in composition. In contrast to Sri Lanka as a whole, Catholicism is the leading religion in some of the watta communities (see Table 3). While admitting that our sample may be considerably biased in respect of religious composition due to the inclusion of two predominantly Catholic communities (i.e. Jude Mawatha in Colombo and Kamachchode in Negombo), it is nevertheless true that a significant part of the western coastal belt, where there is a heavy concentration of the urban poor, is predominantly Catholic. Even though the watta-dwellers have distinctive religious identities as Buddhists, Catholics and so on, the religion practised by many of them is essentially syncretic. Buddhists seeking the blessings of Hindu or Catholic shrines and vice versa are quite common. Irrespective of their religious denominations, almost all households in a community participate in the major religious festivals celebrated communally, such as the celebration of the patron saints in Kamachchode, and the Wesak celebrations in Swarna Mawatha. Similarly, many of the Buddhist youths in Jude Mawatha join their Catholic friends in the annual pilgrimage to the Catholic shrine of Thalawila.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of population according to religion: Sri Lanka, Colombo and the study communities.

Religion	Sri Lanka 1981	Colombo 1981	Study Communities (1883/84)				
			JM	SM	SL	KM	All
Buddhist	69.3	43.0	34.1	49.5	91.0	2.4	34.1
Hindu	15.5	16.8	9.8	31.6	6.0	1.2	11.1
Muslim	7.6	24.3	4.9	0	3.0	27.7	12.5
Catholic	6.8	12.9	48.8	13.4	0	68.7	40.4
Christian	0.7	2.5	2.4	5.5	0	0	1.9
Other	0.1	0.6	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	14,847,000	585,776	302	275	195	554	1,326

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In a tragic accident a Hindu boy in Swarna Mawatha sustained severe spinal injuries when he fell off a tree while picking flowers to be used in a Wesak celebration in the community.

Religious beliefs too have a syncretic character. For instance, according to local beliefs, the patron saint of the Wella Vidiya Church near Kamachchode, i.e., St. Sebastian, originated as a Hindu god, a belief that is in keeping with the fact that the local Sinhalese are Tamil speaking. In Kamachchode there is a St. Sebastian Alms Giving Society (Santa Sebastian Dana Samithiya), which provides alms to the destitute in the city on St. Sebastian day as well as on Wesak day. Many of the beliefs and practices relating to spirit possession, sorcery, charms, astrology etc. are held in common by those of different religious denominations (Kapferer 1983). The Buddhist practices in the wattas are dominated by aspects of devotional religion (*bakti*) and deity cults heavily influenced by popular Hinduism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988).

The watta-dwellers attach a great deal of importance to competitive sports (football in particular), music, films and other forms of recreation. Film-going is unusually popular especially among the youths. Often the watta communities

are situated in close proximity to cinema halls. For instance, there are as many as five cinema halls situated within easy reach of Swarna Mawatha. In addition to regular cinema halls, there are unauthorized video parlours showing video films especially appealing to the urban poor in and around many of the wattas. Irrespective of their ethnic background the watta residents displayed a distinct preference for Tamil and Hindi films. Both local cinema and video theatres knowingly or unknowingly cater to this special demand from the urban poor. As far as the watta-dwellers are concerned the desired ingredients of a film are fights, comedy, love, music, dance and the eventual victory of the movie idol's battle against social injustice. The best loved movie idols included M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), Rajani Kanth and Kamala Hasan, all of whom are cast in the roles of heroes representing the poor and the underprivileged. The following films popular in the communities studied at the time of the survey interestingly had themes directly relevant to the urban poor.

1. Mettu Rajah (The King of the Slum)
2. Pokkiri Rajah (The Homeless Hero)
3. Guru (a film where karate is used as a weapon against social injustice)

The films popular among the urban poor not only project their images and world view, but also influence their behaviour, attitudes and the social values. For a while it was fashionable among the youths in one community to wear long sleeve batik shirts in accordance with what they called "Rajani Style" in keeping with the actor. An old Sinhalese woman in Swarna Mawatha reported that she learned to speak and understand Tamil partly through the many Tamil films she saw throughout her life.

In summary, the multiculturalism of the urban poor has the following features. First, some key aspects of culture like language and religion do not serve to demarcate or even antagonize ethnic groups to the extent this is the case in the larger society. Second, the watta-dwellers have developed a core of common culture facilitating essentially harmonious interaction between ethnic groups. Third, instead of a unilateral tendency towards a hegemonic cultural imposition by the majority (i.e the Sinhala-Buddhists) on the minorities, the majority and minority cultures tend to interact freely within the boundaries of the wattas, giving rise to such healthy cultural attributes like Sinhala-Tamil bilingualism, bhakti religiosity inspired by certain popular Hindu cults and identification with extra-ethnic film heroes.

If the watta-dwellers are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural as described so far in this essay how do we explain their participation in the July '83 riots where heightened ethnic sentiments on the part of the majority ethnic group supposedly turned against a section of the minority ethnic groups.

The Watta-dwellers and the Riots of July 1983

All four watta communities studied included certain social elements that had directly participated in street violence and looting during this nationwide outbreak of ethnic riots. At the time of fieldwork (early 1984), certain people from these communities were serving prison sentences for offences committed during July 1983. There were others who had been taken into police custody on suspicion of involvement in the above riots and later released due to lack of evidence against them or pressure from local politicians.

While the urban riots of July 1983 were a part of a nationwide outbreak of ethnic violence, to a considerable extent, they also manifested growing contradictions within the urban society. The watta-dwellers, now comprising a bulk of the population in Colombo and other cities, appear to have been in the forefront of these riots. To a large extent, the urban riots of July 1983 may be seen as an occasion where the gang activities of the watta-dwellers spread over most cities in Sri Lanka. Given the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural background of the urban poor themselves described in the preceding sections of this essay, their participation in the riots cannot be seen as a manifestation of a deep seated ethnic prejudice generated from within the watta communities. While their feelings of anger and discontent in a context of growing class polarization contributed to these riots, the fact that it took an ethnic rather than a class direction had more to do with the nature of nationalist politics of the ruling elite which affected the watta populations diverting and thereby dissipating their social discontent.

The fact that some gang leaders in the wattas had direct personal influence with some powerful politicians of the ruling party meant that ironically some of the watta-dwellers at least had a sense of identity with the state and a stake in preserving the status quo. The riots were triggered by the massacre of thirteen soldiers by the Tamil guerrillas in the North. In a way it was ironical that the urban poor, who often became victims of the security forces themselves, would be agitated by the massacre of some Sinhalese soldiers by a group of rebels who were in some ways challenging the status quo. Considering that the urban poor so often identified themselves with film idols representing the poor and underprivileged and who are characteristically on the wrong side of the law, it is difficult to understand how in this instance they were agitated by a violent attack on the law enforcement machinery. It shows that riots were triggered primarily by events and ideas external to the wattas.

The watta gang leaders and their followers took to the streets and attacked Tamil-owned business establishments along the streets and Tamil homes mostly in high-income areas. Looting appears to have been a primary motive of their attacks. The gangs from each watta tended to attack Tamil homes some distances away from their neighbourhoods, so that they could not be identified by the victims. The concealed nature of the watta neighbourhoods and at the same time their proximity to high-income neighbourhoods appear to have facilitated the activities of the looters. During the riots gossip, rumours and information quickly spread among the rioters through the informal communication networks linking various watta communities in each city.

One important but hitherto neglected aspect of these riots was the attitude of the rioters towards their fellow watta-dwellers who were Tamils. The view that during these riots the watta-dwellers turned against themselves along ethnic lines is simply not supported by our data (cf. Kapferer 1988). There were no attacks whatsoever on the Tamil watta-dwellers in any of the four communities studied. On the contrary, the rioters came forward to give protection to the fellow watta-dwellers who were Tamils where the latter were under some kind of threat from those in surrounding communities. The riots were unrelated to, and had no effect on any of the inter-ethnic skirmishes that erupted in the watta communities from time to time. During the period of ethnic violence, many outside friends and relatives of the Tamil watta-dwellers came to stay with the latter, using the watta as a place of refuge [5]. In contrast, only one Tamil family in all four communities studied, sought outside refuge during the riots.

Another important feature was that the rioters from the watta communities themselves were not ethnically homogeneous. Apart from the Sinhalese, some segments of ethnic minorities, including a few Tamil youths from the wattas, took part in the attack on the rich Tamils. Given the fact that the gangs within the watta communities were often multi-ethnic in composition, the ethnic heterogeneity among the rioters was not surprising. Moreover, during the riots there was some degree of class tension expressed independently of ethnic sentiments. For instance, those in Swarna Mawatha made use of this opportunity to threaten one of their enemies, a Sinhalese, in a nearby high-income neighbourhood. There were also certain gang leaders in Kamachchode and Soyza Lane who were Sinhalese and who gave protection to some of the Tamil shops in the respective towns, supposedly after receiving protection money from the proprietors concerned.

The mobs expected that the security forces would turn a blind eye towards the rioters in view of their expected resentment over the massacre of fellow officers in the North and this indeed turned out to be the case initially. However, as the riots progressed towards a general break down of law and order the security forces were belatedly mobilized against the rioters. Contrary to the expectations of the watta-dwellers, following the riots there were numerous police raids on the watta neighbourhoods. There was a thorough search for looted goods and where suspected items were found arrests were made. Much to the dismay of the watta-dwellers, the July 1983 riots led to a sharp increase in police vigilance over the wattas.

Some of the existing explanations about the July 1983 riots need to be questioned or at least modified in the light of our findings. The theory that the riots proceeded from a well planned plot hatched by communally-minded politicians in the ruling government to destabilize Tamils in Colombo and other cities (e.g. Tambiah 1986) may have some validity in the sense of pointing to the role of the state in transforming a conflict between the state and militant rebels in the North into an ethnic conflict between groups of civilians. However, the present study found that the riots of July 1983 were considerably more spontaneous in character than is assumed in this theory. Moreover, these riots cannot

be explained in ethnic terms alone as discovered in the present study. We found that the riots manifested a considerable overlap of ethnic and class tensions. To the extent a militant ethnic consciousness among the urban poor came into play during these riots such a consciousness evolved in response to the influences of the larger society rather than from within the watta communities as implicit in many of the explanations of these riots. The relevant influences of the larger society included propaganda of the party machines, mass media and other organs of the state, education provided by ethnically segregated schools which have often evolved in impoverished urban neighbourhoods, new religious movements with an ethno-nationalist orientation as well as widely-circulating rumours.

Conclusion

It is clear that the urban poor do play a role in different forms of violence in contemporary Sri Lanka. As regards their widely acknowledged participation in the July 1983 riots, a closer examination of the composition and culture of the urban poor revealed that a militant form of ethnicity supposed to have given rise to these riots does not exist as a lasting feature among the urban poor. On the contrary, their communities provide important lessons for multiculturalism as a means of accommodating cultural diversity within congested urban space. Any militant ethnic consciousness expressed by the urban poor during the 1983 July riots was of external origin and was introduced in opposition to the dominant multi-cultural tendency in the wattas. The social discontent manifested by the urban poor particularly at a time of growing class differentiation within urban society, however, needs careful attention in social policy in Sri Lanka. In so far as the violence of the urban poor stem from their sense of relative deprivation generated in the last analysis by market forces, it perhaps represents the dark side of liberal economic policies.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was read in a workshop on national integration held in NARESA, Colombo in April 1994. The author wishes to thank UNICEF which funded this research and Mr. K. Athukorala, Mr. M.G.M. Razaak, Mr. I. Munasinghe, Mr. P. Galappaththi and Mr. G. Wickramasinghe who comprised the rest of the research team involved in this study. The views expressed in this essay are, however, entirely the responsibility of the author.
2. The term "watta" is used by the urban poor themselves to identify their neighbourhoods as distinct from upper income neighbourhoods. Sometimes the term "watta" appears in the relevant place names themselves. e.g. Keselwatta, Maligawatta, Asnarge watta.
3. Contrary to the standard ethnographic practice, the actual names of the communities studied are used in this essay. The communities are identified in their actual names so as to facilitate follow up research and any future interventions.

4. A sample survey of 660 slum and shanty households selected randomly from 27 locations in Colombo city gives the following ethnic breakdown: Sinhalese (54%), Tamil (20%), Muslims (25%), others (1%). Unfortunately this study does not distinguish between Sri Lanka Tamils and Indian Tamils. For further information regarding ethnic composition in selected slum and shanty locations see Chapters 4 to 7 in *Marga* (1979 b). For a discussion on the geographical distribution and the economic role of various ethnic groups in Colombo city see *Marga* (1979 a).

5. Similarly Ariyaratna (1979) reported of an influx of Muslims into the slum areas of Aluthkade and Masangasvidiya during the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots.

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