

## Pirapaharan 2, Chapter 6: Indira's Telephone Call

By: T. Sabaratnam

(from Volume 2)

### Tamil Nadu Erupts

Tamil Nadu erupted in anger on Tuesday, 26 July 1983, when news spread that atrocities had been committed on Tamils in Sri Lanka. Thousands of Tamils poured onto the streets in Chennai, Madurai and other cities denouncing the Jayewardene government and demanding Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to take stern action to put an end to the genocide. A massive demonstration marched towards the Sri Lankan High Commission to show Tamil Nadu's solidarity with the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran and Opposition Leader M. Karunanithi issued statements condemning the Colombo government for the atrocities. Ramachandran's statement said fifty million Tamil hearts in Tamil Nadu bled in sympathy with the Sri Lankan Tamils. He pledged assistance to the sufferers. Karunanithi's statement urged Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to act quickly to safeguard the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Other parts of India too reacted with rage. Janata Party leader Raj Narain urged Indira Gandhi to send the Indian army to Sri Lanka to protect the Tamils from massacre. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N T Rama Rao expressed anguish at the riots. Karnataka Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hedge asked New Delhi to take appropriate action at the highest level.

M. G. Ramachandran and Karunanithi instructed their Members in both Houses of Parliament, the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, to raise the matter in the House. This the members did as the first item when the House sat in the afternoon.

In the Lok Sabha, members charged the Jayewardene government of inaction and complicity with the rioters. MPs appealed to Indira Gandhi to take stern action and stop the killings. DMK lawmaker C. T. Dhandapani asked New Delhi to sever diplomatic links with Sri Lanka. He said Indian industries and Indian banks had been burnt.

In the Rajya Sabha opposition parties called for a special meeting to discuss the situation in Sri Lanka. DMK MP V Gopalasamy (Vaiko) asked India to recognize the LTTE just as it did the PLO. He also proposed severing diplomatic ties with Sri Lanka and requested the government to send back the Sri Lankan High Commissioner, whom he called "the agent of the blood-thirsty government." M Kalyanasunderam said, "an attack on the Tamils is an attack on India". He suggested that India should give political asylum to Tamil youths and that it should also give them facilities to travel to states all over the country to tell people what was happening in Sri Lanka.



DMK leader Murasoli Maran, BJP

External Affairs Minister P V Narasimha Rao spoke in both Houses. In the Lok Sabha, he said some members of the Indian mission were also attacked. "Fortunately there was no loss of life," he said. He said he was trying to verify the reports about the burning of the Indian Overseas Bank and the State Bank of India.

In the Rajya Sabha, Rao said the government did not treat the Sri Lankan situation as a party matter. The entire nation is one on this issue and the government is fully aware of the implications and repercussions. He added that "the government will take stock of the deteriorating situation since it is fraught with



M.G.  
Ramachandran,  
1985

leader Jaswant Singh and Mr Vaiko,  
1999

dangerous consequences for our own country as a  
close neighbor to Sri Lanka.

Cabinet Secretary P. C. Alexander, who was sent to  
Parliament by Indira Gandhi, reported to her the  
substance of the proceedings. She acted fast to pacify the feelings of the MPs. She asked High  
Commissioner G. K. Chhatwal who was in New Delhi to rush back to Colombo. She cancelled her  
visit to Chennai and summoned the top-level cabinet sub-committee, the Political Affairs  
Committee, that evening to consider the situation in Sri Lanka.

She issued a statement condemning the racial riots. The statement said that India could not  
remain unconcerned about developments in a neighbour as proximate as Sri Lanka.

The Political Affairs Committee met in the evening and considered two options. The first was a  
political option – to pressure Jayewardene to bring the situation under control. The second was  
military action.

Indira Gandhi preferred the first. The strategy worked out was for Indira Gandhi to talk over the  
telephone with Jayewardene and to send Narasimha Rao to visit Colombo. The second, the  
military option, was to be put into operation if Jayewardene declined to agree to Rao's visit.

The Security Chiefs were immediately told to prepare an emergency plan to invade Sri Lanka.  
That task was assigned to the Southern Command of the Indian Army headquartered at  
Secunderabad. All senior officers in Delhi were put on alert. The plan was to drop paratroopers  
and capture the airports and neutralize the Sri Lankan army as a means of forcing Jayewardene to  
act.

Indira Gandhi telephoned Jayewardene soon afterwards, around 4 p.m. Wednesday (July 27). The  
verbatim report of that telephone conversation was released by the Presidential Secretariat on  
Thursday. The following is the content of the conversation:

*Indira Gandhi:* I am sorry and am also concerned over the reports I have received here of the  
rumours of the murder of the Tamil speaking people in Sri Lanka, Questions are now being asked  
in the Lok Sabah which is even now in session.

*Jayewardene:* I am also equally concerned. I am taking all possible measures to contain rioting  
and its consequences.

*Indira Gandhi:* I have no doubts about that. I wish I could help by providing food and other  
essentials.

*Jayewardene:* Thank you very much for this kind offer. I will let you know if it is necessary.

*Indira Gandhi:* Would you mind if my Foreign Minister Sri Narasimha Rao travels over to Sri Lanka  
today and could you have discussions with him

*Jayewardene:* I would welcome your Foreign Minister.

President Jayewardene immediately summoned some ministers - Hameed, Athulathmudali,  
Dissanayake, Ranil Wickremesinghe, Festus Perera and a few others - and informed them about  
the telephone call. Athulathmudali and Dissanayake opposed entertaining Rao. That would give  
room for India to interfere in the future also, they argued. Hameed cautioned them. He advised  
the President to receive Rao. He gave two reasons for that stand. Firstly, the President had agreed  
to welcome Rao. Secondly, if the President goes back on his word, India would become more  
hostile.

Rao flew to Colombo in an air force plane with Additional Secretary Shankar Bajpai that evening.  
Hammed received him at the airport. Indira Gandhi announced Rao's mission to Colombo at the  
Lok Sabah that evening itself. All India Radio announced Rao's visit to Sri Lanka in the night news  
bulletin of Wednesday.



PM Narasimha Rao, 1996

Rao and Bajpai who stayed at the India House, the official residence of the Indian High Commissioner, met Jayewardene at his private residence at Ward Place over breakfast. Sinha Ratnatunge in his column in the Weekend of 31 July 1983 gave some information about the discussions. Ratnatunga was close to Jayewardene and thus gave a slight slant to favour the Sri Lankan President. But Chhatwal with whom I was in close contact said Ratnatunge's facts were correct and provided me with additional details. He said Hameed was also present at the meeting.

Jayewardene received Rao with warmth and commenced his conversation telling him about his admiration and closeness to India and its leaders. "I am one of the many Sri Lankans who admired the Indian freedom struggle," Jayewardene said and tried to impress on Rao that he understood the feelings of the Tamil people more than the Indians. Then, Jayewardene gave the background of the riots and blamed the TULF, Tigers and Tamils. Then he told Rao that India was trying to interfere in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. Rao interrupted Jayewardene and said, "No, no- there's nothing like that."

Rao told Jayewardene very firmly that the riots had inflamed the feelings of all Indians, especially that of the Tamils. He said instability in Sri Lanka would harm India. He appraised Jayewardene of India's concern for the lives and property of Indians in Sri Lanka. He told him that the Indian Overseas Bank and 17 factories owned by Indians had been burnt down.

Jayewardene skillfully tried to drive a wedge between New Delhi and Chennai. He said that Indira Gandhi was only trying to pacify Tamil Nadu thereby suggesting that New Delhi on its own was not interested in Sri Lankan Tamil affairs. Bajpai, unwittingly swallowed the bait when he asked Jayewardene for a response to the request by Tamil Nadu legislators about how they could assist the Sri Lankan government.

Jayewardene replied almost in retort, "By returning some of the Sri Lankan terrorist suspects." Then he paused and added, "so that they may be tried in our courts."

Rao brought the meeting to a close with the question, "Is there anything you would like me to convey as a special message to Mrs. Gandhi?"

There was silence. Then Jayewardene finally asked, "Will you then...?"

"Of course," Rao promptly replied.

"Will you convey to her my love?" Jayewardene said.

Rao realized the sting in it but dutifully conveyed it to Mrs. Gandhi.

Prime Minister Premadasa also gave a venomous message to the Indian Foreign Minister. Rao asked for a meeting with Premadasa as a matter of courtesy. He kept Rao waiting in the anti-room for 20 minutes. Then he almost scolded India for trying to interfere in Sri Lankan affairs. He told Rao that it was Indira Gandhi's business to tackle the reaction in Tamil Nadu. "That is her business and not ours", Premadasa told Rao. The Indian Minister firmly told Premadasa that India did not view the riots as an internal affair of Sri Lanka but as an issue that could affect India's unity and territorial integrity. Premadasa's behaviour on that day had influenced India's attitude to him, J. N. Dixit commented in his book, **Assignment Colombo**.

Rao's request to visit the refugee camps was rejected by the Foreign Ministry. Hameed told me that he consulted Jayewardene about the request. He told him to reject it saying that permitting Rao to visit the refugee camp would amount to interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. Hameed adopted a polite approach. He told the Indian High Commission which made the request that the authorities were just then



தமிழ்த் தேசிய ஆவணச் சுவடிகள்

engaged in setting up the refugee camps and that refugees were in a state of tension. "In a few days time things will cool down," he told his Indian counterpart.

Permission to visit the damaged areas in the hill country was also refused. He was allowed to go to Kandy and meet the Deputy Indian High Commissioner stationed there which he did on Friday.

### **President's Address**

On Thursday evening, Jayewardene addressed the nation over the radio and television. I watched the speech on the television. He was calm and collected. He was brief and adhered assiduously to the advice given by Ven. Elle Gunawansa. The burden of that 4 minute 50 seconds address was the justification of the attacks on the Tamils and appeasement of the Sinhalese.

He prefaced his address saying that the attack on Tamils was the reaction to the provocative LTTE ambush that killed 13 soldiers. He said, *Because of this violence by terrorists, the Sinhala people themselves have reacted...*"

Then he told the Sinhala people that he would take action to meet their demand. He said, *"... the time has now come to accede the clamour and national request of the Sinhalese people."*

He then spelt out the nature of the action he proposed to take. He said he would amend the constitution to prevent anyone from advocating separation. He said under the proposed constitutional amendment those advocating separation would be punished. They would be debarred from participating from public activities, prevented from traveling abroad and suffer loss of property.

"No person shall directly or indirectly, in or outside Sri Lanka, support, espouse, promote, finance, encourage or advocate the establishment of the separate state within the territory of Sri Lanka," he said.

He concluded his address by asking the Sinhala people to lay down arms. He assured that his government would take all adequate actions to safeguard the rights and privileges of the majority community- The Sinhala People.

There was not a single word to console the Tamils, the victims of the violence.

The threatening tone of the address, the concern he showed in justifying the attacks and pacifying the attackers and the absence of even a word of consolation for the attacked were noted by all the 22 Tamils who listened to the address in my house.

My friend who escaped burning because a Sinhala youth prompted him to run caustically remarked, "Jayewardene had now become a Sinhala President."

Jayewardene's address to the nation annoyed and angered the Tamil people. I felt that it annoyed the Tamils more than the humiliation they suffered during the riots. Jayewardene had told the Tamils they do not belong to Sri Lanka. Youths felt humiliated. They were furious. It bred in them the thought of taking revenge. The Mannar boy who was with us said, "Jayewardene is trying to teach the Tamils a lesson. We must teach him a lesson." I later heard he joined one of the militant groups and went to India for training.

Many youths who lived in the south felt the same way. They joined the militant groups in thousands. I will try to portray the atmosphere that prevailed among the youths during that time in a later chapter.

### **Tiger Friday**

On Friday, Rao flew to Kandy in a helicopter. He saw people panicking when he was driven from India House to Air Force grounds in Fort from where the helicopter took off. While on the air he had a rare aerial view of killing and burning of Tamils.

Tiger Friday was in action from about 9 a.m. People were running away. Roads were blocked with

cars. Drivers were frantically pressing the horns. Confusion was all round.

Tigers have come to Colombo was the chant heard everywhere.

Police radio network suddenly burst into life.

"Pettah mobile calling Control."

"Come in Pettah mobile," answered the Com Centre.

"There is panic building up in Pettah. There are rumours that Tigers are in hiding everywhere to attack the Sinhalese. One man came up to our jeep and informed that several Tigers wearing blue uniforms are in the Weera Hotel. We are leaving to the spot."

Received. Report further developments. Roger."

The environment of confusion that followed is vividly portrayed by Edward Gunawardena, Deputy Inspector General of Police at that time, in his book **Blood & Cyanide** in pages 273-275. I am copying those pages.

Little by little, the rumour caught on. People started running in all directions shouting, "Tigers have come to Colombo;" "They are shooting at the army; Let's get out of here." Shopkeepers started hastily putting up their shutters. Buses, lorries and cars started fleeing Pettah. Armoured cars were rolling to take up positions. Army and police started shooting at ransom at the burnt out shells of buildings. All Tamil establishments had become suspected Tiger hideouts. The rattle of automatics being fired began to echo and re-echo. Two helicopters of the Air Force were strafing the buildings indiscriminately. The fanning of the embers and ashes by these low flying helicopters added gloom and further confusion.

The setting was clearly emerging once again for the criminal mobs to regroup. They moved towards Sea Street, but were repelled by the army. Running along Dam Street, they set fire to several lorries. Cars were overturned and set on fire. The 'City Mission' a Tamil hostel started going up in flames. A store of old gunny bags adjoining the Mission began to emit clouds of thick black smoke which could be seen miles away.

Beedi magnate Sangarasivam was stabbed to death and burnt in his own car. His Sinhalese driver escaped unhurt. Fear stricken Tamil merchants were being herded into police trucks and CTB buses to be removed to refugee camps. At Grand Pass, not far away, Tamil traders were being hacked. Thirupathy Mudalali, a leading grocer, was butchered to death. His fingers with several rings were chopped off and removed. At Peliyagoda, the prized diary of Ambal Café was attacked and all the Thorati buffaloes were removed to be slaughtered. City cinemas belonging to the Tamils were ablaze.

By eleven in the morning, there was total confusion not only in the city but in the suburbs as well. Policemen believing that the Tigers had invaded in force had deserted the streets and fled to the stations. There was none to regulate the frenzied exit of vehicles and pedestrians. The streets were crowded and chaotic. Women and children were running with suitcases, travel bags and pillowcases filled with their belongings. Alongside these innocents were looters openly hurrying with TV sets, video decks and radios. The mad and wild exodus provided the ideal cover for unfettered looting and arson.

(Note: The situation was confounded when a message that went over the police radio network which asked the police to defend their stations. Gunawardena quotes the message)

"Police stations are likely to be attacked and taken over by the Tigers."

This unfounded transmission by an unidentified, panicky, officer on the police radio network caused further havoc. Even the few policemen who dared to be on the roads retreated to safe positions. Mobile patrols slunk off the streets. A senior officer using the butt of an old .303 shattered the concrete grill of the Colpetty police station to give better maneuverability to his

automatic weapon.

(Note: All police stations closed their main gates and took up positions to guard them. At Dehiwala, police sealed off both ends of the Hill Street. The Dehiwala roundabout end of the Hill Street was barricaded with iron gates and policemen lying flat on the road kept their guns ready to shoot the Tigers if they come that way.)

Only a few senior officers braved the streets. Alpha 2 and North 2 standing at the Gas Works Street Junction like two lonely sentinels on a smoky desert were shouting their hearts out on the radio network.

"Alpha 2 here. Alpha 2 here. I am at Gasworks Street roundabout. Don't panic. Get on to the streets. I am out in the open. There are no tigers. There is no shooting."

In desperation he added, Damn cowards, Get off your hideouts."

Strangely, it proved to be an effective order.

Tamils who were identified on all highways leading out of the Pettah and Fort were assaulted and robbed. Their cars were smashed up or set ablaze. Fortunately, the numbers were low, as only a few had resumed their normal activities after Monday's experience. Even the Sinhalese and the Muslims who could not speak the Sinhala language fluently were not spared. The Tiger threat was so real that resistance groups armed with clubs, axes, crowbars and mamoties had begun to take up positions in the suburbs.

Only by late afternoon did sanity return. Hundreds of shops and houses had been burnt or looted. Fleets of lorries burnt. The roads were dotted with lumps of ash, all that remained of cars set on fire. There were 35 casualties including the perpetrators of violence shot buy the police. The carnage was widespread. The wail of ambulances rushing injured victim to hospital continued into the night. Colombo's Day of Tiger, had taken its tragic toll, and virtually sealed the fate of the nation.

Gunawardena had kept the casualty figure low. As a senior police officer, he had to keep it low. I was at home in Castle Lane on that fatal Friday. My sons told me in the morning that they would go and have a look at our burnt house at Dehiwala. They were also worried about our dog which we had left behind which our neighbours agreed to feed. I told them not to go. They were unhappy. They told me that their friends were going as the situation had eased. I persuaded them to wait till Monday.

Around 10 a.m., I heard a commotion on Galle Road. Vehicles were madly hooting their horns. I went up and found the road packed with cars, lorries, buses and three wheelers. All are trying to leave Colombo.



Pettah - Hindu Temple on Sea Street, 1930s  
(Courtesy  
[www.infitt.org/thf/photoarc/selvi/ceylon.htm](http://www.infitt.org/thf/photoarc/selvi/ceylon.htm))

Then my nephew who was living with us came running. "Uncle! Uncle! Get back home. They are killing the Tamils."

He said he saw a mob attacking a Tamil boy at Dickman's Road in Bambalapitiya. He also saw a body burning near Police Park.

Tamils were killed and burnt on the roads throughout Colombo. That was the situation even in the suburbs. One

of my son's classmates was killed and burnt.

Tiger Friday is the blackest day in the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

How did the killings begin?

Sinhala authors and researchers stick to the spontaneity theory. For them it is Sinhala reaction, fury of the wounded Sinhala pride. 'How could Tamils hit us?' syndrome.

Tamil authors and researchers view the origin of the Tiger Friday in a different angle. They say that a planned attack on Sea Street had blown up into an attack on the entire Tamil community.

Rajan Hoole in his book **Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power** had reconstructed the story behind the Tiger Friday attack from the Tamil viewpoint. According to him, Tiger Friday attack was a well-planned onslaught on Tamil commerce.

Tamils controlled the wholesale trade on merchandise and jewellery trade. Pettah is the hub of the wholesale market and Se Street the centre of the jewellery trade. Pettah was attacked on Monday but Sea Street was spared. Hoole gives the reason for that too. I quote his finding (Page 117):

"With the onset of the violence on Sunday night, some of the leading jewelers- Palamuthu Muthukaruppan Chettiyar, Udaya, Ambika, Lalitha and Nithiyakalyani among them- put together a large sum of money, went to persons of great influence and got the place guarded. Several of the leading jewelers had dealings with Prime Minister Premadasa, and owner of Udaya's in particular was backing him financially as well as canvassing for him. Just before the violence Nelson, a right hand man of Premadasa, informed some key people in the Sea Street that their street would be guarded. Pickets comprising of navy and police personnel were placed at the Main Street and Harbour ends of the Sea Street. This street thus had the distinction of being the only Tamil preserve to survive intact from the 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> while the surroundings were engulfed in flames."

Knowing the unreliability of political patronage, Sea Street jewelers organized their own defence. They formed a group of their young workers to defend the place and prepared their own weapons. They filled glass bulbs with acids and other chemicals used in their trade.

Naval and police patrol was removed on Friday morning and at around 10 a.m. a large mob gathered at the Main Street end of the Sea Street. The jewelers tried to contact Premadasa without success.

They put the defence organization into operation. The defenders climbed the roof of the shops near the Main Street end and threw the acid filled bulbs on the crowd as it began to advance.

The counter attack took the crowd by surprise. They were not used to it. It did not happen in the past four days. "Who would resist except the Tigers?"

The shout that Tigers had come to Colombo emanated.

Police was informed. Army and Air Force were called. Police and the Air Force helicopters fired at the defenders on the rooftops.

Twelve of the defending workers were killed. They were from Batticaloa and the Hill country.

An army unit was then placed to guard Sea Street. That was the first direct benefit Tamils got from Indian intervention.

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**Chapter 7, JR Seeks Arms**