

Voice of Shakthi Thursday 27 July 2000

Last Sunday, the 23rd of July was the 17th [anniversary](#) of the July riots in 1983. The ethnic problem exacerbated by the riots has now engulfed the entire island. But still there are among us, people who ask, "what problems do Tamils have?" It is indeed a cruel twist of fate that a branch of Sinhala Urumaya, an organization that vehemently denies the existence of an ethnic problem, was opened in [Melbourne](#) on the 23rd. We at Shakthi would like to use this important anniversary to again explain the biggest problem still faced by Tamils in [Sri Lanka](#).

It is interesting and sometimes amusing that the Sinhalese who ask "what problems do Tamils have?" often point to the Constitution of Sri Lanka as proof that Tamils have no special grievances. We do agree that the Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens in Sri Lanka. But that clause was already in existence during the July riots. But the constitution did not help the Tamils then. In fact, it was the people who were supposed to safeguard those rights, the army and the police, who sometimes burnt down Tamil property. The riots broke out on the night of the 22nd and it was not until 2pm on the 23rd, after all the significant Tamil property in Colombo had been burnt down and many Tamils killed, that curfew was imposed. Still the mayhem continued with little interference from the police or the army. After the riots, the Sri Lankan president, the [architect](#) of that wonderful constitution did not have the decency to express his sorrow to the victims of the riots. Instead, he castigated the Tamil [parties](#) for provoking the riots, blaming the victims.

What happened in 1983 was not the act of a few hundred hoodlums going on the rampage. It was state-sponsored terrorism, unleashed on Tamils in the South to avenge the deaths of 13 Sinhala soldiers; a terrible retribution visited on the entire Tamil community for the act of a few militants. To ensure that work was carried out to satisfaction, the wonderful Sri Lankan Constitution was suspended for one week.

The July riots were informed by an attitude among the Sinhalese which vies the Tamils as dependent on the Sinhalese for their safety and as such, obliged to humor the Sinhalese in order to ensure their safety. When ethnic relations are regulated by such expectations it makes the minorities vulnerable to the whims of the majority because the majority alone decides why, when and how to punish the minority. The constitution does not matter here. This is exactly what happened in 1983. The Sinhala dominated political establishment decided that the killing of 13 Sinhala soldiers was sufficient violation of the unwritten law of ethnic relations to punish the entire Tamil community.

We do not believe that this situation has considerably altered even now. It is true that there have not been anti-Tamil pogroms after '83. But this is largely because the Sinhala political establishment fears an international backlash, not because their hearts have changed. True, tens of thousands of Tamils live among the Sinhalese today in the south because it is much safer than in the

north. But that does not mean that they live in [harmony](#) with the Sinhalese. Every Tamil in the South is a potential terrorist suspect and this makes them feel intensely insecure, with little scope for a normal life. To live among people who perceive you as a threat is to live in fear. The reason for the existence of an ethnic problem in Sri Lanka is the existence of the above attitude, not because the Constitution discriminates against the Tamils or any other minority. That is why the Tamils demand the right to determine their own future in areas where they form the majority. It is true that Prabhakaran has given this demand a deadly twist. But that should not detract from the fairness of that demand.