

## **Demonic Violence and Moral Panic in Post-War Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper seeks to explain and interpret an extraordinary episode of mass tension and anxiety in post-war Sri Lanka caused by a mystery male predator known as the 'grease devil'. Reports over widespread attacks on women by this shadowy, ubiquitous, and powerful being led to heightened levels of vigilance and fear across large parts of rural and peri-urban Sri Lanka in mid-2011. It had particularly strong impact on the formerly war-torn north-east of the island where it led to violent confrontations between affected communities and the police and military, who were widely held to be complicit.*

*This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Sri Lanka during the crisis, together with a comprehensive review of English, Tamil and Sinhala language newspaper coverage of the incidents to reconstruct the crisis as it unfolded. By employing and engaging with a range of ideas and concepts in the sociology of moral panics, the anthropology of magic, the Sri Lankan literature on demonology, rational/instrumental explanations, and hegemonic control in ethnic democracies, it evaluates a number of different ways to understand the crisis, concluding that it served to provide a brief expose of the logic of power in a militarised state under the sway of a dominant ethnic majority.*

## **1. Introduction:**

'They have some special powers, like springs on their shoes, to make them jump high and climb into houses from the upstairs'. He went on, dropping his voice down to a conspiratorial whisper, 'I have heard that it is the Chinese that are behind it. The president is dying and he doesn't trust the Western doctors. So he has gone to the Chinese. Their doctors are asking for a special medicine made from the blood of virgins and they got a special military group trained to get this. That is why they only scratch the women, and don't rape. They want to get the blood from them and take it back.'

Later that night, on 25 August 2011, the same man telephoned me to say that there was an attack going on right then by the 'grease man' in his own neighbourhood near the railway station in Batticaloa, a town in eastern Sri Lanka. Shortly after 10pm a police van had been seen driving past slowly, and had stopped to let someone out. Suddenly, there was a power cut and a few minutes later, the whole neighbourhood awoke to the sound of a woman screaming in terror. It was from a house two down from his own, occupied by three women. After the power cut, one of the women saw the silhouette of a man outside her first floor bedroom window, and heard him rattling the bars.

In response to the alarm, neighbours rushed to the house to find out what happened, but were too late to catch the culprit. An impromptu posse of young men armed with flashlights, sticks and cricket bats assembled to patrol the area and hunt out the assailant. In the course of the telephone conversation where this was being narrated to me, about an hour after the incident, the police arrived, and ordered the neighbourhood vigilantes to go home.

The anecdote recounted above from fieldwork in Batticaloa occurred during an extraordinary episode of mass tension and anxiety in Sri Lanka over attacks on women by a mystery male predator known as the 'grease devil'. Reports over widespread attacks on women by this shadowy, ubiquitous, powerful, and vaguely supernatural being led to heightened levels of vigilance and fear across rural and peri-urban Sri Lanka for several months in the third quarter of 2011. The impact of the grease devil anxiety was felt particularly acutely in areas occupied by Sri Lanka's ethnic minorities – the central provinces and the formerly war-torn north-east, where it reached crisis proportions for the period of about five weeks from 8 August – 10 September 2011.

During this crisis period, there were hundreds of daily sightings and attacks reported and a palpable sense of fear, tension, and anger. It led to violent confrontations between affected communities and the police and military, who were widely held to be both unresponsive and complicit. The onset of the grease devil crisis in the north-east must also been seen in the context of the recent end to the 30 year long civil war, the festering and unresolved ethnic conflict, the continuing deep alienation of the Tamil population from the Sri Lankan state and the ruling government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the long-standing day-to-day

tensions in the north-east between the overwhelmingly Sinhalese military forces and the Tamil-speaking civilian population.

This paper attempts a two-fold task of reconstructing and describing the sequence of events as they unfolded during the crisis period, and evaluating how they can be analysed, interpreted and understood, examining in turn three possible options and their consequences. It draws upon fieldwork conducted serendipitously in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka during the grease devil crisis in August 2011, and also on previous (December 2010), and subsequent (August 2012) periods. In addition, it also draws extensively upon English, Tamil and Sinhala newspaper coverage of the incidents.

In interpreting the crisis, this paper engages with three nested questions and discusses their consequences: (i) what happened? (ii) who was responsible? (iii) what does it reveal? The first question relates to the very simple and simplistic quest for the 'truth', and explores the available primary evidence on whether the grease devil crisis was real or imagined. The second question explores the possible instrumentalities and the way that different actors attached a variety of different rationalisations to these events. The third explores the issue as a metaphor, and raises three different ways in which this episode could be said to have 'revealed' some deeper condition: (i) unhealed trauma relived; (ii) structural violence enacted; (iii) hegemony undone. In doing so, it draws upon and engages with a variety of different strands of literature across anthropology, sociology, social history, comparative religion, psychology, and political science that investigate mass hysteria, witchcraft, magic, rumours, demonology, and ethnic conflict.

## **2. Crisis:**

The grease devil, variously referred to also as *grease man*, *grease yakka*, *grease monster*, *grease demon*, *grease boothaya*, *grease peyi*, or *grease bootham*, is a shadowy and ambiguous figure who inhabits the cosmos of rural and small town Sri Lanka. Much has been written about demons, spirits and malign, powerful, paranormal beings in the Sinhalese village, but the grease devil appears to be an innovation of uncertain provenance. There is no mention of the grease devil in any of the studies and compendia of Sinhalese demonology during the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (De Silva 1865, Barnett 1916, Wirz 1954, Yalman 1964, Obeyesekere 1970, Kapferer 1991, Scott 1994) and the very use of an English word 'grease' as prefix suggests that it does not belong to pre-colonial period. There is also much uncertainty and confusion about the exact nature of the grease devil's powers and its relationship to the more familiar demons who animate the historical and ethnographic literature, such as the terrible *Maha Sohona*, demon of the graveyard.

While there is widespread recognition and belief in the grease devil as was evident from the events described below, there is also widespread disbelief and cynicism about its magical nature in that same socio-cultural milieu where it is frequently associated with mundane petty criminality. The grease devil is widely understood in that context to be an identity and disguise

adopted by thieves – and is so named because he pre-emptively smears his body with grease when setting out on a burglary in order to escape capture. The figure of the grease devil is also associated with the antics of adolescent males after dark, either in trying to frighten people, or more frequently, as an opportunistic disguise adopted by voyeurs, while preying upon women as ‘peeping toms’.<sup>1</sup> For urban middle class Sri Lankans, the grease devil is the stuff of rustic rogues and village lechers who thrive on the superstitions and fears of gullible village folk.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the grease devil is upon closer inspection, a figure of some ambiguity: it is held to be deeply rooted in tradition, but upon closer inspection is of recent origin; there is widespread belief in its magical and demonic powers, but also equally widespread disbelief. The ambiguity and fluid co-existence of a diverse range of understandings of the grease devil play an important role in understanding and attaching meaning to the events that followed.

The grease devil crisis arose in mid-2011, in the context of a series of unsolved murders that happened in the largely Sinhalese town of Kahawatte in the central district of Ratnapura. Seven elderly women had been found murdered over the time-span of a few months in that town, and the increasingly hyperbolic newspaper, television and radio coverage of those crimes radiated fear and tension well beyond the local villages and into the national arena.

In July 2011, the police finally announced the arrest of two suspects. Paradoxically, the news of those arrests served not to diminish tensions, but rather to escalate them. The recapitulation and re-playing of the news and circumstances of the crimes served to broaden the national consciousness of the macabre nature of the murders, leading to a wave of anxiety about the safety of women. These fears appear to have become connected and fused at some point with the pre-existing figure of the grease devil, so that rumours circulating in the countryside increasingly identified the problem as something more terrifying than just a serial killer, but as part of a larger, more demonically connected project of violence and bloodshed.

Partly in response to these growing fears of grease devils, the police announced the arrest of seven youths from the Kandy area on 2 August. The news report goes to explain: ‘Police said these youths known as “Grease devils”, peeped into homes while roaming the streets at nights after consuming liquor’. Once again, rather than quelling fears, the news of these arrests only confirmed the widespread concerns that there was some deeper, more organised enterprise at work, and that other such grease devils could still be at large and waiting to strike.

By 5 August, the level of public disquiet required the police to call a press conference to announce that the grease devil was a myth and that it had created an unwarranted public hysteria. Somewhat contradictorily, the same police spokesman also announced that all grease devils had been arrested, so that they no more roamed the countryside (VK 5.8.11 and DN 5.8.11).

Rumours and reports of the grease devil grew rapidly throughout Sri Lanka in the weeks of July and August 2011, but they gained much greater traction and prominence in the Tamil language media, and had far more impact in the predominantly Tamil-speaking parts of the island. This meant, among other things, that the grease devil crisis was at its most acute in areas that had been affected by the recently concluded civil war.

Sri Lanka's civil war of 1983-2009 between separatist Tamil insurgents and state security forces was fought largely in the terrain of the Tamil-speaking north-east and was embedded in a longer political history of ethnic conflict. In broad terms, the ethnic conflict took shape in the late-colonial and early post-colonial periods around the rival claims of the Sinhala majority (75 percent of the island-wide population as of the 2011 census), and the north-east Tamil minority (11 percent). Two other Tamil-speaking ethnic minorities, the Muslims (9 percent) and the upcountry or 'Indian' Tamils (5 percent) were affected indirectly by the conflict to varying degrees.

In the last phase of the war between 2006-2009, the Sri Lankan military steadily encircled and advanced into the territory held by the separatist insurgents, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), first in the east, and later in the north. Government forces eventually won a crushing victory in May 2009 in which the entire leadership of the LTTE was killed, while virtually all the surviving cadres, numbering over 10,000 had surrendered. In the meanwhile, an indeterminate number of Tamil civilians, widely assumed to be in the tens of thousands, who were sandwiched and sandbagged between the two sides in the final confrontation were also killed.

The end of the civil war had not however, ended the larger political problems of the ethnic conflict and majority-minority relations within which it arose. On the contrary, the minorities, and particularly the north-east Tamils remained deeply alienated from the Sri Lankan state, and viewed the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa with particular suspicion and hostility. (ICG 2012, Goodhand 2010, Walton 2011)

As chart 1 illustrates, news reports of grease devil incidents tended to be clustered spatially, and travelled from the up-country tea estates of central Sri Lanka on 8 August, to the Muslim parts of the east coast on 10 August, the Tamil towns and villages of Batticaloa, Mannar and Mullativu on 15 August, and finally, the overwhelmingly Tamil villages of the Jaffna peninsula on 21 August.

The crisis per se began on 8 August, when Tamil language news media first gave prominent coverage to a series of attacks on women in the Central province. That day, a 'mysterious man' attacked 30 year old Devika Joseph at her home in Badulla, after which she was admitted to hospital with nail marks and scratches all over her body. A female plantation worker in Nuwara Eliya was threatened by a man with a knife, and a 28 year old woman in Gampola was admitted to hospital after being strangled by a man while on her way to the toilet. News of grease devil

incidents involving sightings, attacks, scratches and stolen jewellery were so widespread that day across Nuwara Eliya and Badulla districts that it provoked an impromptu demonstration in Badulla town by women demanding that it be brought to an end (VK 09.08.11 & 10.08.11).

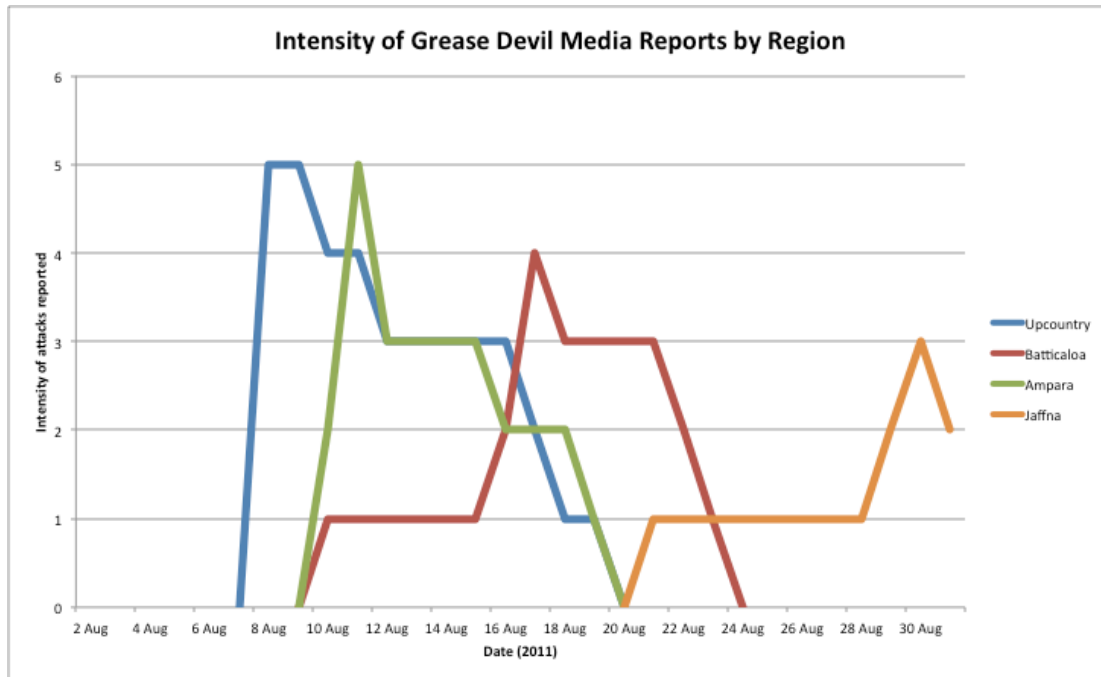


Chart 1: Approximate intensity of Grease Devil Media Reports by Region. Source: underlying data for this chart was collated from the frequency of grease devil incidents reported in Virakesari, Lakkima, Divaina, Lankadiva, Daily Mirror, Sunday Leader, Sunday Times, and Tamilnet.

Two days later in Vazhachenai on the east coast, Ushanar Marzuka, a 31 year old Muslim woman, was confronted outside her home at 11am by two men with their faces painted black. She recounted to the newspaper that 'They asked me where I was heading. As I responded one man tried to grab me by my hand. I freed myself and pushed him back. In the process one of them scratched me with a sharp object'. Hearing her cries, more than a hundred local residents gathered to search for the assailant, and subsequently found a man who, after a thorough beating, was handed to the police. The police arrested the suspect, but to the immense anger of the local community, released him shortly afterwards. This led to a heated confrontation and a violent clash between the villagers and the police, resulting in two policemen and two civilians being admitted to hospital with injuries (ST 14.8.11, VK 11.8.11).

On the same day, 150 kilometres down the east coast in Pottuvil, another Muslim woman, Aashika aged 22 was attacked by a stranger at 8.30pm outside her house. When she managed

to struggle free and raise the alarm, her family arrived to find a man running away dressed in black, although Aashika suspected that there may have been two men (SL 21.08.11).

Grease devil sightings intensified in the next few days. There was an atmosphere of thick tension and fear in many towns and villages: outsiders were viewed with suspicion and liable to be attacked; women frequently stayed at home, under male guard, particularly after dark. Attendance at evening prayers in mosques thinned out significantly, a matter that was viewed with particular regret given that this was the holy month of Ramadan. The tea estates of the Central province became economically and administratively paralysed for days as men and women refused to leave home for work and kept their children from school.

The panic, stampedes, and angry chases generated by the grease devil scare caused a number of accidents, including deaths. On 10 August, a young man chasing a suspected grease devil in Gampola was killed when he fell into an animal trap (VK 12.8.11). On 16 August, a 42 year old woman was struck dead by the Batticaloa-Colombo train while attempting to run to safety after hearing that there was a grease devil in the area (VK 17.8.11).

A frightened and desperate populace demanded that the administration and political leaders respond firmly and bring an end to the attacks, but to no avail. Police spokesmen held meetings and made numerous announcements at the local and national level that the grease devil was a figment of the public imagination and that people should not take the law into their own hands. As before, the attempts by the police to defuse public concerns and dismiss the problem perversely served to aggravate and fuel anxiety. It provided evidence either of official apathy or complicity. There was a collapse in public confidence in the security forces, and the emergence of a growing number of community vigilante groups who assembled to keep watch and give chase. Those suspected or identified as grease devils were often violently attacked, and sometimes handed over to the police.

In an early incident that brought the crisis into the spotlight of the national media, two suspected grease devils were killed in an upcountry estate on 11 August. News reports describe that a group of six unidentified men who entered the Dambetenna tea estate in Haputale (Badulla), were attacked by a large group of estate workers, said to number 28 people. Four men managed to escape, but two were killed. Following this, there was said to be such 'great unrest' in the area, that even the relatives of the two dead men were attacked with stones when they came to claim their corpses from the hospital (VK 12.8.11, DM 12.8.11, ST 14.8.11).

In the next few days, from 11-17 August, there was an explosive increase in grease devil activity in the East, as well as numerous violent confrontations with the security forces. Unlike the tea estates of the Central province, which are largely populated by Tamils of Indian extraction, who were only indirectly affected by the ethnic conflict, the East had been directly and heavily affected by the decades of civil war, and remained heavily militarised, with a large and

controversial presence of ethnic Sinhalese military forces amidst the Muslim and Tamil local population. When the grease devil crisis unfolded in the east, its effects were magnified on the one hand by the long history of civil-military tensions, but also by its timing during Ramadan, which led many in the large Muslim population in the east to believe that this was a deliberate religious affront and provocation.

It is also important to bear in mind that although the focus of this narrative is on grease devil attacks in ethnic minority-dominated areas, grease devil anxiety and incidents were reported around the island, and many elements of the phenomenon and its consequences were very similar across regions and ethnicities. The big difference however is that the grease devil provoked widespread acts of 'public disorder', and confrontations with the security forces only among the minorities. It created a rippling crisis of governability in those areas, and particularly in the heavily militarised north and east, many parts of which had only recently returned to government control.

On 11 August, there appeared to have been an overnight invasion of grease devils into the south-eastern district of Ampara, with a huge surge of attacks and sightings in the mostly Muslim towns and villages of Sammanthurai, Karaitivu, Akkaraipattu, Kalmunai, Maruthamunai, and Pottuvil (VK 13.8.11). In a number of cases, local villagers who had captured suspected grease devils and handed them over to the police were incensed to learn that these men were subsequently released without charge. In many other cases, those identified as grease devils had, upon pursuit run into police stations, military camps, or Buddhist temples, confirming widely held suspicions that the state security forces were in fact, behind the attacks and that the grease devils were none other than soldiers in disguise.

Over the next two days, anger at the grease devils led to furious demonstrations and attacks against the security forces by angry mobs across Ampara district. In Sammanthurai, two policemen were set upon and chased into the police station by a large group of villagers. In Pottuvil three wildlife officers conducting an elephant census were attacked, and in nearby Uradu, several army officers were assaulted by a group of villagers. In the sequence of events and the escalation that ensued between the army and a deeply agitated local population in the Pottuvil area, an army officer shot dead a man who turned out to be a local politician of the Muslim Congress party (VK 12.8.11 & 13.8.11, ST 14.8.11, SL 21.8.11).

Two days later on 14 August, in the town of Kinniya further north in Trincomalee district, another serious and violent confrontation occurred outside the navy base, into which a suspected grease devil had run. When the navy refused to hand the suspect over to the group chasing him, it triggered public disturbances that lasted over two days. A large and highly charged crowd of demonstrators assembled, burning down a military check-point, and encircling and hurling stones at the base. The situation was ultimately defused and the crowd dispersed only after 24 men were arrested following the arrival of paramilitary troops from the Special Task Force (STF), and with the deployment of armed helicopters from the base. But the



disturbances carried on to the next day when another group of demonstrators surrounded the local Divisional Secretariat office, and prevented the military commander of the Eastern Province, Major General Boniface Perera, and the Trincomalee Government Agent Major General V.R.D. Silva from leaving the building for several hours. It eventually required the arrival in person of the three most powerful Muslim ministers from Colombo, Rauff Hakeem, A.H.M. Fowzie, and Rishard Bathiudeen to negotiate a peaceful end to the standoff (DM 16.8.11, VK 16.8.11).

As the crisis rolled on to its second week, the focus of media attention and reports of grease devil incidents shifted towards newer areas of Batticaloa, Mullaitivu, and Mannar. In contrast to the upcountry Tamils of the Central province and the Muslims of Ampara and Kinniya, these newer areas have a predominance of north-eastern Tamils, the ethnic group most directly and deeply affected by the war and its aftermath. On 16 August, residents of Puthoor in Batticaloa gave chase to a 'mysterious man' who ran into Sethukuda police station, prompting a demonstration demanding the removal of that police station (VK 17.8.11). The next day in nearby Urani, a grease devil who had escaped after assaulting a young woman was seen entering a nearby police post, triggering angry demonstrations by local residents who burnt tyres and shut down the main Trincomalee-Batticaloa artery road (VK 18.8.11, TN 17.8.11). Batticaloa remained in the grip of tension and deep fear with a string of incidents including an attack on a girl in Chenkaladi by a man later discovered to be an army sergeant (VK 22.8.11), and the discovery of men lurking in the womens' toilets and the roof of the Nurses Training Institute, that forced the institute to send all 180 of its terrified students back home (VK 20.8.11, TN 21.8.11). In Thandiyadi village, an area in the hinterland formerly under LTTE control, two policemen who were suspected to be grease devils were assaulted by a large group of men, following which 'police retaliatory action' resulted in 18 persons being admitted to Batticaloa Hospital (ST 21.8.11).

In its third and fourth weeks, the grease devil crisis moved to Jaffna, where a predictable pattern of events unfolded yet again. There were multiple sightings of the grease devil, several attacks on women, vigilante groups of local residents who chased and attacked suspects, the escape of such suspects into police stations or army camps, aggressive confrontations between residents and security forces, followed ultimately by arrests, and even violent reprisals by the security forces against those communities.

By the second week of September, the grease devil issue had died down, almost as suddenly as it started. There is no ready explanation at hand for why or how it finally came to an end except perhaps that it had exhausted itself after having covered virtually the entire geography of the Tamil and Muslim-dominated parts of Sri Lanka. In each locality, (see chart 1), grease devil sightings followed a familiar pattern and life-cycle, starting suddenly and intensifying quickly to its peak in the first 2-3 days, and then subsiding gradually over the next 10 days.

While there were far fewer sightings and vigilante attacks once this cycle came to an end, the memory of the terror endured in that relatively short span of time was vividly felt and recalled many months later. In interviews conducted a year after the episode in August 2012 in Batticaloa, Kattankudy, and Eravur, Tamil and Muslim respondents uniformly described the fear and paralysis caused by the grease devil as worse than what they had to endure during the decades of civil war.

What sense can be made of the grease devil crisis? The events that transpired and the rich body of evidence available to reconstruct and analyse it makes it possible to bring a variety of different epistemological approaches and analytical vehicles to bear. At the same time, the very idiosyncratic, contingent, and counter-intuitive nature of the events makes it challenging to take any one of these different approaches forward very far in identifying causality or explaining its specific form and timing.

### **3. Were the Grease Devils Real or Just Rumours?**

A rudimentary way to understand the grease devil crisis would be to evaluate the available evidence to unravel and explain what happened. Did these bizarre attacks actually take place in the manner claimed, and if so, who or what was responsible? Or were they instead the product of a febrile collective imagination? In a narrative that frequently evoked the stereotypical confrontation in South Asia between the rational modern state and an irrational pre-modern society, the Sri Lankan government and security forces insisted that the grease devil did not exist, and that it was the product of an unfounded and irrational fear psychosis. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa spoke out on several occasions, dismissing the issue as 'a myth', and 'just rumours' (TN 24.8.11, VK 25.8.11, DN 25.8.11). Numerous police spokesmen at the national and local levels appeared frequently in the media and in community meetings to deny the existence of any grease devils (VK 20.8.11). The military commander of Jaffna, Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe explained that 'The grease devils and mysterious men are just imaginary tales'. Another senior army commander asserted: 'There is absolutely no evidence to support the grease yaka theory. It has been created out of thin air by an atmosphere of fear' (SL 21.8.11).

Indeed, all the suspected grease devils caught, arrested, or lynched turned out on further investigation to be innocent luckless passers-by. For example, it later emerged from media and police investigations that the two men killed by estate workers in Haputale on 11 August, were travelling salesmen from a nearby village (VK 12.8.11, DM 12.8.11, ST 14.8.11). In a Sinhalese village of Ambagamuwa near Hatton, two strangers assaulted by local villagers were later discovered to be Indian engineers working in a nearby hospital project (TN 25.8.11).

Similarly, when, the Batticaloa Regional Office of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) visited the nine persons remanded in custody as grease devils as of 16 August, they determined that that three were mentally disturbed, one was a beggar, and two were door-to-door Sinhalese trinket sellers. Two others were unavailable for interview as they were in

hospital recovering from serious injuries received at the hands of community vigilantes. The last one turned out to be a young Muslim man from another town who had alighted the bus and was waiting by the side of a school for a rendezvous with his 'lover'. When she failed to appear, he asked a passing woman for information, who instead understood that she was being approached by a grease devil and screamed for help. Local residents and passers-by promptly rushed to her assistance and assaulted him before handing him over to the police (interview, 29 August 2011, SO 14 August 2011, DM 13.8.11).

There is a significant and sophisticated body of literature on similar sounding episodes that has conceptualised the role of rumours (Das 1998, Spencer 2000), many of which also involve violent bio-medical intrusion, including the theft of bodily fluids (White 2000) the theft of body parts (Scheper-Hughes 1996), or the forcible sterilization of women (Bass 2008). The sociological literature on 'moral panic' (Cohen 1973, Goode and Nachman 1994) also provides a way to understand this episode, and describes how the media plays a central role in the construction of 'folk devils'. Indeed, there is much to be said of the role of the vernacular language media in the creation and dissemination of the grease devil fear, and also in accounting for its rippling patterns of transmission across the country. The comparative literature from psychology and the anthropology of spirit possession and mass hysteria also provide plausible accounts of the contagion and transmission mechanisms that were manifest. More importantly, they suggest that those in the grip of extreme anxiety can be deeply convinced that they have endured a paranormal encounter, and can exhibit the emotional and even physical symptoms that resulted from it. All of these remain plausible explanations that fit some elements of the evidence available, but their role is perhaps more significant in lending this phenomenon a conceptual vocabulary and comparative insights, rather than an explanation and a satisfying analytical end-point as such.

In contrast, the weight of evidence from numerous victims would suggest that the grease devil was indeed real. There was a recognizable pattern of attacks on women across the country in this period, who described assailants with similar types of attire and behaviour. Many victims were hospitalized with characteristic scratches and cuts. They explained the details of their encounters in person, and in detail to journalists, police, and hospital staff, with images of scratched bodies displayed widely on television, print and electronic media.

Indeed, any explanation of the grease devils must take into account the sheer number and diversity of similar incidents that were reported. Even if the large majority of the encounters were imagined, invented, or the result of mistaken identity, it would seem improbable that hundreds of different, unconnected people in different parts of the country had, in a synchronized manner, enacted the same hoax, or had imagined the same kinds of attacks from the same kind of assailant.

In sum, any quest for the definitive truth about the grease devils that draws on the primary evidence available to establish its causation is quickly frustrated by the inconclusive or

contradictory testimony of the witnesses and those accused of involvement. Perhaps the only such finding that can be established on this basis and about which there is no dispute is that there was indeed a crisis, and that people did genuinely feel terrified and vulnerable; that numerous women reported being attacked, and were hospitalised with evident injuries. In other words, what is verifiable and can be explained without ambiguity or contradiction is often trivial, itself in need of explanation, or is at best only a fragment of a larger chain of explanation.

In order to go beyond this, it becomes necessary to examine not just what meagre facts can be established, but what rationale might exist and what meaning it might contain. In other words, what plausible explanations can be attached to these reports that might provide a cause or culprit for this apparently inexplicable episode of social breakdown? Or else, can these rudimentary findings be extended and made more meaningful by placing them within a larger context, in order to view them not as an isolated case of mass hysteria, but as symptomatic of some broader condition, or as a lens with which to view the world at large?

#### **4. Who did it and why?**

In the absence of any self-evident answers to the mystery of the grease devil, can an understanding of the hidden functionality or instrumentality of the crisis shed any light? Is it possible to identify a political, economic, social, or even sexual rationale to the grease devil attacks that can help explain them? The search for a deeper logic within illogic, functionality to dysfunction, and rationale for the irrational is a well established tradition in the critical social sciences. It has particular bearing in the study of violence and developing societies, not just because irrationality and dysfunction are the norm there, but because this juxtaposition is embedded in the confrontation between the elements under study (the state versus society), and is also embodied in the relationship between the academic and objects of academic research.

David Keen's analysis of famine and civil war, for example, searches for political and economic agendas that profit and thrive in that environment, and whose interests it serves to perpetuate (Keen 1997). Chabal and Daloz's monograph on African politics describes 'disorder as politically instrument' (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Paul Brass suggests a similar elite instrumentality at play in his work on communal violence in India (Brass 2003). There is also a rich tradition within the historical and anthropological literature that seeks (and rarely fails to find) hidden instrumentality behind witchcraft accusations (De Certau 2000), and that has successfully uncovered the presence of wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, or gluttony among the accusers.

In the case of the grease devil crisis however, any academic exercise aimed at identifying instrumentality, or some rationale quickly confronts the reality that the field of study is itself replete with numerous competing rationalisations of the crisis. It was almost impossible to engage in conversation in Batticaloa (or elsewhere in Sri Lanka) in that period without reference

to the grease devils, its possible culprits, and their hidden motives, which ranged from the complex and bio-political, to the trivial and parochial. While the ghostliness of the grease devil remained present throughout the crisis and lent it a terrifying supernatural edge, most people were upon reflection, quick to dismiss that element and reached instead for very grounded, this-worldly explanations. Moreover, these explanations were often strongly polarised and clustered different actors on the basis of their ethnicity, and their relationship to the state.

1. Tamils and Muslims. Tamils and Muslim of the northeast were overwhelmingly of the opinion that the grease devil attacks were organised by the government, and that they were military men in disguise. As the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) member of parliament for Batticaloa, S. Yogeswaran said (VK, 25.8.11) 'It is obvious that there is government involvement in the grease man phenomenon. If not why has the government, which has control, done nothing about it?' Speaking in parliament, MP for Jaffna, S. Sridharan, charged that 'The people of the North have more than enough proof that the military is involved in the mysterious men issue' (VK, 24.08.2011). The TNA General Secretary Mavai Senathirajah similarly charged that 'It is clear that the military and grease men are interlinked. Therefore the President can control this if he so wishes (VK, 03.09.2011).

It was frequently remarked that the attacks happened only in areas occupied by non-Sinhalese ethnic minorities, in the proximity of military camps, and that suspects often ran into police stations or military camps when identified. A Muslim interviewee noted that 'there were no incidents in Ariyampathy because there is no army camp there, so nowhere to escape'. A Tamil NGO worker remarked (in a conversation otherwise unrelated to the grease devils) that 'the Muslims managed to get it stopped in their areas when their ministers talked to the president'. One anecdote that was widely recounted during the crisis was that a policeman was seen saluting a grease devil when asked to arrest him, the implication being that the grease devil was a superior officer in the security forces.

In terms of rationale, Tamils in particular tended to view the grease devils as part of the long history of military surveillance, harassment, and violent subjugation, stretching back over three decades of civil war. Several Tamils remarked, that 'they just don't want to let us live in peace'. Indeed, reports of sexual harassment by soldiers in the north-east, particularly in the vicinity of military camps were commonplace and long-standing, so that the grease devils were self-evidently assumed to be soldiers.

Several Muslim respondents from the East described the grease devil attacks as a deliberate ploy by the government to provoke anger, and thus to flush out hidden weapons. As one man, a student at the Eastern University elaborated:

*The government suspected Muslim people to have armed groups and guns and they wanted to check. When people are very agitated they will use whatever weapons they*

*have to fight back, no? ... After the Kinniya incident they searched all the houses for guns. When they realised there were no guns, they stopped it [the grease devil attacks].*

There were also more ambitious and demanding explanations of the type described at the beginning of this paper, and of which there were many versions: that the grease devils were a special black-ops army unit technically equipped with springs on their feet, and claws, nozzles and tubes on their arms to collect the blood of virgins, lactating mothers, and those who abstained from pork. According to some versions, this was needed in order to perform a black magic ritual to ward off bad luck for the president, (who had also ordered a search in tandem for the crown and sword of the ancient Sinhalese king Dutugemunu under the tanks of the *Rajarata* region). Elsewhere it was to concoct a special Chinese medicine to cure the president of a terminal affliction. This particular genre of explanation had many subscribers in the Tamils and Muslims of the north-east, but also circulated widely among many Sinhalese, and in the country at large.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in place of the more top-down, organised, and grander theories at play, the grease devils were also explained in terms of a number of far more parochial actors and trivial agendas. For example, in response to reports that twenty grease devils had entered the women's hostel of the South Eastern University in Oluvil on 11 August, Professor F.M. Ashroff of the university dismissed this as a false rumour, spread presumably by students, designed to postpone examinations (VK 12.8.11). Similarly, a Muslim shop-keeper in Batticaloa opined that 'Army may nor may not be involved, but many are just perverts from the locality who want to molest women'.

2. Government, and security forces: Police and security forces: The Sri Lankan government and security forces remained largely on the defensive in this period in the face of an avalanche of accusations, particularly from the north-east, that they were either failing to act, or that they were actually behind the attacks. Their response for the most part, apart from denying the existence of any grease devils, was to stress their innocence, and to ridicule the absurdity of the accusations against them. As Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa argued, 'The President does not need any [blood] rituals, because he has the people's support. ...To suggest that they [the military] would carry out acts such as these is ridiculous'. He went on to mark [in jest] that the grease devil might well be the ghost of dead LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran (VK, 25.08.2011, LD 24.8.11).

But in the face of intense pressure and scrutiny, government ministers, spokesmen, pro-government newspapers, police and military officers often went on to provide a range of alternative explanations that centred on criminal gangs, foreign forces, LTTE revivalists, Tamil political parties, the JVP, and promiscuous women.

At the height of the crisis, Deputy Commissioner of Police Pujitha Jayasundara explained to an audience of concerned notables in Batticaloa that the rumours were circulated by thieves and

people carrying out illegal activities (VK 17.8.11). Former police spokesman I.M.Karunaratne blamed drug traffickers, illegal cow smugglers, and illicit liquor dealers. Minister Dulles Alahapperuma blamed illegal gem miners and loggers. Several military spokesmen argued that the turmoil was motivated by those seeking the removal of army and navy camps from the north-east in order to pursue their criminality with greater ease (VK 16.8.11). Major General Boniface Perera argued that the protests in Kinniya that he had endured were instigated by drug traffickers and fishermen using illegal methods such as dynamite, who would benefit from a removal of the navy camp (SL 21.8.11).

The search for the identity of the grease devils became embroiled within domestic partisan politics, with both the government and opposition parties articulating reasons why each other had organised and benefited from it. An article in the pro-government Sinhala newspaper *Divaina* described the turmoil as the handiwork of an unnamed Tamil political party who wished to depict the Sri Lankan armed forces as molesters and rapists to the international community (DV 21.8.11). Blame was also occasionally placed on the pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora (ST 21.8.11), 'dormant LTTE aggravators' (SL 21.8.11) and unspecified 'terrorists' for instigating attacks on the security forces.

State media and several police spokesmen charged that the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), an opposition party with a history of underground violence in the 1970s and 1980s (Venugopal 2010), was behind the grease devil episode in a bid to embarrass the government (DN 15.8.11, DM, 17.8.11, LB 23.8.11). The JVP for their part, retorted that it was the government who had organised it to cover up their failures (Lankaviews.com 15.8.11), while the main parliamentary opposition, the United National Party (UNP) alleged that the government was promoting disorder in the country in order to justify the continuation of a state of emergency (DM 23.8.11).

Foreign forces: On the government side, there were a vaguely articulated set of accusations that targeted foreign countries. The military commander of Jaffna, Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe argued that 'it was an effort by foreign forces to disturb the peoples' peace. These forces give money to people to carry out these acts' (VK 7.9.11). An editorial in *Divaina* argued that the grease devils were part of a larger plot to reignite bloodshed in Sri Lanka, linking it to the then ongoing western bombing of Libya (DV 24.8.11). President Mahinda Rajapaksa himself also speculated in a press conference as to whether there was an ulterior motive to the grease devils, and perhaps a conspiracy similar to what was happening [with western intervention] in Libya and other Middle Eastern countries (VK 29.8.11).

Adulterous women: Finally, a far simpler and more localised rationale for the grease devil rumours from the government side placed the blame on the promiscuity of the women who made the accusations. One senior army officer explained to a reporter that the women who claimed to have been attacked were 'either divorced, widows, or prostitutes' (SL 21.8.11). The director of Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) Lakshman Hulugalle argued that the

grease devil rumours began when an adulterous woman lied to her husband to cover up the truth about her 'paramour'. Instead, he held, 'the medical reports proved that she had a clandestine affair with some one elsewhere which she admitted to the Police later' (DN 23.8.11).

In summary, the interpretation of the grease devil crisis presents itself as a problem of increasing complexity. Not only is it difficult to plainly establish whether it happened or not, but the traditional approach that social science adopts in such circumstances – of seeking to tear away the mask of mysticism and irrationality to uncover a deeper, logically satisfying core – is itself of little help, as the public realm was already replete with rationalist unmaskers of the grease devils. Whereas the classic interpretation (Evans-Pritchard 1937) holds that witchcraft accusations (and by extension, the recourse to the supernatural in general) should be seen as a way to explain inexplicable acts of mundane misfortune, we have here in this case, the converse. Whereas the normal sequence would be for the real world (inexplicable tragedies) to be explained by invoking the magical, here we have the magical world (grease devils) explained widely in terms of real world instrumentalities, be it sexual predation, exam angst, ethnic hostility, criminal intent, western neo-colonialism, or adultery.

Under such circumstances, there are grounds to turn the spotlight of scrutiny around as it were, and question this very act of identifying and affixing blame and instrumentality. This impulsive search for a deeper, sordid, narrow, economic, political or sexual purpose - whether for something as complex as the deployment of military personnel to collect the blood of vegetarian virgins, or as trivial as the students seeking to postpone an exam – cannot be the end-point of any explanation of the grease devils, for it is itself a phenomenon in need of greater reflection and explanation – albeit one that is sadly beyond the scope of this paper.

### **5. What does it Reveal?**

If it is impossible to ascertain whether the grease devils were real or not, or even who the culprits were, what then, beyond the immediately self-evident, can be said about these mysterious and violent events? Rather than looking deeper within the crisis to try to understand its truth or the identity of its instigators, can it instead be more fruitful to look beyond it to understand what it might be a metaphor for, or symptomatic of? Can this moment of temporary breakdown and collapse provide, as Zygmunt Bauman describes of the holocaust literature, a window that allows a glimpse into the pathologies of normal everyday existence otherwise hidden from view (Bauman 1989)? This section examines three ways (that are overlapping rather than exclusive) of going beyond the micro-evidence of the attacks, and of distilling out a larger meaning from the crisis.

Unhealed trauma relived: The most ready interpretation at hand of the grease devil crisis is that it reflects accumulated stress and unhealed psychological trauma, and that it should be seen as some form of cathartic collective response by a society deeply scarred by fear and violence. This diagnosis connects broadly with Freud and also speaks closely to the literature



on mass hysteria (or epidemic hysteria, or mass sociogenic / psychogenic illness) in psychology and medical anthropology. In case studies ranging from demonic possession in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere 1970), to dancing plagues in medieval European convents, laughing epidemics in East African school children (Bartholomew and Sirois 1996, Bartholomew and Wessely 2002) and spirit possession in Malaysian garment workers in the 1990s (Ong 1998), the underlying problem is identified as some form of pent-up psycho-social stress. John Waller's historical account of mass hysteria in medieval convents describes how:

*the dancing plagues and the experiences of demonic nuns still have something to tell us about human responses to stress. For these events place in bold relief the extraordinary power of context to shape how anguish and fear are expressed. (Waller 2009)*

In many instances, mass hysteria or demonic possession occur in the context of rapid socio-economic changes or oppressive forms of discipline and control (Wessely 1987). There is also an emerging body of literature to support the idea that violence-affected communities experience greater instances of demonic sightings and possession (Nakalawa et al 2010). For example, a study on spirit possession among former child soldiers in northern Uganda finds that psychological damage from violence is frequently explained in terms of 'transcendent phenomena' (Neuer et al 2012). Similarly, the ninja scare in Timor Leste mirrors the grease devils in many respects, and similarly affected a people deeply brutalised by violence (Martin 2010, Myrntinen 2010).

Indeed, the people of the north-east lived with very high levels of fear and anxiety for decades, with the normal rhythms of daily life, (and of entire life-spans) unfolding amidst a regular drumbeat of political murders, disappearances, bomb blasts, and bus massacres, as well as everyday incidents of violence short of death, including torture, intimidation, extortion, and the abduction of children. Many of these shadowy deaths and disappearances during the war years were never accounted for, but were instead superseded by the constant stream of other fresher atrocities. There has as a result, been little accounting, much less accountability, for the massive loss of life.

This interpretation of the grease devil crisis as an outcome of unresolved collective trauma, and as a lens into the brutalised psyche of the north-eastern Tamils is appealing at many levels. It is well supported by the available psycho-social evidence (Somasundaram 2003), and also by two excellent ethnographies of the role of oracles and traditional healing rituals amongst Tamils in the north-east (Lawrence 2000, Derges 2012).

Structural violence enacted: A second and related way of interpreting the crisis is as a metaphor for latent forms of 'structural' violence in society, so that the improbable reports of grease devil attacks are in essence, coded re-enactments of something deeper. As with spirit possession, issues that cannot normally be spoken of for reasons of propriety, are brought out into the public realm under extraordinary circumstances and in a highly charged manner. The

grease devil attacks become a way in which violence and oppression, discussion of which is suppressed, find an outlet through the anguished narration of an attack by a mysterious, powerful, male stranger. As Bartholomew and Sirois (1996: 292) describe, mass hysteria episodes are endemic among females in schools and factories facing 'repressive, intolerable social situations ... While female redress is culturally unacceptable in these societies, males typically believe that those affected are possessed by spirits'.

There are two operative dimensions to note here that overlap, but are otherwise distinct: gender and ethnicity. On the one hand, the grease devil attack is a narrative of sexual violence, and is indicative of the extent to which women (of all ethnicities around the island), particularly in small towns and villages of the periphery are vulnerable to predatory male aggression. In this interpretation, the colourful descriptions of this lithe, lecherous spiderman are not to be dismissed as the paranoid fantasies of shrinking violets and sheltered village damsels (or even as the alibis spun by adulterous wives and promiscuous widows), but provide vivid insights of the pervasive, unpredictable, sexual aggression that women routinely face.

War and militarisation are very important elements of this gendered interpretation, as it has resulted in the transfer of tens of thousands of young males into the north-east, and has in parallel depleted many Sinhalese areas outside the north-east of their men, rendering women more vulnerable in both parts. Indeed, the suspects arrested for the Kahawatte murders (all of whom were Sinhalese women) in July 2011 were described in the media as army deserters.

A second dimension of latent violence is along lines of ethnicity, and signifies the contentious confrontation between the Sinhala-dominated state and the minorities. While women around the island of all ethnicities reported grease devil attacks and anxiety, it assumed the dimensions of a crisis only where minorities were predominant. The image of the muscular and predatory grease devil in this interpretation corresponds to the army soldier, roaming, occupying, and aggressively encroaching on the physical and social terrain of the north-east.

In this post-war dystopia, the LTTE as a putative alternative provider of security and protector of Tamils no longer exists, such that they are left at the complete mercy of the vast Sinhala-dominated state security forces. The grease devil thus signifies the totalising encroachment of the military in the north-east into the public, material sphere, and even beyond, into the more private and intimate sphere of the Tamil and Muslim home, which as Partha Chatterjee would describe, is the domain of nation's uncolonised, spiritual, female core (Chatterjee 1993).

There is an important insight that Nancy Scheper-Hughes provides in her analysis of the body parts theft rumours in South America during the 1990s: these rumours and the widespread hysteria they generated, occurred in the *aftermath* of a period of authoritarian violence in the region. By that time, public enquiries and truth commission reports had publicly exposed the macabre mechanics of disappearances, illegal adoptions, and the extraction of body parts for transplants from the bodies of dead dissidents and criminals. She describes how 'The rumours

have appeared, then, during a time when ordinary people finally became aware of the magnitude of the atrocities practised by the state' (Scheper-Hughes 1996).

In much the same way, the grease devil rumours emerged in the aftermath of the Sri Lanka war and more than two years after its extraordinarily brutal conclusion in May 2009 (Weiss 2011). The specific rumours that circulated, and the grease devil encounters described may well turn out to lack substance. Nevertheless, the crisis erupted at a time (and this is particularly with reference to north-eastern Tamils rather than Muslims or up-country Tamils) when the enormity of the civilian death toll in 2009 became apparent in the public domain and had become lodged in the (Tamil) public consciousness.

What is common to both the gender and ethnic variants of the structural violence interpretation is that they imply the aggression and one-sided violence of males and soldiers, and the passivity of their victims: women and minorities. Though speculative and interpretive, and based on creative inference rather than verifiable data, there is much that is convincing and intellectually satisfying about this interpretation. It does not however, account for the counter-reaction that ensued. What made it a crisis as such was not the depth of anxiety, or the frequency and ferocity of the reported violence (which occurred throughout the country), but the breakdown in the state's authority that it precipitated in the non-Sinhala areas. The crisis was marked not just by one-sided attacks on cowed victims, but by the extraordinary fury with which the affected communities responded and took on the state.

Hegemony undone: There is thus a third interpretation of the grease devil crisis: that it demonstrated not the power or aggression of the state in controlling the minorities, but its weakness. As Scheper-Hughes describes (of the body parts theft rumours), this is 'a classic "weapon of the weak." The rumors have shown their ability to challenge and interrupt the designs of medicine and the state' (Scheper Hughes 2000).

The state either lost or had diminished control of parts of the north-east Sri Lanka for several days. What made it a crisis was not just that people were afraid, but because there was a breakdown in the sphere of governance and administration. Angry crowds all across the north-east confronted, accosted, and even attacked the police and army. In Puttalam, a policeman was killed by a furious mob. The statements and actions of the police and security forces in this period were not those of a confident, victorious oppressor at rest. Rather, they indicated an executive that was desperate, perplexed, and even paralysed, having been suddenly confronted with the reality that their ability to control an agitated and uncooperative population was limited.

What I suggest is that this indicates a much broader breakdown in the implicit contract that governs state-minority relations. Drawing on the conceptualisation of 'hegemonic control' in 'ethnic democracies' from Northern Ireland, Israel and India (O'Leary and McGarry 1995, Smootha 2002, Singh 2010), Sri Lanka can similarly be understood as a case where juridically

enshrined rights to equal citizenship on an individual basis are layered onto and rest upon what are perhaps a more important set of unwritten rules that stratify state-society relations based on collective identity.

In Sri Lanka, the sectarian ideology of the majority community (Sinhala nationalism) is closely incorporated into the legitimacy and practices of the state, such that it constitutes the register of political morality that regulates state-society relations (Venugopal 2008). This close identification of the state with one dominant community creates self-evident problems in the constitution of legitimacy and the exercise of power over non-Sinhalese minority groups. In practice, this is addressed through an implicit bargain where minorities seek to limit their vulnerability and insecurity by accepting subordinate status within a dependable and regulated ethnic hierarchy. Through a combination of elite cooption and mass cooperation, minorities are thus drawn in, and become complicit in a process designed to control them, and through which their nominally equal citizenship rights at the individual level are undermined by manifestly inferior collective claims and access to an ethnically segmented state.

In post-war north-eastern Sri Lanka, the pervasive presence and influence of the military lends the impression that 'order' is maintained largely by coercion. However, coercion is in reality rarely explicit, as it is expensive, and can have unpredictable consequences. Instead, following Gramsci very loosely, the idea of hegemonic control suggests that the exercise of power requires some ideological persuasion to win consent and cooperation. There are elements here which are debatable: for example, whether this collective exercise of cooperation is based more on pragmatism and the imperatives of collective self-preservation rather than the docile 'consent' wrought by the acceptance of a ruling ideology. But regardless, neither cooperation nor consent are unconditional. They rest on an implicit expectation of reciprocity from the state, and contain unwritten moral red lines, which if crossed, precipitate a breakdown and crisis in minority-state relations.

This crucial element of the Sri Lankan state's exercise of power in the north-east is internalised so widely, that it is not apparent even to the individuals who are involved in performing it on both sides. It is only in the rare instances, such as the grease devil crisis, that its role becomes apparent: when legitimacy turns into illegitimacy, cooperation turns into confrontation, and the consent to rule evaporates. Under such circumstances in mid-2011, the state became incapacitated and its power was, however briefly, rendered ephemeral.

For the first time in several decades, the grease devil triggered a series of spontaneous popular demonstrations in the Tamil areas of Batticaloa and Jaffna (spontaneous in the sense that it was not directly instigated or coerced into being by an armed militant group), where people did the unthinkable in openly confronting the military in an aggressive and provocative manner. As sequitur to Jonathan Spencer's account of the 'moment that the political died in northern Sri Lanka' (Spencer 2008), when violence overtook politics in 1983, this display of uncoerced popular political action may have been a moment when the political sprang back to life. It

occurred at a time when people felt that the state had crossed all bounds of acceptable behaviour, and had launched an intolerable attack on them.

I will conclude with a note of caution – that it is important to not overstate the case. This was a fleeting instant of resistance through the withdrawal of consent, not a revolution. It served, however briefly, to render bare the ontology of power, but in a way that did not obviously suggest how a challenge to it could be generated or sustained. Furthermore, following the line of argument pursued above, the identification of weapons of the weak and latent forms of resistance to an oppressive militarised regime does not imply that there was a conscious functionality at work: Tamils and Muslims did not invent the grease devils and wind themselves up into a frenzy of anger in order to create chaos in the north-east. As Foucault notes:

*There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality (Foucault 1978:95)*

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper has sought to reconstruct and understand the events of Sri Lanka's grease devil crisis of 2011. Drawing on the available evidence at hand, it has travelled through a whistle-stop tour of different methodological approaches that seek to explain and attach meaning to the crisis.

The first such approach of parsing the evidence to understand what happened corresponds to an understanding of the grease devil as a self-contained phenomenon amenable to causal explanations. The second approach goes one step further, to situate the phenomenon beyond itself, as a constituent instrumental or functional element within some larger rationale or system. In effect, this approach downgrades the grease devil from a dependent variable that is to be explained in its own right, to an independent variable that forms only a part of some other explanation.

Both of these approaches resulted in explanations that were either inconclusive, unverifiable, or trivial. Furthermore, the possibility of drawing analytical insights from instrumental or functional explanations became seriously compromised by the way in which such explanations – in the form of rumours and conspiracy theories – proliferated in that context, and were in themselves an important part of the anatomy of the crisis.

The third approach goes even one step further to situate the grease devil entirely outside the primary frame of analysis, either as the object of explanation or as explanatory factor. Instead, it is an event that is relevant insofar as it briefly serves to illuminate and delineate the features of some other larger phenomenon: in this case, unhealed trauma, structural violence, or contested hegemony. All three are plausible, and they provide the grease devil crisis with a greater degree of meaning, context, and analytical richness than the earlier two approaches.

They are however, ultimately based on reasoned speculation, rather than hard evidence, so that the preference for any one over the other will depend on the taste and predisposition of the reader. It should be obvious from the last part of the paper that while I have sympathy with all three, my own preference is for the third interpretation, and that I view this to be a case where a fleeting, unanticipated moment of crisis provided a glimpse into the way that state power operates, and how state-minority relations are ordered.

Finally, there are important implications that this argument has for Sinhala nationalism. In recent work, Rampton (2011) and Venugopal (2008) have argued against the idea of elite instrumentalism, and suggest that Sinhala nationalism poses limits to the exercise of power by state elites. In other words, hegemony sprang not from above, but from below, through the iron-clad grip that Sinhala nationalism held on popular conceptions of political morality: that is, on what constitutes the legitimate role of the state, and what the state *ought* to do. Whereas aspiring political elites often toyed with and pandered to Sinhala nationalism (the so-called 'ethnic outbidding') in order to claw their way into power, they were, until Mahinda Rajapaksa, pusillanimous about it once they actually assumed power.

The success of the Rajapaksas is that they have continued to embrace Sinhala nationalism well after the election campaign, and have as such, tamed the turbulent sea of hegemony to gain an unassailable command of the political realm. However, as the grease devil crisis demonstrated, the task of asserting hegemony and winning the consent of the ruled in the Sinhala south can well mean disturbing it in grave and entirely unpredictable ways in the non-Sinhala areas of the north, east, and centre.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jayadeva Uyangoda for his insights on this issue.

<sup>2</sup> The work of Gananath Obeyesekere, Richard Gombrich, Martin Southwold, Michael Ames and others have already well documented this in the discussion of the ‘great tradition’ of elite or protestant Buddhism adopted by urban elites by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and their disdain for the ‘little tradition’ of magical animism, rituals and demons of folk or village Buddhism.

<sup>3</sup> My preliminary investigations suggested that it originated from a news story in an anti-government news website known for imaginative and exaggerated stories. See [www.lankaenews](http://www.lankaenews) 12.08.11.