

**Many will be thrown to the wolves if India abandons in a hurry. (1989, Sept 30). India Today.**

Wesson) and each time the rupee falls a notch, people have to pay more. The rising cost of defence purchases is also draining resources—whatever is left. Says Athulathmudali, former defence minister: "Once, we took pride in constantly being able to keep our defence expenditure within 1 per cent of the GNP. Today it is running close to four." Says a retired Sri Lankan general: "Defence costs money. In green dollar bills."

**G**IVEN its peculiar economy and social structure, Sri Lanka's tragedy has many unique facets, the most tragic of them, ironically, stemming from its phenomenal rate of literacy (86 per cent, compared to India's 36 and Pakistan's 21). This resulted in the churning out of a new and literate generation with not enough industry or white collar jobs to keep them occupied. The first protest against this came with the first uprising of the JVP in the early '70s, crushed by Sirimavo Bandaranaike with some Indian help and at an enormous cost of 20,000 lives. After the right-wing UNP came to power, mushrooming free trade zones that employed thousands and Singapore-type economic changes helped put the lid on the socio-economic tinderbox for some time. But they could not contain the pressure forever.

"This generation of frustrated, over-qualified, underemployed Sri Lankans is being supplemented by a new one that is overaged and underqualified as well," says a senior university don who eagerly opens his mailbox twice each day to check if the letter from a US university—"the most important thing in my life today"—confirming his year-long fellowship, has arrived. For four years, not one person has graduated, as Sri Lanka's eight universities and 212 high schools have remained mostly shut. Medical colleges have been paralysed for five years. "We have had no new doctors, no new lawyers, no new engineers, no new teachers for at least four years. And the ones we had are going away to safer climes," rues a senior government official. Hoplessly short of doctors for its largely state-funded health care system, Sri Lanka is now employing final-year medical students as doctors.

It is from this vast mass of idle, frustrated and sullen students that the JVP picks its bloodthirsty new converts, the defence forces their trigger-happy troops or the suspects for torture chambers, and the streets their new criminals.

"The problem is not just to survive economically but how to survive without suspicion," says Ranjan Gunasekhara (not his real name), a final-year law student for four years now. "You hang

around the street all day doing nothing, and sooner or later the police come for you. And once they give you the treatment, you go to the JVP asking for weapons for revenge," he adds, explaining why the rebel ranks have swelled despite their confused ideology. Gunasekhara has tried to sit for his examinations three times, only to return home without writing out a line. "The vice-chancellor went on TV asking us to come for exams, commandos guarded the institutions. But they don't accompany you from home to college," says Gunasekhara. Adds Minoli, a fellow law student: "You've done this thrice over, you're sick of your notes." Both, like thousands others, have tried getting into Indian universities. But they are overage for most. The others want them to begin from first year onwards. The Sri Lankan

get away. We are running for our lives," said one of Sri Lanka's best-known newsmen last week as he went through a series of farewell parties for him.

Many of the national television and broadcasting corporation employees have quit, most refuse to report for work. Result: for more than a fortnight now, most of the key jobs have been manned by soldiers. Some of them even double as television newsreaders fumbling, stuttering, and yet blabbering out pages of propaganda interspersed with scores of nervous sideways glances. A naval commodore is in charge of the television network. No surprise, professionals say, that the newsreaders and anchorpersons seem all at sea.

Despite all the mayhem, Colombo's subterranean jetset has found ways to live

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**VARATHARAJA PERUMAL, 40**  
EPRLF Chief Minister

**The Tigers call him a puppet. India views him as a moderate. He will be the LTTE's target once the IPKF quits.**



campus lexicon now has an addition to flotsam and jetsam: dropsam.

Caught in the same crossfire is the media, particularly the state-owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and Rupavahini, the television network. Three top executives of the two organisations have been killed. So has the Government's chief censor in the brief period of press censorship in July. The JVP said it was punishing them for purveying "anti-people" propaganda and for denying the free press its rights. But the free press is far from enthused. In the past three months at least a dozen senior journalists have grabbed job offers abroad, many more are negotiating and those who can't get employment abroad are thronging western embassies looking for scholarships. "Anyone, just anyone who does some political writing wants to

with the times, and continue living it up. To get around the night curfew—sentries have shot too many violators without asking questions for anyone to take chances—parties now begin at nine and end at four in the morning when curfew ends. The casinos are doing more business: players have to stay on till four. Two of the major hotels with casinos are offering free coffee at 4 a.m.

But for much too large a majority of Sri Lankans, the night brings terror and the question: will they wake up alive the next morning? The day brings the drudgery of staying at home because of the strikes, or the option of defying the strikes and risking one's life. One of Premadasa's ministers put it most aptly: "What can I do except count every day as my nation falls apart."

—SHEKHAR GUPTA in Sri Lanka