

WOMEN AND ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Nationalism in brief can be interpreted as a process of re-creating the nation according to the 'needs' of those who deemed to be the 'guardians' of the nation. According to Hall it is never fixed and stable, though often drawing on a repertoire of traditions, myths and representation which are constantly reworked and re-articulated to different national projects¹. It can be described as perception, symbolic or linguistic representation of a nation that strive for political/social recognition. Smith define nationalism as 'an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some members to constitute an actual or potential nation²

Women are often incorporated into nationalistic projects in different and contradictory ways. Nationalism, particularly in the third world post colonial terrain has been commensurate with the rise of feminism, women's movements and the construction of the 'modern' women through social and legal reforms encompassing education, marriage, inheritance laws and religious/cultural customs. Equal rights for women has been a part of this campaign, from obtaining the vote to entry into public service. Nationalism has also subordinated women, at times through this very social and legal reforms, to keep them at the boundaries of the nation by controlling their sexuality, mobility, the trope of motherhood, rights of citizenship and a variety of personal laws that became codified with the advent of the modern state³. These very boundaries of the nation have needed, for their existence, the subordination of women even as they are posited in nationalist projects as central in the grounding of the nations.

Pettman⁴, argues that "In comparing nationalist struggles internationally, we discover specificity, but also remarkable similar constructions of women in relation to nation-a-reminder that nationalism is always gendered". Although the particular histories of nationalism are each different, there are commonalties in narrative structures, state and nation-building strategies, patriarchal patterns of control, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, particularly with respect to the ways in which exclusive

national identities are constructed through gendered representations, hierarchies and narrative.

Gender in the context of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism

Gender has been and continues to be a central within dominant Sinhala Buddhist and militant Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. Women from diverse class, caste, professions, religious, ideological and ethnic backgrounds have engaged in this nationalistic project of creating the anticipated Tamil homeland⁵. Their incorporation have been different and often contradictory. On one hand women are called upon to participate in nationalist struggles in their capacity as members of the national collective and they are simultaneously constructed as 'mothers' and guardians of the nation state.

In Sri Lanka today there are women who actively take part in nationalism, as frontline combatants of nationalist/revolutionary groups. The women cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) undergo rigorous military training as their male counterparts and participate in land and sea battles. Like wise the newly appointed women cadres of the Sri Lanka army is trained for combat which is a shift from the auxiliary positions they used to hold traditionally. There were a considerable number of women in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramune (JVP) in the 1971 and 1988/89 periods. There are also women's groups such as the Kantha Vibushana Peramune who actively promote and encourage the war effort.

While actively encouraging militant nationalism women have also resisted and have been victims of such nationalism. Women have been simultaneously placed as agents in situations of political manipulation by the hegemony that over power them.

Women's bodies as the battle field

One of the key aspects of nationalism is the 'honour' of the community it strive to gain social/political recognition. The demands and expectations on women from both men and the state in this regard confirm this. The armed virgin a unique creation of the LTTE is a conformity to this ideology of honour' and 'purity' of the woman. Women's bodies have been made symbolic sites of communal, class and caste enmity. They are raped⁶, tortured and even murdered in the name of honour and shame.

Women are victimised for being wives, sisters, mothers or relatives of men who are deemed as the 'other'. In most cases such brutality have been carried out in front of

their husbands, parents or in public with the intention of breaking down their enemy or destabilising the communities these women belong to.

While inflicting such violence on women their sexuality is also used to justify the acts of brutality carried out during conflict. In the statement⁷ issued by the LTTE in regard to the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, they claimed that the woman acted in revenge for her rape by the Indian Peace Keeping Force during their occupation in Jaffna.

The JVP a Sinhala lead Marxist party which comprised mostly youth and University students from the southern parts of the country on the other hand ceased the opportunity to gain public sympathy through the Rape and murder of Premawathi Manamperi an alleged women combat during its first phase in 1971.

Both movements have entered into any sort of public dialogue about the abuse women undergo only when it suits them. In other times they maintain silence. However, it is common knowledge that the LTTE has have a policy to kill them selves if and when apprehended by the enemy by using synyde capsule. It is reported that there is a poster on the main road leading to Jaffna giving instructions to its cadres how to kill them selves when apprehended. Even in such instance it is only in the interest of the organisation and not the individual or the community.

Women as Agents

With the concept of liberation for the Tamil community, the LTTE also adopted its double liberation ideology 'Liberation for women'. Women recruited were trained and sent to the battle field and called '*birds of freedom*'⁸. They are represented as 'women fighting along side their men '.

The deployment of women never brought honour or empowered women as claimed by LTTE. It only demeaned women's positions further in a society which places virginity and self respect in high esteem. With the incidents of suicide missions carried out by women increasing, women have been subjected to increased harassment at check points and door to door searches. There have been many occasions where women have been stripped off in the guise of body searches in public. There have also been incidents where women blew themselves up at check

points. Women also face the risk of increase physical and sexual abuse by the Sri Lankan forces.

The situation was similar under the JVP. Even though it was not successful in organising themselves to extent of the LTTE and relatively had a shorter life span, they too recruited women to the organisation. As a result women especially young girls who were suspected to be cadres faced threats, abuse and rape during the crackdown period which was named "Beeshanaya". The JVP itself resorted to acts of sexual/physical harassment on women. One incident that shook the nation was the brutal torture and assassination of a woman artist named Sagarika Gomez who they claimed to have disobeyed their orders in the suburbs of Colombo

On the one hand while advocating women's liberation the LTTE also is accused of putting out a poster in Jaffna Town stating the 10 commands in the late 1984 almost when the Women's wing were created. This was signed by a group that professed interest in Tamil Culture.

The dictates were that all young women should wear traditional dress Married women should not be seen in public in house court (Jaffna housewife's often buy fish early morning from vendors on the road and come tout to do so in their house courts). That women should wear their hair long and not ride bicycles (which have traditionally been the mode of transport in Jaffna and especially helpful with the scarcity of transport facilities due to economical embargoes) Women who did not abide these commandments were threatened with being whipped.

Even though the LTTE denied these statements, two years later (1986) the following was issued by the LTTE "It is important for women to take care in their dress, in their Pottu and make-up. It doesn't' meant that we are enslaved if we dress according to tradition. Some married women say that it is expensive to wear saris. This is not acceptable. Women should dress simply, and they should not attract men by their way of dressing. Some women say it is difficult to maintain long hair. These pretensions are wrong. We are engaged in a struggle for national liberation. But the changes which have been taking place in our culture will only demean our society"⁹

Resistance- Politicising motherhood and womanhood

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, under severe and non state repression (militancy of JVP and LTTE) when Sri Lankan society was in crisis the women's movement

were compelled to stand up for the human right violations across the society. With a renewed sense of urgency these women call for an end to the war and associated violence. However, these women's groups were subject to immense hostility from the nationalistic movements such as the JVP. Women were threatened and harassed by these groups.

Recognising the potential of politicising motherhood in a situation of anarchy an organisation was formed called the Mothers Front. "mother politics" was to become an even greater force in the wake of the formation of the mothers front and its challenge to the state during the 1990-92. Earlier in 1984 a Mother's front had been formed in Jaffna to protest against the arbitrary detention of youth taking place, but was disbanded under LTTE pressure. Nelufer de Mel¹⁰ suggests that the Southern chapter of the Mothers Front can be cited as the most visible and potent women's protest movement in the history of post colonial Sri Lanka. The aims of the movement were to protest against the abduction and involuntary disappearance of persons. The mother's front engaged themselves in many ways to protest against these atrocities of the government. They demanded death certificates and compensation for those who were missing during the years. The main organisers of the movement were two MPs of the opposition party. By the 1992 there were about 25,000 members of the mothers Front. The government was disturbed by the series of protests and president Premadasa himself openly declared sympathy for the mothers whose children had been led astray by undesirable elements. He told the mothers that many of their children were being re-habilitated in the camps in which they were held. Malathi de Alwis point out that this statement of the president implies the state had taken the responsibility of bad mother hood.

Not ending here the government followed every tactics it could to prevent the activities of the Mothers Front. The second rally of the mothers Front was held Colombo on the 8th of March 1991, to coincide with the International Women's day. The government tried to ban the rally on the grounds of security threat from LTTE. The wife of the then president Mrs. Hema Premadasa held a separate rally on the same day in which women mourned the deaths of those killed by the JVP and LTTE. The government media gave much publicity to this rally. Finally in July 1992 the government responded to the challenge of the Mothers Front by inaugurating its own Mothers Front comprising UNP women mainly from the Gampaha District.

The fact that there were women who joined the second Mothers front and other organisations with similar causes is an indication to the inability of the first Mothers front to spread enough to cut across political party and social lines and recruit these other women whose children have been abducted or killed irrespective of their political party affiliations. On the other hand the mothers front also concentrated only in the Southern parts and Colombo of the Country. It did not extend its call to the central parts of the country where there were mothers who had faced similar experiences. These mothers had no platform to make their voices heard. The mothers front also was not extending its call to the JVP or the LTTE to disarm but only putting pressure on the Government who had no other option but to crack down on the JVP in the context of the violence (even though such violence cannot be justified). Therefore, the mothers front could not maintain its image of being an independent group. This is can be directly linked to the fact of the political interests of the founders of the group.

Conclusion

Gender Based Violence and Sexualised Violence that have become an integrated part of nationalist struggles can be seen as the most extreme form of patriarchal control over women's bodies. Such violence that restrain women and deny them of the most fundamental human rights of life, liberty, bodily integrity and dignity as a person. The consequence of violence inflicted and the threat of violence restricts women's lives in term of their options and choices not to mention their behaviour. The experience of violence affects their personal and family life including the community. It also results in serious health problems such as trauma and mental disorders. Sexual abuse and rape also lead to the life threatening risk of HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases, forced pregnancies, persistent gynaecological problems and some times even physical disability. The threat of violence limit women's participation in community and public life.

Where violence occur repeatedly, the experience can lead to an internalisation of guilt where women take the responsibility for the actions of the perpetrator. This psychological impact of violence affects women and instil

a sense of insecurity and lack of safety and loss of self worth which can lead to social exclusion.

A closer look at the way women have been incorporated into the nationalistic aspirations clearly shows that women have become victims in the name of ethnicity and nationalism. Women are been used as political tools to achieve nationalistic aspirations. Thus even when women have been the sites of liberal reform, it has contained a degree of instrumentalism rather than the cause of women itself. Then the question to be asked is that does nationalism associated with violence and political repression provide a platform for liberation of women?

References

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3. Nivedita Menon , "Women and Citizenship" in Partha Chatterjee (ed) Wages of Freedom: fifty years of the Indian Nation State. New Dlhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 pp 244-45
4. Pettman, J. J., (1995) Race, ethnicity and gender in Australia, in D. Stasiulis and N. Yuval Davis (eds) *Unsettling Settler Societies*. London: Sage
5. In September 1995, when several events were held in Colombo to commemorate the 10th death anniversary of Rajani Thiranagama, who was assassinated allegedly by the LTTE for her activism. Women from various groups gathered at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute on 13th September and took part in a picket at the Lipton Circus. These women comprised the Women and Media Collective, Mothers and Daughter of Sri Lanka, University Teachers for Human Rights, the movement for the Defence of Democratic rights and the National Christian Council
6. The case of Krishanthy Kumaraswamy is an example of SGBV within the context of the armed conflict which received international attention. Krishanthy an eighteen-year old A/L student was detained at the Kaithady army check point. Her mother, brother and neighbour who went in search of her also went missing. A month and a half later, t heir bodies were recovered form the Chemmani cemetery. Reports claimed that Krishanthy was gang raped and murdered by security forces.
7. De Mel, N., (2000) Women and the Nations Narrative, Gender and Nationalism in Tweintieth Century Sri Lanka pp
8. Adele Ann, Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers. Jaffna: LTTE 1993 pp. 8-9

9. Sitralega Maunaguru, "Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The construction of the Women in Projects of Protest and Control". In Pradeep Jeganathan and Ismail Quadri (eds) *Unmaking the Nation*. Colombo: Social Scientists Association 1995 p. 164
10. De Mel. N., (2000) op. Cit. pp