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**Whose Nation?
Power, Agency, Gender and Tamil
Nationalism**



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Our Liberation

What shall we gain comrades?
What shall we gain?
We stand having lost all joy and
youth
We come burdened with
trepidation and poverty
What shall we gain?

You called it liberation
You called it independence
You said it was our race
You said it was our soil

Countries have been liberated
and gained independence
Nevertheless in many countries
the people have been beggared
Comrades will we also be
beggared when we achieve our
liberation tomorrow?

We have lost everything
However, we do not want
freedom only for a few
We do not want freedom with
shackles
We shall achieve liberation only
after we shackle the animals
amongst ourselves

- Sivaramani¹

¹ C. Sivaramani, 'Our liberation' (1993) *Poems of Sivaramani* (Batticaloa: Women's Study Circle): p.8.

“I am not going to use my own pain to paint the story of our community.”

- Regini²

Introduction

Gender and Tamil nationalism have generated a significant scholarship, ranging from analyses of historical influences on the construction of the ‘ideal Tamil woman,’³ the impact of the armed conflict and displacement on Tamil women and how it has shaped their agency,⁴ to the role of the militancy in influencing women’s status within Tamil society.⁵ From Chitraleha Maunaguru’s critique of the place of women within Tamil nationalism and Radhika Coomaraswamy’s paper which challenged the LTTE’s narrative of militarisation as empowerment, to Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake’s study which argued that the armed conflict and women’s participation in the militancy have resulted in their ‘ambivalent empowerment,’ research on the subject is rich and varied. The discourse on women and Tamil nationalism has been categorised into five strands:

² Skype interview with Regini, former member of Poorani Women’s Centre, Jaffna, 31st August 2012.

³ S. Maunaguru, ‘Gender Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of “Woman” in Project of Protest and Control’ in P. Jeganathan & Q. Ismail (Eds.) (1995) *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association): pp.157-172.

⁴ D. Rajasingham-Senanayake, ‘Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict’ in R. Manchanda (Ed.) (2001) *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage): pp.102-130.

⁵ R. Coomaraswamy, ‘Tiger Women and the Question of Women’s Emancipation’ (1997) *Pravada* 4(9); T. Herath (2012) *Women in Terrorism: Case of the LTTE* (London: Sage); M. Trawick, (1996) *Combatants’ Positions: An Account from the East*, paper presented at the International Conference on the Conflict in Sri Lanka: Peace with Justice, Canberra, Australia; M. Allison (2009) *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-national Conflict* (London: Routledge).

1. The inclusion of women's questions on the agenda opened up new spaces for women within the Tamil militant movements.
2. Since nationalism functions as an over-determining factor, women's liberation cannot be achieved through national liberation.
3. Tamil society has been fundamentally changed through women taking up arms.
4. Women's agency in the nationalist movement is ambivalent.
5. The contradictory nature of women's involvement in militant movements.⁶

“Nationalism...is a gendered project”⁷ and “while nationalist movements seek to mobilise women, they do so in strictly limited ways and for strictly limited time periods.”⁸ In this gendered project, how does women's contribution to the construction of the ethno-national identity affect social relations and personal identities? Since “one's sense of the nation shifts according to one's positioning within it or outside of it,”⁹ “the various ways in which different women are ‘located’ or ‘situated’ in respect of divisions of power, violence, labour and resources will shape allegiances they have in the context of nationalism.”¹⁰ This chapter explores the experiences of women who were placed within the Tamil nation, such as LTTE combatants, and those who were placed outside it, like those who were engaged in activities that challenged the nationalist discourse, in particular the LTTE's militant form of nationalism. Although, “as social reproducers of the group members and cultural norms, women's...roles as mothers and teachers are meant to transmit family and group histories as well as cultural practices, myths, stories and values that socialise children into the imagined

⁶ R. Cheran, ‘Pathways of Dissent: An Introduction to Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka’ in R. Cheran (Ed.) (2009) *Pathways of Dissent: Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Sage): p.xii.

⁷ Maunaguru (1995): p.158.

⁸ S. Thapar-Bjorkert & L. Ryan, ‘Mother India/Mother Ireland: Comparative Gendered Dialogues of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Early 20th Century’ (2002) *Women's Studies International Forum* 25(3): p.305.

⁹ Z. Eisenstein, ‘Writing Bodies on the Nation for the Globe’ in S. Ranchod-Nilsson & M.A. Tetreault (Eds.) (2000) *Women, States and Nationalism: At Home in the Nation?* (London: Routledge): p.38.

¹⁰ Allision (2009): p.102.

identities of the group,”¹¹ women have actively subverted these roles both in support of and in challenging nationalism.

Writings on this subject have over-emphasised women’s role in the militancy, with the nationalist struggle being very often equated with the militancy.¹² In contrast, interviews conducted by the author reveal that several historical moments – such as the enactment of ‘Sinhala Only’ legislation in 1956, the introduction of standardisation policies in tertiary education, the promulgation of the 1972 Constitution, the incidents at the 1974 Tamil Research Conference, the death of Sivakumaran (the first person to commit suicide in the nationalist struggle by swallowing cyanide), and the 1983 riots – spurred women’s activism and participation in the nationalist struggle in numerous ways. This chapter therefore seeks to focus on areas previously under-researched, such as the political activism of women in parliamentary/party politics during the 1960s and 1970s, their role in youth activism, and their position within non-LTTE politico-armed groups. Through new empirical evidence this study proposes to nuance and problematise existing scholarship on women and Tamil nationalism. Since “the goals of nationalist movements, particularly for women, are not solely associated with the political structures and policies of the state but also with changes on the domestic front,”¹³ the domestic sphere as a site of political resistance will be studied. As part of this analysis, the notion of motherhood, the ways in which it has been employed by all actors involved in the national struggle, and whether (and if so, how) ‘mothers’ have subverted traditional notions and expectations to exercise agency within the restrictive boundaries to which they were relegated, will also be considered.

¹¹ M.K. Meyer, ‘*Ulster’s Red Hand: Gender, Identity, and Sectarian Conflict in Northern Ireland*’ in Ranchod-Nilsson & Tetreault (2000): p.122.

¹² R. Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham ‘*Being Tamil a Different Way: A Feminist Critique of the Tamil Nation*’ in Cheran (2009): pp. 107-138. Although Coomaraswamy and Perera Rajasingham’s paper, which focuses on ‘describing contingent moments’ when Tamil nationalist politics ‘intersects with issues of gender’ takes a broader view, it does not adequately identify women’s activism in alternate spaces which challenged and supported the various strands of Tamil nationalist activism.

¹³ S. Ranchod-Nilsson, ‘*(Gender) Struggles for the Nation: Power, Agency and Representation in Zimbabwe*’ in Ranchod-Nilsson & Tetreault (2000): p.168.

Writing in the late 1990s, Joke Schrijvers states, “Although the Sri Lankan women’s movement in all its diversity, as well as some by-products of globalisation, have created counter-discourses, the ‘traditional’ discourse is still very influential.”¹⁴ She sets out the behaviour that was demanded of ideal Tamil girls who “were expected to be obedient daughters to their parents, wives had to obey their husbands and widows their brothers and adult sons,”¹⁵ Additionally, women were required to be “chaste, caring and self-sacrificing and this was symbolically expressed in their body language and way of dress.”¹⁶ In times of war, women had to “be willing to send their husbands and sons to the battlefield for the well-being of the nation.”¹⁷ Given it is “a struggle to define what constitutes *the* national project, and women are, typically, heard less than men in this,”¹⁸ it is important to analyse how societal expectations of Tamil women shaped their ability to define the Tamil nationalist project. This chapter will also explore how gender and gender relations were articulated in the process of mobilising women for the national liberation struggle, and whether women’s participation led to fundamental changes in gender relations within Tamil society. As Judith Butler argues, “reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of re-making of gendered reality along new lines.”¹⁹ In the Tamil nationalist struggle, did the reproduction of norms in the course of women’s participation result in re-making gendered reality along new lines? Were women able to exercise agency even within very restrictive contexts, and thereby shape and even challenge the Tamil nationalist struggle?

¹⁴ J. Schrijvers, ‘Constructing “Womanhood”, “Tamilness”, and “The Refugee”’: *Internal Refugees in Sri Lanka*’ in S. Thiruchandran (Ed.) (1999) *Women, Narration and Nation: Collective Images and Multiple Identities* (Colombo: WERC): p.178.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ S. Walby, ‘*Woman and Nation*’ in G. Balakrishnan (Ed.) (1996) *Mapping the Nation* (New York: New Left Review): p.245.

¹⁹ J. Butler, ‘*Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics*’ (2009) *Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana* 4(3): p.i.

Methodology

This chapter, which draws from a broader study on Tamil women's political and civic activism, is based on primary data collected through individual interviews with persons chosen through purposive sampling. Individual interviews were conducted with 25 female and 15 male former LTTE combatants, Tamil parliamentary representatives and political party leaders, and civic and social activists. In instances where interviewees wished to be anonymous, pseudonyms have been used. Interviews were conducted in Tamil, or a mixture of Tamil and English, and transcribed into English by the author.

The primary data in this paper contains the following shortcomings, which will be rectified in the next phase of the study. Not all political party leaders were interviewed, for instance, Mr R. Sampanthan was not interviewed. The two women who were elected to Parliament in 2004, Pathmini Sithamparanathan and Thangeswary Kathiraman, were not interviewed. Of those who were politically active in the 1950s and 1960s, only Mrs Amirthalingam was interviewed. This was mainly due to difficulties locating others who have either passed away or are ill and infirm. However, a number of other persons in this category have been identified and will be approached during the next phase of the study. Of the LTTE cadres who were interviewed, only two women cadres and one male cadre were recruited in the late 80s/early 90s, while the others were recruited post-2005. Only one woman former member of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) was interviewed, while no former women cadres of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) were interviewed.

Situating Gender Issues within the Framework of Tamil Nationalism

“The TULF started this whole business with *Thamil Unnarchchi* (Tamil sentiment). Finally the boys made the TULF traitors to the Tamil cause.” – Sanmarga²⁰

Following the nineteenth century Hindu revival spearheaded by Arumuga Navalar and the construction of a collective cultural consciousness, the 1950s and 60s witnessed the growth of a Tamil nationalism which was founded on the common experience of discrimination and an uncertain future.²¹ Despite resorting to ancient historical data to support legal and political claims, Tamil nationalism is generally presented as a historically modern phenomenon, originating in the nineteenth century.²² The traditional set of grievances as articulated by Tamil politicians related to parity of the Sinhala and Tamil languages, collective and personal protection, political representation, freedom from state discrimination, access to state resources, and the cessation of state-aided colonisation in Tamil-speaking areas.

“The Tamil language has been one of the most important rallying points of the Tamil movement”²³ both because the Sinhala Only Act gave momentum to the Tamil struggle, and also as “the Tamil language as spoken in Sri Lanka...provides an identity to the Sri Lankan Tamil distinctive from his or her Tamil Nadu counterpart.”²⁴ Even though it cannot be argued that for the Sri Lankan Tamil “undoubtedly *Tamilpatru* (love of Tamil) is a state

²⁰ Interview with Sanmarga, 4th and 12th May 2012, Colombo. Sanmarga is a former member of the Mother’s Front and the Women’s Study Circle. She was also associated with Poorani women’s centre/shelter. All three entities are discussed below.

²¹ M. Rasaratnam, ‘Re-envisioning Sri Lanka’s Ethno-nationalism’ in Centre for Just Peace and Development (2006) *Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka* (Luzon, Switzerland: CJPD): p.349.

²² A. Welikala (2012) ‘*The Sub-State National Challenge in Sri Lanka: Tamil Nationalism and its Political and Legal Claims*’, unpublished, on file with author.

²³ R. Coomaraswamy, ‘*Myths Without Conscience: Tamil and Sinhalese Nationalist Writings of the 1980s*’ in C. Abeysekera & N. Gunasinghe (Eds.) (1987) *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: SSA): p.87.

²⁴ Ibid.

of mind, an exemplary habit, a way of life – indeed, the only possible condition of being,”²⁵ historically, devotion to Tamil has formed a cornerstone of Tamil parliamentary politics²⁶ and youth activism in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. For instance, Mangayatkarsi Amirthalingam, the wife of one of the leading politicians of the Federal Party,²⁷ sang only *Tamilpatru* songs during Federal Party campaigns.²⁸ When Mangayatkarsi, her husband, and others were held at the Panagoda army camp following their arrest after the 1961 *satyagraha*,²⁹ they began studying important Tamil texts to while away the time, the first of which was *Thirukkural*.³⁰ Pushparani, a political and student activist in the 1970s, in her memoir *Ahaalam* describes a number of political activists and politicians as ‘*thamil apimani*’ (Tamil devotee),³¹ while her brother Pushparaja asked his mother to console herself and be proud she sacrificed her son to the cause of Tamil.³² With the growth of militancy, the importance of the Tamil language as a basis of both rights claims as well as political mobilisation receded, with territorial and self-determination claims taking precedence.

Although the Federal Party strengthened the Tamil political project, it lost legitimacy amongst youth when it failed to “deliver political goods,”³³ leading to youth militancy. Militancy in the late

²⁵ S. Ramaswamy (1997) *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970* (Berkeley: UCLA Press): p.23.

²⁶ The campaigns of Tamil political parties in the 1970s and 1980s centred on rallying people by calling them to ‘vote for Tamil’ and for ‘*Thamil unarvu*’ (Tamil emotion/sentiment).

²⁷ The Federal Party, a Tamil political party, was formed in 1949 as breakaway faction of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC).

²⁸ Interview with Mangayatkarsi Amirthalingam, 2nd July 2012, London.

²⁹ On 21st February 1961, the Federal Party initiated a *satyagraha* (civil disobedience/non-violent campaign) against the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government for failing to honour the pre-election pledges given to the Federal Party and for taking steps to implement the Sinhala Only Act from 1st January 1961.

³⁰ *Thirukkural* is a classic poem of 1330 rhyming Tamil couplets or *kurals* that expounds on various aspects of life and is one of the most important works in the Tamil language.

³¹ S. Pushparani (2012) *Ahaalam: Memories of the Eela Struggle* (Chennai: Karuppu Pradhigal): p.63.

³² *Ibid*: p.98.

³³ Rasaratnam (2006): p.348.

1970s amongst Tamil youth culminated in the formation of several armed groups, which were led by persons from the middle class and the left who attempted to infuse socialist ideals into the liberation ideologies of these armed groups.³⁴ Following the 1983 pogrom against Tamils and the Sixth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution, which outlawed the advocacy of secession, the ascendancy of the militancy could not be stemmed. The forfeiture of parliamentary seats by Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)³⁵ MPs who refused to take the new oath of allegiance to the Sri Lankan state under the Sixth Amendment resulted in the militant brand of Tamil nationalism taking control of the struggle for the rights of the community. The rise in violence and the stepping up of terror tactics by the state also led to increased use of violence by the armed groups, and the movements “became subordinated to the compulsions of Tamil Resistance in the face of increasing state repression.”³⁶

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as the standard-bearer of Tamil nationalism, rested its claims on the existence of a historical Tamil homeland centred in the north-east of the country, which it was able to buttress by institutionalising a *de facto* state in areas it controlled. The Sinhalese nationalist viewpoint aggressively countermands this with its discourse of the unitary state, embodying the right of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority to a position of pre-eminence. Tamil nationalism is hence viewed as a defensive nationalism and not anti-Sinhalese.³⁷

The militancy led to the emasculation of the successor of the Federal Party, the TULF, which in 2004 morphed into the coalition called the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). In the post-2009, post-LTTE phase, the Tamil electorate continues to

³⁴ Cheran (2009): pp.xxxiii-xli.

³⁵ In 1972 several Tamil political groups, including the Federal Party and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, formed the Tamil United Front (TUF). The TUF changed its name to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976 with the adoption of a demand for an independent state, a ‘secular, socialist state of Tamil Eelam.’

³⁶ K. Loganathan, ‘Q & A with Kesthesh Loganathan’, *Lines*, May 2003, available at: http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art_May03/kethesh.htm (accessed 8th November 2012).

³⁷ A. J. Wilson (2000) *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism* (London: Hurst & Co.).

support the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), “the main Tamil political representative of Tamil nationalism [which] has restated its distinctive national identity based on history, ethnicity and territory, but in terms of constitutional claims, appears to have eschewed explicit separatism”³⁸ and thereby “endorsed a vision of distinctive nationality,”³⁹ albeit within the Sri Lankan state. At the same time, the TNA’s “inability to articulate a persuasive vision for constitutional accommodation, indeed even division, that the international community finds attractive, and which can be deployed to favourably distinguish itself from the hegemonic majoritarianism of the Sri Lankan state” is evidence of the triumph of the militant brand of nationalism over the parliamentary brand which was essentially constitutional.⁴⁰

Tamil Women’s Participation in Parliamentary / Party Politics:⁴¹ Present and Active but Invisible?

“If you prepare a charge sheet we (Tamil political parties) stand guilty of not providing adequate space to women within Tamil politics.” – S.C. Chandrasaran⁴²

³⁸ Welikala (2012): p.23.

³⁹ Ibid: p.38.

⁴⁰ A. Welikala, ‘*Ethnos or Demos: Questioning Tamil Nationalism*’, *Groundviews*, February 2008, available at: <http://groundviews.org/2008/02/01/ethnos-or-demos-questioning-tamil-nationalism/> (accessed 8th November 2012).

⁴¹ There was no Tamil women’s representation from 1833 to 1931 in the Legislative Council and from 1947 to 1970 in the Senate. From 1931 to date, eight women have held political office with only two women, Pathmini Sithamparanathan and Thangeeswary Kathiraman from the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi (ITAK) the main Tamil party. The other Tamil politico-armed groups such as the EPRLF, EPDP and PLOTE do not have women members who are either in positions of power within the party or are engaged in active politics. The leaders of all these parties stated that while they willing to and had even actively attempted to find women candidates to stand for local government elections, they had not been particularly successful as women were reluctant to come forward due to the prevailing political context.

⁴² Interview with S.C. Chandrasaran, 25th May 2012, Colombo. S.C. Chandrasaran is a lawyer, former Federal Party (FP) and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) member, and son of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, the founder of the FP.

It has been argued that Tamil women's political participation in the 1950s and 60s centred around the broader national question rather than on "women's empowerment or the women's question"⁴³ and was predicated on an understanding of "their place in society." Hence they "did not come forth on their own without the support of their spouses to fight for various rights."⁴⁴ Maunaguru goes further and states that women "themselves perceived their role as supporting and nurturing."⁴⁵ These observations disregard the ways in which women, sometimes unwittingly, *challenged* traditional norms while being *subject* to them. Interviewees recalled many women who participated in, and even delivered speeches at campaign meetings of the Federal Party. In most cases, their families were supporters of, or were involved with the party in some way. Although a number of them who were unmarried stopped participating upon marriage, the fact that families in a conservative, patriarchal Tamil community did not object to the political activities of young women illustrates that they were willing to bend strict social norms in the service of the community / nation, thereby creating limited space for women's political participation. Pathmavathi Veluppillai, referred to as "one of the fire-bands of the Federal Party platform"⁴⁶ and whose rhetorical skills Mangayathkarasi Amirthalingam says she observed and learnt from, and Mangala Christopher were mentioned by a number of interviewees as women who withdrew from politics upon marriage. Women who remained active in the political sphere were those who married politically active men, such as Kala Maanikkam who married Sam Tambimuttu, or those who became politically active upon marriage such as Mangayathkarasi Amirthalingam and Sarojini Yogeswaran.

Numerous interviewees identified societal expectations of women's domestic roles and their responsibilities, as one of the main factors that restricted their political participation and engagement in public life. For instance, many mentioned widows were free to participate since they were not subject to familial restrictions, indicating that perhaps more than society and family,

⁴³ Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham (2009): p.119.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Maunaguru (1995): p.161.

⁴⁶ Interview with S.C. Chandrahasan, 25th May 2012, Colombo.

restrictions on the woman's public activities were placed by the husband.

Mangayatkarsi stated that, at the time, she never did anything without her husband's approval.⁴⁷ Despite this, the narratives of others and her own account of her activities illustrate she played a considerably important, vocal and sometimes independent role in Federal Party politics. Pushparani in her memoirs recalls that, in response to the Tamil Youth League's⁴⁸ criticism of the Federal Party's moderate politics, Mangayatkarsi angrily chastised them because they were criticising the party on its own platform.⁴⁹ Pushparani also states Mangayatkarsi exacerbated the conflict between the Tamil United Front and the Youth League⁵⁰, which sought to function independent of Tamil political parties, by attempting to portray the League as part of the TUF. She is said to have done this by stating at public meetings that the League was founded by those who while being part of the League were also members of the TUF⁵¹ According to Mangayatkarsi, at the time, wives accompanied their husbands only during campaigns in their own electorates, whereas she used to campaign actively in all electorates. Mangayatkarsi is also portrayed as someone who encouraged other women to become actively involved in the Federal Party. Pushparani for instance says Mangayatkarsi encouraged her to speak at public meetings.⁵² Working within what she perceived to be a limited sphere does not appear to have restricted Mangayatkarsi's active participation nor prevented her taking the lead in several instances.

⁴⁷ Interview with Mangayatkarsi Amirthalingam, 2nd July 2012, London

⁴⁸ The Tamil Youth League (*Tamil Ilaignar Peravai*), the progenitor of many of the armed groups, was formed in 1973.

⁴⁹ Pushparani (2012): p.63.

⁵⁰ Although the conflict was said to be between the Tamil United Front (TUF) – the alliance of Tamil political parties formed after the promulgation of the 1972 Constitution – and the Youth League, in reality it was between the main constituent party of the TUF, the Federal Party, and the Youth League. In 1976, the TUF became the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). The Youth League sought to function independently of the TUF but members of the League who were also members of the TUF were reportedly not in agreement with this decision, which caused internal dissension.

⁵¹ Ibid: p.66.

⁵² Ibid: p.44.

Women who engaged in political activism within Tamil party politics unwittingly transgressed, and thereby challenged, traditional norms that placed restrictions on their agency.⁵³ Mangayatkarsi who participated in the ‘Sri’ campaign in 1958⁵⁴ not only fed her toddler son in the car during the protests, but was also arrested and produced in court. In 1961 when the *satyagrahis* were arrested after the imposition of a curfew, she was the only woman to be arrested. Mangayatkarsi’s political participation did not escape criticism and vilification through gender-specific attacks, such as Minister Cyril Matthew’s speech in Parliament in which he queried,

“What are her desires that she wants to express? Is she a maniac? Is she a megalomaniac or is she a nymphomaniac? What is wrong with this woman? Can no one control her mouth? Has the husband not the potency to control her or not? Has he control over her tongue or any other organ?...If none of them can control her, if nothing else can control her, in the name of heaven, I appeal to them, poke a living feathery cock-bird into her mouth so that the muzzled crowing of the cock bird will at least smother the vituperations that come out of her throat. That alone will stop her.”⁵⁵

While attacking her, Matthew also excoriates Amirthalingam by pointing to his inability to ‘control’ Mangayatkarsi, thereby depicting her as an uncontrollable, unruly force that should be subject to masculine control. According to Mangayatkarsi, she encountered opposition within the Federal Party too, with those critical of her casting aspersions on her moral character. Gendered attacks which sought to silence her continued in the

⁵³ This will be discussed further in the section on domestic space and motherhood, below.

⁵⁴ In late 1957, the introduction by the government of the Sinhala ‘Sri’ character on the number plates of all vehicles in the country was met with strong opposition by Tamil people. In response, the Federal Party organised an ‘anti-Sri’ campaign, with participants applying tar on the ‘Sri’ character on vehicles in the north of the country.

⁵⁵ Quoted in S. Sri Kantha, ‘On Mrs Mangayarkarsi Amirthalingam: Her Tongue and her Dirge Song’ (2010) *Illankai Tamil Sangam*, available at: http://www.sangam.org/2010/10/Mangayarkarsi_Amirthalingam.php?uid=4086 (accessed 8th November 2012).

post-LTTE era. In 2010, Mangayathkarasi was subjected to severe criticism by Tamil nationalists who resorted to gendered attacks in response to her statements that were critical of the LTTE. Satchi Sri Kantha for instance declared,

“It seems that, for the past 21 years, she has been singing only one dreadful dirge song (*oppari*)...it is certainly not to the benefit of Eelam Tamils. In Tamil culture dirge song was acceptable for a widow, for an year or two. But, to continue singing this dirge song repeatedly sickens the listeners.”⁵⁶

The criticism which made her a traitor to the Tamil cause focused on her widowed status.

While there appears to have been some awareness on the part of Tamil political parties of the need to enlist women’s support and participation in political activity, interviewees suggest it was done mainly with utilitarian aims. A former member of the Women’s Front of the Federal Party stated that the party included women in order to garner more votes and because they required women’s participation in the non-violent struggle in which they were engaged, and not due to a commitment to increasing women’s political participation. According to Chandrahasan, the Federal Party knew it had to involve women in certain campaigns, such as the campaign to eradicate caste discrimination, since it was mainly women who dealt with household help and were responsible for activities in which there was interaction with persons from depressed castes. They therefore knew the campaign would not be successful unless women acquiesced. A similar strategy was used by Mahatma Gandhi who included women in campaigns to eradicate untouchability and child marriage. Suresht Bald argues that, “Most encounters with Bhangis (sweepers) occurred in the home when they came to clean the latrines...and because women were the family cooks, inter-caste dining would be difficult without their cooperation. For his reforms to succeed therefore, Gandhi needed to win women over

⁵⁶ Ibid.

to his cause.”⁵⁷ Chandrahasan further stated that it is the woman within a family who influences the thinking of the house and “play[s] a very dominant role,” which though “not loud is very, very crucial.” His thoughts are mirrored in Bald’s analysis of Gandhi’s enlistment of women, which he claims was done because Gandhi felt “it was their natural traits and traditional role that...made them suitable for the ‘battle’ to gain access to temples for the untouchables.”⁵⁸ Likewise, Tamil political parties remained within traditional boundaries when enlisting women’s participation; women however, exercised agency even within these restrictive spaces.

It has been argued that, “women’s political activities are typically more local than those of men, and less nationalist,”⁵⁹ which seems to have been the case of the Women’s Front of the Federal Party, which visited marginalised communities, cleaned the environs in those areas and created awareness on sanitation and health. Even though the Women’s Front focused largely on ‘soft’ tasks that were not overtly political, they were mobilising the vote-base at the grassroots. Hence, the Federal Party, while restricting women’s political activism to activities considered ‘socially acceptable,’ inadvertently entrusted women with the task of mobilising a constituency which historically was not their traditional vote-base, since the leaders of the traditional Tamil political parties were from the bourgeoisie or middle class and were not very successful at mobilising the peasantry and the depressed/marginalised castes.⁶⁰

The historical inability of Tamil political parties to acknowledge women’s concerns and provide space for their political participation continues to date. A former member of the Federal Party’s Women’s Front who later joined a politico-armed group said that, even though she personally felt women’s issues were important, they were not explicitly identified as concerns of the Tamil people or addressed by the party. Similarly, Pushparani states that during conflict between the Federal Party and the

⁵⁷ S. R. Bald, ‘*The Politics of Gandhi’s “Feminism”: Constructing “Sitas” for Swaraj*’ in Ranchod-Nilsson & Tetreault (2000): p.89.

⁵⁸ Ibid: p.91.

⁵⁹ Walby (1996): p.248.

⁶⁰ Cheran (2009): p.xxxiii.

Youth League, Mr Amirthalingam told women members of the Youth League that it was safer to function within the women's wing of the party rather than the League.⁶¹ This illustrates both a protective, paternal attitude towards women activists and an attempt to restrict their activities to a controlled space within the confines of the Federal Party. The perception of the role of women in public life is illustrated by the statement of senior politician and leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), V. Anandasangaree, who, speaking of the lack of women's participation and activism in the 1950s to 1970s, stated that although at the time many women were educated, they were "shy to speak on stage" and hence were not visible in Federal Party politics. This is contradicted by a photograph in Pushparani's book, in which Anandasangaree is speaking on stage with three women, assumed to be the other speakers, seated on stage. This illustrates the invisibility of women within Tamil party politics even when they are in public.

Youth Activism: Pushing the Margins of Conservative Tamil Society

Student activism in the 1970s and 1980s was very vibrant within the Tamil community. The state policy on standardisation in tertiary education, giving primacy to Buddhism in the constitution, and Sinhala colonisation, were cited as factors that pushed scores of young persons to become politically active.⁶² The Tamil Youth League, the leading youth organisation during the 1970s, sought to engage in mass civic mobilisation through political activism and build the Tamil national armed struggle based on the support of the people.⁶³ The high visibility of women in the youth movement⁶⁴ acted as a catalyst for women's engagement in political activities during this period. This is demonstrated by a photograph of a Youth League rally held in May 1973 in Jaffna, which is discussed in Pushparani's book. In the photograph, a

⁶¹ Pushparani (2012): p.70.

⁶² Ibid: p.46.

⁶³ Ibid: p.47.

⁶⁴ Pushparani's account of her participation contains an entire chapter dedicated to women who were active in the youth movement at the time.

five-year old girl and a seven-year old girl appear with their mouths covered by black cloth.⁶⁵ These girl children are identified as 'Kulam akka's children,' illustrating that not only did women participate in political rallies but also brought their children to public events and protests, thereby challenging the strict demarcation between the public and private spheres, and traditional notions of motherhood and child-rearing.

Women in the youth movement were politically aware and very conscious of the barriers they faced due to social restrictions. Pushparani acknowledges that initially she encountered difficulty participating in the activities of the Tamil Youth League, because as a woman, she could not travel freely to distant areas or go out when she wished.⁶⁶ Restrictions on the freedom of movement of women were pointed out by Gnanasakthy (Raaji), a former member of the Women's League of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), whose family was upset when she did not return home until well after dark, for which she was chastised, after attending the funeral of S.J.V Chelvanayakam, the leader of the TULF in 1977. She says her mother was concerned because they lived in a middle class area and neighbours would gossip if she was seen arriving home after dark. Going to cemeteries to attend funerals of public figures and student leaders, such as Sivakumaran, was identified by a number of interviewees⁶⁷ as an important, and sometimes first step, towards breaking traditional barriers. Young women also faced discrimination from within youth groups. Gnanasakthy, while speaking of visiting disadvantaged communities with a now-senior TNA politician, who at the time was a member of the Tamil Youth League, said that he lacked awareness on issues of concern to women and women's empowerment, and viewed everything within the framework of the 'national' issue. Likewise, Pushparani in her account mentions that one of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation's (TELO)⁶⁸ main leaders, Thangamahendiran,

⁶⁵ Pushparani (2012): p.51.

⁶⁶ Ibid: p.49.

⁶⁷ Ibid: p. 57; author's interviews with Gnanasakthy, 30th May 2012, Colombo, and Skype interview, 3rd September 2012; Angayatkanni, 2nd July 2012, London; Samudra, 15th and 19th May 2012, Sri Lanka.

⁶⁸ The TELO was a militant group many of whose membership was killed by the LTTE during internecine violence in 1986. It now functions as a political party.

completely disregarded the opinions of women members and seldom paid any regard to their opinions.⁶⁹

Despite these restrictions, the activism of young women is noteworthy and points to their ability to exercise agency even within environments that were not entirely conducive to women's political participation and civic activism. Samudra,⁷⁰ who began working with the Student's Organisation of Liberation Tigers (SOLT), the student's wing of the LTTE, in 1987 at the age of twelve, is a case in point. She was one of thirty-two students, who along with Thileepan⁷¹, demonstrated outside the Jaffna Fort by lying down on the sand for more than six hours to prevent the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka J. N. Dixit's departure from the Fort during his visit to Jaffna in protest at the stationing of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the north. During her time with SOLT she attended mandatory classes on politics, history, documentation and preparing documentaries, organised by the LTTE, which she says led her activism at the time to be shaped by the Tamil nationalist discourse. Samudra's memories of power dynamics between men and women within SOLT are largely positive. For instance, she said it was evident that even though Bharathy, the head of SOLT's women's wing, held a lower position in the organisational hierarchy than Aravinthan, the head of SOLT, she was treated with respect as an equal because she was articulate and did not shy away from voicing her opinions. Samudra mentions several key moments to demonstrate the participation of young women in the youth movement connected to the militancy, one of which is the funeral of LTTE members Pulendran and Kumarappa,⁷² held at Theeruvil in which over 100,000 people participated. At this event, Samudra,

⁶⁹ Pushparani (2012): p.179.

⁷⁰ Interview with Samudra, 15th and 19th May 2012, Sri Lanka.

⁷¹ Rasaiah Parthipan (Thileepan), the LTTE political wing leader in the Jaffna peninsula at the time, initiated a fast-unto-death campaign in 1987 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was stationed in the north, appealing to the Indian government of Premier Rajiv Gandhi to honour the pledges made to the Tamil people when the Indo-Lanka Accord was signed.

⁷² Pulendran and Kumarappa swallowed cyanide and committed suicide after being arrested by the IPKF and were in the process of being taken to Colombo for interrogation in 1987.

along with young school girls, was responsible for many aspects of the event.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the political activism of young women, which was often linked to the militancy, challenged traditional understandings of the conservative nature of Tamil society. When asked whether families of the young women who were part of SOLT were concerned about their physical security or social censure, Samudra said that most families of her friends, including her own, were mainly concerned their children were not dedicating adequate time and attention to their education, rather than about their physical security or community gossip. Although it could be argued that the Tamil national cause coupled with the asexual environment created by the LTTE's puritanical rules could be the reason for this attitude, further research and study is required to ascertain the factors that created space within the Tamil community to enable young women to break away and move beyond traditional boundaries.

Women and Tamil Militancy: Victims, Collaborators, or Agents of their own Destiny?

The militancy is said to have awakened the consciousness of the Tamil community⁷³ and bridged existing caste and class divides.⁷⁴ According to Wilson, with this process the Tamil community began "the process of reconstruction."⁷⁵ The suffering and pain experienced by the community both as a result of the policies and actions of the state, and the resulting Tamil militancy, is said to have united the community, with the results of war valorised, and posited as events which led to the resurgence of Tamil consciousness amongst the people. There is however a different account advanced by those such as the authors of the *Broken Palmyrah*, which conveyed the militancy "as largely aimless and as

⁷³ Wilson (2000).

⁷⁴ R. Philips, 'Tamil Politics III: Kinship, Caste and the Diaspora in Tamil Nationalism' (2007) *Transcurrents*, available at: <http://transcurrents.com/tamiliana/archives/448> (accessed on 8th November 2012).

⁷⁵ Wilson (2000): p.166.

the work of ill-prepared and misguided youth.”⁷⁶ In this context, did women’s activism related to the militancy and women taking up arms, cause fundamental changes within Tamil society?

Women in the LTTE: Making a distinction between rhetoric and reality

“Everything came back to Pirapaharan. All issues related to women, whether it be the creation of widows, or the fact that women could walk freely on the street at midnight, were due to him.” – Paarthipan, former senior male cadre.⁷⁷

“My leader was a righteous person (*sariyaai irunthaar*). I have love for my leader – a love that is intertwined with love for the community (*samookam saarntha kaadhal*). Even now, I see the love I have for my leader as the purest form of love.” – Sulochana, former senior woman cadre.⁷⁸

Historically, the LTTE has portrayed women who participated in the militancy as courageous warriors. These women, by assuming masculine traits “become warriors to defend the nation in two ways. One, by protecting national possessions (goods and land) and two by fending off attacks on their bodies.”⁷⁹ The June 1990 edition of *Viduthalai Puligal*, the official newspaper of the LTTE, proclaims that in the past Tamil women placed *pottu* in blood on the foreheads of departing warriors, whereas now, the blood-soaked bodies of women have blessed the movement to continue the Tamil Eelam struggle. In the January 1994 edition of *Viduthalai Puligal*, women combatants are described as fighting without fear, making their contribution to the *Thamil Thaaai* (mother) and creating history. Using a gendered lens, this section

⁷⁶ R. Vaitheespara, ‘Towards Understanding Militant Tamil Nationalism in Cheran (2009): p.38.

⁷⁷ Interview with Paarthipan, 5th and 28th April and 5th September 2012, Sri Lanka.

⁷⁸ Interview with Sulochana, 3rd July 2012, London.

⁷⁹ S. Banerjee, ‘Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India’ (2003) *Women’s Studies International Forum* 26(2): pp.168-169.

will study the position of women within the militancy, and whether and how the LTTE's brand of militant nationalism has impacted on the empowerment and agency of Tamil women, both within and outside the movement.

According to Paarthipan, Veluppillai Pirapaharan, the leader of the LTTE, took a protective, paternal view towards women and believed that because women challenged conservative social norms by joining the militancy and were fighting for the Tamil nation, they had to be given more leeway than male cadres. Tamara Herath's research echoes this when she says that women who had grown up in the movement "placed an implicit trust in the organisation to attend to their needs justly, in the same way that they might expect a consanguine parent would."⁸⁰ She further states that one of her interviewees "placed the LTTE family in a position of a mother – a person who cared, provided and protected those that were born of her."⁸¹

Existing scholarship on the LTTE's position on, and handling of a number of issues, such as violence against women and control of sexuality, argues that women's agency "is still within the framework of a militarized environment and therefore restricted in its manifestations."⁸² Radhika Coomaraswamy and Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham for instance state that the LTTE's approach to violence against women "appears to resemble 'law and order feminism'. The emphasis is on punishment and deterrence."⁸³ While the LTTE was a proponent of using punishment and fear of punishment as a means to effect what they considered social change, there is evidence that the LTTE's approach was not as straightforward as it appeared. An article on the LTTE's stance on violence against women which appeared in the January-February 1992 issue of *Viduthalai Puligal* focuses on an act of violence perpetrated against a woman on the street in public view. The piece recognises violence is an issue of power and states that the intent of the man was to punish and shame the woman, and take revenge. It points to the man's higher socio-economic status

⁸⁰ Herath (2012): p.105.

⁸¹ Ibid: p.106.

⁸² Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham (2009): p.128.

⁸³ Ibid: p.130.

and his resultant belief that he could do anything to the woman with impunity. At the same time, the article reiterates the woman's freedom of choice to either reject or accept the man's advances, and states that society's view of women as second-class citizens who were created solely to fulfil the wishes of men, has to be eradicated. Although the article further states that the LTTE wants women to play an equal role in society, it relapses into a 'law and order feminist' approach that focuses on draconian laws and punishment as the solution, when it notes that the LTTE showed no mercy to the man and refused to give him permission to sit an exam. It goes on to say that the perpetrator's family resorted to casting aspersions on the woman's character in an attempt to justify the man's actions. The piece concludes by declaring violence against women is an ugly manifestation of patriarchy that is embedded within Tamil society since time immemorial. The LTTE's approach is therefore contradictory; although its understanding of violence, like feminist discourse on the issue, recognises sexual and gender-based violence as an issue of power and patriarchy which requires change in societal attitudes towards women, it seems to view penal sanctions as the main means of eradicating such violence.

The experience of a woman community activist employed by a non-governmental organisation, who worked in the LTTE controlled areas after the 2002 ceasefire agreement, illustrates other dimensions of the manner in which the LTTE dealt with violence against women. When the activist approached Thamilini, the leader of the women's wing of the political division of the LTTE, to discuss issues of violence against women, initially Thamilini denied it was a problem in the Vanni. The activist therefore documented cases of violence against women in the Vanni,⁸⁴ ironically enough with the assistance of the Centre for Women's Development (CWD), a community group that was linked to the LTTE Women's Political Wing, which she presented

⁸⁴ The community activist stated that the LTTE could not have been unaware of these cases since they had intelligence officers posted in every village. The explanation could be that the intelligence officers were not entirely gender sensitised and did not always think the cases were worth reporting. It could also be that even if Thamilini had known about the prevalence of SGBV issues, the LTTE did not wish to acknowledge it publicly for fear of losing face and bringing disrepute upon the Tamil community.

to Thamilini as evidence of the existence of sexual and gender-based violence, following which her organisation was allowed to implement a campaign against violence against women in the Vanni. Hence, despite its rhetoric on the issue, the LTTE exhibited great reluctance in acknowledging that sexual and gender-based violence was a problem. Regardless, the activist stated that people generally felt very comfortable complaining to the LTTE of cases of violence against women. She recalled in Jaffna (when the LTTE was in control until 1995) even those who did not support or like the LTTE complained to them of such cases. The LTTE, which reportedly had special offices managed entirely by women at which such complaints could be made, was very conscious of maintaining confidentiality and treated victims of violence with respect. According to her, the LTTE's consciousness of the vulnerability of women to violence, particularly during times of conflict and disaster is illustrated by the fact that after the tsunami, male and female (LTTE) police officers were posted at each internally displaced persons' (IDPs) camp on a twenty-four hour basis. Therefore, on the one hand, the LTTE was reluctant to publicly acknowledge that violence against women was a problem in the Vanni and instead functioned on the belief that long-term change was achievable mainly through coercive sanctions. Hence, it did not focus on changing social beliefs and entrenched patriarchal values by creating awareness with the aim of effecting substantive and long-term social change. On the other hand, the LTTE appeared to be aware of the causes of violence, including socio-cultural factors, and responded by establishing processes to provide support to women who were affected by sexual and gender-based violence.

Since "The female/maternalised body becomes the site for viewing the nation"⁸⁵ and "...is an imaginary site that is wholly naturalized through the symbolization of the female body,"⁸⁶ it is useful to examine the LTTE's perception of the female body and the way in which it shaped the Tamil nationalist discourse and militancy. During the last phase of the armed conflict, and following that, the mass displacement of people from the Vanni who were held in closed camps by the government, the LTTE

⁸⁵ Eisenstein (2000): p.43.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

engaged in vigorous propaganda about mass rapes of Tamil women by Sinhala soldiers and the performance of forced abortions.⁸⁷ This is unsurprising considering the LTTE has historically utilised the figure of the Tamil woman, subjected to sexual violence and in need of protection, as its main tool to mobilise women to join the armed struggle. Several interviewees who lived in Jaffna in the 1980s recalled the LTTE's propaganda that rape was a tool used by the Sinhala state in ethnic cleansing.⁸⁸ At the same time, at the level of policy and rhetoric, the LTTE challenged traditional norms which stigmatise women who have been or might have been subjected to sexual violence. A short story in the June 1990 issue of *Viduthalai Puligal* is about a young woman who was arrested and detained by the IPKF, and the impact it had on her life and life chances. Not surprisingly, being detained by the IPKF leads to the break-up of the woman's arranged marriage, which was to take place. The main argument of the story is that detention of women leads to their stigmatisation by society due to the application of double standards. The story queries whether the woman will ever be free from the social oppression of her own people, even though she was freed from detention by the IPKF.

The rape of women cadres, however, is never mentioned in LTTE literature or propaganda because it would have directly challenged the LTTE's rhetoric that militarisation leads to empowerment and enables a woman to protect herself. On the one hand, violence against women was normalised by the LTTE by its reluctance to name it as such,⁸⁹ evidenced by Thamilini's denial of the existence of violence against women in the Vanni. On the other hand, the LTTE, by naming the violence perpetrated against women and using it as a propaganda tool contributed to the stigmatisation of women. All this was done while the LTTE, at the level of rhetoric, challenged patriarchal

⁸⁷ During the last stages of the war in early 2009, websites such as TamilNet published many such stories.

⁸⁸ Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham state that, "the LTTE's fear of the rape of women – the rape of the nation – has prompted them to demand that their female cadres commit suicide rather than be captured by the enemy." It should be noted the LTTE required both male and female cadres to commit suicide to avoid capture, p.126.

⁸⁹ Eisenstein (2009): p.47.

notions of purity and chastity that exacerbated the adverse impact of violence, through articles such as those in *Viduthalai Puligal*. These seeming contradictions are the result of the LTTE using every possible strategy in its quest to build the Tamil nation, with the empowerment of women taking second place to the larger nationalist project.

Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham argue that the LTTE's understanding of sexuality was based on Arumuga Navalar's concept of Tamil women as "chaste, protected and necessarily married."⁹⁰ They use the well-known incident of the ouster of Uma Maheswaran⁹¹ from the LTTE for reportedly transgressing the rules of the LTTE on sexual conduct by engaging in a relationship with Urmila, as a case in point. Several instances reveal the LTTE's puritanical rules on sexuality were used as a tool/strategy to further both the nationalist cause and also reinforce the authority of Pirapaharan. For instance, contrary to Adele Balasingham's narrative on the Uma Maheswaran-Urmila incident, which has been used as the authoritative narrative by researchers, a number of interviewees pointed to the supposed relationship between Maheswaran and Urmila being used as a means to oust Maheswaran from the organisation as he was viewed as a threat by Pirapaharan. While one interviewee who knew Urmila stated that to her knowledge there was no relationship between Urmila and Maheswaran, another interviewee stated, "At the time there were issues between *thambi*⁹² and Uma Maheswaran – it was not due to policy or ideological differences but was an ego clash. Where *thambi* was concerned, he wanted to be the first and only leader. The split was a result of it."⁹³

The LTTE's rules on sexual conduct were used strategically to control cadres. A former senior cadre pointed to the case of the

⁹⁰ Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham (2009): p.131.

⁹¹ Uma Maheswaran was the chairman of the LTTE until his ouster from the organisation by Pirapaharan in 1980. Following this, he founded the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

⁹² Pirapaharan was often referred to as '*thambi*', i.e. younger brother, by those who were his contemporaries in the militancy.

⁹³ Interview with Sithadthan, leader of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), 8th May 2012, Colombo.

killing of Pirapaharan's bodyguard Thiyaku, who during the latter part of 1988 began a relationship with a woman resulting in the woman becoming pregnant. When Pirapaharan came to know of it, he summoned Thiyaku to the LTTE's camp in the jungles of Weli Oya in the North Central Province, along with the woman, and shot and killed both. He reportedly did so because the relationship was conducted at a camp at which he himself lived, and he felt that if he failed to take action his authority would be undermined, as it would be perceived he was unaware of what was taking place in an environment over which he had supposed to have complete control. It could be argued that the LTTE's puritanical rules on sexual behaviour were also used to create an environment which was conducive for the participation of women; an environment that would be acceptable to conservative Tamil society. This is a strategy which was employed by Mahatma Gandhi, who "insisted that men treat women as if they were mothers or sisters. His downplaying of sex made women feel safer working with male satyagrahis."⁹⁴ Similarly, puritanical rules on sexual conduct enabled the LTTE to address societal concerns that Tamil women were rebelling against Tamil culture by joining the militancy. This is supported by Peter Schalk who states that by constraining sexuality, and portraying women as armed virgins, the LTTE was able to justify their inclusion in the armed struggle.⁹⁵

The notion of chastity still holds value in Tamil society. Mangala, a former LTTE combatant, stated that during flight from LTTE areas to government controlled areas during the last stages of the war, women married unknown Tamil men to be 'safe' as they prized chastity and feared they would be subjected to sexual violence by Sinhala soldiers. She went on to say, "I'm a Tamil woman in the Vanni. I need my chastity to be protected. One can live without food for even a month but one cannot live without chastity." Another former combatant who is more politicised than Mangala (and held a senior position within the organisation)

⁹⁴ Bald (2000): p.95.

⁹⁵ P. Schalk (1992) *Birds of Independence: On the Participation of Tamil Women in Armed Struggle* (Colombo: Lanka): pp.103-106.

echoed this when she said, “worldwide Tamil women are known for their *katpu* (chastity), for protecting their *katpu*.”⁹⁶

Where decision-making within the LTTE was concerned, Herath states women were members of the LTTE Central Committee and hence during the ceasefire years played a role in decision making.⁹⁷ Although this is contradicted by former senior male cadre Paarthipan,⁹⁸ perhaps structures were formalised following the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement with women being included in decision-making bodies to construct a certain image of the organisation, particularly amongst the international community. According to Paarthipan, the heads of all divisions (sea tigers, intelligence, etc.) were men but most divisions also had a women’s wing. This does not mean women exercised no agency, because although Herath states that “none of the women combatants interviewed said that they had the authority to direct men in any strategic or policy-led matters,”⁹⁹ the January 1994 issue of *Viduthalai Puligal* states that in Operation Frog, which was an attack on the Poonekary base of the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), for the first time, women engaged in espionage and were responsible for all aspects of the mission, after making direct appeals to Pirapaharan to be allowed to do so. This was confirmed by Paarthipan. Despite these moments of agency, it appears Pirapaharan was viewed by women cadres themselves as “the midwife of their agency.”¹⁰⁰ When Thamilini gave permission to a non-governmental organisation to implement a campaign on violence against women, she told the community activist she was doing so because *anna*¹⁰¹ (Pirapaharan) had told the women’s division it was important to get involved in such initiatives. Another community activist stated that in 2003 when her organisation offered to support the LTTE on raising awareness about gender issues, she was turned down by Thamilini who

⁹⁶ Interview with Mangala, 25th February 2011, Jaffna.

⁹⁷ Herath (2012): p.176.

⁹⁸ Paarthipan left the LTTE in the late 1990s.

⁹⁹ Herath (2012): p.177.

¹⁰⁰ N. de Mel, ‘Agent of Victim? The Sri Lankan Woman Militant in the Interregnum’, in N. de Mel (Ed.) (2001) *Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Colombo: SSA): p.222.

¹⁰¹ Most cadres referred to Pirapaharan as ‘anna’, i.e. older brother.

stated “*thalaiwar* (leader) has given us full equality and there is absolutely no problem related to gender in the Vanni.”¹⁰²

It appears the LTTE itself was not unaware of the challenges involved in changing societal perceptions of women’s position in society and their rights. The March 1994 issue of *Viduthalai Puligal* states that it cannot be said that much has changed within the family where the status of women is concerned, or with regard to awareness of feminism. The LTTE’s ideologue Anton Balasingham for instance is reported to have referred to women bearing arms and said,

“*penn viduthalai ithu illai*” (this is not women’s emancipation). Merely giving uniforms and weapons to women doesn’t mean they have been empowered. Hence, it is not complete empowerment but the first step. You and your leader think that by bringing laws through the gun it is going to bring about change in society; you need to change their mind set.”¹⁰³

Even within the movement, it is clear not all cadres were able to accept women’s participation in the struggle. Margaret Trawick¹⁰⁴ and Adele Balasingham¹⁰⁵ mention this, which a cadre named Jayanthi confirms in an interview published in the December 1990 issue of *Viduthalai Puligal*.

Post-2009, women combatants who have been held at rehabilitation centres suffer stigma and discrimination. Due to being subjected to continued surveillance by the Sri Lankan Army, these women are viewed as possibly dangerous, and even thought to act as informants. There is also a perception these women were, or continue to be sexually abused by the armed forces. Mangala pointed out that since many people do not know that women

¹⁰² Interview with Shanthi Satchithanathan, 11th May 2012, Colombo.

¹⁰³ Interview with Paarthipan, 5th and 28th April and 5th September 2012, Sri Lanka.

¹⁰⁴ Trawick (1996): p.12

¹⁰⁵ A. Balasingham (1993) *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* (Jaffna: Thasan Printers). Re-published on Sangam.org, available at: http://www.sangam.org/2011/10/Women_Fighters.php?uid=4495&print=true- (accessed 8th November 2012).

were in charge of rehabilitation centres at which women cadres were held, they believe women who were held at these centres were sexually abused. She further stated any behaviour considered to contravene strict social expectations of how women should behave, for instance receiving a lift from an unknown man, would result in gossip about her 'character,' an euphemism for sexual chastity. Another former combatant Kanchana said her relatives were advising her parents to arrange a marriage for her since keeping her at home as a single woman would lead to problems. Ironically, when her parents arranged a marriage with a relative, after initially agreeing to the match they later withdrew, citing her visits to the army camp to sign-in every week¹⁰⁶ as the reason. Shanthini, another former cadre who spent time at the government-run rehabilitation centre, said that while it was easier for educated women to find employment and build a life for themselves, former combatants who are not educated face innumerable problems and are forced to give large dowries in order to find a match. Paradoxically, at the same time, there is a perception, particularly amongst young Tamil men, that former cadres are very brave, skilled and also 'strict,' a reference to their adherence to strict social norms on sexual behaviour indicating that chastity continues to be valued in Tamil society.

Many former women cadres, even those who were forcibly recruited, expressed fear they would now have to 'go back to being traditional women' following the end of the war. Mangala for instance said she had more freedom in the LTTE than at home. Another former cadre expressed the same concerns and pointed to her young neighbour asking her why she climbed a wall to cut a tree in her yard instead of hiring a man to undertake the task, as evidence of society's adherence to patriarchal notions of behaviour deemed acceptable in women. The 'ambivalent empowerment'¹⁰⁷ experienced by, and transgressive agency exercised by women within the LTTE is illustrated by Sulochana, a former senior cadre's statement, "one day a person will be on the battle field and the next day the person will be involved in

¹⁰⁶ Those who were held at so-called rehabilitation centres for former LTTE cadres are required to visit the local army camp or civil affairs office (civil-military liaison office run by the army) to sign-in weekly, fortnightly or monthly according to the diktat of the local army commander.

¹⁰⁷ Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001).

political activities. If they are told to go to a certain division they have to go. Because of it we have a wide experience of different tasks and have developed varied skills.”¹⁰⁸

Women in non-LTTE armed groups: One step forward, two steps back?

“The women came for the nationalist project. Whether they were fully aware about the political consequences, I don’t know. They thought they were going to get Eelam – which was Tamils ruling themselves – very simple.” – Shanthi¹⁰⁹

“It is Tamil nationalism that pushed me to this extent. We didn’t have opportunities to mould Tamil nationalism to become more inclusive of women.” – Angayatkanni¹¹⁰

Since scholarship on women’s role in the militancy has focused primarily on women in the LTTE, the participation of women who were members of other armed groups has not been studied. This section will therefore focus on women within the EPRLF and PLOTE. Admittedly, there are gaps in the research as only one woman cadre and another woman who taught political classes for the EPRLF, and one woman member of EROS were interviewed. The leaders of PLOTE and EPRLF were also interviewed. Although other former women PLOTE and EPRLF cadres have been identified, they are yet to be interviewed.

A number of common threads bind the experience of women cadres of non-LTTE groups. Firstly, EPRLF and PLOTE made a conscious decision to recruit women cadres, but faced censure both from society and also the LTTE, which used the presence of women within these groups to belittle the groups and accuse them of sexual impropriety. For instance, the LTTE printed pamphlets

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Sulochana, 3rd July 2012, London.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Shanthi Satchithanathan, 11th May 2012, Colombo.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Angayatkanni, 2nd July 2012, London. Angayatkanni was a political activist and member of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS).

which accused the EPRLF of abusing its women cadres and spread rumours¹¹¹ about sexual immorality within the non-LTTE groups, which it claimed was causing cultural decimation and thereby bringing disrepute upon the Tamil struggle.¹¹² When the LTTE began hunting members of the other groups, women within these groups not only lacked the support of their groups but also their families since many had left their families when they joined the militancy and could not return home. Following internecine violence, it seems the community also largely began to view non-LTTE armed groups as ‘illegitimate,’ and hence women members of these groups were stigmatised. This holds true even today, since in comparison to former women LTTE members, women who were members of the non-LTTE groups are extremely reluctant to acknowledge they were ever members of these groups.

a. EPRLF

“When the LTTE banned the EPRLF the women were caught between the government, society and the LTTE.” – Gnanasakthy (Raaji)¹¹³

Initially, women in the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) engaged only in political work due to the group’s decision that only women who were politically aware would be sent abroad for military training. Following the 1983 riots when women joined the group in droves, a decision was made to provide military training in Sri Lanka to all women cadres. This led to considerable conflict within the EPRLF because some members were of the opinion that recruitment should be done slowly, with only those who were politically sensitised sent for military training. Others felt people could be recruited first and politicised in stages. Gnanasakthy, a former senior cadre of the women’s wing, stated that, although she felt it was important to politicise cadres before arming them, her view was countered by men

¹¹¹ Interview with Suresh Premachandran, 7th May 2012, Colombo.

¹¹² Interview with Sanmarga, 4th and 12th May 2012, Sri Lanka.

¹¹³ Interview with Gnanasakthy, 30th May 2012, Colombo, and Skype interview, 3rd September 2012.

who argued that since women had dared to leave their homes and join the struggle they should be given military training. Gnanasakthy believed that given Tamil society was not gender sensitive, it was not prudent to provide military training to women and house them in military camps,¹¹⁴ because then women would think society had to “respect them merely because they carried arms.” She feared women would then believe militarisation was the source of their empowerment.

According to Gnanasakthy, although there were male cadres who were progressive and believed women’s empowerment was an important part of the struggle, this was generally not the case. Suresh Premachandran, the current leader of the EPRLF, concedes that they did not have specific policies on the membership of women within decision-making structures; even though there were women in the district committees, there were no women in the core committees. A civic activist, who gave political lessons to EPRLF cadres and was in charge of producing EPRLF’s women’s magazine *Senthanal*, recalls an instance when they prepared the magazine and sent it to India to be printed. When they received the printed magazines, they found the photograph of one of the founder members of the group Pathmanaba (Naba) not only on the front and back covers but also the inclusion of his “insipid quotes.”¹¹⁵ Since the EPRLF did not believe in venerating individuals, she said they returned the magazine to the publisher in India with instructions to remove Naba’s photos and quotes. Although during the initial stages of the militancy the EPRLF undertook initiatives that made Gnanasakthy feel hopeful that women’s emancipation was taken seriously by the group, as the group became more militarised, she said decisions were made in a hierarchical way with men possessing and exercising more power. Further, there were no mechanisms, processes or space within the group to complain against discrimination or abuse by male cadres.

¹¹⁴ While many women lived in the women’s camp in Manipay, others lived in the homes of those supportive of the EPRLF; only some lived at home as generally it was not possible for women to live at home and engage actively in the militancy.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Shanthi Satchithanathan, 11th May 2012, Colombo.

The women's wing of the EPRLF which appears to have had the ability to make its own decisions without being subject to the dictates of the general organisation at all times, also engaged in civic activism. For instance, they held demonstrations to protest issues that were ignored by society and political groups, such as violence against women and child sexual abuse, in localities where they were known to have taken place, which Gnanasakthy felt was not looked upon favourably by men within the community. When the LTTE began assassinating its critics, the women's wing of the EPRLF organised a public demonstration on 12th December 1987, in which around 200 women participated, to condemn internecine violence and commemorate members of all armed groups who were killed by the LTTE. The LTTE banned the EPRLF the following day.

It was not uncommon for women cadres of the EPRLF to face societal and familial criticism of their behaviour. Gnanasakthy recalled that sometimes when a young woman visited a male cadre's house on official EPRLF matters, his family would speak rudely to the woman because families were afraid their sons might get married to women within the movement. Gnanasakthy believes she escaped social censure only because she was older than the other cadres, but said she would face gossip and social censure in her native village even today if she lived there permanently. As an example she mentioned an incident at a relative's puberty ceremony where she overheard women asking others whether she was married as she was not wearing a *thaali*.

As the EPRLF did nothing to assist women cadres get to safety when the LTTE banned the group, women were forced to hide in the houses of persons they knew as many had discontinued relations with their families and therefore felt they could not return home. Some managed to travel to Colombo while others whose families were willing to assist them left the country. Some women were left destitute while others who got married without disclosing their involvement with EPRLF faced marital discord, with many marriages breaking down when husbands learnt of their past.

Although women exercised agency while they were members of the group, their ability to influence decision-making and be heard within the group diminished as the EPRLF became increasingly militarised. While they challenged and fought against traditional social norms, when the LTTE directed its violence towards the EPRLF, the group did nothing to recognise and address the context specific vulnerabilities of women. At present there are no women within the party, which Premachandran attributed to the political atmosphere, which he argued is not conducive not just to increasing the participation of women, but even men.

b. PLOTE

Like the EPRLF, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) made a conscious decision to recruit women. Even though in the late 1970s many women who were not members helped PLOTE by carrying messages, transporting small weapons and providing shelter, the events of July 1983 functioned as a motivating factor resulting in a large number of women joining PLOTE.¹¹⁶ D. Sithadthan, the current leader of PLOTE, admitted not all male cadres felt women's emancipation was important and that it was not generally accepted as a fundamental aim of the organisation. He recalls conversations with male cadres during which they would ask, "What do you mean by speaking of women's emancipation? What problems do women have?" At the level of the leadership, Sithadthan claims women's empowerment was thought to be important as evidenced by the establishment of a women's section in the 1980s. However, progressive beliefs were not always reflected in practice. For instance, he stated it was felt women were not suited to engage in combat, and hence if they were sending cadres to launch an attack they never considered sending women cadres to execute the task. This appears to be due to two factors, a fear of social censure¹¹⁷ for involving women in

¹¹⁶ Interview with D. Sithadthan, 8th May 2012, Colombo.

¹¹⁷ According to Sithadthan, PLOTE did not establish separate camps for women and arm them because they knew it would be unacceptable to Tamil society.

carrying out violent acts, and a patriarchal, protective attitude that viewed women within a conservative socio-cultural framework. Despite conscious efforts to view women's liberation as an integral component of the national struggle, at the time the national struggle took precedence and women's liberation came second.

Women's participation in the militancy: The impact on their lives and society

“Substantive change has not taken place in society where gender equality is concerned. In our society respect is not shown towards those who have been part of the movement. Middle class families do not look upon such persons with respect. Women are in a worse position in this context. While women bore arms in the national struggle they were probably shown respect – arms could have protected them. Women are respected because of the positions they hold – if people are able to get them to do favours for them.” – Gnanasakthy¹¹⁸

Women members of the different militant movements were able to exercise limited and even transgressive agency in many instances which depended on, and differed, according to the ideology of each movement. However, generally, the space given to women seems to have been determined by the strategic needs of the organisation rather than a commitment to women's empowerment. Even though the LTTE managed to advance more than other groups and include women in the national struggle, the national struggle always took precedence. Further, since there was no fundamental change within the Tamil community on issues of gender equality, the 'respect' that was shown towards women LTTE cadres can be deduced to be largely due to the fact they carried weapons and were in a position of power. As Paarthipan stated, “the problem is everything was tied to military strength. When that no longer existed everything else also ceased to exist.” Sithadthan

¹¹⁸ Interview with Gnanasakthy, 30th May 2012, Colombo, and Skype interview, 3rd September 2012.

challenged this and argued that there was a social impact of women taking up arms since historically women were viewed by the Tamil community as timid, and LTTE women cadres proved this notion wrong through their courage and bravery. He claimed they “showed they had the mental strength to withstand everything that one is faced with during battle. They were fearless.”

Blurring the Boundaries: Politicising and Militarising the Domestic Sphere and Motherhood

“Even though in our culture men tend to be the leaders and have control, in this situation (armed conflict) women were in control because men were the first targets of the army – then young women. In this situation our mothers became leaders. I saw that from my mother.” – Regini¹¹⁹

The “extent to which women are passively depicted in the private sphere not only underestimates women’s active involvement in transcending the boundaries between public and private but also neglects women’s active negotiation of gendered national symbols within these overlapping spheres.”¹²⁰ Although the role of Tamil women as mothers and wives has been critiqued,¹²¹ this chapter will re-visit the issue from a perspective that seeks to explore whether “women’s domestic and mother roles became potential sites of politicization and mobilization” and if “The blurring of boundaries between the public and the private, the home and the battlefield helped to broaden and enhance women’s involvement in the national campaigns.”¹²²

Where party politics is concerned the domestic sphere was a site of political activity because in the 1960s and 1970s, party meetings were not held at public halls or hotels but at homes. Even though women played a lead role in organising meetings and providing meals, they most often did not participate in

¹¹⁹ Skype interview with Regini, 31st August 2012.

¹²⁰ Thapar-Bjorket & Ryan (2002): p.307.

¹²¹ Maunaguru (1995); Coomarswamy & Perera-Rajasingham (2009).

¹²² Thapar- Bjorket & Ryan (2002): p.311.

meetings.¹²³ At the time, the role of Tamil mothers in the national struggle was glorified in numerous ways. Mangayatkarsi Amirthalingam recalled a song that was written during the 1961 *satyagraha* which included lyrics that praised the suffering Tamil mothers were bearing in the name of Tamil by engaging in non-violent protest in the blazing sun on the tar road that was melting in the blistering heat (*Thaar urugi perrukedukkum veiyil roatillae, Thamil thaaimaarkal thavikkiraarkal Thamilin peerilae*). While Mangayatkarsi fulfilled her traditional role as wife and mother in the name of the Tamil struggle, she also transgressed traditional norms of motherhood through her political participation. For instance, in 1961 she participated in the *satyagraha* leaving her younger son, a toddler, at home. When Mangayatkarsi, along with her husband and other Federal Party members were held at the Panagoda army camp following their arrest after the *satyagraha*, she was once again separated from her children and saw them only once during that period. Her failure to fulfil her socially expected duties as a mother did not escape societal criticism. Mangayatkarsi recalls that “Mrs. Vaithilingam used to scold me and ask me why I was wasting time getting involved in politics instead of looking after the children.”¹²⁴

Pushparani lists a number of homes, all referred to as homes of women (never referred to as the house of the man) who supported the Tamil Eelam liberation movement; these homes are described as sanctuaries which provided a room to stay, meals and a place to hide. Pushparani states Sivakumaran’s mother Annalakshmi Ponnuthurai was a very brave woman who assisted Sivakumaran in numerous ways, including hiding explosives and weapons. When Pushparani visited Annalakshmi following her own release from Welikada prison, Annalakshmi’s first question was, “Why did you surrender? If you had come to me I would have hidden you.”¹²⁵ This illustrates Annalakshmi was not, “conveniently drawn unto the national movement”¹²⁶ but was a willing and active participant. Pushparani’s mother too appears to have been a strong and active supporter of the national struggle. In her

¹²³ Interview with S.C. Chandrasan, 25th May 2012, Colombo.

¹²⁴ Interview with Mangayatkarsi Amirthalingam, 2nd July 2012, London

¹²⁵ Pushparani (2012): p.58.

¹²⁶ Thapar-Bjorket & Ryan (2002): p.311.

statement to a newspaper following her son Pushparaja's arrest, she said she had dedicated her son to the lives of Tamils and was proud he was in jail for the sake of the liberation of the Tamil people.¹²⁷ Her statement can be better understood within the framework of Miranda Allison's argument that the "mothering experience can promote an accommodation to war and an acceptance of premature and violent death" as a result of women being militarised.¹²⁸ She further states, the "brave mother, the 'mother-warrior' and the 'social mother' are all different variations of how women's physical reproductive capabilities and their social nurturing role can be utilised in nationalist conflicts."¹²⁹ The LTTE used a combination of the brave mother and mother-warrior to idealise "the resisting and fighting mother, the mother who destroys all shackles and takes up arms."¹³⁰ The February-March 1991 issue of *Viduthalai Puligal* for instance contains the story of a mother who, despite suffering multiple losses in the form of the death of her sons, vowed to do what she could for the movement.

Women such as Annalakshmi and Pushparaja's mother, like Nicaraguan women who supported their children's enlistment in the insurgent army, are likely to have viewed their support as "an act of political engagement."¹³¹ Or as Cynthia Enloe argues, it could be they were unable to "escape the pressures that are generated by these militarized expectations of motherhood," particularly when it originates from "husbands, fathers, neighbours, friends, ethnic community leaders."¹³² The reality is likely to have been a combination of both. Curiously, in Pushparani's narrative and even in the LTTE's stories of mothers who have contributed to the Tamil struggle, the men of the households, in particular husbands, are never mentioned; when the house and the contribution the person of the household made to the movement are discussed, it is always the woman to whom reference is made. In some cases the husband was not alive, but

¹²⁷ Pushparani (2012): p.198.

¹²⁸ Allison (2009): p.95.

¹²⁹ Ibid: p.171.

¹³⁰ Schalk (1993): p.114.

¹³¹ C. Enloe (2000) *Maneuvers* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press): p.250.

¹³² Ibid: p.254.

even in instances where they were alive, they are in the background and never mentioned.

Instances of mothers challenging the nationalist discourse, particularly what was expected of them by the nationalist struggle, is evidenced by the interaction of the Mother's Front¹³³ with the LTTE and other armed groups. A member of the core committee of the Mother's Front stated that when the LTTE summoned the Front to instruct them to either function within their purview or cease to exist, the cadre who addressed them "went off on a harangue about useless Tamil mothers" and asked them to read newspaper reports about Sinhala mothers who were supporting the army by giving *meltai* (mattresses) to injured soldiers in hospital. He asked the women of the Mother's Front, "Have any of you done any service to our heroes? Our heroes are giving their lives to the land and what are you doing? How is anything that you do useful? You only write against us but won't support us. Have you not read about Tamil *veerath thaimaar* (brave mothers)?"¹³⁴ The Mother's Front member also recalls instances of negotiating with non-LTTE armed groups for the release of young men from rival groups who were detained. During one such interaction, a member of an armed group, scolded the Mother's Front member who went to negotiate and asked the members of the Mother's Front to mind their own business. The member retorted, "the plight of our children is our business – how can you ask us not to get involved?"¹³⁵

While motherhood has been used as a tool by both Tamil political parties and armed groups, it has also resulted in politicising the domestic sphere and blurring the boundaries between the public and private sphere. Even though it can be argued that women exercised transgressive agency, they have at the same time

¹³³ In August 1984, in Jaffna in the Northern Province, when the government using national security laws conducted mass arrests of young men suspected of being part of the armed groups, women, particularly mothers, formed 'The Mother's Front', an informal collective to protest the arrests and demand their release. They were in existence until 1987 when they discontinued activities after being instructed by the LTTE to either function within their purview or cease to exist.

¹³⁴ Interview with Sanmarga, 4th and 12th May 2012, Sri Lanka

¹³⁵ Ibid.

become political actors during a time when there was little space within Tamil society for women's political activism.

Challenging Tamil Nationalism from Within: The Creation of Alternate Spaces by Women

The remainder of the chapter will focus on alternate spaces created by Tamil women in the context of the Tamil nationalist struggle; spaces which challenged Tamil nationalism and the militancy, and supported those affected by the militancy. While these structures unwittingly challenged the nationalist discourse, they were not always able to do so within the organisations themselves, mainly because the membership recognised that if they were overtly anti-nationalist, they would exclude many women who were in some way supportive of the armed struggle.

Poorani

“Often Poorani's story is seen through the eyes of middle class women,¹³⁶ which ignores working class and grassroots women who were actively involved in the Centre and made substantive contribution to its work but whose faces have never been seen.” – Regini¹³⁷

“Regini is a superb example of what the founders dreamt these women would become.” – Sanmarga¹³⁸

Poorani, the women's shelter, has been the focus of several studies on women and Tamil nationalism.¹³⁹ In this chapter I wish to

¹³⁶ Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham for instance states that two members of the organisation used their 'class and citizenship status' to stop IPKF interference in the shelter. While their class and citizenship might have benefitted the centre in numerous ways, Perera-Rajasingham's piece makes no mention of the role played by working class and grassroots women, who are always portrayed as those who were beneficiaries of the benevolence and progressive strategies of the middle class women.

¹³⁷ Skype interview with Regini, 31st August 2012.

¹³⁸ Interview with Sanmarga, 4th and 12th May 2012, Sri Lanka.

¹³⁹ N. Perera-Rajasingham, 'Feminist Politics Beyond the Law: Poorani as a Space for Empowerment and Resistance' in N. Perera-Rajasingham (Ed.) (2007) *Feminist Engagements with Violence: Contingent Moments from Sri Lanka*

both add to existing scholarship and in that process also interrogate a number of conclusions presented in previous studies. Regini, my main interviewee who now works as a community organiser in North America, joined Poorani when she was 16 years old and worked at the centre until the core membership of Poorani left Jaffna in the late 1980s due to LTTE threats and intimidation. While young people around her were joining militant groups to fight for the national struggle, she consciously chose an alternate space that was not part of the nationalist struggle. Her motivation at the time was a consciousness about the need to address women's concerns and hence she found Poorani, which was founded on feminist principles, a nurturing space. Although in the beginning the members of Poorani focused on helping women affected by war and rape, they later became more open to the needs of the community within which the centre was situated, as they realised providing services to the community would enable them to mobilise women. One such service was assisting women who had no little or education or personal documentation, whose husbands were killed in the ethnic conflict, claim compensation from the government.

One of the key characteristics of Poorani was that it challenged both the state (in the case of organising women to go to government departments and demand they be provided compensation to which they were entitled) and the LTTE (by refusing to leave the LTTE office until women were provided passes to travel to the south). Regini recalls that when the LTTE visited Poorani and demanded they function within their purview, she argued vociferously with them and refused to acquiesce to their demands. Similarly, she narrates an incident when the IPKF visited Poorani at night on the pretext of examining the space women had marked out for a gardening project. Since senior members of the centre, such as the founder Pat Ready, were not at the centre that night, Regini, masked her fear and asked the soldiers to leave the premises reminding them Pat Ready had

(Colombo: ICES); N.Somarajah *'The Experiences of Tamil Women: Nationalism, Construction of Gender, and Women's Political Agency'* (2004) *Lines*, available at: http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art_Feb04/Nanthini.htm (accessed 8th November 2012); Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham (2009).

already visited the army camp and informed them of the activities of the centre and hence there was no reason to search the centre.

Although previous studies claim that, “Poorani became a centre for women who dissented from nationalism to congregate and discuss feminist ideas,”¹⁴⁰ the narratives of Regini and another member who was closely associated with the centre illustrate that, even though the centre was founded on feminist principles, its main aim was not to challenge nationalism *per se*. Rather, the activities of Poorani, by virtue of the principles upon which it was founded and the manner in which the centre functioned, challenged the nationalist discourse and militancy in effect. According to Regini, where politics and respecting each other’s political opinions were concerned, the house rule that Poorani was a group that espoused non-violence was observed. At the same time, she said women who were living at the centre did support various armed groups and had their own reasons for doing so. For instance, some women supported the LTTE because their families did. In other cases, if their family members had been affected by the LTTE they were anti-LTTE. She said Poorani members understood this and gave space for dialogue on these issues if women so wished. Hence, even in the violent and restrictive environment that prevailed at the time, the members of Poorani not only created an alternate space that was a refuge to women, but also challenged the militants, the state and the Indian army in a quest to maintain the neutrality and integrity of the centre, and the feminist principles upon which it was founded. According to Regini, Poorani did not merely challenge Tamil nationalism, “it challenged the army and everything else that took women’s rights away.”¹⁴¹

Women’s Study Circle¹⁴²

Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham state, “The Study Circle raised important issues of women’s freedom and sought to

¹⁴⁰ Sornarajah (2004).

¹⁴¹ Skype interview with Regini, 31st August 2012.

¹⁴² The Women’s Study Circle, an informal collective, was formed in 1984 by a group of women living in Jaffna in the early 1980s with the aim of creating space to discuss issues of common interest, including feminism and politics.

introduce a feminist component to the nationalist struggle.”¹⁴³ Based on the narratives of interviewees, it appears that while the Study Circle was very critical of Tamil nationalism and the armed struggle, which the members felt was going to adversely affect the Tamil community, their activities did not publicly challenge the nationalist discourse since they met at a private residence and engaged in discussions of books, politics and feminism, and wrote poetry.¹⁴⁴ Although the group engaged in a semi-public activity such as visiting women’s hostels and speaking to young women about feminism and women’s rights, they stopped once they realised it had little impact. However, when they came across promising women students they encouraged them to participate in the Study Circle. Sanmarga saw being part of the Circle as a process of building confidence amongst women and engaging in conversations about issues other than the mundane. Like Poorani, the Women’s Study Circle too attempted to be inclusive, since in the prevailing militant, oppressive climate in Jaffna in the 1980s, they were conscious that excluding women who were nationalist might further alienate these women and perhaps even exacerbate their vulnerabilities. For instance, Sanmarga recalls an EPRLF cadre approaching her and inquiring whether the Circle was holding classes and if so whether she and a friend could attend. When Sanmarga placed this request before the other members, they agreed to include the cadre and her friend as they felt it would be an ‘achievement’ if they could influence the thinking of even two women by exposing them to feminist ideals. Hence, the Study Circle did not challenge nationalism publicly but constructed an alternative space within which women could articulate their concerns and opinions about nationalism, amongst other issues, in the company of like-minded individuals. This was

¹⁴³ Coomaraswamy & Perera-Rajasingham (2009): p.122.

¹⁴⁴ The Women’s Study Circle published three books, a pamphlet on feminism and two books of poetry. One titled ‘*Sollaatha Seithikal*’ (Untold News) was a collection of poems by women, which was published in 1986, while the Study Circle was functioning in Jaffna. The aim of this collection was to bring to the public sphere the feelings, opinions and voices of women. The second publication, titled ‘*The Poems of Sivaramani*’ was published in 1993 in Batticaloa, after the members of the Study Circle had moved out of Jaffna. This book contains poems which are critical of the armed struggle. The Circle also commissioned and staged a feminist play titled ‘*Sakthi Pirakkuthu*’ (Power/woman is being born) by S. Maunaguru, which was later published by Women’s Education and Research Centre (WERC) in 1997.

integral during a period in which there was little room, particularly for women, to engage in critical discussion on socio-political issues.

Mother's Front

The Northern Mother's Front utilised the contradictions inherent in employing motherhood as a political force to their advantage; they accepted the essentialised identity thrust upon them by society and used it to challenge the state's resort to violence and refusal to 'acknowledge life', which denied them of the opportunity to fulfil their mothering role.¹⁴⁵ Sanmarga, a member of the core committee of the Front, said after the protest march in July 1984 to the Government Agent's¹⁴⁶ (GA) office to demand the release of young boys arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the members of the Mother's Front realised there was a lot of potential that could be used to engage in social activism. In this regard, they acquiesced to requests from different villages (Myliddy, Vethilaikerni) and helped them establish mothers' groups within their villages.

While challenging the government, the Front also confronted the LTTE on a number of occasions. When the LTTE issued 'ten commandments' on the expected dress and behavioural codes to be followed by women, the Front issued a statement in the *Eelanaadu* newspaper condemning it. Similarly, they challenged posters that appeared all over Jaffna, thought to have been printed by the LTTE, with text that said President J.R. Jayewardene was giving Tamil women Rs 500 to undergo operations to prevent them from bearing children, and called upon Tamil mothers to counter this by giving birth to brave sons. By doing so they contested the LTTE's "use of mothering to further militaristic goals."¹⁴⁷ For instance, Sanmarga said the Front knew the different armed groups would attempt to use the

¹⁴⁵ Malathi de Alwis quoted in Maunaguru (1995): p.167.

¹⁴⁶ A Government Agent (GA), or District Secretary, is a Sri Lankan civil servant of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service appointed by the central government to govern a certain district of the country. The GA is the administrative head of public services in the district.

¹⁴⁷ Enloe (2000): p.260.

procession to the GA's office in 1984 to further their own political interests. Hence, the core members of the Front checked every single signboard that was being carried to ensure those which had slogans that called for people to give their life for the land, etc., were not included. Instead, everyone was told they could only carry signboards that focused on the arrests of the young men and called for equality before the law.

Sanmarga noted it was difficult to hold people from different socio-economic backgrounds together as a collective and at the same time be true to the shared goal, because members had differing political opinions, with some supporting one of the many armed groups.¹⁴⁸ The core members responded to this potentially incendiary issue by making a conscious decision not to discuss the activities of any of the armed groups in the interests of preserving the Front. Hence, while they challenged the LTTE and the government, nationalism within the group went uncontested, as doing so would have prevented the construction of a broad coalition. This resulted in the Front deliberately adopting an apolitical stance, particularly within the organisation, in order to engage in civic activism. These factors coupled with the relatively short lifespan of the Front meant that they were not able to explore the “patriarchal risks in relying on motherhood as a political idea, and about the limits of building a broad women’s movement on a maternal role that not all women can or want to assume.”¹⁴⁹

Maathar Marumalartchchi Munnani (Women’s Reawakening Front)¹⁵⁰

The Women’s Reawakening Front, the initiative of a number of women civic activists who were not affiliated to any armed or political group, was formed in 1984 following a meeting of women social activists who also invited women members of militant groups. This collective is yet another example of attempts

¹⁴⁸ There was a core group of members who issued statements and drove the activities of the group, while the ‘branches’ of the Front that were established in villages engaged in their own activities, such as income generation and came together only at instances of collective action.

¹⁴⁹ Enloe (2000): p.260.

¹⁵⁰ This section is based on an interview with N. Ratha, 3rd July 2012, London.

by women to create space independent of nationalist processes. At the initial meeting the women who were members of armed groups were reminded that even though they were part of different armed groups, they continued to experience oppression as women even within these groups. These women were requested to use the forum to share with others problems they faced, particularly within the armed groups, which would then be raised by the collective with the armed groups. According to the interviewee, in that context, not surprisingly, most women from the armed groups did not attend further meetings. Despite this the Front continued working with marginalised groups, particularly day labourers' collectives, and assisted women cadres of non-LTTE armed groups to safety during internecine violence.

Conclusion

It is acknowledged the nationalist struggle “was a necessary factor in pulling women out of the traditional domestic sphere into the public and political sphere; but equally it placed limits on the movement, limits that contributed to the decline of women’s movements in the aftermath of the success of nationalist struggles.”¹⁵¹ In the Tamil community too, the nationalist struggle was instrumental in bringing women into the public sphere, in sometimes blurring the boundaries between the public and private spheres, and in politicising the private sphere, and thereby mobilising women to support the nationalist struggle. While women played an active role in the nationalist struggle, they were not always successful in exercising agency and capturing power to create space for their voices to be heard. Tamil women created alternate spaces, which while not always established with the specific aim of challenging nationalism, sometimes unwittingly or indirectly did so. However, even within these spaces, women were not always able to challenge the nationalist discourse for the sake of keeping the collective together and engage in civic activism on common issues. In order to be political they were forced to be apolitical at times.

¹⁵¹ K. Jayawardena (1986) *Feminism & Nationalism in the Third World* (Colombo: Sanjiva Books): p.259.

In Sri Lanka, as in other armed conflicts, women have often been portrayed only as victims. This is more so in the case of Tamil women, who at times have been used as propaganda tools by both the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil nationalists. The focus of the rights discourse on the 'victim subject' can contribute to the perpetuation of the notion that women are persons without agency, and inadvertently rob them of the power to make choices regarding their lives.¹⁵² Presently, the dominant narrative in post-war Sri Lanka is that of a woman without agency, with the primary focus on her sexuality and reproductive functions, or as a misguided and misled terrorist who has to be rescued or shown the 'correct' path. The current standard-bearers of Tamil nationalism, the TNA and the radical Tamil diaspora, at best ignore women, their rights and concerns, and at worst use them as propaganda tools in their campaigns. Where Tamil women's political activism is concerned, women are reportedly reluctant to engage in mainstream politics. For instance, Suresh Premachandran, the leader of the EPRLF and Anandasangaree, the leader of the TULF, both stated that it is extremely difficult to find women willing to participate in politics. Although the current environment can hardly be termed conducive to women's political participation, given the history of women's political participation and activism, this needs to be explored further.

In the north, talk of cultural decimation and the need to protect Tamil traditions and culture is increasingly being heard following the end of the war. The resurgence of conservatism is to be expected in a community in which traditional social networks and social norms have broken down and there is a general feeling the community is under siege. In these circumstances, there is a need to capture and record Tamil women's civic and political activism in the past to mobilise women to become active participants in social change.

Since the political rights of the Tamil community are perceived to be under threat, perhaps even more so than before the end of the armed conflict, it is likely that women's empowerment and rights

¹⁵² R. Kapur, 'The Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric: Resurrecting the "Native" Subject in International Post-Colonial Feminist Legal Politics' (2002) *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 15: p.1.

will once again be relegated to the backburner, with the concerns of the Tamil nation taking precedence and women's concerns being used only as a propaganda tool to further the national struggle for political rights.

Both the state and the LTTE, the key players in the armed conflict, have appropriated written/textual history. Hence these women have no space within the dominant narrative to place their stories on record, as part of historical record. The silence of women in the dominant narrative of conflict and displacement has to be acknowledged and challenged, since "The 'not telling' of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny," which has the potential to provoke deep distortions in memory and the organisation of everyday life later on. The fact that these are narratives which cannot be heard and cannot be witnessed is what constitutes a "mortal death blow to the survivor."¹⁵³

¹⁵³ D. Lamb quoted in E. Jelin (2003) *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press): pp.63,65, cited in N. de Mel, 'The Promise of the Archive: Memory, Testimony and Feminist Domains' in N. de Mel (Ed.) (2007) *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (New Delhi: Sage): p.255.