

CIVIL WAR AND WOMEN OF JAFFNA

Tales of Many Widows

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The source for this article on the widows of Jaffna is a study done by a non-government organization called the Tamil Refugee Relief Organization (TRRO).¹ This organization, one of many NGOs in the North, had its birth in 1977 in Colombo after the 1977 riots in that city. The founders were some concerned Tamils. Then the organization moved to Vavuniya, where it also tried to aid Indian Tamils from the tea estates who fled there as refugees. In 1983 it was reactivated, and established its office in Jaffna.

One of its activities was giving immediate assistance to the families of those killed or injured, and further assistance to widows and destitute mothers. It had other projects concerning health and medical care, housing, and community upliftment.

The actual scale of killing in Jaffna dramatically increased from 1983 onwards with escalating confrontation between the Tamil militants and the security forces of the Sri Lankan government. The TRRO report on widows only deals with a fraction of the total number of widows who sought aid from the TRRO. Since the most likely victims were males, usually young adults, who were also the main breadwinners of their families, their deaths resulted in a number of widows now burdened not only with the care of their children, but also with the task of finding gainful employment. Since many of these widows were poor, the TRRO tried to meet their needs on an individual basis, first by giving guidance and assistance to initiate some income generating activity such as keeping milch cows, or working on home crafts or engaging in small scale shopkeeping, and so on.

During the later stages of the occupation of Jaffna by the Sri Lankan army, the soldiers were mostly confined to their camps, and civilian deaths occurred mostly through indiscriminate shelling. There was occasional strafing of houses and vehicles by helicopters. But the Sri Lanka Navy in following its so-called surveillance of the northern coastline had frequently shot fishermen in boats.

The TRRO report was based on information collected with regard to 477 widows in the Jaffna District who during the period 1983-86 reported their circumstances to the organization. About 70% or more of the civil war widows in the sample were in the age range 18-40 years. About 27% were between 41-60. "Altogether 70% of the widows did not have any income at all, as most of their husbands were engaged in occupations like fishing, farming, toddy tapping, wage labour, and small scale

business." At the time the report was composed, most of these widows were being temporarily maintained by their close kinsmen—parents, siblings, and others. Only 17% had some kind of stable income through pensions (mostly elderly widows) or through their own employment, and another 13 had unstable incomes through self-employment as street vendors, fish sellers, or cultivators.

The Jaffna District had the reputation in the past as having a higher ownership of houses (over half of them stone built) than the national average. A certain number of these houses was damaged or destroyed by army operations and had to be vacated. With regard to housing once again it is the young widows, who ended up the most deprived. About 40% of the young widows, the largest category in the sample, had no shelter of their own. In the entire sample, 38% of the war widows did not possess any shelter and 82% were found to be living with relatives. The placing of older widows was less problematic because they were taken as dependents by their children. Again, among 37% of the widows who had no land of their own on which houses could be built, more than three fourths were young widows. (There is no information on the ownership of arable land.)

The number and ages of the dependents of the civil war widows, mainly of course in the form of children, once again places the burden on the young widows. The 477 widows had a total of 1349 dependents to support. Only 10% of the widows, mostly the elderly, had no dependents to support. About 25% of the widows had children ranging from four to six in number, and 57% had three children or less.

About 36% of the dependents were infants below 6 years of age, and 40% were school-going children ranging in age from 7-14. Adolescents and young adults (14-18 years) constituted 9% of the total number of dependents. Dependents above 18 years composed 14% of the total (and 27% of this number were still students, the majority enrolled in the university). Those not in school were reported as unemployed.

It is noteworthy that 35% of the widows preferred financial aid in the form of a fixed bank deposit, that would give them a monthly interest, to any other alternative use of money, such as investing in an income generating enterprise. However, 49% of the widows preferred to have the money put into enterprises such as animal husbandry, vending and shopkeeping, home craft, and fishing.



Re-Marriage of Widows

To be a widow, specially a young one, is to be in an inauspicious condition. Even in normal times in Jaffna, the remarriage of widows is difficult to accomplish, even if there are no taboos against it. But given the conditions of civil war, when young adults are the prime victims, the chances for remarriage of young widows are much less.

Here is an example of a tangled situation: The marriage had been an inter-caste union, between a man from Udupitti of goldsmith caste and a woman of *karaiya* (fisherman) caste from Point Pedro. The respective parents had accepted the marriage and the couple lived virilocally (with the husband's parents). The young husband was killed, leaving his wife and a young son. A non governmental organisation gave her some 3 or 4 thousand rupees in aid. But her husband's parents appropriated the money, leaving her in the lurch.

The local community then suggested that the widow be given in marriage to the unmarried older brother of the deceased man, but the parents refused. So the girl was forced to return to her own family together with the child. The widow knew how to type and was requesting the aid organisations for a job rather than monetary assistance.

Among the more affluent upper ranges of Tamil society, widows whose husbands had been killed are sought to be sent abroad, say to Canada and Australia, to join relatives there. Their immediate crisis is to some degree mitigated in this way; it is worth inquiring into their subsequent fate.

Predicament of Young Wives and Widows

There are cases of young men married to young girls who because of fear of being apprehended (every young man is from the other side's point of view a Tiger, a sympathizer, or a potential sympathizer) have left the country to seek asylum abroad. They have not been able to take their wives with them. (It is a costly, uncertain and perilous venture to enter and live in another country illegally).

Some of these young wives, married a year or two, have formed liaisons, and have asked for contraceptive devices (including injections). But given the strict norms and closely supervised family life, these liaisons must remain few, hidden and secret for fear of public opinion and sanctions.

Married women with young children, with husbands who have been killed, bear the double burden of seeking a job, engaging in new transactions such as dealing with banks and aid agencies, and also of attending to domestic tasks, even if they are fortunate to live with relatives.

But such increased entry into the public realm necessarily also affects such a woman's role and activities in it, and also allows her to acquire new technical, commercial, even professional skills, and thus in an unexpected way the civil war and the deaths of men may actually help to "emancipate" women and empower them while at the same time increasing their burdens.

Women nowadays have to deal with the authorities ranging from the Assistant Government Agent to lesser officers of the local *grama sevaka*: they must file documents, plead their cases, and implement decisions. When relief agencies invite requests it is more frequently women than men (even in the case of husbands locally present) who turn up to negotiate.

When a woman's husband has been killed during military action (which is usually explained as necessitated by the actions of terrorists), she has to file an affidavit and a report with the Police, the *vidan* (headman) and with the *grama sevaka*, and they have to be ratified by the Assistant Government Agent before she can have an official death certificate and thereafter can claim a compensation of 25000 rupees from the Ministry of Rehabilitation.

These negotiations place her in a vulnerable exploitable position. Ordinarily she will need to be accompanied by a senior male when she moves around from office to office. And since the Ministry of Rehabilitation is located in Colombo, negotiations for claiming the compensation can be speeded up if an agent personally visits the ministry there, presents the properly documented claims, and receives the money. In Jaffna there has emerged a certain number of professional middlemen, who perform these duties for widows and collect a commission of 500 rupees from each widow. They represent a number of widows on each visit, and collect a fair total sum as commission. They remind us, an informant told me, of the *ur appukatu* of old, the 'village lawyer' or intermediary who would act as a link man between a village client and the town advocate who argues his case in court. Finally, since a widow is held to be responsible for all the debts and other monetary obligations contracted by her husband, a variable amount of the compensation she receives may have to be parted with in fulfillment of these claims.

In Sri Lanka, as in many a third world country, and in contrast to the industrialized West, even clerical and secretarial positions are occupied primarily by males. But in Jaffna, with a dearth of young male clerks, women are increasingly being employed to fill clerical positions in government offices. Women more frequently in the past entered teaching and nursing professions, but I was told in the late eighties that in Jaffna there were two women serving as Assistant Government Agents, three or four as staff officers, and one as a cultural officer in the provincial administration (*kachcheri*). The Social Serv-



ices Officer was a widow. Indeed I was told there are some instances in public life where the women have a superior education and/or a better job than their husbands, a reversal, that would be highly 'visible' in Jaffna among the middle class caused by the increasing unavailability of eligible young men in the present circumstances.

There are also many more women than before working in the retail sector, for example, in grocery shops and in the marketing of rice.

Orphans

Where army and militants have engaged in heavy action, and civilian homes have been shelled or simply levelled in the cross fire, deliberately or otherwise, the likelihood of orphans who have lost both parents becomes an inevitability. For instance, I was told in 1988 that the informant knew the existence of some 25-30 orphaned children in the vicinity of Urumpirai in Jaffna which had seen heavy action.

If the family of the orphans had some property and other resources, and if there were other relatives present, they may be taken care of by them. Grandparents in particular are the first volunteers. And there are some interests at stake: if both parents have died, the orphans become their heirs, and the adopting parents or foster parents would be in a position to act as trustees.

But orphans without anyone able to look after them can only go to orphanages. And in Jaffna (as elsewhere in Sri Lanka) there is some shame attached to being relegated to an orphanage.

But orphanages are also the focus of an explosive religious issue. In Sri Lanka, leaving aside the few government run orphanages, the majority of orphanages are run by the Christian missions. Both Hindus and Buddhists, and their organizations, have not sponsored this form of philanthropy to any significant extent, or at least to the extent achieved by Christian missions and congregations.

Now, since Christian orphanages would try to convert non-Christians to the Christian faith, there has been some concern among Buddhist and Hindu circles about this possible loss of Buddhists and Hindus to the 'alien' religion. There have been some attempts to remedy this: I am told that Dr. Parameshwaran, Professor of Philosophy in the University of Jaffna, had been made chairman of a committee composed of members from Hindu NGOs.²

Women as Freedom Fighters

There are young women who have joined the insurgents. The LTTE is said to have a unit called *Sutantiran Paravai* (Freedom Birds), about one hundred

in number (in the late eighties). Some educated young women, with feminist and other 'progressive' ideological commitments are said to have joined the EPRLF and EROS.

Rajini Thiraganama, who was assassinated by an unknown gunman, is the author of these lines which cryptically speak of the situation of women in Jaffna:

The community's families are headed by women; the old, the sick and the weary die without even the family to mourn or the sons to bury the dead.

Women militants during discussions "confessed to much confusion within the movement regarding the women's question..."

Even in the community, women have come out strong during this war. In many instances of confrontation with the Indian army, they have stood out as individuals or as small groups, exposing the atrocities and violations of dignity. On the other hand it was mainly women who, in the midst of war, pleaded and argued with militants for their families and for the whole nation. Again it is women who have braved the guns and sat in a fast to save others in Batticaloa. Thus when one appraises the political bleakness that confronts this community and this land, the women's history does have a triumph. There is powerlessness, disappointment and disillusionment, but also hope. We have done it... a little bit.³

These cryptic references have been elaborated and deepened by the rich documentation provided by the courageous authors of *The Broken Palmyra*,⁴ of whom one was the martyred Rajini Thiraganam herself.

To what extent the civil war and the domination of the 'freedom struggle' by youthful militants have caused significant changes in the 'traditional' pattern of marriages, or segregation of castes is difficult to gauge. It seems that on the whole the militant groups such as the LTTE, the EROS, EPRLF, and so on, have not taken as one of their stated causes the transformation and 'liberalization' of pre-existing 'orthodox' practices. The militants have more or less accepted the extant family values, and although some of the young folk may have a greater freedom to choose their partners, the flouting of caste or sub-caste or even more circumscribed kin-circle preferences and restrictions are not a matter of ideological contest. But perhaps more than ever before some inter-caste marriages have taken place. And ideas centering on women's liberation may relate more to women's role in choosing their mates, and even to matters of dowry, rather than to the social equality of castes or their homogenization.

As stated before, a minority of girls have actually joined the militant groups. And they have had to face the



sex-based discriminatory evaluations of their parents and kin as a result of taking this 'revolutionary' action of leaving home, and consorting with male militants. For example, after the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord was signed, parents had no problem welcoming home their (briefly) returning sons; but the return to the family of the young women who have joined the movement was more difficult and fraught, because of the 'stigma' of their flouting 'domestic surveillance' and strict control of interaction with males, and 'suspicions' of their possible sexual 'transgressions.'

Young Women and the Problem of Marriage

It has been surmised that there is a vastly disproportionate sex ratio of five women to one man among those of marriageable age in Jaffna. One of the immediate results of this situation is the postponement of marriage, and the increased age of marriage for women, up to 33, 34 and 35 years.

It is in this context that one sees the intensification of a ritual called *Sumangali Vilakku* which is performed so that a woman might soon find a marriage partner, and/or be able to marry a man of her choice. I was told that this ceremony for example is performed every Tuesday at the Durga Amman Temple in Tellipallai, Jaffna. This ritual is performed as a collective rite—a number of women may get together and have it performed for them.

Young Women Abroad

The diaspora of youth abroad, though it has largely been the fate of young men, has also been experienced by women. Many young women and girls from Jaffna have gone abroad, some to study if their families could afford it, and some even to the Middle East seeking domestic service.

Apparently there is a collection of them in Scandinavia, working as shop assistants, studying at folk high schools and so on. They live in 'chummeries,' observe traditional festivals like *thai pongal*, send remittances home if they can; they have decided to or have recognized that they will have to postpone their marriages. Consorting with Scandinavian males is not favoured.

Civil War and Inter-caste Relations

It has been remarked in certain circles that some if not all the militant groups had been led by youth of the Vellalah caste or *Karaiyar* caste: thus the LTTE are said to be led by the *Karaiyars* of Valvettithurai, and that the TELO, wiped out by the former, was a *Vellalah* organization. But it is generally agreed that in the course of time, youth of all castes joined the same militant groups.

Although the militant groups did have multi-caste membership, there is an important sense in which 'radical politics' (the fight for the separate Tamil state of Eelam and the attendant organization and common life of resistance fighters) seemed to have co-existed with a 'social orthodoxy' in matters of caste.

The issue of free temple entry for all castes has been a divisive one in Jaffna politics. The case of the Maviddapuram Temple entry dispute has been discussed recently.⁵ Another related issue is the free access of lower castes to wells under high caste control or ownership. On these matters the militants have more or less not wanted to rock the boat, but let circumstances loosen up the traditional restrictions and attitudes.

Today it can be said that the vast majority of the major and famous temples of the north are firmly open to the public, and are so in practice, in attendance and worship. But privately owned temples with restrictive entry to exist, and there are present in Jaffna *saiiva* 'revivalists,' usually drawn from the upper castes, who resist changes.

In an ironic twist, certain actions taken by the occupying armies—Sri Lankan and Indian—have actually loosened up caste avoidances and prejudices. For example, frequently when the two armies have declared a curfew, they have ordered civilians to gather in specified Hindu temples allegedly for their collective protection. This means that all castes will have to enter and occupy the temple, and frequently do so. But there are sticky episodes. On one occasion a temple nominated for occupation was the Karaveddy Pillayar Temple, whose annual festival was to take place in a month's time. The trustees of the temple closed it giving admission to no one. Young men of the area who could not take refuge were arrested.

A more subtle play of caste aversion was witnessed in the Vellani Pillayar Temple, which was made available for the occupation of refugees. Apparently, the *Pallars* (of low caste) circulated the joke that while "our boys are inside the temple, their (high caste) boys are outside." This inversion of traditional inclusion-exclusion was brought about by the high caste refugees keeping away from their social 'inferiors.'

Notes

1. The TRRO report is entitled *Widows of Ethnic Violence in the Jaffna District. A review of the Available Data (1983-86)*. Compiled by the Project Division, T.R.R.O March 1988. I am grateful to Professor K. Sivathamby for providing me with this report.
2. I was told in this regard to read the Buddhist Congress Report on the *Role of Church Organisations in Rehabilitation* where the issue of proselytization and conversion of orphans and derelict children has been discussed.
3. *The Thatched Patio*, Vol. 2, No. 6, Dec. 1989. "Under the Shadow of the Gun," pp. 7-8.
4. Claremont, California: Harvey Mudd Press, 1988.
5. See Brian Pfaffenberger, *Journal of Asian Studies* 49.1 (1990).