

## TIGER WOMEN AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S EMPANCIPATION

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I am often asked, as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, what do I feel about the women cadres of the LTTE. As someone who has been entrusted with the task of attempting to protect women victims of violence, how do I respond to a situation where women become the perpetrators of violence. Let me be clear at the very beginning so that there is no room for misunderstanding-I do not believe that inducting women into a fighting force is a step toward empowerment and equality. I believe that the recruitment of women into the fighting ranks signals the militarisation of civil society-a militarisation which in itself is inimical to anyone who believes in human rights. The militarisation of civil society destroys the important human rights values of due process, non-violent resolution of disputes and the celebration of humane values of compassion and tolerance. The militarisation of women is a move away from these foundational values of human rights so large segments of the population are instilled with a militaristic approach to society and its problems. The induction of women fighters into the LTTE is an example of this militarisation. As women concerned with non-violence, we can only be critical of the dynamics which have led to this process. As people concerned with human rights, we have to question and challenge any discourse which attempts to promote this perverse militarisation of civil society as a step toward the realization of equal rights among women.

Having made my position clear, I would like to explore the phenomenon of women LTTE cadres and its implication for the role of women in society as well as their symbolic representation. The task is made even more daunting because there is international fascination with the topic of women fighters. The BBC has already made two documentaries, both of which focus on the women tiger phenomenon. The fascination of the international media rests on the fact that this is an unusual and unique development. Though there have been women guerrilla fighters, the complete transformation of South Asian women from the Sita Devi ideal to armed guerrillas raises curiosity and concern. In addition the phenomenon of suicide bombing, the complete annihilation and mutilation of the female body in pursuit of a political cause, is also unusual and disturbing. Both these factors combine to allow for international fascination with the subject of armed women fighters of the Tiger movement. Tiger women are "against the current" of mainstream thinking about women. This uniqueness privileges them in the world of the media where what is extraordinary and unusual is also seen as newsworthy.

Peter Schalk in his article Tiger Women says that 8% of LTTE cadres killed in combat for the period 1982-1991 were women. This percentage has increased in recent times. He estimates that there are 3,000 women fighters ready and willing at the disposal of the LTTE command. What is also interesting is that he points to the fact that except for one or two isolated cases, there is no record of women fighters dying before 1987. The systematic strategy of developing women cadres was only inaugurated after the Indo-Lanka Accord when the LTTE was suffering from a loss of manpower and resources. It would not be cynical to assume that the change toward including women in the LTTE fighting force was a result of material considerations and the need for personnel and not a concerted ideological shift in their thinking about women's empowerment. Though Adele Balasingham argues otherwise, there is definitely a correlation between the militarisation of women and the LTTE need for a larger base for the recruitment of personnel. The induction of women and children is primarily a result of this material determinant, the need for a constant supply of cadres and personnel.

Whatever the actual motive of the LTTE in inducting women into the armed cadres, there is no doubt that this decision has led to a major transformation in the way a Tamil society deals with and represents its women. Whatever reservations we may have about the overall militarisation of women, there is no doubt that the actual role of women in Tamil society has been drastically altered. With regard to the issues of dowry, inter-caste marriages, the seclusion of unmarried women etc.... there have been major changes in the perception as well as operation of Tamil society. These social issues which were a major burden in the lives of Tamil women have been eradicated at least for the moment. LTTE strategy and the imperatives of displacement have completely changed the routine and structure of a sedentary, agricultural community which was once infused with stifling rituals and customary practice. Inequitable social practices which kept unmarried women at home and menstruating women in the back garden have given way to virile forms of mobilization. For survival, non-combatant women, either in the war torn regions of the North and the East or in the refugee camps, are forced to develop a public persona. They are compelled to interact with armed men, bureaucratic officials and international agencies if they want to meet the exigencies of day to day living. There is no sanctity in their homes and in refugee camps they have no home at all. They are compelled to negotiate terms with the real world, no longer subject to the paternal protection offered to them in the Thirukkural. They are not kept away from the hard decisions which make up the real world. As armed women cadres, they have to

engage in rigorous training, receive and assert military authority, and even dispense justice in certain limited circumstances. They have begun to enjoy some of these male prerogatives as a matter of course.

While these factors seem transformative, the important question remains-how permanent are these changes? The war reality of the Northern and Eastern provinces has created an interregnum, a crisis of opportunity to radically change the status of women in Tamil society. But in actual fact, these changes are not being articulated in ideological terms. Once peace returns, will Tamil society revert back to casteism and oppressive sexist practices? A cursory glance at the Tamil diaspora in other countries seems to imply that once people leave the atmosphere of war and return to some semblance of peace, the rituals and practices return. The numerous announcements for various rituals and practices, including the coming of age ceremony for women contained in the Tamil Times seems to indicate that the present reality is not really transformative and that once peace return, the old attitudes will condition Tamil social life again. Yet, one may also conclude that, in the North and the East, the present suspension of Tamil cultural life as we once knew it, will probably leave an indelible mark and that some of the transformative potential may also be realized. The longer the war lasts, the more women become militarized, the less likely is the chance that they will return to the Sita Devi ideal of times past.

Despite these dislocations with regard to the role of women in Tamil society, there are still important questions to be asked about Tiger women and women's equality. Despite the celebration of armed women cadre by LTTE ideologues, there is still no evidence that women are part of the elite decision-making process. They are not initiators of ideas, they are only implementers of policy made by someone else, by men. This authoritarian model of decision making does not really empower women as political and social beings. They become cogs in the wheel of someone else's designs and plans. They are not the creators, the visionaries, the entrepreneurs of any political or social project. They are only following orders, or enacting someone else's strategy. They are the consumers, not the producers of the grand political project. This disempowerment, the inability to affect the fundamental policy and decision making process in a given society is an important measure of women's equality. In this context the tiger women of the LTTE are really without true political or social empowerment. Until they are given access to decision-making at all levels in a free and democratic manner they will remain dispossessed. Neloufer de Mel, in a recent article, asks whether LTTE women are agents or victims-the answer must lie in the appreciation that Tiger women are not given the freedom to determine their own destiny; they are helping to act out the perceived destiny of someone else.

The induction of women into the fighting force of the LTTE has resulted in a major transformation with regard to the symbolic representation of women in Tamil society. For many decades, anthropologists have pointed out that in Hindu society generally, and Tamil Hindu society in particular, the privileged woman is the auspicious married woman with many children and material wealth. The status of a married woman was idealized as the only condition

worth speaking about. As Kenneth David, Susan Wadley etc.. have pointed out, unmarried women and widows were considered to be inauspicious- shakti without control. The celebration of the ideal of prosperous married women in peace time Jaffna was instilled in all the cultural rituals from birth, to marriage to the funeral. Unhappiness in a family was often blamed on the Shakti of the women since her energy was not powerful enough to ward off evil. This Tamil obsession with the married women was an important marker in the ideals and aspirations of young women.

The LTTE has changed all that-even if it is for the worse. According to individuals who have studied the writings of the LTTE on women cadres, the LTTE privileges two types of women-the militant mother and the armed virgin. Neither of these ideals has resonance with the traditional Tamil ideal of the prosperous wife whose children are all living and doing well. According to writers such as Malathy De Alwis, the militant mother is a common image in all nationalist thinking, especially when that nationalism is in conflict. Writers have also pointed out that the Militant Mother is a common image in the war poetry of the Tamil Golden Age-or Sangam period. In this poetry, mothers rejoice when they hear tales of brave deaths of their sons. One of the BBC productions focused on the mother of Captain Muller, an LTTE martyr, and the mother was spouting words of joy and celebration at the brave death of her son. The continuity with Sangam poetry is all the more remarkable. Sivaram in a series of articles pointed out that present day LTTE ideology may be influenced by this Sangam literature. But in the case of militant mothers there seem to be a direct connection, even in the words that are used.

The ideal of the armed virgin, however, is not present in Tamil literature or culture. Virgins were expected to stay at home where they would be protected from devouring forces of evil. Nowhere in Tamil literature is there a role model of a virgin armed to kill. This is pure LTTE innovation. This perversion of Tamil culture is seen by writers such as Adele Balasingham as a welcome step in the liberation of women. But we must seriously consider the impact of such a vision for Tamil women as a whole. The privileging of the armed virgin does radically alter Tamil notions of women's identity and dress. As mentioned earlier, women's identity in Tamil culture has always been linked to the married women. This was symbolically represented by the wearing of rich sarees, brilliant jewelry, flowers in flowing hair, silver anklets, a silver toe ring and a red pottu on the forehead. Today the views presented are of women in combat fatigues, in boots, with no make-up, jewelry or ostentation, often with their hair cut in short male styles, wearing a cyanide capsule around their neck. Those who comment on this ideal have also noticed that it puts forward androgyny as an ideal-both men and women aspiring to the same thing with an identity of purpose and style. But it is androgyny in a male sense-the masculine completely wiping out the feminine. This is the privileged woman of the LTTE movement. Is this liberation?

In some ways it is difficult to answer this question. On the one hand, the liberation from rich sarees, jewelry and flowers in the hair is seen by many young women as an escape from the rigid confines of social life in earlier Tamil society. There is freedom of movement and an

equality of social and political commitment to a cause. There is a radical transformation of the self-image, a woman no-longer protected, sheltered and kept at home, but a woman seemingly empowered by a gun, enjoying free movement and camaraderie with the other sex. However, the LTTE is also clear that the ideal woman remains a virgin; sexuality is seen as an evil debilitating force.

And yet one has to be cautious. Firstly, for all its negativity, the earlier Tamil notion of the ideal woman was a celebration of life. Prosperity, sexuality, love of music and the arts, these were all important aspects of the married woman paradigm. This rejoicing in the material and artistic of life is severely missing in the LTTE's notion of an ideal woman. Self-sacrifice, austerity and androgyny are put forward as ideals. Death, not life, is celebrated. The greatest feat for a woman is to die a martyr. This celebration of heroic death is an aspect of most nationalist movements but in the LTTE it is a major factor which determines and conditions the life of women who have dedicated themselves to the cause. This preoccupation with death is a major transformation from the earlier life paradigm of woman whose shakti was meant to prolong and nurture life. Women as nurturers is a concept which is completely lacking in the LTTE ideology, a concept which is the basis for solidarity among women's movements throughout the world.

Secondly, the LTTE notion of androgyny, or making women and men act in the same way is a death knell to femininity. In some ways social constructions of femininity have been strongly criticized by feminists. But feminists have also celebrated the positive qualities of certain constructions of femininity—the networking among people, nurturance, social bonding, gentleness, compassion, tolerance, etc... qualities long recognized as feminine are as important in the human personality as aggression and empowerment. In this sense, the complete eradication of femininity by the LTTE is not so much a victory for women but a triumph for the masculine world view of authority, hierarchy, and aggression. The women's movement has pushed for androgyny but where all personalities develop their masculine and feminine sides— a wholeness often captured by the Hindu concept of Ardhanariswara, half man-half woman. Women have never fought for the complete annihilation of the feminine identity, only for its recognition and empowerment. One may even argue that true liberation will only come when LTTE men acquire feminine attributes of gentleness, compassion and tolerance.

Thirdly, despite its portrayal of Tiger women as liberated, the LTTE movement does not use the words empowerment, shakti or karpu in describing the power of women. There is no sense of an independent woman, empowered by her own agency, who makes decisions for her own self-realization. Her liberation is accepted only in so far as it fits the contours of the nationalist project. There is no sense of autonomy or empowerment as an end in themselves. Kumari

Jayawardena among others has written extensively on how nationalist movements put forward women's liberation programmes only in so far as they fulfill nationalist aspirations. In that sense the LTTE would not approve of the international women's movement which puts social justice and identity, politics above the concerns of nationalism. The notion of empowered female agents, creating their own political and social agenda, independent of male authority, asserting autonomy and identity would not be accepted as part of the LTTE policy on women. In addition the universalism of the women's movements which attempts to subvert nationalist categories from within, while asserting international ideals of women's solidarity across cultures, against war and for peace, would not find resonance with the LTTE notion of women's equality.

Finally, the LTTE ideal of the armed guerilla woman puts forward an image of purity and virginity. There is enormous emphasis on both these characteristics. LTTE women are groomed as one group in one division with one purpose. In the LTTE ideology misogyny or hybridity is a terrible crime. The women are described as pure, virtuous. Their chastity, their unity of purpose and their sacrifice of social life supposedly gives them strength. They are denied sexual or sensual experiences. This refusal to accept hybridity, sensuality, sexuality, —the social mixing of human beings as an important part of everyday life, is a foundational principle of nationalist ideologies and the LTTE is no exception. The armed virginal woman cadre ensures that this notion of purity, based on denial, is a part of the social construction of what it means to be a woman in the worldview of the LTTE. Those of us who value multiculturalism based on diversity and hybridity can only be stifled by the monocultural vision which conditions the life and times of the armed women cadre of the LTTE.

In conclusion it may be said that the armed women of the LTTE forces the feminist movement to come to terms with its own assumptions. The empowerment of women by giving them arms and taking them out of the home, making them do the most masculine of activities, is put forward as an aspect of women's liberation. By putting forward this ideal, the LTTE forces us to come to terms with the foundational values of feminism. Unless feminism is linked to humanism, to non-violence, to hybridity and a celebration of life over death, it will not provide society with the alternatives that we so desperately seek. Feminist practices only have legitimacy if they are based on humanistic principles; otherwise they lose their moral anchor and dissipate into abstract notions of equality. So, let me end this lecture by celebrating a life, the life of Rajni Thiranagama, who was brutally murdered a few years ago. She was a Tamil, married to a Sinhalese, living in Jaffna, fighting the moral authority of four armies, the IPKF, the LTTE, the Sri Lankan Army and the EPRLF, struggling against all odds for the humanistic resurrection of the broken palmyrah.