



No more tears sister: Sri Lanka, gender and militancy

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Abstract

As the title of the documentary suggests, it explores Rajani's relationship with her sister, Nirmala Rajasingam. By incorporating personal testimonies and emotional expressions from people close to Rajani like her daughter, her husband, parents, and colleagues, it charts out her commitment to the principles of social justice, engagement with the revolution and Sri Lankan Civil War, and her subsequent disillusionment with militancy.

Keywords: civil war, Tamil population, Sri Lanka, British rule, madras, LTTE, colonialism, women, liberation

Introduction

'No More Tears Sister' is documentary made by Helene Klodawsky for PBS Point of View Series in 2006. It is based on the life of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a militant activist who was a part of 'Tamil Tigers' or 'the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)' ^[1] - a guerilla group in Sri Lanka. The documentary follows the events leading up to her assassination on September 21st, 1989 and its aftermath. As the title of the documentary suggests, it explores Rajani's relationship with her sister, Nirmala Rajasingam. By incorporating personal testimonies and emotional expressions from people close to Rajani like her daughter, her husband, parents, and colleagues, it charts out her commitment to the principles of social justice, engagement with the revolution and Sri Lankan Civil War, and her subsequent disillusionment with militancy. It is an interesting fact that in the re-enactment, Rajani is played by her daughter Sharika, who herself has taken a path of social justice. Rajani's life is a postcolonial representation of women militants and revolutionaries who believed in leftist political ideals and the ethnic clash, along with the involvement of State crushed their efforts. Through following the life of a woman activist and advocate, and militant, larger inferences can be made about the role of women in conflicts and war by contextualising it within Sri Lanka and the long-lasting Civil War also called the ethnic war between the Tamil population and Sinhalese population there.

Sri Lanka is rich with diversity, as it represents a postcolonial history of migration and conflict. Before looking at Rajani's life, it is essential to gain a critical understanding of Sri Lanka's postcolonial history. The country was generally seen to be split into two parts geographically; between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Both populations occupied separate spaces physically and figuratively. The Sinhalese form the majority of the country while Tamils are comparatively fewer in number. The Tamilian population was always seen as the 'alien' element in the face of Sinhalese Nationalism, however, this is not a homogenous

community as even within the Tamil population there are Jaffna Tamils and Indian Tamils. It is a wide diaspora which was seen as distinctly different from Sinhalese diaspora who have their own culture, religion, and practices. The Indian Tamils were the settlers and descendants of the indentured workers brought to Ceylon under the British rule from Madras, India. This historical displacement led to the creation of a minor population in Sri Lanka of Tamils.

The conflict started out with minor tensions during the colonial rule, as the Britishers followed a divide and conquer policy. In the former nation of Ceylon, political representation was a key question as it was determined by the British who were seen by the Sinhalese as privileging the minority populations of Tamils and Muslims. They were considered to be having privileges and advantages due to their minority status, while Sinhalese representation was low (DeVotta 2009) ^[4]. However, there is also a contesting school of thought that poses that the British colonisers actually favoured the Sinhalese in electoral representation (Sivakumar 1989) ^[8]. It's hard to trace the colonial history, but these differing points go to represent the various power dynamics between the Sinhalese and Tamils, which were deliberately complicated by the colonizers. After Independence in 1948, democratic elections brought Sinhalese representation in political office. There was an effort from the majority to bring a 'standardisation' in the form of 'Ceylon Citizenship Act', 'Sinhala Only Act' (replacing English with Sinhala as the official language) to rectify the wrongs of the British Era against Sinhalese. This was specifically exclusive of the Tamil minority who claimed that this was particularly discriminatory in political, social, and economic realms. With a centralised political system in place, it was considered to be a Sinhalese hegemony in the Nation which led to violent demands of a Tamil State of 'Eelam', a separate Tamil state. This saw an increasing participation of Tamil youth and a high participation of women. It was an exceedingly violent revolution during the 1970s which saw an

¹ In this paper, L.T.T.E. and Tamil Tigers will be used interchangeably.

increasing number of militant groups. There were 35 groups of militants, under the demand for a Tamil *Eelam*, that were formed initially, but the LTTE or Tamil Tigers became the most important and authoritative.

Rajani was a member of the Tamil Tigers, and through the documentary, we are given an insight into her reasoning and rationale for joining them. Since she was a child, there was a revolutionary streak in her and Nirmala. This was elevated by Nirmala's visit to the West, which inclined her towards left ideology, which was also what Rajani was inclined towards. Both of them were seen to be defying the traditional norms of Jaffna middle-class society as the documentary sheds light on their private lives. Both Nirmala and Rajani chose their own partners as for them an important aspect of marriage was sharing the same political ideologies. Rajani was a vocal, medical student and then a reclaimed surgeon, who was discriminated based on her caste, class, and gender but fought for equality at every level. She slowly became a public figure, who advocated ethnic and religious equality for everyone in Sri Lanka. She was inducted into the LTTE by her sister, Nirmala. As the documentary reveals, the close bond of the sisters and their influence on each other was integral. The LTTE as a militant organisation was initially seen as a strong articulation of Tamil identity in the face of Sinhalese hegemony and brutality. The Sinhala dominance was seen in every corner of Sri Lanka as they formed the physical majority and held political power. Formed in 1976, headed by Vellupiali Prabhakaran, the LTTE formed two wings of military and politics. The LTTE had founded or rather, mainlined the use of suicide bombers (largely women) and a significant act from the LTTE was on July 24th, 1983. On that day, the Tamil Tigers murdered 13 soldiers which led to a massive Anti-Tamil riot from the Sinhalese where a large number of Tamilians were tortured and murdered. By 1986, as the documentary tells us, it had become the overarching militant group by eliminating leaders and subsuming members of other groups. It has been considered as a 'terrorist organisation' by global organisations, as well as the Sri Lankan State itself which conveniently ignores their role in its formation. In a State filled with increasing tension, the role of women came to be extremely significant.

Women have played an integral role in this as they were initially delegated soft work of fundraising, awareness, and medical care. The socio-cultural role of women and their perceived identity played a strong role in their participation in the Ltte. An idea of a 'womanhood' had been constructed in opposition to colonialism and modern forces, where they were forced into the private, domestic sphere but with the incoming of a debilitating ethnic war, more and more Tamil women came out into the public sphere and actively participated in the violent uprisings. In the LTTE, the role of women is actually complex as they actively called for women to work towards liberation as can be seen in their posters and slogans like "Woman you light the flames of liberation! We are calling upon you. Pick up the torch of liberation and struggle for with each heartbeat, our nation is taking form-Tamil Eelam!" (Sangarisivam, 2003). Due to this heavy participation of women, LTTE was seen as an organisation that promoted gender equality, but this conception needs to be

problematized as the figure of the woman militant was forced into specific categorisations. Their role in this form of political violence needs critical analysis as it goes against the traditional ideas of women being submissive, docile, and passive. LTTE built a Women's Front based on the principles of gender equality and women's emancipation. But, in reality, the quest for *Eelam* trumped the aspect of equality (Davis 2008) ^[3]. As 'No More Tears Sister' uncovers, Tamil intellectuals were drawn towards the LTTE's assertion of the liberation of Tamils from the dominance of Sinhalese oppressors. Rajani and Nirmala were among them even though they were discouraged by Dayapala - Rajani's husband - to not get involved with that organisation, both of them were committed to the project of Tamil liberation and freedom from the brutalities of the State. For Rajani, her active role had started after rallying against the arrest of her sister, but after a resilient commitment, she was faced with the reality of the hierarchical, oppressive structure of LTTE.

Denying and challenging the role of the 'victim', the 'suicide bomber', or 'the volunteer', Rajani was a strong presence within the organisation as she fought for self-determination. The emphasis in the organisation was seen as being on women's agency and visibilization in the militant struggle. It became a method of 'empowerment' through militarization. Alexander (2014) is a useful resource to obtain testimonies from women in the LTTE. A quote from Rajani is presented in the paper - "one could see the nationalist fervour and the romantic vision of women in arms defending the nation" as she talks about women's role in the LTTE. But for her, there was a gradual recognition of the lack of true revolutionary potential in the LTTE. As the number of deaths by the LTTE increased, and its violent potential was realised, both Rajani and Nirmala grew disenfranchised from the organisation and decided to leave it and focus their energies on helping people. However, as was the power structure, it proved to be a painstaking process which led to a target on Rajani's body due to her strong morals and ideals. Rajani became aware of the "the fact that the LTTE had, in fact, the same petit-bourgeois base as the now discredited parliamentary party" (Wilson 1989, p. 2363). There is a strong criticism of the LTTE for their 'use' of women as women were seen as victims of political strategies and aim of separation. The role of the female suicide bomber has been widely discussed in literature ², as women were employed by the Ltte to sacrifice their lives for the 'greater good of the Nation'. This tactic was institutionalised by the LTTE as a tactic, as increasing reliance on the 'unsuspicious' nature of women was used to their own advantage. They were inculcated in the dominant ideal of masculinity and through this one form of participation, the Nationalist ideology was able to forgo addressing the crucial issues of women's subordination and oppression in the Nation by the 'Other' as well as within the militant movement. Rajani was a part of this organisation but separated herself from it. She dedicated herself to the documentation of human rights violations performed by the LTTE, Indian peacekeeping forces (IPKF), and the Sri Lankan Governments.

Rajani's journey goes back to Jaffna where she started work on human rights and helped in mobilizing underground

² Hellmann-Rajanayagam (2008), Somasundaram (2010) amongst many analyse the role of the suicide bomber in the war, which is connected to the traditional roles attached to women.

organisations like University Teachers for Human Rights, helping in the work of documentation. The documentary makes it clear that she was aware of her death, that too by a “son born in the womb of this very society” (Rajani’s last letter), almost foreshadowing her brutal death. As Rajani had been actively involved in voicing her dissatisfaction and hatred for the forces that marginalized Tamil identity in Sri Lanka, her death was surrounded by ambiguity. Even though Dayapala and Nirmala believed it to be done by the LTTE, there is also speculation about the involvement of the IPKF who had viciously and violently targeted civilians in Jaffna, and Rajani had spoken against them through her writings and work. She also maintained well-written documentation of the atrocities committed on people of Jaffna, specifically women and her writings were subject to investigation and ransacking by the IPKF. The State was also seen as a possible attacker, but her sister and husband maintain LTTE as the main perpetrators.

It is an extremely moving and emotional end to the documentary as guilt, sorrow, longing, and anger merge together in remembrance of Rajani, a courageous figure who modelled conviction to her work. ‘No More Tears Sister’ covers the two decades of violence and makes a poignant statement about the role of the militant and activist women in Sri Lanka. It is real history, told through the lived experiences of people left in the aftermath of a political murder of a strong woman. Sri Lanka has had a traumatic, distressing history which finally ended with the dissolution of LTTE and assassination of in 2009. But after the decades of violence and suppression, it has been a long road to recovery and rebuilding of the Nation of Sri Lanka. Even now, there are internal conflicts and women’s subordination that exist, but there’s an effort to move beyond the massive history of genocide at the hands of multiple organisations and groups, along with the State.

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