

THE RISING OF THE PHOENIX: SRI LANKAN TAMIL WOMEN DURING AND AFTER CIVIL WAR CONFLICTS

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Abstract

This article deals with the challenges of Sri Lankan Tamil women during and after the civil war in Sri Lanka. In this research work the lives of Sri Lankan Tamil women are compared to the famous traditional Egyptian mythical story of the Phoenix bird. The study focused on a qualitative method of text and interviews with these people. This article explains unending land reclamation conflicts due to European colonization and internal ethnic breakdown in Sri Lanka. Then, after the independence, the newly formed Sinhalese government started to marginalize both Sri Lanka Tamils and Malaiyaha Tamils people. Hence the protest took place against the Sinhalese Government which led to many disasters and civil conflicts between the Government and Tamils. Therefore, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed where many Tamil Women joined for security and ethnic equality and gave their lives as Black Tigers to destroy the Sinhalese. Most of the Sri Lankan Tamil were scattered and migrated to other countries during the war and after, especially to India. In recent years, the UNHCR and Tamil Nadu Government have taken some actions to support Sri Lankan Tamil Women, who are the phoenix of society.

Keywords: Conflicts, Ethnic, LTTE, Phoenix, Sri Lankan Tamil women, Voice of the Voiceless.

1. Introduction

A never-ending series of battles over land reclamation have plagued Sri Lanka as a result of European imperialism and internal ethnic disintegration. After Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the newly established Sinhalese government soon started to marginalize the previously politically privileged Tamil people. Hence there were many non-violent protests against the Sinhalese Government by different Tamil groups like the Tamil Student League, Tamil United Front and Tamil New Tigers. Later in 1975, the assassination of Jaffna's Mayor

Alfred Duraiappah by Velupillai Prabhakaran, the Founder and leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was the beginning of a violent protest against Sinhalese. Black Tigers killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers in a landmine trap. Then Thousands of Tamil civilians were murdered, tortured and raped by the Sinhalese armed force in turn in 1983 and swept the southern portion of the island. This incident was called “Black July” by Tamil people. Traditionally, Tamil women have been timid, bashful and lacking confidence. However, after Black July, many Tamil young women joined the LTTE and formed the women's armed forces. Nearly 30 % of the LTTE members were women armed forces. Most of the women in the Black Tigers were divided into three sub-wings: the Black Sea Tigers, the Military Wing Black Tigers and the Intelligence Wing Black Tigers. Captain Angayarkanni was the first Black Tiger who blasted a Sri Lankan Navy Surveillance Command Centre Ship in the sea near Kankesanthurai. Her death was significant as later women joined the Tamil Tigers at all levels and played significant roles. After the civil war conflicts, most of the Tamil women were seeking justice and restoration of their land even going on a hunger strike before the government office. The UNHCR recommended that the Sri Lankan Government would fulfill some of the requests of the Sri Lankan Tamil women. Most of the things are only in black and white, still not yet fulfilled. Up till now, women are fighting for justice and peaceful living.

2. Objectives

1. **To Examine the Historical Context:** To provide historical background on the ethnic and political conflicts between Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, before and after independence.
2. **To Analyse the Impact on Tamil Women:** To explore Tamil Women’s participation through LTTE in civil war conflict.
3. **To Compare with Mythical Phoenix:** To draw a comparative analysis between the experiences of Tamil women in Sri Lanka and the mythical Phoenix bird, symbolizing rebirth and resilience.
4. **To Investigate Post-Conflict Support:** To evaluate the post-conflict support and efforts made by organizations like UNHCR and local governments for Tamil women affected by the war.

3. European Imperialism and Conflicts in Sri Lanka

The island of Sri Lanka was previously known as Ceylon. Europe has been interested in acquiring and desiring Sri Lanka since the fifteenth century. The island was invaded by the

Portuguese in 1505 when they split it up into seven rival groups. Nevertheless, the indigenous administrative structure was based on a dominance and mismanagement mechanism intended for the personal and economic benefit of the Portuguese. Politically and commercially, the Portuguese were supplanted in the marine provinces of Ceylon by the Dutch East India Company from 1656. They took over the kingdoms of Sinhalese and Tamil people, but they were unable to take over the much sought-after Kandyan kingdom. The Kingdom of Kandy was eventually overthrown and the island was "unified" politically with the entrance of the British in 1815. But there was never a united country. The remarkable change in the environment that followed the emergence of the plantation sector is evidence that forests were replaced by farms in the central highlands. To labour on the vastly more lucrative tea plantations after the coffee plantations, tens of thousands of Tamils were brought in from south India.

Tensions were already high and they only became worse when Britain gave the minority Tamil ethnic community preferential treatment over the majority ethnic Sinhalese population. The Tamil population, which constituted 22% of Sri Lanka's total population, had benefited disproportionately from English education and the country's civil services.

4. Ethnic Conflicts and the Rising of Tamil Tigers

After Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the Tamils began to rise for more autonomy and they grew increasingly interested in the idea of creating a Tamil Eelam. Enacting a system of political representation based on the dominant ethnic political parties, the newly established Sinhalese government soon started to marginalize the previously politically privileged Tamil people. Not long after the government proclaimed Sinhala to be the only official language of Sri Lanka, a non-violent demonstration was planned by one of the Tamil political parties in front of the Parliament building in Colombo, the country's capital. Violent confrontations broke out between Sinhala Buddhists and Tamils. The conflict occurred in 1956.

Additional complaints included laws that were created soon after independence and Tamils were given land titles, government documents and birth certificates in Sinhala, a language that the majority of them could not understand. Similarly, the University made a new education policy in which it is mentioned that the entrance examination for any higher education should be in Sinhala language. Henceforth, the Tamil minority suffered greatly to get admission to the university for higher education. It became clear that the government and all the systems in Sri Lanka were trying their best to suppress the Tamil people.

Meanwhile, many Tamil organizations were formed to fight for their rights non-violently from the day of independence. Tamil Students League and Tamil Youth League were the most important organizations which often were protesting and raising voices against the Government. As hatred grew, Velupillai Prabhakaran, a young, fundamental Tamil, established Tamil New Tigers which was a combination of both Tamil Student League and Tamil Youth League in 1972. Later Tamil radicals blamed Alfred Duraiappah, the Mayor of Jaffna for supporting the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1974. Hence Velupillai Prabhakaran took violence and hand by assassinating the Mayor in 1975. This was the beginning of a violent moment of Tamil and started to establish a Tamil Separatist state. Henceforth Prabhakaran introduced the use of suicide bombers who wore black uniforms and their head covered and were known to many as the "Black Tigers" in 1976. On 24th July, 1983, the Black Tigers killed nearly thirteen Sinhalese Soldiers and in return, the Sinhalese military force entered the southern region of the Island and killed thousands of the Tamil people and tortured them. This was marked as "Black July" 1983 by the Tamil people. Black July was the milestone for the Tamil women to enter into the LTTE armed force.

5. Traditional Tamil women

Modesty and silence, poise and restraint are cultural customs and social expectations that limit the traditional Tamil women. The traditional ideal of the auspicious and fertile wife is embodied by a Tamil woman. Traditionally, Tamil women have been timid, bashful and lack confidence. When Tamil men were questioned about Sri Lankan gender standards, they all agreed that women have "lack of freedom and power and general socialization processes" and the Tamil society deeply ingrained those traditional conceptions of gender identity. It seems that the conflict has been the only vehicle for changing these basic customs.

6. The Rising of Phoenix: Tamil women in LTTE

This research work is a comparative study on the LTTE woman's life with the famous traditional Greek, Egyptian and Chinese mythical story of the phoenix bird, which will live for 500 to 600 years in the Arabian jungles. The year after, it burns itself on a funeral pyre, gets reborn with its ashes and lives for another cycle of years. Likewise, a human's life becomes renewed or restored after suffering from natural calamities, war and personal conflicts. Here, the scholarly work states that the Sri Lankan Tamil Eelam men and women are like Phoenix. The rebirth tells about their struggles and the restoration of their lives during and after the Civil War from 1983 to 2009.

After the Black July event, a large number of Tamil people joined the militant groups and it turned into a successful recruitment tool for the LTTE. Women made up a large portion of individuals who requested entry into these groups. The proportion of women LTTE members at the peak of their organization was about 30%. Security and ethnic identification are the main reasons why women joined the LTTE. The awareness towards their gender bias and attraction to the LTTE's gender emancipation attitude coincided with their recognition that their ethno cultural identity also played a role in their excluded status. Women LTTEs typically understood security as being free from bodily threats. Women talked about how the LTTE gave them the chance to develop and turn into defenders of the Tamil nation, demonstrating the need for gender equality in leading meaningful lives.

The deadliest conflicts and most hazardous jobs were carried out by women. They took part in land, air and sea operations and some of them were members of the Black Tigers (suicide bombings). A significant portion of the casualties in these units were women. For instance, the Black Tigers were divided into three sub-wings: the Black Sea Tigers, the Military Wing Black Tigers and the Intelligence Wing Black Tigers.

7. Captain Angayarkanni: Phoenix of Tamil Women in Sri Lanka

The research work reflects Captain Angayarkanni as a Phoenix to give rebirth to many women to join the Tamil tigers. Pushpakala Thuraisingham is the original name of Captain Angayarkanni. She was born on 10th May, 1973. She is commonly known as Captain Angayarkanni. She was the LTTE's first woman Black Tigers (suicide bomber). She has one brother and one sister. Her parents are very proud of her sacrifice for the entire Tamil Eelam. She was 21 years old when she accepted this mission. She carried 50 kgs of bombs and swung nearly 35 km in the sea. She sunk a Sri Lankan Navy Surveillance Command Centre Ship in a suicide attack in the sea near Kankesanthurai. Her death is significant as later females joined the Tamil Tigers at all levels and played significant roles.

8. The Voice of Voiceless: Affected Women after Conflicts

The Sri Lankan war, which ranged from 1983 to May 2009, claimed thousands of lives and left tens of thousands of people homeless as they fled to the country's northeast and east or were driven from their homes. According to the human rights organization claim that many of the people who ran out from their homes had their belongings seized. The People's Alliance for Right to Land estimates, that the army still controls over 142 hectares (350 acres) of land in Keppapilavu. Former President Maithripala Sirisena had pledged that all private land in the

northern and eastern provinces would be returned by December 31, 2018. However, those who defend land rights claim that the deadline was not reached.

To return home, Chellamma Singharatnam, an energetic 87-year-old from Puthukkudiyiruppu, Northeastern Sri Lanka, had to go on a hunger strike in May 2009 as the army moved forward. The army had taken control of both her home and her daughter's home when she and her family finally left. For nearly three years, they had spent in camps for displaced people. Following multiple petitions, Singharatnam staged a hunger strike in front of the District Secretariat. The protest lasted for a month as more local women joined her. Eventually, the army consented to return them despite the homes which are in severe damage. Researchers found that resolving land disputes during and after a war is hampered by corrupt legal systems, a lack of accountability and transparency and the destruction of land records.

Meanwhile, Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils fled to neighbouring India during the conflict, mainly to the southern state of Tamil Nadu during and after civil war conflicts. According to Menique Amarasinghe, the organization's country representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), nearly 8,529 refugees were assisted in returning to Sri Lanka in 2011. A considerable number of refugees have also independently returned, leaving 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils in India, many of them living in camps. Human rights groups claim that almost two-thirds of returning refugees are landless in Sri Lanka. There are currently about 30,000 people classified as internally displaced and many of them have lost their houses and lands.

9. Findings

1. **Historical Marginalization:** The Tamil population faced significant marginalization and discrimination by the Sinhalese government post-independence, leading to increased tensions and violence.
2. **Role of Tamil Women in LTTE:** Tamil women played crucial roles in the LTTE, with a significant portion joining the armed forces and participating in high-risk operations, including suicide attacks.
3. **Phoenix Comparison:** The analogy of the Phoenix effectively illustrates the resilience and transformation of Tamil women who, despite facing immense adversity, sought to rebuild their lives and assert their identities.
4. **Insufficient Post-Conflict Support:** Efforts by the UNHCR and the Tamil Nadu government have been partially successful but remain insufficient in fully addressing the land, justice, and rehabilitation needs have affected Tamil women.

10. Suggestions

1. **Enhanced Support Mechanisms:** Develop more comprehensive support mechanisms for Tamil women, including psychological counselling, legal aid, and economic assistance.
2. **Effective Land Reconciliation:** Ensure that the Sri Lankan government follows through on commitments to return occupied lands and address property and land rights issues.
3. **Promotion of Gender Equality:** Increase initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering Tamil women, both within Sri Lanka and in refugee camps abroad.
4. **Strengthened Transitional Justice:** Implement robust transitional justice measures to address past human rights abuses and ensure accountability for war crimes.

11. Conclusion

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recommended the government of Sri Lanka to restore democratic reforms and to implement transitional justice. They are,

1. Redouble efforts to draft a new constitution that respects the rights of all citizens and communities equally.
2. Restore civilian authority and build confidence in the north and east by expediting and making more transparent the return of military-occupied land to its owners.
3. Ending military involvement in farms and shops that harm local businesses.
4. Ending military involvement in the construction of Buddha statues in Tamil and Muslim areas.
5. Constituting the office of missing persons and a significant role for victims' families.

But it is very miserable to know that the promises of the Government standstill. The Sri Lankan authorities continue to observe silence and repress the victims' families and communities.

The Tamil Nadu government has continued to support self-sufficiency among the Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka who are housed in camps by encouraging business ventures and providing access to both financial and technical resources. Notably, to foster the integration of these women into the local community and to promote their involvement in the women-led workforce, the government formed 667 self-help organizations for women residing in various rehabilitation camps. This project supports the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly emphasising on “Leaving No One Behind” (LNOB). This includes

advocating for the inclusion of refugees in national and local development initiatives run by the government, the private sector and other organizations.

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