

# Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

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## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

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PRIAVI JOSHI, OCT 12 2021

For over three decades, Sri Lanka witnessed one of the most violent armed conflicts between the Sinhalese majority State and the minority Tamil community, represented by the militant organisation *Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam* (LTTE). The state formally descended into a civil war after anti-Tamil pogroms across the country on 23rd July, 1983 – observed as *Black July* – and remained a war zone till 18th May, 2009 which marked the capture of the entire island by the Sinhalese army and the death of LTTE's leader Velupillai Prabhakaran (Williams and Weaver). The LTTE grew to be one of the fiercest militant organisations in the world and the only one commanding a navy and an air force (Wall and Choksi). The Tigers also boasted an army of ferocious women who served the organisation in roles ranging from medical care, recruitment, and propaganda to that of active combatants and suicide bombers. The ferocity of the women occupying 'non-traditional' roles in the LTTE stands in sharp contrast to the culture of subservience imposed on them by the Tamil culture. This paradox has sparked the interests of several academics. Academic responses to women's (violent) participation in the militant movement remain varied between those who understand their participation as being forceful and oppressive and others who argue it to be agentive, emancipatory and empowering in nature.

Through this paper, I analyse the existing literature on the subject and establish that the aforementioned 'victim-agent' binary is falsely constructed. It takes women's political identities to be constant and hence, fails to grapple with the complex relationships that women share with war, and how conflict alters their identities and aspirations itself. This paper makes an attempt to move away from the dominant discourse around women in the LTTE as being situated in the extremes of the falsely constructed binary of victimhood and agency, and towards analysing their participation through the lens of state repression. I argue that the experiences of Tamil women under the twin workings of *displacement* and *militarisation* fundamentally changed their political and cultural identities, and gave rise to new personal, feminist and nationalist aspirations which led them to join the LTTE.

### I. Context

The Sri Lankan conflict traces its roots to the contested histories of the two concerned communities in the island, the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, with both the communities claiming to be the original inhabitants of the land. The 1956 *Sinhala Only Bill* introduced by President Bandaranaike's government granted Sinhala the status of the sole official language of the State (Parashar 113). This denied an equal status to the Tamil language and consequently, to the Tamil people. In addition, the *Standardisation in Education Policy* was introduced in 1970 which provided positive discrimination to Sinhala students, allowing them access to University admissions at much lower grades than their Tamil counterparts (ibid.). Both policies together provided grounds for systemic discrimination against the Tamils and hampered their relative job prospects. This was followed by anti-Tamil riots of 1956, 1958, 1977 and 1981 (ibid.). In response, a number of Tamil political and militant organisations arose to forward the cause of justice for their community. One such organisation, *Tamil New Tigers* (TNT) was formed by Vellupillai Prabhakaran in May 1972 (ibid.). The LTTE was formally established on 5 May 1976 as a successor to the TNT (ibid.).

Faced with electoral defeat in the national elections of 1977, the *Tamil United Liberation Front* (TULF), an alliance of all parliamentary parties of the North, concluded that Tamil interests could not be safeguarded within a unitary state and called for demands of an independent Tamil *Eelam* ("Anti-Tamil Riots"). The TULF envisioned the *Eelam* to be

## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

achieved through non-violent means. However, their inability to do so coupled with the resentments of the Tamils, led to the formation of small organisations among Tamil youth to strive towards actualising the vision of the *Eelam* through a militant armed struggle (ibid.). President Jayawardene's regime responded by stationing armed forces and militarising North and East Sri Lanka within three months (ibid.). In 1983, one such youth organisation ambushed an army convoy in Jaffna and killed 13 Sri-Lankan soldiers, all of whom were Sinhalese (Wall and Choksi). The army responded by killing over 20 civilians (ibid.). Anti-Tamil pogroms broke out across the country and the brutal state-sponsored genocide lasted from 23rd July to 30th July. Sinhalese mobs "murdered at least 3,000 Tamils, raped at least 500 women, destroyed 5,000 shops and displaced over 1,50,000 Tamils" ("Remembering Black July"). In remembrance of this bloody state-sponsored pogrom, 23rd July is observed as *Black July*.

By *Black July*, the LTTE had also emerged as a significant player in the Sri Lankan conflict. The early years of the organisation's armed militant activities were geared towards eliminating and absorbing rival militant groups (Parashar 114). The guerrilla strength of the LTTE increased from 200 members in 1983 to over 10,000 in 1986 (Stack-O'Connor 45). The period after *Black July* also saw a sharp increase in the number of women members in militant groups (ibid.). Not only did the number of women increase, but they started performing diverse tasks under these organisations. Till this period, women assisted militant groups with nursing, administration, intelligence collection and providing cover for male operatives (ibid.). Women were included in the LTTE's fighting forces in 1984 and in combat in 1986 (ibid. 48).

Early LTTE cadres were aided by the Indian Government and armed and trained in the state of Tamil Nadu (Parashar 114). The LTTE also created a special combat unit, *The Freedom Birds*, for its women combatants in 1984 (ibid.). The unit began its six month training in Tamil Nadu in 1984, was exclusive to women and mirrored the military training of their male counterparts (Stack-O'Connor 50). The LTTE benefited from international financing and training, and gained legitimacy in the eyes of Tamil people in Sri Lanka and across the world. The militant organisation extensively used military, air and navy combat and pioneered and executed suicide bombings of political and military targets through its exclusive *Black Tigers* unit.

The LTTE lost nearly 860 men i.e. approximately 8% of its membership, between 1982-87 (Stack-O'Connor 47). As part of their counterinsurgency policy, the government targeted Tamil males between the age of 14 and 40 years for interrogation and detention (ibid.). By 1986, the government is estimated to have arrested nearly 3,000 Tamil men under the suspicion of being militants (ibid. 48). As a result of loss of the male force and increasing requirement for combatants, a sharp increase in the number of female members in combatant roles was observed during this period (ibid. 47).

The LTTE entered into diplomatic negotiations with the governments of Sri Lanka, India and Norway and agreed to the *Indo-Lanka Accord* of 1987 (ibid.). The Accord called for the LTTE to disarm in exchange of greater autonomy being guaranteed to regions in North and East Sri Lanka (ibid.). India extended military assistance by deploying the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to the northern and eastern region of the island country. The excesses committed by the IPKF fuelled bitter resentments towards the force and the government. By 1993, The LTTE had been successful in assassinating two heads of states – Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, killing Sinhalese and Tamil politicians they viewed as enemies to 'their i.e. the Tamil cause' and engaging in large scale military confrontations with both the Sri Lankan Army and the IPKF (Herath 149, Hoole). It had established a "de-facto state" in northern and eastern Sri Lanka (Dearing 71). Women formed 15%-20% of the LTTE's guerrilla fighters, and about 33% of the *Black Tigers* (Stack-O'Connor 53). Female *Black Tigers* executed at least 15 suicide attacks between 1991-2006 and their male counterparts executed approximately 35 suicide attacks (ibid.).

Faced with escalating violence, the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE signed a Norwegian-mediated ceasefire and agreed to political and diplomatic conversations which broke down in 2003, with the state accusing the militant organisation of using the terms of the agreement to regroup and rearm (Parashar 115). The Tsunami of 2004 severely impacted the island and the relations between the government and the LTTE deteriorated over equitable sharing of the international tsunami aid (Williams and Weaver). The LTTE revived its militant attacks and political assassinations in 2005. It also called for a boycott of national elections and Mahindra Rajapaksa was elected as

# Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

President in November 2005. The ceasefire was officially terminated on 16th January 2008 and the violence escalated over the year (ibid.). The Sri Lankan government rejected all international calls for ceasefires and the civilians were caught in a war between the government and the LTTE for nearly eight months. On 18th May, 2009 the army took control of the entire island and killed several LTTE leaders, including Prabhakaran. Later, it was reported that Prabhakaran's family was also killed in the war and that the army had executed his 12 year old son Balachandran Prabhakaran (Macrae). Prabhakaran's death officially marked the end of a 26 year long civil war.

## II. Women in the LTTE: Beyond Victimhood and Agency

In order to understand the diverse roles of women in the LTTE, reasons behind their participation, and how their participation in a violent militant movement came to be seen as culturally acceptable in a socially conservative society, we first need to study the reasons behind the LTTE recruiting women in non-combatant and eventually combatant positions. This section aims to study the LTTE's motivations behind recruiting women, women's own reasons to participate, and how these have been narrativised to cast women in the binary categories of 'victims' and 'agents/perpetrators'.

### *Women as 'Victims'*

As observed in the earlier section, women were accepted in combatant roles in the LTTE in the context of increasing casualties among male LTTE members and large scale detentions of Tamil men. Confronted with both the Sri Lankan army and the IPKF, the LTTE was faced with an acute need to recruit more combatants. As a result, women were recruited in combatant roles after 1986. In addition to requiring a greater man-force, three other tactical reasons also marked the LTTE's recruitment of women. First, the inclusion of women allowed the LTTE to posit itself as the sole true representative of all Tamils and eliminate intra-Tamil competition among various militant groups (Stack-O'Connor 48). Second, in a conservative society, it was easier for women to bypass unsuspecting State soldiers and penetrate hardened military structures for attacks (Dearing 68). Third, women combatants, especially suicide bombers, received disproportionately higher coverage by the international media and hence, provided greater psychological impacts to the LTTE's military strategies (ibid.).

Many have used this to argue that women combatants were not employed in the LTTE because they are empowered, but because they were 'disposable'. Bloom (2007) furthers this by stating that "they (women combatants) are more valuable to their societies dead than they ever could have been alive" (Murray 22). In addition, the LTTE also subjected its members to strict sexual control and surveillance (ibid.). The onus of maintaining 'discipline' was on the women who were celebrated as *Armed Virgins*, hence, the organisation retained the chastity of women as a personal, cultural and political virtue (Parashar 137). It retained some core conservative Tamil practices and the decision making powers were concentrated among a small, male-dominated leadership. Lastly, women were mandated to have short hair, wear standardised combat uniforms and receive intensive military training – many have argued that instead of feminising the military, the organisation aimed to "de-feminise" and "de-sexualise" its female members (ibid.). In a biting critique, Chenoy states that the message in military training was to "kill the woman in you" (Gowrinathan 85). Understood in the context of forced conscription by the LTTE, widespread rape and social exclusion of the rape survivors, their choices are argued to be culturally predetermined. Women combatants are cast as 'double-victims' – victims of both patriarchy and war, forced to join the LTTE only for the cycle of oppression to repeat itself. This pushes women into a 'victim complex' and strips them of any agency they would have exercised through their actions.

### *Women as 'Agents'*

While tracing the victimhood of women combatants of the LTTE is the dominant narrative, Schalk argues that the LTTE had its own kind of feminism which he terms as "martial feminism" (Schalk 165). He states that a LTTE woman's *martial feminism* "insists on civil rights of women and on taking up arms", and argues that their decision to join the LTTE was a rational and practical one to further gender equality (ibid.). For him, gender equality was not possible without an independent *Eelam* and hence, women voluntarily joined the LTTE to strive for both equality and an independent state (Schalk 163). When studied in light of the safer conditions of women under the regions in North

# Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

and East Sri Lanka, as opposed to the regions controlled by the State army, his argument holds merit. Within LTTE-controlled areas, sexual violence, domestic violence, prostitution, dowry, alcohol and pornography were all banned and strictly punishable offences (Gowrinathan 154). The LTTE was also credited with eliminating the caste system (ibid.). This leads scholars to argue that women's liberation could only be achieved within the nationalist project. Women are viewed as agents perpetrating violence to realise their own nationalist aspirations, which are argued to be inherently tied to their feminist aspirations.

## *Complicating the Binary*

Both these theories take an 'either-or' stand on the question, portraying women as either victims or agents of violence. I argue that this is a falsely constructed binary as women combatants were more often than not both victims and agents simultaneously. As a 'people' living under the conditions of a civil war in a conservative society, women shared experiences of state and cultural repression. Tamil women were a 'twice-disadvantaged' community – first, by the virtue of being Tamils in a Sinhalese dominated state, they were victims of systematic discrimination and targeted state repression. Second, by the virtue of being women in a conservative hierarchical society, they were also victims of patriarchy and oppressive cultural practices. I argue that these shared experiences of state and cultural repression fundamentally changed their cultural and political identities and influenced their political aspirations. As their political aspirations influenced their decisions to join the LTTE and whether to serve in combatant or non-combatant roles, it follows that their experiences of victimhood and repression inform their agentive decisions. Casting women combatants solely as passive victims ignores their nationalist aspirations and right to self determination. On the other hand, casting them as complete agents ignores the limited means of survival available to women during times of conflict. Complete agency presupposes the availability of choice and absence of coercion – both conditions were absent during the Sri Lankan war and hence, women were not realistically able to exercise unrestricted agency. Under conditions of war, it is important to move beyond simplistic definitions of agency as "free will" towards understanding it as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Gowrinathan 4 "). Hence, their participation in the LTTE lies somewhere between victimhood and agency.

Through this section, I have established that as women in the LTTE simultaneously held both identities of a 'victim' and an 'agent', these binaries of 'victim' or 'agent' are falsely constructed, and there is a need to move beyond this dominant discourse to understand women's participation in the militant organisation. I posit that the question can be understood by viewing their participation in the LTTE as an exercise of 'restricted agency' – agency exercised within politically and culturally oppressive structures. The question remains – what drives them to exercise their restricted agency and join the LTTE? In the next two sections, I argue that the experiences of Tamil women under the twin workings of displacement and militarisation, coupled with the narratives around it, produced new fears among them which framed their political aspirations and led them to join the LTTE. It is an attempt to understand the restricted agency exercised by women under conditions of state repression.

## **III. State Repression**

State repression is defined as the "actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organisation, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions" (Davenport 2). It includes emotional, physical and sexual harassment, surveillance, arrests, tortures and mass killings by government institutions or affiliates within the state's territorial jurisdiction (Davenport 1). Several governments have indiscriminately used strategies of state repression to suppress dissent and maintain the territorial integrity of the state. While several authors have studied the relationship between gender-based violence on women and their recruitment in militant organisations, they have done so by emphasising the emotional trauma faced by the survivors which further portrays them as victims at the hands of the state and society. Instead of being limited to studying the emotional trauma of violence, this paper seeks to study gender-based violence as a direct form of state repression, which reshapes women's identities, frames their aspirations and informs their agentive decisions. This section analyses displacement and militarisation in Sri Lanka as strategies of state repression, its gendered impacts on women and how it reshaped their cultural and political identities.

# Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

## A) Displacement

Over the course of the Sri Lankan war, the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) is recorded to be between 5,00,000 and 12,00,000 for a total state population of approximately 20 million (Gowrinathan, "Inside Camps" 13). 80% of the IDPs were ethnically Tamil (ibid.). It is important to note that Tamils constituted only 12.7% of the population (Gowrinathan 21). This implies that out of a total population of approximately 2.6 million Tamils, 1.2 million i.e. half of the Tamil population was displaced during the war. Amongst this population, several were displaced multiple times due to the conflict and recurring natural disasters and some IDPs only travelled to safer territories for the night (Gowrinathan, "Inside Camps" 13). The main cause of displacement was identified as "real or perceived conflict-related violence" (ibid.). While displacement is often viewed as an inevitable by-product of violent conflicts, I argue that it is a calculated political act which creates the necessary settings for more direct forms of state repression. Through the next subsection, I show the disproportionate impact of displacement on Tamil women and the ways in which it reshaped their cultural identities.

### *Displacement and its Gendered Impacts*

In Tamil culture, women are classified into two categories, on the basis of their relationship with their 'house' - women who stay within the physical confines of their house are termed as *Kula Makal*, meaning 'women of the family', and those who venture outside the confines are termed as *Vilai Makal*, meaning 'women available for a price' (Herath 36). The former are seen as the ideal women and the latter as deviant exceptions - control over both categories of women are exercised through the settings of home. The former are subjected to patriarchal traditions and expectations of a family life and the latter are shunned for not conforming to the standards of an 'ideal woman'. Herath observes that "the house in Tamil culture represents female moral virtue, modesty and social responsibility" (ibid. 92). As the cultural roles and familial expectations of women are linked to the house, the security provided by the 'house', the expectations constrained and the relationships contained within it break down in the face of multiple displacements. This was compounded by the recruitment (into the LTTE) and the detention of several men from the age of 14 to 40 years during the conflict (Stack-O'Connor 47). Several families were also broken apart in the process of displacement. This implied four things. First, women were faced with the loss of a 'home' and 'family' as they had known it. Second, women replaced men as heads of households. This shifted the gendered roles within a 'house' dictated by Tamil culture and weakened social hierarchies within family units. Third, displacement and resettlement in new places meant communal living - IDPs had to live with relatives, friends or strangers from all castes for long periods of time (Herath 97). Last, the three aforementioned implications led to deterioration of cultural norms and "an extensive reduction in social control over Tamil women as a collective" (ibid. 94). These four paradigm shifts challenged the traditional gender roles in Tamil society and hence, fundamentally altered the cultural identities of Tamil women in Sri Lanka.

In addition to altering their cultural identities, displacement and resettlement also posed new challenges for Tamil women. Resettlement camps suffered acute food shortages, and the situation only worsened after the 2004 tsunami (Gowrinathan, "Inside Camps" 13). Through personal interviews, Gowrinathan notes that this scarcity was felt most acutely by women who often had to give their own ration of food to their children or the elders in the family (ibid.). There were long lines to collect rations, and both wells and food trucks would be stationed far away from the camps (ibid. 14). It was the women's responsibility to walk long distances, stand in lines and collect food and water (ibid.). For this, they had to cross checkpoints and military camps, which made them particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual assault. As a result of multiple displacements and poor economic conditions, women were also forced to live in the absence of permanent shelters and conduct large parts of their lives in overcrowded public spaces (ibid. 13). This raised concerns of hygiene and privacy. In the absence of bathrooms, girls and women had to use open fields and meadows for both bathing and restroom purposes. In case separate bathing facilities existed, they were eerily close to army camps (ibid.14). This further aggravated women's anxieties and vulnerabilities in heavily militarised zones. The impacts of militarisation, the experience and the fear sexual violence and its role in reshaping the political identities of Tamil women are discussed in the next section.

## B) Militarisation

## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

Militarisation is broadly understood as the process by which territories and people begin to be controlled by the military. Several theorists have argued that militarisation does not simply refer to an increased percentage of state budget being allocated to military personnel and expenditure, but also a regime in which “civil leadership puts military power to civil use to ‘save the nation’ or solve political problems” (Gowrinathan 71). This defines the state of affairs of Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka before, during and after the conflict. The scenery of North and East Sri Lanka was flooded with visible signs of militarisation in the form of heavy deployment of military personnel and associated infrastructure such as camps, sentry points and checkpoints. The North and East Sri Lankan region encompasses a total of 25,332 square mi., out of which 7,289 square mi. of land is inhabited by Tamils (Gowrinathan 74). Out of this 7,289 sq mi. area of land, the defense forces occupied more than 2,702 sq. miles i.e. over a third of the land (ibid.). These are the figures for 2007, there is reason to believe that the state was more heavily militarised during the conflict. Through the next subsection, I assess the disproportionate impact of militarisation on women, rape, and the fear of rape in the context of militarisation and the ways in which it reshaped the political identities of Tamil women.

### *Militarisation and its Gendered Impacts*

Even though rape has been extensively studied as the perpetration of sexual violence against individual women, it is equally important to understand it as form of political and ethnic violence perpetrated by the State. Like in most conservative patriarchal societies, women’s chastity is considered to be a ‘sacred value’ in Tamil culture, and their bodies and virtues are used to symbolise the Tamil nation’s honour (Herath 162). Hence, the violation of women’s bodies is viewed as an assault on Tamil culture and nation. Murray argues that the use of rape as a military tool in the conflict is a “method of permeating the boundaries between the two groups” and “the damage done to the culture is permanent” (Murray 39). When rape is indiscriminately used as a weapon of war against members of one community by State officers, and the State does not seek to reprimand the officers but systematically deny allegations and silence the survivors – it is safe to categorise rape, and the crippling fear of rape, under militarisation a form of state repression in itself.

Checkpoints were overt visual markers of militarisation of the state – they consisted of roadblocks or small huts at the sides of roads and were manned by two to four military officers (Gowrinathan 74). Identity cards were demanded and body and luggage checks were conducted by army men. Women’s bodies were placed at the centre of both suspicion and surveillance at these locations (ibid. 76). Experiences of women at checkpoints range from being groped and harassed, being asked to strip naked and walk long stretches of the road while army men “inspected” them, to being gang raped by officers (Gowrinathan 76, Gowrinathan, “Inside Camps” 15). 16 out of the 20 women interviewed mentioned the presence of checkpoints while describing their everyday lives in civilian areas (Gowrinathan 90). More than half cited the fear of walking through a checkpoint to get their ration of food, water, bathe, or attend school (ibid.). A direct correlation between sexual violence committed by the State forces and the cases of domestic violence committed by family members has also been observed (Gowrinathan 109, 127). While commenting on the sexual abuse faced by Tamil women, an aid worker commented “maybe after the army starting raping Tamil women, it became ok for everyone to do it?” (Gowrinathan 127). Hence, women became victims of violence perpetrated by both the State and their own family members.

In both the cases, acts of sexual violence regardless of their form or perpetrator were silenced due to the fear of social stigma and being ostracised (Gowrinathan 143). Survivors were labeled and these labels have far reaching consequences for their lives – from their entry in temples to marital prospects (ibid. 143). Lack of marital aspects further reduces their access to material resources and increases their chances of being raped, making them more vulnerable. Social ostracisation implies that the survivor has to travel alone, which increases the likelihood of being harassed as compared to those who walk in groups. Hence, it further restricts their access to public spaces. The trauma of being physically and sexually violated, along with social ostracisation, restricted access to public spaces, and worsening financial status have devastating impacts on the survivor’s mental health. These women earn the added title of being ‘unstable’ or ‘unwell’ and are further shunned from the society (ibid. 144). Hence, the act of sexual violence becomes a definitive moment in the lives of Tamil women as “it permanently places them outside the mainstream of society” (ibid. 145). The social consequences of rape, along with the physical and emotional trauma it entailed, generated a crippling fear of rape among Tamil women. I argue that when the consequences of being a

## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

victim of sexual violence are so severe that they threaten the physical and social survival of women, and the possibility of being sexually violated is so high under the conditions of displacement and militarisation, both the actual experience and the fear of rape are culturally and politically disruptive enough to push women towards laying down their lives for an *Eelam* that is imagined as safe and egalitarian. Their willingness to participate in an armed movement, and perpetrate violence on its behalf, to actualise their nationalist aspirations of an *Eelam* fundamentally alters their political identities.

Through this section, I have argued that the twin working of displacement and militarisation birthed new aspirations in Tamil women and fundamentally altered their cultural and political identities. In the next section, I will argue that women joined the LTTE seeking basic necessities, security and social acceptance, and to actualise their nationalist and feminist aspirations through the promise of *Eelam*. I will proceed to show how the LTTE used the narrative of rape to construct new 'feminine' virtues that made the perpetration of violence by women socially acceptable but at the same time depoliticised them.

### IV. LTTE and the promise of Eelam: Women's decision to join the LTTE

So far we have studied displacement and militarisation as forms of state repression, and analysed how their twin working fundamentally altered the identities and aspirations of Tamil women. Through this section, I will argue that women took the radical step of joining the LTTE to realise their personal, feminist and nationalist aspirations – we will observe how these aspirations are intrinsically linked to their experiences of repression.

#### *Basic Necessities*

We observed how the shortage of food in displacement camps and poor financial conditions of families disproportionately affected women. The food rationing process pushed women to the brink of starvation, and created an experience of suffering so intense that it left an "indelible mark on one's political consciousness" (Gowrinathan 190). Several interviewees cited the availability of food three times a week to all LTTE members as an important reason to join the organisation (ibid. 173). Access to other basic necessities such as private spaces and bathrooms further incentivised them to join the organisation. Hence, joining the LTTE was first and foremost an act of survival.

#### *Safety and Security*

Survival in the context of war expanded beyond the availability of basic material necessities and included safety and security from harassment. As observed earlier, the fear of rape was a pressing one, especially in context of the social ostracisation that followed the rape. The LTTE replicated the structure of a consanguine family within the organisation – members were supposed to address each other as brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts – avoiding any sexual connotations to be construed from interactions among members (Herath 124, 127). Sexual violence was strongly punishable within the LTTE and in the areas controlled by them (Parashar 139). Being a member of the LTTE assured them their own safety (from sexual violence) inside the organisation. Being a combatant and training under the LTTE, secured them with additional military skills that allowed them to defend themselves outside the organisation. Both of these formed important reasons for women to join the militant organisation. Those who were more ideologically driven believed that the only way to effectively resist state militarisation was to take up arms themselves – an interviewee stated that "instead of dying, screaming, being raped by an aggressor army, it is a relief to face the army with your own weapon" (Gowrinathan 92). Even those who were less ideologically engaged felt safer after having received training in arms than they did as unarmed civilians (ibid.).

Furthermore, The LTTE had also introduced anti-dowry legislations, banned alcohol and prostitution and meted out strict punishments for domestic violence in the areas under their control (Parashar 139, Gowrinathan 154). Parashar notes that travelling to LTTE controlled areas was like travelling to a different state in Sri Lanka under a different rule of law (Parashar 125). These areas followed a different administrative, legal and justice systems and allowed its women a much greater degree of freedom from patriarchal control, harassment and everyday criminality (ibid.). She observes that "molestation and harassment was unheard of in LTTE controlled areas and Tamil women could move freely and safely as compared to areas controlled by Sri Lankan armed forces" (ibid.). In LTTE controlled areas,

## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

civilian and combatant women saw a glimpse of an *Eelam* which would assure them and their future generations freedom and security. It led women to believe that their feminist and nationalist aspirations were linked, and could only be actualised through a separate *Eelam*. As the *Eelam* could be realised through the LTTE, they joined the movement.

### *Home and Family*

As observed earlier, displacement also led to the breakdown of family structures. An increase in incidents of domestic abuse among Tamil families was also observed. As a result, women were faced with an acute feeling of homelessness. Several women joined the LTTE because they had no home or the home they had was no longer a safe space with abusive family members, regular home checks by army officers and lack of resources (Parashar 126, 127). The Sinhala State was seen as an enemy that not only challenged their rights to their homeland but also one that created “conditions of homelessness and destitution through their oppressive policies” (ibid. 127). In the face of increased poverty and violence being directed at women, joining the LTTE served two purposes: first, the feeling of a *home* created within the LTTE as a product of shared experiences, aspirations, and solidarity among its members; and second, the realisation of an ideal *homeland* i.e. the *Eelam* through participation in the movement. There was a large consensus of having been treated well in the LTTE among women cadres (ibid. 128). In an interview, a female ex-combatant shares, “In the LTTE, I found happiness, comfort, and many more things I didn’t find at home” (Wall and Choksi). Joining the LTTE provided women a sense of belonging to the LTTE ‘family’, as the LTTE was structured in consanguineous familial structures, and belonging to the movement.

### *Solidarity and Acceptance*

Women who had been survivors of sexual violence, and social ostracisation as a result of it, also found comfort and solidarity in their interactions with other women members of the organisation. While the LTTE remained ambivalent on the social perceptions of measuring a woman’s worth by her virginity, it did recognise that survivors of sexual violence received little to no support from their communities and stepped into this void by providing them a sense of community (Herath 164). It also moved away from the dominant discourse of victim blaming by directing the blame towards the armed forces (ibid.). While LTTE’s own use of narratives around rape to justify violence by women combatants is, it did provide emotional and physical strength to survivors. Women felt they could talk about their experiences and trauma without being ostracised and marginalised for it. In an interview, an female ex-combatant states “Akka, at least in the LTTE I was with those who had similar experiences. I felt it was important to share my story rather than hide it” (Gowrinathan 131). As a result, the LTTE enjoyed high loyalties from women cadres (Herath 164). Several interviewees expressed “satisfaction and a sense of purpose” while being a part of an organisation and movement which “embraced them with all their problems and aspirations” (Parashar 128). These solidarities also strengthened feminist aspirations among women as articulated in interviews records of women combatants – “I did not join the LTTE to fight for women’s rights, but our participation has shown that we must fight for women’s equality as well” (Gowrinathan 186).

### *The Question of Forced Recruitments*

The LTTE had instituted a system of forced conscription in the regions under its control – this mandated at least one young member from each family to join the LTTE (Parashar 128). It is observed that a majority of early recruits joined voluntarily, but as the war escalated and the LTTE counter-militarised, some of the later recruits were coerced or forced in nature (Gowrinathan 62). These counter-institutional networks primarily operated through familial and community networks (ibid. 91). This added another layer of exposure and vulnerability, as civilian girls and women were not able to identify LTTE informants. While some girls were forcibly recruited either by being abducted by the LTTE or volunteered by their own family members, once they joined the organisation, they displayed higher levels of commitment than their male counterparts irrespective of their recruitment process (Parashar 124). It was also observed that parents who tried to get their children back home found it more difficult to do so in case of girls than boys (ibid.).

In addition, the perceived number of forced recruitment of girls and women seems exaggerated. Herath states that all



## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

female combatants in her study joined the organisation voluntarily (Herath 107). It has also been widely noted that a large number of girls joined the LTTE without parental consent, or in the face of strong parental resistance (Herath 115, Parashar 122, 127). Once recruited, most women found security, solidarity and a sense of purpose within the organisation and hence, chose to stay in it despite having the option to leave a few times in their journeys.

Hence, we observed that women joined the LTTE to seek basic necessities; safety and security; home and family; and solidarity and acceptance; but above all they joined the LTTE and stayed in it to actualise their dreams of an *Eelam* – a homeland where their nationalist and feminist aspirations would be realised. We observed how women's suffering under state and cultural repression did not limit them to the role of victims, but informed their agentic decisions. Agency exercised by Tamil women in deciding to join the LTTE in varying capacities, albeit restricted, was radical and marked a departure from their traditional roles.

### V. Culturally Legitimising Acts of Violence Perpetrated by Women

In the Tamil culture women are viewed as docile and peace-loving by nature. Violence perpetrated by women is seen as 'unnatural' and culturally disruptive. The LTTE enjoyed strong support from conservative Tamils, and projected itself as a revivalist organisation. Hence, the LTTE needed to culturally legitimise its recruitment of women combatants to perpetrate violence on their behalf, especially as suicide bombers. I argue that the LTTE manipulated the narratives of rape, which depoliticised the women, to culturally legitimise violence perpetrated by their women cadres.

Unlike most cases in which the LTTE maintained complete silence about their affiliation to suicide bombers, they have actively claimed for female suicide bombers to be victims of rape by the IPKF or the Sinhalese Army (Herath 149). It has narrativised the use of rape by the State to claim that all women combatants had been raped and that is what served as their primary motivation to join the organisation (ibid. 165). It legitimised the violence being perpetrated by its women cadres by claiming that it was her revenge against the enemy who "polluted her" (ibid. 150). As women's chastity is linked to the nation's honour, she is avenging not only her own rape but also the dishonouring of her nation by perpetrating violence against the 'enemy'. In Tamil culture, self immolation by fire (*agnipravesam*) is an ancient purification ritual (ibid. 150). Therefore, the act of women perpetrating violence is viewed by the society in four ways: first, as her avenging her rape; second, as her avenging her nation's dishonour; third, her acting out of emotional trauma and last, her 'purifying' her 'polluted' body through *agnipravesam* and hence restoring her 'purity' and 'honour'. As it adheres to the cultural beliefs and practices of the Tamils, such a narrative culturally and socially legitimises, and even pedestalizes, acts of violence being committed by women.

It is important to note that this entire legitimising narrative is based on the assumption that all women combatants of the LTTE were victims of rape – this is categorically untrue. It is incorrect to assume that all women combatants, or even all women suicide bombers, are rape survivors (Herath 165, Murray 44). The fact that on one hand, the LTTE maintains complete silence around the private lives of its members, and on the other shares only their assumed experience of rape is very telling. It aims to rationalise the act by portraying it as being a product of shame and trauma being faced by women. It reduces the agency of women to their victimhood, their desire to 'purify their polluted bodies' and hence, depoliticises them. It is in sharp contrast to how the LTTE women viewed the act of suicide bombing. They viewed it as first, an act towards actualising the dream of *Eelam* and second, as a "gift", "an act of contribution" in the movement and for future Tamil generations (Herath 184). It silences women and recasts them in their traditional roles while upholding patriarchal oppressive cultural values of 'purity' and 'honour', and is also in stark contrast to the reasons we have analysed in this paper that guided women to join the LTTE.

### VI. Conclusion

Through this paper, I have attempted to move away from the dominant discourse around women in militant organisations as being situated in the extremes of the falsely constructed binary of victimhood and agency, and towards analysing their participation through the lens of state repression. The perspective of state repression helps our nuanced understanding of women's participation in militant organisations in four ways. First, it helps us analyse the gendered impacts of displacement and militarisation, and the new fears it produced among women. Second, it

## Repression, Identity and the Promise of Eelam

Written by Priavi Joshi

illustrates that women's identities and aspirations are not constant but a product of the conflict itself. Third, it demonstrates women's decision to join militant organisations as a step towards actualising their personal, feminist and nationalist agendas. As these aspirations are products of the conflict, it complicates the binary of victimhood and agency by demonstrating how women's agentive decisions are informed by their experiences of suffering. Last, it helps us understand agency as a constant negotiation with one's culture and society rather than a dramatic act which frees women from the confines of patriarchal structures and traditions.

That being said, this paper also suffers from certain limitations. First, due to its scope, it does not analyse the post-conflict situation of women in North and East Sri Lanka. These regions continued to be repressed by the State for nearly a decade after the war was officially called off, and the twin working of militarisation and displacement continued to create gendered insecurities among women. However, without the presence of the LTTE, these insecurities manifested themselves in a significantly different manner post-conflict. Attempts were made to push women back to their traditional roles by the State, society and even international organisations through their selective DDR<sup>[1]</sup> programmes. Second, this paper is centered around women's motivations to join the LTTE and hence, does not incorporate the State's standpoint while addressing the conflict. As a result of these two points, this paper does not attempt to answer how successful the movement was in addressing women's concerns and aspirations in society. The success of the movement on this front can only be measured by first understanding what women's concerns and aspirations were to begin with – and this paper is a step towards understanding the often silenced and misunderstood politics of militant women in Sri Lanka.

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Written by Priavi Joshi

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[1] Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration