

On Moments and Movements

Nimmi Gowrinathan, Ph.D.

*Professor/Founder, Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative
City College of New York, USA*

I am coming here from an event in Washington, DC on ‘The Future of Women in Extremism’ where I spoke amongst a gathering of counter-terror ‘experts.’ Needless to say, I very much appreciate this space, here today, where the violence of states is considered alongside the violence of the resistance.

In the distorted view of policy analysts, women join movements for reasons as simplistic as seeing it as a status symbol. I’ve heard female combatants described as monsters, anti-social, deviants, or simply criminals. Their motivations reduced to a matter of ‘who they bump into’ or what ‘brightly-colored visuals’ they find online.

This conference is, and was, an important space to ensure that the western gaze does not define any aspect of a movement – we cannot allow them to construct us to be the victims they can save. We cannot accept the technical solutions that often reinforce the vulnerability of women, and overlook what shapes their political beliefs - like the politics of memory and the complex positioning of Tamil women within the nationalist project.

Two years ago, Dr. Angana Chatterjee asked me to help develop an archive on *Legacies of Violence in South Asia* at Stanford University. It came at a moment when I was consumed in the urgent work of a contemporary political crisis here, and one where the political terrain of memory was all that remained of a movement in North East Sri Lanka.

Yet, as the generation who defined the movement began to die and retributive justice of the state in Sri Lanka increasingly placed the material proof of violence at risk – the task felt urgent.

Citation

Gowrinathan, N. 2018. On Moments and Movements. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Tamil Nationhood and Genocide. May 5-6, Ottawa, ON. 2:15-18.

One evening in New York, two Sri Lankan Tamil uncles transfer history from a basement in New Jersey to my apartment. A trolley helps bear the weight, and the deposit is made. We go out for Thai food. Tamils love Thai food.

When I return, the boxes spill over, occupying the small space I worked hard to eke out for myself and my son. They tempt me in the mornings and taunt me before bed. They threaten to overwhelm me. Stuffed in between the VHS Tiger recruitment videos are bent photos of Tamil women in bellbottoms protesting outside the White House. Hidden in the pages of speeches is the stenciled artwork of a female fighter. Binders are overfull of letters, appeals to humanity signed by long-dead dignitaries. Tissue-paper thin political pamphlets calling for revolution that once circulated, lay still.

I feel the acute burden of materials that are both meaningful, and without concerted effort, meaningless. I am drawn to the markings of, and about, Tamil women in this historical content.

Archivist Arlette Farge once wrote, “*The decision to write history from the archives comes from somewhere between passion and reason. Each vies with the other without ever quite overwhelming or stifling its rival.*”

For me, I am looking for the markings of Tamil women’s history, and my own, in materials that reveal both moments, and the movement that captured them.

Running throughout these boxes was also a disturbing, consistent tension, as Tamil men grapple with the problematic positioning of the individual Tamil woman, marrying her obligation to Tamil culture with her participation in the movement.

A thicker booklet, emblazoned with the insignia of the Tigers, is a collection of speeches by the leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran. On International Women’s Day in 1992, he cites the dual struggle for Tamil women against Tamil patriarchy and a racist state. The practice of dowry he said, was to be banished; domestic violence severely punished; sexual violence of any kind would be met with the death sentence.

As perceptions of women's political potential in Tamil society began to shift, an elderly political supporter of the Tigers writes:

"How the Tamil woman, who was a docile, meek, peace loving member of the Tamil society turned out to be such a courageous, bold, and sacrificing person offering herself to fight injustice and to save the Tamil nation, is really unbelievable. But it's true."

On Memory

Memories are the disappeared in service of reconciliation. The erasure of violence, sentiments like "rape is no longer a problem in the North & East," occludes the inescapable reality – moments of violence make an indelible impact. Traumas commit themselves to memory, without consent.

When I ask Tamil women to remember – I know that they are not re-traumatized: a trauma that never subsided cannot re-emerge. For the first time, among these boxes, I felt at ease asking questions.

Memory is also disappeared as experts seek to find the motivations of women who engage in violence movements. In a study conducted by European and Sri Lankan government scholars, given access to ex-Tigers in detention, these 'scientists' claim to have identified drivers of radicalization and the signs of successful de-radicalization of women.

Central to their analysis is a belief that the female fighter is driven by a "significance quest":

"In the context of terrorism, feminism refers to the motivation to prove that women matter; that they are as worthy as are men, as committed to the cause, and as willing to undertake sacrifices on its behalf; in short, as deserving of significance."

The authors go on to identify feelings of insignificance on group or individual identity – never linking the feeling of insignificance, or isolation to acts of repression by the state. Like the United Nations, USAID, and others, in these studies - the state is disappeared.

Meaning, and significance, for Tamil women in the North and East, is inextricably linked to specific moments of state violence. While memory and memorialization have always been an anchor of Tamil nationalist politics in a large, overtly political way, we often miss the intimacy of moments of violence in everyday life: acknowledging both is the only way to understand the politics of the female fighter.

Looking back through a wider lens, at the movement, Ananthi, a political figure and wife of a missing senior LTTE cadre tells me *'If you look at what we are facing now, then we see those times (under the LTTE) as a golden time, because there was security for women.'*

An ex-LTTE cadre herself, after describing how she dropped a military-given cell phone into the nearest well to avoid surveillance, tells me, *"I miss a lot of things. There we were happy, we were free. We are not happy. We are not free."*

This past November, *Maaveerar Naal* celebrations of Tiger martyrs were the most widely attended in nearly ten years. Among the men and women in attendance are those not willing to commit the LTTE to the confines of memory.

The Uncles who dropped the boxes are coming from a protest at the UN, nearly ten years after the end of the war. I marvel at the energy to engage with an organization so deeply, devastatingly, disappointing. He tells me,

"Thangachi, those were my sisters and brothers, who would pull me inside during a shelling. They were the ones who died. I will stand here until my arms fall off. I will remember"

Harder to locate, to take note of as politically relevant, are the memories interwoven into the lives of Tamil women, the relentless moments of violence that left indelible marks.

It is around these moments, and the materials that recall them, that their own politics crystallized – hardening quickly. A mother who holds the new shoes of her son, who never got to wear them before he was disappeared; his bike that became the gravestone she worshipped in absence of a body.

This July, the "Mothers of the Disappeared" in Sri Lanka had been protesting the disappearance of their children for 500 days. Their label was not bestowed by an NGO, but carefully chosen for its politically protective shell. Public space in occupied territories is limited, so they sit on the roadside.

They have gone through all their photos to choose their favorite of the child they once knew. It is laminated, and then wrapped in a plastic bag. They are willing to use them, but they must be protected.

Their children are not disappeared: they are detained, or dead. Life, for the mothers, is framed in terms of death. On the first day of protest last year one mother tells me, "I only want to see my son before I

die.” She holds his shoe as she remembers every detail of the night five years ago that she was separated from her son.

Running between these women are distinctive strands of political opinions. Some want a separate state to safeguard their rights. Some supported the Tigers. Some of the women were combatants in the Tigers. Some were combatants in other rebel groups.

On the 100th day of protest, the President came to them. Soon after, they rejected the advances of male Tamil politicians eager to share the spotlight. Journalists began to approach the mothers for their opinions on pressing national political questions. Western non-profit groups hoping to mold them in the image of white feminist outrage received a cold reception.

Here, motherhood is a means to an end. In the hands of women acutely aware of the cultural commodity they wield, it is a tool, sharpened to eke out the political space they have been denied. The mothers are organized enough to be visible, and yet unstructured in ways that resist co-optation. Their demands are overtly political enough to threaten power, and gendered enough to protect them from it. The violence that permeates their reality fuels a rage that, in this space, roams free. Free to react, to resist, and, to radicalize.

Memory, for Tamil women, is linked to survival, in itself a political act, for Tamil women under concentric circles of captivity. For those who try to escape, seeking asylum demands remembering, accurately, again and again, for survival, and status. For those who stay, there is a politics to forgetting. Former cadres I met last year could not remember where the scars on their arms were from. The memory is useless to them. For these women, remembering is a risk.

When contemporary life, for Tamil women, is framed, in terms of death (Tamil women often say “I want to see my son before I die” or “I want to die on my land”), how does one grapple with questions of meaning, and political significance? The de-radicalization study suggests,

“It turned out that the love of Veluppilai Prabhakaran, the all-powerful leader of the LTTE, often was the major motivation underlying the cadres’ readiness to die for the cause.

Psychologically speaking, such love and worship of the leader translates into the quest for his or her approval which endows him with the ultimate authority in matters of personal significance.

Based on heavily biased research, this approach to women and militancy falls into a common framework, erected to dismiss the politics of women, past and present. In a paper out this year with Zachariah Mampilly, we look at the specific political space Tamil women carved out under the LTTE:

The paper argues that civilians always possess agency in war. Existing narratives adopt a minimalist sense of civilian agency, treating it as a form of ‘victim’s agency.’ Agency is reduced to varying strategies for survival, particularly gendered in distinct ways.

The implicit assumption is that civilians who remain under the dominion of an insurgency are either complicit in its rule or powerless to act against it.

We challenge this notion, arguing that the LTTE’s ideological and cultural framing of the rebellion, provided a limited space for certain women to challenge the group regarding its policies by subverting these cultural frames.

The LTTE adopted a form of rule that relied heavily on a culturally determined construction of Tamil identity in order to gain legitimacy in distinctive aspects of “Tamil-ness,”: a key aspect of this identity was an emphasis on women as embodying Tamil cultural values.

The absence of historical ties between Tamil women and transnational feminist movements reinforced a false impression of Tamil women living under LTTE rule as incapable of exercising agency. The rebellion did, in fact, organize several village-level “Women’s Federations.” When interviewing women leaders of these groups, they argued that the federations were an “anomaly... a rare space that the LTTE never fully co-opted.”ⁱ

While the LTTE claimed that women’s activism could be engaged in through the Women’s Federations and its own Women’s Political Wing,ⁱⁱ the likelihood of cooptation hangs over rebel-initiated attempts at social engineering, preventing any strong conclusions regarding female agency. Though Tamil scholars like Sumanthy (2004: 126) did argue, for example, that “Women’s agency is not controlled and / or activated by the dictates of a central command”, even women within the rebellion acknowledged the organization’s dominance of the relationship.

Thamilini describes the work of the LTTE Women’s Wing, and also acknowledges that some of the most urgent concerns of Tamil women were in direct conflict with the policies of the movement. While it is true that no collective efforts to organize

women independently were able to survive, more individualized and informal forms of resistance persisted throughout the conflict, autonomous of the rebel organization.

One male activist remembers visiting his mother's elder sister in the mid-1990s in the outskirts of Jaffna. LTTE cadre would come to her door to ask for money only to be scolded for harassing an elderly woman. He describes how the young cadres would look apologetic and leave immediately.ⁱⁱⁱ

His mother vigorously yelled at the cadres at Killali pass for harassing her family before they allowed them through without further questioning. This, as they remember, was a fairly normal occurrence as "you could talk to the 'boys' in a way that you couldn't talk to the army...after all, this is our own community."^{iv} Women constituents subverted their vaunted position within Tamil culture to offer direct rebukes of rebel policies.

A group of women in a village outside Batticaloa described how they repurposed Tamil cultural norms by manipulating those values they felt could best serve their own self-interest. In 1999, they came together informally after their husbands had gone missing. Individually, they went to the local rebel administrative offices to inquire about their husbands' condition, to no avail. In response, they visited the detention center as a group and again asked to see their husbands. One woman recounted her approach to gaining access: "A cadre was giving us a hard time to get into the center. I told him I was pregnant and feeling faintish, and he let us through so I could find my husband."^v Eventually, all of the women were allowed to visit their husbands.

By performing gendered emotional states, women capitalized on the perception of female physical weakness. Each of these women had a clear understanding of the purpose behind her actions, a purpose that was often self-serving, even as they behaved without transgressing existing social boundaries to achieve their goals.

By evoking Tamil motherhood, the women tapped into deep-seated cultural norms regarding the role of women within Tamil society. Women took advantage of this symbolic dynamic, often emphasizing their role as the 'nurturer' responsible for the safety and education of Tamil children in order to challenge LTTE practices.

"It is as if some material traces had returned from this departed world, traces of moments that were the most private and the least often expressed. Moments when people were taken by surprise or pained or at least feigned being so. The archive preserves these moments at random, chaotically." -Arlette De Farge

More so than any text or novel, the archive collects characters.

Asha, speaking to me in 2017, tells me that her son was late coming home from school one day, in 2008. She hasn't seen him since then. "*If he's dead, ok, tell me. If he's alive, please tell me.*", she argues. His case was dismissed in 2010, but for Asha, she will never move past 2008, past that moment.

Handed a compilation of materials and moments, the task then is to organize.

As I create small boxes, within larger ones, to hold history: boxes with vague categories to create structure inside resistance, but porous enough to allow for the overlapping, contested, politics of Tamil women. The Mothers of the Disappeared do not all have the same politics – nuanced strands of nationalism run between, but do not divide, them.

For female fighters, what they believed was a movement, for Tamils, for women, feels now, like just, another, moment.

"When I wore the camouflage uniform and walked into the town with a gun, there was some respect in the way everyone looked at me. People thought of me and treated me as their own child because I was fighting for them. Now I go into town, no gun, no good clothes to wear. People turn their faces away when they see me, or they sneer at me. Like a forged coin, I have no value.

We female fighters dreamed of bending the sky to a bow once. Now, all our memories are dissolved and we lie fallen at the threshold of reality."

-Thamilini

ⁱ Interview, Tamil academic, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka (July 2010).

ⁱⁱ Adele Balasingham's account of female activism within the LTTE remains the dominant organizational account. See also Malathy (2013). NEED CITE TO T'S MEMOIR

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview, 'G,' Tamil activist, London (May 2014).

^{iv} Interview, 'N,' Tamil activist, New York (November 2013).

^v Interview, "Nanthini," Allis Garden Refugee Camp, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka (February 2005).