

Why Does the Tigress Roar?

Exploring the Role of Female Suicide Bombers in the LTTE

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were the first terrorist group to employ women as suicide bombers. Making women's bodies into weapons that the women themselves deployed was an important choice for the success of LTTE assassinations and reveals the complex and often contradictory gender dynamics within the Tamil Tigers. In Sri Lanka, women have a subservient position in both Tamil and Sinhalese society. The LTTE claimed gender neutrality and women did rise to leadership positions within its ranks, although this ideal was compromised by traditional cultural norms.

Why did women join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and why did they then become suicide bombers? This paper seeks to answer that question from both the organizational level, to explore the strategic reasons the LTTE encouraged and trained women to execute suicide attacks, and the individual level, to understand why women made the choice to participate in the liberation movement in this manner. I contend that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's break from traditional Tamil and Sri Lankan gender norms in a time of war, when women were particularly vulnerable to attack, made joining the LTTE an attractive option for Tamil women. On a personal level, women used suicide attacks to escape and seek revenge for rape, to find gender equality, and to deal with coercion from the LTTE and constraints within society.

It is worthwhile to examine the deployment and recruitment strategies for female suicide bombers and terrorists separately from the strategies that apply to men because,

although both men and women wished to accomplish political goals, the recruitment tactics, motives, and societal reactions were different.

First, I examine the strategic reasons to use female suicide bombers. I start by assuming that Robert Pape's thesis in "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism," that terrorist organizations use suicide bombings for strategic reasons is correct. I also adapt and expand Pape's argument to explain why women were particularly well suited to carry out suicide bombings in Sri Lanka. Next, I examine each of the contributing factors to the individual choice to become a suicide bomber: revenge, the role of rape, the significance of the act to the organization, and coercion from within and outside the organization.

A Brief History:

Relations between the mostly Hindu, Tamil minority and Buddhist, Sinhalese majority began to deteriorate as soon as the British left Ceylon. Colonial rule had favored Tamils and emphasized ethnic differences leaving a legacy of resentment to fester after independence from British rule. The governmental and political structure of the island coalesced around Sinhalese nationalism that made Sinhala the official language, Buddhism the official religion, and imposed ethnic quotas that restricted qualified Tamil students from entering university. Initially fragmented, Tamil nationalism emerged and became violent in the 1970s. It eventually became five terrorist organizations of which the LTTE was the most powerful and longest lasting. The conflict solidified in July of 1983, known as Black July. The LTTE killed thirteen Sinhalese government soldiers and in response government-supported riots erupted against Tamil homes, businesses, and people. These seven days of deadly riots are accepted as the start of the Sri Lankan civil

war and mark the ascendancy of the LTTE as the primary Tamil response to government oppression.

Strategy:

Why did the LTTE decide to use female suicide bombers? The story behind the LTTE's highest profile assassination answers this question and poses several new ones. Thenmuli Rajaratnam appeared to Rajiv Gandhi, the former prime minister of India, as a young, pregnant woman standing alone in the crowd with her hand stretched out to greet him. A female police officer tried to bar Rajaratnam from coming too close to the former prime minister but Gandhi dismissed her concern, urging her to "relax, baby" (Bloom 141). Gandhi's casual sexism and disbelief that a woman could pose a threat gave Rajaratnam the opportunity she needed. As planned, she knelt in front of the former prime minister and detonated the explosives hidden under the baggy Hindu clothing that had suggested she was pregnant. Rajaratnam killed herself, Rajiv Gandhi, and sixteen other people on that May day in 1991.

Female members of other terrorist groups outside Sri Lanka had committed suicide attacks before, but Gandhi's assassination was the first time a female member of the LTTE had used the tactic. However, its success galvanized the LTTE, and eventually the Black Tigers, the suicide wing of the LTTE, was 60 percent female (Sajjad 8). The highly gendered culture of both Tamil and Sinhalese societies in Sri Lanka helped female suicide bombers pass as innocuous and harmless in situations in which men might have been scrutinized more carefully. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere and thus an overt, political act such as carrying out a suicide attack was not something most people thought a woman would do. In Southeast Asia, security guards can be reluctant to search

a woman thoroughly because of cultural norms (Sajjad 8). Less stringent or non-existent body searches meant female Black Tigers could disguise explosives as a pregnancy, solving the dilemma of how to hide the explosives and emphasizing a feminine, domestic nature that would shield them from suspicion.

The LTTE gained a psychological advantage when women committed suicide attacks because it shocked society when women stepped outside their prescribed roles as mothers, daughters, wives, and widows. Before the three-decade long conflict, both Tamil and Sinhalese societies defined women in terms of their family position and relation to men. But, wars kill men. The death of many husbands and fathers interrupted a patriarchal structure and required women both within and outside the LTTE to assume roles previously thought of as exclusively male (Rajasingham-Senanayake 104). One of the goals of suicide attacks is to inspire terror. For a patriarchal society, struggling to reconcile a colonial legacy of Victorian gender roles and older Hindu ideas of feminine power as a life-giving force, a female suicide bomber was a terrifying person who attacked multiple societal norms and rocked the foundations of society (Rajasingham-Senanayake 112).

Rajaratnam sparked all these fears and contradictions when she killed Gandhi. Gandhi had dismissed the threat the female police officer guarding him recognized, presumably because Rajaratnam was a woman. Rajaratnam had mimicked pregnancy in order to hide the bomb but the pretended pregnancy also closely aligned her with the ideology of *Shakti* or the female Hindu goddesses who derive their power from the ability to give life (Rajasingham-Senanayake 112). Rajaratnam was unaccompanied, suggesting to a Sinhalese audience that subduing the male Tamil population was not enough, Tamil

women would also rise up to attack them. Rajaratnam's assassination of the former Indian prime minister was not only one of the most successful LTTE attacks; it was the beginning of a strategy the LTTE would use to prolong the conflict for another eighteen years.

Robert A. Pape identifies in "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism" various instances when it is useful for a terrorist organization to use suicide bombers. One strategic value he identifies is that suicide bombers "[breach] taboos concerning the legitimate targets and broadening recruitment to confound expectations about the number of possible terrorists" (Pape 265). The choice to use women as suicide bombers shocked Sri Lankan society at many levels because it upset a number of implicit and explicit beliefs about women, power, and agency. Women participating in the political realm were not unheard of in Sri Lanka; Sirima Bandaranaike became prime minister in 1960. However, she entered politics in response to the assassination of her husband, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, founder of the Sinhala nationalist party and former prime minister. Female suicide bombers were previously anonymous, Tamil women whose actions could not be rationalized into the existing gender paradigm by assigning their agency to a male relative's legacy. Female suicide bombers inspired more fear because they acted outside gender norms making involvement in the Black Tigers a powerful choice for Tamil women and deployment of female members as suicide bombers a strategic choice for the LTTE.

Dr. Tazreena Sajjad suggests women are also chosen as suicide bombers because they are seen as expendable and are less likely to hold leadership position, thus making them more suitable to serve as cannon fodder (8). This argument is too simplistic to

capture the reality of women's lives within the LTTE. The Marxist origins of the LTTE led to a fundamental belief in gender equality. The unusually high number of women in leadership positions for a Sri Lankan organization indicates significant efforts towards integrating women into the military command structure (Bloom 153). However, these female leaders commanded separate, single sex units, complicating any attempt to understand gender politics within the LTTE through a feminist lens born of the West.

The Personal Choice to Become a Suicide Bomber:

Why did Thenmuli Rajaratnam choose to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi through a suicide attack? It is difficult to analyze the motives of successful suicide bombers because the very nature of the attack precludes the interviews that could help explain an individual's decision to assume a certain role in an organization. However, the mythology that has grown up around Rajaratnam and her role in the LTTE's fervent adoption of female suicide bombers as a tactic provides clues to the reasons underlying her decision.

Propaganda claims Rajaratnam was raped by Indian soldiers. However, in interviews, members of the LTTE cast aspersions on this claim (Bloom 142). It is verified that soldiers of the Sri Lankan government, including Indian peacekeepers, routinely raped Tamil women. Female fighters captured by Sinhalese government forces were particularly likely to face sexual assault while in custody (Briggs 91). Rape shames the victim in the Hindu faith and she is forbidden from marrying or bearing children after the attack (Tambiah 80) (Post 96). Post also notes that the ideal of sacrifice is entrenched in Tamil culture (96). Thus the interaction of Sri Lankan culture and government actions narrowed the choices available to women, eliminating the possibility of marriage and perhaps making the LTTE and a mission as a suicide bomber a more likely possibility.

Therefore a narrative begins to emerge about the female suicide bomber, personified in the first LTTE suicide bomber, Thenmuli Rajaratnam. The Sri Lankan government used rape as a tactic of war to subdue and torture Tamil women, men, and children and thus enlarged the pool of disaffected Tamils who could be recruited by the LTTE. A UN field officer recalled “a large number of women fleeing from the conflict areas during the peak of fighting were sexually assaulted. The abuse was extensive, causing a large number of civilians to flee back to the theater of conflict to escape the abuse.” (qtd. in Hog). Thus joining the LTTE often became the only viable solution for women trapped within the conflict and without hope of the anticipated path of family and children they might have dreamed of as girls.

War had unalterably disturbed the course of life for more than a generation of Tamil women. Thenmuli Rajaratnam’s well-publicized story of being raped by Indian soldiers suggested there was no escape in India, the country closest to Sri Lanka. However, Rajaratnam had secured a legacy through her actions on behalf of the LTTE as a suicide bomber. The LTTE used her story as propaganda to recruit more suicide bombers (Bloom 142). Examining the numbers of female recruits the LTTE was able to train as suicide bombers in the wake of Rajaratnam’s death suggests the story resonated with many young women.

The decades long Sri Lankan civil war fought primarily in Tamil territory also evoked the same nationalist longings in potential female recruits as it did in male recruits. Miranda Alison reminds students of the conflict that it is a mistake to ignore the commonalities between male and female Tamil Tigers in favor of overemphasizing the gendered factors that distinguish women’s reasons for joining the LTTE from men’s

motives for joining (39). By the 1980's women were able to channel their nationalist longings into the same direct combat experience as men did, proving that the war had altered gender roles in Tamil society in practice, even if the accompanying ideology had not always changed with it (Alison 38-39). The disconnect between the combat opportunities women were encouraged to assume and persistent gender constructs that framed women as domestic creatures and forbid rape victims from marriage and children contributed to a sense of helplessness and pessimism that the future would offer better opportunities, making the Black Tigers an enticing option for women.¹

The leader of the LTTE was Velupillai Prabhakaran, a cult-like figure who demanded devotion from members of the Tamil Tigers. Writing and testimony from former and current LTTE members often reference his divine or god-like status (Post 95). He paid particular attention to the contingent of suicide bombers, the Black Tigers, by dining with each suicide attacker before she or he departed for the mission (Post 96). After a Black Tiger died in a suicide attack she or he was memorialized and celebrated through statues, paintings, songs, and photographs (Devotta 1035). Honoring future suicide bombers and celebrating ones who had martyred themselves for the Tamil cause emboldened women who, barred by war from more typical legacies of children and friendships, sought success as suicide bombers.

Velupillai Prabhakaran offered female recruits the novel experience of opportunities equal to those of male recruits, even if these opportunities were violent and segregated ones. His speeches and the rhetoric of the LTTE leadership reflect an

¹ Fathali Moghaddam's book *From the Terrorists' Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy* influenced the way I have thought about and phrased societal factors that made Tamil women amenable to recruitment in the LTTE.

ideological commitment to eliminating gender-based discrimination from Tamil society, although this goal was secondary to the focus on the emancipation of the Tamil people from the rule of a Sinhalese government (Alison 45). Sumathi, a member of the female-only Liberation Birds recalls a childhood of frustrated ambitions because she was constantly reminded of all the things women were forbidden from doing. She decided to join the Tamil Tigers because she wanted to ensure Tamil rights, but she was also attracted to the variety of opportunities available to female LTTE members (Alison 44). Alison finds that this joint motivation of determination to fight for Tamil liberty combined with personal goals like gender equality was common among the Liberation Birds (44).

Fear of what happened to female prisoners of the Sri Lankan government also contributed to women's willingness to serve as suicide bombers. Tamil Tigers carried a cyanide pill so that they could commit suicide rather than die (Post 94). Two twenty-eight-year-old Tamil Tigers, one male and female, offered very different rationales for the use of the cyanide pills in the event of imminent capture. The male LTTE member spoke of "necessity" and said, "First, information can't be given to the enemy. Second, we must not be humiliated in front of the enemy. Third, we don't want to be tortured.... Everything we do is dedicated to the nation" (qtd. in Post 94). This male narrative mentions a fear of torture but focuses on the strategic reasons it would be detrimental to the LTTE as an organization if captured members revealed plans or organizational weaknesses to the Sri Lankan government. In contrast, the female member said "in earlier fighting experiences we see our cadres' bodies; they are almost always mutilated. I've seen it with my own eyes. It's far better to die than to be taken alive" (qtd. in Post 94).

This female member of the Tamil Tigers focuses on the risks of bodily harm including sexual assault that awaited female terrorists captured by the Sri Lankan government. Suicide, whether because of a planned suicide attack or a response to unexpected arrest, was a better alternative than the grim punishment and torture used by government forces. It would be a mistake to generalize too much about group-wide differences between men and women based on two narratives but the supporting evidence of the particularly cruel fate of a female rape victim in Sri Lanka supports the conclusion that these differences in testimony are gender based.

Within the LTTE women did not have to fear rape. The LTTE strictly punished sexual assault within its ranks and forbid its use as a tactic of war (Briggs 87). This absence of sexual assault and rape from one actor in a conflict in which rape is rampant is unusual (Wood 132). Wood suggests that this safety from sexual assault for female recruits stems directly from the strict control Prabhakaran maintained over the members of the LTTE and his own insistence that members renounce private vices to pursue their mission (Wood 150). Thus protection from sexual assault, especially in the absence of traditional protectors such as husbands and fathers who were frequently killed in the conflict, may have been motivated women to join the LTTE. Once a member of the LTTE, the dominant culture of self-sacrifice encouraged suicide missions.

The death of many Tamil men, the need for soldiers, and the Socialist-Marxist foundations of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam made the Tamil Tigers open to recruiting women combatants, especially as suicide bombers. These same exigencies of war interrupted the lives female recruits expected to lead as mothers and wives and trapped them in perilous situations in which danger, either from membership in the LTTE

or attack by a government soldier, was the only guarantee. Faced with this brutal choice many female Tamil Tigers chose the agency of serving as a suicide bombers as a better alternative, or in some cases as a response, to assault from enemy soldier.

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