



Institute of
Social Studies

THAMIL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA:
ETHNICITY AS A MOBILIZING FACTOR

A Research Paper presented by

Sitralega Maunaguru
(Sri Lanka)

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for obtaining the Degree of
Master of Arts in Development Studies

Members of the Examining Committee

Ms. Amrita Chhachhi
Ms. Radhika Cumarasamy

The Hague,

November 1988

THAMIL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA :
ETHNICITY AS A MOBILIZING FACTOR

Sitralega Maunaguru

A Research Paper submitted in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for
obtaining the degree of Master of
Development Studies (Women and Development)
of the Institute of Social Studies,
The Hague, The Netherlands.

November 1988

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies; the views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Research papers and theses are not made available for outside circulation by the Institute.

Acknowledgment

I take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation and gratitude more than formally to all those who have assisted me in so many different ways.

Ms. Amrita Chhachhi, my supervisor, deserves a special "thank you" without her untiring guidance and hours-long stimulating discussions, this study would not have been organized in its fruitful form.

Ms. Kumari Jayewardena, has always been my source of inspiration. Her continuous encouragement is the prime motive force for me to take up this task.

I would also like to thank my friends in the Hague who helped and buttressed me during my stay in The Netherlands. It is, indeed, just a word, to say thanks for them for their emotional and material support. I could not do more better.

Last, but not least, I owe my thanks to my good friend, who happens to be my husband S. Maunaguru, who always has been a moral strength in my endeavours.

M Sitralega

Table of Contents

Chapter I	Introduction	1
Chapter II	Understanding the Women's Movement: A Conceptual Framework	10
Chapter III	Thamil Women's Organizations 1977-87	24
Chapter IV	Leap in Consciousness and Contextual Constraints	47
Chapter V	Conclusion	57
	References	61

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The documentation of women's history which encompasses their struggles, their organizations, their participation and contribution towards various developments and struggles of the nations is very essential for the understanding of the women's movement. It is particularly essential to bring to light the extent of women's struggles since these have usually been played down by historians and hence to correct the general view of women's role in the history of the country. It is also essential to obtain a theoretical, and ideological understanding of the dynamics of women's struggles. Furthermore, in the process of conceptualization of the women's movement various trends and motivations can be seen if they are documented properly and in detail.

The emergence of the Tamil Women's movement in Sri Lanka is a relatively new phenomenon. However this does not mean that issues concerning women have not been previously addressed or women have not participated in public activities. But, a women's movement which is constituted only of women is of recent origin.

I shall adopt a working hypothesis in studying the above, that the specific articulation of problems within an existing socio-political and cultural contexts defines women's issues and determines the nature of their struggle.

"Women's movements do not occur in a vacuum but correspond to and to some extent are determined by the wider social movement of which they form part. The general consciousness of society about itself, its future, its structure and the role of men and women entails limitation for the women's movement. Its goals and methods of struggles are generally determined by these limits."(Jayawardena K.: 1986:10).

Based on this premise, I shall focus particularly on the mobilizing factors of the movement with a brief analysis of the trends within it. Within this process I shall examine how ethnicity operated as a powerful factor during the last ten years (1977-87).

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to analyze and describe the Tamil women's movement which has emerged during the last ten years (1977-87). This will include an examination of the historical development and the socio-political and cultural forces which has given birth to this movement.

This period of ten years witnessed important economic, political and social changes in Sri Lanka. The overriding crisis of the decade, however has been the ethnic conflict and the oppression of the Tamils by the state. This has been legalized through repressive regulations. In reaction to this, the Tamil liberation organizations emerged with a demand for the right to self-determination of the Tamils.

In this period of social and political upheaval and continuing conflict, it is significant that the women's issue has come to the forefront in the whole country in general along with the emergence of women's organizations in the Tamil areas. It was during this period that the concept of participation of women in the National liberation struggles in the Third World countries became very popular among the Tamil liberation organizations. Most of these organizations have formed their own women wings. These women wings, in addition to their broader political commitment, had taken up women's issues. They have also challenged, in various ways, the patriarchal ideology which is prevalent in the Tamil society.

During this period, the growing awareness among the Tamil women about their subordination and the consciousness to change it, has also led to the formulation of other women's organizations which are autonomous in character. Some of them adopted very clear feminist perspectives.

The strategies of these organizations vary from direct actions to consciousness raising through cultural activities. The crisis of this phase has forced women to reconsider their traditional role and their status in the society. The gap between the traditional ideology of women and the present day social reality has been widening. The awareness of Tamil women regarding their subordination and the ways of changing of it, in this particular context, did not provoke an extreme reaction in society as would have occurred under "normal" situation. In this respect the socio-political conditions and the rise of the Tamil women's movement are complementary.

While focussing primarily on the contemporary movement, I shall also look briefly at the past to identify instances and experiences of women's involvement, their participation in political activity as well as their initiation and undertaking of specific agitation on women's issues.

It is hoped that this study would contribute even in a limited way towards understanding character of the movement in order to explore its strength and weaknesses, the forces behind it, to see its potential for change and its ability to reach a desired vision.

Motivation

Why should the Tamil women's movement be studied separately from the general women's movement of Sri Lanka?

When writing the history of the Sri Lankan women's movement, most studies tend to focus mainly on the south. The primary reason for this is the non-availability of material regarding the Tamil areas to the writers or researchers in

the South who are mainly Sinhalese by ethnicity. In addition, since the published relevant materials are in Tamil, they are not able to use it effectively. The details about the militant organization's women groups also not available to the public knowledge, and to those in the non-Tamil areas, it is really difficult to know and comprehend the information about them. The physical separation and lack of communication between the Tamil and non-Tamil areas caused by the ethnic conflict particularly during the last ten years, led to different material conditions for Tamil and Sinhalese women. Sinhalese researchers have recognized this fact when writing about the contemporary women's movement in Sri Lanka.

"when we refer to the women's movement in Sri Lanka, a further clarification must be made, that is the distinction between women in the North and in the South in Sri Lanka. This distinction is not a schism natural to the movement itself. On the contrary, it is a direct consequence of the primary contradiction in our society today. The ethnic conflicts as they have developed over the past ten years have led to a virtual physical separation of the Sinhale and Tamil communities. Furthermore, given the nature of the contradiction of both race and class in contemporary Sri Lanka society, the historical, and material conditions of Sinhala and Tamil women are also different and this is a reality which must be kept in mind when referring to the women's movement" (Gunasekara. N: 1987:4).

Unlike the South, the Women's organizations in the Tamil areas emerged for different reasons. In the South women got mobilized as workers in trade unions, as peasants in peasant struggles and as women around the issues specific to women. This, however does not mean that the Tamil women have not taken part in any struggle as such, as their sisters in the south are engaged in. For instance, in the plantations the Tamil women workers form the major part of the labour force and have taken part in the trade union activities. Also in the north there were instances where women have taken part in peasant struggles and struggles against casteism. The

mobilizational factors are different for the Tamil women. The primary and burning issues of the time are the repressive regulations of the state, human rights violations of the armed forces - the issues more of ethnic discrimination and oppression rather than gender oriented. In spite of social differentiation within the Tamil society, ethnicity did and does play a significant role as an umbrella-mode of mobilization. This aspect will be dealt in detail later in order to assess its positive and negative aspects.

The active political crisis in Sri Lanka especially in the Tamil areas after the Indian intervention in August 1987, forced many of the people's organizations to maintain a low profile. Numerous restrictions have been imposed on organizing public activities. In this context, the women's activities, their participation and contribution towards various struggles of this period, if left unrecorded, will diminish in the pages of history. In addition some women's organizations which emerged during this period had died off for various reasons, especially the women groups which were affiliated to the national liberation organization became inactive when these organizations were physically eliminated by rival organizations; e.g. Eelam Women Liberation Organization (EWLF), Tamil Eelam Women Liberation Organization (TEWLO).

The above three reasons will explain the motivation of a separate study of the Tamil women's movement.

Justification for the Period

The period is one of the important political, economic and social changes in the country. In 1977 the right wing United National Party came into power defeating the coalition government headed by Ms S. Bandaranayake, the first woman prime-minister of the world. The new constitution in 1978

was a change from the 'Westminister Model' to a French-style Gaullist presidential system.

The referendum in 1983 was an important sign of the shift to authoritarianism, coupled with the economic policy changes, since 1977. During this period the oppression of the Tamils by the state has worsened, culminating in the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979, and the military occupation of the North and East. This period has witnessed the aggravation of ethnic conflict between Tamil and Sinhala communities, often erupting in violent pogroms against Tamil almost periodically in 1977, '81 and '83. (There are many writings on the growing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the evolution of Tamil National Liberation Movement. (See generally - Shanmugathasan N: 1984, Sivathamby K: 1984, Charles Abeyasekara and Newton Gunashina 1987, Jayawardena K: 1985)

During this period, the Tamil liberation organizations grew in strength and in number. A kind of united feeling among the Tamils as an oppressed ethnic minority became strong. As a result, women began to participate more in public activities. They started forming their own organizations. Tamil liberation organizations also formed their women's wings. 'Suthanthrirapparavaikal' of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Eelam Women's Liberation Front of the Eelam People Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Tamil Women's Liberation Organization of the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) were active in mobilizing women. These wings were working among women on women's issues as well as on political issues. On the other hand the autonomous women's organizations which were formed during this period were focussing on women's issues and on human right violations. The war in the North and the East demanded non-traditional behaviour from Tamil women in general. Many women having lost their men folk, became the

sole bread winners for their families. The young girls who joined the militant groups left their homes, received military training along with their male comrades, went to the combats, slept in the jungles and kept up on sentry duty throughout day and night. This new situation posed a challenge to the patriarchal ideology that prevailed in the society. Women's organizations carried this challenge further by direct actions and in initiating a range of cultural activities which provided a forum for review and discussions on the "women's question".

It should be borne in mind that the awareness and actions for women's emancipation during this period was necessarily bound to the fight for national liberation. The women's participation brought a revolutionary feminist perspective into the political movements. Hence, the study of this period will bring to light the dynamics of the Tamil women's movement.

Description of the Sources

In this study, I shall use primary and secondary published sources and draw from personal experiences. I shall examine materials such as monographs, journals, newsletters, articles, and pamphlets published by different groups. It should also be mentioned that these materials are in Tamil and will be quoted in translation.

Any social historian who attempts to study the Tamil women's movement from early 20th century has to face the limitation of sources. The sources, mainly published materials, especially for the early phase have their own limitations in reflecting the middle class orientation, and documenting specific activities of individual women. This study too, suffers from this limitation. The limitation referred to here is related to the narrow scope of "elitist historiography"

which does not extend to cover activities of "subaltern groups" in the society. This narrowness is partly due to the fact that these subaltern activities do not fall within the formal framework of the state and society; and partly due to the bias of the elitist historians, towards their own class interest and against the subaltern groups (Ranajit Guha:1986).

However, by referring to my own experience and observation, I attempt to overcome this limitation and perhaps contribute in recording some activities of women which may otherwise not be recognized. I shall also share the insights gained during these years, as a result of my association with the various women's organizations, militant women's groups and my working experience with the autonomous women's organizations such as the Mother's Front and Women Study circle. Collectively, these experiences enable me to venture out to study the Tamil women's movement.

Notes

1. Sri Lanka is a multi ethnic multi-religious country. Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims form the major part of the population. Beside these three communities, there are other minor groups such as Malays, Bugers who consider themselves as distinct communities. The census report of 1981 gives the following details: Sinhalese - 73.95, Ceylon Tamils - 12.7, Ceylon Moors - 7.05, Indian Tamils - 5.52, Burghers and other Eurasians -0.26, Malays - 0.32, others - 0.19. [Source: Statistical Pocket Book of Sri Lanka, Dept of Census & Statistics, Ministry of Planning Implementation. Sri Lanka.] While the Sinhalese mainly inhabit the southern and western parts, the Tamils consider the Northern and Eastern parts of the country as their traditional homeland and are the main inhabitants, though a considerable number of them have been living among the Sinhalese. And also Tamils living in the tea plantation in the central hill country, who were brought by the British from south India as labourers. The Muslims, whose mother tongue also Tamil, are characterized by the distribution of their population all over Sri Lanka, are numerically significant in the Eastern province. Majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists and Hinduism is the major religion of Tamils, while christianity during the time of colonialization had led to many converts from both sections.

The two ethnic formations, Thamils and Sinhalese, which make up most of the Sri Lankan society has been drifting away from each other for sometime and the point has been reached according to some scholars, that the breakup of Sri Lanka along ethnic line is inevitable (see A.J. Wilson: 1988). This focus of this paper, however is not to analyze this breakup, but to study the Tamil women's movement which has been triggered of by the Tamil struggle for freedom and equity.

CHAPTER II

UNDERSTANDING THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter deals with the conceptual issues pertaining to the analysis of the Tamil women's movement in the following chapters.

Women's Movement

A movement can be defined as a collective and sustained action and participation of people over issues and demands at particular historical conjunctures (See Rao M.A.S : 1979). It also includes organizations, actions, demands and the ideology underlying the issues. Hidden actions or agitations which are quantitatively limited and individual responses to specific ideology are not generally included. This definition -at-large necessitates a reformulation of the concept of movement in terms of the specific historical context and the situation of women in it.

"Given the fact that the women's movement works within invisible reality, i.e. working with an atomized constituency, women disorganized in separate privatized houses etc., it is also essential to understand that the conventional models for movements are therefore inapplicable to the women's movement. Consequently, the concepts and indicators generally utilized for gauging the strength of the movement are also unsuitable" (.Dater,C:1984 : 4-5)

Therefore when speaking about women's movement, I do include, not only the collective actions at mass level, but also the agitation and struggle of small groups and individual women. Another question that comes here is, what is a women's movement? Is it necessary that organizations, demand and actions should centre around the issues specific

to women only? In the context of the Third World, other issues which are not gender specific (poverty, repressive regulations, discrimination of ethnic minorities) are also equally important to women as well. Hence, the women's organizations cannot afford to campaign only for the issues related to gender. C. Dater in her article "Women's Movement, A Feminist perspective" attempts to explain the objectives of the women's movement.

"Let us try to understand what is a women's movement. Alternative perception(s) of status of women in the society and also the perception of an alternative society which will be able to assure this new status and efforts to change the present status as well as present society are the two essential components of the women's movement" (Dater, C: 1984:3).

While accepting this position, it is also important to note the fact that especially in the Third World countries, women's movement emerged and grew out of other struggles like anti-imperialist and national liberation struggle. This is precisely because in the countries where major changes and crises have taken place, the situation often generally stimulates a new awareness of democratic rights and the campaign for the elimination of oppressive measures of all kinds. This would have an effect on women too. This creates a response from women and also an awareness about the need for change in the position traditionally accorded to them. So here, the women's movement is defined as a movement which has an awareness about the women's subordination and oppression on the domestic, social, economic and political level and a consciousness to change it. However, this does not necessarily mean that the movement confines its campaigns and activities only within these limits. It can also engage itself in taking up more general issues.

Within this wider realm of women's movement how to categorize the trends and the organizations? Categorization could be made in terms of objective issues, campaigns and

organizational structure. This categorization would enable us to analyze and understand the organizations and to focus on the dominant trends.

There are differences in the ways feminist scholars classify organizations. It has become a custom to classify women's organizations according to four categories. For instance Jagar. A (1983) makes her categorization as liberal, radical, marxist and socialist as representing different ideological trends.

Liberal feminism takes a position that if people are allowed to make their individual choices, then women are not discriminated or hindered by specific structures in society. Hence the liberal feminists advocate legal, economic and political rights for women which include equal access to education, employment and political decision making. They do not recognize the difference of class and race between women and also not consider that the oppressive mechanisms are interwoven with the economic and social structure. In other words, they do not see the necessity of structural transformation of society in order to eliminate the oppression of women.

Radical feminists focal point of attack is on patriarchal power relations. They do not pay much attention to the issues of racism and capitalism. They argue that women form a "sexual class" since they face "the similar experience in terms of oppression, (rape, compulsory heterosexuality) and in relation to their bodies (menstruation, childbirth etc.) (Delphy. C.: 1977, Firestone, S.:1979).

Marxist feminists focus their attention on class struggle. The development of private property is seen as the root cause of women's oppression. They argue that the subordination will end with the inclusion of women into social production. They believe that women's exploitation and oppression are part of the whole exploitative economic system

which depends for its survival, on the continuing oppression and exploitation of both men and women. The primary emphasis here is in achieving changes in the economic and social structures, believing that a socialist society would pave the way for women's liberation. (see Vogle, L: 1983, Hartmann, H. 1979).

The socialist feminists include most of the aspects of the above three. They see women's oppression as a social construct. They also highlight along with the economic exploitation of women, the oppression within the family and within marriage. They emphasize the dominance of patriarchy in all spheres of life. (see Maria Mies : 1986, Barrett. M: 1980).

This categorization is not useful in the Sri Lankan Tamil context. One could certainly face difficulty in fitting the Tamil women's movement in these different theoretical paradigms. For instance, within an organization itself prevail multiple aspects of theories; different campaigns were taken up. Hence the above categories do not suit the social and theoretical reality of the organization which will be studied here.

Another categorization at a micro-level has been formulated by Gita Sen and Caren Grown. They claim their classification was done from the "perspective of building and strengthening our own movements and net works, that is, from the perspective of empowerment"(1985: 83). According to them Third World women organizations can be classified into six categories.

- 1) The traditional service oriented women's organizations.
- 2) The organizations affiliated with political Parties.
- 3) Workers based organizations.
- 4) Grassroots specific project.
- 5) The organizations which have sprung up during the decade

as a result of external flow of funding and interest
 6) Research organizations that have been growing rapidly in the last few years.

Even though all these types do not exist in Sri Lankan Tamil context, which is the scope of this study, I do find this categorization helpful at a practical level. This categorization at a micro level will lead to understand the movement from a descriptive perspective. In the Sri Lankan context this categorization can be more wider according to the links/allies of the organizations. 1) The women's organizations affiliated with political parties/ groupings. 2) Autonomous women's groups

In addition to this a broader framework of analysis is needed in order to bringout the broader ideological thrust and the features of the movement.

This would require an examination of the subjective and objective conditions which led to the emergence of such movements. This means situating the women's movement in the socio-political context which facilitated its emergence, and this will enable to identify factors which motivated women to mobilize themselves into organizations. Within a given socio-political context there are various factors which can contribute to the mobilization of women. Gender, class and ethnicity can be the three major factors.

Charles Tilly who did extensive historical research on collective action defines mobilization as "the process by which a group acquires collective control over resources needed for action" (1978:7). Mobilization leads to collective action which is a set of people acting together in pursuit of common interests.

There is an on going debate that whether this collective action is spontaneous or it should be initiated by forces from outside. This debate in its classic form can be found in Leninist concepts in terms of consciousness. It says that consciousness in terms of economic interests can be

spontaneous. But the class/political consciousness should be guided and organized by activists who have a highly advanced political consciousness who constitute a vanguard party. (For detailed feminist critique on Leninist notion of consciousness - Rowbotham.S: 1980: 21-157)

In the classical Leninist concept of Vanguard party, highly disciplined control led by a core leadership was insisted. Inherent in Lenin's formulation of a vanguard for mobilization has the implication that the masses would always have to be led, by a dedicated core of activists, organized under a party.

A similar value underlying the mobilization of people from a social work, community work perspective to present day non-governmental organizations and it emphasizes the individual leadership. Though a new generation of non-governmental organizations have embarked upon a line, of "empowerment of the target group" the dominant values are centred around individuals (Ross, M: 1985:78).

Distinguished very much from the above, another important conceptualization on mobilization comes from the protagonists of new social movements. They emphasized that the movements are not necessarily organized from outside and stress there are reasons for the movement to emerge within. The positive and strengthening aspect of their contribution lies in the fact that awareness becomes much more important (See generally David Slater: 1985, Castells, M: 1983).

The term "mobilization" here is used to refer to the emerging awareness, actions and women getting into organizations. It is also based on the premise that women are not passive objects of mobilization by external factors, but they are the actors.

On the assumption that, people mobilize themselves over their own interests, recently a concept had emerged among feminists as "women's interests". Hence mobilization

regarding gender has been discussed in terms of "women's interests."

Women's Interests

It is evident from the extensive feminist literature that a variety of different conceptions prevail on women's interests. These differ on the basis of theories of the causes of women's oppression. Some claim that women have certain common interests by virtue of their gender and that these interests are primary for women; given by this commonality of their interests, they can be united in spite of their class and ethnic differences. They argue that women constitute a "sexual class" and that for women gender issues are supreme. Maxine Molyneux refuting this idea has this to say:

"Because women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means - among them class, ethnicity and gender - the interests which they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible to generalise about the interests of women. Instead, we need to specify how the various categories of women might be affected differently, and act differently on account of the particularities of their social positioning and their chosen identities" (1985: 232).

However, she does not deny that women may have certain general interests in common. Attempting to overcome this problem she says that, "These can be called gender interests to differentiate them from the false homogeneity imposed by the notion of women's interest" (Ibid: 232).

Molyneux formulates two types of interests - strategic gender interests and practical interests, and defines strategic gender interests as being derived

"... from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist. These ethical and theoretical criteria provided the basis for the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination. Such as the abolition

of the sexual division of labour, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labour and child care, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over child bearing and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women" (ibid ; 232-33).

On the other hand, practical gender interests, she defines as the response to an immediate perceived needs which do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality.

While accepting that women's interests are not homogeneous and that certain sets of interests may be in conflict with other sets of interests. Saskia Wieringa argues that it is hard to develop a definite criteria to distinguish between the two.

"What may be considered to be a highly strategic issue at one particular moment in time (the vote, a change in rape law), might be called practical at other times. Also the perspective from which certain organizations take up similar issues may be so different, that in the case of one organization an issue should be seen as being a practical concern, whereas in the context of another organization the same issue may take strategic dimensions" (1988:8).

In the final analysis what Saskia Wieringa says is correct that practical and strategic interests may vary according to the different situations. So it is difficult to arrive at any meaningful analysis of women's interests, if the specific context in which these interests are situated is not taken into account. These interests cannot be abstracted from the political context. One more point that could be added here is that, sometimes a fluidity could happen between two sets of interests - strategic and practical. One may develop into another and it is not possible to make hard and fast distinction between the two. Saskia Wieringa notes that even sometime they merge together.

" A struggle for certain practical gender interests, such as food in a Peruvian collective soup kitchen may yield certain skills which might be characterized as

strategic; the development of political skills of the women concerned, of leadership pattern between women, the growth of women's solidarity etc." (1988: 9).

This makes clear that a major focus should be given to the context within which these interests must be seen.

Class

Another approach is based on women's economic interests—that is their class interests. This is more clear in Orthodox Marxists' standpoint on women's emancipation. Marxists define class on the basis of the ownership of the means of production, i.e. those who own and those who do not. Based on this premise they argue that oppression of women differs significantly from class to class. Engles stressed this point, asserting that both husband and wife are engaged in wage labour, their proletarian home is relatively an egalitarian one, and women as exploited wage labourers constitute part of the working class. This is the basis of his views that the entrance of women into social production is the precondition for their emancipation. Hence, according to Marxists the strategy set for women's liberation is to take part in the class struggle. This is the stand point on women's question mostly adopted by traditional Marxist parties. However, the Marxist concept has been subjected to much debate in the feminist inquiries and it resulted in the mushrooming of literature on the relationship between gender and class.

The main arguments of feminists are that irrespective of their class interest women do unite in terms of their gender and gender roles accorded to women are independent of which ever class they belong to. In addition, the gender subordination exists in pre-capitalist and post-socialist societies. This leads to the fact that patriarchy as a system that oppresses women, functions independent of class. Feminists point out that the narrow focus of Marxists on

economic interests excludes the aspects of gender and ethnicity.

Ethnicity

Defining ethnicity has always been a complex issue and scholarly perceptions of ethnicity, in recent years have tended to discount notions that treated it as a manifestation of primordial sentiments, while it is acknowledged that entry of an ethnic group into the political arena is contingent on a variety of contextual factors that precipitate subjective perceptions of the ethnic identity.

The objective factors that determine ethnicity could change, alternate or differ. Hamza Alavi in his analysis on Pakistan points to the fact that boundaries of ethnic categories are not objectively given. Realignments have occurred with changes in contexts and perceptions of self interest. One objective criterion (say religion) is abandoned in favour of another (say language or another religion) thus bringing together a quite different set of people into the category and community, alienating some and embracing others (Hamza Alavi: 1988).

Every individual is a combination of multiple elements of identity. Caste, religion, language and territory might be the factors which can operate as points of identity. However, mobilization at a particular context does not necessarily draw from one aspect. In the Sri Lankan case the people who identify themselves as indigenous Tamils are both Christians and Hindus. Religion as a defining ethnic factor is no longer at work. On the contrary, unlike their counterparts in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states of India, the Muslims of Sri Lanka consider themselves as a distinct ethnic group on the basis of religion.

The ethnic context of Women's Struggle has been not recognized except in terms of blacks. Contemporary Marxist analysis has indeed recognized the importance of relating

ethnic to class division but there is not much efforts to link ethnic and gender division to each other.

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis (1983:68-69) has shown how ethnicity and gender division are linked in terms of employment and reproduction in specific political contexts. It is very misleading to consider gender interests and relations without situating them within ethnic and class divisions. The subordination of women operates in many different ways and in many different historical contexts.

" Feminist goals cannot be the same in different historical contexts. For instance, the family may not be the major site for women's oppression when families are kept apart by occupying or colonizing forces (as in Lebanon or South Africa) abortion may not be the major issue when forced sterilizations are carried out ... " (F.Anthias and N.Y.Davis; 1983; 72)

Here, one can note the ethnic oppression is related to patriarchal oppression. In order to keep an ethnic community in the minority position, the major ethnic community which is in state power controls the composition of the population, by enforcing birth control regulation on women. Like wise when a state uses its armed forces to crush, the struggle of an ethnic group the women of the group become victims of male violence (Police and Military).

Paul.R. Brass provides us with an evolutionary model which illustrates the evolution of an ethnic category into a nationality which is politically conscious and motivated by ethnic nationalism.

"When ethnic groups demand not merely enhanced opportunities for individuals but corporate recognition for the group as a whole with the right to control the public system of education in their areas of concentration or to govern themselves in a federal unit, then they are engaged in the politics of nationalism" (Paul.R.Brass: 1976:227).

The point at which ethnic identity becomes ethnic nationalism is very important because it facilitates a struggle - a struggle which aims at an autonomous nation.

This nationalism has a vision of a nation in which women have a specific status and role, specially when the ethnic nationalism is based on religion.

In these situations women are generally looked upon as ethnic markers and this implies that they have to follow a certain mode of behaviour and a style in dress, for example in Algeria, during the national liberation struggle the chador of women (the veil) became a symbol of resistance. However after the liberation the way in which the chador became a symbol of restriction is a point of another discussion.

The main hypothesis on which this study is based is that ethnic nationalism can be a powerful mobilizing factor for women. This also depends on both the basis of ethnicity and the broader orientation of the struggle. The term ethnicity will be used in this study of SriLankan Tamil case, simply for a group of people who identify themselves as one, on the basis of the language they speak. When a minority ethnic group in a multi ethnic society, in which the majority ethnic group is the dominant holder of state power at the centre, subjected to discrimination and oppression by the state, often experiences a defensive nationalist feeling. This feeling develops as a political demand - as a demand for the right to self determination. Then it becomes a struggle of a broad front of people who have a common history and culture (language) and consider themselves as a "nation" transcending class and gender differences. At times when this struggle either aims at more democratic structures based on equality and justice or at socialist goals, conducive environment is created for women to enter into social political arena and take up gender issues as well.

Such National Liberation struggles always have given space for the "women's question" to be discussed widely. The most recent national liberation struggles of Asia, Africa and Latin American countries also witness this phenomenon. To

mobilize the masses towards the ideal of national autonomy it becomes necessary to mobilize the women too. Most of the leaders of National Liberation struggle have realized the revolutionary potentiality of women in the struggle. And also they recognized women as an oppressed section of the society and always stressed that they should be liberated in the process. Hence the struggles provides the initiation of the weakening of traditional stereotypes and conventions on women. So there is usually a sudden eruption of women's movement in terms of women's organizations, and a general awareness of their present situation and alternatives occurs during this process.

It has been acknowledged and well analysed that Tamil Language is the important rallying point of the Tamil Liberation movement. Given the fact that Tamil's agitation for equal rights gathered momentum after the Sinhala only act of 1956, it is not surprising that Tamil language acquired far more greater role in defining ethnicity in Sri Lanka as far as the Tamils are concerned.

As have been stated earlier in this chapter the basis of identity can change even in an ongoing movement. In the Sri Lankan context too, there were some tendencies to combine religion with language as ethnic identities. However this tendency is not widespread and the basis of Tamil ethnic nationalism remains predominantly linguistic.

Even though it is difficult to separate language from culture, there is a difference between the movements which are based on religion/culture and language in terms of the notion of womanhood. The image of new woman is not conflicting directly with the notion of womanhood in the language based national movements as it would have been in culture/religion based movements.

As mentioned earlier, if the ethnic identity of a community is based on religion it is very common that women looked upon as symbols and guardians of the religio-cultural

traditions. And also values, symbols and culturally created myths directed mostly at women. Such attitudes have often led to the growth of fundamentalism as in Pakistan and in Iran in recent times. (For detailed discussion on Religious Fundamentalism in South Asia see Chachihi.A: 1988). In the SriLankan Tamil case due to the combination of the broader socialist orientation of the national liberation movement and the language base nationalism women are not caught in the boundaries of religion and culture.

There has been a debate counterposing national liberation struggle and women's liberation among feminists, based on the experience of the national liberation struggles of most countries. It has been said that once the struggle has been won and independence achieved, women are again pushed back to their traditional places and roles. The notion of the state/nation and the pattern of development the countries follow after national independence are said to be the main reasons for this reversal as far as the women are concerned.

While accepting that no one can guarantee the women's liberation through national liberation struggle, the mobilization power of the struggle and the new awareness of women it had brought, it cannot be under estimated. This awareness and the new thinking it activated cannot die off completely. These together with the experience gained can be a basis for another new movement with more awareness and new strategies. This paper is an attempt to capture such a process of mobilization amongst SriLankan Tamil women, to identify the constraints arising out of the present political milieu and to explore the future prospects for the movement.

CHAPTER III

THAMIL WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS 1977-87

The Socio-Political Background

A very brief over view of socio-political background of this period is given in the first chapter. The overriding crisis of this period is the ethnic conflict and it dominates the political scene. The present government's repression of democratic rights of the people, militarization of the country, the open economic policy - all these affect the Thamil people with very negative consequences.

The accession of the UNP government in 1977 also retarded the economic development of the Thamil areas. There has been no major utilization of the physical resources of these areas and the only economic activity that flourished well -the cultivation of subsidiary crops - in Jaffna during the previous government was badly hit by the import liberalization policies of 1977 (Nithiyandanan.V:1987:142-3).

Trade, for a long time remained one of the key economic sector of the Thamil. Trading activities of the Thamil have until recently been, fairly widespread even all the major towns in Sri Lanka. During periods of violence trading establishments can be easy targets. During these ten years due to the violence against Thamil all over the island most of their trading establishments had been affected badly, leaving them in uncertain situation.

Ever since the beginning of open discrimination against Tamils, the role of economic issues has been recognized and the issues are generally classified and studied under the following headings: a) employment b) education c) settlement (see generally Balasuriya T:1978, Gunatilleka Godfrey: 1978, Schwarz Walter: 1975).

The nexus between education and Tamil Nationalism has been a fact in the sense that Tamils of the North with their unproductive arid geographic social formation, have concentrated mainly on professional jobs which demanded higher education. The British and the American missionaries facilitated this by schools and various other educational activities in the North, hence enabling them, at a very early stage to get into the professional stream. It is not surprising to see, at one point that Tamils especially those from Jaffna had a disproportionate share in the professional jobs (Nithiyanandan : 1987).

Independence in 1948 brought power to the majority ethnic community and the "affirmative actions" that followed made Tamils virtually non-existent in certain professional fields. The opportunities for higher education also were severely restricted for Tamils.

The main hinderance has been the discriminatory admission procedures to the Universities. The "standardization" which was introduced by the previous government continued and the intake of Tamil students was very low (For more detail see Bastian Sunil:1984).

During this period the discrimination in employment faced by the middle class Tamils in state and public sector was also intensified (see Charles Abeyasekara : 1984 & Report of Civil Rights Movement in Lanka Guardian 1.11.83).

The loss of the traditional Tamil areas to the government aided Sinhala peasant settlers is another main grievance of the Tamils. The pattern was the establishment of agricultural settlements sponsored by the state, where

Sinhalese, not residents in these areas, were brought in and settled. These settlements drastically changed the demographic pattern of the Tamil areas. The most crucial change had taken place in Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts in the Eastern province.

This Sinhala colonization was being done with the full blessings of the administration, the best example being the attempt to make Vavuniya a Sinhala majority district. There was also allegation made that migrant Sinhala fishermen were being used to threaten the traditional residents of the areas. The middle and lower level of the bureaucracy imbued with anti-Tamil feelings, were enthusiastic implementors of these policies.

It is also significant to note the use made of the Buddhist symbols of worship in consolidating the illegal settlements. These provided a religious-cultural legitimization to the process of Sinhalization. In this context, the emergence of Buddhist sacred cities in the area of colonization, Seruvila and Digavapi should be mentioned here (Sivathamy K: 198?).

This colonization also contributed to the growing feeling of insecurity of the Tamils. This increase when the government began to station "Home Guards" [para military] units in the settlements on a constitutional basis. During periods of ethnic tension Tamils living near these settlements were subjected to attacks from the home guards.

In 1977, soon after the election the island wide violence against Tamils had taken place and lives and properties have been destroyed. The subsequent years witnessed a spate of violence against Tamils in the plantation and in the east, north central areas. These attacks culminated in the pogrom July '83 in which thousand of Tamils were killed and their properties worth of millions destroyed. Along with this, special mention should be given to the burning of the public library in Jaffna by the state armed forces in 1981.

The grievances created a united feeling as an oppressed ethnic community among the Tamils. This feeling of togetherness developed in strength after the July '83 pogrom. They found that a common cause bound them together. The violence has exposed fully the insecurity of the Tamils living in non-Thamil areas. The July '83 violence suddenly impoverished the middle class Tamils of Colombo. The common sharing in the refugee camps and the common fear for lives also contributed towards bringing about this united feeling. The most striking feature of this new found unity is that it cuts across class, caste, religious, regional boundaries.

In addition to this growing violence, some drastic regulations came into force to repress the emerging Tamil national liberation movement. The emergency 1977, the Prevention of Terrorism act of 1979 which gave enormous power to the army and to the police to arrest, Ordinance 1982, empowering the police and the army to dispose bodies without judicial postmortem inquiries are the important repressive regulations. Number of military camps were opened in the North and East. After the July '83 violence, Sixth Amendment to the constitution was passed which outlawed the advocacy of separatism. This has resulted in the loss of parliamentary rights of Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and leaving the Tamil population without representation in the parliament.

All these factors have made the Tamils feel that they have a common cause. The gap between the state and the Tamils became more wide.

In the background of these developments the emergence and consolidation of the Tamil liberation organizations could be explained.

The Emergence of Tamil Youth Militancy

The major factor which changed the whole character of the SriLankan Tamil National question is the emergence of youth

militancy in the mid seventies. Disappointed and frustrated by the earliest negotiations which had taken place between the government and political party representing Thamils, the Tamil youths rejected the parliamentary mediation, and sought the path of armed struggle. They directed their actions against the state as an institution, its armed forces and against those whom they thought "traitors" of the Tamil cause.

The emergence of this movement has radically altered the character of politics and modes of political communication among the Thamils. There is a ban on this type of organization - "The prevention of Liberation Tigers of Tamil and other similar organizations (Law 1978).

These organizations functioned underground adopting guerilla warfare. There are at least five major organizations: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary Organization (EROS) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO).

All these groups advocate for the establishment of Tamil Eelam, through armed struggle. And most of them speak the language of Marxist concepts of political and economic liberation. All these organizations oppose the TULF for its parliamentarism.

The source of recruitment for these organizations was initially and mainly from the youth who were discriminated by the state in the University admission. But with the intensification of the efforts of the security forces to suppress these movements, the field of recruitment was widened. The support base for the movement transcended regional, class, caste and gender differences.

Indian involvement and the later development

Even though there had been an Indian concern over the Tamil question since the late 50's, it only began to increase with the periodic attacks on Tamils especially on the Tamils of Indian origin in the plantation, with the exodus of Tamils as refugees to TamilNadu and the militant youths seeking shelter. And since 1977, there had been an additional concern in Indian official circles of an American takeover of the coveted Trincomale port.

There had been attempts by the Indian government to bring about a political solution to the SriLankan national question by playing a mediatory role. The 1985 Thimpu conference and the subsequent attempts had not proved any positive results. However, events in the year 1987, such as a full scale attempt by the SriLankan Army to subjugate the Tamil resistance, which resulted in thousands of death, a food and fuel blocade to the Tamil North by the state, had invoked Indian Government to intervene in the form of air drop food relief to Tamils. Then onwards, India was successful in bringing about an agreement, at least temporarily. On the 29th of July 1987 a peace accord was signed between the SriLankan and Indian governments to set up a process for political solution to the problem. Thousands of Indian soldiers had been sent to SriLanka as peace keeping force. But the breakdown of peace process and the confrontation between the LTTE and the IPKF due to various factors (SuriyanarayananK : 1988, SriLanka Work Group: May 1988) has led to growing dissatisfaction regarding India's role in SriLanka widely among the various communities in the island.

Thamil Women's Movement :

The Scenario Before the Seventies .

Before going into the detail of the contemporary women's movement, a brief survey of the activities of womens' organizations and individual women from the early 20th

centrury will be given here in order to trace the history of the Thamil Women's Movement and more importantly to contrast with contemporary movement and to establish the fact that the contemporary movement is a sudden eruption due to the socio-political context.

Activities of Individual Women

From the early decades of this century there had been some literary writings by women on the plight of women in society. These literature had highlighted women's suffering which arise from their powerless position in society. Arranged marriages and dowry are the popular subjects of these early writings.

In 1914, Mangalanayakam Thambiah wrote a novel titled "No rungunda Ithayam" (The Crushed Heart), criticizing the system of arranged marriage and dowry. The novel is a story of a women - Kanmani - and her suffering. Even though the novel suggests that salvation comes to her when she became a Christian (the author herself, a convert) hence advocating Christianity, the novel is important in the sense that it exposes the problems of women vividly for the first time in the SriLankan Thamil literature. S.Sellammnal was another woman writing on the problems of women, demanding social reforms.

In the thirties another Thamil woman entered the field of journalism - a hitherto male preserve. Mangalammal Masilamani started a Thamil journal Thamil Mahal (Thamil woman) advocating the emancipation of women. At that point of time it was an adventurous task. She herself carried the journal house to house for sales. Her enthusiasm and strong spirit did not pay her well. Some of her contemporary male scholars have nothing good at all to say about her when I interviewed them in April 1986. Mangallamal lived in India for some time being influenced by the Indian cultural and political movements started publishing Thamil mahal journal

from Jaffna. This can be claimed the first women's journal of Sri Lanka. The motto of the journal-

"We are not slaves of anyone

We do not fear even the Yama"

expressed its courageous outlook.

This journal very actively campaigned for the voting rights of women. In an article, it even accused men as indifferent to the issue. It further said that men got their voting rights because of the property they acquired from the dowry which their wives brought.

Women, taking part in public life such as in politics and social work can be considered as reflecting the emerging awareness of society and of themselves among women. In Sri Lanka the professional middle class women especially teachers and doctors became politically conscious in the first decades of the 20th century and a few of them joined the national organizations. When the Ceylon National Congress was formed in 1919 several women participated at its first session including some Tamil women - Dr. Nallama Murngesu and Maheswari Segarajasingam the daughter of Sir Ponnabalam Arunachalam who was one of the leader of the congress.

In the plantations, when the trade union movement became active in 1930's, the first trade union was formed by K. Natesa Iyar and Sathiyawagisvara Iyar in 1931. The labour force in the plantations was, at that time almost 100% Tamil by ethnicity. Women formed the major part of the labour force. They were victims of every forms of oppression and exploitation. They received lower wages than men even though their work was physically hardest - plucking tea leaves. Among these women, the general mortality, maternal mortality and infant mortality rates were highest in the island. These exploited women became active in the trade union movement that grew in strength.

Some sections of the middle class women also had become more ideologically and politically class conscious and committed to struggle of the plantation workers. Ms. Satiyawagiswara Iyer who was politically conscious from her youth, devoted her time to work on the plantation. Ms. Natasa Iyer composed lyrics on the suffering of the plantation workers and she had sang them at the public meetings. She published her collection of songs titled the Pathetic Survival of Indian coolies.

Apart from these Thamil women who worked either independently or with other organizations like trade unions, also, there were a few womens' organizations at national level in which Sinhala and Thamil women worked together.

Women Franchise Union

SriLanka is one of the first countries in Asia which achieved voting rights for women. This right was given to all women who are over 21 years in 1931. However, middle class men received this right in 1912 and that time onwards there were campaigns for women's voting rights.

The Women Franchise Union was formed in 1927. Its demand was the franchise for all women. Among the main activists there were also some Thamil women. Ms. Nesum Saravanamuthu, Ms. Satiyawagiswara Iyer were the two of them. In 1931, when the adult franchise was granted to SriLanka, all the citizens above 21 years of age regardless of sex became entitled to vote in the elections. The first woman elected to the legislature was Naysum Saravanamuthu in 1931.

Women's United Front

In 1948 United Women's Front was formed mainly by the women from the two left parties in SriLanka. It included all ethnic groups and women from different classes. This front agitated for the removal of discrimination against the entry of women into the administrative services, campaigned for the

improvement of living conditions in the slums and protested the rising cost of living.

Parameswarykandiah, wife of the prominent Tamil member of the Communist Party actively participated in its activities along with another Tamil woman Nobel Rajasinhham.

The activism of this front came to a halt when the conflict between the two left parties widened and this was culminated in the withdrawal of one party from the front.

In the period after independence from the British in 1948, not much participation of Tamil women was there to be seen at the national level. But women continued to participate in charity organizations and social service organizations. Though these organizations are not politically oriented, The Hindu Women's Association and the Young Women Christian Organization were very popular. Middle class women joined them, and engaged in charity work, which was to be intensified during and after the periodic ethnic violence.

The popular women on the political platforms in the sixties and in the seventies have been the wives and sisters of the party leaders especially of the Tamil United Liberation Front. Ms. Amirthalingam the wife of the secretary general of the TULF is a good example. She formed its women's front - Tamil Mahalir Paravi Tamil Women's Council - and became its president. From the early period of agitation for Tamil language rights, women were among those who participated in Satyagrahas and protest marches. In the later stages, Philomena Lorenz of Tricomale and Kala Manikkam of Batticaloa were among the women in the forefront of the TULF activities along with Ms. Amirtharlingam.

Contemporary Women's Movement and Tamil Nationalism

The history in Asia, Latin America and Africa has shown nationalism in the form of National Liberation Struggle provided an initiative for women to come out from their

traditional patriarchal bindings. The entry of women into political and social arena especially in this context is very significant in that, it has a strong mobilizing effect as evident also in the SriLankan Tamil context which I will discuss.

The emergence of women's movement in Tamil SriLanka, could be seen in this background. This "opening up" of women during the national liberation resulted in the realization that they are being oppressed by institutions and ideology of the society. This, in the process, leads to an increased awareness of being women and of their subordination. The formation of various women's groups is the cumulative result of this process.

In the early 1970s when Tamil students began to be politically very active after the ethnic standardization procedure in the university entrance which severely restricted Tamil students, many women students took part in protests and demonstrations organized by the student organizations. In 1975 when the Tamil Youth council was split, a section of it formed the Tamil Eelam liberation Organization, there were several women involved in it. Some of these women were engaged in anti-state activities like assisting in robberies, getting information, smuggling out the gold from the banks and various other forms of underground activities. Pushparani, Aankayatkanni, Kalyani Pathmini are some prominent women of this period. Some of them were arrested, tortured and imprisoned.

From the beginning of the 80's when the liberation organizations began to grow in strength, along with men, young women in large numbers joined both as public workers and armed combatants. The main organizations began to form their own women's wings.

These national liberation organizations recognized the fact that the social barrier for women to participate in public life should be eliminated in order to absorb them into

the struggle. This necessity created an awareness about women's subordinate situation in Tamil society. All these organizations cherished the idea of the participation of women in national liberation struggles. One of the journals, of this time expressed this idea as follows:

"Women are being fifty percent of our population and hence their participation in various levels in the armed struggle is very much necessary. Women are the internal revolutionary forces in any national movements. The level of participation of women including armed combats should prove the revolutionary potentialities of Tamil women" (Thalir:vol 21:31).

Another point that should also be mentioned here is the adoption of socialist principles by the national liberation organizations. Most of these organizations began speaking in terms of marxists concepts of socio-political and economic liberation. In this wider realm of the ideology concept of women's liberation also became an issue. In their publications and in public meetings they propagated the idea of women's liberation. In short, public meetings and write-ups in the press and journals were adorned with the slogan:

" No revolution without women's liberation;
No women's liberation without revolution".

Along with this main factor, two other points also merit attention. 1) The opening of the University of Jaffna in 1974. This institution played a vital role in drawing together the various ideas on women issues and various individuals who were concerned on the subject. It became a centre of activity and provided the platform for women to come up with ideas. Students and teachers were actively involved. The early events which demonstrate the feminist consciousness were centred around this institution. It also provided the necessary ground for some women's organizations to emerge as demonstrated later. In this period men students of the university were also attracted towards this new

development. Thus a new layer of young men who became the supporters of the women's movement began to be formed.

2). This ten year period witnessed the emergence of feminist ideology and movement in the south of Sri Lanka with a new strength. The "year of the women" proclaimed in 1975 by the U.N was significantly connected with this. Government and non-government organizations, political parties, trade unions - all celebrated this event. This became a nation wide occasion to popularize women's issues. During the International Women's decade of 1975-85, feminist literature from abroad also influenced many local women, who began to translate these writings. New women's organizations emerged especially in the south, reflecting different shades of feminism (Jayawardena K: 1986:23). This island wide development had its reflections in the North too, in public meetings, discussions and in writings. In December 1975 a full day programme highlighting the problems of women an exhibition, film show and a public meeting - was held in Jaffna to mark the International Women's Year.

All these factors mentioned above provided a suitable ground for a women' movement to be nurtured upon. Among them the national liberation struggle based on ethnic nationalism played a vital role.

In this context women's organizations which were formed during this period can be classified broadly as a) women's wings of the national liberation organizations and b) autonomous women's organizations.

The Women Wings of the National Liberation Organizations

I. Eelam Women's Liberation Front (EWLF)

This is the women wing of the Eelam people Revolutionary liberation front. In its inaugural address of the first

Congress its secretary general mentioned the mobilization of women.

"We mobilized the women of Eelam and inducted them into revolutionary struggle through the Eelam Women's Liberation Front" (Text of Inaugural address, 1984-p.7). This women's front had been functioning in two ways. One is to mobilize women for their political organization. Second is to mobilize them towards women's liberation. This group held public meetings and discussions among women both in urban and rural areas.

EWLF brought out a regular women's journal -titled Senthalaal - (Red Flame). Their perception on women's liberation was clearly expressed in this journal. They see the subordination of women arises from their economic dependency which is linked with private property.

"The struggle of the women cannot be stopped till the abolition of male authority and the exploitative class which treat women as commodity. The day when the exploitation in every sphere ends, then only the exploitation of women by men also will end. Hence the women's liberation struggle is unseparable part of working class struggle which aims at the abolition of society where the private ownership of property exists" (Senthalaal:vol 3:1984).

In the first number of Senthalaal, the women's wing had clearly expressed its view on women's oppression and liberation. It identifies the oppression and subordination in terms of ethnicity, class and gender. (Senthalaal : vol 1 1984).

Even though their political programme prioritized the oppression of the Tamil people as the primary contradiction and the national liberation struggle as the dominant form of struggle, the women's wing recognized the fact that the liberation of women cannot be automatically achieved through the revolution. Women should consciously and constantly fight for their right while participating in a common struggle (Senthalaal: vol 3: 1984).

This organization initiated some women's struggles in Jaffna. It supported the women's agricultural workers agitation for raise in wages; struggle of women workers in weaving centres.¹

EPRLF as a political organization had its base among all section of the society. However they gained a stronghold among the depressed castes in Jaffna. The composition of the EWLF reflected this aspect and also they had a strong support among students.

Women's Wing of the Liberation Tigers of Thamil Eelam

In 1984 LTTE formed a women's combat group. In the same year they started their over ground women's organization Suthanthirap Paravaikal (Birds of Freedom). It can be observed that the women's combat group and the overground organization functioned separately.

In 1983, the political committee of the LTTE released a book entitled "Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Thamil Eelam National Liberation". This book focuses primarily on the oppression of the Thamil Women as an ethnic group and secondarily on the oppression and subordination of women through cultural practice.

"Thamil women are victims of double (oppression; victims of national oppression generated by Sinhala chauvinism and victims of oppression emanating from cultural images of women, cultural norms and practices ... 'Thamil women contribute to a cheap labour force in the national formation"

it goes on to say

"... domestic labour coupled with employment in social production means a double burden for women, a double oppression for women, allowing no scope or time for personal development as a human being or participation in the socio-political life of the nation" (Balasingam. A: 1983 : 23-25).

Further it says that the benefits of women's mobilization and involvement in the National Liberation Struggle have been

the opening up of debates, challenging traditional norms values and customs.

"The Stage is set for women to fight back against powerful social constraints and male chauvenistic prejudices that were determinants in the mobilization of the female masses (ibid., p.30)

and this will pave the way "for radical transformation of women's lives and social attitudes towards women in an authentic socialist state of Thamil Eelan" (ibid: p.30).

Suthanthirap Paravaikal - the overground organization of the LTTE functioned as a support base engaged in propoganda work. This organization organized first aid classes, set up fair price shops, Montesoori School for children and also involved in rehabilitation work among regugees. This group also published a womens journal titled Suthanthirap Pravaikal and it provided women a formum to express their ideas on women's liberation.

Young girls mainly fròm Jaffna peninsula became members of this organization. We couldn't see a caste or class bias towards this organization. But it is a striking feature that not many women from the east are among its cadres.

Thamil Eelam Women Liberation Organization

This is the women wing of the People Liberation Organization of Thamil Eelam. In 1981 women from the North and East got together in forming this group. " The aim was to help women to analyse their problems, enlightend them on the character of their oppression and to help to organize their own movement to overcome those problems. (PLOT-Bulletin, vol:1 no, 14: 3). This group held public seminars and discussions at village levels to illustrate the discrimination faced by women. System of dowery, unequal treatment of male and female children, unequal wages, male domination are the issues which were given considerable attention. This group also realized that they being

oppressed first for being Thamilis and secondly for being women. It was hoped that only by securing their rights as an ethnic group they could struggle against the oppression of women. This is the primary reason for women to participate in the National liberation struggle. "With the goal of setting up a socialist structure while at the same time emphasizing (their) special problems as a precondition to end their oppression as women as well" (Ibid: 4).

While engaging in consciousness raising programmes, this organization worked with women especially in the rural areas of Vanni which is south of Jaffna peninsula. Attempts were being made to setup model farms for women, cooperative shops to sell textiles and handicrafts produced by individual women and rural women societies which enable the producer to get all the profit. They also organized pre-schools in the poor areas of the villages and in refugee settlements.

These activities facilitated an entry point to reach the rural women in order to educate them on their subordinate situation and on their capability of managing their own problems.

Autonomous Women's Organizations

Apart from the women's wings of the National liberation organizations, this period witnessed the formation of other women's groups which are autonomous of political organizations. They adopted the autonomous position for ideological and tactical reasons.

Women's Progressive Association

In 1980 some students of the Jaffna University decided to form an organization of their own. The activities like celebration of International Women's Year in 1975 which were already had taken place in the university, the political climate of the region and the encouragement given by some of the teachers - all contributed the formation of this

association and in March 1980 this organization was formed. It was very significant that some male students also were present at the inaugural meeting.

The aim of the organization is to create and develop an awareness in general and especially among the women students. It conducted seminars and discussions mainly among the students on various subjects concerning women.

Women's Study Circle (WSC)

In mid 1981 the women who were actively involved in the Women's Progressive Association wanted to extend its membership outside the university in order to broaden its activities. By this time the women's question also began to be discussed widely in Jaffna among the youth, and a suitable ground was setting in. Given this background, a few active members from the Women's Progressive Association and some women from outside came together to form this group. They all felt the need for a clear, relevant theoretical background to deal with women's issues and the main concern was to study the problems confronting women, at theoretical and practical level.

In the beginning, the Women's Study Circle engaged itself in the discourse and every week its members held discussions among themselves on the various oppressive mechanisms prevailing in the society.

This organization held public meetings, exhibitions, and used cultural mediums like theatre, to create an awareness among women.

These programmes made the women's study circle very popular. A programme which was subjected to hot discussion was an exhibition which was held in February 1982. The aim of this exhibition was to create awareness and discussions on how women's bodies have been commoditized in the capitalist set up and also to create a rethinking on the image of women.

This exhibition not only led to the condemnation of commoditizing of woman's body but also to the deeper discussion of capitalist commodity production and strategies of the commercial world. The seminars which were held on the same subject in the following days clearly reflected this broad focus.

From late '82 to early '85 there was a lull in the activities of women's study circle except some occasional seminars. The general repressive situation in the Thamil areas was not conducive for any kind of progressive activities. This had virtually led all the progressive movements to lie in low profile. So the WSC also did not function during the years of 1983, 1984.

The second phase of the WSC began in 1985. Most of the earlier members had left, some of them involved in the women's wings of the National Liberation Organization except for a few older members. It was decided to keep the group small and to function as a resource group.²

When reactivated in 1985 WSC was again engaged in conducting seminars. The seminars and discussions have drawn women from various National Liberation Organizations and the ideas had been disseminated to different levels.

WSC's first publication was a booklet titled "Feminism is relevant" in Thamil. It is a translation of a booklet published by the Feminist study circle, Colombo. The members of WSC has chosen a popular temple festival to sell it in order to make it popular. It was sold very fast.

It's next publication was a collection of poems by women- Soltatha Seithikal - Unspoken Messages - a collection of 24 poems by ten women is the first collection of its kind so far published in Thamil. Most of the poems express both the experience of an oppressed nationality and of oppressed women. It also represents women's creativity in the field of poetry which was not acknowledged by the male critics.

The next important action of the WSC, was the celebrations of International Women's Day on March 8th 1988. This is the first time this day was observed in Thamil areas. The celebration was with cultlural programmes. Observation of this day and the responses shown by women are the clear reflection of the new feminist awareness emerging among women.

WSC from its begining tried to be autonomous by not liking with any political organization even though all its twelve members have some what left orientation. They argue not only for emanicipation but for liberation from all the oppressive structures and institutions of patriarchal society. They emphasize the struggle against patriarchy, believing that unless continuously opposed it is likely to survive even in a socialist mode of production. WSC having adopted this position sees the necessity of an autonomous organization to continue the women's struggle even after the national liberation struggle.

"No one can deny the subordination of women in Thamil socociety. There is an illusion that women have achieved their rightful place in our society. But in reality it is not so ... This subordination of women reflects in many spheres of life from philosophy to politics. The patriarchal ideology that binds women is deeply rooted in our culture and in our values of life".

This part of the statement which was issued on the International Women's Day 1987 clearly reflects its view.

Women's Revival Front

This women's group formed in 1985 "to identify and solve the social injustices towards women" (Villakku:vol:1 1986) It also had the aim of contributing towards the solution of ethnic conflict.

WRF was mainly working within rural women in Jaffna and had taken up the issues of equal wage for agricultural women workers, wife beating etc..

This group had adopted an autonomous position ideologically. Their argument for autonomy of women's organizations more or less same as WSC is clearly reflected in their journal 'Villakku' (see vol:1&2). This publication contains writings on sexual division of labour, violence against women etc.

The Mother's Front

This is an organization of women in Jaffna who came together in a situation of increasing violence and repression by the state in the north. The repressive regulations didn't allow any male to protest against this human rights violation. Here a need was felt to mobilize women as mothers to protest against this action. This led to the formation of a women's organization - The Mother's Front in August - 1984.

It's first action was a protest demonstration against the arrest and detention of their children. About 2000 women participated in the march which went through the roads of the city to government agent's office. They handed over a memorandum to the government agent demanding the immediate release of their children. This unexpected action embarrassed the SriLankan government that it agreed to issue the details about the whereabouts of those arrested.

From its inception the Mother's Front repeatedly protested against the arrests, detention without trial, rape, torture, establishment of military camps, surveillance zones and repressive regulations. Its main forms of agitation are protest marches, picketings etc.

The collective action of Mothers, generated a sense of strength and unity and inspired the women in the other areas to engage in such activities. The Mother's Front in Batticaloa, The Association of Mothers of Missing Youths are such organizations worth mentioning.

Mother's Front is very distinct in its composition from other organizations. The members are mainly middle aged women where as in the other organization the members are young women.

The basic fact that women themselves have to fight for their rights, has been the motive force of all the women's wings of the liberation organizations; they have also been in total agreement on the issues of sexual division of labour, economic dependency of women, etc. which characterize women's subordination in the society. However, inspite of these commonalities in their outlook they were unable to forge a united alliance because of their political affiliations. The International Women's Day in 1986 is the only one occasion on which all these women groups went on a joint march.

However, the crucial factor that differentiated the women's wing was the nature of their mass base and to a certain extent the class component. Suthanthirap Paravikal to a great extent was composed of women from Jaffna peninsula both from urban and rural areas while EWLF relied mainly on rural women. The support base of TEWLO too, mostly rural women, came from the Vanni region outside the Jaffna peninsula.

The autonomous groups were distinct in the sense that they followed mainly a cause oriented programme and did not affiliate themselves to any particular political organizations although they supported the Tamil cause.

WRF drew its cadres from the lower middle class and poor rural women and primarily concerned with their immediate problems like unequal wages etc. The WSC, small in membership continuously strived for consciousness raising among women. Composed mainly of intellectuals, teachers and students the WSC functioned as a resource and educating forum for all the other groups.

The Mother's Front, even though in principle committed to the various issues concerning women (aims and objectives : 1984) their campaigns and actions mostly centred around human rights violation and refugee situation.

Notes

1. I am unable to provide the exact dates of these struggles for the simple fact that the communication with the persons/organizations became impossible for me since I am writing this in the Netherlands being faraway from home, and more importantly the organization itself in complete disarray.

2. By this time WSC clearly formulated its aims and objectives as follows:

To identify the forms of oppression of women and to formulate strategies to eliminate them.

To initiate research and study on the problems of women workers in the urban, rural and plantation sector and disseminate the findings.

To assess the legislations regarding marriage, property, rape, abortion, birth control and if necessary put forward suggestions which could rectify the discriminative aspects.

To monitor the image and ideas on women in the media and to take actions if necessary.

To publish and translate books and phamlets pertaining to women, in order to raise the consciouness of both women and men.

To keep link with other women's organizations in the country which work for justice and equality and to unite in action on common issues.

CHAPTER IV

LEAP IN CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS

When looking at various women's organizations that emerged during this period, the issue and the campaigns that sprang up it could be argued that ethnicity in general functioned as a mobilizing factor in forming and expediting the Tamil women's movement. Discrimination and oppression of the Tamil ethnic community paved the way for a national liberation movement and it has created a situation of struggle which demanded the mobilization of the people irrespective of class, caste and gender. Along with this, the war, the crisis of every day life, the breakdown of normalcy, and the refugee question - all these have caused a rupture in the social fabric. Life and values could not be continued as earlier any more. In this context, rethinking over traditional norms and behavioral pattern of women has taken place.

The Challenges to the Traditional Concept of Femininity in the Tamil Society

After 1983, with the widening of the recruiting base of the liberation organizations, young women in hundreds began to join the liberation organizations. In the beginning they were engaged in propaganda work, medical aid etc. Then they slowly moved into the area of underground activities like smuggling arms and spying. With the deepening of the crisis, when more combatants were needed, women were also given armed training. They had to leave their houses in order to get training in guerilla warfare. They had to live in camps with other women who were not known to them earlier. This is

unimaginable for young unmarried middle class Tamil women in a normal situation. Women used to live in hostels and boarding houses only for educational or employment purposes. The armed training provided them with new experiences. Even the concept about their bodies had changed drastically from traditional formulations. The concept of four virtues modesty, charm, coyness and fear could not prevail any more. One of the slogans, in a joint march organized by the women's wings of the national liberation organizations on the eve of international women's day, 1986 aptly expressed this. The slogan was, "Let's forget the four virtues, Let's have a fighting spirit". The combat dress and the physical mobility provided a sense of freedom for them. Here, the women, through the military activities tried to safeguard their traditional homeland by non-traditional behaviour. During the struggle it is not surprising to see the changes in traditional attitudes even in very sensitive areas like the relationship between men and women. During the Zimbabwe revolution the change of attitudes of women towards contraception and abortion can be cited here. One of the combatant who had taken part in the Zimbabwe revolution explained how these attitudes changed due to the necessity which the situation had created (Nysha : 1983:105). However, the question is after the struggle will these changes continue? After the Zimbabwe revolution there were instances where men refused to marry the women who had served as fighters in the struggle.

Though one cannot predict what will happen in the Tamil context, considering the experiences of other countries, the Tamil women's organizations should be cautious about the future.

Emergence of Social Motherhood as a Political Force

The violent repression by the state armed forces had increased from the early eighties. The arbitrary arrests, detention of youth without trial, killings of civilians, and

raping of women became norm of the day of the armed forces. The repressive regulations didn't not allow any individual or organization to protest against. Soon, the situation became unbearable. In this context women as mothers organized themselves to protest against the human rights violations.

The Mother's Front, both in Jaffna and Batticaloa, the Association of Mothers of the Missing Youth in Batticaloa are such organizations which Tamil women were mobilized into. This type of mobilization is not a new phenomenon. Mothers of Maya De Plaza in Argentina emerged in a similar way as a protest against the disappearance of sons. In Nicaragua too, for many women, entry into the political life began with their involvement with neighborhood committees caring for the victims of earthquake in 1972. The women were first involved in feeding the dispossessed, tending the wounded, and then moved into the sphere of political struggle.

Many of these women experience this transition from relief workers to participants in the struggle as a natural extension of their protective role in the family. Molyneux calls this as "Combative Motherhood" (1985:228).

Some feminists argue that this use of motherhood will further consolidate the traditional role of women. However, in a particular situation the positive outcome of such women's organizations cannot be understated. The kind of mobilization which comes through their own situation will provide women with new strength and strategies as Gladys Diaz pointed out in the Chilean context.

"... That is how the first organizations arose; committees of relatives of those who had "disappeared" of relatives of prisoners, soup kitchens for the unemployed, workers associations that meet in private houses, mothers' centres etc. These groupings represent the search for a collective answer to the women's problems, to their most deeply felt demands (1983:32-33).

In the Tamil context this is entirely a new phenomena. These mothers, having united by the suffering as mothers

whose sons and daughters were arrested, killed or disappeared, raped went on demonstrations, picketed in front of police stations and government offices. These actions of protest by middle aged and old women who are so far confined to their home created a new scenario. These women were exposed to the events in the political sphere. This has raised their socio-political consciousness. The actions of mothers were a symbol of a shift from the individual strategy of protecting their children to a collective strategy in which the traditional role of women as mothers was used. They clearly and effectively articulated the motherhood as a political force. In the Asian tradition, mothers have always been considered as a source of power and respect. When they came out in the streets demanding their children back, the momentum they generated and the legitimacy they possessed at all levels as extra moral responsibility could be understood in this background. Even during the heights of repression the military, be they from Sri Lanka or India (IPKF) acted with restraint in dealing with the protesting mothers at least initially. If it were not for mothers, the counter-actions by the army would have been brutal.

These mothers were involved in many attempts to bring peace in the country. They have made several petitions to the government, political parties and concerned organizations. One of their memorandum appealed "... to citizens to work towards an end to the violence and to resolve the ethnic problem to enable all communities to live in peace and harmony" (An Appeal for Justice - 1985).

In early 1987, the Batticaloa Mothers' Front launched a fast unto death campaign on the demand of immediate ceasefire between the LTTE and IPKF. Two mothers participated in the fast unto death and one died without any success.

It is relevant to make a note on the peace activities of women in general. The women's peace movement such as Greenham Common Peace Camp has generated considerable debates

among feminists. Some of the feminist quarters even dismissed the women's peace movement as a "real threat to the women's liberation movement" (Liliyan, Mohin: 1983:25) They say that Greenham has diverted women energies from the real struggle against male power. However, majority of feminists support the peace movement (For a detail discussion on women's peace movement; see Segal.L :1987: 162-203).

How futile they may be at the moment, the initiatives of women's organizations such as Mother's Front and Women for Peace (an organization in the South) to bring peace in the country cannot be under-valued.

Legitimization of the Discourse on the Women's Question

All major groups of national liberation organizations adressed the women's question as part of their political agenda. This was framed in the typical format, of first elimininating the barriers for women to participate in National Liberation struggle. In addition, an ideal was projected that women have to be equal in the future society which these organizations were aiming at. Even though the formulation is typical, only focussing the participation of women into the movement without the recognition of the specific oppression that arose from the subordination of women, the acceptance of the concept of women's liberation even in a rehtoric form, the organizations provided a space for women's question to be taken up.

This enabled the women in the women's wings of the national liberation organization to takeup the women's question both as a personal and a philosophical issue. They began to see the issue of women's subordination beyond the issue of ethnic repression. This comes up clearly when we look at the campaigns on rape.

The presence of military in the region had led to numerous incidents of harassment and rape of women. (see reports in Eelanadu, 10-1-85, 20-5-85). Incidents of rape had been

taking place earlier also in the society but in a different context; then it was a non-issue or an issue concerning an individual woman. However when it happened as a form of violence to intimidate the community, it became an issue of serious concern. While the national liberation organizations had taken it as a race issue the women groups had taken up the issue of rape as a gender issue and linked it up with the issue of violence against women.

Furthermore, both the women wings and the autonomous women groups, through their discussions and debates, extended the issue of rape to the concepts related to rape such as chastity and patriarchy. In the Tamil society, it is an accepted norm, that a woman should safeguard her chastity at any cost. A woman who lost her chastity with or without her will used to be ostracized by the society. She will have to bear a social stigma of a worst kind. But during this period there was a call to the society not to ostracize the women who were raped and women were also called upon not to feel guilty about it.

There were discussions centered around the concept of chastity and the patriarchal interests underlying (Thalir, vol. 30 & 31). The women's groups consciously avoided the Tamil term for rape "karpallipu" which is in common usage because of 'its connotation of purity/impurity of women. The term "paladhkaram" which means "by force" came into usage.

This led to the discussion on patriarchy as a systemic oppression of women. Thus the women's question gained a legitimate area in every day discourse - from silence to a point of discussion.

Due to this commitment towards the women's liberation a concern for the women living in other areas was also created. In particular, the concern for women workers in the tea plantation was widely spread. The exploitation of those women as workers and as women was subject of writings in women's journals. These women had not existed earlier in the

consciousness of the people of the North. In fact, they were looked down as illegitimate residents. In addition, the "low" caste women working as agricultural wage labourers and the women workers in small, and cottage industries, the exploitation they were facing became the subject for discussion. The Women's Study Circle had done a research on these women workers in late 1985 and had found that the collapse of law and order in Jaffna caused more severe exploitation of these women. The factory owners took advantage of this situation and force the women to work more for less pay. These hidden realities were brought to the public knowledge.

Linkages and Wider Dissemination

The conceptual clarity and the knowledge which was gained by the autonomous women's groups on the situation of women were disseminated to a wider level with the help of the women's wings of the national liberation organizations. The women's journals and the booklets which were published by the urban oriented autonomous groups were mostly consumed by the women in the national liberation organizations. Since these books were published in Jaffna and due to the breakdown of transport and communication, these literature could not be distributed outside Jaffna through the normal channels. But it was so amazing to find the copies of the publications in Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the East and even in the remote villages. This was done by the national liberation organizations through their own networks. In this way, issues concerning women were disseminated to a wider audience. Without the network of the National Liberation Women's wings, it would have been limited to a few women in the urban areas, hence limiting the whole issue to middle class boundaries.

Autonomous women's groups by their structural limitations and practical difficulties, are slower in making a

progressive change in the consciousness of women. Due to this limitation they could not reach out people below their ranks and also were unable to raise issues as political.

However, the leap in consciousness which occurred among the Tamil women could be understood in the background of the socio-political context and the special way women have been mobilized.

While accepting the limitations of the autonomous groups, the advantage of being autonomous particularly in some situations also should be mentioned. The autonomous position enabled them to link with the women's organizations in the south on some issues. For example, the activities of the Mothers front were supported and highlighted by some of the organizations in the south. From '83 onwards on the celebration of International Women's Day in the South, women from the North have participated. These women were either independents or from the autonomous organizations.

Some Women's Organizations in the south were accused by the reactionary forces in the south as the supporters of Tamil cause and traitors of the Sinhala nation (Jayawardena K. 1986) This allegation was partly due to the Women's Organizations standpoint on Tamil question and partly due to their links in Tamil areas. This allegation would have been more harsh if they had relations with the Women's Wings of the national liberation organizations.

Contextual Constraints

Even though a leap in consciousness of women and public legitimization of women's question had occurred during this period, the fact remains that the old traditions die hard. Women had to confront limitations of society on various grounds. Different elements in the society had contributed to this.

Conservatism of the Society

In 1985 during a cordon and search operation in a village in the north, some incidents of rape had taken place. When women groups tried to inquire into it, it was denied by some male members of the Citizen Committee of the village. They claimed that these women were not raped in the "actual sense" but being harassed physically. In January 1985 when a pregnant woman was raped by the SriLankan soldiers she was even accused that she had not properly covered herself, hence the soldiers were provoked to rape her ;

It was very alarming to see more hard reactions against women liberation from the conservative corners of society. The leaflet "A warning to women" which was circulated in Jaffna in October 1985, illustrates this point. It's text runs as follows:

1. Grown up girls should wear long skirts.
2. They should not ride on cycles with all kind of men.
3. Married women should wear saris when going out. They should not wear transparent clothes.
4. Married women should only go with their husbands on bicycles.
5. Women who loiter about in public places should be beaten up.
6. Women going on bicycle with men should be inquired into and they should be beaten up.
7. Adhere to good habits when young so that you will grow up to be persons of good conduct.
8. Young men like to marry girls of good conduct without demanding a dowry.
9. Parents who allow their grownup daughters to behave as they like, should be punished and disgraced.

This was a clear reaction of conservatism against the growing militancy among women. However, all the women's groups responded immediately issuing counter leaflets and statements to the press condemning it.

When issues of double moral standards of males and sexuality became a subject of discussion among women, it was harshly ridiculed. In a public meeting a woman activist criticized the control imposed on women's sexuality. Immediately a daily in Jaffna wrote an editorial vulgarizing the subject saying that the women liberators aim at sexual freedom only (Murasoli :5.6.1986).

Ethnic Identity versus Gender Equality

In 1986 a novel very much similar to "Dolls House" was written by a woman writer (Kohila Mahendran: 1986). The main character was - a woman who leaves her home and husband in order to protect her self autonomy. This novel soon became popular for its theme. One male critic had even written a review titled "In Revolt Against a Husband" (Sivakumaran. S: 1986). However in the introduction of the book another critic expressed a different view. He argued that the novel as a whole, was a symbolism of the struggle of the Tamil Nation (Subramaniyam N:1986:4).

Even though this opinion was not widely shared among the people it is an indication of dilution of the subject. And it also shows the typical tendency which is known from other countries how the issue could be subsumed.

Due to the reactive nationalist feelings, some traditional customary laws which were discriminative towards women were argued as benefiting women. While a common law exists for all the SriLankans, matters concerning inheritance, property, marriage, divorce etc. are governed by separate personal laws for different ethnic communities. In 1986, in the SriLankan parliament a proposal was put forward to abolish the customary law - Thesavalamai Law of the Jaffna Tamils. One of the arguments put forward by the people who proposed it was that this law is discriminative towards women. They pointed out an article on property. According to this

article, a married woman cannot operate her own property without the consent of her husband. This is a time when there was no representation for Tamils in the parliament as a result of the sixth amendment to the constitution which banned the only parliamentary party of Tamils. There was an accusation against the government that it tried to abolish the traditions of the Tamils. Even some articles appeared in the press written by women's lawyers arguing for the need for the consent of the husband for women in order to manage her property. It was argued that due to the generally soft mental make up and passivity of women they can be easily manipulated by others. Hence, it was argued that it is always good for a woman to have a male guardian (Eelanadu 15-2-1986).

The political context within which this attempt has taken place, made the women groups faced difficulty in taking a standpoint on this. If the people who proposed the bill are concerned with women's rights and make similar attempts to abolish all discriminatory laws towards women, then this particular proposal also could have been welcomed by women's groups. But in the context of wiping out the identity of the Tamils, it cannot be considered as a gender issue. Even though the bill was not passed in the parliament, this is a good example to see how the ethnic identity and gender interests can conflict with each other and create complex questions to the women's organizations.

During this period there were not much conflict on issues between the women's wings of the national liberation organizations and the autonomous groups due to the fact that the autonomous groups looked at the priority of issues placed on the context. Even though, not outwardly and clearly expressed there was a dissatisfaction among the National Liberation organizations over women's groups functioning autonomously. Each organization wanted the autonomous groups to ally with them.

When analysing the various aspects and the outcome of the mobilization of Tamil women one could see that it has its own positive and negative aspects.

The challenge to the traditional notion of womanhood, the wide dissemination of awareness/knowledge, the legitimization of women's question during this time all facilitated a leap in consciousness among women and this led to the sudden eruption of the Tamil women's movement during this period.

At the same time, the conservative reaction to this growing militancy among women and the constraints on women which were imposed by the context could not be ignored.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This paper indicates how ethnic nationalism could play a significant role in mobilizing Tamil women in Sri Lanka. This mobilization took place not only along ethno-nationalistic line but it also incorporated women's consciousness. The whole process has given way to a new environment in which a woman's movement could thrive on. The foregoing chapters lead us to the following conclusions:

a) A woman's movement in a given country cannot be separated from its specific historical context. This context shapes and determines the nature of the movement. Thus the Tamil Women's Movement itself is a reflection of its historical context.

The major concern of this movement is linked with ethnic repression, which has already been shown in the former chapter, signifies this fact. In addition, this also shows how a gender practical interest develops into a gender specific interest (Rape and violence against women).

b) The organizational nature of the movement also has been subjected to the conditions of this historical context; some of the women's groups being the wings of national liberation organizations and some being autonomous. Even though tensions prevailed among the women's wings of the national liberation organizations in trying to persuade the autonomous groups to ally with them, no major conflict in terms of ideology or issues had occurred. In fact, the study shows these two types of organizations functioned as complementary to each other.

c) Non-linking with political groupings at times, can be an advantage to women's organizations. In addition, inter-

rivalry among political groupings can cause damage to the women's wings of these groupings. The SriLankan Tamil case provides examples for these both features.

Consequences of the Indo-SriLankan Peace accord and the subsequent eruption of war between the LTTE and the IPKF in late 1987 forced the LTTE to virtually go underground. This has blocked the women's wing of the LTTE-Suthanthirapparavaikal from functioning openly. However the autonomous organizations such as Mother's Front and Women's Study Circle are able to function even with a low profile.

The climax of inter-rivalry within the Tamil Liberation Movement resulted in the elimination of certain groups. In 1986 the women's wing of EPRLF and PLOTE became virtually non-existent due to the ban imposed on the above two political organizations by the militarily superior LTTE. The autonomous women's groups have not been caught in this situation and able to function as a positive result of their autonomous position.

The gloomy picture of present SriLanka is not preventing us from identifying the future prospects of the women's movement. The deterioration of democratic rights, growing militarization, increasing chauvinism and racism are all the challenges not only to the women's movement but to the progressive forces in the society. In this situation, the Tamil women's movement, how small its proportion may be at the moment, how faint its voice may be, should ally with other progressive forces in the society which are struggling for a total transformation of the society, while maintaining its goals towards women's liberation. This may be the longterm goal and strategy for the Tamil Women's movement. This may be a long, painful journey but this is the only path available to transform the whole society towards a new culture in which peace and equality prevail and in which every human being can realize his/her full potentiality.

REFERENCES

- Anthiyas. F & Davis. N.Y (1983) "Contextualizing Feminism-Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions", Feminist Review, no 15, 1983.
- Balasingam. A (1984) Women and Revolution: The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam National Liberation Struggle, Madras.
- Balasuriya. T (1978) " Minority Problem - a Socio-economic Perspective", Race Relations in SriLanka, Colomob.
- Barrett. M (1980) Women's Oppression Today, London.
- Bastian. Sunil (1984) "University Admission and the National Question", Ethnicity and Social Change in SriLanka, Colombo.
- Brass. E. Paul (1976) ".Ethnicity and Nationality Formation", Ethnicity, vol:3 no:3, sept 1976.
- Charles Abeyasekera. & Newton Gunasinha (1987) ed Facets of Ethnicity in SriLanka, Colombo.
- Charles Abeyasekera. C (1984) "Ethnic Representation in the Higher State Services", Ethnicity and Social Change in SriLanka, Colombo.
- Chhachhi. A (1988) The State, Religious Fundamentalism and Women in South Asia - Conceptual Issues and Trends, Working Paper, ISS, The Hague.
- Castells. M (1983) The City and Grass Roots: A Cross Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements, London.
- Dater. C. (1984) "Womens Movement: A Feminist Perspective" Trivandram.

David. Slater (1985)ed New Social Movements and the State in Latin America, Amsterdam.

Delphy. C (1977) The Main Enemy, London.

Eelanadu - 10 -1-85, 20 - 5-85, 15-2-86, Jaffna.

EPRLF (1984) Inagural Adress of the First Congress.

Firestone. S (1979) The Dialectic of Sex, London.

Gita. Sen & Careen Grown (1985) Development, Crisis and Alternative Visions: Third World Women Perspectives, NewDelhi.

Gladys Diaz (1983) "Roles and Contradictions of Chilean Women in the Resistance and in Exile" Third World-Second Sex. Compiled by Miranda Davies, London.

Gunesekara. N (1987) Characterization of the Contemporary Women's Liberation Movement in Sri Lanka, M.A. Research paper (unpublished) ISS, The Hague.

Gunetileke. Godfry (1978) "Some Socio-economic Aspects of Communal Problems", Race Relations in Sri Lanka, Colombo.

Hamza Alavi (1988) "Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology", State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan. (ed) Fred Halliday and Hamza Alavi, London.

Hartman. H (1979) "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union" Capital and Class, no.8.

Jagar. A (1983) Feminist Politics and Human Nature, Sussex.

Jayawardena. K (1986) Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, London.

_____ (1986) "Villians and Witches in Paradise" Lanka Guardian, vol.9 no.7.

_____ (1986) "Feminism in SriLanka in the Decade 1975 to 1985, Voice of Women, vol.II no 4.

_____ (1985) Ethnic and class conflict in SriLanka, Colombo.

Kohila Mahendran (1986) Thuylum Oru Nal Kalaiyum, Tellipalai, Jaffna.

Mohin. L (1983) Breaching the Peace, London.

Mother's Front (1984) Aims and Objectives, Jaffna.

_____ (1985) An Appeal for Justice, (pamphlet).

Nyasha (1983) "Four Years of Armed Struggle in Zimbabwe", Third World - Second Sex, compiled by Miranda Davies, London.

Nithiyanandan. V (1987) "An Analysis of Economic Factors Behind the Origin and Development of Thamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka", Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka.

PLOTE. Bulletin, vol.1 no.14.

Ranajit Guha (1982) Subaltern Studies, vol I, Oxford.

Rowbotham. S (1980) Beyond the Fragments, London.

Sanmugathasn. N (1984) "Sri Lanka: The story of the Holocaust", Race and Class, vol:xxxI, no:1.

- Saskia Wieringa(1985) (ed) Women's Struggles and Strategies, ISS, The Hague.
- _____ (1988) So many Women's Movements - How to Analyse Them ? (unpublished) Discussion paper for xiith IUAES Congress, Zagreb, Yugoslavia.
- Schwarz. Walter (1975) The Tamils of Sri Lanka, Minority Rights Group, Report No.25 London.
- Segal. L (1987) Is the Future Female?, London.
- Senthalal vol :1, 3 & 4. Jaffna.
- Sivathmby. K (198?) The SriLankan Tamil Question - 1977-1983. unpublished mimeo.
- _____ (1984) "Evolution of the Tamil Question" Lanka Guardian, vol:6, no:18 & 20.
- Sivakumaran. K.S (1986). "In Revolt Against A Husband". Island (14-9-86), Colombo.
- Sri Lanka Work Group (1988) Peace Accord and Its Aftermath. Occassional Paper, Amsterdam.
- Subramaniam. N (1986) "Arimuham" Thuylum Oru Nal Kalaiyum.
- Suriyanarayanan. K (1988) The Peace Trap, Madras.
- Thalir vol:21, 30 & 31. Jaffna.
- Ross. Murray (1985) Community Organization: Theory and Principles, Harpe.
- Vilakku vol : 1 & 2. Jaffna.

Vogel. L (1983) Marxism and Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory, New Brunswick.

Wilson. A.J. (1988) The Breakup of Sri Lanka, London.

Women's Study Circle (1987) Statement on the International Women's Day, 8-3-87, Jaffna.

