

# Women, nation and struggle

The issue of gender is often overlooked in traditional nationalism debates, despite the significant contribution women have made to nationalist projects, and the intertwining of the feminist struggle and the nationalist one, writes Malar Segaram.

NATIONALISM has been described by various academics as a reaction to colonialism, as the political expression of particular groups, as expressing a cultural belonging to an imagined community or as articulating an ethnic sense of belonging. It is seen as homogenising or differentiating a discourse aimed at people who see themselves as having something in common and against others they see as being different.

The traditional theories have been espoused by predominantly (white) men who argue the pros and cons and reach their conclusions, overlooking the influences of the gender debate on nationalistic sentiment. However, a fast growing literary effort argues that looking at nationalism without considering gender is to paint a partial picture. First developed by feminists, this line of thinking argues that gender is constitutive of both nations and nationalism. They argue that ways in which nations are expressed have to be looked at through the lens of gender, as well as race, ethnicity and class.

As far back as the 1930s, the English writer Virginia Woolf looked at what the phrase 'our country' meant to

women. Writing on the eve of a world war, she queried in what way English women of the time belonged to the nation. They were 'outsiders', unable to vote or own property, poorly protected by laws that effectively considered them chattel of the men in their lives. She queried in what way England belonged to her.

Woolf argued that a woman might say she had no country, indeed wanted no country. "As a woman, my country is the whole world." But the utopian ideal of belonging to womankind, above all other loyalties was immediately crossed out by her own strong sense that she was British. For as she went on to say, once reason had spoken, emotion tugged on the heartstrings. This 'pure, if irrational emotion', she went on to argue, will drive her to secure first for her country 'what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world'.

Her thoughts are those of a pacifist responding to the threat of war. But her brief imaginings of being an outsider could not survive the war. Having seen her favourite places blown up, heard the bombs fall and watched her friends die, she could not stay aloof from it. As Cath-

erine Hall says, "There is no way to be outside war, either as a man or a woman."

Yet the British nationality, which was felt so strongly by Woolf, was one that deemed her an 'outsider'. Its property laws and legal processes deemed even her, a white, upper class, educated woman, as being unworthy of citizenship. While the reform acts of 1832 and 1867 had given first, middle class, and then, upper class men franchise, women were excluded from this class of subject. Class, race, ethnicity and gender all played a role in the debate, defining the lines along which boundaries could be established.

That debate on citizenship has to be viewed in light of the empire. Citizens had to be differentiated from subjects. It was the construction of 'others' in Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the former colony of America that enabled the benchmarks for who the British did and did not want to be.

In 1867, Gladstone, the liberal leader, argued that working class men were entitled to have a voice in the running of the country because they had shown their maturity in volunteering for the American War. They had put their belief in a value system, the abolition of slavery, above their own material interests. His only concerns were where the lines were to be drawn.

They were eventually dr-

awn around notions of respectable masculinity. Men who were independent, had homes and regular incomes, were eligible for citizenship, while men who did not, the vagrants and unemployed (which, at the time, often meant the Irish) were not. It was deemed that only the 'respectable' men would not threaten the fabric of national culture, or in the words of Hutton, "make us any less English or national than we now are."

While the rights of men were being debated, the rights of women were also raised. In 1832, it was formally clarified that women could not vote. By 1867, the right to vote had become the symbolic crux of citizenship, and suffragettes organised a petition seeking the same rights as men. When the issue was raised in the House of Commons, it was briefly debated and speedily dismissed. The House of Commons concluded that women were not citizens because they were subjects. These 'naturally' gentle and affectionate guardians of domesticity and morality were not suited to the world of politics.

Many years after women were eventually granted the right to vote the perception that women are the 'gentler' sex still prevails. Discussions on the role of women in combat and the recent urging by the United Nations to give women a greater role in peace delegations are both often argued on this basis, rather than on physical capability or equal rights, which may be equally gendered, but less confrontational reasons.

Gender issues surrounding nations and nationalism are perhaps most clearly articulated at times of war, when bodies become the sites of conflict. The masculinization of war and citizenship have been recognised as being intimately connected, with the exclusion of women from the military crystallising in their exclusion from citizenship. Britain decided in 1867 that men were entitled to vote because they had fought for the beliefs of their country. Women, who were denied the right to make that choice, were also denied the right to vote.

But gender also has other bearings in times of conflict. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis theorised that women are crucial to national processes as biological, cultural, ethnic and symbolic reproducers of the nation. While it can be argued that women continue to bear and reproduce national traditions, it cannot be assumed that women's interests are not represented in nationalistic movements. Tamil women for example have redefined their roles in society as a consequence of the Tamil nationalist movement. Traditionally a very conservative community, the war has forced the Tamil people to re-examine the role of their women.

From the early stages of the agitation for the recogni-

tion of their rights, Tamil women supported the actions of their men. Heading into the 1970s, the women were at the forefront of the Satyagraha campaigns. As the form of struggle transformed from silent protests to non-violent agitation and on to violence, the women were only steps behind the men - and not for want of trying to be alongside.

However it was the descent into violence that saw the greatest change in the role of Tamil women. Unlike the British women, Tamil women were given the option of joining the war effort, and many chose to do so. From being viewed solely as wives, sisters or mothers, women have begun to carve a name for themselves as warriors.

In the West, where women work outside the home on a regular basis, the role of women in combat is still a contentious one. For a society that until the world war believed that women were the homemakers (although it was somewhat acceptable for those with professional qualifications to work as well) to accept - or be forced to accept - women as military leaders is a considerable leap. That the Tamils have taken that step can be seen as considerable progress on the road to gender equality - provided these changes persist even after the war is over.

Other women have also made tremendous gains in the course of nationalistic movements. Many young women of Nepal have moved from traditional homemakers to arms bearing warriors in the Communist struggle while the women of Guatemala fought alongside their men in the Central American country's revolutionary war. While many Guatemalan women went back to the homes after the war, they proved their capabilities outside these and can do so again.

The role of women in society has also shaped the course of nations. For example, the emergence and evolution of Egyptian feminism was an integral part of the history of the nation and was vital to the founding of the state. Egyptian women assumed agency and in so doing subverted and refigured the conventional patriarchal order. The Egyptian feminist movement advanced the nationalist cause while working within the parameters of religious (Islamic) precepts.

A gendered view allows for another lens through which to view nationalism. It can provide a different perspective on nationalistic struggles. But to view nationalism without factoring in the gendered view is to ignore a significant factor that contributes to nationalistic sentiment.

The role of women in nationalism, whether it is as nurturers, citizens or combatants, remains, as through the history of feminist struggle, a vital one.

# Memories of six days of terror

Tamils remember the events of 'Black July' eight years ago, when state organised rioting throughout the island of Sri Lanka claimed 3,000 Tamil lives.

IN JULY 1983, a pogrom was carried out against the Tamils of Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese. Over 3,000 Tamil people were killed in over 6 days between July 24-30. Most Tamil owned properties in Colombo were razed to the ground, and the entire Tamil community fled to the north and abroad. The pogrom of July 1983 is referred to by the Tamil people as their 'Holocaust'.

Contrary to popular belief, the Holocaust was not a spontaneous reaction to the ambush of a Sri Lankan army patrol by Tamil guerrillas. The International Commission of Jurists said "the suspicion is strong that this organised attack on the Tamil population was planned and controlled by extremist elements in the government UNP party, and that the killing of the 13 soldiers by [Tamil guerrillas] served as the occasion for putting the plan into operation. The reports go so far as to allege that a member of the Cabinet was actively involved in planning these attacks".

In early July 1983, troop levels in Colombo were increased. On July 19, 1993, the movement of (foreign) journalists was abruptly limited and strict press censorship imposed throughout the island. All the factors necessary for a crackdown were in place. However, on July 23, Tamil guerrillas carried out their first major attack on the Sri Lankan security forces, killing an unprecedented 13 Sinhalese soldiers.

The attack stunned the Sinhala populace, but the government saw the incident as an opportunity to mobilise support amongst the Sinhala people and a state funeral planned. On July 24, the bodies of the dead soldiers were taken to Colombo. Attacks on Tamils started, almost on cue, in several parts of Colombo on the night of July 24. There was widespread violence in Jaffna, where over 50 Tamils were killed, and elsewhere on the island.

Despite the increased possibility of world condemnation, the Sri Lankan government remained silent. Sri Lankan army lorries moved gangs of armed Sinhalese from district to district in Colombo. As they arrived in each area, the attackers were given the local voting lists. Tamil addresses were systematically targeted.

London's Daily Telegraph (July 26) wrote: "Motorists were dragged from their cars to be stoned and beaten with sticks. Others



An icon of the Pogrom

were cut down with knives and axes. Mobs of Sinhala youth rampaged through the streets, ransacking homes, shops and offices, looting them and setting them ablaze, as they sought out members of the Tamil ethnic minority. A mob attacked a Tamil cyclist riding near Colombo's eye hospital. The cyclist was hauled from his bike, drenched with petrol and set alight. As he ran screaming down the street, the mob set on him again and hacked him down with jungle knives."

In his book, 'The tragedy of Sri Lanka', William McGowan wrote: "While travelling on a bus when a mob laid siege to it, passengers watched as a small boy was hacked 'to limb-less death'. The bus driver was ordered to give up a Tamil. He pointed out a woman who was desperately trying to erase the mark on her forehead - called a kum-kum - as the thugs bore down on her. The woman's belly was ripped open with a broken bottle and she was immolated as people clap-ped and danced. In another incident, two sisters, one eighteen and one eleven, were decapitated and raped, the latter 'until there was nothing left to violate and no volunteers could come forward,' after which she was burned. While all this was going on, a line of Buddhist monks app-eared, arms flailing, their voices raised in a delirium of exhortation, summoning the Sinhalese to put all Tamils to death."

The London Daily Express (July 29) wrote: "Mrs. Eli Skarstein, back home in Stavanger, Norway, told how she and her 15 year old daughter, Kristen witnessed one massacre. 'A mini bus full of Tamils were forced to stop in front of us in Colombo' she said. A Sinhalese mob poured petrol over the bus and set it on fire. They blocked the car door and prevented the Tamils from leaving the vehicle. 'Hundreds of spectators watched as about 20 Tamils were burnt to death' Mrs. Skarstein added: 'We can't believe the official casualty

figures. Hundreds, may be thousands, must have been killed already. The police force did nothing to stop the mobs. There was no mercy. Women, children and old people were slaughtered. Police did nothing to stop the genocide."

Tamil detainees held in Colombo jails, mostly for political 'crimes' (which usually meant lobbying for a separate state), were killed jointly by about 300-400 Sinhalese prisoners and their guards. In a perversion of religious belief, the blood of the victims were reportedly offered to the statue of Buddha in the prison's shrine.

Tamil owned businesses and homes were systematically looted and then torched. Sinhalese households attacked neighbouring Tamil homes. Tamil patients in Colombo hospitals were murdered, often by Sinhalese hospital attendants. In some cases, Sinhalese residents, horrified at the violence, shielded and hid Tamil friends. However, a significant proportion of the Sinhala populace joined in the violence, which clearly had the backing of the Sri Lankan army and government.

Tamils attempted to flee the city, in whatever transport they could obtain. As the days progressed, some Tamils emerged from hiding and ran the gauntlet of rioters. As the last busload of Tamils raced out of Colombo, it drove past a wall on which the heads of dozens of murdered Tamils had been arranged.

Despite condemnation and protests from all over the world, the violence continued for several days as the mobs searched Colombo for Tamils who had escaped the initial bloodletting. On July 28, President Jayawardene, in his first public speech since the violence began, did not condemn the violence, but sought to placate the Sinhalese and virtually justified the mass killings as the 'expected reaction of the Sinhala masses to Tamil demands for a separate state'.

The President called an end to the violence on the sixth day. By then, an estimated 3,000 Tamils had died (the Sri Lankan government said only 400 died), and the Tamil population of the island was in shock. Over 200,000 Tamils were displaced. 18,000 Tamil homes and 5000 businesses were destroyed, with economic losses total-ling \$300 million. There has been no compensation by the government. Sri Lankan governments have consistently rejected demands for a proper judicial investigation by international organisations.



Patriot: A female Eritrean fighter relaxes amidst an offensive. Photo Jenny Mathews

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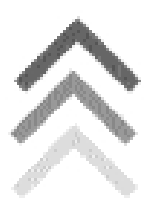
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