The Productive Capacity of the Sri Lanka War

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Abstract

Traditional understandings of war overlook its productive capacity. To remedy this neglect this paper focuses on the case of the Sri Lanka war and critically engages with the war's generative and transformative power. After theoretical explanation of how war has productive capacities, the article develops a historical, societal and global analysis of the Sri Lanka war in order to trace back the creation of ethnic tension, to show how war is embedded in the societies and to demonstrate the war's global effects. It argues that the war in Sri Lanka produced both Sinhalese and Tamil identity as well as the latter's gendered character and spatial distribution. This exploration of identity creation as a by-product of war, will contribute to the critical war studies literature.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Sri Lanka war, Tamil women, Diaspora, War and Society

Conventional understanding of war mainly focuses on its destructiveness. However, such a conception of war undermines its complexity and overlooks its ability to produce and connect in consequential ways. Through critical analysis of the Sri Lanka war, this paper argues that besides destroying, the war progressively produced both Sinhalese and Tamil identity as well as the latter's gendered character and spatial distribution. Moreover, to make the analysis more systematic the paper takes a historical, societal and global perspective. Starting with the brief theoretical debate on the ways war can produce, the paper will firstly trace back the process of creation and polarisation of ethnic identities. Secondly, and relatedly, it will explore the changing role of women in the military to demonstrate identity formation of women. Lastly it will locate the Sri Lanka war in a global context, demonstrating the production of a Tamil diaspora. This paper aims to contribute to the literature by primarily challenging the conventional understanding of war and showing how new identities can be outcomes of war.

War produces and connects

Besides being destructive war is also generative, transformative and interactive. However, these characteristics of war are overlooked, as critical theory of war has relegated its effects on culture, society and politics into only a few lines. Redressing the ontology of war, Barkawi (2004) argues that there is a reciprocal relationship between war and society, as wars are formed by the societies in which they occur and that societies, in turn, are shaped by the wars. In other words, the character of war takes its shape due to the larger social context, thus accordingly the conducted war "reacts back on its social context" (ibid: 162). Moreover, Nordin and Öberg (2015) agree that understanding war as a reciprocal phenomenon enables to track the ways in which it produces identities, spaces, discourses and exchanges among them.

Historical perspective

To trace how war, state and society in Sri Lanka were mutually constitutive, taking a historical approach is necessary. Even though the actual war in Sri Lanka started after 1983, the conflict retrojects to British colonisation. This was followed by the political and economic favouritism of Sinhalese after independence and essentialization of ethnicities which produced antithetical Tamil and Sinhalese identity. Bose (1994) and Herring (2001) agree that the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil is not primordial as their ethnic identities were shaped and produced through a process of identity construction dating back to the colonial period where colonisers united the three regional sovereignties on the island under single administration. Such administrative union led to an unequal development of the capital city, Colombo, as well as a reorganisation of power in the government based on ethnic lines (ibid). However, due to the making of a post-independence unified administration in 1948, a territorialized logic emerged, in which Sinhala-Buddhist were regarded as majorities and thus the other ethnicities as minorities (Nadarajah 2018). Essentially, this led to the rise of a Sinhalese majoritarian nationalism. Yet, at the same time, it also fuelled the Tamil demands for federalism and autonomy which manifested itself through massive protests (ibid).

The economic and political pressure on the Tamils imposed through the state-led reforms resulted in dogmatisation of identity and produced a "territorialized and equally modern rationality of Tamil resistance" (Rampton and Nadarajah, 2017: 455). Indeed, the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act and Indo Ceylon Agreement of 1964 disenfranchised Indian Tamils from political life (World Bank, 2003); the adoption of 1956 "Sinhalese Only Bill" rejected the parity of Tamil language; standardisation policies of 1971 further limited the education opportunities of Tamil groups, and lastly the 1972 constitution advocating Sinhalese language and Buddhist religion resulted in overt Tamil claims of an independent state (Bose, 1994). Moreover, the Mahaweli project, non-utilisation of foreign aid in the Jaffna region and imposed limitations in public sector admission of Tamils, created economic insecurity and inequality in the system, necessitating the Tamils to secure their identity (Herring, 2001).

Subsequently, the essentialisation of ethnic identity, such as seeing "Tamil as a whole and Sinhalese as a whole" ascribed collective characteristics to individuals and heated the ethnic tensions, which was manifested by revolts in 1956, 1958, 1961 and 1977 (Herring, 2001: 161). Indeed, the ethno-political identities were sharpened even more when the state adopted the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act, attaching an idea of 'terrorism' to the perception of the Tamils (Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah, 2005). This vital change manifested itself in youth radicalisation, and after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) assassination of 14 Sinhalese in 1983 and anti-Tamil pogrom, the context of the Tamil Sinhalese conflict shifted from "cold war to a civil war" (Nithiyandam, 2000: 303). Consequently, the identities were polarised to such an extent that by the time of the outbreak of war, the army consisted of 300,000 Sinhalese soliders and the institutional organisation of the military was formed on the basis of a Buddhist 'just war' ideology (Rampton and Nadarajah, 2017: 458). In essence, the historical context of the Sri Lanka war reinstates Barkawi's (2004) war and society approach: the conflict, and later the war, in Sri Lanka took its shape due to the alienating hierarchical order in society, which was imposed by the state mainly through economic and political pressures. Thus, the war in turn produced and sharpened the conscious Tamil and Sinhalese identities.

Societal perspective

War can never be "fully exterior to an order war itself creates" (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011: 135). Hence, to thoroughly understand the productive and connective effect of the war, there is a need to shift the debate from the conceptual notion of 'war and society' to 'war in society' (ibid: 139). Indeed, with regards to the case of Sri Lanka, one can argue that through the active military engagement of women in LTTE, the war in the Tamil society produced a new ideas of gender roles among the Tamils. Thus, as war produces new power-geometries in societies, different social categories may be challenged or strengthened (Brun, 2005).

 While the women's role in the traditional Tamil society (before the armed conflict) was restricted to the cultural norms of "addaccam" (meaning modesty and silence) and "odducam" (meaning poise and restraint) (Alexander 2014: 10), the role of women changed as an effect of the war. As Tamil women started having income-generating jobs and participating in the military force during the war, the position of women was transformed in social, gender, class and cast relations (Brun 2005). Thus, from 1980s LTTE started enlisting women in its units, which, due to the mass female mobilisation, accounting for more than 30% of LTTE's force, led to the creation of its women branch in 1983 (Alison, 2003). Therefore, while the Women's Front of LTTE initially trained females for battle, it later started fighting against all forms of discrimination, such as the dowry and caste system, in order to guarantee the political, social and economic equality of Tamil women and propagate the female emancipation as part of the Tamil struggle towards an autonomous state (Alison, 2011; Alexander, 2014). Indeed, questioning whether or not female empowerment was an ambition of LTTE, the movement received several criticisms from Sixta (2008) and human rights advocate, Radhika Coomaraswamy, (cited in Alison, 2003: 46) who saw the women of LTTE as victims of a nationalist patriarchal plan and "cogs in the wheel" who are implementers but not decision makers. However, the fact that in the early 2000s, five of the twelve members of LTTE's central committee were women. The movement's Women's Wing took part in ceasefire negotiations held in Geneva in 2002 and was chosen as a prominent member of the Sub-Committee for Gender Issues. These examples demonstrate that whether voluntarily or not, LTTE challenged the traditional gendered relations in the society (Dissanayake, 2017). Moreover, the election of a female Sri Lanka Tamil MP, Vijayakala Maheswaran, in the 2010 parliamentary elections, further strengthens this point (Alison, 2011). To sum up, analysing the Sri Lanka war through a 'war in society' concept challenges two overlooked issues. Firstly, it understands that militaries are not outside the society but are embedded in it, thus, the forms of organisation in militaries both reflect and shape the social relations around them. Secondly, it demonstrates that the Sri Lankan war did not only transform the society, but that it also produced a place for women in the public arena.

Global perspective

While analysing the war from a societal and historical perspective opens its interior dynamics, ignoring the role of international actors in Sri Lanka and relegating the war into an internal conflict could result in a limited analysis and overlook its wider effects. Thus, by taking a global perspective and locating the Sri Lanka war in a transnational security debate, one can argue that this local/global war produced a Tamil diaspora as a social and political formation. Today Tamil diaspora accounts for over one million people living mainly in North America, Europe, and India (Sriskandarajah, 2005). However, according to Fuglerud (2001), Tamil migration dates back to the pre-colonial era. Nevertheless, it particularly increased after the breakout of the war. Following

India's refusal to accept refugees in the 1990s the migrants consequently settled in mainly European countries, forming a diaspora network.

However, being in a triadic relationship between host state, the home state and among themselves, diasporas in this local/global war became the targets, channels, and centres for various security procedures (Sriskandarajah, 2005). Although the diaspora members mainly constitute a "diaspora nationalism" (ibid: 495), as pointed out by Laffey and Nadarajah (2012: 404): their power can put them in the position of either "warmongers" or "peacebuilders". Thus, while such a dualism shapes diaspora as hybrid trans-local subjects, it also defines the paradoxical international reaction to it: disciplining through policing, proscriptions and immigration when they are warmongers, but empowering and supporting when they are peacebuilders (ibid). For example, during the Norwegian-led mutual peace processes the Western stance towards the LTTE and the Tamil diaspora was more or less neutral. However, with the failure of the peace talks, LTTE was included in proscribed terrorist organisation lists in the EU, UN, UK, and Canada, subsequently turning the diaspora into warmongers in the eyes of the West (ibid).

According to Vimalarajah and Cheran (2010) being a 'stateless diaspora' and supporting illiberal LTTE, Tamil mobilization was regarded as bringing home conflicts to the host states which threatened their security. As a result, systematic legal restrictions such as limitations on Tamil broadcast, venue arrangements, and social events were enforced. However, such attacks politically and socially mobilised the global Tamils diaspora, and simultaneous Tamil protests took place in different European cities (Laffey and Nadarajah, 2012). Indeed, the 72 day long occupation of Parliament Square in the UK (ibid), the 'Say No to Sri Lanka' and 'No Blood for Panties' campaigns, organisation of hunger strikes, as well as the use of violence, forms demonstrate the organisation and spatial social construction of Tamil identity (International Crisis Group, 2010: 16).

On the other hand, the political formation of a Tamil diaspora emerged when Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, "a non-violent democratic political organization with an aim to be parallel to a government", was founded in 2009 and 2010, with 99% cast votes in a referendum held in Germany, France, Canada and Switzerland favouring the establishment of Tamil Eelam state (ibid: 9). Interestingly, the expansion and formation of diaspora resulted in its cooperation with Western governments on human rights issues subsequently shifting its position from 'warmongers' to 'peacebuilders' after 2010 (Nadarajah, 2018). In essence, the continuity of Tamil diaspora to fight for the Tamil Eelam state, even after the defeat of LTTE demonstrates that the local/global war of Sri Lanka could produce the Tamil identity spatially and form a political and social organisation of the Tamil diaspora.

Conclusion: From war to identity creation

Beyond its destructive power, the Sri Lanka war did at the same time produce and connect. This paper analysed the case of Sri Lanka from three different perspectives- historical, societal and global. Starting from the period of British colonisation, the paper demonstrated how administrative, economic and social policies implemented by the state were isolating Tamils and resulted in the creation of their ethnic consciousness. As a result, through the conflict and war, both the Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil identities got sharpened, this reflected back on the society and further triggered the actual war. Applying the 'war in society' approach to the LTTE military, it becomes evident that the war also produced a new gendered aspect of the Tamil identity and

opened up spaces for women in the society. In fact, through active military engagement of women in LTTE, the war produced new power dynamics in the society. On the other hand, in a global/local war context, the Sri Lanka war also produced the spatial distribution of Tamil identity, namely through the Tamil diaspora as a political and social formation. Lastly, in the current phase of ongoing conflicts, this paper suggests that identity creation as a product of war should be further researched.

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