

Researching Masculinity and Violence in Sri Lankan Politics: Subject Construction as Methodology

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Abstract This article discusses a research methodology study which worked with young men - members of a formerly armed Tamil group in Sri Lanka, now struggling to survive in electoral politics. Study participants had security concerns which made a conventional ethnographic approach problematic. An alternative methodology was needed, offering a contextualised analysis of events that could capture the background, political persuasion and motivations of actors without actually revealing specificities of personal identity and geographic location. The research sought to analyse the context of Tamil militancy, the changing dimensions of Tamil masculinity, and the way in which combat training transformed notions of selfhood and political dissent among young Tamil men. There was an activist element to the project, aiming to open up a discursive space which would enable participants to interrogate their own political praxis in a supportive environment, allowing them to conceive new ways of acting out their political rages. In this, it had partial successes and some failures.

1 Introduction

This article discusses a research methodology framed during a two-year field study funded by the Ford Foundation, Delhi. It is a methodology-in-progress, devised to address the efforts of a formerly armed group in Sri Lanka, now struggling to survive in electoral politics. The aims of the study were manifold, but one important intention was to try and open up a discursive space where participants in the study could interrogate their own political praxis, through a retrospective traversing of key events in their lives.

This kind of discursive space becomes imperative when seen against the peculiar political culture which evolves within 'underground' groups. These groups, by definition, function in conditions of great secrecy. Security concerns become a key preoccupation. Loyalty to the group is seen as more important than the right of the individual to dissent against the authority of group leaders. Efforts by individuals to frame any kind of dissent against the party line or its leadership are construed as disloyalty, even treachery. Consequently, the scope for principled moral critique is diminished.

At the same time, combat training and battlefield experiences tend to harden the activist's body. They widen the range of fighting skills and bodily reflexes he can deploy in the face of physical threat. In the process, he overcomes fear of bodily injury and learns to risk his body in violent encounters. He develops physical courage. Thus a contradiction emerges, where the acquiring of physical courage is not matched by the moral stature to critique leaders' authority. Subject construction for each activist, then, becomes contingent on the extent to which he is able to exert moral authority through political critique as well as display physical courage in specific situations.

This article is in three parts. The first describes the goals and the political backdrop of the study. The next section discusses the methodology deployed and the final section discusses how participants responded to this research methodology.

2 Masculinity, subjectivity and performance in Sinhala and Tamil discourse

The backdrop to the study was a 25-year-old inter-ethnic war between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. By 1983, no less than 20 Tamil militant groups had taken up arms against the Sinhala-dominated regime in Colombo, to demand the secession of the Tamil-speaking regions of the North and East of the island. Less than two years later, the most powerful militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), launched a massive onslaught against other armed groups in a bid to assume total control of the Tamil struggle. Faced with sustained attacks on their camps by the LTTE and the assassination of their cadres, such rival groups eventually found themselves driven into the arms of their erstwhile enemy, the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). Thus, many young Tamil men who had taken up arms to fight for Tamil secession suddenly found themselves labelled as traitors to the Tamil cause and subject to vilification and assassination attempts by the LTTE's infamous killer squads.

This study focused on one of the five key Tamil militant groups which emerged in the 1980s, which I call the People's Liberation Organisation (PLO).¹

Armed struggle is in many societies a specifically gendered practice, a masculine prerogative. Gender identity, argues Butler (1990), is not biologically 'fixed', but is rather a performance, an acting out of roles chosen from one's cultural repertoire. Here, performance is tied to the body, and refers to modes of embodiment, bodily display, demeanour, postures, agility and versatility.

In this formulation, men act out culturally framed roles of father, son, lover, scholar or warrior in their daily lives, constantly shifting subject positions from one to another. Each role involves a culture-specific mix of traits, such as courage, authority, aggression, rationality or love. Taking this performative approach implies that acts of violence cannot simply be relegated to the realm of the irrational. Since no act, however transgressive it may seem, is outside culture, the role of the anthropologist-as-researcher is to decipher the role which the practitioner is attempting to act out, and render it intelligible.

In subsequent writings, Butler argues that performativity is not a single act but is always a re-enactment of a set of cultural norms, roles or practices, which are transformed through their re-enactment (Butler 1993). Thus, she sees each enactment as a new version of the original norm or practice. This places individual agency within the framework of cultural norms. But this element of agency may entail alterations and distortions of the conventional cultural practices.

Extending Butler's approach to the ex-militant group studied, it could be argued that the repertoire of gender-roles shaped by Tamil convention instilled in early childhood are now extended through combat training. This re-enactment yields new codes of masculinity such as risking the body (de Silva 2005). Combat sequences are subsequently acted out across new terrain, such as the battlefield. Simultaneously, the possibility of enacting such gender roles within the parameters of electoral politics may be foreclosed. Still, such newly acquired skills are open to further transformation in the future, through critical revisitings, self-analysis and collective discussions.

Local practices of masculinity in South Asia were reconfigured by empire. In particular, British colonialism brought with it Victorian notions of manliness built on post-enlightenment concepts of subjectivity (de Silva 2005). It was this subjectivity – which stressed decisiveness, autonomy and assertiveness in social dealings – that the Victorian missionary enterprise strove to instil in the colonised.

Still, the colonies were not a blank page, but terrain already strewn with the debris of former social, cultural and institutional forms and practices. Thus, imported versions of masculinity were confronted everywhere with local notions of selfhood and subjectivity.

Sinhala cultural practices were far removed from the assertiveness of post-enlightenment norms. Rather, they turned on the cultural motif of *lajja* (deference or shame) which transpires when one is subject to public ridicule (de Silva 2005). This creates a sense of *lajja-bhaya*, a fear of being publicly shamed, expressed by the postures of bodily deference that offspring in Sinhala society conventionally assume towards parents and authority figures. While deference is to a code of seniority, senior members will also defer

endlessly to others defined as somehow more senior, even as they receive the deference of those construed as junior.

But most of all, against the vigorous, athletic physique of the Victorian gentleman, feudal Sinhala masculinity was marked by a composed body and sedate bearing. Consequently, in Sinhala discourse, the warrior practice of risking the body – so integral to the gentlemanly code – remained the idiom of minions and underlings who bloodied their hands (de Silva 2005). Such a disparagement of the vigorous body as unseemly or undignified is even more manifest in Tamil discourse. Thus, while the confident demeanour of the Victorian gentlemen was admired and emulated, the *modus operandi* of risking the body spawned deep ambiguities.

Consequently, the research goals of the study involved exploring the discursive trajectories which created the conditions allowing Tamil militancy to grow from a marginal protest to a mass phenomenon. It traced the ways in which the sedate, desk-bound figure of the schoolteacher or civil servant who epitomised hegemonic masculinity in Tamil society, gave way to the militant, whose practice involved bodily risk and violence. Finally, it looked at the way in which combat training transformed notions of selfhood and political dissent among young Tamil men.

There was an activist element to the project, aiming to open up a discursive space which would enable participants to interrogate their own political praxis in a supportive environment. This would allow them to conceive new ways of acting out their political rages.

A word about combat training and combat experience. This particular militant group had a policy of extended guerrilla struggle, involving extensive combat preparedness over a long period of time. It was against engaging in adventurist operations such as landmine or bomb attacks against army or police units. One consequence of this strategy was that large numbers of young men – at one time as many as 15,000 – were kept within training camps for as long as three or four years, usually longer than they spent on the battlefield. Combat training, rather than combat itself, was their main formative experience. Combat training prepared militants to fight the Sinhalese armed forces.

But by the time they actually engaged in battle, they were in fact fighting their former brothers-in-militancy, the LTTE. Thus, actual military combat was a time of guilt, betrayal, anxieties and lost illusions, when they found themselves killing fellow Tamil militants with whom they had no personal quarrel.

3 Methodology

Being an anthropologist by training, my first instinct was to explore these issues via ethnographic fieldwork. But it soon became evident that such an approach would not be appropriate. Study participants had serious security concerns which made a conventional ethnographic approach problematic. An alternative methodology was needed, one which offered a contextualised analysis of events that could capture the background, political persuasion and motivations of actors without actually revealing specificities of personal identity and geographic location.

We decided to collect life narratives from study participants, in order to track their progress from ‘victims’ to ‘practitioners of violence’, and to trace their trajectory from studious schoolboys to armed militants, and again into electoral activists. We spoke to 11 PLO activists between March 2006 and May 2007, at one of their ‘political offices’ located in the Colombo district.

The biggest challenge we faced was translation. My first language is Sinhala, and although I am of mixed ethnicity, I felt my Tamil-speaking skills were rather basic for the kind of discussions envisaged in this study. Tamil translators were almost impossible to engage for a project such as this, due to a generalised perception within the Tamil-speaking community that translators would be personally targeted by the LTTE. We had the great fortune to find a retired social worker to work as a translator in the initial phases, but subsequently no other translators were found. In the end, some of the participants translated for each other. This resulted in many complex individual and group narratives, none of which could be taped because of the security anxieties of the narrators. This required detailed note-taking, sometimes involving many versions of the same event by the same narrator and at others diverse versions of the same event by different narrators, in order to ensure that I had a sufficient grasp of events.

Much recent work has been done on the role of narrative in ethnographic writings (Portelli 1981; Watson and Watson-Frank 1985; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988). Narrative, says Ricoeur (1988), helps us to structure our social and cultural world. Out of the chaotic minutiae of everyday happenings, we pick particular events as relevant and give them greater weight. This allows us to discern patterns in our lives. But it also implies that we erase, dismiss or forget other events as irrelevant.

Narrative draws on memory, which is never a simple, factual recounting of past events but rather an account of emotional and cognitive experiences of specific events, filtered through cultural metaphor, myth and idiom. It allows both the listener and speaker to make sense of the past event, to decide who was the victim, perpetrator or spectator. Memory allows the speaker to construct a personal narrative, which is at the same time a social commentary on the narrator's life and times.

Memory is an active process by which meanings are created, rather than a passive reservoir of facts (Portelli 1981). Consequently, the act of remembering is also a construction of subjectivity: it involves assuming specific kinds of masculine or feminine subject positions. What we choose to remember and forget becomes a function of the social, political and cultural discourses we invest in at a given moment.

Memory is also conditioned by the listener, who asks questions which channel the narrator's recollections along a particular route. The listener's face, mien and gender may also effect specific emotions and reflections which further condition memory. The gaps and silences in the story-telling could perhaps themselves be a response to the presence of the listener. In any case, they represent efforts at subject-construction by the speaker which are conditioned by the presence of the listener. Such silences may involve refusing the experiences or the imprecations of specific actors in favour of others.

Thus, one of the main aims of the project was to use the presence of the researcher to motivate narrators to assess how they had changed as individuals over the years, in which realms they felt they had grown and what gifts and skills they had developed through their life experiences.

Thus, I constantly asked narrators to reflect on how they perceived the event narrated to have changed them as individuals; how they had learnt to form their political positions and articulate them – to 'speak'; in a word, how they acquired agency over the years. We also spoke about the ways they felt their growth as people had been stunted or their self-worth reduced because of events over which they had no control, and how they could move on from this point. In many ways then, the narrative became a construction of subjectivity by the speaker.

4 Response of participants

My first step was to approach the present political leader of the PLO and discuss the study goals with him, and request his permission to speak to the 'boys'.² In the first few months we had a series of extended discussions, during which I sketched out exactly what I wanted to do, and he became interested in the research goals of his own accord. I was fortunate in that his was a reflective and analytic political outlook, unencumbered by any desire for personal gain. He was anxious about the political future of his 'boys', and keen that I should engage with them. I assumed he had already explored my political leanings, educational and family background from a security point of view, all of which I was perfectly happy for him to do. Once he had approved the project, other members were totally accepting of my presence, although rather quiet at the start. At this point, the cultural motif of deference-to-seniority worked very much in my favour, and legitimised my position.

Everyone at the PLO office seemed to have been detailed their specified tasks, and a hierarchical division of labour was evident. Those who had better English were clearly in a more commanding position. Inter-personal relations were marked by deference to senior cadres, but here, deference assumed the form of almost a courtesy, in a context where loud-voiced and aggressive conduct was routinely deplored as 'not Tamil'.

One discussion which surfaced early on concerned the shifting power relations between the militants and elected Tamil representatives, which underwent a dramatic change in the late-1980s. This shift created a space for the political criticism of socially established Tamil personages, which previously Tamil cultural

mores enabled no room to articulate. Crucially for the study, it began to fracture the myth that political critique of the Tamil establishment was in itself an act of disloyalty.

It seemed to me that over the months, the narratives of study participants grew more articulate and analytic. In particular, in the accounts of the time spent in various training camps in South India, participants seemed to recover a more decisive and vigorous sense of self. This was also a time of discoveries; some participants found out for the first time that they had been in neighbouring camps at the same time or in consecutive years, but had not met each other. They discovered friends in common and the names of comrades who had died, all of which created new bonds. Although combat training was clearly gruelling, in retrospect, it seemed to be viewed with rose-tinted glasses. Activists sometimes went into exuberant performances of combat manoeuvres for my benefit. And in the reiterating of these accounts, something of the schoolboy enthusiasm with which they had embarked on the militant project seemed to be recaptured. Learning to risk the body often scarred and marked their torsos, but these became markers of achievement. At that point in their lives, anything and everything seemed possible, they appeared to have felt they were very much in control of their bodies and their destiny.

‘What did you learn from this experience?’ I asked, after listening to an extended description of the different kinds of combat training he had engaged in. ‘I learnt that everything can be climbed’, he said, ‘everything can be scaled – everything, fire or water, can be negotiated, if you go about it correctly’ (Interview, July 2006).

This control was an illusion, dispelled as the political climate changed. By 1987, LTTE-PLO relations were so bad that the PLO leadership decided to bring in their India-based combat units to Sri Lanka to confront the LTTE. In the military encounters which followed, the newly trained combatants at times found themselves killing ex-PLO activists who had recently joined the LTTE’s ranks.

Some participants seemed able to view such happenings with the detachment of time. Others recalled the sense of dread and helplessness which

consumed them at the torture and deaths of people they knew whose only crime was to join a rival militant group at the wrong political moment. Some seemed to struggle with feelings of complicity and culpability. One participant said:

I was too young to do anything about [the death of] Kumar. Nobody would have listened to me, I was only 16 years old. They took him away and then they killed him. He was from the same village as me. We played together when we were about 10 years old.

(Interview, July 2006)

This narrator realises that although his body was trained to be the ultimate fighting machine, trained to kill, he was not morally free to decide who to kill. Nonetheless, political dissent does not occur to him.

During this time, many participants’ families saw terrible suffering; those who had not been killed were displaced. This bleak situation created a generalised feeling of desolation, in which comrades came to represent all sources of family and kin, creating deep feelings of loyalty. Another participant said:

At this time I heard that my father had died, my brother was in prison and my mother and young sisters were in refugee camps. Though I had a gun, I could not help them. Somehow, I felt that my comrades were all I had left in the world.

(Interview, August 2006)

The culture of deference instilled into the participants spawned a profound devotion to the then PLO leader. A political analyst (Narayan Swamy 2003) observes that he was subject to incessant assassination bids, and became so consumed by the fear that the PLO would be infiltrated by LTTE that gradually all internal freedoms were vitiated. A climate fraught with secrecy evolved, with leaders demanding deference and unquestioning loyalty. Dissent became defined as treachery, leading to mass purges and other excesses. In the early months, the intense group loyalties together with the uncritical commitment to the ex-leader made it problematic for participants to formulate criticisms of the PLO leadership, past or present.

Consequently, there were many silences. One such was the subject of the debilitating purges of the late 1980s. Over time however, fragments of

these events began to surface in some narratives. No activist would openly denounce any of the PLO leaders. But over the months, one by one, activists began pointing out that it was the LTTE's assassination attempts which transformed the PLO's leader, making him unable to trust anyone. On one occasion, a participant commented that although I may describe the ex-leader as a 'blood-thirsty thug' – which I had not – he was in fact a lot less repressive than the leaders of other militant groups. This statement seemed to suggest that the participant accepted the blood-stained record of his leader as problematic.

Other narratives also at first presented the leadership planning as 'correct', and the purges as 'necessary'. But over the months sometimes the storyline shifted. The issue of the lack of dissent against leadership excesses was initially justified by the security situation. Later, narratives changed slightly and it was constantly pointed out that dealings within the PLO were more liberal than within the LTTE. Finally, it was argued that if not for the fact that they were so viciously targeted by the LTTE, they would have been more empowered to take a stand against leadership decisions.

The most difficult phase for participants was following the leadership decision to enter into democratic politics and work with the SLA. The PLO was deployed to act as informers for the SLA, tasked with identifying LTTE infiltrators who attached themselves to families of fleeing refugees. The PLO manned checkpoints at border crossings to process this stream of refugees. And as many human rights groups complained, they often acted out their social angers by terrorising these hapless victims and extorting crippling 'taxes' from them.

Questions on this phase of their political history again met with initial silence. Later, some narratives emerged. One participant observed:

These boys were highly trained. They were geared up for action, and suddenly, there was no enemy. The LTTE were safely behind their frontline. All they saw were refugees. Soon, all the refugees began to look like LTTE. It was a terrible time.

(Interview, December 2006)

Others responded to my questions about extortion from the public by speaking of the

early 1980s, when the PLO criticised the LTTE's extortionist practices in Jaffna. Narratives described how PLO had organised groups of small traders and businessmen to resist LTTE 'taxes'. Here, the very focus on their own best practice in helping the community to resist the LTTE's extortions seemed to constitute an oblique critique of their own worst practice in the early 1990s. Others attempted to analyse the cultural idiom behind acts of extortion, arguing that they built on the traditional practice of troupes of young men going round villages collecting money and provisions for temple festivals. In the early years, militancy seemed to acquire the moral overtones of such a collective enterprise. The traditional practice of collecting for a religious end deteriorated into extortion rackets.

In subsequent years, the liberation of some Tamil-speaking areas from the LTTE by the SLA and subsequent elections in these areas allowed some senior PLO cadres to enter parliament. But it was the local government elections of January 1998, which enabled more young PLO activists to come forward for nomination. Some embraced this opportunity. Subsequently, they turned all their energies into rebuilding the shattered political infrastructure of the Vavuniya district. Others however, chose to deploy their combat skills to capture office by pre-empting the electoral participation of rival political groups. This kind of electoral malpractice was rife, ranging from the outright assassination of candidates, to attacking rival groups putting up posters, to intimidating voters at electoral meetings and polling-booths.

Once learnt therefore, the strategy of risking the body to intimidate opponents was hard to abandon, particularly when it seemed to offer easy political dividends. Against this, no activist who participated in the study attempted to defend such methods. In fact, the tendency was to maintain that it was 'other groups' which initiated armed violence and to imply that they were the victims. In the context of an ongoing war, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect the conduct of electoral democracy to remain untouched by violence.

In February 2002, the Sri Lankan government entered into a ceasefire with the LTTE. One condition of this arrangement was that ex-Tamil

militant factions, such as the PLO would be forcibly disarmed. The Sri Lankan government proceeded to implement this, and the LTTE responded by unleashing its assassins. By the end of 2007, up to 30 PLO activists and former activists had been killed. Many former activists had once again had to leave their families and take refuge in the political offices, where the SLA provided security. Once again, a climate of besiegement prevails, and the political options open to PLO activists remain bleak.

5 Concluding comments

This turned out to be a two-way research process. In order to engage in such a methodology on such a subject matter, I found myself – as a mixed-ethnicity female researcher – having to open up to interrogation by research participants as much as they had to open themselves up to me.

The study attempted to open up a discursive space which would allow participants to reconstruct themselves as new subjects. In this, it had partial successes and some failures. My expectation at the outset of the research was that exploring combat training and battlefield experience would provide new depths to notions of subject identity and political agency among activists. Feldman (1991) argues that narratives recounted in retrospect at times allow the speaker to recover agency lost at moments of subjection to intense pain or torture which may literally deprive the narrator of powers of speech. I therefore expected that the research participants would offer narratives that plotted the trajectory of their political evolution and development of subjects in retrospect. At the very least, I expected that they would be able to assess their achievements, review past failures, and perhaps learn from them. But the methodology established that subject construction is not a linear process, but open to frequent reversals. The subject grows, and at moments of hardship and misfortune, sometimes loses himself and somehow begins to construct himself anew.

In retrospect, I would argue that the PLO's political project was premised upon a basic contradiction. On the one hand, it was built on the need to act out dissent against both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE. Combat training equipped them to do this. On the other, it reinforced instilled notions of deference to

elders, which remains an inherent aspect of Tamil masculine practice. Activists were further constrained by the fact that their personal security was contingent first on efficacy of the PLO's armed wing, and later on its leader's success in extracting protection from the Sri Lankan state. Political education classes, which aimed to formulate dissent against the injustices of the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan state against the Tamil people, did not incite dissent against the PLO's party line. All of these factors precluded the possibility of dissenting. Physical courage, it seemed, could be learnt, but moral integrity appeared to be more elusive. Remaking themselves as subjects, by definition, entailed transcending this instilled deference and interrogating the excesses of their own leaders, and by extension, themselves.

Over the months, cadres were at times able to develop criticisms of the group's leaders and policies, which they could not articulate previously, although this in no way diminished their apparent loyalty to the group. There is of course still a tendency to attribute all policy and leadership failures to the LTTE's fratricidal hatred. But the failure of PLO activists to dissent against internal purges or at least support those who did rather than acquiesce to their being labelled 'traitors' did contribute to the terrible haemorrhages of the past two decades. And for this the LTTE can hardly be blamed.

In any re-assessment of the political practice of PLO activists, it is possible to say that for some activists, democratic politics, as much as armed struggle, seemed to have provided a stage for the acting out of violent dissent against all comers. But for others, it offered a space to engage in energetic political activity on behalf of the disempowered. And in the end, both kinds of political narrative had to justify their positions to each other within the frame of the research project. Best practice is set against worst practice, in a situation where before it was not possible to critique a worst practice without being accused of betraying the group. This conversation is not yet resolved. Still, the remaking of the self is a long journey and an open-ended one. It would be presumptuous for any researcher to attempt to predict where it would end. In the end, all one can do is open up a discursive space.

Notes

1 This is a pseudonym which I deploy in deference to the security anxieties of study participants; all individuals have also been anonymised. I am profoundly indebted to the study participants for their courtesy in speaking to me, and for their hospitality.

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2 Initially, all militant groups were dubbed 'the boys', which became an affectionate label, but also underscored their subordinate position in the Tamil scheme of things.