

Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?

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Suicide Cadres within the LTTE

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is a secular separatist terrorist organization in Sri Lanka whose goal is the establishment of an independent state of Tamil Eelam. Often considered the most ruthless terrorist organization in the world, the LTTE has used lethal force indiscriminately, and has in fact killed more Tamils (including Tamil politicians and leaders and members of other militant groups) than Sinhalese or the military. The organization has a centralized command structure under the direction of the national leader, Vellupullai Prabhakaran, and encompasses various operational/service wings and units. Each branch of service is divided by gender and has a secondary gender-based leadership, i.e., women's military leader or women's Sea Tiger leader, so that women cadres are under the operational control of the respective wing/unit leader, but under the administrative control of the women's wing leader.

The LTTE did not pioneer the concept of martyrdom, but it successfully realized its efficacy and pursued it. The Black Tigers, the suicide terrorists within the LTTE, are not grouped in a separate unit, rather are integral members of any particular host LTTE wing/unit. And while all LTTE cadres carry a cyanide capsule to commit suicide rather than be captured,¹ they are not all suicide terrorists. Instead, "Black Tigers"² is a generic designation of all suicide cadres of the LTTE, those who set out intentionally to sacrifice their lives as an integral part of their mission.

The first LTTE suicide operation occurred on July 5, 1987. In an effort to offset heavy losses to the Sri Lankan army offensive, an explosives-filled truck was driven by a Tiger volunteer. Significant here is that circumstances, rather than ideology, dictated the operation; that is, operational exigencies prompted the attack, and indeed, during the period of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) – from July 1987

to March 1990 – there were no suicide bombings.³ The LTTE had not yet adopted suicide terrorism as an organizational ideal and had not yet established the Black Tiger suicide cadres, even though the concept of self-sacrificial attacks and pre-emptive suicide was very much a part of the LTTE ethos.

On July 10, 1990, following the withdrawal of the IPKF and exactly a month after the outbreak of hostilities between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka, a Sea Tiger craft rammed a Sri Lankan naval craft, which then exploded. While there was some ambiguity as to whether this was indeed a Black Tiger suicide attack, there is no doubt that the attack on November 22, 1990 was a Black Tiger suicide attack,⁴ when an explosives-laden truck driven by a male LTTE suicide bomber was used to spearhead the attack on the Mankulam army camp. The adoption of suicide terrorism came at a time when the LTTE, rebounding back from the attrition suffered during the IPKF period and after having decimated other Tamil groups, required a force multiplier to take on the government forces. It was in the post-IPKF period that the term “Black Tiger” came to be used.

A supportive collective environment has been carefully cultivated by the LTTE within the society over a period of more than two decades. In the context of the Black Tigers this is one of the most important motivational imperatives that encourage volunteers to the Black Tigers rather than religion, cause, mystic indoctrination, or individual personality characteristics. The LTTE has no political ideology (other than its separatist-nationalist stance) and is very much a grievance-based organisation. Therefore, the Black Tigers are used to fill this vacuum as a pseudo-ideology of sorts.

As for the cadres themselves, there is little evidence that Black Tigers have any psychological disorders or are mentally imbalanced. Research has revealed that while it may appear to be a rational choice by the individual – to volunteer to die-to-kill – there are many other factors that come into play in the individual’s decision in becoming a suicide terrorist. Societal and peer pressure, social stigma by the dishonor bought about by refusal to become one, the social conditioning of Tamil society, and even economic reasons, all contribute. Self-sacrificial service has become a norm rather than an exceptional act, and is an outward display of commitment to the leader, the organization, and the cause.

More than 316 Black Tigers have been killed over the years, including those who were killed by accidental explosions and training accidents. While the Sri Lankan military hypothesizes that the majority of the Black Sea Tigers are LTTE battle casualties who are seriously disabled, this has yet to be substantiated by empirical

evidence. A summary of the numbers by service and gender provides a picture of the distribution and ratio of male to female. The LTTE's own numbers differ, in that they acknowledge only 273 killed. Of these, 196 were reportedly Black Sea Tigers, of whom fifty-six were said to be female. Of the remaining seventy-seven (i.e., Military Wing Black Tigers), eighteen were said to be female. The LTTE does not acknowledge the Intelligence Wing Black Tiger operations.

Table 1. Black Tiger (BT) Attacks and Casualties, 1987-2006

Service Wing	Number of Black Tiger's Killed				Attacks		
	Male	Female	?	Total	% of TTL	No	% of TTL
Military Wing BTs	58	18	3	79	25.00	30	23.62%
Black Sea Tigers	125	48	0	173	54.75	62	48.82%
Intelligence Wing BTs	44	9	11	64	20.25	35	27.56%
Totals	227	75	14	316		127+	

? Gender has not been confirmed yet

+ Does not include accidental explosions, etc.

A Different Breed?

Women entered Tamil militancy seven years after their male counterparts, and females were involved on the periphery of Tamil militancy until 1983, mostly in supportive logistical roles. The recruitment of women to the LTTE combat units expanded during and after the IPKF period, and was clearly more for military operational needs⁵ than any drive to empower Tamil women. From the women's perspective, ideological, i.e., nationalist, and personal motivations appear to be the stronger imperatives, rather than feminism.⁶ According to Alston, however, the LTTE's female cadres also represent a type of feminist ideology, bolstering the LTTE contention that female emancipation is one of the key benefits it has achieved. While it has been estimated that a third of the combat strength of the LTTE are women,⁷ with the LTTE themselves claiming it is 50 percent, the actual number might be closer to between 20-30 percent.⁸ Approximately 6,000 females cadres are said to have been killed in combat;⁹ although according to Thamilini, the women's leader of their Political Wing, about 5,000 women have been killed out of an estimated 18,000+ LTTE cadres killed during the conflict. Considering that female cadres are invariably either spearheading attacks or are often in the thick of the battle, the casualty count does not necessarily match the 1:3 ratio of female to male cadres.

It has been suggested that most women who join the LTTE do so out of a drive for liberation from traditional Hindu/Tamil cultural restrictions, in other words, female emancipation. This was cited as the reason female LTTE cadres are referred to as “Freedom Birds.” However, the term “Freedom Birds” was more a political and propaganda ploy of the LTTE than an instrument promoting empowerment and emancipation of women.¹⁰ On the ground neither they nor the female suicide cadres were referred to as such, despite erroneous claims to that effect.¹¹ Nor were the female Black Tigers – sometimes referred to in the media as “Black Tigresses” – called the “Birds of Paradise.”¹² The term “Freedom Birds” was propagated by Adele Balasingham¹³ as a generic name synonymous with the female cadres of the LTTE. But this is again part of the spin that the LTTE created, since women’s emancipation is touted both as an achievement and direct result of the LTTE’s liberation struggle (freedom from economic, political and social “bondage”¹⁴ is espoused by the LTTE in its propaganda) in an effort to generate much-needed recruits to the LTTE.

The first successful female Black Tiger operation was the assassination of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on May 21, 1991 in Sriperunpudur, India. Considering the time it initially took to select and train Black Tiger cadres, female cadres may have been selected from the early stages of the adoption of suicide terrorism, around the beginning of 1990. Though there has been much hype about the number of females in the ranks of the Black Tigers, statistically they constitute about 24 percent of the 316 who were killed and identified as being Black Tigers, not including Black Tiger cadres arrested/captured and those known to be Black Tigers who committed suicide by taking cyanide. The number of Black Tiger cadres that neither killed themselves nor were captured is also unknown, and this presents difficulties in interpreting numbers and female representation.

The female suicide bomber in the context of the Tamil Tigers has more than political and organizational underpinnings. The social and cultural backdrop allows a fuller understanding of the phenomenon:

The self-sacrifice of the female bombers is almost an extension of the idea of motherhood in the Tamil culture, [as] in this strongly patriarchal society, Tamil mothers make great sacrifices for their sons on a daily basis; feeding them before themselves or the girl children, serving them and so on. Acting as a human bomb is an understood and accepted offering for a woman who will never be a mother.¹⁵

Interestingly, in the past, there was no evidence to suggest that any of the female Black Tigers were mothers or for that matter married. In the case of male suicide

bombers, married suicide bombers were a rarity, though a few existed. However, in the April 25, 2006 attack on the commander of the Sri Lanka armed forces, it was alleged that the suicide bomber was a pregnant woman.

To de Mel, “the woman suicide bomber refutes conventional notions that women are essentially pacifist and peace-loving by nature.”¹⁶ She questioned whether the woman suicide bomber’s “act of destruction [is] a moment of victimhood or agency? As she explodes, is she both a victim *and* an agent of change? And what does she signify for the struggles for women’s empowerment and the future of the women’s movement?” According to Clara Beyler,

There is a difference between men and women suicide attackers: women consider combat as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them. When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender.¹⁷

Beyler argued that this stems from the fact that a patriarchal structure dominates the societies in which suicide terrorists originate, including Kurd, Tamil, Palestinian, and Arab. However, LTTE women’s cadres were inducted to active combat units in equal fashion as the male cadres, received the same training, and were expected to perform equally well. The LTTE has spared no pains to assert that by this women were emancipated. Therefore, gender equality has already been established and does not require the extreme measure of women dying by suicide bombing missions to prove that they are equal to men. At the same time, Beyler also suggests that “a great number of LTTE women are victims of rape and that becoming a suicide bomber is the only redeeming option left.” Yet while there have been instances of rape, in the known cases the victims did not become Black Tigers or even members of the LTTE. This was a myth advanced by the LTTE itself for disinformation purposes, but finds little corroboration in reality. While alleged rapes of Tamil females by the Sri Lanka armed forces were reported, with some culprits brought before the law and convicted of such crimes, the incidents have been few and far between. The Sri Lanka military, which has been in combat continually for the past three decades, has matured and become more professional, and understands the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the Tamil populace, as much as winning battles in the overall effort in the war against separatist terrorism. During the IPKF period, rape of Sri Lankan Tamil females was rampant. This contributed significantly towards the militarization of Northern and Eastern Tamil females who flocked to the LTTE for both protection

and a chance to hit back at the IPKF. However, there is little evidence to suggest or support the contention that females raped by the IPKF turned to suicide terrorism as a means of revenge or as a redeeming option.

The utilitarian value of female terrorists because of certain particular characteristics, i.e. practicality, coolness, dedication, inner strength, ruthlessness, and single-mindedness, has been posited.¹⁸ A dissenting view contends that “to view the female suicide bomber purely in terms of utilitarian purposes would diminish its true effectiveness. In reality, the female suicide bomber’s covert function is a liberating tool that challenges the inequality and subordinate status of women in Muslim society.”¹⁹ How far this is true in Tamil society, which is conservative and traditionalist and somewhat similar to Muslim society, is a question that must be addressed, keeping in mind the organizational characteristics of the organization that operates the female suicide cadres, the LTTE. The LTTE’s consideration of women’s emancipation has always been subordinate to the overarching goal of Tamil Eelam. Utility is the rationale more than any other motive. The women, particularly in leadership positions, toe the LTTE line and pay lip service to the “struggle for emancipation,” but the reality is different.

There are indeed practical advantages that females have over the males. These include “tactical advantages conferred by their seemingly innocent outward appearance and the universal perception of their non-violent character. These enable them more easily to bypass security measures and (security) personnel less suspicious of their intentions. These considerations must overcome the inhibitions grounded in the norms regarding the status of women in the traditional societies in which they operate.”²⁰ Another aspect in the use of female perpetrators in suicide terrorism that has received little attention is that women’s participation is not just a means, but an end in itself. By portraying the participation of the “weaker” sex as the victim of circumstances (e.g., rape) that drove these women to desperate measures, women are in fact used (or abused) as a justification for suicide terrorism, or at the very least in the case of the LTTE to make Black Tiger operations/suicide terrorism acceptable to the world at large. This disinformation was the main justification put forward by the LTTE for the suicide attack on Rajiv Gandhi, wherein the bomber was portrayed as the victim of an IPKF rape and that the attack was more her personal vendetta rather than a politically motivated assassination. What is less publicized is that on this occasion, there were two female suicide bombers tasked for this target – the second as a standby in reserve. The high level of planning and organizing that was revealed in subsequent investigations clearly refutes this absurd claim.²¹

"Rebel groups deliberately use personal distress to recruit women because theatrical acts of female suicide bombing with overtones of martyrdom and national liberation receive immense media coverage and widespread public attention."²² Additionally, suicide terrorism in general and female suicide bombers in particular are used to increase a group's legitimacy in the eyes of the movement's own supporters. Stern raised concerns that terrorist profiling takes into consideration male perpetrators rather than female and this is a deficiency in the counterterrorist mechanisms of security forces in the West.²³ Terrorists will no doubt use such loopholes to breach security and conduct suicide terrorist attacks.

However, as in the case of the Chechen Black Widows, who have aroused in the Russian security forces and intelligence organizations a heightened awareness, the attention of the Sri Lankan intelligence and security forces over the years has come to address the female suicide bomber threat – particularly in off-battlefield areas, e.g., Colombo and in VIP protection. This has more to do with the reality of suicide terrorism in Sri Lanka than any particular difference attributed to the female of the suicide terrorist species. Therefore, one might add that the advantages previously enjoyed by female suicide cadres in Sri Lanka have been offset to some extent by the increased awareness and attention they have brought upon themselves.

Yet heightened awareness notwithstanding, lack of training tends to permit suicide terrorist attacks anyway, as was demonstrated when a female Black Tiger was taken into custody on suspicion and blew herself up inside a Colombo police station in July 2004. In the attack on the commander of the Sri Lanka armed forces inside the high security army headquarters complex on April 25, 2006, the thirty-four year old suicide bomber, Kanapathipillai Manjula Devi, was allegedly pregnant. Posing as the wife of a soldier on her way to the maternity clinic, this cover story enabled her to gain relatively easy access into the high security complex where the army hospital is located. On at least two previous occasions she had gained access to the complex on the same basis, had not gone to the maternity clinic itself, and used the opportunity to stake out her the target ground. Subsequent investigations in fact confirmed that she was not pregnant and that it was a clever disguise. Despite the lax security, the attack itself failed, and with it the LTTE lost a great deal strategically, including the supportive environment it enjoyed from its own Tamil constituency in the areas they controlled. Women are traditionally seen as "life-givers" rather than "life-takers": the LTTE has turned them into human bombs. Although sending a female to self-destruct as a suicide bomber in itself departs from accepted conventions, against the backdrop of a three decade old ethnic conflict, it was condoned as a sacrifice,

a necessity of circumstances, as an asymmetrical response to the much stronger adversary, the Sri Lanka military. However, the revulsion at the decision of using a “pregnant” woman has had adverse effects on the LTTE, both from the international community as well as from within the Tamil community itself.

According to Ayers,

Terrorist organizations have a choice whether to adopt suicide bombing or restrict themselves to conventional bombing tactics...most suicide bombings occur in “marginal” democracies or authoritarian regimes demonstrating that perhaps repressive societal conditions play a greater role in choosing suicide bombing....The presence of repressive conditions is a necessary condition for terrorist organizations to develop cults of martyrdom capable of successfully recruiting suicide bombers.²⁴

If repressive conditions support the recruiting and perpetuation of suicide terrorism, then the opposite – tolerant conditions – should have the opposite positive effect. During the past decade or so, there has been greater movement by successive governments towards addressing the root causes of the ethnic problem and devolving administrative and political power to the provinces/regions.

The low-key commemoration of Black Tiger Day on July 5, 2006 indicated the LTTE’s appreciation of the reality on the ground, namely, the changing perceptions of its constituency. However, the rhetoric remains intransigent and the importance of retaining the Black Tigers was expounded by the LTTE leadership as “an indispensable weapon in the LTTE arsenal who had played a decisive role.”²⁵ Indeed, the message had just been transmitted nine days prior, when on June 26, 2006, a Black Tiger on an explosive-laden motorbike rode into the car of the third highest ranking army officer, Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Parami Kulathunga,²⁶ killing him and several others, including a civilian on his way to work.

Together with the practical difficulties posed by heightened awareness of the threat posed by female Black Tigers and resulting greater alertness of security forces, and the adverse repercussions of the “pregnant” suicide bomber, the peace dividend of a forbearing atmosphere resulting from almost three years of the ceasefire augers well for the future of countering the LTTE Black Tigress threat. Despite the hype, the numbers clearly indicate that female suicide bombers have not been a significantly greater threat than their male counterparts in Sri Lanka. Nor is there an appreciable difference between the male and female Black Tigers. There are indications that their utility value to the LTTE, as well as the prospects of promulgating the use of female

suicide bombers is waning, despite reports from an arrested alleged female Black Tiger of twelve female suicide cadres who have been tasked to attack VIP targets in the deep south.²⁷ However, suicide attacks from their male counterparts remain an evermore increasing threat in the escalating intensity of the conflict, despite the ceasefire agreement., particularly against high profile targets, i.e., political and military leadership, critical infrastructure, and economically sensitive targets.²⁸

Notes

- 1 LTTE leader Vellupullai Prabhakaran claimed that he conceived of the concept of the cyanide capsule after Sivakumaran, a Tamil militant, took cyanide in 1974 and became the first “martyr.” Ten years later, Prabhakaran institutionalized the practice and included the cyanide capsule among the standard equipment issued to LTTE cadres.
- 2 Contrary to media and current literature. See P. Chalk, “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s (LTTE) International Organization and Operations – A Preliminary Analysis,” Commentary no, 77, a Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Unclassified Publication, 1999.
- 3 This despite that the LTTE threatened the IPKF with suicide attacks. See M. R. N. Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerillas* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2004), pp. 267, 276. Thus, contrary to generally held view and LTTE propaganda (Anton Balasingham, *War and Peace: Armed Struggle and Peace Efforts of Liberation Tigers*, Mitcham: Fairfax Publishing, 2004, p. 97), the July 1987 attack was just a one-time operation.
- 4 Photographs taken of the ‘last supper’ with Prabhakaran and other hallmarks of the Black Tiger hype were clearly in place on this occasion.
- 5 M. Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka,” (University of Warwick: Centre of International Cooperation and Security, 2004), http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/cics/publications/avpi/AVPI_Sri_Lanka.pdf.
- 6 Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka.”
- 7 D. Filkins, “Sri Lanka Women at War,” *Herald Tribune*, March 13, 2000.
- 8 Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka,” and J. Kainz, “Women Warriors,” Focus Asia: Interview of Female LTTE Cadres, July 25, 2004 , <http://www.focusasiatv.org/archive.php>.
- 9 Alsion, “Armed Violence and Poverty in Sri Lanka.”
- 10 The term was adopted from the title of a journal *Suthanthirap Paravaikal* (Freedom Birds), first published in December 1984.
- 11 For example, C. L Joshi, “Sri Lanka: Suicide Bombers,” *Far East Economic Review*, June 1, 2000, http://www.fae.com/_0006_01/p64currents.html.
- 12 Mia Bloom, “Devising a Theory of Suicide Terror,” Center for Global Security and Democracy, Rutgers University , p. 13.

- 13 Adele Balasingham, *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance*, 2nd ed. (Mitcham, Fairmax Publishing, 2003).
- 14 Besides the conservative and religious aspects of Tamil/Hindu culture, traditions such as the caste and dowry systems were also considered elements of female bondage. The stated policy of the LTTE does not recognize or permit caste restrictions and the dowry system in the areas controlled by the LTTE. However, the reality of Tamil society makes this ban almost impossible to enforce and continues. While outward appearances have indeed changed – from *sari* to trousers – despite the LTTE’s public stand and the freedom LTTE female cadres have allegedly earned for themselves, little has changed in the deep-rooted caste system and dowry is now demanded in the form of a “bridal gift.”
- 15 Mangalika Silva, “Co-ordinator, Women for Peace,” quoted in Ana Cutter, “Tamil Tigresses, Hindu Martyrs,” Columbia University, *Journal of International Affairs*, 1998.
- 16 N. De Mel, *Beyond the Gaze: The Female Suicide Bomber, Gender, Sexuality and Militarism in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Vijitha Yappa Publications, 2002).
- 17 Clara Beyler, “Messengers of Death: Female Suicide Bombers” (Herzliya: ICT, 2003).
- 18 Arjuna Gunawardena, *Black Tigers: LTTE Suicide Terrorism – the Sri Lankan Experience*, MSc dissertation, University of Leicester, UK, 2003.
- 19 Laura Ann Trombley, “Female Suicide Bombers: The Newest Trend in Terrorism,” May 8, 2002, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefer/joe/tromb1.html>.
- 20 Yoram Schweitzer, “A Fundamental Change in Tactics,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2003.
- 21 Jain Commission Report on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.
- 22 W. A. Knight and T. Narozhna, “Black Widow Terrorists are a Puzzling Breed,” *Express News*, 2004, <http://expressnews.ualberta.ca/article.cfm?id=6052>.
- 23 J. Stern, “When Bombers are Women,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2003.
- 24 N. Ayers, “Choosing to Die: Repression and the Adoption of Suicide Tactics,” PS311C IR Workshop (Fearon/Goldstein), Stanford University, March 5, 2006.
- 25 LTTE political leader at a ceremony commemorating Black Tiger Day on July 5, 2006.
- 26 Posthumously promoted to Lt. Gen.
- 27 Iqbal Athas, “Situation Report,” *Sunday Times*, Wijeya Newspapers Ltd, Colombo, July 22, 2006.
- 28 This is the case even though an all-out war may well be what the LTTE wishes to avoid at this juncture, during which the LTTE has made use of the ceasefire agreement (CFA) to create a situation of a state-in-the-making. An all-out war would result in both the loss of infrastructure built during the CFA and a negative international impact. Use of suicide terrorism, however, as well as claymore mines/landmines in government controlled areas can be a means of exerting pressure on the government and compelling the redeployment of additional troops away from the defense lines in a general defensive posture vs. an offensive posture, even setting the stage for a UDI, which may be what Sri Lanka will face next.