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Name of the Topic: National Security and State Surveillance in the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict: A Feminist Perspective

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Findings of the study:

The present study examines the relationship between national security, state surveillance, and gender during and after the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict through a feminist lens. It argues that surveillance is not merely a security practice employed during periods of armed conflict but a broader political mechanism through which the state governs, disciplines, and regulates populations. The findings demonstrate that surveillance in Sri Lanka has been historically shaped by colonial legacies, ethnic politics, militarisation, and post-war governance, producing differentiated experiences of security and insecurity across society.

One of the central findings of the study is that traditional understandings of national security are inadequate for explaining the lived realities of conflict-affected communities. While conventional security frameworks prioritise territorial integrity, sovereignty, and military victory, this research demonstrates that security must also be understood in terms of everyday experiences of surveillance, fear, mobility, dignity, and political freedom. The end of armed conflict in 2009 did not automatically translate into human security for all citizens, particularly those living in the former conflict zones.

The study finds that surveillance in Sri Lanka extends beyond intelligence gathering and law enforcement. It functions through a combination of military presence, administrative regulation, humanitarian governance, welfare mechanisms, digital technologies, and bureaucratic practices. Surveillance, therefore, becomes embedded within ordinary governance, shaping the relationship between the state and its citizens even in the absence of active armed conflict.

A significant finding of the research is that surveillance is deeply gendered. Women and men experience surveillance differently because state institutions perceive and regulate them through different social and political roles. While Tamil men were frequently viewed as potential security threats due to suspected militant affiliations, Tamil women were subjected to more subtle but equally pervasive forms of surveillance through rehabilitation programmes, welfare structures, community monitoring, and regulation of public participation. This demonstrates that surveillance operates not only through coercion but also through gendered expectations and social control.

The research also reveals that militarisation in Sri Lanka did not conclude with the military defeat of the LTTE. Instead, military influence became institutionalised within post-war governance. The continued presence of military institutions in civilian administration, development projects, land management, tourism, and reconstruction transformed

militarisation into a normal feature of everyday governance. This prolonged militarisation reinforced surveillance practices and affected civilian life long after the cessation of armed hostilities.

Another important finding concerns the role of humanitarian governance in post-war Sri Lanka. Through case studies such as Menik Farm and post-camp screening procedures, the study demonstrates that humanitarian spaces often functioned simultaneously as spaces of care and control. Registration systems, biometric documentation, movement restrictions, and security screening illustrate how humanitarian interventions became intertwined with surveillance and population management. These findings challenge the assumption that humanitarian governance is politically neutral.

The study further demonstrates that post-war surveillance increasingly relied upon processes of datafication and bureaucratic management. Identity documentation, population databases, intelligence records, and digital monitoring expanded the state's capacity to classify, monitor, and regulate conflict-affected populations. The research argues that contemporary surveillance extends beyond physical observation to include administrative and digital forms of governance.

The thesis also finds that women emerged as important political actors during the post-conflict period. Movements led by the Families of the Disappeared transformed grief into political resistance by demanding truth, accountability, and justice despite continuous surveillance and intimidation. Rather than portraying women solely as victims of conflict, the study highlights their agency as activists, caregivers, negotiators, and community leaders who actively challenged dominant narratives of reconciliation and post-war normalcy.

Another key finding is that colonial systems of governance continue to influence contemporary surveillance practices. The research demonstrates that mechanisms of census classification, population registration, and administrative control introduced during colonial rule provided important foundations for postcolonial state surveillance. Contemporary security practices, therefore, reflect not only wartime imperatives but also longer historical continuities in state formation and governance.

The study further finds that feminist security studies provide a more comprehensive analytical framework than conventional security approaches for understanding the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. By shifting attention from the security of the state to the security of individuals and communities, feminist analysis reveals how surveillance, militarisation, displacement, and political exclusion are experienced differently across gender and ethnic lines. It also demonstrates that security and insecurity coexist within the same political structures, depending upon whose experiences are being considered.

Finally, the research concludes that surveillance should not be understood simply as a technological or military practice. Rather, it is a historically embedded and politically constructed form of governance that shapes citizenship, identity, memory, and political participation. The Sri Lankan case demonstrates that post-conflict reconstruction cannot be assessed solely through military success or economic development. Sustainable peace requires addressing the everyday insecurities produced by surveillance, militarisation, and unequal power relations.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by integrating feminist security studies, surveillance studies, and postcolonial perspectives to develop a more nuanced understanding of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. It argues that meaningful security must extend beyond protecting the state to ensuring dignity, accountability, political participation, and freedom from fear for all citizens, particularly those who continue to live under the enduring effects of conflict and surveillance.