

## FEAR...

ing, the looting, the massacres, the ambushes, the abductions and finally, and irrevocably, the disappearances.

The fear was intense; acute soon after the traumatic experience and subsequently decreased because it had been provoked by tangible stimuli or situations.

If the Conditioning Theory of Fear - developed in the 1960's over a period of a few years by Wolpe, Eysenck and Rachman - can be proved, we could expect a decrease in the magnitude of our fears and a progressive change in our reactions and behaviour.

The Conditioning Theory of Fear supports that repeated exposure to fear-evoking situations may:

*at times sensitize us;*

increase the fear when we anticipate trouble.

*at times habituate us;*

decrease the fear when the situation often re-occurs or prolongs itself. The reaction will diminish in magnitude.

The young child learns very fast that if a balloon is about to burst, soon it will make a terrifying sound.

After having heard a balloon burst a number of times, the child learns to fear the sound less. The sound is no longer unfamiliar.

Similarly, we have been conditioned to expect and fear violent reactions from human beings during political tension.

We, too, grew 'accustomed' or 'resigned' to many fearful situations. It became 'natural' for us to be ordered to stay indoors by the JVP, even stocked goods in 'anticipation' of the curfews. Today, the fighting in the North and East is no longer 'extraordinary'; not having safe

and easy access to a large part of the country is no longer 'unusual'.

Not such a long time ago, the killing of thirteen soldiers generated very violent behaviour. Again, at present, a political alternative to the ethnic war feared by some, the nationalist spirit widely criticised and feared by others, are fundamental issues which provoke extreme and long repressed reactions.

We have learnt to live and continue to live with this 'acquired' fear. We must, however, not be indifferent to it. We must not let it become an 'ordinary' fear, like the fear of death; a fear that, we are taught to believe, does not need to be justified. ■

# GENDER AGENDA

## STATE CO-OPTION OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

by Khema de Rosairo

Women, we have been told, are half the sky. But politicians, in Sri Lanka as elsewhere, have been always acutely conscious that they are half the electorate. This consciousness becomes sharper when, as in Sri Lanka today, women's labour accounts for the largest share of our foreign exchange - earnings from tea, garment exports and work as housemaids abroad. It is therefore not surprising that the state in Sri Lanka has recently "discovered" the woman question and has not only created a National Women's Day (to coincide with the day the Buddhist missionary Sanghamitta came to Sri Lanka), but has also co-opted March 8th - Inter-

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national Women's Day (originated in 1910 by the German Communist, Clara Zetkin).

Up to the late 1970's, March 8th was celebrated with meetings, demonstrations, exhibitions and cultural activities involving women of all communities. The main organisers were women party activists and trade unionists and women Socialists from a range of autonomous feminist groups. The association of the women's movement with the Left necessarily brought within its ambit certain anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist slogans on democratic and trade union rights, economic policies and foreign relations. During this period, International Women's Day was celebrated without either interference from the state or feminist-bashing in the media.

### VIOLENCE ON WOMEN'S DAY

A major shift was seen after the change to an executive presidency in 1978, when attacks on dissident movements including trade unions and student organisations became a regular manifestation of the state's obsession with political stability. Women's Day became an occasion for state violence against women, as well as an opportunity for demonising feminists in the media.

In 1982, women demonstrating on March 8th in Colombo were tear-gassed and March 8th 1983 became a cause celebre; women of the SLFP, CP and LSSP had organised a picket outside the US Embassy against US army bases in the Indian Ocean. Returning afterwards, the

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women also protested outside Temple Trees against the rise in the cost of milk foods. The Kollupitiya police removed their banners and arrested a photographer, and when the women went to the police station to inquire, they were attacked. Former LSSP member of Parliament Vivienne Goonewardena recalls: "A policeman threw me like a sack of potatoes across the room and kicked me twice ... and stood with one foot on top of my stomach." (*Sunday Times*, 6 January 1991).

Violence continued in subsequent years; on March 8th 1984 and 1985, women were tear-gassed, baton-charged and arrested. During these years, the media (English and Sinhala) also had a field day attacking feminists for being influenced by the West. An editorial - "Women's Liberation" - in the *Island* in 1984, typical of this anti-feminist inclination, said :

"The feminine consciousness as it obtains today is another article of the contemporary ideological baggage borrowed from the West... to which our alienated intellectuals genuflect."

The sexist bias in the media continued through the 1980's - totally ignoring increasing international consciousness on women's issues during the "Decade of Women" (1975-85). After International Women's Day in 1989, the *Island* published a letter complaining that a programme on TV on March 8th, portrayed the woman as "innocent and humble" and the man as a brute. This occasioned an editorial on 'Female Chauvinism' which said, "over the years, since women libbers began bra burning in the West, Lanka libbers have got into the habit of bashing males. They do so with gusto on this so-called International Women's Day. This sort of female sexism got to cease (sic)." (*Island* 13 March 1989)

### CO-OPTION OF WOMEN'S DAY

**B**ut after the presidential election of 1989, and the further centralisation of state power backed up with

populist ideology, the tendency has been to incorporate rather than to confront. In the case of the women's movement, the state has moved to appropriate feminist discourse, its symbols, language, slogans and, maybe in the future, even its persons.

In 1990, a significant change took place. The state began to officially celebrate March 8th with public meetings, campaigns and supplements in the newspapers. The media obliged and made a sharp about turn; the *Island* even had an editorial on the event, entitled "The World at Their Command," hailing the achievements of women political leaders and claiming that "the much flogged male chauvinist pig is as dead as a dodo ... Women are on the march and all major obstacles have been cleared. It is now only a matter of time for the goal of equality."

By 1991 the state's theme on Women's Day was "the strengthening of women through women's organisations," which of course meant the Seva Vanitha Movement. This movement, based on the Indonesian Dharma Vanitha, organizes the wives of politicians and officials in government departments in support of state policies, and to promote charitable projects.

This year, there have been further noticeable changes in attitudes: the *Island* (March 9th) in an editorial entitled "Liberating Women" even went as far as to express the hope that "the strident voices of those women's libbers keep going throughout the year on issues that will improve the status of women," and praised "the progress women are making rapidly."

But the *Divaina*, the Sinhalese daily published by the owners of the *Island*, proved that, whatever is said in editorials in the group's English newspapers, the Sinhala public gets the mixture as before. In an editorial "Women's Liberation!" the paper (March 7th) claimed that feminist slogans and drum beats are not only borrowed from the West but are also propagated with foreign money with the aim of promoting sexual license and therefore cultural decline.

What is new this year however is a Women's Charter, a document including and expanding on the economic, social and political rights of women as expressed in the UN Charter against discrimination of women. The ideological "new look", as displayed by newspaper articles in English, is also revealing. For example, "Women in the Context of Social Change" by Indrani Iriyagolle, has radical thoughts on patriarchy, women's subordination and a tribute to the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1970's. She calls for changes in "male domination, female repression, sexual assault, rape, violence, forced motherhood, and pornography" calling for state intervention to deal with issues ranging from "unequal pay to reproductive rights." Though she is the President of the Sinhala *Kanthaabhivurdhi Sanvidhanaya*, (The Movement for the Advancement of Sinhalese Women) there was no reference to Sinhaleanness.

But the Prime Minister gave a traditional message in the same Women's Day supplement "Our history is adorned," he wrote, "by women such as Soma Devi, who bravely faced the Chola invaders ... Vihara Maha Devi who came forward to sacrifice her life to save the country from disaster, and Sanghamitta Therini who brought about a significant change in our country"; a message more appropriate for Sanghamitta Day.

What does all this signify? Does it mean the recognition of the economic and social rights of women and a greater respect for their right to speak out on International Women's Day? (In which case, why was the march of the members of the Ceylon Mercantile Union on March 8th 1991 and 1992 banned?) Or does it signal the state's appropriation and manipulation of women for a specific political agenda based on radical rhetoric and populist slogans? Is the state on a path to mobilizing different segments of society in a corporatist fashion? One can only speculate as events unfold. ■