

*Susanthika Jayasinghe won a silver medal at the World Athletic Championship in Athens in one of the prime events, the 200 meters for women. She was lauded, garlanded and given all sorts of rewards both by the state and private sector firms. All this has now been clouded by allegations, made publicly by Susanthika, that she has been subjected to sexual harassment by top sports Ministry persons.*

*These allegations have reverberated in the media in Parliament and among the public. They have brought into high relief quotations of sports, big money rewards, the state are the sexism to which women in sports are subject to.*

*Two articles refer to there various aspects of the Susanthika Jayasinghe controversy.*

## SPORTS, BIG BUSINESS, THE STATE AND PATRIARCHY

Janaka Biyanwila

In a stunning disclosure smacking of sexual harassment Jayasinghe said top persons involved in sports in Sri Lanka were pressurizing her to divorce her husband and give into their personal demands of her. *Sunday Leader*, November 9th, 1997

The recent controversy about Susanthika Jayasinghe over the allegations of sexual harassment, and death threats against her is an episode of historic significance to sport in Sri Lanka and women in sports in this country. It is of historic significance because of two prime reasons. First, in the history of sports in Sri Lanka this is the first time a world class athlete has exposed exploitation of athletes by the sports bureaucracy. Second, for women in sports this episode will clearly show that male-bias and male domination of sports is socially sedimented, and pervasive, and that lower class women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment.

Let us expand the first argument here. The general nuance at the beginning of this controversy was that Suanthika is making some outlandish remarks against certain powerful sports official because she was after more money and material comforts. Let was just step back and look at the big picture of sports in this country. Except for the Cricket World Championships and Duncan White we have had a less than mediocre performance at international sports competitions. Along with the rhetoric of fitness, health and good will, the official ideal of sports also include a notion of excellence in international competition. Yet, history has shown that international sports are very much part of the larger geo-politics and national foreign policy. Hitler used it exemplify Nazi efficiency, apartheid South Africa was banned from certain international competitions, US teams boycotted the Moscow Games condemning Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (61 other countries joined the U.S, with Great Britain and France being important exceptions) and in retaliation Soviet Union boycotted the Los Angeles games. At the 1995 World Cup it was our foreign Minister who expressed outrage against Australian and West Indies teams pulling-out from playing in Sri Lanka. So sports are part of international and national politics.

What does global politics have to do with a dictatorial and corrupt Sri Lanka state bureaucracy? Well, geo-politics are tied with capitalism and big business and sports is big business now. So the Sri Lankan sports bureaucracy, after a long period of unintentional gestation is finally in the big league of world recognition of local sports talent and multinationals. The popular belief is that this seemingly flourishing of local talent is because the State, the Sports Ministry, is an effective organizing apparatus to harness all this local talent, and has streamlined and planned junior sports programs to arrive at this stage. This is simply self-induced ignorance about local sports. Susanthika was not a product of such a planned systematic organization of sports, but a talented female athlete who had some lucky breaks and personal perseverance. Anyone who has actively participated in sports at the national championship level, as an athlete or a coach, may have experienced the chaotic process of local sports, from the ministry down to the sports association and clubs.

If you are from a poor, rural, background and you are an international competitor, then you are pretty much bonded labour to the system. You are most likely to be in the military or some state bureaucracy or with the private sector "token employment" and the ministry decides your sports destiny. You might be qualified to participate at the highest international level competitions but the state is your feudal lord, deciding the value of your labour. You also have to pay tribute to the lords of the sports bureaucracy. This includes a gamut of parasitic school officials, presidents of sports associations, the Sports Ministry and of course the media men [since most so called sports journalists in this society are men]. There is absolutely no democracy in sports. There are no mechanisms within sports institutions to evaluate it's cultural contribution, economic efficiency or historical trajectory.

In any sports controversy, the Ministry usually appoints an "investigating committee" consisting of political allies and a judgment is reached to re-legitimize the status quo and the sycophants in the media are rationed their share publicity mileage. This was

Susanthikas intention, during an interview aired on November 12th on a private television channel, to inform the audience that the Ministry of sports and the media are reading off the same script. Both are dominated by social forces which exploit female labour and the female body, deployed by sexist, opportunist men. But, of course, the popular media is politically and professionally tactical to protect their own vested interests.

It was also courageous and perceptive of her to claim that the Sports Ministry's power elite will temporarily neutralize the conflict, only to defer the option of returning with a vengeance. It reminds of a dimension of terror and its aggressive idiom that embodies this society. At one level, it is an expression of the coercive power of the state. And those who basked in her glory, her representation of Sri Lanka at various international venues, especially of winning the silver at the Athens World Athletic Championships in 1997, must also feel partly responsible for her safety in the future.

Admittedly, Susanthika alone will not be able to expose exploitation of athletes by the sports bureaucracy in this country. It is highly unlikely that anyone else will be willing to risk their future in Sri Lankan sports by speaking out on this occasion. What is meant by exploitation here is the making use of talented athletes for potential benefits of others. The list of beneficiaries include a range from transnational corporations, governments in power, politicians and bureaucratic officials, to popular media. The NBC (U.S broadcaster) paid \$3.7 billion for the rights to broadcast the Olympics through the year 2008 not because of some humanitarian concern about sports. Carlsberg beer, Gold leaf cigarettes, etc, 'sponsor' sports not because they like a healthy generation of young consumers. They like financial profits more. From Coca-Cola and Wills cigarettes, to Toyota and the transnational corporations, all want audiences who are most likely to consume their products. So if it is an international sports competition of entertaining 'action' value with a global audience, big business is likely to be there. More than Cricket, it is Susanthika that has reached this global audience. [She participates in a centerpiece event in Track & fields events, where most previous champions have achieved global celebrity status]. So big business is interested. But, she is essentially owned by the Sri Lankan state, the Sports Ministry, and here lies her vulnerability and exploitation. The Ministry has to mediate with big business, but the intricacies of this process, broadly termed sports marketing, is new to most officials and the media. Briefly, there is a pot of money at the end of the maze, but they are too backward, lazy, and petty-minded to understand the dynamics of sports marketing and sports development.

In the international sports arena, these bureaucrats join forces with other similarly opportunistic, especially South Asian, officials. Why is it that a population of 1.2 billion in South Asia cannot produce a whole gamut of internationally competitive athletes or sports teams? Ultimately most of these veteran opportunists benefit from the crumbs which the transnational corporations and international sports organizations throw at them as charity. It is ironic that the main concern of the Ministry of Sports, when sending a team for international competition is not performance, but illegal migrations [defections]. Would the main concern of the State be defections, if

the State, the Ministry of Sports was non-exploitative and nurturing of its internationally competitive athletes. Skeptics defend the status quo by reasoning this as some Third World phenomenon, but it is also a pervasive Sri Lankan phenomenon.

But the more enabled Donovan Bailey born and raised in Jamaica and 1997 gold medalist, the 'world fastest man', runs for Canada. At the Atlanta Olympics, all the members of the Gold medal winning Canadian 4x100 meter mens relay team were migrants from the Caribbean islands. The winner of womens 200 and 400 meters, Marrie-Jose Perek was born on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, moved to Paris when she was 16, and now she lives and practices in Beverly Hills, California, U.S, and she carried the French flag after winning her events. The best of the athletes, especially in spectator sports with a global audience, live in fluid national boundaries. It is time Susanthika also contemplates migrating to the center of sports action to escape from the feudal periphery of opportunist politicians and petty bureaucrats.

Most of the top-class athletes compete year round in events with prize money. All governments like high earning, globe trotting, sports stars because they become a source of foreign exchange, domestic investment or income tax revenue. For example, the Kenyan long distance runners have invested in farms providing income avenues mostly to family members. It is well known that Susanthika should have been in this prize money circuit soon after her setting the Asian Games record in her event. The alleged gifts the Ministry and the media claim that she has received, is marginal compared to the value of prize money she would have earned if she was properly promoted into the big-business international sports arena. But, the more important dynamic is the reaction of the media and the Ministry to her potential for economic independence. Denying women economic power is at the center of male subjugation, domination and control over women. The media and Ministry have both manipulated the popular opinion that Susanthika claiming what she has rightfully owned is preposterous, undermining the behavior of a 'good' woman and a 'sporty' person.

And now we come to the second part of my argument that Susanthika's present controversy is significant for women in sports. Aside from the direct economic exploitation, women in sports also encounter multiple forms of harassment of a male dominated institution and its ideology. Sports and masculinity are powerful ideological constructs in Sri Lanka. If you have captained the college cricket team you are likely to be in a high income category of employment. Just a cursory glance at sports, and it is apparent that it is saturated with male participants, officials, admirers and male journalist who write about male sports. This would be acceptable if domination and discrimination against women were myths. Unfortunately, patriarchy is real. This is a culture that which has most often discouraged young girls' participation in sports. And the few assertive women who excel in the national champion level have to negotiate with the endless, multiple forms of discrimination, sexual harassment, and intimidation by men. For instance, the standard question of male journalist interviewing local female sports stars would be whether they cook. So the alleged sexual harassment of Susanthika is not the

first of these violations a woman has encountered in a male-dominated sports establishment.

Susanthika has already been the symbolic victim of the reassertion of male dominance not only in sports but also in popular ideology. The 'disciplining' of her for alleged drunken behavior, the media event for the month of May in 1997, illustrated a powerful dimension of sexism in this society. Its intended purpose was to claim that patriarchy in Sri Lanka is not going to tolerate any [rural] young women going too far beyond their assigned role. The sports ministry and the media joined together in their castigation of Susanthika then, and it is reproduced at present. What does this all signify to young girls who want participate in sports? Considering the openly aggressive and arrogant stance of the male biased sports establishment [state machinery involved in sports, sports associations, and the media] the task of achieving excellence for women in sports will continue to be difficult.

The structures of sports are not some isolated enclave; rather they are interdependent with the rest of the society. A media monitoring group has reported 155 cases of violence against women and girls

in the month of August 1997. So the patriarchy will again regroup and its cheerleaders will battle the Susanthika phenomenon. The sexual politics, personal and public politics of Susanthika's controversy will mostly remain at the level of party politics. Criticizing a government that has come to power on a mandate of democracy, and transparency will also have a commoity value.

But the State bears the primary responsibility to intervene to prevent acts of discrimination and violence against women. Why is the Ministry of Women Affairs silent on these issues? According to the women's charter the state shall in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, take all appropriate measures, including the promulgation of legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the basis of equality with men. We must begin at least marginally to move in this direction. It is time the sports bureaucracy is exposed of its dictatorial regime, hypocrisy, and its male bias. This is an issue for all of us, who have been at least momentarily captured by this talented female athlete, who has the potential of becoming the world's best. ■

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## SUSANTHIKA: SEXISM, RACISM AND THE BODY POLITIC

**I**n India," said Arundhati Roy, "we live in several centuries simultaneously". If Sri Lankans agreed about India, but thought they were more advanced — superior, modern, civilized, enlightened, progressive and ready to move into the 21st century — they had better think again. The whole Susanthika Jayasinghe episode has revealed the social backwardness and obscurantism still prevalent in Sri Lanka, in spite of decades of exposure to liberal - even Socialist - ideologies. The roots of racism and sexism run so deep that, in the "best" of circles and among educated persons of all communities racist talk is tolerated and sexism is the rule rather than the exception.

### SEXISM *a la* Sri Lanka

**W**e don't need women's lib, because our women are liberated" say the local Bamunas (Brahmins) and Baminis. But a careful look at our society reveals that in spite of good social indicators (health, education and life expectancy), Sri Lankan women are subject to patriarchy in the family, workplace and in society. The power over women of fathers/husbands/sons in the family, and their subordination to males in situations of authority are features of society, which laws may be unable to deal with, since the patriarchal tradition permeates the culture.

It has long been the practice in parliament for MPs in replying to female MP critics, to indulge in obscene and highly sexist com-

ments. This has been tolerated as mere banter by all political parties. In recent weeks, the levels have sunk to a record low. Apart from sexist remarks about Susanthika and other prominent women in society, we read that a Minister, when asked by woman MP if he could type, replied "I can do everything efficiently and if you come out I will show you my capabilities" (Island 18 Nov. 1997). Such sexist talk in parliament is the order of the day.

But in the case of Susanthika the line has been truly crossed. Calling Susanthika a performing circus monkey, or deranged woman is hardly the way one should speak of the country's most famous international athlete. Such use of parliamentary privilege to defame Susanthika is totally reprehensible.

Sexism is also very prevalent in the media where journalists, in season and out, make vulgar jokes, demeaning remarks and offending comments on women; not to mention the terribly sexist cartoons. The advertising industry is also one of the worst offenders, where women's bodies are used to promote commodities. Feminists have had to frequently protest against the grosser advertisements - an example being the semi-rape scene in T.V. ad for some brand of Eau de Cologne. What is remarkable is that Sri Lankans who are quick to copy all sorts of foreign ideas, seem to be hopelessly out of date on what constitutes sexism, sexual harassment and politically incorrect attitudes to women.