

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. ■

SUSANTHIKA: SEXISM, RACISM AND THE BODY POLITIC

In 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

We 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.

Male chauvinism

The treatment of Susanthika is also a fine example of double standards, hypocrisy, male chauvinism, sexual exploitation and the demonizing of women prevalent among the patriarchs. Earlier this year, when Susanthika, the much-lauded "village lass", was accused of drinking beer and partying, the vultures swept down; Susanthika has "betrayed village values", she has eaten "forbidden fruit". "Who does she think she is?" they cried. She was even punished with a 6 months ban on sporting activity, but the ban was lifted after women's groups and many other protested. When she won a silver medal at Athens, politicians and officials who had punished her were all over her again, basking in the reflected glory. What the general public did not know, but might have guessed, was that there were rumours and gossip about attempts to sexually harass and exploit her by men in authority.

Sexual Harassment

In many countries, exploiting women and girls over whom one has authority and power (officials, police, armed forces, teachers etc) is considered a gross misuse of a power relationship, more heinous than usual, with greater penalties; ("custodial rape" by police, of those in custody has higher punishments in some countries). It was the duty of Ministry officials to give Susanthika the conditions she needed for the development of her talent in sport. Instead they have shamefully taken away her peace of mind which probably will affect her future performances. Would any MP have dared to harass and speak of the cricket captain or any of the cricket team in this way? Women, it seems, however distinguished in their field, are targets for remarks about their looks, skin colour and behaviour. Susanthika was persistently asked by reporters why she cut her hair; a kind of personal, idiotic remark never directed at sportsmen.

Racism *a la* Sri Lanka ("Who's the Darkest of us all?")

References in parliament to Susanthika looking like a black American man were horrifying. It was intended not as a compliment but as a crude, racist insult. (If Sanath Jayasuriya was called a black American woman, people would think the speaker was deranged!)

Sri Lankans, as Susanthika remarked, are a black people and although they have been brain-washed by myth-makers to believe they are light-skinned "Aryans" from North India, the reality is different. Instead of opting for the slogan 'Black is Beautiful' which was used 25 years ago in the USA, Sri Lankans, though dark in complexion, don't want to face the reality. On occasion, a man is complimented for being a "Maha Kalu Sinhhalaya" (The Big, Black

Sinhala, a famous warrior). But "black" used for woman denotes "ugly" in South Asian cultures, which are, alas, racist to the core.

The Great Whitewash

And the racism goes deeper and further into history than the colonial opposites of black and white. The system of caste, the prime basis of social organisation in India, was originally based on colour as the name *Varna* implies. The distinction between the invading Aryan-language speakers, reputedly pale, and the dark-skinned original inhabitants became then the basis for stratifying society according to colour. The distinction permeated culture and perceptions of beauty, particularly with regard to women, with black skin being equated with low status or physical ugliness. In Sri Lanka, the popular perception of the figures in the Sigiriya frescoes is that the "fair-skinned ones" are princesses and the dark-skinned are *dasis* or servants.

In common parlance today these racial overtones prevail. "Although black, she is beautiful." And the marriage advertisements are full of "fair" women seeking spouses. The advertisements for soap and household goods, and even wedding and fashion pictures in the papers have women whose faces have been "whitened" to look "beautiful"! So when an MP says "like a black American" everyone understands the insult.

Gender Sensitising

To feminists, if it is sexist and insulting to a woman to remark that she is black and ugly, it is even more sexist and insulting to say she is fair and beautiful. Today even "flattering" comments to women on their appearance are "out of order". What is unfortunate is that Sri Lankan males - however well educated - are often very ignorant of the new trends in relations between men and women based on equality and mutual respect. *They have not heard that it is sexist to think that all women have to conform to a stereotype of beauty, and that it is racist to think that this stereotype should include a European-type fairness of skin.*

For several years in Sri Lanka there have been "gender-sensitizing projects", intended to raise the consciousness of people on the struggles for women's equality. Many have also been involved in campaigns to reduce sexism and racism in language and in all other spheres of life. These messages against sexism and racism seem to have by-passed our legislators. Since we boast not only of our women leaders, but also of our attempts to solve the ethnic problem, it is high time - as we near the 21st century - that the political parties clean up their acts educate their MPs on how to free themselves from the sexist and racist demons who still bedevil our society. ■

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