

use the terms communalism and fundamentalism when I seek to compare the two phenomena.

3. Interview with Kusum Mehre, Bhopal, 14 June 1991.
4. Interview with Uma Bharati, New Delhi, 17 December 1991.
5. Ibid.
6. Interview with Arun Jaitley, New Delhi, 11 April 1991.
7. Interview with Mridula Sinha, New Delhi, 7 February 1991.
8. Speech delivered at the BJP plenary meeting, Jaipur, December 1991.
9. Interview with Purnima Sethi, New Delhi, 27 March 1991.
10. On this question, see Ahmed (1992). On the Pakistani context, see Gardezi (1990); Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987); Rouse (1986); and Shaheed and Mumtaz (1990).
11. Agnes (1995) similarly points to the failures of the Indian women's movement to redress some of the sexist aspects of Hindu law. If two Hindus marry under the Special Marriages Act, according to a 1954 amendment, the secular code that grants equal rights to men and women—the Indian Succession Act of 1925—does not apply. Instead, the couple is governed by the Hindu Succession Act, which grants men coparcenary rights (the rights to the family's ancestral property). Under the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, a Hindu wife can neither adopt nor give a child in adoption. In reformed Hindu law, although marriages are in principle monogamous, in practice they may be polygynous, and co-wives are denied the protection that they are afforded in Hindu customary law.
12. Interview with Mridula Sinha, New Delhi, 7 February 1991.
13. Interview with Mohini Garg, New Delhi, 11 April 1991.
14. Interview with Nirupama Gour, Lucknow, 5 January 1992.
15. Interview with Mala Rustogi (pseudonym), Lucknow, 28 December 1992. Other references to Rustogi's views are drawn from the same interview.
16. There are many parallels between women's activism in Hindu nationalism and in German fascism; see Koonz (1987); Bridenthal, Grossman, and Kaplan (1984). See Blee (1991) and Klatch (1987) for parallels with women's activism in racist and right-wing organizations in the United States.

## Chapter Eleven

# Motherhood as a Space of Protest

### *Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka*

MALATHI DE ALWIS

DURING THE YEARS 1987 TO 1991, Sri Lanka witnessed an uprising by nationalist Sinhala youth (the JVP or Janata Vimukhti Party) and reprisals by the state that gripped the country in a stranglehold of terror. The militants randomly terrorized or assassinated anyone who criticized them or supposedly collaborated with the state. The state similarly, but on a much larger scale, murdered or "disappeared" anyone it suspected of being a "subversive," which included thousands of young men, some young women, and a number of left-wing activists, playwrights, lawyers, and journalists who were either monitoring or protesting the state's violation of human rights. Bodies rotting on beaches, smoldering in grotesque heaps by the roadsides, and floating down rivers were a daily sight during the height of state repression from 1988 to 1990. It was in such a context that the Mothers' Front, a grassroots women's organization with an estimated membership of more than twenty-five thousand women, was formed in July 1990 to protest the "disappearance" of approximately sixty thousand young and middle-aged men. Its only demand was for "a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives" (*Island*, 9 February 1991). The seemingly unquestionable authenticity of their grief and espousal of "traditional" family values provided the Mothers' Front with an important space for protest unavailable to other organizations critical of state practices.<sup>1</sup>

The Mothers' Front phrased its protest in the vocabulary that was most available to it through its primary positioning within a patriarchally structured society—that of motherhood, which I define here as encompassing women's biological reproduction as well as women's signification as moral guardians, care givers, and nurturers. I fully agree with the argument that maternalist women's peace groups project essentialist views of women that reinforce the notion of biology as destiny and legitimize a sex-role system that, in assigning responsibility for nurture and survival to women alone, encourages masculinized violence and destruction (Enloe, 1989; Hartsock, 1982; Houseman, 1982; Lloyd, 1986). Nevertheless, I think we need to consider carefully the reasons that "motherist movements" (Schirmer, 1993) adopt the strategies they do, and what effects they have. In light of such a project, I would like to consider here the contingent usefulness of maternalized protest at a particular moment in Sri Lankan history. However, such an attempt at a positive reading cannot ignore the complex interplay of power within this space that also reinscribed gender and class hierarchies and reinforced majoritarian ethnic identities while those of minorities were erased.

Though the Mothers' Front's agenda remained very limited, its few, brief, and spectacular appearances on the Sri Lankan political stage nevertheless placed a government on the defensive, awoke a nation from a terrorized stupor, and indelibly gendered the discourses of human rights and dissent. It also created a space in which a much larger, nonracist, and more radical protest movement could be launched to overthrow in the general elections of August 1994 an extremely repressive and corrupt government that had been in power for seventeen years.

This chapter will concentrate only on exploring how the Mothers' Front created a space for itself within a predominantly patriarchal political landscape by articulating its protest through the available, familiar, and emotive discourse of motherhood. This space was mediated by a powerful political party that was predominantly male, Sinhala, and middle class. Yet the repertoire of protest employed by these women, albeit under the sign of the mother and mainly limited to tears and curses, was the most crucial component in an assault on a government that had until then held an entire nation at ransom on the pretext of safeguarding the lives of its citizens. It is in this sense that I assert the contingent value of the Mothers' Front's repertoire of protest.

### The Mothers' Front

Tears . . . are common to all. Yet, there is nothing more powerful on earth that can wring tears from others than a mother's tears.

—Lankadeepa, 28 June 1992

The first branch of the Mothers' Front was formed on 15 July 1990 in the southern district of Matara, a region severely affected by "disappearances."<sup>2</sup> The meeting was held under the auspices of Mangala Samaraweera and Mahinda Rajapakse, members of Parliament and of the main opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), from Matara and Hambantota, respectively. Fifteen hundred women from the district elected officers to coordinate the group's activities. They decided to work out of Mr. Samaraweera's home because the climate of violence warranted some protective measures.<sup>3</sup> A majority of the women were severely traumatized: "At that time we were like children constantly needing to be told what to do. Sometimes I would come away from one of our meetings not remembering a single matter that was discussed," commented one officer.<sup>4</sup> Within six months, branches of the Mothers' Front had been set up in ten other Districts (often under the aegis of an SLFP MP). By 1992, Front members numbered twenty-five thousand, most of whom were from rural and semirural areas and of the lower and lower-middle classes, women well acquainted with poverty and hardship.

Initially, the Front's focus was mainly regional and it made little headway, except in compiling systematic and extensive documentation about the "disappeared." Visiting police stations, army camps, and local government offices with lists of the missing and petitioning various state institutions and officials for information produced few results. The women often viewed their reception at such places with a certain resignation and cynicism, tolerating politicians who promised the earth when campaigning but became dismissive when elected, and accepting that the everyday provision of state services was often contingent upon one's wealth and status. Yet, what fueled their pursuance of such activities and their increasing anger at being thwarted was an overriding confidence that their "disappeared" were alive and should be sought before trails grew cold. As one mother eloquently pointed out to me, "I gave birth to that boy. Surely, won't I sense it if he dies?" The first seeds of protest were sown in such moments of stubborn refusal to give up hope, to concede failure. The "absence of bodies," noted Jennifer Schirmer (1989: 5), creates a "presence of protest." In early 1991 the Mothers' Front showed "its muscles" (*Island*, 27 January 1991) by targeting the epicenter of power—the capital Colombo—and capturing the attention of the entire country.

A 19 February rally in a Colombo suburb at which thousands of these "chronic mourners" (Schirmer, 1989: 25), clad in white and holding mementos of their "disappeared," demanded that the nation not forget them or their "disappeared." The rally also commemorated the death of well-known actor, newscaster, and journalist Richard de Zoysa, who had been abducted, tortured, murdered, and dumped upon a beach by a paramilitary squad the year before. His mother, Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu, who had publicly

accused senior police officers of being involved in her son's abduction, had returned from self-exile at this time and was invited to serve as the president of the National Committee of the Mothers' Front. The nature of the Front, its seemingly conservative and apolitical rhetoric, and the unorthodox avenues of protest it subsequently employed made a counterattack by the state especially difficult and complicated. Unable to contain the Front through its usual authoritarian practices, the state was constantly on the defensive, dealing in counterrhetoric, counterrallies, and counterritual.

### Counterrhetoric

As in the case of the Madres of Argentina or the GAM (Mutual Support Group for the Reappearance of our Sons, Fathers, Husbands, and Brothers) of Guatemala, the rhetoric of protest used by the Mothers' Front can be read as confronting a repressive state by revealing the contradictions between the state's own rhetoric and practices. By appealing for a return to the "natural" order of family and motherhood, the women were openly embracing patriarchal stereotypes that primarily defined them through familial/domestic subject positions such as wife and mother. However, by accepting the responsibility to nurture and preserve life, which is also valorized by the state (de Alwis, 1994), they revealed the ultimate transgression of the state: it was denying women the opportunity to mother by its resort to clandestine tactics (cf. Schirmer, 1989: 28).

The Sri Lankan state's major rhetorical counter to the Front's implicit accusation is very interesting. On the day of the Mothers' Front's first rally in Colombo, President Premadasa expressed sympathy "with the mothers whose children have been led astray by designing elements." He continued, "Many now in custody are being rehabilitated" (*Daily News*, 19 February 1991). In a similar vein, Minister of State for Defence Ranjan Wijeratne pontificated: "Mothers are not expected to stage demonstrations. Mothers should have looked after their children. They failed to do that. They did not know what their children were doing. They did not do that and now they are crying" (*Daily News*, 15 February 1991). Both men were suggesting that the women had not been good mothers, but the president was also suggesting that because of their deficiencies the state had taken on their responsibilities by rehabilitating their children. By bringing in notions of rehabilitation, the president was deflecting the women's accusations of the state's complicity in the "disappearances" and killings.

Government officials used various rhetorical ploys to slander the Mothers' Front. The most vociferous was Ranjan Wijeratne, who denounced the Front as "subversive" and "anti-government" (*Daily News*, 14 March 1991); characterized it as "against the security forces who saved democracy" (*Daily News*, 23

February 1991); threatened to "get at the necks of those using the Mothers' Front" (*Island*, 20 February 1991); and stepped up police surveillance of its leaders (*Sunday Times*, 29 March 1991).<sup>5</sup> The SLFP was also consistently accused by government-owned media and various government ministers of trying to use the Mothers' Front to further its power (*Daily News*, 19 February, 23 March 1991; *Sunday Observer*, 24 February 1991). The state's central thrust was (1) to undermine the primary subject position of the women by suggesting that they had been "inadequate" mothers and (2) to undermine their credibility by insinuating that their organization was a puppet of a political party.

### Counterrallies

The state attempted to disrupt the first Mothers' Front rally by banning demonstrations and creating an atmosphere of distrust and panic with suggestions of possible bomb explosions and an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) infiltration of Colombo. At the second rally in Colombo a month later to commemorate International Women's Day, the state implemented a different countertactic under the aegis of First Lady Hema Premadasa: a rally in another part of the city to which women were bussed in from various *Sēvā Vanithā* units affiliated to government departments, especially the armed forces.<sup>6</sup> While the Mothers' Front mourned the "disappeared," the women at the state counterrally mourned the deaths of male relatives who had been killed by the JVP in the south and by Tamil militants in the north and east. The state-owned *Daily News* (9 March 1991) carried an entire page of photographs of the state rally but no mention of the Mothers' Front rally.

In July 1992, the United National Party (UNP) government even inaugurated a UNP Mothers' Front in the Gampaha District, the stronghold of the Bandaranaike clan and thus synonymous with the SLFP. At its first meeting, the only female minister in the cabinet, Health and Women's Affairs Minister Renuka Herath, categorically declared, "It was the children of those mothers who slung photographs and marched who killed the children of you innocent mothers" (*Divaina*, 27 July 1992). She promised financial support for the members of the Gampaha District Mother's Front and to erect memorials to their children's bravery. The women were still waiting to have their promises fulfilled when the government was overthrown two years later.

### Religious Rituals as Resistance

The tactic of the Mothers' Front that most unnerved the government, especially the president, who was known to be extremely superstitious, was the skillful use of religious ritual as resistance. As Marx has so perceptively pointed out, "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress" (quoted in Comaroff, 1985: 252). Most fami-

lies of the "disappeared" were intimate with such manifestations of religious distress, which included beseeching gods and goddesses, saints, and holy spirits with special novenas (Catholic masses), penances, offerings, donations, and the chanting of religious verses over a period of months; taking vows, making pilgrimages, and performing *bodhi pūjās* (offerings to the Bo tree); and resorting to sorcery and the placement of charms and curses on those deemed responsible.

The SLFP first realized the powerful potential of publicized religious practices when members of the Mothers' Front participated in the SLFP-organized 180-mile *pāda yātrā* (march) to protest government policies and human rights violations, in March and April 1992. The absolute abandon and passion that the mothers displayed at the Devinuwara and Kataragama *dēvālēs* (temples), as they broke coconuts and beseeched the deities to return their sons and husbands, and heaped curses on those who had taken them away, surprised the SLFP organizers and provided tremendous photo opportunities for the media (e.g., *Divaina*, 4 April 1992). The president apparently took this collective and ritualized display personally; on the advice of his Malayalee swami, he immediately participated in a counterritual in which he was bathed by seven virgins. Sirimavo Bandaranaike (the leader of the SLFP) publicly linked the two events at the second national convention of the Mothers' Front on 23 June 1992, and her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga suggested at the convention that the mothers' curses during the march had effected the sudden and much-publicized disclosures of former deputy inspector general of police Premadasa Udugampola, who had masterminded the paramilitary hit squads that terrorized the southern and central provinces of Sri Lanka at the height of the JVP uprising in 1989–1991.

The ritual of religious resistance that received the most publicity and generated much comment was the *Dēva Kañnalawwa* (the beseeching of the gods), which took place in the afternoon of 23 June 1992. The Mothers' Front had picked the date because it was President Premadasa's birthday and coincided with the commencement of his extravagant brainchild: the *Gam Udāwa* (village reawakening) celebrations. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the wrathful speeches at the convention focused on his autocratic style of governance and megalomania. Afterward, the SLFP provided lunch to the mothers and bused them to the Kaliamma *kōvil* (temple) at Modera, where they were greeted by locked gates and a battalion of police standing guard. SLFP MP Alavi Moulana instructed the first group of mothers to break their coconuts outside the gates. Almost simultaneous with this and the loud chanting of "sādhu, sādhu" that rent the air, the gates were hastily opened by a somewhat chagrined senior police officer, though access to the inner sanctum was still denied. The small premises soon became packed with weeping and wailing

women, many of whom boldly cursed Premadasa and his government. Asilin, one of the mothers and my neighbor at the time, chanted over and over, "Premadasa, see this coconut all smashed into bits. May your head too be splintered into a hundred bits, so heinous are the crimes you have perpetrated on my child." Another mother wept, saying, "Premadasa, I bore this child in my womb for ten months. May you and your family be cursed not for ten days or ten weeks or ten months or ten years or ten decades but for ten eons."

The passion, the pathos, the power of these weeping, cursing, imploring mothers riveted the entire nation. Not only did the mothers make front-page news the next day and for much of that week but their display of grief was a topic of discussion for several months. Some alternative as well as mainstream Sinhala dailies and Sunday editions began series of articles that focused on individual families of the "disappeared." An editorial warning issued when the Front was founded now seemed prescient: "When mothers emerge as a political force it means that our political institutions and society as a whole have reached a critical moment—the danger to our way of life has surely come closer home" (*Island*, 20 February 1991).

### Counterrituals

To ward off the mothers' curses, President Premadasa sought refuge in an elaborate counterritual—the Kiriammāwarungē *Dānē* (the feeding of milk mothers), an archaic ceremony now connected with the Goddess Pattini.<sup>7</sup> On his birthday, 23 June 1992, the day of the commencement of *Gam Udāwa* (and the day of the Mothers' Front's *Dēva Kañnalawwa* at Modera), the president offered alms to sixty-eight (grand)mothers (*Silumina*, 28 June 1992). At the conclusion of *Gam Udāwa* and another *Dēva Kañnalawwa* organized by the Mothers' Front on a smaller scale at Kalutara, south of Colombo, on 3 July 1992, he offered alms to ten thousand (grand)mothers while North Central Provincial Council Minister for Health and Women's Affairs Rani Adikari chanted the *Pattini Kañnalawwa* to bring blessings on the president, the armed forces, and the country (*Daily News*, 7 June 1992).<sup>8</sup> Though the commonly held belief is that *Pattini* is predominantly a guardian against infectious diseases, she is also the "good mother" and ideal wife whose chief aim is to maintain "a just and rationally grounded society" and can thus be read as a counterpoint to the goddess that the Mothers' Front appealed to: the "bad mother" and evil demoness *Kali*, who deals with sorcery and personal and familial conflicts (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988: 158–60).

It was not only Premadasa who was disturbed by such rituals. The urbane minister of industries, science, and technology Ranil Wickremasinghe, warned, "If your children have disappeared, it is all right to beseech the gods. After all, if there is no one else to give you succor it is fitting to look to one's

gods. But if one conducts such *Dēva* *Kaṇḍalawwas* with thoughts of hate and revenge, it could turn into a *hūṇiyam* (black magic) and backfire on you" (*Divaina*, 13 July 1992). Ironically, despite such dire warnings and counter-rituals, Premadasa was the victim of a suicide bomber before a year was out. A few days after his death, a beaming Asilin came to see me with a comb of plantains (considered to be an auspicious gift). "He died just like the way I cursed him," she said triumphantly.

### Tears and Curses

The complicated interplay between the Mothers' Front and the state operated on a common terrain that took for granted the authenticity and efficacy of a mother's tears and curses. Though the state could retaliate that these women were not "good" mothers and that they were the pawns of a political party, it could not deny the mothers' right to weep or to curse because, after all, that was what was expected of women. Rather, when these women wept or cursed en masse and in public, it became an embarrassment for the state, which then organized its own "Fronts" to engage in counterrituals. In a context of violence and terror, the tears and curses of the mothers finally stirred a nation and shamed a government.

It is important to bear in mind that tears and curses differed in signification. A mother's tears are a familiar, emotive trope in the arts and a part of the public practices of grieving, such as at funerals. A mother's curses are a familiar yet less discussed practice mostly restricted to the private, religious domain. The SLFP had manipulated the emotive power of tears at the Mothers' Front rallies it had organized, but it was the spontaneity of the women themselves, during the *pāda yātrā*, that had suggested an alternative avenue of protest that was not merely emotive but powerful—in its staging as well as in the ferocity of its call for revenge. The presumption inherent in a curse—that it could bring about change through the intercession of a deity—complicates efforts (for a believer such as the president) to stall such change, for the curse now transcends the human. The use of curses as public protest and the use of religious ritual as resistance not only had no precedent in Sri Lanka but could circumvent emergency laws that were applicable to standard forms of political protest such as demonstrations and rallies.<sup>9</sup> To ban the right to religious worship was something an autocratic government that repeatedly defined itself as a protector of the people's interests would not dare to do. Not that the government did not toy with the idea. After all, the gates of the *Kaliānman kōvil* were locked when the Mothers' Front arrived, and the alternative media were quick to highlight such blatant violations of human rights (*Aththa*, 24 June 1992; *Divaina*, 6 July 1992).

For the members of the Mothers' Front, weeping and cursing were nothing

new. What was new was that the gaze of an entire nation was upon them and that their cause had achieved national prominence. One could also point out that despite their participation in a mass movement, their activism continued to be limited to tears and curses. It was quite common for politicians at the Mothers' Front rallies to exhort the mothers that it was "time to stop weeping and move beyond," while at the same time congratulating them for having brought about the sudden disclosures by the former deputy inspector general of police, Udugampola, the unnerving of Premadasa, and even the death of Wijeratne. This circumscribing of the mothers can be chiefly attributed to the fact that they had merely exchanged one structure of power riven with gender and class inequalities for another. Socialized within a society that defines women primarily through familial subject positions such as wives and mothers, these women might nevertheless have managed both to mobilize and transcend these categories had they chosen to organize themselves as the Mothers' Fronts in the north and east had done (see below) and as the *Madres* in Argentina continue to do. Mobilized and funded by a group of men who were representatives of a powerful political party, these women were never pushed to break out of gender and class stereotypes or to form links with other women's groups.

### The Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Male Orchestration

On an everyday level and in organizing rallies and rituals, the financial backing and infrastructural support of the SLFP were crucial. Mothers' Front members elected their own officers and ran their regional offices relatively autonomously but remained under the control of their respective SLFP MPs, who provided much of their funding and office space. The SLFP coordinators (such as Mangala Samaraweera) set the agenda for rallies planned in Colombo, handled the advertising, sent out invitations, and hired buses to transport women from various regions of the country. A couturier, Samaraweera was central in designing the Mothers' Front logo: the Sinhala letter *M* containing a mother cradling a baby. He acknowledged that he was instrumental in identifying the Front with the color yellow because yellow was not associated with any Sri Lankan political party and because it echoed the ribbons displayed in the United States that symbolized hope for the return of the American hostages held in Iran. His office drafted petitions for the Front—demanding an independent commission to inquire into "disappearances," and calling for the state to issue death certificates and to compensate the families of the "disappeared"—and organized the lobbying to bring these demands into effect.

It was the events held in Colombo, however, that made the SLFP/male dominance of the Mothers' Front the most visible. The following account of the 19 February rally in Nugegoda (a suburb of Colombo) is especially telling:

Most of the people on the stage, in the shade, are men, with perhaps two or three women visible. Most of the mothers, dressed in white, are seated at the foot of the stage in the sun. As the meeting starts, the press, cameras, videos spill onto the stage . . . sometimes even blocking the microphone and the speaker . . . the disrespect for the speakers is more apparent when a "mother" is speaking. . . . About twenty women's testimonies were interspersed among the politicians' speeches, which often took over fifteen minutes, to the five minutes the women seemed to use. (Confidential report, INFORM, 1991)

Though representatives of other opposition parties had been invited to speak, they were a mere "smattering" compared to the SLFP MPs "jostling on the stage," who in their speeches "were hell bent on making it a party political rally" (Confidential report, INFORM, 1991).<sup>10</sup> Even the two leading women in the SLFP, party leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike and her widowed daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, were obviously not committed to the Mothers' Front; their late arrivals and early exits annoyed many mothers who had hoped that these powerful women would be more approachable.

No attempt was made to rectify the errors of the previous year at the second national convention, which was held indoors and drew a more modest crowd on 23 June 1992. Once again, the stage was dominated by males mainly representing the SLFP. Of the twenty speakers, only eight were women, of whom four represented the SLFP. This gender imbalance created a marked spatial hierarchy that was completely contradictory to the goal of a national convention, where one would have thought that at least once a year, these mothers would have an opportunity to come to Colombo—the seat of power—and speak, and the politicians and concerned citizens would listen. On the contrary, what occurred was that the politicians on the stage were listened to by thousands of women seated below them who listened, wept, and wailed almost on cue. However, there were a few instances when women exceeded their roles as listeners: when their wailing drowned out a speaker; when a woman was so moved by a speaker that she insisted on sharing her own story; and when another demanded that she be allowed to hand a petition to Chandrika Kumaratunga while she was giving her speech. Yet, the majority of the women felt that at least this part of the meeting had been a useless exercise. One woman commented cynically, "At least this year they gave us a free lunch packet." The women's disillusionment with the SLFP-organized meetings and rallies stemmed not only from frustration at being marginalized but also from impatience with orthodox forms of political protest, such as when one politician after another either tried to absolve himself of blame for having participated in similar kinds of repression in the past or attempted to blame the state for all ills (views of some Mothers' Front members from the Matara District).

While the SLFP went to great lengths to build an antigovernment coalition by incorporating the participation of various political parties, progressive religious dignitaries, and specific interest groups, such as those representing the Organization of Parents and Families of the Disappeared and the Organization for the Disappeared Soldiers in the north-east, the majority of the mothers viewed the attempts as mere political ploys. The only worthwhile participation they were involved in, they felt, was when they were able collectively to beseech the deities on behalf of their "disappeared" and call for the punishment of those at fault. For someone like Asilin, who may never see her son again, the knowledge that she may have had a hand in the death of the president was indeed a powerful weapon in the hands of the weak.

### Class Domination

The only woman who rose to national prominence as a Mothers' Front spokesperson was Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu. The reasons for this hinged on her class position and social status. Dr. Saravanamuttu, a scion of a prominent Tamil family in Colombo, had married into an equally prominent Sinhala family, the de Zoysas. Her only child, Richard, was a popular actor, broadcaster, and journalist. Divorced for many years, she had an extensive medical practice. Her ancestry, professional status, and dignified bearing afforded her much respect among all ethnic groups in middle-class Sri Lankan society. She was transformed into a public personality when she courageously pressed charges against senior police officers for murdering her son, and an entire nation's sympathy was aroused when newspapers published photographs of her as she watched her son's burning pyre. When she had to flee the country because of threats to her life, she was also embraced by an international human rights community.

Dr. Saravanamuttu's main link with the women in the Mothers' Front was the shared pain of loss and grief. Yet, she counted herself more fortunate than they: "I am the luckiest woman in Sri Lanka—I got my son's body back" (*Amnesty Action*, November/December 1990). She was conscious from the outset of the chasm of inequality that divided her from the other mothers: they could not afford to leave Sri Lanka when their lives were threatened; they were not fluent in English or literate enough to file habeas corpus writs; the list was endless. But what the mothers appreciated was that Dr. Saravanamuttu made it clear that she genuinely cared about them and constantly tried to form bridges of friendship and support. Her speeches, often in faltering Sinhalese or simple English, always directly addressed the concerns of the mothers present—cautioning them to be "watch dogs" in regard to political parties, including the SLFP; reminding them that they were not alone in their grief, that Tamil women in the north and east were also suffering as were

women in faraway Latin America; and sharing the news that women around the globe had pledged their support to the Mothers' Front. When Dr. Saravanamuttu realized that the mothers had been sidelined at the 19 February rally, she quietly left the stage and mingled with the women below (Confidential report, INFORM, 1991). Her individual mission to fight her son's murderers in court was articulated as a battle waged for all mothers: "Most of them don't have the means to obtain justice. But I have the means and the social position. I'm doing this for every mother in Sri Lanka who has lost a son" (*Amnesty Action*, November/December 1990).

Dr. Saravanamuttu's overtures and actions were not sufficient to shatter an entrenched class and patronage structure. When the mothers sought the help of their MPs, they were following a familiar route of patronage between politicians and constituents: the people elect an MP and then expect him or her to look after them. Even if the quid pro quo arrangement does not often work in practice, it is a last resort in the face of despair. MP Mangala Samaraweera noted that in his father's day, people would line up outside his office requesting jobs; in his day, people lined up outside his house asking him to find their sons and husbands (*Lankadeepa*, 28 June 1992).

#### Erasing Tamil Women's Agency

It was extremely unfortunate that the SLFP, in its efforts to build an oppositional coalition against the government through the Mothers' Front rallies in Colombo, did not make a sustained effort to forge links with minority ethnic parties or organizations, except for a token representation from the Eelam Peoples' Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). The most glaring absence was that no member of the original Mothers' Front—which began in the north of Sri Lanka in 1984 and later spread to the eastern part of the island—was invited to speak or even mentioned as providing inspiration for the Mothers' Front in the south at any of its meetings. In fact, when I questioned Mangala Samaraweera on that Front's antecedents, he promptly mentioned the *Madres of Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, whose strategy of marching with photographs of their "disappeared" he had introduced among the Sri Lankan women. I found it quite astonishing that he did not think it worth mentioning that there had been an earlier parallel in his own country. Thus, in a seeming move to internationalize the southern Mothers' Front, its organizers were completely erasing the agency of Tamil women not just from their own memory, but from the memory of an entire population in the south. In fact, it was Gamini Navaratne, the former editor of an important English-language weekly in Jaffna, the *Saturday Review*, and one of the few Sinhalese civilians who chose to remain in the north during the height of the Civil War in the 1980s, who attempted to set the record straight, albeit in a somewhat skewed

fashion. He disputed the claims made by the organizers of the southern Mothers' Front that it was "the first of its kind in Sri Lanka" and reproduced an article he had written in 1984 reporting on the first march organized by the northern Mothers' Front to protest the arrest of more than five hundred Tamil youths by the Sri Lankan state. It is dismaying that he trivialized the agency of Tamil women by portraying himself as the instigator and ultimate hero of that protest campaign (*Island*, 3 March 1991).

The northern Mothers' Front, like its southern counterpart, was active only for about two years.<sup>11</sup> However, unlike the newer Mothers' Front, it was controlled by and consisted of women from all classes who "mobilized mass rallies, and picketed public officials demanding the removal of military occupation and protesting against arrests. Not only the spirit, but also the enormous numbers that they were able to mobilize, spoke loudly of the high point to which such mass organizations, especially of women [could] rise" (Hoole et al., 1990: 324). The northern Mothers' Front also inspired Tamil women in the east to begin their own branch, which in 1986 took to the streets with rice pounders to prevent a massacre of members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) by the LTTE (Hensman, 1992: 503). In 1987, one of its members, Annai Pupathi, fasted to death to protest the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF). She was subsequently immortalized by the LTTE (it was common knowledge that the LTTE had forced her to keep at her fast), which now offers a scholarship in her memory. It was finally the increasing hegemony of the LTTE and its suppression of all independent, democratic organizations that did not toe the line that pushed the Mothers' Front in the north and east into political conformism, thereby losing its wide appeal and militancy. "It became another Y.W.C.A"; its central structure, mainly made up of middle-class women finally confined itself to works of charity (Hoole et al., 1990: 324). Many members also migrated abroad or to Colombo. Several in Colombo now work with southern feminist organizations with which they had had close ties. These women were an available resource that the organizers of the southern Mothers' Front chose to ignore, with one exception: Ms. S. Sujewardhanam, from Batticaloa, who had been invited to be part of the presidium at the first national convention of the Mothers' Front on 19 February 1991, along with Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu (Colombo) and Ms. D. G. Seelawathi (Matarata). In contrast to the huge open-air public rally held later on that day and attended by more than fifteen thousand people (one of the country's biggest public gatherings in recent years), the convention of the Mothers' Front was much more focused on procuring international support and was attended by more than one hundred foreign invitees representing embassies, NGOs, and the press. It was in the organizers' interest to create an image that proclaimed that the Mothers' Front was not antigovernment but propeace

and, more important, that it was being run by women from different ethnic groups and classes. Much concern was expressed about the plight of the mothers in the north and east and the need to form branches in those regions (Confidential report, INFORM, 1991).

The organizers had dispensed with such rhetoric, however, by the time of the second national convention in 1992. Only two of the twenty speakers mentioned the suffering of Tamil mothers, and, with the exception of Dr. Saravanamuttu, no Tamils were given an opportunity to address the gathering. The absence of Tamil or other minority participation in the Mothers' Front meetings reduced the possibilities of launching a more integrated, national protest campaign that could have also gained much from the experiences of Tamil women in the north and east of the island.

### Conclusion

The members of the Mothers' Front were motivated not by ideology but by circumstance to participate in a protest campaign against the state. Despite repeated assertions that it was not political or antigovernment, the Front generally identified representatives of the state as perpetrators of "disappearances"; the president, the supreme repository of state power, was its key target. Yet, the fact that the main opposition party, the SLFP, was coordinating the organization justifies doubt about its nature. However, the political participation of so many women articulating a specific subjectivity, that is, motherhood, had been unheard of until the Mothers' Fronts in the north and east took to the streets in 1984 and 1986 and the southern Mothers' Front demonstrated despair and anger through public, collective, ritualized curses. Despite the limitations inherent in the identification with the familial and the nurturant, and the mobilization of feminized repertoires of protest such as tears and curses, these women did manage to create a space for protest in a context of terror and violence. In fact, the contingent power of their protest stemmed from their invocation of "traditional" sensibilities and the engendering of emotional responses by presenting themselves before a government and a nation as grief-stricken, chronic mourners for their "disappeared" whose only resort now was to beseech the deities for justice. Ironically, in a time when the protesting voices of several left-wing feminist and human rights activists had been silenced with death, it was the mothers' sorrowful and seemingly apolitical rhetoric and practices that alerted a nation to the hypocrisy of the state.

The Front's politicization of motherhood by frequently linking it to a discourse of rights and dissent (cf. Schirmer, 1989: 26) was continued to its full realization through the campaign strategies of SLFP politicians and, in the 1994 general elections, prime ministerial candidate Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. Herself a grieving widow and mother, she cleverly articulated

the mothers' suffering as both a personal and national experience. She too "sorrowed and wept" with them but also made it clear that she was capable of translating her grief into action, of building a new land where "other mothers will not suffer what we suffer."<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Ms. Kumaratunga's embodiment of these grassroots women's suffering also usurped their space of protest; the materiality of their lives was sacrificed for an election slogan.

What has become of the thousands of women in the Mothers' Front? Have their lives changed significantly with a more progressive government in power? The new government has appointed three Commissions of Inquiry to look into the "disappearances" and killings that occurred during 1988–1991.<sup>13</sup> We cannot yet predict what will result. Maybe the women will receive individual hearings, another chance to demand that the perpetrators of violence be brought to justice. Maybe their "disappeared" will be restored to them. Perhaps they will receive financial compensation, although that would pale in comparison to all that they have lost, sometimes even their sanity.

It also remains to be seen how the women's involvement, however marginal, in a protest campaign has changed their lives. Although the majority of women who were part of the movement had been relegated to their homes and to the margins of an increasingly militarized society throughout much of their lives, the Mothers' Front did provide some opportunities to air their grievances and anger in public and to create strong networks among themselves. Several groups of these women have now formed links with feminist groups and other nongovernmental organizations that are providing them with trauma counseling and help with establishing self-employment projects. Yet the numbers are minuscule relative to the thousands of women and their families across the country who continue to grieve and to bear the livid scars of a nation-state that has blood on its hands.

### Notes

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1. The Mothers' Front was inspired by and shares much with similar organizations in Latin America, but I want to highlight here the importance of historical and material specificities rather than make comparisons of different movements.
2. On 20 May 1990, the Organization of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (OPFMD) was formed to do similar work among the families of "disappeared" trade union workers and left-wing activists. It was closely aligned with Vasudeva Nanayakkara, opposition MP and politburo member of the left-wing N SSP (Nava Sama Samāja Pakshaya). The OPFMD rarely received as much publicity as the Mothers' Front, but it supported the Front and joined in its rallies, and members of the Front often participated in OPFMD rallies (see n. 9).
3. Mr. Samaraweera reports that a branch office set up independently in Weligama (in the southern Province) was attacked by thugs.
4. The event of "disappearance" not only inscribed the minds of family members with anguish but also turned their bodies into ciphers of agony. Most seemed to suffer from trauma-related neuroses: children who stopped speaking; old and young women who complained of memory loss, fainting spells, seizures, weight loss, severe chest pains, and the like; and fathers who died of sudden heart attacks.
5. When Wijeratne was killed in a bomb blast in late March 1991, many Front members and SLFP organizers directly connected his death to the efficacy of their collective protest.
6. All wives of government officials and all female officials had to join this national social service organization, *Sēva Vanithā*, which replicated the hierarchical structure of the government in that the president's wife was the leader, cabinet ministers' wives were below her, and so on.
7. For a brief description and analysis of this ritual, see Gombrich (1971); for a discussion of its origins, see Obeyesekere (1984), especially 293–96.
8. However, this was not the first time the president publicly participated in this ritual (e.g., *Lankadeepa*, 13 January 1992; *Island*, 22 March 1992). Nevertheless, the repetition of this ritual within such a short period and on such a grand scale suggests it was not mere coincidence. The ritual is usually performed with just seven (grand)mothers, and the chief (grand)mother, rather than a politician, leads the chanting.

9. Besides its efforts to ban demonstrations in February 1991, the state also attempted to ban and later curtailed a protest march of the Mothers' Front organized in Kalutara on 3 July 1992 (to coincide with the end of the Gam Udāwa) by forbidding the Front to carry its banner and insisting that the women walk in single file. As a news report pointed out, there were as many policemen as there were mothers (*Divaina*, 4 July 1992). On World Human Rights Day, 11 November 1992, a sit-down protest coordinated by the Organization of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (OPFMD) and joined by some Mothers' Front organizers like Mahinda Rajapakse was teargassed and baton charged by the Riot Squad, leaving several of the leaders injured (*Island*, 12 November 1992).
10. Mahinda Rajapakse did make an effort to rectify this gender imbalance halfway through the meeting, but since the stage was already very crowded, few women took up his offer (Confidential report, INFORM, 1991).
11. I gratefully acknowledge the help of R. Cheran, Sarvam Kailasapathy, and Chitra Maunaguru in connection with the following material.
12. Excerpted from Ms. Kumaratunga's final advertisement before the elections that was published in both Sinhala and English newspapers.
13. While the previous government did appoint a commission to investigate "disappearances" due to intense pressure exerted by the Mothers' Front as well as international human rights organizations, it empowered the commission to look only into "disappearances" that occurred from the commission's date of appointment, 11 January 1991, rather than during the height of the repression in the south, January 1988. The commissions appointed under the new regime, although rectifying this error, continue to ignore the atrocities that were perpetrated in the north and east by the previous regime because it is not empowered to investigate "disappearances" of Tamil youth as far back as 1979, under the guise of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (cf. *Pravada*, 1/2 1995).