



Readers' Forum



■■■ Necessary Adjustments ■■■

I am glad that you reacted so kindly to my letter of regret to your subscription renewal reminder. First, I react by renewing the subscription. Second, I feel I should give you the feedback you have asked for at some length because I do feel that MANUSHI has the potential to fulfill the needs of a cause that demands national attention.

I have been deeply interested in the role of women in India and how our ancient cultures gave women a place of great importance. As an English historian put it: Indians were a very practical people. In ancient India while they gave their gods due importance, they put them safely away on the high Himalayas, but they were practical enough to create a number of goddesses for their day to day needs – for knowledge, Saraswati; for protection Durga; for wealth, Lakshmi. They looked to them for their welfare, knowledge and values.

A millennia later, following a thousand years of foreign domination, Gandhiji renewed the importance of the role of women in his fight for national sovereignty. There was Sarla Devi, Sarojini Naidu, and of course, the leading role played by Annie Besant who, despite being British, served the cause of India and laid the foundations of the Indian freedom struggle. We also went back to name India, Bharat Mata. Somehow, half a century into freedom, we have changed our culture and are today creating the Jayalalithas, Maya Devis, Phoolan Devis and others; all women of courage but negatively aggressive.

What we need of our women today, in their effort to penetrate the 'glass ceiling', is first, a statement of their problems, the proper solutions and their implementation, not only a constant reiteration of the problems. Second, for women who reach a position of influence in society, we need them to act in a manner that achieves societal recognition for its wisdom, integrity, transparency and competence. Instead, all we get is drama from Medha Patkar and now, Arundhati Roy regarding the Narmada dam issue. They are great women, and bold, but they could achieve much more if they sat together with those who want to build the Dam for a public purpose, to work out

practical solutions that would help the villagers while also producing power. Let women introduce a new culture that leads to synthesis and not to conflict.

I had the privilege of appointing India's first woman manager in Hindustan Lever in 1946. I have encouraged women in the State Trading Corporation, Punjab National Bank and all the institutions I have moved into. Yet, half a century later, no women head any of those organisations. They are still under the 'glass ceiling'. If you analyse this, perhaps the cause is not society, which is open to anyone who is qualified, but the women themselves, because they have not yet made the necessary adjustments to meet the requirements and responsibilities of a professional career, especially when it comes to mobility. They rightly get married and have children, but thus are not amenable to transfer in organisations, which may be necessary to widen their experience and responsibility. Their argument is: who will look after the home? what will my family do if I am away on tour or move to another place? This lack of mobility at work diminishes the likelihood of promotion.

Many girls today, especially in urban areas, receive an advanced education. The question is, how to cope with a home and a career? The answer is to bring up their sons to be working men and, one day, house men, sharing the work at home with their wives. Sweden was the first country to first give woman maternity leave and then, when a women went back to work, the man had paternity leave to look after the children. Our mothers will have to teach their boys the culture of housework as they teach the girls. They must raise children, boys or girls, with an ethos of shared domestic responsibility.

The time has come to initiate a serious analysis of the place of our women in society and how to augment their contribution and their relevance in order to make the society holistic. India is already ahead of the West with regard to women. We have produced more women leaders than the West. It was good to read in the BJP election promises that they will implement the 33 per cent reservations for women. Yet somehow, we have still have a long way to go.

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