



## Letters To Manushi

### Different Title

I have just received **Manushi** No. 36 containing my article on Muslim women in Ahmedabad. I am afraid I was rather disappointed to see the title you have given. The article is about the common sufferings of all poor women workers, even though I have mentioned that Muslims suffer the most.

I feel that the title you have chosen, "Aren't All these Also Banos?" What Muslim Women Suffer, does not accurately represent the contents.

My title was: "Living with Communal Violence—The Experience of Women Workers in Ahmedabad".....

**Mirai Chatterjee, Ahmedabad**

### 'Charity' Industry

I felt sad on reading the report on the exploitation of women, "How Tata Treats Its Women Employees" in **Manushi** No. 36.

During the last few decades, the House of Tatas, like many other industrial houses, is always shouting from the roof top about its great national and social services.

These industrial houses try to claim all sorts of undue advantages from government and other authorities, on the pretext of charitable works they want to undertake for the benefit of the public.

Thus, charity is made into a commercial and business proposition....

**Shalil Ghosfa, Bombay**

### Effective Remedy ?

....I think the effective remedy for the disadvantages Indian women suffer is reservation. There is nothing more 'untouchable' than being reduced to objects of sex and domestic labour. There is nothing more 'backward' than being confined at home and not being allowed to educate oneself. This discrepancy is not a recent post Vedic age phenomenon as are others. The female caste existed from the very advent of Man.

Why cannot 50 percent of every category be reserved for women? The argument is no more radical than the one used for the regular reservations in this country.

What the fathers did to their daughters, let the sons undo.....

**G. Venkataramana Rao, Vijayawada**

### For Breathing Space

I am a journalist from Pakistan. I have written a book on women of Pakistan, which views ruthlessly the ideologies of Islam concerning women. I had to leave the country before it was known that I had written this book.

I feel I have the right to be heard. I also feel that it is important that women start investigating the ideologies that enslave them the most.....

History proves that religious ideologies, even when thought to be different from one another, have many

things in common. One of these is their unparalleled contempt for women.....It was the momentum of religious hysteria that made people kill as many as 30,000 women within one year in France alone in medieval times. The fact that these women were declared witches before being burnt to death only indicates the inhuman attitude towards women of the Christian society.....

It was only after religion in Christian societies was pushed back to its restricted place that women found a breathing space. It was now possible for them to start to think of living like human beings and not exist like an afterthought of god.

Similarly, Islamic ideology, according to the Holy Quran, does not accept a woman as a human being in her own right. A woman is created for man to use and abuse. "And men are in charge of women because they spend of their property on them", says the Quran.

The women's movement in Muslim countries has to come to terms with the fact that, rhetoric apart, the Quran has an extremely biased view of women. When an ideology, whether conceived by man or by god, is so thoroughly contemptuous of half of the believers while the other half finds it acceptable to put this into practice, one has no way out but to fight both.....

The women's movement in Pakistan and other Muslim countries has also to get rid of the popularly held delusion that violence being done to women in the name

of Islam comes not from the Quran but from an incorrect interpretation of the Quran...

Indeed, these laws are in accordance with the Quran. Not only does a council of Islamic ideologues say so but anyone who reads the can find them there.....

Will the women's movement keep on justifying Islam while proclaiming that they are fighting for women's rights in Muslim countries?

**Fauzia Rafiq, Canada**

### Saving Fuel

The Yantra Vidyalaya at Bandoli in Surat district, Gujarat, has designed a fuel efficient stove called the *Damroo Chulha*. It is made of mud, sawdust and sand.

A *chulha* project was launched in 10 villages of Songadh in Surat district with the help of Amari Mandali. This is a voluntary organisation working exclusively with tribal women, girls and children in remote villages. This area is largely inhabited by Gammit tribals whose main occupation is subsistence agriculture.

We held several live demonstrations in different villages to show the advantages of the new *chulha* over the traditional *chulha*. The demonstration models were left behind with a family from the village for familiarisation..

During our first demonstration in Borpada village, we used small pieces of wood to illustrate the efficiency of the *chulha*. At the end of the demonstration, the women felt that it would be difficult to break up wood into such small pieces. One woman said: "It is a man's job to chop the wood and he would never agree to chop it to small". In later demonstrations, we started using the same size wood as they do.

After the demonstration, when the *chulhas* were under preparation, one woman suggested we make the window for the wood wider. This helped us in using thicker wood pieces but we felt it may affect the stove's efficiency.

We also observed the different ways in which families adopted the *chulha*. One

woman used it without the lower ring and the grill which widened the opening for the wood window. Almost no family used the iron ring on the top of the *chulha* as this seemed impractical to them.

At each demonstration, a minimum of 10 women reported. Men and children also watched these demonstrations with interest. But in all the demonstrations we held, we noticed that women were restless and did not want to stay on for the entire demonstration.

We also had problems in training the girls in *chulha* making as it is not a local skill. Besides, this *chulha* was



comparatively more labour intensive than the other stoves they make.

After completing 25 *chulhas*, we approached the Forest Department at Vyara in Surat district to ask for funding the project. Here, we were told that the existing scheme was not for the Songadh area. This is ironical as Songadh is only 15 kilometres away from Vyara.

**Mohini Gadhia, Mira Tanna, Surat**

### The Joys Of Middle Age

I will be 42 this month. Distinctly middle aged. So how do I feel? Not bad at all! In

fact I feel pretty good!

When I hear people bemoaning their lost youth and hankering after the good old days when they were young or in college, I shudder and can't help wondering what was so great about those days, when I personally felt tense and insecure. Men treated you as a sex object and women were your competitors in the race to attract the male. This hollow, superficial living was pretty horrible and I was being slowly covered up by so many layers of inessentials that no one knew who I really was, least of all myself! I was so busy racing, competing and winning that I never gave myself the chance to save the person being smothered inside.

Well, all that is behind me now and at last I can relax. Life has become as comfortable as an old kurta. It's a lovely feeling that men no longer consider me sexually attractive or are merely interested in my body. It means I can stop and chat to a man, be warm and affectionate, without him and the world thinking that I want to go to bed with him; that I can have close friendships with women without rivalry and competition. In many ways, I feel liberated!

This liberation, of course, is not merely due to the fact that youth and its problems are behind me but to two other important factors. One is that I discovered in my thirties what I really wanted to do with my life and that gave me meaning, motivation and direction. Fortunately, it was something where a person was not measured by physical and material attributes but by qualities of character and soul. These qualities improve with age unlike youth and beauty. If not inherent they can be acquired and the effort involved in doing so carries its own satisfaction and reward even if one is not particularly successful. I no longer feel insecure about getting old and ugly. In fact, it has proved an asset to my work rather than a liability!

The second thing to which I owe my sense of liberation is that I have been able to find a husband-companion who is one

of the few men I know who not only talks of equality for women but actually practises this in daily life.

So, it is a combination of these social and personal factors that makes me feel life is stimulating, where I can get down to the real challenges of being a human being without getting sidetracked by inessentials.

There is no doubt, however, that it is quite an indictment of our society that a woman can only feel safe and secure when she is middle aged and unattractive. But that is the way things are at present. All I can say is, it's marvellous to be middle aged!

Oh, the joy of not having to sit uncomfortably with knees and ankles demurely pressed together. To be able to shout and laugh aloud without being considered unladylike, to put one's feet up or slap someone heartily on the back without being considered forward.....

**Srilata Swaminadhan, Rajasthan**

### **Not As Pleasant**

...A point that needs comment is how a single woman is considered 'available' in north India. A friend of mine whose marriage was breaking up had to move out of her husband's flat. She said that if renting or buying a small place in Bombay was impossible she would go off to Calcutta. I asked if Delhi was not a pleasanter place. She replied that there are far too many men who consider themselves god's gift for a single or unattached woman.

In Pune and Bombay, on the other hand, after a film show finishing at 9.30 p.m., girls get on to their cycles or motorbikes and go horns without any fear. If anyone misbehaves with a girl on a Pune street, he is likely to be beaten up by passers by....

**Naira Ahmadullah, Bombay**

### **Burnt For Dowry**

To add one more insult to womanhood, a heinous incident of brideburning took place at laxmangarh in Rajasthan. The

victim this time was my niece Mrs Rekha Pareek.

Ever since her marriage in 1982, Rekha was subjected to ill treatment and torture by her in-laws. They used to abuse and harass her. Her 'fault' was that she did not bring sufficient dowry for them from her parents. Under this physical and mental torture Rekha's health deteriorated and she had an attack of tuberculosis. Her parents took her to their house in Ramgarh where she was undergoing medical treatment and was recovering.

Suddenly, one day, Rekha's husband, Sushil, came to Ramgarh and insisted on taking her back to his house. Her parents explained that she was undergoing treatment and as soon as she had fully recovered she could return with him. But



Sushil insisted and forced them to send Rekha with him to her in-laws.

On June 13, 1986, this heinous crime took place. Her husband, Sushil, her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law, and her husband's older brother conspired together and burnt her to death. They also tried to remove all evidence of the crime.

The case of murder that took place on June 13, 1986, was, however, at last registered with the Laxmangarh police on June 25, 1986 (FIR No. 89/86) but till date the culprits have been reported

absconding and have not been brought to trial.

**L.P. Kesot, Calcutta**

*Dated October 17*

...I have a girlfriend named Shashi in New Delhi. She was forcibly married 10 years ago to a man named P. N. Sahni who works in the CBI. He is 15 years older than she is. He tortured her physically and mentally, and her family, feeling afraid of her husband's position, did not help her. Three years ago, I happened to be her neighbour. At first, I wanted to keep away but my principles did not let me behave like a coward.

Afterwards, our friendship turned into love. We decided to get married. I am 28 years old and She is 33. So our decision was not an emotional outburst.

I tried to get her a job. She has outstanding potential in writing and drawing. But her husband's maltreatment increased. So I resigned my job in Delhi and took her with me to Bangalore on September 4.

Using his contacts in the police Sahni, with two of Shashi's five brothers, came to Bangalore and came with the police to harass us. Shashi stated that she had come of her own free will and was not willing to go back. Her brother, Balakrishna Kohli wanted to take her back to Delhi because, he said, her father had fallen seriously ill when she left. He gave an assurance to me in the presence of the assistant police commissioner's representative that he would ensure her safety and allow us to marry after she got a divorce. So he took her back to Delhi on September 16.

But now they have gone back on their word. They have completely restricted her movements. They are using money, power, influence with the police and even press, publicity to defame me. I received two letters from Shashi, describing her misery and pleading for my help. So I request you to please take immediate steps to save her life and inform me by telegram.....

*Dated November 3*

...Before I wrote you my first letter, on

October 4, she was burnt to death. I had taken sleeping pills, to commit suicide and was recovering in hospital when this happened. I came to know this only very recently from a newspaper...

I know she would not have committed suicide. This was a planned murder. Because on October 3, she wrote to me: "I am in trouble. They are making some plan. I don't know what their plan is. Come to Delhi quickly." The very next morning, she was burnt to death.

Madam, they treated her throughout her life like a washing, cooking and bedroom machine. When the machine became uncontrollable, they burnt it to ashes. Her younger son, seeing her condition, had told her: "Mummy, you go with uncle (myself). I will come to you later."

She loved him very much so I too love him. She told me once that if anything happened to her, I should save him.

The Delhi police want to close the case only because of Sahni's position...

**Udayan, Bangalore**

### Struggling To Protect Themselves

The struggle that was started in 1977 by women of Khirakot village in Almora district to protect their common grazing grounds and neighbouring forests, has now spread to different parts of Uttarakhand (in Uttar Pradesh).

Last year, residents of Pethi, "Sliding and Chowada villages, situated above the snowline, brought pressure on the local district commission to call off the work in Khadia thine which had ruined their grazing grounds. Soon after, the village women planted saplings to heal the scarred landscape.

The recent struggle of the women of Nahin Kalan, a village 40 kilometres from Dehradun, is very similar. The extensive damage to green cover by the 26 year old limestone mine here has to be seen to be believed. Thousands of trees were felled to clear a way for the road constructed to facilitate the transportation of stone from

the mine.

The nearby mouth of the rivers Vidalna and Udalna was once a dense forest where the villagers took their cattle for grazing and the women collected fodder. They also made baskets and floor mats for their use from the *ringle* trees. Today, the area is denuded.

The loss of forest cover has led to the erosion of the steep slopes along the course of river Jakhan. The resulting debris even buried Balbir Singles windmill. Deprived of his livelihood, he and his family have become destitute.

Debris from the mine also falls unchecked into the river, increasing siltation. The contractor of the mine, C. J. Gujral, turned a blind eye when the



accumulated debris forced some families to leave the village.

The villagers stopped grazing their cattle in the forest ever since two cows were hit by boulders displaced by dynamite blasting. The women who went to collect fodder now live in constant fear of their lives. Said Chaman Devi: "Not only do we have to shield our head from the stones being dispersed by mine blasting, while we are collecting fodder or working in the fields, but also protect our persons from the evil intentions of the outsiders working in the mines. Look how the 100 metre high Manda falls and the waters of the Judkhala have dried up? These jungles which provided us with fodder are like parental homes to us. Once resounding with the calls of different birds and animals, the

forest has now fallen silent and we no longer feel secure in it."

However, the women decided not to be silent spectators of the slow destruction of their environment and their way of life. Nearly 30 of them held a sit-in protest at Sinstharu Khala and vowed not to allow the contractors' trucks to Nahin Kalan. These women understand the symbiotic relationship between nature and the local economy and are determined to preserve it even if it costs them their lives.

In this, they have the support of their neighbours, the inhabitants of Talai village. Their local canal has been completely submerged by debris from the mine. Set up at a cost of Rs 290,000, the irrigation system has been rendered useless by abundant debris brought by the Jakhan river. The villagers say that if Jakhan swells like the Sursa river many families might be rendered homeless in the next quarter. The river swells during the monsoons and floods its banks. A week after the rain stops, however, it is as dry as a sandy tract.

In the name of progress and development, cultivation and cattle rearing, the livelihood of the people of Uttarakhand is being destroyed. This blatant use of natural resources by industrialists is proving to be a matter of life and death at the village level.

**Radha Bhatt, Indore**  
(translated from Hindi)

### Identify Variations

I read Madhu Kishwar's article on dowry in **Manushi** No. 34. It is a very well written article which demolishes all arguments in favour of dowry. I found, however, that your central thesis that dowry is a manifestation of contempt for women is not correct, or, at least, has not been convincingly argued.

In a number of places you have pointed out that in certain communities of India either dowry is not prevalent or "daughters do not have to go to their in-laws..." (p. 12). It will strengthen your case a great deal if these communities had been

identified and more details provided.

While it is true that women everywhere in India have been assigned a status subordinate to men, there are differences in different parts of the country. For example, in the North, eve teasing or restrictions on women's ability to move about freely are considered perfectly normal. This is not the case in Maharashtra or at least not in Pune. The point is that while in one community certain restrictions are imposed upon women and these are considered natural, in another community, these restrictions are not imposed, while

some others may be. A comprehensive article identifying such instances will go a long way in convincing people that these are not natural but are socially imposed and hence questionable.....

**Rajinder Chaudhary, Rohtak**

*(translated from Hindi)*

### An Inspiration

...Today, many Dalit women have entered the professions of law, medicine, academics and administration. Yet, these women are made to feel socially inferior.

As Dalit women are coming into their

own, a need has been felt to give their ideas a context and a voice. There are many Dalit women who express their thoughts in writing. Several are accomplished in the arts. But, until recently there was no institution to discover their talents or to relay their scattered voices.

On September 2, the first ever Dalit women's literary forum, was set up in Bombay under the guidance of poet Hira Bansode. Also, present at the occasion were several eminent Marathi litterateurs. This literary forum has been given, the name Samvadini.

**Shakuntala Vahwal, Bombay**

## Convention On Communalism

AN important convention on communalism and the threat to diversity was held in Calcutta from November 7 to 10, 1986. It was jointly sponsored by a number of prominent figures from all over the country, but the initiative was taken by Vaskar Nandy, who belongs to one of the factions of the CPI (ML). This group also provided the organisational base for the convention. About 300 delegates from different parts of the country, including states like Nagaland, which are rarely represented in such meetings, attended.

A notable feature of the convention was the presence of people from many of the minority communities in India—Dalits, tribals, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. It was interesting that while most of the delegates who happened to belong to minority communities assumed the role of spokespersons for their communities, the Hindus present seemed to be present either in their individual capacity or as representatives of their organisations and did not assume that they represented the Hindu community.

As a result, most speakers tended to dwell on the grievances of minority communities rather than initiating a dialogue between communities on how to resolve the situation of confrontation and violence that is developing in the country today.

An important outcome of the

convention was the articulation of the sentiment by various minorities that when put together, they constitute the overwhelming majority of India's population, and that they would not feel as vulnerable if they could make common cause with each other. A common grievance of all the minorities was that while the Hindu majority is assumed to be patriotic, any sign of dissent by a minority is perceived as not only an affront to the majority, but is also dubbed antinational.

After a common plenary session, the convention split into three workshops : on religious minorities, on nationalities and regional identities and on Dalits and tribals. Even in the workshops, declamatory speeches rather than discussion took place.

On November 10, a big public rally was organised at Shahid Maidan, Calcutta, joined by thousand of cadres from various parts of north Bengal. Unfortunately, very few people from Calcutta seem to have joined the rally. The public meeting was addressed by Rajni Kothari, Balraj Puri and various representatives of minority communities.

The highlight of the convention was an exhibition of paintings by several eminent artists. The common theme in the paintings by Navjot, Arpana, Altaf, Nalini Malani and others was the havoc caused by communal violence and repeated

massacres. There were also touching water colour paintings by children of the Sikh families who were victims of the November 1984 massacre in Delhi.

A major shortcoming of the convention was the failure to mention, let alone discuss, the special problems faced by women of minority communities. Women face discrimination not only as Dalits,» Muslims, Christians or tribals, but are also denied their human rights within each community. Therefore^ we need to strengthen women's struggle within the community even while we safeguard the minorities from attacks by the majority community.

For instance, while there was much discussion of the denial of equal opportunities in education and employment to Dalits, tribals and Muslims, there was no mention of the fact that within each of these communities, there is a growing gap between male and female literacy rates and that the few available to these communities even on a reservation basis, are usually cornered by the men of the community.

The meeting was predominantly attended by men and the organiser\* had allowed no space for discussion of women's issues. The few women present somehow failed to put women's issues on the agenda.

—Madhu