



Letters to Manushi

Concept Of Autonomy

Your editorial in **Manushi** No. 38 spelt out a new concept for me—that of autonomy. It gave me new, insights—mobility, decision making and freedom to form alliances would require a framework of thought—a major taboo for women in our society.

No wonder then that so many of us talk in painfully correct accents about education being a life-long process and then wrap ourselves in domestic complacency or resign ourselves to domestic misery. Our salaries and degrees have not changed things and will not, until we take a long hard look at ourselves.

I kept thinking also about the letter to **Manushi** about a woman found dead—murder or suicide? It is indeed a hard choice—to live or die. But do your tormentors deserve the sacrifice of your life? It's a question many slowly dying women should ask. In the midst of an overwhelming absurdity, suicide would be the crowning act of absurdity. Realising this, a person could gather inner strength and resistance.

Revenge

*When you shout in your loud, hysterical voice
that your misfortunes began the day
I stepped into your house
I would shout "It's the same here"
If only my voice, were not weak from
disuse.
But maybe mine began earlier, at
birth
I have no memories*

*pain past, pain present
pain to be exist in continuum.
Wrinkles and aching joints
tell me I've lived, aged and changed.
This morning as prickly rays prise
open
my swollen eyes, something still
stirs
beneath my battered head.
If you're a monster
you can be confounded.
A ridiculous monster
—more ridiculous, less monstrous--
I laugh and laugh and you shrink
back
quaking at my maniac laughter.*

*Hard luck, husband dear.
Your plans to secure sympathy
at the suicide of your dull witted
wife
and to find another
are going to fall through.*

*For I very much intend to live,
fastened to you—like a glistening
leech.
Laugh, live and exult,
(partly for her who has escaped
you)*

*I'll live and laugh,
a wicked, cunning, crazy creature.*

M. Geetha, Kerala

Tall Talk

The letters published in **Manushi** No. 39 give us in a nutshell what **Manushi** is

all about. I fully agree with Lucy Carroll that almost all TV advertisements expose the double standards of our government which speaks against dowry and for the emancipation of women but in reality, strives to perpetuate the former, thereby putting off the latter. Every insurance advertisement makes it a point to advise viewers to save for their daughter's marriage. Advertisements in general show women as sex symbols or obedient housewives.

Our government's tall talk of promoting a higher status for women sounds as stupid and shallow as the saying on a cigarette pack: "Cigarette smoking is injurious to health" or the saying outside an arrack shop that liquor is bad and should not be drunk ...

Latha Ramakrishnan, Madras

The Happy Part

We are a group of village women in Tamil Nadu. Our villages are around Dindigul.

We come together in Dindigul two or three days a month because we are all animators of our villages' women's literacy classes. Our students are mostly young girls as the older women find it hard to get to the classes of an evening.

Most of the women and girls we teach are agricultural workers earning Rs 3 a day. Their day begins at 8 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. They dare not ask for the Rs 6 which is advertised on the boards as not only will they not get employment again but their families and maybe their whole village

will get blacklisted amongst the surrounding landlords.

Despite the hardship of the work, the girls' and women's only complaint is the poor salary. Some little girls work in a betelnut factory and if they work very fast and do not take a lunch break, they can earn Rs 5 per day.

One of us, Rosamal, is 24 years old. She has two children—a girl of eight years and a small boy. Rosamal has very strong feelings about the starvation and neglect of young village girls. Because she was a girl, her family did not want her. They hardly fed her and were very cruel. Her own daughter Jancie Mary is protected and loved and Rosamal's mother now regrets the way Rosamal was treated. The mother says: "Look at my daughter. Despite our lack of care for her she is the kindest of my children and now she helps others in her teaching."

Pappa is a new member of our group and she loves her teaching. It is the "happy part" (*yanakku romba sandosham*) of her day. Since beginning this programme, she has sat for the SSLC at the age of 35, as she now places a new value on education. Her family life is very painful. Her husband drinks heavily and physically abuses her and encourages her sons to do likewise. She is the major wage earner for the family and despite the cruelty of the men in the house, she cares about them and wants them to be happy.

Alagamal has now encouraged other literate women in her village, which is very large, to start small classes. She is teaching these new animators what she has learnt about the nonformal way of teaching. Alagamal is excited about her work and says: "It is like making the blind see."

We have been together for more than two years now. Nightly we teach our classes and monthly we come to Dindigul to discuss our problems and so learn from each other. We have learnt that it is not easy to bring women together to try new things—but if we do, many good things can result. We have discussed different kinds of small savings schemes which we

would like to start, but we are anxious about how to do it. If we try it first in our group, we may feel easier about starting such groups in our villages.

The villagers are not sure of us and our intentions. They are afraid of change. If we try hard, we can bring women together, if for no other reason than that it is nice to meet and to know one another.

Dindigul Women's Literacy Unit

Amended Dowry Laws

...I am delighted that the question of succession to dowry has engaged the attention of the law makers, but the 1984 amendment of the Dowry Prohibition Act does not go far enough. It does not completely oust the personal law, but merely introduces a couple of preferential heirs—the woman's child or parents. What if the woman is childless and her parents have predeceased her? Her dowry, even if provided by her siblings or uncles or grandparents, will go to her husband or in-laws.

The Penal Code as now amended defines the crime of "dowry death" with reference to section 2 of the Dowry Prohibition Act. As it stands, the definition of dowry in section 2 is insufficient because it does not cover unagreed to demands and does not unambiguously cover demands made for the first time after the wedding or disguised as something other than dowry, for example, gifts on the birth of a child. The situation where the woman is virtually a hostage in her matrimonial home for an ongoing series of demands on her family must be seriously addressed.

Part of the definitional problem lies with the use of the term "marriage" in section 2. This term might usefully be replaced by the word "wedding" in the first part of the definitional clause ("at or before or any time after the marriage.") This would allow the term "marriage", when it occurs later in the same clause, to bear a more extensive meaning encompassing the ongoing relationship subsequent to the event that establishes the status of husband and wife.

I am quite surprised to find that after



the 1984 amendments, giving and taking dowry is regarded more seriously than demanding dowry. In my view, the demanding of dowry is the most serious offence since it places women in danger of abuse, torture and death. If serious and urgent attention is given to the question of demands, by unequivocally bringing such demands within the definition of dowry in section 2, and within the prohibition of section 3, perhaps we can deal with the situation while the woman is still alive and help to ensure that she does not become a "dowry death" statistic...

Lucy Carroll, Austin

Wasted Talent

Selvi is 22 years old. She has a lovely open face that sparkles with mischief and happiness but also frequently is awash with tears.

She lives with her mother, father, elder brother and his wife and baby son, younger brother, and her own small boy, Pradeep. Selvi is not married and now probably never will be. When she was 19, a young man, a childhood friend, convinced her that he cared enough to marry her. Selvi's natural friendliness and affectionate nature became her downfall. She soon became pregnant. The boy ran off until the heat died down. He paid five other men to swear to the police that she was a prostitute and the child could be anyone's.

Selvi continued to take long walks to the forest to bring heavy headloads of

wood for the family. She did this until the baby was delivered, with the aid of her mother in their little mud hut. Straightaway she rose, cleaned the house and went back to work. The family forbade her to breastfeed the child, because she was not married. They forced her to feed him watered down powdered milk from a bottle. Even today, when she recalls her half motherhood, her shame and her loss, tears flow down her cheeks. It is difficult not to cry along with her.

Selvi came to work with us two years ago. She knew no English whatsoever. Now she is amazingly fluent in English and can translate between Tamil and English. She is very receptive to new nutrition and health practices and has implemented them in her own and her family's life, so that the two babies are the picture of health. Selvi is very literate in Tamil and reads the local daily paper.

It is sad that her talents and abilities are wasted. She has much to offer her community if she were a teacher or a nurse rather than a maid servant. But she was taken from school when she was in class six, to gather wood, wash clothes and work on a vegetable plot. Now that she is "ruined", her father refuses to let her be tutored for the SSLC and for nurses' training.

Her family has been good to her insofar as they have continued to keep her with them. Her mother has loved and cared for Pradeep while Selvi goes to work. Her parents are afraid that if Selvi gets an education she will leave and not care for them in their old age. Her "sin" has become their insurance against abandonment in old age.

Recently, someone came forward to marry Selvi, demanding a price of Rs 30,000!

Jan Orrell, Kodaikanal

Stop Sacrificing

From childhood, a girl is never allowed to breathe freely. A boy is granted every desire but a girl gets nothing but rebukes. Even if the boy is younger, he will keep an eye on his sister so that she does not talk to other boys.

A man's personality is his education, his understanding. Therefore, he has no need to deck himself up. But a woman's personality is identified with her beauty. Since she is considered to have no personality apart from her person, she must decorate herself like a lifeless object.

Many girls hope they will get more freedom after marriage. But marriage only starts another phase of torture. She is declared queen of the house where she has to spend her life amidst the taunts, reproaches and demands of her in-laws. Her husband gets a free doll to play with, along with a dowry. If she returns to her parental house, she is soon sent back to the in-laws.

No matter how many faults a man has, one quality of his covers a multitude of sins—his being a man. This manhood becomes a powerful weapon to attack women. Today, women have begun to protest, hesitantly, softly. It will take time to undo a lifetime's conditioning.

As long as we continue to fear society, society will keep us in a disabled state, will threaten us with dire consequences. But once we stop sacrificing ourselves in the name of duty, no one can stop us ...

Asupreet, Palamau
(translated from Hindi)

Start Revolting

...Nine years ago, when I was studying for the predegree course, my father passed away and, six months later, my mother too died. I am the youngest in the family. After completing the course, I wanted to take up a professional course. But my brothers and sisters refused to let me go ahead, on the pretext of my ill health. When I was 10 years old, I got rheumatic fever which affected my heart, and have been under treatment ever since. My family makes this an excuse to prevent me from building a career.

After much bargaining, I managed to study for B. Com. I was very lonely during this period. My married brother with whom I live, refused to provide my clothing or medicine, saying it was not his responsibility. I covered my expenses by

giving tuitions.

Since I needed money to prepare myself for a career, I asked my brother to give me my share of my parents' land. My other brothers and married sisters have not asked for their share, so this brother wanted to shut my mouth too. He and his wife started spreading rumours about me, saying I am immoral. They tried to prevent me from giving tuitions. Only one cousin tried to support me. My brother now treats him as arch enemy.

When I insisted on going to give tuitions, my brother beat me up and, one night, threw me out of the house. I went to my married sister's house which is nearby. She gives me freedom to decide my own life. Now I am teaching in a private college, earning Rs 200 a month.

I consulted a lawyer who is a friend of my brother. She advised him to share the property otherwise she would help me file a suit against him. All my brothers were opposed to me, considering me a rebel. In my absence, they divided up the property. They gave a part of my share to our neighbours who are related to us, as a "special consideration towards them." This happened in March 1984.

I approached the police but my brothers bribed them to remain inactive. I could not afford to go to court. Finally, my brothers filed a civil suit against me. They also tried to attack me when I went into the fields. I sought legal protection. My brothers filed a criminal suit against me, for trespassing on the disputed land. All these cases have been dragging on, and the opposite party has ignored my attempts to reach a compromise. The court decisions so far have been favourable to me, but my brothers keep appealing against them because they want custody of three trees, worth Rs 10,000, which my father planted on the boundary of the land which is now my share.

I am now 27 years old. I have taken a loan and am running a small shop along with my teaching. Sometimes, I feel very tired and wish to commit suicide. Excuse me for this long letter...

Indira, Kerala