



# Letters To Manushi

## Much To Answer For

On September 4, a 17 year old bride of eight months immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband in a village in Rajasthan. The incident has sparked off reactions from women activists, political parties and other groups and individuals. Barring a few protests that have seen the incident as a reflection of the overall context of woman's subjugation and the brutalisation of society at large most other people who have voiced their opinions in newspapers and in private discussions have tended to react as though from an elevated plane.

These "civilised and cultured" people pity their "backward" country brethren and "hang their heads in shame" for the "uncivilised and barbarous" act. They mourn the civilisation having gone to the dogs. boastfully voiced comments that this kind of incident could never have occurred in any part of the country except Rajasthan, are also heard. Truly, the cultural background of other parts of the country does not permit burning of widows on the funeral pyre but happily tolerates the burning of young brides by pouring kerosene oil on them.

These people are really kind hearted (I consciously refrain from using the word sensitive). Burning of a bride on the funeral pyre upsets them, but destroying of female foetuses, and calling woman a burden to

be given away in the form of *kanyadan*, does not hurt their sensitivity.

Throughout her unmarried life span, woman is prepared for a life with her in-laws. At the time of marriage, an all-out euphoria is created about suhag. The various symbols, the *kum kum*, *mehndi*, *mangal sutra*, bangles, anklets, rings and ceremonies like *karva chauth* are eulogised to such an extent as to make her believe that she has finally attained the meaning of her life. Life is married life and nothing else.

The incident at Deorala therefore, should not shock us as something out of the blue. I am not advocating that so long as the ideology of woman's subjugation is pervasive, self immolation is a better choice. Certainly not. I only want to stress that all of us who are showing much concern about the incident have also much to answer for.

Navsharan, Lucknow

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## Murder, Not Suicide

Almost two months have passed since the shameful episode of the burning of Roop Kanwar. The administration failed to prevent it and its subsequent glorification. What is worse, there are many people defending the act or rationalising it, including the Shankaracharya of Puri ...

For thousands of years, society has demanded that woman be totally self effacing, and subservient, her primary function being reproduction, preferably of

sons, and housework. The doctrine of karma has been used to beat her into submission. She is made to accept that her own nature is inferior and her life becomes an endless round of atonements through rituals and fasts. Her whole existence must revolve around one man. Her highest ideal is service and devotion to her husband and family irrespective of his merit or of how she is treated. Her sexuality has been regarded as evil, to be shunned by saints....

A daughter in modern India is still generally regarded as a burden on her family. Her whole upbringing is a preparation for marriage. Her education and health are the must neglected. After all, she has only to be a slave in someone's household. A daughter-in-law is usually regarded by the mother-in-law, who at last has a slave to command, as an unpaid servant ...

Sati is an act of murder. Even to regard it as a suicide is to provide a loophole because a dead person can always be wrongly termed "willing." It is the duty of the relatives present to prevent Sati from happening and they must be made to prove that they did all that was possible to prevent it ...

Kavita Sharma, Canada

## What Step To Take ?

This is in relation to the letter "What Step To Take?" published in **Manushi**, No. 41, 1987. The letter, whose writer's name had been withheld, revealed the agony

which the writer had to undergo. I am not very experienced in such things but I can offer some suggestions.

First, it is important to know whether the writer can support herself and her son if she starts to live alone. If she can, then when her husband returns to this country, she must talk to him and make him understand that it is not only he who is necessary to her but that he too will find it hard to live without her.

Second, she must prepare him for living away from his parents. I do not usually like sons who live separately from their parents, with their wives. But here, the case is different. The in-laws of the writer are inhuman brutes.

If this does not work she must learn to live without her good for nothing husband. She must separate from him, But that must be the last resort.

I extend my wishes to this lady who has suffered and tolerated so much while her husband was a mute spectator. I wish her all the best to regain her self confidence. She must show the same will power as she showed when she conceived the second time and told her husband that she would have that child.

**Alpana Bhat, Delhi**

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### **Another Suggestion**

This is in response to the letter "What Step To Take?" in **Manushi** No. 41. As you rightly said, her predicament is not uncommon, yet each is a case in itself and there can be no general solution. I am, however, not discussing this particular case but trying to raise some questions to help initiate a debate on what women should do in such a situation. This is assuming that the woman in question has sufficient formal education or other means of sustenance, is young, and has just one child or none.

The question that bothers me is why such women do not leave the husband and walk out. Are we afraid of how society will treat a separated wife? Society usually considers the wife to be in the wrong. Is it lack of confidence of getting support from

her parental family ? Is it that she needs a husband for companionship or sex? Is she afraid of living alone, because the overly protected environment of an Indian home does not equip a girl to be alone ? These are some of the questions that need to be debated.

In the ultimate analysis, the only solution is to say 'no' to such harassment and walk out. There is one thing which all women like the "name withheld" should know. The type of change of heart depicted in Indian commercial films is a celluloid illusion that hardly ever happens in real life. So please do not wait for such a dreamy filmi end to all troubles. To the best of my knowledge, the *rakshasas* in Hindu mythology never had a change of heart...

**Kamala Jaya Rao, Bangalore**

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### **Naming Practices**

I was happy to read the article "Was Sita Mrs Ram?" in **Manushi** No. 39. Indeed, the influence of the West is so great that we try to copy many things, without thinking about them.

The Nagas living in the North East belong to the Tibeto-Burman speaking family of the Mongoloid race. They are an ethnic group different by race, cultural heritage, religion and tradition from other Indian communities. They are composed of tribes with no class divisions. Caste is unknown to the Nagas; men and women are equal socially.

Clan plays an important role in Naga life. Marriage within one's birth clan is not permissible. The Naga generally has two names. The first is given by the parents or grandparents and the second is one's clan name. Thus, one is easily identified by clan. If Asangla Longchar marries Temjen Jamir, she remains Asangla Longchar, never becoming Asangla Temjen or Asangla Jamir.

Woman should, irrespective of her background, attempt to realise her own being.....

**Alice Walling, Nagaland**

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### **Relief Or Repression ?**

*This letter was sent to us by the Rajasthan Kisan Sangathan:*

I, Zubeida Begum, am a poor Muslim widow, resident of Bhinder, Udaipur district, Rajasthan. The Rajasthan state minister for irrigation, drought and home affairs, Gulab Singh Shaktawat owns land lying adjacent to my land. A number of trees stand on the border between his land and mine.

On July 13, 1987, Mr Shaktawat's wife, Mrs Kailash Kunwar, and her brother, Matadan Singh Chauhan, came with labourers and broke the canal leading to the cultivated fields. This canal is about 200 years old, and lies about 15 feet away from the border between their land and mine. They also cut down my green trees and put up a stone wall in my portion of land.

I paid the police inspector and *patwari* a fee to inspect the land, but they were terrorstricken and declared the land to be Mr Shaktawat's. I went to register a complaint at Bhinder police station where the officer in charge not only refused to take action against Mr Shaktawat's wife and brother-in-law, but also threatened me saying if I continued opposing them, I would have to face serious consequences.

The tehsildar, commissioner and collector, all refused to listen to me. Might is right. The party in power can get away with anything. My deceased husband worked in the Rajasthan police all his life, yet I got no protection from the police or the law.

Now I have no means to irrigate my land and my maize crop is drying up. The situation is even worse because of the present drought. My only son has just died, and I, an old woman, have now to support my six daughters. My only means of income is agriculture. Where am I to get compensation for my withering crop?

The land which Mr Shaktawat calls his, which lies adjacent to mine, is actually temple land. Mr Shaktawat has illegally occupied it. According to law, temple land cannot be bought or sold nor can it be

registered in the name of an individual. The nearby thoroughfare has also been illegally occupied by Mr Shaktawat.

On the one hand, the state government is running a tree planting campaign and on the other, their minister is breaking laws and running a campaign to fell green trees....

**Zubeida Begum, Bhinder**  
(translated from Hindi)

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### **Perverse Planning**

The government's family planning programme is often carried by medical officers to a point of atrocious perversity. This realisation came to me at an immunisation camp organised in Kanpur by a voluntary agency along with a women labourers' group.

The woman giving away pills for immunising children was also passing on packets of contraceptive pills to the mothers. Kamala, a woman labourer, showed me the packets and voiced her gratitude for the generosity of the medical officers. There was a long list of do's and dont's printed on the instruction slip but the lady giving out the pills had not explained these to the recipients.

I read out to the women this detailed proforma of precautions. Women having fever, any kind of gynaecological problem or abnormal menstrual cycle were instructed to undergo a medical check up before using the pills. There were many other precautions. The method of taking the pills according to one's menstrual cycle was also detailed.

On realising that they had not been given this necessary information the women were very angry. Eventually, everyone returned the packets, much to the annoyance of the medial team.

The most dismaying aspect of the episode was that it took place under the nose of the lady doctor heading the immunisation team. She, however, was engrossed in dictating a complaint to the

chief medical officer, regarding the non-provision of transport to her team.

Another significant point: while the immunisation team lacked the necessary amount of malaria drops, there was no dearth of contraceptives. This shows how our government is more bothered about record breaking achievements in family planning tactics than about making a sustained effort to nourish and take care of those children who are already in this world.

**Navneet Sethi, Kanpur**

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### **Not Dowry Alone**

You have heard from me before, but now I am writing in a different connection. We have started action in Patna, not only to protest against atrocities committed on women in the town, but also to educate the girls of the five women's colleges here, in one of which I am a teacher, regarding their human and legal rights.

Between July 1 and 12, two young women were murdered in Patliputra colony, the most posh area of Patna. Both women were well educated. Ruby, a graduate, had been married just six months. Her father-in-law, Dayanand Sah, claimed that she



had committed suicide by an overdose of drugs. However, there were clear marks of strangulation on her neck.

Ragini, a mathematics lecturer in J.D. women's college, had been married nine years to Ravi Upadhyay. It was an intercaste love marriage. On the day she died, neighbours heard a drunk Ravi shouting : "I will see who saves you today", but did not intervene, thinking it was another of their frequent quarrels. While their one and a half year old daughter was asleep Ravi sent their other daughter, Svatि, out on an errand and locked the door from inside. Neighbours heard suspicious sounds and broke down the door. They found Ragini badly burnt and Ravi naked but not burnt at all. The police arrived only the following day. They accepted Ravi's statement that Ragini's clothes had caught fire while she was cooking.

Although there was no question of dowry in either case, the evidence pointed to murder. There was also evidence of the police colluding with the accused to suppress evidence, neglecting to question witnesses and failing to perform their duty such as sealing the houses and arresting the accused.

On July 19, members of the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini and Mahila Sangathan came to our college, Patna women's college, and suggested that we try to pressure the police to take action. We were more than ready. After having enthused our own staff and students as well as those of other women's colleges, we planned a demonstration. This was given publicity by the press, so Ragini's case was opened for investigation by the police, even before the demonstration. This encouraged us, for we saw what we could do by sheer force of numbers.

On July 25, although it was a very rainy day and many roads were flooded, about 1,000 persons, most of them women, marched first to the homes of the two murdered women and then to the Patliputra police station. We carried placard's and

distributed handbills to onlookers. The students shouted slogans all the way. At the police station, the DIG was forced to answer our questions.

Since then, Ragini's husband has surrendered to the police. But we feel that evidence in Ruby's case is still being suppressed, so a committee consisting of a teacher representative from each of the five women's colleges, a Vahini member and a couple of others, is still pursuing the matter with the police. We hope that this protest committee will develop into a nonparty group to study and work for women's issues in Patna.

**Sister M. Carol, Patna**

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### **Social Boycott**

We have highlighted a rape case in the newspapers and tried to organise protest against it. Shobha, a 16 year old Marwari girl, was abducted three days before her marriage was to take place, by Satish, Sunil and Sushil Kumar Dhariwal, nephews of her fiancee. They deceived her into going with them and kept her for two days in Nandi Hills, where she was raped. After this, her marriage broke off and the rapists absconded, after bribing the police with Rs 25,000.

When we wrote on this issue, the man's family first approached us for a compromise and later began to threaten us. The Marwari community has now taken up the case and decided to socially boycott the family for 18 years and steps are being taken to get the rapists punished....

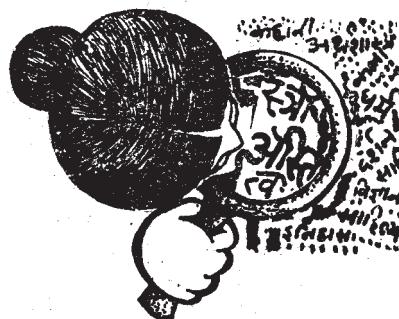
**Ambrish Kumar, Bangalore**

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### **Professional View ?**

I would like to draw your attention to an interview conducted by S.N.M. Abdi with the Orissa director general of police, Prafulla Chandra Ratho, published in The Illustrated Weekly of India, July 26-August 1, 1987. In this interview, the police chief clearly and repeatedly states that rape is

not a crime. To quote him : "Rape is not a manifestation of crime. It does not reflect the crime position. Neither do rapes reflect the law and order situation....By crime, we mean professional crime. Like theft, murder, dacoits, communal riots. If we use this yardstick, rape is not a crime. The motive of gain is not present in rape. I am giving you a professional's view." Steps should



be taken to lodge a strong protest before the government of Orissa and seek a clarification on the point.

**Laxmidhar Mohanty, Cuttack**

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### **Rearing Strong Women**

Today, it is essential that we make every effort to stop the increasing incidence of women being murdered or driven to suicide by their husbands and in-laws. A strong personality cannot be developed overnight nor can it be inculcated by some sort of tonic that will turn a submissive girl into a courageous one. Girls who have been taught that marriage alone is the goal of life naturally

"The Interview was part of an investigative report by S.N.M. Abdi on the abduction and rape of a 17 year old schoolgirl Sunita Mohanty in Cuttack on July 1. The two men chased Sunita through the crowded thoroughfares of the city in broad daylight. She made valiant attempts to escape, appealing for help to scores of people at different points along the route to her home. But no one dared intervene except one Piru Mian, a butcher, who risked his life in helping her and confronting the armed criminals who finally overpowered him, and abducted her. She was rescued by police from their flat the following morning.

feel half dead at the very thought that their marriage might break up.

Parents must make every effort to bring up their sons and daughters as equals. This means giving girls equal educational opportunities and an equal share in inheritance and involving them fully in decisions regarding their marriage. If we have only daughters, one should not consider ourselves insecure nor should we hesitate to accept financial help from daughters.

It is important that girls' interests not be confined to cooking, dressing, interior decoration and needlework. We should try to educate them in coeducational institutions. This will allow them to participate fully in activities like trekking, swimming, sports and judo, and acquaint themselves with the world, there is no reason why they should consider themselves incomplete even if they choose not to marry. A girl can be a successful mother, doctor or lecturer even if she is not a successful wife.

We should also teach our daughters that there is no harm in combatting a husband's violence, in self -defence. The world's greatest exponent of non-violence Mahatma Gandhi, too has said that violence in self -defence is preferable to cowardice. If a husband's first attempt at violence is not countered, he naturally becomes emboldened to continue being violent.

**Indu Sena, Delhi**

(translated from Hindi)

