

Letters to *Manushi*

A Pro Muslim Stance?

We notice a pro Muslim stance on your part which, coming from a magazine published in Hindustan, is rather distasteful. In your issue No. 48, not only is the cover photograph of Amina, a Muslim, but also the leading contribution on Urdu magazines of the past, despite whose efforts India could not be kept as one country in 1947....

Manushi should extend its orbit to include the betrayed Indian, mostly Hindu and Sikh, girls living in the five continents of the world. They are subjected to equal, if not more, terror and discrimination at home and abroad. Divorce rate is very high. Suitable boys are difficult to find. There are no opportunities to meet outside the home ... Please take up the challenge and go worldwide for the dignity of Indian womanhood.

Manushi should show pictures of Hindu and Sikh girls on cover and inside. Muslim girls are fortunate to have 43 Islamic republics to raise their image and morale. But who will publish the story of a Hindu or Sikh girl? We cannot neglect our own kind so badly. We are already neglected by the rest of the world.

Immensely appreciating your noble work.

Bharat Ratan Kurukshetra, England

*We find it distressing that you feel it is distasteful for a magazine from India to publish a photograph of a Muslim woman on its cover and carry an article on Urdu women's magazines. **Manushi** is committed to the protection and strengthening of the human rights of all, especially of the disadvantaged groups in India. All evidence points clearly to the fact that Muslims in India are heavily*

discriminated against, in matters of employment, education, housing and political representation.

Unfortunately, many people in India think as you do, and thereby contribute to very vicious prejudices against the Muslims. The history of preindependence India shows that it was precisely this kind of latent and blatant anti Muslim prejudice and the inability of the Hindu community to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of the Muslims that gave rise to separatist politics, leading to the partition of the country. It is important that we learn from our past blunders, instead of repeating them with renewed vigour, as you would have us do.

The existence of Islamic republics has little relevance to the lives of Indian Muslims. It would be ridiculous to treat them as foreigners on that ground. They have as many ties to this soil as do Hindus, being an integral part of the subcontinental tradition. Culturally and historically, they have much more in common with Hindus in India than with Muslims of many of the Islamic republics.

Even when dealing with groups with a history of recent migration, it would be suicidal for you to suggest that they be denied the rights available to other citizens. As you are an Indian living in England, we would expect you to be more sensitive to the rights of minorities. You seem to be rightly concerned about the "terror and discrimination" that Indians suffer abroad. But the logic you use against Muslims could be extended to argue that Indians in USA, Europe, Fiji or Malaysia ought not to be considered equal citizens, or have the right to practise their religion, preserve their distinct cultural identity and learn their

mother tongue.

Human rights are indivisible. They become meaningful only when we are willing to be as resistant to the violation of the rights of others as to the violation of our own.

—**Manushi**

Saving Hindu Society

I was happy to receive a copy of **Manushi** (No. 47, 1988), one of my cherished journals. I was deeply moved by the article "When Marriage is A High Risk Enterprise" which highlighted how the minimum democratic and social rights of a woman were sought to be negated.

If organisations like RSS, BJP, Arya Samaj want to save Hindu society, there can be no objection, but why at the cost of the interests of women? What is the concept of democratic rights and human values held by these organisations? Why do they consider Rajrani's marrying a Muslim boy a crime? Did these people save Roop Kanwar? No.

Women do not want to live by the dictates of Manu or his successors who claim to be the sole spokesmen of our community, but are actually out to undermine women's rights. We are against atrocities and injustice of any kind. In order to save any civilisation, one has to save the women, otherwise neither the community nor the country as a whole will survive.

Ayesha Chowdhury, Darjeeling

Fresh Air

Your article "Rethinking Dowry Boycott" in **Manushi** No. 48 has given a new direction to thinking on dowry. Our Federation has been active on women's upliftment and problems of women for two

decades. We try to develop a healthy attitude amongst people on these questions... You have made a meaningful attempt to bring the main problem on the right track by raising the slogan of "Give daughters inheritance rights." Please permit us to use this article and the ideas expressed in it, in our work. Whenever a new issue of **Manushi** arrives in the house, it feels as if a breath of fresh air has come in.

Ratan Shah
All India Marwari Federation,
Calcutta
(translated from Hindi)

Life, Not Marriage, Is Sacred

I came across the article "Rethinking Dowry Boycott" when I myself was going through the process of reviewing it after some bitter experiences. Without wasting words, I want to quote my family's example.

We were seven daughters and one son in a subdeputy inspector's home. I am the eldest. You can imagine our economic status and the quantity of our self esteem. We were brought up with the humiliation of sympathetic remarks by relatives and neighbours, reflected in our parents', especially mother's, attitude.

At the time of my marriage, my husband, who is my cousin, demanded that I should not be given a single piece of dowry. He refused to accept the clothes and crockery arranged by my parents with loving sentiments. I went to my in-laws emptyhanded. But a couple of days later, he allowed me to bring the clothes and gifts given by relatives as they were not "dowry."

Two of my sisters got married without interference or giving of orders by their in-laws. They got whatever our parents

could arrange. When my fourth sister was to marry my husband's maternal cousin, again the demand, rather order, was given that not even a hanky should be taken by her to her in-laws' house. My relatives pleaded, but the order was given "If you want to give anything then keep your daughter. We want only the bride." We had to yield, and my sister went to the strange home, with the clothes given by "his" side. Nothing in the home had any sentimental value for her. She was lost in strange surroundings, strange things, strange clothes, strange shoes and sandals. Her wedding gifts were just turned down.

You can imagine the self esteem of that girl. She, without protesting, gave up her teaching job which she was doing before marriage. Now she works like a slave, from morning to night, never demands new shoes or new clothes, never protests, never visits her parents' home. When her daughter was born, we were perplexed as to whether they would accept gifts for the baby. If "yes", would they expect them to be a compensation for the dowry. Should they be costlier than usual? If "no", then how could we maintain any link with our sister? If a no dowry order is given, what about future occasions when gift giving is normal?

So dowry is not the main issue. Self respect and self esteem are sacred. Marriage is not. The sacredness involved in marriage is the main culprit. Career is sacred. Self realisation is sacred. Life is sacred.

Tasweer Naqvi, Lucknow

Inheritance Rights First

Madhu Kishwar deserves to be congratulated for her courageous honesty

in confessing to a rethinking on the subject of dowry and conversion to beliefs contradictory to the ones she held earlier. I am happy that I am now not alone in my views on this vexatious subject. I have taken every opportunity to point out that we are not being helpful to women in seeking to deprive them of what to most women would be their only chance of acquiring economic assets before we have succeeded in securing for them inheritance rights on par with men. More so because the moral claims a woman had on her natal kin are steadily losing force. In an earlier dispensation, a brother was continually at his sister's side in good times and bad. His duties extended even to her progeny. A maternal uncle had an important place in all rituals of celebration or mourning.

It is arguable whether inheritance rights serve a woman better than right to a dowry. Would she be more benefited by property coming to her at a parent's death, when she will probably have put the difficult years behind her, and probably also have grown up children as a source of support, rather than at her marriage when she enters a life wherein she is physically and emotionally vulnerable? Perhaps if we arrive at a proper definition





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of the word dowry we will not be so exercised on the subject.

A marriage settlement or *stridhan* in a form inalienable for a period of time so that a woman cannot be cajoled or coerced into parting with it, would stand her in good stead. Gift tax free bonds launched by government would fit the bill. Perhaps we could settle for a halfshare in inherited property for a married daughter in the interests of fairplay and also to emphasise that the marital home also has some responsibility towards a woman. This latter has yet to be concretised in legal terms. For example, a man may or may not nominate his wife for his provident fund and life insurance dues. He may or may not mention her in his will as a beneficiary. Withal, all this pertains only to that small section of our population where there is property to be passed on to heirs.

My experience, like yours, has been that not too many cases of marital discord originate from dowry. But if, as many seasoned social workers whose sincerity cannot be doubted, perceive it, growing greed and materialism seek satisfaction through dowry demands, it is because of the entrenched attitude that a woman is an eternal charge on her natal home which is responsible for her wellbeing, while the marital home remains only the beneficiary of her labour and resources. We have to fight for women's economic rights in the marital home too, with which will come status and dignity.

Kamala Ramji, Delhi

No More Homilies

Madhu Kishwar's article "Rethinking Dowry Boycott" in **Manushi** No. 48 is thought provoking. I congratulate her for her insight into an issue of women's right to live with dignity. The talk of dowry

boycott is a shenanigan with which the issue was being hijacked, in tune with our national penchant to escape the issue by resorting to homilies.

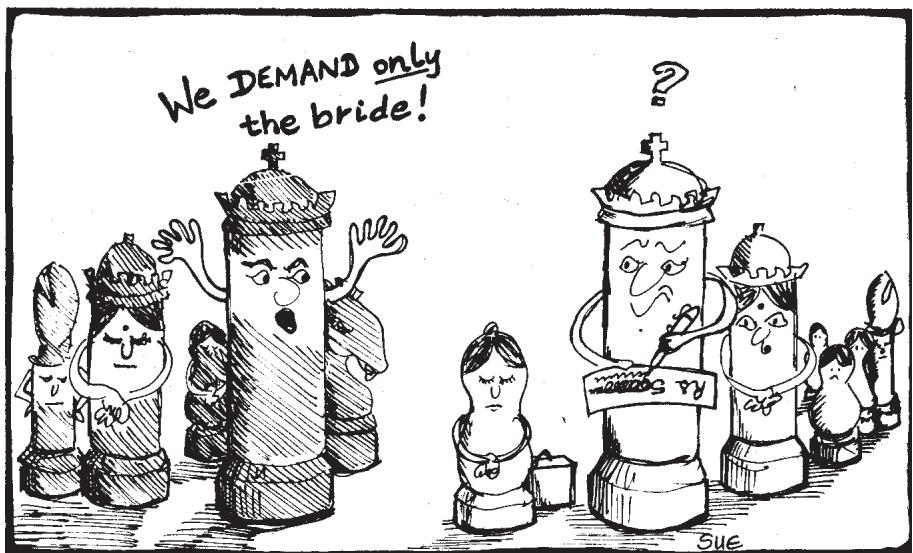
Dowry is a gift, in cash or kind, to the daughter on the eve of her marriage. A girl has to abruptly leave her parents, brothers, sisters and a host of close relations with whom she has inseparable emotional links. Abruptly she is packed off to another family like a commodity and instructed to treat the new family as her own, and to completely surrender herself to the whims and idiosyncrasies of the new establishment where she finds herself a lone stranger viewed critically by everyone.

She is not seen in her totality. She is appreciated or devalued because of her looks, her conformity verging on inanity, her parentage in the light of the gifts received by her in-laws. Every inmate of the new household has his or her own comments to make. This is the cruelty of the situation. Until recently, the family was an institution subject to the social norms of a larger extended organisation which

consisted of uncles, cousins, neighbours. There was some restraint and decorum, although cases of maltreatment due to incompatibility were not few. Now the family is atomic. The nuclear family is cut off from any wider circle. The torture is aggravated and, as the article points out, dowry is one of the excuses.

In this transitional stage, the only remedy is to put an end to this situation. Why should a girl forget her existing obligations and merge with the new family instantaneously? This is neither human nor social. Why should not the son-in-law join her parents? The boy's movements in society are incomparably greater than the girl's. So let him visit her at her parents' house, if the choice is confined to one of the two houses. She may be treated as a guest in her parents in-law's house where she may or may not go. She should not be forced to join them.

A couple may have a separate existence and both husband and wife should be free to have their preferences for companionship. If this approach is accepted, the relatives of the husband



would be more courteous on the basis of behavioural reciprocity. If the husband is not competent to maintain a separate identity, he should be denied the right to force his wife to join him under the pretext of exercising matrimonial rights.

...It is not the money but the cruelty involved that is responsible for the misfortune of many a newly married girl. A girl should remain a permanent member of her original family. This will make her property rights real and effective...

Samdarshi G. S. Varma, Patna

Being Open To Differences

... I am writing to congratulate you on your article on dowry. You have once again shown great courage in your ability to reexamine a position. Too often, in the women's movement, we decide what is best for women. This is one of the reasons why we have rarely been able to gather true grassroots support. I imagine you will get a mixed response to your article and that is why I wanted to write.

It is so difficult to think through our positions without being condemned by our sisters. The women's movement has rarely been open to differing views or positions. That is a loss to us....

Michelle Harrison, USA

Reevaluation Needed

Your deconstructive coverage of sanitary conditions in certain localities of Delhi (**Manushi** No. 47) was remarkable. It is rather unique of you to concentrate on a subject for which most people have internalised a deep aversion.

Likewise your curt reply in favour of the Muslim festival. There is in fact an urgent need to reanalyse and reevaluate the contributions of Muslim thought and culture. So far as Punjab goes, the written form of Punjabi and literary discourse in it

appeared only under the impact of Muslim culture in the eleventh century.

Tejwant Singh Gill, Amritsar

Noting Parallels

Your column "Readers' Eye" in **Manushi** No. 48, carries an extract from the novel *Ruth* by Elizabeth Gaskell, which shows that "the practice of widows' hair being cut off was prevalent in some parts of 18th and 19th century England." On page 13 of the same issue the popular folk song "Where are you going to, my pretty maid?" appears to prove that the dowry system was prevalent in England too, at some time in the past.

I do not understand what purpose such information serves. Does it mean that these social evils receive some kind of sanction because of their prevalence in England? Or does it mean that we may feel consoled and exonerated for our aberrations because even the "enlightened" West had been trapped in such social customs?

Instead of finding parallels in other cultures for what is obnoxious in our own, would it not be better if we tried to understand how societies have risen above the social discrimination against women, and, if possible, adapt their solutions, if they have discovered any, to our own mores?...

Charanjit Kaur, Ulhasnagar

The purpose of providing information on similar phenomena in cultures other than our own is not at all to suggest that this in itself renders the phenomena either more or less objectionable.

Too often, both Westerners and Easterners assume that women's oppression is endemic to Eastern traditions and cultures, and that these are in all respects different from Western traditions, as if the two emanate from two different species. The fact is, however, that

women's oppression is universal—it is only the forms which vary. The fact that a specific form may occur at different times in different places, highlights this universality which we may otherwise overlook. It also suggests, that a phenomenon may disappear so completely, when conditions change, that it is no longer remembered.

One purpose of the "Readers' Eye" column is to present interesting bits of information with which most readers may not be familiar.

—**Manushi**

No Smiles

In a way, your answer to Seema Dayal, regarding her objection to the advertisement for giving gift subscriptions on the occasion of Id, may be justified, because of her silence on earlier occasions, especially Hindu festivals (see **Manushi** No. 47, letters page). But, in my view, the sufferers of oppression in this society have no reason to feel elated even at the birth of an eminent person, say, Mahatma Gandhi. They may grieve at his death, at best. This tendency to start an activity on a supposedly auspicious day, is very unsecular. It may even lead us to be pleased by the naming of a street after a prominent woman or installation of a statue of a woman. It is a way to get cheated by the cheaters.

There are times when the oppressed want to experience a ray of hope, to get out of despair. But they should find a different way and not travel on the beaten track. In comparison to the enormity of anguish, the ray of hope is so feeble that one may as well not indulge in such self deception.

This is written with a feeling that for those who are concerned with the issues of the oppressed, it is not yet time to smile even a bit. On no day.

S.V. Anbazhgan, Kudremukh □