

Letters to Manushi

Friends in Jammu

We, some friends in Jammu, had decided in one of the group discussions held in October 1989, to collect a sum of Rs 20 per month for one year and send it as a contribution for Manushi which is doing a great deal of work for women.

These friends of Manushi are Anuraag, Jyotsna, Rashmi and myself, all of us being students and regular subscribers of your magazine.

We are enclosing a draft of Rs 1000 in favour of Manushi Trust and hope that it will be of some use to you.

Manisha Shelly, Jammu

In Defence of Our Dharma

Your article "In Defence of Our Dharma" offers an in-depth analysis of the current wave of fundamentalism in India. I was very pleased to see that you have clearly separated the greatness and tolerance of Hindu religion from the fanatic communal violence which has nothing to do with the religion, but simply uses religion for the political gains of a few. In the process of achieving their narrow goals, these people will destroy what is truly unique about India and rule on the ashes of our great nation.

I am very disturbed by the recent events in India and have been keeping a close watch through newspapers and through friends who have returned from India recently. The accounts of massacres in Aligarh, Agra, Meerut, Kanpur, Hyderabad, some of which were witnessed by my friends, are simply unbelievable. When an innocent person is pulled out from a train and killed, when houses are burnt, when women are raped, it is not only Hindus and

Muslims that suffer - it is the ultimate violation of human rights and dignity, and everyone suffers from the seeds of hatred that are planted time and again.

I feel that the communal situation has never been as bad in India since 1947 as it is now, and I put the entire blame on the political parties who are manipulating the population by



intimidation, by exploiting religious sentiments and by creating false fears.

It is very reassuring that there are people like yourself who can see beyond the narrow confines of communal thinking. I have no hope in the system any more. I just hope that people like you can turn the clock back and help bring India back to the days when all people could live in harmony and mutual respect.

I would like to offer any support I can to help you in your efforts.

Here in Canada we have had a number of rallies, demonstrations and discussions to try to avert the gulf war in the last two weeks, but in the end militarism has won once again. As I write this letter, Iraq is being pounded by the American military

might, and the Iraqis in turn are attacking Israel. There must be a lot of people hurting right now.

The students at McMaster have had a peace camp here at the University, in the middle of snow with temperatures going down to minus 5 degrees Celsius. The enthusiasm and concern of these students is very encouraging.

The futility of war and the tremendous price the people of Iraq (and neighbouring countries) are paying because of the macho stubbornness of two men (Saddam Hussein and George Bush) is unbelievable. Why does the world allow disputes to be settled through the use of weapons? Only the ordinary people pay the price in blood, while both these men and their buddies sit safely in palaces and fortified bunkers.

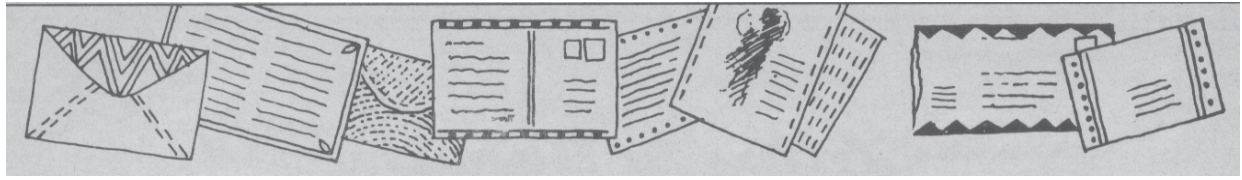
We have a lot of work ahead of us to make the war and violence against human beings an unacceptable way of solving any problems. The goal of getting the world rid of all weapons—nuclear, biological, chemical and conventional, seems a long way away, and perhaps a bit Utopian, but I remain convinced that we have to keep working for it.

Khursheed Ahmed, Canada



In Solidarity

Thank you for putting into words what so many around the country feel. Get to a Doordarshan station and say it out loud in every language you know, and get yourself translated into those languages you don't. Years ago when *the Rath Yatra* was taken out in riot-torn Ahmedabad, I spoke against it, and was called a non-Hindu. I



answered defiantly at the time that I, did not care to be called a bigot. But the thing hurt me deeply, and I had to get to the bottom of it in my mind. Faith in these things, especially when it illumines ethical conduct, is very precious, and although we could be dubbed Hindu sentimentalists, we know it is vital to sane living. You have touched upon this simple thing without in the least sounding pompous.

You have put in perspective, the importance of Gandhi and for that, too, I thank you. There is a point beyond which Gandhi bashing has always sickened and shamed me. Your list of steps to be taken to clean up religion and foster a healthy multi-religious culture is well thought out.

Your article expresses the shame of seeing a tradition being stripped of its graciousness and catholicity and assume an outlandish and barbaric bigotry. You lay the blame on the politicians alone. I think the religious leaders can't escape a good part of the blame. The Ayodhya priest is the leader on the spot, but he is not being allowed to speak for the people of the town. The Hindu religious leaders in the spotlight have mostly shown a clear acquiescence in the BJP-RSS-VHP position. Bad times are ahead, and not only the secular spirit of pluralistic polity, but also the sense of shame of the majority community has to be invoked to prevent countrywide massacres and reprisals.

How is the Ram Janambhoomi—Babri Masjid dispute to be solved, practically, at this point? An elderly lady who is devout and traditional says it is silly to insist on a temple being built there. Another woman says it is totally against Hindu

sanskriti not to respect another's place of worship. But how does such common sense translate into action? Can those who feel love for the Hindu faith stretch themselves in the Gandhian sense? I think they can, if they are mobilised.

I would like to help in any way possible in this business of making Hindus look at what is happened to Hinduism. What is this strange thing called "Hindutva"? This faith is essentially inclusive, it is not exclusive.

Vasantha Surya, Madras

Tolerance or Cleverness



I read your article "In Defence of Our Dharma" with interest. I welcome your unconventional approach and completely agree with your contention that a review of the whole question of secularism is urgently called for. But I see no reason why you should harp on your being a Hindu. Ram did stand for some high spiritual ideals but there was the other side also which you didn't discuss. I know that Ram is revered as a god by the Harijans, the progeny of Shambuka. But whether they have internalised Ram on their own, or whether the model has been thrust upon them, thanks to the ingenious working of the Brahminisation process, is a question that needs to be seriously probed. The moot question is: whether what passes for Hindu tolerance is really tolerance or a clever bid to swallow up everything that poses a threat to its existence. Religious texts at least do not corroborate your view that "Hindu

gods are not jealous gods". The Punanas and the Mangalkavyas (written in medieval Bengal) give ample proof of jealousy between one god and the other. Anyway, I thank you for the questions you have raised and hope that they will help initiate a serious rethinking.

Sandip Bandyopadhyay, Calcutta

Helping Hands

Reading "In Defence of their Livelihood" by Elisabeth Bentley and a letter by Pushpashree Pattnaik, titled "Not for Women?" in Manushi no. 60, helped me conclusively decide to send in my life subscription, especially since my subscription expires this month. I, in a way, follow Pushpashree Pattnaik.

The present paradoxical situation is that even my wife may not approve of such apportioning of our money. I only hope that my daughters will recognise the importance of this magazine in their lives. Right now, they are studying in classes six and two.

I hope that the term "women" will mean all women and not a particular section. When people talk of "man's spirituality" they never mean that of a so called untouchable who is considered expendable. I hope Manushi will gain some teeth as time passes, and will continue with its simplicity, a great virtue.

I feel perhaps not enough effort is being made to get Manushi to more people. Old copies should be sold at subsidised rates. I would also like to associate with Pushpashree Pattnaik to bring out an advertisement in *The Times of India* since they advertise books and magazines at concessional rates.

Letters to Manushi

Manushi should reach new hands. Old readers may not be effectively contributing to its growth.

S. V. Anbazhgan, Kudremukh.

Feeling Isolated

I'm writing to you after a very long time. Actually, it is very difficult for me to communicate as I don't know where to start from.

I go to a women's library. I also attend study circles. Though the study circles are helpful to a certain extent, I felt that only discussing things and reading out papers doesn't solve the problems. The notion which some of the people of my peer group in the 'circle' have is that a 'study circle' is a kind of social gathering where you come to know many people, and it is not necessary to be serious about it. Like one of them, after discussing things with me, said later that she wasn't a 'total' feminist—that is, she was a feminist in front of us, her friends, but in front of her parents, some relatives, etcetera, she wasn't. Now what does this imply?

Ever since I've come to this city for my studies, except for a very few people, I have found that people lack sincerity and involvement. They are neither true to themselves nor others and half the things they say are just to create an impression. Another thing which is disturbing me now is that since a few of my friends from my home town have got engaged and are full of stories of their would-be grooms, my other friends, who were earlier aware of feminism, are also misguided and confused. Since there are not many theoretical books on the basics of feminism available in that small town they have no source of information whatsoever and their

behaviour towards me has also changed. They say that feminism is just hypothetical, and in practical life it is difficult to adhere to it, and you have to compromise if you want a happy married life. It's all so sad and I am really notable to handle this situation. Would you please help me out.

Name withheld.

Your questions and doubts are likely to be shared by a large number of young women who are trying to build an independent life for themselves. However, your overall pessimism is disturbing. There is no dearth of sincere and good hearted people in our country. Those of us who try to break away from the beaten path and build our life around certain ideals tend to be extra demanding and impatient with those who do not share our ideals, as well as with those who profess certain ideals but do not live up to them. It is important to remember that we all have our own share of weaknesses.

The more you confine yourself to socialising in political circles, the more frustrated you are likely to feel. It is a common experience that among political activists the gap between public postures and their lived reality is much larger than among ordinary women. The attitude of your non-feminist friends towards you, the differences in their live's priorities will not affect you so adversely if you go only as far as you feel comfortable and happy in making changes in your life. Your attitude towards marriage should not be solely determined by the feminist or other books that you read. They could lead you to adopting a posture which your emotions do not sustain. The conflict

between an intellectually arrived at position and a different emotional reality is bound to cause you depression and self-doubt causing you to feel resentful against your friends for not providing you support for living up to what are your ideals. On the other hand, if you go only as far as your own emotions can sustain you joyfully, you will find building an independent life, or even living without marriage, not such an isolating or daunting experience.

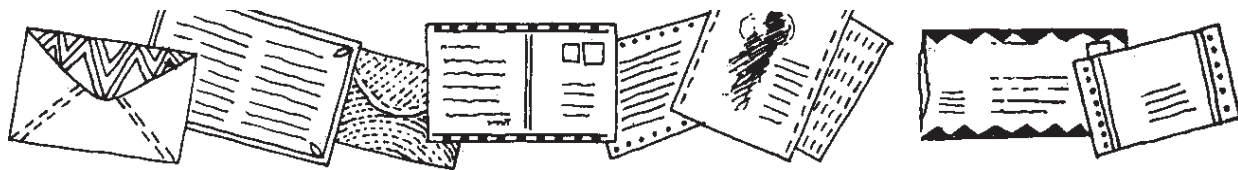
If you want to change our society's attitude towards women, it is more important for you to understand this country's people. Women's lives and aspirations do not follow the same pattern as in the West. The dilemmas of Indian women cannot be understood by reading Western feminist literature which is rooted in a different cultural milieu.

A mild exposure to western feminist literature is O.K. - even desirable - but to be immersed and overwhelmed by it is likely to be harmful. The lack of exposure of your friends to feminist literature need not come in the way of your establishing a fruitful dialogue with them on women's freedom.

Manushi

A Threatened Man

Dear liberated Indian women of **Manushi**: the beauty of the Indian women has always been "submission". No matter what words poets use to describe it, it all boils down to this. I have been looking for a wife so have had due occasion to evaluate what I want. I realize what draws us, men, to Indian women is their compliance, pliability and meekness. I have been schooled in



the U.S. and dated American girls. These attributes were either missing or not cultivated enough. I suppose every man looks for a girl like mom, so I found my self doing the same. I joined an Indian club at school and was disappointed. Some were Guyanese and had totally different attitude than we Indians. Other real Indian girls were so Americanized, same as myself. I confess that I couldn't relate to them. I dated one girl, Kanta, and she gave me your newspaper, trying to see my reaction, I guess! I told her "this is bullshit" (sorry) and she said I had a lot to learn. Then I said "what are you doing in an Indian club when you hate Indian culture?" Same to you "can't you get out of India if it is so repressive? Or do you feel you can change the whole country?" I'd say you better enjoy your own lives rather than creating disharmony for all women. How can Kanta ever think she can hold her (your) views and still satisfy her family by marrying an Indian guy? (She admits this!) I tell you, the two are incongruous, that is to say, they cancel each other out. If you are Indian women, you gotta "play by the rules" or else get out. No way my mother would tolerate Kanta. She'd make mince meat out of her in a week. We'd only end up divorced and she'd be blamed. No skin off my back, so in a way I am trying to help you girls.

Either I marry a girl from India, have it like I want: dinner on the table, no arguments, kids who respect me; or I marry Kanta/American girl from whom I get no guarantee. Maybe she doesn't feel like cooking or having kids! A lot of guys try them out, divorce them and then bring over an Indian wife. I personally now agree

with my father, "if you don't like an Indian woman you can change her, if you don't like your American woman you have to pay her off (divorce/settlements) or she'll change you. When a man lives once he wants to live as worry-free as he can. I can see you girls, how you are getting the short end of the stick. I'd never want to be my mother's daughter in-law, she's a tyrant! But an Indian girl can adapt. By the way, I am 23 yrs. old,



M.A. Communications, and I work for WNET (CH. 13) in Manhattan in case you want to warn India that I'm coming in October to get married to someone beautiful and yes, submissive. What a refreshment!

Good luck to all the others who are brave but in our society, doomed! Ladies, Mom says "you are insane women, must be from uneducated families or maybe rejected by boys' families because you are very ugly and talkative".

Are there others like you in India or are you an endangered species? Kanta sends me photocopies of your

newspaper every few months. Some Indian guys are really angry at you, you know.

Anil Khanna, U.S.A.

In all the years of Manushi's existence we never recieved any hate mail from our subscribers. Recently we began getting some angry, nasty letters, like the one printed above, from Indian men living in the U.S. It is puzzling to us why some of these gentlemen living far off in America feel threatened by Manushi in a way that Indian men living within the country do not. In fact, Manushi has recieved a lot of support and help from men in India. Maybe some of our overseas Indian subscribers can help us solve this puzzle.

Manushi

From A Peace Activist

I have read your article "In Defence of Our Dharma" and feel it was important and courageous to publicly denounce the political misuse of religion and remind people of what Hinduism is really about. Your genuine fundamentalism— that is a return to the roots, to the original works of the scriptures — is at the same time clever, enlightening, honest and leads to a revival of respect for the human rights, I hope. We are going to have the article xeroxed for the purpose of distribution to the Indian community leaders in Canada. We already have shared your article with friends.

During the past few months, there has been little to rejoice about in this world. Might and fanaticism have prevailed over dialogue and reason. I have grave concerns about this Middle Eastern war. It is a highly technical war, fought from very high

above. Nobody sees any casualty; we see only the slick F18s or Jaguars and the beautiful spectacular fireworks photographed from far above. It is a feast for the eyes, a tribute to technology and its experts, including the pilots. This war is covered exclusively by CNN, unlike the Vietnam war which was photographed on the ground by independent journalists. CNN shows only the Pentagon's official briefings, interviews with proud American families who have a relative fighting in the Middle East, a series of diagrams and graphs on the technical "capabilities" of the missiles. Where are the people? It is the civilian population of Iraq who is paying the price of its leader's foolishness and the western world's criminal hypocrisy. I also fear for the Palestinian population who will be persecuted more than ever. I fear the after effects of the humiliation the Arab world has experienced. I fear the so-called new "world order" instanced by Rambo Bush.

We are comforted only by the sense of solidarity we feel with the numerous peace activists and sympathisers who have organised, demonstrated, prayed during the past month. I hope it was not in vain. I desperately need to believe that the world will not belong to the Rambos, and that their victory is only temporary.

Maroussia Ahmed, Canada

More Debate Needed

I was a bit disappointed with your article 'In Defence of Dharma'. I thought that Sudras and women were never part of Hinduism but in this article you repeatedly argued putting yourself within the fold of Hinduism. However, I think that more debate has to take place on the question of Hinduism and communalism.

Kancha Ilaiah, Hyderabad

Dowry in Instalments

Recently I've come across an incident which was rather disgusting. One of my colleagues announced her engagement to her cousin who is a scientist and working at Poona. When one of us asked her about the particulars like where his parents live, how they are and whether there is any dowry or not, she answered that due to the conflict between the parents of the boy and the girl, the wedding has been postponed.

The parents of the groom, I believe, asked for one lakh rupees (only!) in dowry, since the girl is the niece of the groom's father; otherwise the demand of the groom is about Rs two lakhs. When the bride's father hesitated to give such a large amount, which he could not afford, the groom's parents came up with a solution. They

asked the girl's father to pay the dowry in instalments. The first instalment of Rs 50,000 could be paid at the time of the wedding and the second could be paid by the girl and her undergraduate brother by taking up employment and crediting their earnings to the boy's account. "Within how many years is the payment to be made?", I asked. When she said that there was no time limit, I exclaimed, "Thank God!" To my amazement she then remarked that they were "not that mean"! I did not know whether to laugh or to congratulate her on the eve of her engagement.

If girls and their parents agree to these sort of agreements then who can help bring about any social reform in society?

Bhargavi Mohanti, Hyderabad

Poem

Stereotype

*She was
what you might call
normal
did everything expected
strove to satisfy
and sedulously
sought approval*

*Daily she applied anew
virtue's vermilion mark
centring it carefully
looking cross-eyed at herself*

*reversed in the mirrors
of others eyes.*

*Fastidious, frugal, and above all
vigilant
she always locked herself in for her
own safety
dropped the key from the barred
window
into hands that never failed
to catch it.*

Vasanthi Surya