

Letters to Marushi



A Women's Library

We are a group of women working on women's issues in a semi-urban village in Kerala. We have a women's study centre and library called *Sthree*, which is visited by nearly 25-30 women everyday. This is not only a library but a meeting place for the women to share their common concerns.

Our Centre was opened on July 7 this year with a discussion on 'Women and Media'. It was attended by over 200 women from the same village. Now the Centre has become a part of our life.

In Kerala, village libraries are very popular. A wide network of libraries exists statewide under the Granthasala Sangham. Every village or panchayat has a library of its own and it is the centre of social and political discussions. Though most Malayalee women are well educated, they shun libraries and consider them a men's monopoly. We decided to concentrate on the promotion of reading habits amongst women and women's literature. We have collected

more than 1,000 books, periodicals and other reading materials for the Centre. Many of our friends in Kerala, both men and women, helped us with books and money. We do not receive any funds from inside or outside the country. It is raised only through contribution. We do face acute financial difficulties but we hope to overcome them by our commitment to the Centre.

Books and articles by women writers, works on women, research papers and studies by and on women, women's literature of the past and present will be a major part of the library. We are also planning to conduct studies on women with special reference to Kerala's society, and other such related subjects.

**Mini Sukumar,
*Sthree, Women's Study Centre and
Library, Kottayam***

Mockery of Law

The Andhra Pradesh police are at it again. Despite a strict law forbidding the police to bring women to the police station at night, a law enacted after the Rameeza Bee case, the Andhra Pradesh police are continuing to disobey it unabashedly.

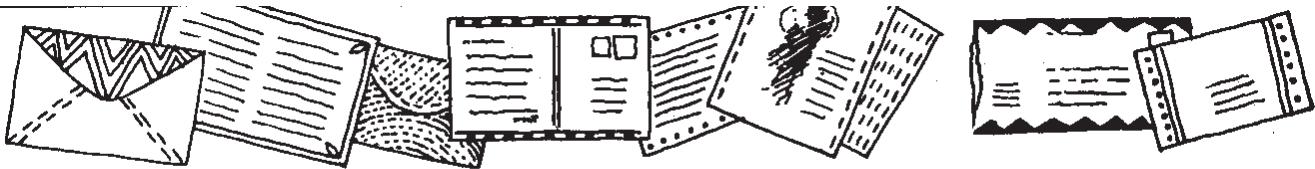
At Hyderabad's Chikkadapally police station, circle inspector Ramesh Babu called Uma Maheshwari to the police station at 9.30 p.m. to threaten her over a dispute with her landlord Professor Premadasa. Uma, 33, is a health project officer in the Deccan Development Society. She lives in a portion of the house of Premadasa who is a retired professor of Osmania Medical College in Hyderabad. Uma, who is divorced, lives with her two sons, aged 17 and 15. She works at Zaheerabad, 100 kms from her home in Hyderabad, and comes back

on weekends and holidays.

In the city of Hyderabad a flourishing nexus exists between the landlords, rental agents, and the police. The landlords are able to forcibly evict tenants and rental agents bring new tenants who will pay a higher rent. If the tenants refuse to move, the landlords call the police to intervene on their behalf. Complaints against the tenants asserting they are violating the law are often made on flimsy grounds to harass the tenants into giving up their flats.

Uma had lived in Premadasa's house for one year, from September 1990 onwards. The landlord asked her to vacate the premises in September 1991. She politely told him that she would only be able to vacate by October 1, 1991. This angered Premadasa so much that he started harassing her. The electric fuse was removed. Premadasa's sons, Dr Satish Kumar and Dr Anand Kumar, started threatening her and casting allegations that the two boys were not her sons but two bachelors with whom she was living. Uma was, in fact, married at the age of 15 and her first child was born when she was 16.

The showdown came with a call from the local police station at Chikkadapally on September 14. The police authorities were acting in response to a complaint made by Premadasa. Since it was a Saturday, Uma had returned from Zaheerabad. At around 9 p.m. two male constables came from the police station and informed her that she had been called by the Circle Inspector. She told them that she would come the next morning. Despite her protests, they insisted that she accompany them. Otherwise they threatened to take her sons and beat them in the lock-up. They



made her sit in an auto rickshaw, with both the constables on either side of her as if they were escorting a thief. They did not observe the minimum decency of hiring another rickshaw for themselves.

At the police station, Circle Inspector Ramesh Babu abused her for half an hour and threatened her with dire consequences if she did not vacate the house by the next morning. When Uma protested, he asked her to speak slowly and timidly "like a woman". He insinuatingly asked her if she was doing *dhanda*, or prostitution. He alleged that her sons were creating a nuisance in the locality. He also suggested mockingly that if she could not control her sons, he would control them by beating them up in the lock up. When Uma bitterly protested against such humiliations, another police official also asked her to speak like a woman. Finally, at 10 p.m., Ramesh Babu asked her to leave.

The next day, September 15, Uma brought this incident to the notice of *Maitri*, a local forum for women. When two members of the organisation accompanied Uma to the Chikkadapally police station, the police exhibited the same high handed manner and told them that the matter was none of their concern. When the *Maitri* activists demanded an explanation for calling Uma to the police station at night, the Circle Inspector told them that Uma had come of her own free will. Realising the futility of wrangling with the police officials, *Maitri* lodged a complaint with the city Police Commissioner against Ramesh Babu. But no action was taken against him.

Finally the Forum decided to bring the incident to public notice. Inspite of the imposition of Section 144 in Hyderabad, several activists of women's

organisations staged a lightning *dharna* before the police station on September 28. Their protest mainly focussed on the problems of single women. They reiterated that a single woman is a citizen. As such she is also entitled to live independently and be treated with respect like other citizens.

A similar *dharna* was staged outside Premadasa's house. His sons abused the women activists. But neither Ramesh Babu nor Premadasa came out to face the protesters.

A day earlier *Maitri* had organised a meeting where the problems of single women were discussed. They also decided to carry on the struggle for a better deal for single women. Snippets of the meeting and *dharna* were telecast on Hyderabad Doordarshan. These evoked considerable public discussion. The following day, on September 29, Uma and some women activists met the Assistant Commissioner of Police of Chikkadapally, who recorded Uma's statement.

Two days later, some local newspapers carried a news item about the warning that had been issued by the Police Commissioner to his subordinates against interfering in landlord-tenant disputes. He also told his subordinates to treat women respectfully when they were called to the police stations. A charge sheet was issued to Ramesh Babu. Information concerning any other action against him is not yet known. Nevertheless *Maitri* has through its protest furthered the cause of single women.

Y. Nirmala, *Maitri*, Hyderabad

Changing Stereotypes

I'm writing to praise **Manushi** for the work it is doing in India and abroad for

women. I had completely turned my back on Indian culture for some time. Only when I came across **Manushi** did I come to appreciate my heritage. It is very inspiring to see the strength and courage women are displaying in India.

When I grew up in the United States, I was the only Indian girl in my class and in the neighbourhood. When I was a teenager I began meeting Indians for the first time. I never experienced any discrimination as an Indian from my American counterparts but when Indians started moving to New York in large numbers I began to feel inferior. This attitude was fostered by the narrow mindedness that a lot of the new immigrants displayed. Because I grew up in the US there was a lot of resentment shown to me by Indians, male Indians that is. Even strangers would make negative comments to me. For instance, if I was walking with a group of non-Indian friends, on several occasions I heard comments such as, "Look what happens to Indian girls once they come here", "Don't her parents care about her?", or "She'll never be able to get married." I also heard negative remarks from older Indian women who criticised me openly for not wearing Indian clothes. Why should I wear Indian clothes when I had never even been there?

Whenever I went into Indian owned businesses such as grocery or candy stores, the men who worked there, who were strangers to me, would feel free to quiz me. They would ask me if I spoke Hindi, where I was from in India, did I date, did I use drugs? I felt that everywhere I went I was being policed by other Indians. This was the most difficult time in my life.

The turning point came when I was

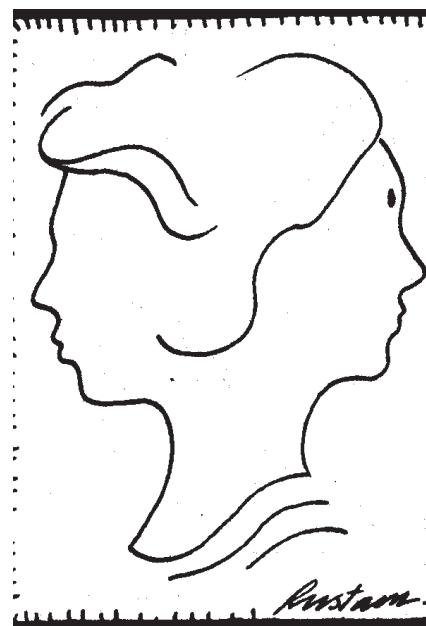
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in a taxi and the driver asked me if I was Indian in an accusatory fashion. I said, "Yes, and what are you so angry about?" I realised that what he was angry about was that it was getting harder and harder to spot an Indian woman as many had tried to blend with the general population. He then launched into a tirade about how Indian girls get so spoiled once they come here, they turn against their families and desperately try to be like Americans. He felt nothing good could come out of this because all American girls were prostitutes. He felt sorry when he met a nice girl like me who could be drawn into this miserable life. I was so angry I told him he was illiterate and knew nothing of American life and I wasn't trying to be anything. I was all American and I resented him trying to make me into some pathetic creature that would be lured into something evil. When it was time for me to get out, I attempted to throw the money at him and he spit at me, screaming in Punjabi, I think.

I dismissed the whole incident but many other small incidents occurred and I began to internalise it all and develop an inferiority complex. I began believing that maybe Americans really do feel I am an outsider and they don't accept me. When young men asked me out I felt that they only saw me as an oddity, someone exotic. As soon as I got out of high school, I dyed my hair blond. I did it the night before my graduation party which my family and many other Indians would attend. At the time I did it under the pretext of being fashionable but now I see I just wanted to become what everyone was so afraid of. My father was very angry. He said to me it represented a total denial of what I was. I remember

telling him that with Indians one can never win. If you are too Indian they call you backward and snicker at your old fashioned ways and if you try to be what they consider too American you are ostracised and insulted also. He said he had made a mistake, he should never have come here to the US if it meant losing his family.

I could not believe he could equate my changing my hair colour with turning my back on him. I felt that as an Indian one can have no freedom, can show no



individuality. Everyone at the party had a sarcastic comment about my hair so this further enforced my belief that being Indian was a liability. I wanted to get as far away as I could from these hypocrites. How many of them were divorced yet they looked so harshly at Americans who were also divorced, saying that they don't have values or don't understand marriage. They tried so hard to be American in everything they did. Even

when they wore their sari or salwar kameez, they would brag that it was imported material from Europe, made in America. They would compete with each other over how many American friends they had or about how many Americans they met were fascinated by Indian culture. Yet when it came to me, the very thing they wanted to become, I became the target for all their bitterness. Again, I didn't realise it, I just felt lost. I hated the way I looked because it gave Indians the right to own me.

With blond hair I felt I could avoid all this. I walked into Indian restaurants and was treated by Indians in a completely different way. I was talked up to, not talked down to, for the first time. I really didn't look Indian anymore. Everyone kept telling me I looked Italian. I enjoyed going into stores now and instead of being insulted for not speaking Hindi or being too modern, I was treated in the most formal manner—"Will that be all Miss, enjoy the afternoon." How refreshing! I lived in this fantasy for a few years, through college at least. I felt a renewed confidence. On a few occasions, if someone asked, I said I was half Indian and half English.

Now I have come to realise that most of my inferiority feelings were in my head and that, by and large, people were accepting me as a person and didn't care if I was Indian. However I must blame some Indians for giving me the idea that being Indian is undesirable. I saw **Manushi** about four years ago and what it did was put this in my mind: there are more constructive ways for Indian women to change the stereotypes that are set up to hold them back than dyeing their hair.

Brenda Chander, USA