

Letters to Manushi

Complementary Account

I am grateful to Kamala Mukhopadhyay for her supplementary note on *Women in Bengal Revolutionary Movement* published in the Manushi No. 65. I would prefer to call it a supplementary note rather than a "rejoinder", as termed by Manushi, because Smt Mukhopadhyay has not challenged any of my assertions; nor does her note contradict the main slant of my account.

The editorial note however bears out that Kamaladi is "unhappy" with my comment on the activities of the women revolutionaries on the post-Independence days. When I wrote that they "could not sustain their political life for long", I actually meant a section of the women revolutionaries. The preceding paragraph began with, "But a large section.....period."

And I also did not forget to note that "the post revolutionary careers" of a section of the revolutionaries "found expression in different directions". I did not mention the various activities a section of the revolutionaries engaged in during the post-1947 period. Kamaladi's note has actually added to and thus enriched my account. The focus of my article being on the role of Women in Bengal Revolutionary Movement, I didn't dwell much on their activities in their later life. It is heartening that Kamaladi, herself a revolutionary activist, has taken the trouble to help elaborate the chapter.

Finally, with due humility, I would like to point out one factual error in Kamaladi's note. Indusudha Ghosh was arrested in connection with the attempt on Watson, the *Statesman* editor and not with the murder of

Garlic. The latter, a judge, was killed on different grounds and Indusudha had no association with that case.

Sandip Bandhopadhyay, Calcutta

Reports Are Welcome

I've long been an interested reader of Manusai, (bough I've never had occasion to write a letter to the editor before. However one or two things in your issue No 68 set off a train of thought, and so I'd like to share some reactions with you.

Sympathetic as I am to the opinions expressed by Sudhir Kumar in his letter "Revive Hindi Manushi" in issue No 68, I really see no future to regional language publications, unless they are supported by massive subsidies, or by links to large publishing houses, which have multi language productions, or by more astute marketing. Usually publications run by voluntary organisations or co-operatives have access to none of the above. Hence publishing in a regional language (in which there is a high percentage of illiteracy in the population) is usually doomed to failure. Your problem would probably not have occurred in Kerala or Tamil Nadu, perhaps. But even in Maharashtra, the book company *Granthali* which had great success in taking reading to the villages is experiencing difficulties today.

So what is to be done? I wonder why we have not experimented more with 'pictorial literacy'. By this I mean posters, comicstrips, and illustrated folders (as opposed to books, periodicals and reviews, which are print-heavy). I believe that a lot of women's issues can be disseminated to village women with lower reading skills through such media, printed

cheaply and distributed widely. Today printing technology makes it possible much more easily than formerly. In fact the 'new Manushi' look certainly makes more attractive reading than your earlier issues. Your cartoons and illustrations are a pleasure to see. So perhaps you could think of issuing 'occasional Hindi offprints' of important Manushi articles, once or twice a year, marketed more attractively especially to college youth and working women.

My second comment has to do with content. Could we have more reports about what is actually going on in the country regarding women's issues? Well, we do get a lot of information from the newspapers, still I feel that a regular 'Indiawatch' or 'Worldwatch' column would keep the readers abreast of what is actually happening. Though most of the serious articles in Manushi are well thought out and researched (I particularly like your writings on the communal issue some months ago), I wouldn't say that the average woman reads or understands them. More's the pity. I think that reflective articles are important, for they open us to the future; but I think that current reports are also necessary for they show us the present, with all its obstacles and achievements.

Myron J. Pereira, Bombay

We try hard to get reports of important struggles and happenings from different parts of the country, especially rural areas. But given that our resources are very limited, our coverage tends to be limited too. We invite our readers to take an even more active part in sending us reports from their respective areas.

—Editor.



From a Daughter

This is a letter which I wrote in my journal to my parents. I cannot send it to them for several reasons. I write it in anonymity because they will be shattered if they knew it's me.

I feel Manushi is the right place to express women's problems and feelings. I have sent this letter to you, believing that when it is published other Indian women in the US with similar experiences will come out. Perhaps we can all then find a solution to this suffering.



It's been a year since I came to the US from India after my marriage. In the world's eyes I am a happily married woman. The days and months have rolled by fast.

The first six months of our marriage were good. I didn't tell you about the serious problems in our relationship. When we have arguments he beats me. I cannot swallow the fact that I, an educated and positive woman, am getting beaten by my husband. I feel very helpless. I don't know how to protect myself. He threatens to call and tell you that I ruined his life. I can imagine your fears for me if he does this. I don't have a Green Card, no savings and nowhere to go. I am scared.

I can't go back to India. It would be very painful for both of us. I picture society discarding me like a piece of trash and the bad-mouthing you will have to hear. I feel I would be letting you down.

Some chilly evenings when I walk down the tree-lined street, I watch the sun filtering through the branches, watch the many cars drive past me, and I think of you so much. Your laughter, your touch and all the

feel-ings we have shared. I imagine your day beginning when the sun sets here and the memories return, mixing with the endless tears rolling down my face.

My emptiness is painful; futility and hopelessness is all that is left.

Name Withheld

Men versus Women?

This has reference to Madhu Kishwar's article entitled *Sex Harassment and Slander as Weapons of Subjugation* (Manushi No 68) wherein she has posed the question of sexual exploitation of women largely, if not exclusively, as a men versus women issue, divorced of the context of exploitative social system and the different manifestations of exploitation.

I largely agree with Ms Kishwar's observations; but in my humble opinion that is the partial truth, and her delineation of the causes and suggestions to prevent sexual harassment are not quite correct because the issue has not been placed in the proper context of the social system.

Ours is certainly a male-dominated world, where women are exploited. However, it is the 'unchecked' power — antithesis of democracy — that corrupts, and is responsible for exploitation, whether sexual or otherwise. Even several women in power exploit, sexually or otherwise, both men and women.

Let us take the case of the researchers' plight, which Ms Kishwar has discussed. Here, the democratisation of the system, whereby the arbitrary, discretionary powers are not concentrated in the hands of one or few, would go a long

way in reducing the exploitation. The research scholars need to organise themselves, not only at the level of faculty and institute, but at the state, national and international level, and raise and fight for demands that would help make the whole system and process transparent and rational. However, to organise and achieve the objectives would not be easy. But, when, if ever, has the fight for justice been a bed of roses?

Not only temporary women researchers, even men researchers, that too working as permanent government employees, are exploited/victimised when they do not side with the vested interests of the powers that be. The competent and conscientious researchers (non-*chamchas*) are a numerically insignificant minority. But one has to make such hard choices if one wants to consciously range against the vested interests.

Hasan Abdullah, New Delhi

Unmasking Beliefs

This is in response to Rani and Abhay Bang's *Why Women Hide Them: Rural Women's Viewpoints on Reproductive Tract Infections* in Manushi No 69. The article brought out the indifference with which the health problems of women are treated by their relatives as well as by doctors. This illustrates society's response to the problems faced by a generally deprived half of its population. That various myths surround the major manifestation of gynaecological disorders, that is white discharge, show that some kind of cultural investment was required to come to terms with this problem. These myths blame both men and women who suffer from such

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disorders. Such diseases are also believed to have been contracted through illicit relationships. However egalitarian this argument may seem for its being inclusive of both the sexes, it definitely is not equally meaningful for both, in a society where equality among the sexes is not the norm.

Thus, while it may be a matter of pride for a man to be indulging in extra marital relationships, the fear of such an accusation does not allow a woman even to seek a cure for serious health hazards. Since the whole issue is considered a 'private' problem, not to be discussed openly, the possibility of establishing 'who got it first?' remains dim. The insensitivity of men towards their wives' suffering, further indicates the quality of the relationship. If these are the results of the survey done by the *Search* team, the need to relate health policies with steps for increasing social awareness is urgent. Any health programme which aims at providing women with a total reproductive health scheme also needs to add to its agenda the major task of unmasking such beliefs which perpetuate mistrust and guilt among women. Only then will it be possible to have women utilise the facilities which the *Search* team urges the policy makers to provide for them.

Anuja Agrawal, Delhi

Solidarity with Chipko

I just finished reading your report on Sunderlalji's crusade and on Vimlaji. Previously I had read about Sunderlalji and his *Chipko* movement and also about his current struggle at Tehri, but in Calcutta papers we get

very sketchy and casual reports. Your report is both comprehensive and touching.

I am a 64 year old man — a retired person and staying far away from Tehri. Yet I wish I could take part in that movement and express my solidarity with their attempts to save the country for future generation. I cannot contribute Rs 15,000. It is quite a large sum for me, but I can definitely send some amount as a token of my support. I can also try to spread the



message of Tehri *andolan*. Can you help me with his mailing address?.

Sarbakinkar, Calcutta

The address of Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna is : Chipko Information Centre, P.O. Silyara, Via Ghansali, Tehri Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh, Pin Code-249155.

Grounded In Reality

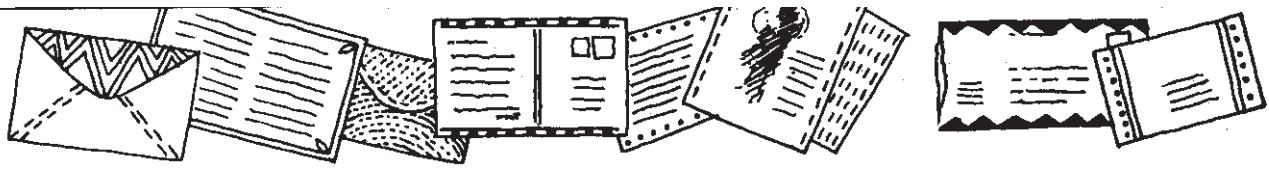
I am a twenty-one year old final year medical student and was recently introduced to *Manushi* by a friend of mine. The first thought that stuck me was, "Why haven't I come across this magazine earlier?" I am impressed by the simple yet highly effective format of your magazine. I can see that the articles are not only well-written but also well-chosen to

truly project *Manushi* as a "Journal About Women and Society". The simple wording of your articles easily bring reality into focus. And what I find in *Manushi* that is so strikingly different from other 'women's' magazines is the total absence of addressing women's issues from a showbiz kind of view that unfortunately tends to project a less-than serious image of the whole, magazine (of the latter kind, that is.) There was no second thought about

it. I had to subscribe to *Manushi*.

If I may, I would like to share some of my thoughts and experiences regarding the broad issue of women in society. As a man, I realise that it is only too easy to take women for granted, especially in a country like ours. In the last couple of years or so, I have awakened to so many biases, injustices and downright abuses against women that I have often wondered how I could have possibly handled all this had I been born a female. As a result, I have nothing but the greatest respect for women in general in their various roles in society. And I know realisation is but the first step.

We medical students are currently on a strike over the issue of private medical colleges. The merits and demerits of the case aside, one incident is particularly worth mentioning. A group of students were peacefully demonstrating when the police came over to arrest them. In the process, the women medics were not only man-handled by the policemen but also singled out for abuse based on their gender and subjected to extreme mental anguish. As usual, no



action was taken against the offenders.

The callous treatment meted out to lady patients has already been brought out quite well by my friend in issue number 70 of **Manushi**. Believe me, the situation in the labour wards has to be seen to be believed! And I am not in the least bit surprised when my lady colleagues say it has been a traumatic experience for them to have been posted in the ward. Sometimes it seems incredible the way we guys act indifferent to women's needs. Although we are a class of nearly equal proportions of both the sexes, many of my friends would rather not have doctors for their wives because they feel they "won't receive as much care and attention as they would from wives not in the medical profession." And no mention of wives' needs!

The more apparent discriminations like eve-teasing, dowry-related problems and sexual harassment at jobs receive ready publicity, as in-deed they should. But as your articles readily bring out, the subtler and by far the more prevalent of discriminations against women, in home and in society, need a lot more introspection and education than they currently receive. It is in this context that I wrote what I agree is but a very modest claim to a poem. But more importantly, it helped me give a shape to my thoughts.

There are a lot of other specific incidents that I would like to bring your attention to. But be that as it may, I am sincerely working out from within to bring about a definite change. I am sure I will have a lot to correspond about in the near future. One last comment — I have noticed a few of

your readers writing in to complain about the 'depressing' nature of your magazine's contents. I don't agree with them. If anything, you are only mirroring the depressing situation that prevails today. And unlike one of those flashy-glossy magazines, you seem to be doing something concrete about it. It seems pointless to complain about the darkness while we keep pulling wool over our eyes.

Prabhakar Viswanathan, Madras **Names are Important**

We have just read K. Jayanthi's article *WhatisinaName?* in *Manushi* No 69. We would like to share with *Manushi*'s readers our experiences and views on this topic which deserves greater discussion and attention by all those believing in gender equality.

In Maharashtra, a three name system is rigorously followed. The first is the individual's name, followed by the father's/husband's name. The last name is the surname which is indicative of one's caste. People are normally known and referred to by their surnames. If one gives just the first name, people would invariably ask for the surname and would not rest till they learn it. It enables them to decide how to relate to you, how to 'place' you in the social hierarchy.

Both of us started our social-political life with *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini*. Many of our comrades dropped their surnames as a protest against the caste system. Although we shared their sentiments, we felt it was inadequate. Our friend from *Vahini*—Mohan Hirabai Hiralal was the first of our acquaintances to adopt the three-name system, consisting of one's own

name, followed by the mother's name and finally the father's name. We have adopted the same system. There are many people in Maharashtra, specially from pro-gressive organisations, who have adopted this system.

We believe this system serves three purposes. First and foremost, it indicates one's belief in gender-equality. It gives equal importance to either parents and shows that the child belongs to both of them. Secondly, it does away with the surname, thereby establishing one's identity as an individual, rather than the member of a particular caste. Thirdly, a three-name system almost completely ensures one's complete identity. There could be thousands of Ravindras, a few Ravindra Pandharinaths, but hardly any other Ravindra Rukmini Pandharinath.

Although we believed in this system for a long time, we completed the legal formalities only a few years back. There had been problems. We had to struggle to get a ration-card, passports and other official documents, more so because we wanted Lata to be designated as the head of the family. On most occasions, Lata suffered more. Often the concerned government servants were convinced only when the arguments came from a 'man'. Even he postman refused to deliver letters to 'such' people. But, we look at such episodes as an opportunity to explain our viewpoint. Over time many people have come to appreciate our stand while a few have adopted this system of nomenclature.

Our daughter Manasvini Lata Ravindra is now in the fifth standard.

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Her name did create some problems in getting her admission to a school. Nevertheless, in schools as in all places, people ultimately accept a new system of nomenclature if they are assured of its legal validity.

We do not feel that we have imposed our ideas on our daughter Mansvini by asking her to follow our nomenclature system. Routinely, when a child adopts the father's name and surname, is there a conscious choice? Is it possible for a child join-ing kindergarten to make a conscious choice about its own name? We be-lieve, that one's name, like other values and *sanskaras*, is given by parents to a child. It is upto the child to accept or reject it. We have told Manasvini that she is free to choose a system of nomenclature of her choice once she becomes a major.

We are ready to make changes in her name even earlier if she feels too pressurised by society. Upto now, she has insisted on retaining it. She knows the idea behind it and is proud of it. "I love both parents, hence I put their names along with mine," is her answer. We hope, her conviction would be shared by many of our friends, who haven't so far mustered courage to accept this system.

Ravindra R. P, Lata P. M, Thane

Shared Views

I do agree with a lot of what you say in your articles. I am sure that will not surprise you, because what you say very often fits in with what I was trying to say in my book, *No Full Stops in India*.

I was particularly impressed with your article *In Defense of Our Dharma*. While I agree with your re-marks about the BJP, what I think is even more important is that you have highlighted reasons why the BJP is attracting support. There are so many people who simply condemn the BJP and mouth secular cliches. In fact, I find that if one says anything in favour of Hinduism, one is accused of being pro-BJP.

In a television programme I made for the BBC, I tried to make some of the points you made in your article on the Mandal Commission. I am particularly glad that you discussed the reactions to the conduct of the police. Whenever I have been asked about this, I have always said that the elite of Delhi and indeed the middle classes should go and see for them-selves what the police do as an every-day matter of routine to poorer people in other parts of the country. I believe that what shocked the elite was that this time the police were beating their or at least their children's fellow students.

Mark Tully, New Delhi