

Give and Take

This is in response to Anil Khanna's letter titled *A Threatened Man* that appeared in **Manushi** No. 62 and to your question of why Indian men in the US may feel threatened by **Manushi**.

Let me begin by saying at the outset that I found much of what Khanna said horribly one sided and chauvinistic. It seems as if he wants to live in a dream (nightmare?) world of a house, without any arguments from anyone. A place where he can rule as some kind of a monarch. Does a South Asian household exist where there are no arguments between a wife and husband? In my view, such households would have definite physical and mental oppression. A place where a woman is kept as an object in the house, perhaps as a servant for those who cannot afford one. Or as someone whose existence is defined as being a conduit in carrying on the "family name" by bearing a son (daughters not being able to qualify for this benediction).

Having said this, I will also say that I found myself having somewhat similar feelings as Anil, however from a different perspective. Let me explain:

I feel sacrifice (submission) is the most important action in a relationship. But, I also feel that sacrifice has to be mutual. If the woman is the only one sacrificing, then that is oppression and should not be condoned in any way. Living in the US and having "dated" US women, I have found this spirit of sacrifice very lacking. I feel much of the time it is the work, career, or what is termed as "my life" that takes

precedence over the relationship. This career does not have to be one of climbing the corporate ladder, it can be working with the poor, being a peace activist, or an artist. In whatever case the "life", in exclusion of the relationship, takes priority. I feel, for many it would be far easier changing spouses than changing jobs, or reducing the commitment to a career.

My problem is that I was brought up to believe that the family must come before everything else, that my spouse is the one to whom I must be most devoted. If I am to work 80 hours a week then it should not be for the sake of the work, but because I love my family. This difference of intentions, and reasons also leads to differences in the way the situation of working 80 hours a week may be resolved. If work is done for the love of the work, then there is a good chance the marriage will break up so that even more time may be devoted to work. If work is done for the love of family, then, I feel, some kind of a balance can be searched for and sacrifices made. This is what I find so attractive about the tradition of submission. Submission not to me personally that I would boss her around, but submission to the love of the relationship. Not because I need someone who will not argue with me, but because, I too, myself, would submit to love.

Anil talks about changing his wife if he doesn't like her, and not being able to achieve the same with the US woman. Here, too, the question for me is of sacrifice and that just has to be from both sides. So many times I have heard the excuse for breaking up being that I grew up and changed, or

that the other person changed. These same people then find someone else who now fits better in their mode of thinking. As a result of this moving around, all that a relationship becomes is jumping from one "compatible" person to another. Where then is love, if one is not willing to adapt to another?

Then there is the question of commitment. I am attracted to the commitment that South Asian women give to their spouses; the words "till death do us part" (or their equivalent) really mean something and are not just a routine in a ritual of successive marriages. I look for that commitment because I wish to commit. I do not wish to have relationships with US women only to the extent we don't "outgrow" each other. How absurd, how can one outgrow love? It is strange: I sometimes feel that there is so much more care, commitment, sacrifice, and love in the "arranged marriages" than there is in the going-out-then-getting-married path of "love" followed in the US.

Perhaps Indian men in the US feel "threatened" by feminism that looks to the western world as an ideal to be achieved. At the same time, this westernisation is not just restricted to women. Men need to look at themselves just as well. Are we offering women what we are asking of them? Are we offering our wives the same commitments, sacrifice, adaptability that we ask of them? If so, then yes, we have a reason to ask the same of our spouses and spouses to be. If not, as it is the case among many men, then by what reason do we have that right?

On Indian feminism, it would be

sad if all that can be achieved is a mimicking of the western US women. We need to work together, both men and women, for true liberation based on the beauty that refreshes.

Altaf Ali Bhimji, USA

Marital Rape and Law

The institution of marriage legalises cohabitation between two persons and provides mutual rights to be enjoyed over each other's bodies without any hindrance. But marriage does not give a licence to the husband to have sex with his wife as and when he desires, though it is generally assumed that by the very fact of marriage, a wife gives her irrevocable consent to sexual intercourse with the husband under all circumstances. There can be numerous instances of forced sex by the husband where the wife refuses either due to her ill health or depression or if the husband is under the influence of some drug or has perverted sexual tendencies or is oversexed. Such cases usually remain confined within the four walls of the bedrooms and those reported represent only the tip of the iceberg because Indian law on rape gives least protection to the wife from the sexually outrageous behaviour of her husband, whether she is living separately or with him. There are glaring lacunae and inadequacies in the penal law dealing with marital rape. These are:

Firstly a man having sexual intercourse with his own wife without her consent is exempt from any charge of rape if the wife is 15 years of age or above, whereas in other cases of rape, an intercourse even with the consent of the girl if she is below 16 years, is

rape. Secondly, sexual intercourse by the husband with his own wife without her consent amounts to rape only if she is below the age of 15 years, but in this case punishment prescribed is very mild as compared to other cases where the woman is adult also, namely im-prisonment which may extend to two years or fine or both. In the latter case the prescribed minimum imprisonment is seven years which may extend to 10 years in addition to liability to pay fine.

Thirdly, marital rape is equated with ordinary rape only when the wife is below 12 years of age and sexual intercourse is without her consent.

Fourthly, in 1983, through an amendment in the Indian Penal Code, a provision was added which makes it an offence for a husband to have sexual intercourse with his own wife without her consent when the wife is living separately under a decree of separation or custom or usage. But surprisingly, though it bears all the ingredients required for the offence of rape, it has not been placed in that category. The punishment is mild again — imprisonment which may extend to two years and fine.

Lastly, there is no protection for the wife from sexual outrage by the husband, if she is living separately but not under decree of separation or custom or usage.

It is evident that under law, the consent of a wife who is of 15 years or above and is living with her husband and of that who is living apart from her husband but not under judicial order or custom or usage, is not required for sexual intercourse by the husband and the husband would not be guilty of marital rape even if he

forces himself on her. The factor of consent is underplayed in these cases in the name of the sacred concept of marriage and a wife's obligation to submit herself in totality to her husband. Even granted that sex is an important aspect of conjugal life, there is more to marriage than that. Over the years, the concept of marriage too has undergone tremendous change. It has now started being considered as an equal partnership. People are beginning to realise that a woman is no more an appendage to her husband, hence must be treated as an individual with a will of her own and not merely as a sex object. Moreover, when it requires two to marry so it also requires similar consensus for consummating marital relations.

This is a subject fit to be taken up by the National Commission for Women constituted under the National Commission on Women Act 1990, which is committed to reviewing laws affecting women. Changes in law can be made to make marital rape an offence and hence a ground for divorce also.

Arvind Kaur, Patiala Rural Experiences

Ever since 1979 I wanted to work for rural development after being exposed to it at a project where my brother was working.

The work I do is to help develop women's self reliance, awareness and confidence in getting them to operate as a group in a rural environment.

Since Andhra Pradesh is unfamiliar to us, my husband Shankar (from whom I am now divorced) and I had to learn the language, customs and so on of the local people. In the

process of settling down here we bought a farm. For city slickers like us this was a new experience. We bought books on farming and asked for advice on how to go about earning a living from farming. Shankar also started getting things together for his factory and was cheated left, right and centre in the process. The biggest thorn in the flesh was the local MLA who had also become the Small Scale Industries Minister. It is really something to experience the power politics of these politicians at close hand. The guy was a Reddy who had a lot of power at that time and did he use it, and how! He succeeded in getting Shankar so disgusted with the whole experience that he wanted to sell the farm and return to Delhi. The main reason for this man's wrath was that we were now big landlords too (as newcomers) and if Shankar had started the factory the MLA would have lost a lot of his hold over the village landless poor who would be able to come to us for work. He tried to get us to leave. What he did not bargain for was that the man would leave but the wife would stay on!

From February 1987 onwards I stalled to look after myself here, learnt to live alone on a lonely and remote farm, went into all the nearby villages, and started talking to all the women and men about the situation in the villages, and the areas of their lives which needed support, for change to evolve.

After six months of getting acquainted with all the village women, Stree Sangshema was formed and registered. And with a small staff of five we started having meetings regularly in the villages. At these

meetings we conducted health awareness classes for common village ailments, social education and other village issues. We had a lot of difficulty in getting the women to come out of the house as the men felt that their women would get "spoiled". We had to overcome that slowly, by gaining their trust over a period of time.

Due to the precedent set by other voluntary organisations in the area, these people have got used to handouts, loans, and so on, which have not helped them in the long run. So although it has been tough and the groups are small, we have resolutely stuck to the norms that unless a woman has awareness, is functionally literate, has the ability to handle money, controls assets and the confidence to confront the issues that may come up and is part of the Sangham, we will not introduce any economic programme. With that as the basis of our work, we have been growing slowly but surely.

We did face threats, by way of our workers being told that they should not use mopeds or cycles, or they'd be stripped and marched around the village. I went and met the village sarpanch who was at the bottom of it (he's the MLA's cousin) and told him that if they wanted to strip anyone it should be me, and that I had no qualms about it, as I did not believe that my self-respect lay in my skin and what anyone saw of it! This shocked the man into protesting loudly that he did not have any such intentions towards my staff or me. So generally people leave us alone and by God's grace till today no harm has befallen any one of us, even though our meetings are

held only at nights, and they continue till 10.30-11.30 p.m. or later at times. We use a 1973 model Jonga jeep, mopeds and cycles. Our organisation has grown a lot since then and we have more staff doing the work.

I've also faced difficulties since I am now a single woman. I divorced in 1988. Initially the local bigwigs thought they stood a chance as my husband wasn't around. I had to send them packing. Now everyone in this entire region knows me, so I have no more problems. I also must admit that this whole experience has made me a different person.

I would like to make an offer to other women who may have faced similar situations like me, to come and stay here with me and learn the truth about living with nature, amongst poverty and realise how much we can contribute to our rural sisters. I invite other educated/illiterate, destitute, deserted, battered women with/without children to come and join me in this work.

Chandra Kanjilal, Rampuram Beyond Reproduction

I read the article on reproductive tract infections titled *Why Women Hide Them* (*Manushi* No 69) by Rani and Abhay Bang with interest. Poor women's experiences and perceptions of their health problems and health needs are seldom stated so clearly. During various training programmes and workshops with rural poor women we find that, apart from the problems related to their abject poverty, the major health problems of women are kept under wraps. So long as the health care system remains in collusion with the family and state institutions' women will not get a

solution to their real health problems, especially those linked to their sexuality and reproduction.

However, I have a few comments to make. First of all, I find it problematic to categorise women's problems related to their sexuality, menstrual cycle and re-production as reproductive tract infections or call a programme that addresses these issues as 'reproductive health care'. When we name a problem, it has certain political implications as no categories are neutral. When the state names its population control programme the family planning programme or family welfare programme it strongly reinforces a certain notion and definition of family and therefore excludes a large group of women who live outside this ideal family of '*hum do hamare do*'. A woman's marital status should not decide her need for contraceptives.

Similarly, when we use a term like reproductive tract infection, what gets overemphasised is the role of reproduction rather than the women's sexuality. A woman who is not involved in the act of reproduction, but has an active sex life, gets marginalised by the very naming of the disease. This is the way medical textbooks have looked at our problems and we, by using the same terminology, exclude a range of women who are living outside heterosexual marital homes. Thus all single, women like deserted and widowed women, prostitute women, unmarried and lesbian women get excluded, because ideologically and structurally, they cannot benefit from the programme that is called

reproductive health care. This has serious implications in the context of AIDS and women's need for safe sex.

Within the confines of the health care system, women matter only as wives and mothers and have legitimate access only to maternity wards. We have often wondered what kind of health care we could demand if we did not have 'married wombs'. We as feminists need to move away from these biases against us and create concepts and terms that do not differentiate between us on the grounds of our choices to reproduce or not to reproduce. So long as we refer to our ailments as reproductive tract infections, we unwittingly see women's organs as primarily useful for reproduction. It undermines the cyclic nature of our bodies and undermines our sexuality.

I personally feel that a woman's sex life, more than her reproductive life, is lived in total privacy and secrecy. There is tremendous societal recognition and acclaim for her role as a mother and reproducer. A married woman can still talk about these problems while a single woman has to hide them from even her own gaze.

Further, the article seemed to somehow treat white discharge in itself as a problem. I am certain that it is not the intention of the writers, but what gets communicated is that since women see it as the most important and common problem, the writers continue to refer to white discharge as a major problem. In various sessions on women and health during workshops with women, we have taken a lot of time to explain the whole menstrual cycle and its relationship

with white discharge. When our focus is "to create awareness of our own body" then the definitions and understanding of a complex process such as white discharge can be very heartening and revealing of a woman's strength and the cyclic nature of her body and its functions. This is an empowering process. Having established that, we can move into the area of infectious white discharge and problems arising out of that. The first awareness has to be '*safed pani sabko ho jata haf*'; white discharge is normal and happens to every woman. We should then move on to the issue of when and why it becomes infectious, painful and disconcerting.

I am also concerned about a cryptic statement in the article regarding the effectiveness of modern (allopathic) treatment versus 40 existing methods of indigenous treatments for infectious white discharge in the region where the project is going on. The article somehow strengthens the already existing view that an injection is better than a pill and a pill is better than home remedies. It is true that none of us know the truth but what is more important is whether we want to explore other truths than the ones that we are familiar with.

However, I must again stress the relevance of the article. It is based on years of rigorous research and a well thought out community health programme with a strong bias in favour of rural poor women, the most neglected group in our patriarchally structured class, caste society.

Abha Bhaiya, New Delhi
Intolerable Situation

I am a 28-year-old woman with two children. I got married in my first year of college to a government employee who is 10 years older than me, a fact that I didn't know at the time. However, the age difference between us is not the reason for the profound gap that exists between us.

It is possible that he, a post graduate in two subjects, feels that a woman is a man's servant. Because of this he indulges in brutal behaviour, causing me both physical and mental anguish. I want to be an equal partner in our marriage, not a servant in his house who serves his relatives and father.

Also he is extremely suspicious of me. It matters little to him whether the person concerned is a milkman, a vegetable seller or an educated neighbour. The mere fact of a man being in my presence is enough to arouse his suspicions. I have suffered all this for 10 years, despite making efforts to convince him about my innocence.

He never agreed to my taking up a job. However, I studied privately for my master's degree. I am now trying for a job but have not yet succeeded in finding one. Despite all the trials of my life, I love my children and my father says that my husband is exploiting this fact. I cannot take any hasty decision because I cannot entrust their upbringing to my husband, who is unlikely to be a good father.

I never expected that life would have these unseen chains. I can neither leave him nor adjust with him. A major reason for my being unable to leave him is my financial condition.

I can manage on my own, but how do I bring up the children? I am making a determined effort to get through this crisis, but I do not know how far I will succeed. Perhaps the only ways out are my financial independence or total detachment. Is there any other way, any via media?

S.D. Sasi Kiran, Guntur Violations of Law

Thousands of workers, women and peasants of the Mahasamund region on Madhya Pradesh have been peacefully agitating for the removal of liquor shops from the centre of the city since May Day this year. As a result of their agitation, one of the liquor shops, illegally run near the Food Corporation of India godown, was shifted out of the town in July 1992. The other liquor shop is also being illegally run on the state highway near a petrol pump, although it had been given a licence to run the shop at Ganj Para. The agitators were demanding its immediate removal and action against violation of excise laws.

The liquor contractors had not paid revenue to the tune of Rs 17.23 lakh to the government for the months of August and September 1992. While the government remained a silent spectator to this flagrant violation of excise laws, the contractors continued with their business.

The total amount recoverable from liquor contractors for the months of August and September 1992 in Raipur district (for country or local liquor) is Rs 17,23,525 from the Mahasamund group, Rs 6,81,118 from the Pithora group, Rs 5,62,860 from the Gariband group, Rs 2,12,666 from the Chura group and Rs 1,11,84,917

from the Raipur group.

The district administration had an workers' force to an oath taking ceremony. In their oath, the workers have volunteered to accept punishment by the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha or the Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan, to which they are affiliated, in case they waver from their anti-liquor campaign.

**Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti
Sangathan, Raipur**

A Constant Struggle

I have been a regular and, believe me, a proud reader of **Manushi**. I have read a lot of women's journals and other magazines based on the problems faced by women, but I have never really respected any magazine or journal as much as I respect **Manushi**.

I work as a public relations manager in the City Guide. Being a working woman myself, I know what we women have to go through in this male dominated world. We have to fight tooth and nail for something which belongs to us — our personal freedom, opinions, views and desires. We have to fight for everything.

The road is tough but we will work out something; we already are. But I wish our men would learn to respect

nounced the auction of the defaulting liquor shops on October 19, 1992, but as usual the contractors did not turn up to bid.

Having resolved to fight against the misdemeanours of the liquor contractors, the representatives of the KN Oil Mill Workers' Union (affiliated to the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha and the Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan) met the district

collector on October 17, 1992. But instead of looking into the serious allegations against the liquor contractors and punishing them, the district administration cracked down on October 19, 1992, on the agitating organisations and arrested 49 leaders and activists who were agitating against the illegal acts of the liquor trade at Mahasamund. They were arrested under Section 151 read with Sections 107 and 116 (3) of the Cr. PC. They were later lodged in the Raipur Central Jail after they refused to furnish the exorbitant amount (two securities of Rs 20,000 each) demanded by the sub-divisional magistrate.

It is surprising that the five-month old agitation had not been considered a threat to law and order till the agitators sought to bring to public notice the violation of liquor laws by the contractors and the likely connivance of officials in such illegal acts.

The workers of Mahasamund have already reaffirmed their commitment to fight the liquor menace. On Gandhi Jayanti this year, about 500 workers pledged to stop drinking. This was also the last day for the Shaheed Niyogi Week celebrations. At this moving function, thousands of workers and peasants, women and children, took out a procession and later held a public meeting in which a school student led the 500 strong women as individuals rather than treat us as sex objects.

Kiran Jyot, New Delhi Realistic View

I am writing in response to a letter in **Manushi** No 70 complaining about

the "negative" views of the magazine. In my view your magazine is doing a commendable job reporting about the varied and complex lives of women in India. Your interview with Vimla Bahuguna pictured a woman of incredible independence, strength, resilience and yes, success. Readers looking for a positive view of women could surely find one here. Your magazine very rightly foregrounds the fact that we live in a patriarchal culture and it seeks to awaken women to this realisation. Please do not give up this emphasis. If you do, you will run the risk of making **Manushi** a *Femina* or some trivial magazine that pretends that women are born into privilege, unlimited opportunities and complete freedom of choice. Such conditions exist nowhere for women at present.

Malini Johar Schueller