

Letters to Manushi

Prayer has No Religion

As a Muslim I feel very sad at the way the supposed leaders of Muslims have mishandled the issue of Babri Masjid, leading to so much violence and bloodshed. I am convinced that it could have been resolved amicably had the Muslim leadership acted responsibly. Ordinary Hindus and Muslims react in a far more enlightened fashion to such issues. Let me illustrate this by sharing one of my own experiences.

In 1986, a family friend of ours, Dr Islam, came to visit Delhi from Islamabad. He works in the Ministry of Agriculture in Pakistan and had come to Delhi to attend an international conference. He expressed a desire to visit his native village in Haryana near Pakistan, I accompanied him to his village which he had not seen since the age of five or six when his family migrated to Pakistan at the time of Partition, but he had fond memories of his village. There had been no communal riots in 1947 in that village. Yet all the Muslim families had fled out of fear.

I was very moved to see the warmth and affection with which he was received by the elders of the village who remembered his family and recognised him. In the course of our conversation, the village elders told Dr Islam: "We have kept your masjid in very good condition. We too use it as a place of worship. We too go there to remember God (*Hum bhi wahan bhagwan ka naam lete hain*)."

Then they took us to show the masjid. It was in very good condition. They had put a *murti* of some Hindu god in there, but had not made any

changes whatsoever in the structure of the building which had been preserved as it was.

I distinctly remember that Dr Islam was moved by this sentiment and felt happy rather than offended. I too was touched because I have seen hundreds of mosques in dilapidated condition in areas from where Muslims fled in 1947. Many are being used as animal sheds or worse. But the way the village people had maintained the sanctity of that place of worship was inspiring. If one has love of God in one's heart, it does not matter whether one is Hindu or Muslim or Christian. A prayer has no religion. If my soul is pure and my actions are good and I am thinking of God, it does not matter whether I am a Hindu or Muslim and whether I pray in a mosque or temple. (*Ibadat to ibadat hai, Hindu ne kahee ya Mussalman ne*).

Syed Hussain, Delhi

A Wider Base

I have a few ideas about how **Manushi's** readership can be expanded: Why don't the contributors and subscribers of **Manushi** in a given town, city or village get together and form a group that will create greater awareness about the issues discussed in the magazine? I am not sure if such groups exist, but it may be possible to implement this suggestion.

V. Janaki, Madras

Starting Manushi study/discussion groups or Manushi Mitra Mandate is a very good idea. In fact, this is what many of our subscribers did in the early years. We hope you will initiate one such in Madras.

Editor

Appropriate Subject

Only **Manushi** could have thought of writing an article on a topic such as commodes and toilets. This is an important aspect of our everyday living, yet no one ever thinks of writing on such subjects. The last time I read something on this topic was by Gandhiji in *Harijan* and his other publications. The artwork accompanying the article was great.

Puloma Shah, New Delhi

Slip-ups

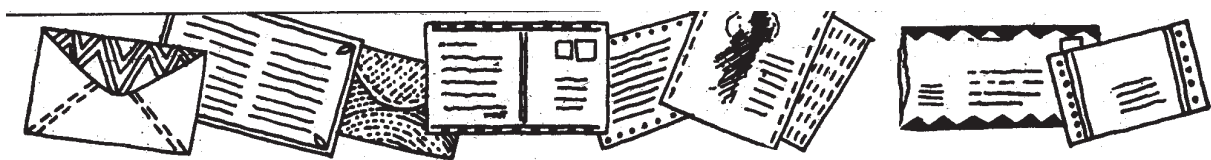
This has reference to your article, *Symbols of Mental Slavery* (**Manushi** No 72). The general tenor of the article was good. Also, certain specific points and larger issues you brought up were extremely pertinent.

However, there are some points that I would like to bring to your notice:

On page 8 of the article you mention that just digging a pit and covering it with a metal lid would act as a septic tank and produce fertiliser. It is extremely dangerous to have an unlined tank—it would lead to irreparable ground water pollution. Also, without proper monitoring, effective decomposition does not take place. Additionally, the septic tank (or soak pit as it is sometimes called) will have to be disinfected, otherwise it could be a health hazard.

Perhaps, a little bit of research would have prevented such a careless statement from being made. It is all too easy to lose track of the smaller details when we dwell on larger issues.

While being a great supporter of the Indian-style toilet and its many benefits, one must also consider the advantage a 'seat toilet' has for older people or people with arthritis. Now-



a-days, special seats are available in the market which can be placed over an Indian toilet and used as comfortably as a Western loo, and removed later on.

I do hope you understand that this is not meant as criticism, but is just a frank response to what I read.

Sunita Rao, New Delhi

I am very grateful to you for having pointed to the inadequacies and lapses in my article. Manushi is fortunate in having such alert and well informed readers.

Madhu Kishwar

A Better System

Congratulations for the brilliant attack on the prominence of the WC in India in the article, *Symbols of Mental Slavery*. As an American about to travel to India for the first time, I suffered through many of my friends' jokes about the Indian toilet system. When I first reached Delhi, I stayed at a hotel that offered both western and Indian-style toilets. I decided to start using the Indian one as I figured I should get used to it. I found it didn't take me long to adapt to the system.

I've been in Varanasi now for the last six months and my house is equipped with only an Indian toilet. The first benefit I noticed of the Indian system was that one didn't need toilet paper. In this day and age, anything that can be done without paper is a benefit. Yet, this is only one of the many things that makes the Indian system more desirable. I have noticed that the squatting position facilitates bowel movement as well. It is very easy for me to clean my toilet and, although I know very little about

waste disposal methods in India, Kishwar's arguments are convincing.

Often I am upset that western toilets are offered for westerners. Certainly, using the Indian toilet system is hardly an inconvenience for most travellers, although it may indeed be difficult for older western travellers whose joints are unused to the squatting posture. Many westerners, however, are turned off by the Indian toilet system simply because the western idea of cleanliness balks at the idea of using one's hand and water in place of toilet paper. But, after a few times of trying the Indian system and washing afterwards with soap, plus washing before each meal and using the right hand/left hand system, the westerner begins to realise that the Indian toilet system is quite hygienic after all. And, as Kishwar noted, in India, the Indian toilet is generally much cleaner than the western toilet. Certainly, when given a choice, I use the Indian toilet.

When I leave India next summer I'll have been using the Indian toilet system for one year, while I've used the western one for 22 years. And, while I'm no Jane Fonda, whenever I can afford my own house, the first thing I will do will be to rip out the WC and install the Indian toilet. After that, I will rid my house of napkins and direct my guests to the tap instead. Now, if only I could get consumers to take their take-out coffee in clay pots and their take-out food on leaves, instead of in paper and styrofoam!

Perhaps I am, in part, mentally en-slaved to India, or perhaps, rather, in these days of scarce resources, the West needs to look towards the "backward" countries to find more

efficient ways of living. India needs to wake up to the wise planning of its forefathers and we, in the West, should turn our heads to the East. The toilet may seem like a distasteful place to start an ecological revolution, but, in my view, if people begin to look at the impact of the WC on the environment, then we've gone a long way towards deconstructing the myth of western "progress".

Linda Parascandola, Varanasi

Transcending Boundaries

Reading your article, *Symbols of Mental Slavery*, I was reminded of a recent letter I wrote to my grandmother in the US, regarding my relationship with a Muslim man. I was attempting to dispel some of the myths that she, as a Jew, seemed to embrace about Islamic culture and Muslims as a group. The very essence of racism is rooted in a basic misunderstanding of other peoples and cultures (besides, of course, factors such as fear, ignorance, politics, and religion). This mis-understanding is best represented by the way many people in the West view the use of the Indian-style toilet and the act of "wiping with the left hand". Most westerners seem to view this sort of "faecal interaction" with contempt and disgust. They react to the thought of cleaning themselves without toilet paper after excreting waste with utter repulsion because they cannot see beyond what they themselves are familiar with.

What they fail to realise is that the WC and the squat toilet are entirely independent systems and that the actions that are applicable to the one system are not interchangeable with the other, but must only be viewed within the context of its own system.

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For example, when a person uses a squat toilet, the position of the body is entirely different than when using a WC, which changes the dynamics of the process. Not only are squat toilets more “natural”, environmentally sound and healthy from the standpoint of cleanliness, but the bowel movements themselves are actually facilitated and come out of the body in a different, cleaner way than with a WC. Often those unfamiliar with squat toilets are unaware that water is used (and provided) to clean oneself when using this toilet system.

Apart from its negative environmental effect such as cutting of trees, toilet paper should not be used for squat toilets anyway, as it is difficult to flush and clogs the system. Yet, most westerners insist on seeing the Indian style of cleaning as repugnant. It is far easier to hold people in contempt when their mores are seen as barbaric and their systems deplorable than to take the time and energy to re-evaluate one's own

mores — or to perhaps risk finding fault with one's own systems.

I know this analogy is a gross simplification, but I see many parallels to the problems facing the world today — the aversion to and fear about transcending the boundaries of the familiar. People cling so desperately to what they know because it is all they know. It is comfortable and secure. They fear that if that were taken away from them, they might be left with nothing.

Anastasia Fayne, USA

Slave Mentality

Your observations in the article, *Symbols of Mental Slavery*, are correct. But I disagree with you on two points. Firstly, it is difficult for an aged person, particularly one suffering from rheumatism, pain in the knee joints and soon, to use the Indian-style commode. Secondly, the fault lies not with western or eastern-style toilets, but with our unhygienic habits, illiteracy, poverty and proliferating population.

In public places such as state transport depots, hospitals and railway stations, I have seen people spitting after eating *paan* and small children relieving themselves in open places. Many *jhopadpattiwallas* don't have private or public toilets, so they use open spaces.

Lastly, Indians seem to be comfortable in slavery. When a minister or an important dignitary visits our city or village, we pay obeisance by doing *apuja*, garlanding him and doing his *aarti*. After a thousand years of slavery, we have lost our self-respect. And don't you

think that we prove our mental slavery by using the English language and the English calendar?

Chandrika Trivedi, Vabad

Shirking Responsibility

I read with great interest the article, *Symbols of Mental Slavery* (Manushi No 12). I entirely agree with you that Indian squatting style toilets are far superior to their western counterparts in all respects. It would help if organisations such as yours attempted to influence government officials, and builders to popularise such toilets. Dr Pathak, who pioneered the use of Sulabh Shachalayas, might be able to help in this endeavour.

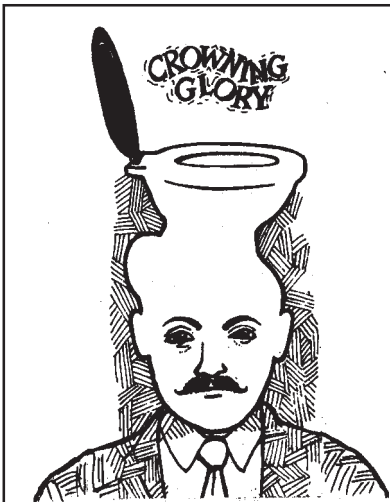
According to the *Bhagavadgita*, doing one's duty is the best course of action. However, in India those holding public office do anything but their duty. It is left to hapless citizens to perform the duty which should have been done in the first place by the concerned official/department, be it in government or in private organisations.

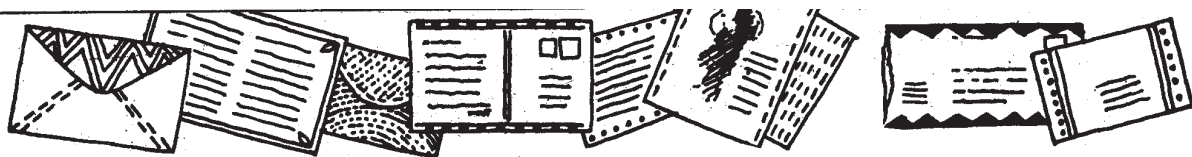
Mudit Jain, Bombay

Empathy with Horses

Horses are well known for their beauty, speed and disregard for frail human egos. One cannot dictate terms to a day-old foal, let alone an adult horse. Apart from their strong will, horses are also acutely sensitive to people's feelings about them. If, for instance, a person is fearful, the horse can smell this fear and intimidate that person.

To successfully handle a horse, one has to speak gently to it, pat it frequently and win its confidence. That is why women are particularly good with horses. History gives, us





many examples of good horsewomen, such as Joan of Arc, Rani of Jhansi and Kittur Rani.

In contemporary times, the first, second and fourth places in the recent world show jumping competition were occupied by women. Women have been achieving top honours in equestrian events for the last three years.

India has many women vets both in the teaching and research areas. But Dr Rajeshwari Agarwal, a member of the former ruling family of Gwalior, is unique since she is both a vet and a good horse rider. A photograph of her doing a horse jump was published in the souvenir of the ninth Asian Games. She trained to be a vet in Hyderabad but is particularly adept at handling horses.

To give you some idea of her rare skill with horses: she has single-handedly managed so-called 'impossible' horses. Once she had to shuttle between Pune and Bombay to dress the wound of a fractious horse in Bombay because nobody else would dare go near it.

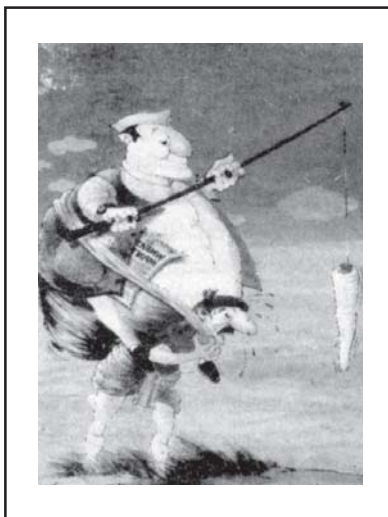
This Pune-based surgeon, who performs major operations on horses, is a source of inspiration to lady vets and a reminder that 'horsemanship' is not a male preserve.

Murali Pai, Madras

Distortions in Agriculture

The wonderful piece, *Cutting Our Own lifeline* (Manushi No 73), was timely. Urban vs rural contradiction is becoming widely prevalent in the present neo-colonial era. The main "agents" of distorted development, both on the economic and the ideological fronts, are urban people. These people are manipulating the

economy and acting as the carriers and defend-ers of the ideology of the ruling elite. The green revolution is one of the main sophisticated "developmental packages". The green revolution was imposed on the unassuming farmers by the urban bosses. Self-reliant agriculture was converted into totally dependent agriculture. Knowledgeable farmers were converted into illiterate, ignorant workers. Beneficial agriculture was converted into a losing proposition. Benefits were to accrue to fertiliser,



pesticide and seed manufacturers at the cost of farmers. It was this which made the agitating farmers of Karnataka launch an attack on Cargill, a pesticide/fertiliser/seed manufacturing company.

Having clearly brought out and understood these phenomena, Madhu Kishwar cannot justify the meagre wages being paid to farm labourers. The minimum wages of farm labourers are not even sufficient to get the minimum requirement of energy (2,400 calories a day) for people on the poverty line. Fanners

must and can rally all the rural people along with them against the exploiters only by paying the minimum wages to the agricultural workers, who are part and parcel of the agricultural community.

Conversion from food crops to cash crops is resorted to by most of the fanners to come out of this net. It is like coming out of a weak net to step into a doubly strong net. The market economy is not in their hands. It is a market economy of imperialists and their urban lackeys. They will close the noose as and when they want. This has already been experienced by the cocoa producers of Kerala when Cadbury ditched them and the tobacco producers of Coimbatore when the tobacco traders pulled their strings. This forced many farmers to cut their own cocoa trees in protest.

What is happening in Somalia is no different. Somalia's independent economy of the '70s was converted into a dependent economy. The feudal lords (now called warlords) shifted from food crops to cotton and sugar-cane to benefit from the market economy of imperialists. The severe famine which we are seeing today is an after-effect of these changes. The whole country is in shambles. People are killing each other in anguish. Their independence is at stake, while the warlords are fighting amongst them-selves. The wheel has turned full circle with American Marines coming in as saviours of the Somalians.

The happenings in Somalia and Ethiopia must serve as eye openers to us, since we are not very far from going the same way.

Cbander Raju, Kalpakkam

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I did not "justify" the meagre wages paid to farm, labour. Instead I emphasised that those of us who wish to see agricultural labourers get ad-equate wages have to work to ensure that farming becomes a paying occupation.

Madhu Kishwar

Stories of Strength

Manushi No 70 was of great interest to me. I was very eager to read the article on Sunderlal Bahuguna's crusade because, for several years now, I have been writing letters for an environmental group called Prole International. I have written about the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada river and also about the Subarnarekha Dam.

Stories of strength and determination like that of Vimla Bahuguna are not only informative and interesting, but give me encouragement to pursue my goals through a time in my life that I find challenging at best and discouraging and depressing at worst. I have been a single mother of three sons for 10 years now and although many women have much greater difficulties than mine, I haven't found it easy at all.

After a four-month visit to India six years ago, I came to see how important it was for developing countries to develop in a way that satisfied the needs of their own people, not the need of companies in the West to sell their own technology.

I am presently preparing to enter university in two or three years to study environmental sciences. I see a future for myself in trying to help India protect what it has and gain what it

needs at the least cost to the environment, with the most benefit to the people.

Barbara Gauthier, Canada

Development for Whom?

On September 22, 1992 Bhanwaribai, a *sathin* in the Women's Development Programme (WDP) of the Rajasthan government, was gangraped by men of the dominant Gujjar community, allegedly for her role in pre-venting a child marriage.

The WDP in its project document, prepared eight years ago, purports to empower women. Its stated central aim is "one of creating conditions in which (rural) women can discover themselves as active participants in the development process." Yet when an active, articulate village woman who is a government functionary, is sexually assaulted and raped while campaigning against child marriage on directions from the state government, why doesn't the latter bring the culprits to book?

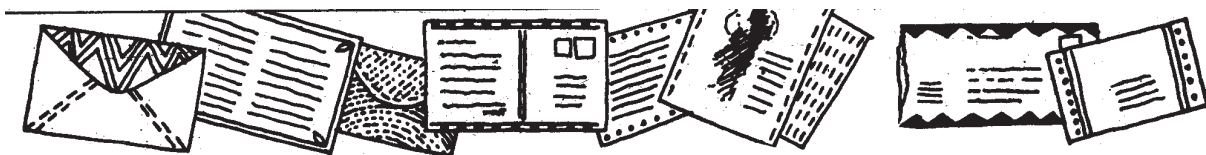
Why has the state turned deaf to the demands for justice made by Bhanwari and other women's groups? This does not go well with its avowed intention, repeated ad nauseam, to raise women's consciousness, to mobilise women and empower them.

These questions have become of critical importance today because the WDP has become a high profile programme, a front runner for many other such programmes. It has also been replicated in a number of districts in many states. *Thesathins* mostly come from remote, backward villages of Rajasthan. They have created breathing space for women in a still

highly feudal and repressive social order in the villages. The WDP has succeeded in creating a network of 1,200 women in 13 districts of Rajasthan, who articulate the needs of the community they live in.

Despite all the controversies that shroud the programme and the state's real agenda, the less discerning would deem the programme a success for whatever it has managed to achieve. Today these *sathins* are being dubbed as change agents. "Yet there is cause for concern on some fronts. For instance, there is apprehension that government inaction in the Bhanwari case will undermine the confidence of all women functionaries in being able to fulfil their role as effective agents of change, be it in fighting resistance to family planning, popularising protection against AIDs and so on.

Secondly, though the WDP has constantly emphasised the necessity of collectivising, of channelising the strength of the village women, by "the formulation of appropriate organisations for women in order to facilitate communication, learning and organised action", the ground level reality is somewhat different. When one such organisation, the Kekri Manila Samuh in Ajmer district, did emerge, a clear conflict of interest came to the fore on the issue of this group asserting its individual entity by the mere act of attending the National Convention of Autonomous Women's Groups held in Calicut in December 1990! It subsequently led to the termination of the services of



the *sathins* from WDP and much harassment by the WDP officialdom. These *sathins* (who are functionaries in the WDP) went on to win a writ petition in the High Court in March 1992 and despite contempt of court proceedings, the *sathins* are yet to be reinstated in the WDP.

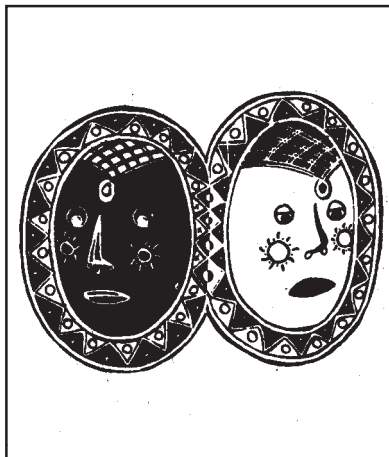
Any attempt to organise the strength of the local women outside the government-run WDP is seen as dividing the "unity of women" by the officialdom of WDP! The message clearly sent to all the *sathins* in the WDP was that since this was a government-aided programme, the *sathins* were accountable to the state, while at the same time keeping a facade of volunteerism, which was used to justify their measly salaries. This has been the experience with other government-run programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme.

Maiika and members of Manila Samuh, Ajmer

Denigrating Portrayal

In my view, **Manushi** represents not just a magazine for women-related issues, but a movement. The magazine has set me thinking about the "vamp" brand of "feminism", which is bandied about in the elite circles of Delhi society in particular and our nation in general.

An Indian woman is faced with challenges and dangers of a different kind as compared to our 'Medusa' sort of western counterpart. But the range of "feminist texts" produced and published, for example, by Penguin India, is disgusting indeed. One shudders at the writings of



present day authors such as Shobha De, Namita Gokhale and a host of others. Shobha De seems to have been specially commissioned by Penguin India to constantly churn out highly denigrating and disgusting portraits of Indian women in books such as *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights*, *Sisters* and the latest, *Strange Obsession*. This unholy alliance between the writer and the publisher begs condemnation of all thinking people, male or female.

Reena Saxena, New Delhi

Relatively Peaceful

In the turmoil following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, it is no small mercy that the Jammu region was free from incidents of communal violence.

Though two temples were blasted in the border district of Rajouri which I visited, there was no evidence of local involvement. Anybody from across the border could have planted the explosive device. Local Muslims, on my appeal, offered to make a token contribution for rebuilding the temple.

The government has also undertaken the construction.

Balraj Puri, Jammu

Defamatory

Through the pages of **Manushi**, I want to record my protest against certain defamatory comments made in the programme, *Sahityald*, beamed on Channel II of Delhi Doordarshan on March 13, 1993 at 9,30 p.m. The programme had a panel of four writers who were to discuss certain literary Hindi books. But before the discussion started, the producer's statement was read out. It asserted that a Hindi novel, *Chitticobra*, by Mridula Garg, was obscene. The exact words were: "*Lekhikaka duhsaahasashleelta ki seema tak pahunch gaya.*" (The recklessness of the writer has reached the level of obscenity).

Doordarshan has no business passing judgements like this. Had it been an opinion voiced by a participant, it would have been a different matter. It could then be confirmed or refuted in the discussion. But this was a blanket statement made by an official of Doordarshan.

The word "obscene" cannot be used by a media official of the government of India so lightly for a literary work as it has a definite legal connotation. The merit of the work and the reputation of the author are not of prime importance. What makes such a statement condemnable is the attempt at deliberate slander against a particular person, violating fair norms of journalism. I may add that

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the said book was published in 1979 and has gone into six editions.

I hope that Doordarshan will en-quire into the matter and take suitable action against the producer of the programme.

Mridula Garg, New Delhi

Struggle for Justice

Birohin Minz, a young Adivasi girl, became such a threat to the local liquor contractor, corrupt officials and even the BJP leaders in Raigarh, Madhya Pradesh, that she was raped on February 15, 1993 when she was on her way to her village, Laripani in Raigarh district.

Birohin, a grassroot-level worker of Ekta Paris had, had been organising the Adivasis in the Lailunga Vidhan Sabha constituency in Raigarh district. For the past three years she had been involved in organising the people of the area to defend their rights, which included a struggle for minimum wages and of their pending wages for the work they did in the government relief operations. During the tendu leaf season, she organised the people to demand higher wages from the tendu leaf contractors. She led the people to stop trucks carrying away stolen coal. She carried on an anti-liquor cam-paign in the villages, organising the people to take a vow not to drink — which indirectly affected the liquor trade in the area.

She eliminated the middlemen by organising the people to form “paddy banks” in their villages, which they could turn to in times of need. The people contribute to the “paddy bank” at harvest time and can take loans from it when they need rice, repayable at a

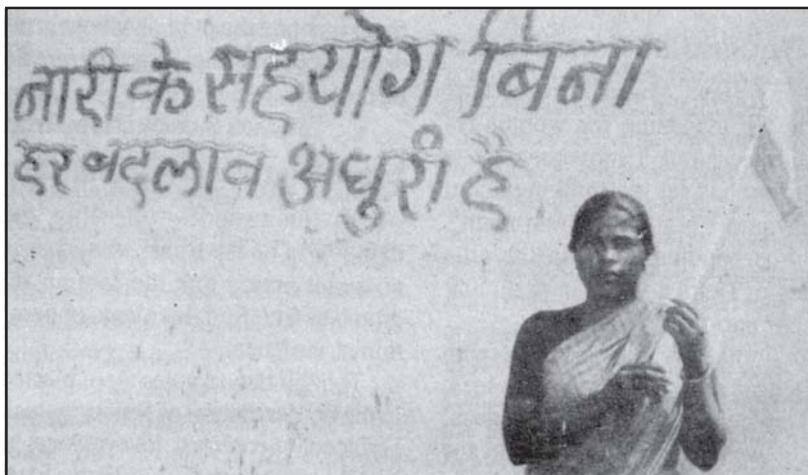
very small interest. This “paddy bank” renders the middleman powerless over the Adivasis, who do not need to turn to him any longer for help in times of need. These and many other small but significant battles were fought by the Adivasis under her leadership. The slogan of the Adivasis was, “*Jaljangal aur zamin, yeh ho junta ke adhin.*” (Water, forests and land should be in the control of the people). This was considered a threat by all those who have till today exploited these natural resources as well as the Adivasis for their own power and gain. Birohin had to be silenced in order to silence the voice of the people. So she was raped because earlier threats and other forms of intimidation had proved futile. Birohin had continued exposing these local contractors, corrupt government officials and the political leaders of the BJP.

On March 11, 1993 people gathered at Raigarh, travelling over 300 km, to protest against the rape and

to assert that they would not be silenced, but would continue to fight for control over their own resources. They marched through the streets of Raigarh in a silent procession, bearing placards expressing their resolve to fight for a better and more humane world. Birohin, an epitome of courage and fierce determination, led the march through the streets of Raigarh, and at the public meeting at Gandhi Chowk, spoke of her rape.

After the public meeting, the people decided to punish the culprits by a social and economic boycott. They resolved to boycott the grocer shop owned by one of the culprits and have decided to start another shop in its place for their needs. They propose to start the shop on a cooperative basis, to be run by the *mahila mandal* of the village. It was resolved at the meeting that a *mahila dal* would be formed in each village to deal with such people and to hand them over to the police.

**Shashi Sail, Chattisgarh
Mahila Jagriti Sangathan, Raipur**



Birohin Minz