

Letters to *Manushi*

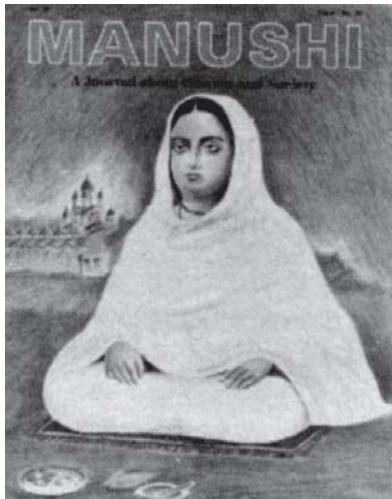
More on Rasmani

The life of Rani Rasmani was very nicely described in your issue. The following two incidents will be of interest.

Rani Rasmani's family was at first Vaishnavite (Bhakti cult). Once during the Durga Puja ceremony at her Janbazar Road house, some Europeans were very angry about the terrible noises made by the trumpets (*dhak*, *dhol*, etc) especially during the Navami Puja and Sandhi Puja at midnight. Some of them ordered the trumpeters to stop that noise but they kept right on playing. One angry English sahib came with some associates to attack her house. Then Rani, with a sword in her hand, appeared before them as Asuradalini (destroyer of Asuras). The Englishmen had to retreat. After this affair, she became a devotee of Kali, the destructive goddess, whose other name is Bhabatarini (saviour of the world). This goddess in our Bengali tradition has 12 forms, varying from affectionate saviour to destructive deity. Perhaps we women have to take such forms in our different aspects of life.

Another tale concerning Rani is that once she became so angry with the local British rulers that she considered asking the Danes in Chinsurah (Hoogly district) to help her against them. However, this alliance never materialised.

Now I am busy with the publication of two books and editing one of my lectures on unknown women in India's freedom struggle from 1857-1911. One of the women, Rani Siromani of Midnapur, fought against the British for which she was impris-



oned. She died in prison. Matangini Hazra, also from Midnapore, joined the 1942 movement and was shot when three bullets were fired at her and the volunteers who accompanied her.

All these instances are important for historians. Fifty years have passed since Independence was declared. Now women are more conscious and have to fight daily along with others against all sorts of injustice and torture which they have to face everyday. In some cases, some reference to past heroines are necessary, of course. But I think present day problems need to have our attention more than those of the past.

I hope you don't mind my wasting your time.

**Kamala Mukhopadhyaya,
Calcutta**

*Please feel free to "waste" as
much of our time as you like. We are
honoured to receive a letter from you.*

Editor

Early Discrimination

The article "Dowry Calculations"

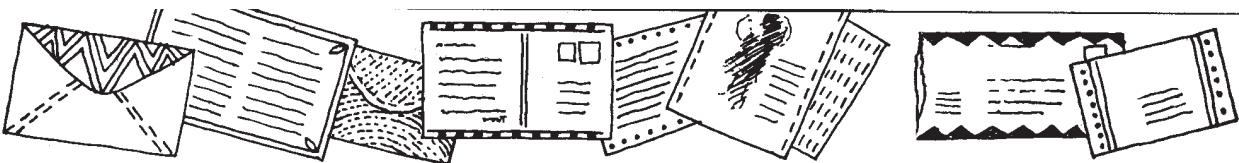
in *Manushi* No 78 was very good. I entirely agree with you that the degradation and persecution of an Indian woman starts with her own natal family. Almost all the decisions that underline the unwantedness and vulnerability of a woman are taken by her own parents. It is the latter's son preference which leads to amniocentesis induced female foeticides or female infanticides, neglect to death of the girl child and denial to her of the same opportunities for education and skill training as her brother. Cheating her out of her rightful share in the parental property on the flimsy grounds of expenses for her marriage is just another instance of this parental discrimination. After all, many families which give huge dowries and spend lavishly on daughter's weddings often outdo themselves at the time of the sons' weddings and in decking out of the daughters-in-law. However, that expense is not taken into account when parental property shares are being decided.

Nirmala Banerjee, Calcutta

Justice Delayed

Thanks for using my article "Crime and Punishment: Combating the Shiv Sena Menace in Bombay" in *Manushi* (No. 78). There's one small but significant error I made. I said, "Neither petitioner is Maharashtrian." (page 23) What I meant was, "Neither petitioner is a Maharashtrian Hindu." My father is definitely Maharashtrian. His family has lived in Bombay for generations. And Dilip Thakore is a Hindu, but not Maharashtrian.

You may be interested in what



happened to our application for an expeditious hearing on the petition against Thackeray. It took three months to finally come up in front of the chief justice on November 14. Three months! He said he wanted two weeks to read the case papers. On November 26, he passed a bland "order" simply saying we should approach him in another two months. Meantime, he's moving to the Supreme Court and who knows how long it will take for his replacement to take up the hearing application?

I enjoyed your article on dowry (as far as I could "enjoy" reading about dowry). I hadn't thought much about this notion of inheritance and the role that it plays. It is good you are exploring it from so many angles (the woman, the parents, the in-laws' family). Just focussing on banning dowry seems both counter-productive and inadequate. What ways are there to agitate or press for legislation to ensure inheritance rights? Not that legislation alone will solve it either.

For instance it seems to me that banning amniocentesis is entirely wrong. I know of doctors here in Bombay who agitated to have it banned; now that it has been, they engage in a far more lucrative, *illegal* business, offering the test themselves. Sickening, but more than that, the very purpose of banning the test has been undermined.

Dilip D'Souza, Bombay

Senseless Rioting

A great deal has been written about the brutality and massacre that was perpetrated in December 1992 and January 1993, but very little has

been written on how ordinary working people risked their own lives, home and property to save and shelter people of another community.

There have been several such incidents. In one *basti* in Jogeshwari, when rioters came to kill people, a Maharashtrian Hindu family hid their neighbours in their attic. The rioters knew that people were hiding in that room. They threatened the owner of the house and ultimately poured kerosene on him, saying that they would burn him. The owner kept silent and said, "Do what God tells you to do." Luckily for all of us, however, the rioters were persuaded to leave.

There are countless heartening examples. We are proud of them and they instil hope in all of us who live and work here and whose families and children have to inherit this country.

Often the worst sufferers were those noteworthy for their contributions to the community. Take the case of Professor Amin who used to live on the ground floor of the building that faces our playground. Professor Amin is a Sanskrit scholar doing his Ph.D on the life and era of the seventeenth century Maratha hero, Shivaji. A couple of months ago he had organised an exhibition on the period of Shivaji. Amin is active in different cultural activities in his own residential area, as is his wife, a Maharashtrian Hindu woman. Professor Amin had over the years built a sizeable library of rare and choice Sanskrit classics.

This collection was set on fire on January 11, 1993. At the forefront of the attack was one of our locally active persons, a leader of a local Hindu cultural-cum-political group in the

colony. He had mobilised about a hundred gangsters, who were all armed. All the residents of our colony were saying, "If not for the armed outsiders, all the residents would have gone and intervened. Amin and his people are one among us. How dare anyone call them otherwise."

Similarly, in Asalfa village, on the Andheri-Kurla road, lived an old soldier called Ismail Naruddin Chiplunkar. He had fought in the Indian army twice against Pakistan. In one of the wars he had narrowly escaped death. After his retirement from a full-fledged career, where his patriotism was more than well tested, Chiplunkar was working as a security guard in a company in Bombay. When the riots broke out in Bombay in January 1993, his family members were all ready to leave for safer areas. However, the brave soldier insisted that he had fought for the country and risked his life, which none of the rioters or the people goading them to riot had. He felt that his selfless service to the country was protection enough. He refused to go, but his family left the area. In a few hours, Chiplunkar was hacked to death by the rioters.

Also among the sufferers of the riots was the daughter of Haroon Rashid, editor of *Urdu Blitz*. She could not attend the ceremony at which she was to be felicitated for her top performance in the Marathi language. She had scored better marks than many others whose mother tongue was Marathi, but could not be present to accept such an important felicitation simply because a fortnight earlier she and the 20 families who lived at Jubilee Hall had

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to flee for their lives. Organised gangs had burnt down their houses. Among many other possessions, Haroon Rashid lost his precious library which he had painstakingly built over the years. The attack took the form of petrol bombs thrown from the house of a local Shiv Sena corporator who used to be a good 'friend' of Rashid.

There is also Aalam Saif, a carpenter who lived in Girgaum, in central Bombay, a largely Hindu locality. Saif was compelled to leave for Allahabad, his 'hometown' which he had never seen. He speaks neither Hindi nor Urdu, only Marathi. "At the age of 40 I'll now have to start learning what they tell me is my language," he says sadly.

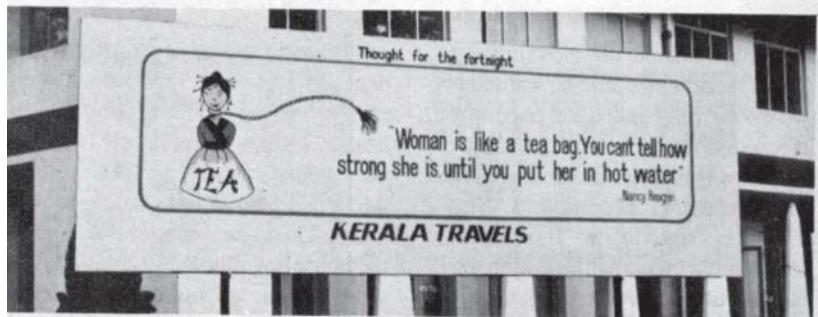
Sujata Gothoskar, Bombay

Complementary Roles

Nature has allotted different roles to men and women. A woman has the very essential and responsible task of carrying the unborn baby in her womb for nine months, giving birth to and feeding the baby. Even later it is the mother who has to be strength giver and supporter for the child's development. Hence, the mother's role is irre-placeable.

It is a widely believed, tested and accepted fact that a man can construct a house but a home needs a woman—wife, mother or sister. This certainly proves the greater prudence and maturity provided to woman by nature. Despite these factors, why is the patriarchal family system imposed on women in society?

Why does the girl have to go to her in-law's house after marriage and break all ties from her real house, whereas the boy is not expected to



do the same?

Why does the girl have to change her name and surname after marriage? Why is the husband always the head of the family?

When nature has not made woman lesser than man, why is she treated as a subordinate in present day society? The separation or gulf between men and women should not be stretched to the extent that they come in conflict with each other.

Surabhi Gangal, New Delhi

Revolting Hoarding

I was in Trivandrum recently where I came across this billboard by Kerala Travels while wandering through the city. [See *lwo above*] I am no feminist or social rights activist, but I found the quote and the context in which it was set quite revolting. I re-read it several times, and still could not figure out why it was there at all, ironically right outside the child welfare complex.

Sunita Rao, New Delhi