

## Reader's Forum

*Readers' Forum is a new feature in **Manushi**. Readers often send us long letters sharing their thoughts and providing new insights into issues or situations that **Manushi** may not have dealt with. Often these submissions do not fit the format for articles. Therefore, we are introducing a Readers' Forum - a space in which you can share thoughts, views and experiences with others. Letters that come to us in response to specific **Manushi** articles or to the magazine itself will be published separately under a new title: **Responses to Manushi** (see p. 43).*

### Struggling Alone

This is my first letter to any journal. I am an educated girl of 30 years of age, at present working in a government residential school. My friendship with **Manushi** is only seven months old. Though many people say that you are not Indian, and you are the cause of problems for some people, I feel exactly the opposite. So my friends are also saying that feminism is only hating men, and because I am not beautiful I am frustrated, and so became a feminist.

Here in my school I am the most qualified teacher among the staff of forty, including our principal. You advocate women's causes. We all talk about the abuse against women. Here in my institution, eleven to sixteen year old girls are being regularly exploited by male staff members, and even females are supporting it by keeping quiet. Unnecessary patting here and there in the name of affection to kids is very common. Male teachers ask the girls to come to their residences at any time for any reason. The girls are losing their innocence before time. I am not a conservative. I know that if a woman decides to talk to someone, to stay with someone with or without marriage, it should be her choice. She must take the decision and face the result. But such young girls do not know what is being done to them. I along with two colleagues

raised objections. We were in trouble, and one colleague has been transferred tactfully.

This being a residential school, and a government-aided one, there are



a lot of evils going on. Once I was involved in purchasing, and I raised some objections. Since then I am being tortured mentally. Threats like extending my probation period, or transferring me to some hard station are common. I have received threatening letters also. Above all, the character assassination, involving a colleague eight years junior to me in age

whom I treat like a brother, was more than I could tolerate.

At that time I had my father's support, and my brother colleague's support. Now, after 14 months of tension, my colleague has broken down and has stopped even talking to me. My father too wants me to keep quiet. My other colleagues do not talk to me. Even newcomers are also not talking to me, as my principal gave them clear instructions to isolate me.

So I am alone in the school. It has become very difficult to work. I had to consult a psychiatrist, and am still taking medicine to keep myself going. Now I am a little better. At this juncture you were my only support.

**Manushi**, you fought for so many people, are you not going to fight for young girls?

Please do not publish my name at this stage, or I may be in serious trouble in such a remote place. I fear physical attack. But if you want to investigate the case then I will give full support even if I have to resign by will or by force.

**Name withheld, Purola Dt, U.P.**

***Manushi** has offered to help investigate and publicise the situation at this institution. However, being so far away, we can offer only limited support to the author of this letter. It*

*will be far more effective if she can get some support from people in the area. we hope some of our readers in the Purola district will volunteer to help her, at least by way of moral support. Those interested should write to the Manushi office, and we will provide your addresses to her. -Ed*

### **== A Call for Protest ==**

The Metropolitan Museum in New York has recently built some new galleries to house South Asian art. Works from all of India's traditions are co-mingled where they are contemporary — a medieval bodhisattva is besides a medieval Shiva — except for the fact that all "Muslim" works are relegated to the Islamic wing, which is on the other side of the gallery. The "Muslim" works are by and large secular — miniatures of Mughal notables, flora and fauna etc. — and many are not particularly aesthetically different from Hindu religious paintings in the South Asian section, not to mention the fact that the museum's dichotomy is utterly incapable of grappling with works such as Mohammed Ustad's Radha-Krishna painting or the Persian Ramayana. At a time when so many other forces are trying to capitalise on differences in Indian society for ignoble ends, the museum must be condemned in the strongest terms for entrenching meaningless, communalist divisions in art history. We as Indians must oppose this pernicious and ahistorical western attempt to divide our heritages. I encourage NRI groups - particularly the Association of Indian Muslims - to protest the Met.

**Mina Kumar, New York, USA.**

### **== The Last Rites ==**

My father is no more. I used to call him by his first name, "Ghundu" (an informal version of Gundappa)

and not use any of the customary respectful addresses reserved for a father in an old fashioned Hindu joint family in Karnataka. In April 1986, he was diagnosed as suffering from lung cancer and he died on 10th June 1986 late at night. It would have to be a male member of the household, not me — my father's only child who belonged to the 'inferior' female gender — who would perform the last rites. Because I had been mulling over this problem for some time, I made up my mind to perform the funeral rites myself. My husband got in touch with the priest at the municipal crematorium who was aghast at hearing my views and flatly refused to cooperate. My father-in-law tried to get him to do what I wanted but the priest refused to budge repeating the familiar argument that according to the Hindu '*dharma shastras*', women don't have the right to perform funeral rites. I was listening to the arguments and feeling more and more depressed. Even though my father had not died childless, should he be cremated at the hands of a male relative just because his only child whom he had loved intensely in his own way was female? So I took over from my father-in-law and told the priest that I was the sole heir of my father and as I believed in the equality of men and women, I felt I had the right to perform the last rites. As expected the priest reminded me that irrespective of my new-fangled beliefs, the *Shastras* left no scope for what I wanted to do. When I pleaded with him to modify the conventions in accordance with changing times (as people like Maharshi Karve had, regarding widow remarriage), he expressed his dismay and suggested with understandable anger that we could cremate my father with the help of even a street-walking male urchin (if male members of my own household were not cooperative) or cremate

him without rites (*bhadaagni*). Everything under the sun was possible except a Hindu female performing the last rites of her dear father's lifeless body! A wave of helplessness, frustration and anger surged through me and I felt like banging down the receiver on its cradle. However, I controlled myself and calmly told the priest that there must be a way out, though it may be a little unconventional. The Guruji expressed his fear of being criticised and denounced by his fraternity for straying from the trodden path. I suddenly saw some light at the end of the tunnel and asked him why he should not take pride in being bold and innovative in this age of social change and reform. There was silence at the other end of the line. I waited with bated breath to hear a final 'sorry' from the priest. The receiver crackled with his voice, I thought I heard 'No, I can't do it.' But no. What my overtaxed, but still functioning brain was registering was a reluctant but nonetheless unambiguous assent. My husband, whose face was flushed with worry and excitement put his hand on my arm to express admiration. While I was briefing my mother about going to the crematorium (an unheard of thing for Brahmin women) and the need for maintaining her cool as much as possible, my mother-in-law was gathering and packing up things in the room where my father's body lay.

The crematorium in Pune is a well-kept area with tall trees and waiting sheds and toilets. Friends of my sons who had proceeded to the crematorium had arranged for the funeral pass, firewood, cowdung cakes and the items needed for the rituals. The priest beckoned me over to where my father's body had been placed. And then followed a barrage of instructions and commands, most of which I did not comprehend, which

my father-in-law interpreted for me with care and affection. These included bringing water, sprinkling it in the cremation pit, preparing balls of *sattu* dough, placing them on various points of the torso of my father's body, etc. The only redeeming feature of the exercise was that it was a woman who was doing it on behalf of millions of Hindu women who did not know probably that they had, in fact, the rights to perform the last rites if they chose to, a right denied to them by the male-chauvinistic Hindu tradition.

I sneaked a look at my father's face which was still partially visible. That moment flooded my mind with countless memories associated with him. By the time I recovered, I realised that the dead body had been fully covered with fire-wood and cowdung cake, excepting the face. The Guruji instructed us to take a last look at my father's face before covering it with firewood. It was like saying goodbye to somebody on a departing train. There was a strange feeling of numbness and hypersensitivity.

When Dada, my father-in-law, handed over to me a piece of smouldering cowdung cake, I realised that the priests were instructing me to start the process of cremation by putting the first flame to the kerosene-soaked fire. Like a robot, I ignited the fire. The others ensured that the firewood caught fire from all sides. Then I was instructed to go round the fire with an earthen pot filled with water, which was deliberately broken a little every time with a piece of stone as I completed a round, letting the water spill out. Finally I was asked to drop the pot at the head of the pyre.

The next thirteen days passed in a daze. They included going through the motions of answering the queries of well-wishers, accepting condo-

lences and going to the special places where additional rituals had to be performed. At these rituals males of all ages from other households were seen doing similar rites for their dead relatives and among them, I was the only woman. This created quite a sensation. For many my very presence among them was disturbing, aroused the curiosity of some and for a few was even inspiring. By this time, perhaps, even our priest had started feeling that he had done something which was not only not shameful, but actually something which he could feel proud of. He and my father-in-law,



on their own, tried to explain the reason for my presence to curious onlookers.

On the tenth day, there were the rites of *tilanjali* in which a ball of rice is placed on a cup made of leaves, which is then put on a rock, to be consumed by a crow. It is believed that only if a crow devours the offering, can one assume that the soul of the departed has reached a state of fulfilment. I knew that if by sheer coincidence crows showed no interest in the offering, the priest would be upset and blame me and himself for having entertained my request in the first place and vow never to do such a sacrilegious thing in the future. (I later came to know that my

relatives and friends were filled with the same anxiety). To our pleasant surprise no sooner had I put the ball on the rock than an obliging crow pounced on it (the *pinda*).

On the last day of the rites, some of the priests who had been invited for a ritual feast confessed that Hindu scriptures do not, in principle, forbid women from performing the rites; it is only the force of age-old tradition that has resulted in the current near-total discrimination against women. They felt that if more Hindu women came forward to assert themselves, the practice would change. This was corroborated by a woman friend who secretly confessed that she would like to do what I had dared to do except that she had brothers who would abhor the idea when they, males, were alive. A male friend expressed doubts as to whether his own wife would emulate my example in the event of the death of a parent as her brother was abroad.

Though I respect everybody's freedom to follow custom, I strongly feel that there is a lot of scope for making Hindu last rites simpler and less messy. Some institutions have been taking a lead in this and this is a very encouraging development.

**Seema Joshi, Pune, MS**  
(Translated from the Marathi by  
Avinash Joshi) □

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