

Readers' 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 before. 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**.*

■■■ Women and Music ■■■

I am writing to bring to your attention some potential lines of enquiry about women and music. I am an Indian male engaged in using music in the education of the mentally disabled and I have admired your work for women's empowerment since the 70's when I first saw *Manushi*. In the last few years, I have been thinking more intensively about how men and women make music.

The first thing I would like to point out is what I have observed since the 60's in Indian music: The voices of popular female singers across the country are getting thinner and those of the male singers are getting deeper and more resonant. It appears that the people who make, record and sell popular music are preferring female singers who project a very thin, high-pitched, "feminine" voice, whereas in male singing those singers are preferred who have a more European kind of "masculine" voice. Growing up as a teenager in the 60's in southern India, I remember, through various pressures, learning to prefer the superthin voice of Ms S. Janaki, whereas my mother's generation liked singers with a more full-bodied, realistically woman-like voice, capable of traversing the deeper as well as the higher reaches of the gamuts (*sthaayi-s*).

The second observation I would

like to make is this: in India I saw that men tended to have a different vision of musical structure than women. Often men gravitated toward rhythmic pyrotechnics and exploding climaxes (whether these were appropriate or not) whereas women focused more on the melodic and emotional aspects and also on the process of



making music. This seemed to be a conscious choice, because some of the women singers could also do rhythmic pyrotechnics if they chose to, yet they did not.

There is even a hierarchy of particular forms of music that can be seen along gender lines. Forms like *khayal* are considered superior to *thumri*, *khajri* and *bhajan*, the latter usually being associated with women singers.

Bhajans, and other forms sung mostly by women, also incorporate all musical elements such as melody, rhythm, ornamentation, text, *bhava* (emotional content) and more subtle elements as well. Perhaps this has to do with the devaluation of the female sphere (home, temple, weddings, et cetera) as compared to the male sphere (darbars, music halls, music conferences) and nothing to do with inherent musical worth.

In addition to these three areas - (i) structural differences between men's and women's music in their voluntary forms pointing toward some male-female musical differences, socially constructed or otherwise; (ii) thinning of the female voice in the popular media determined perhaps by a certain male fantasy of ideal femininity and (iii) popular views about the superiority of particular types of music, there must be many more aspects of music that could stand a feminist theoretical scrutiny. Wishing your magazine and movement success.

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■■■ Uttarakhand Movement ■■■

Uttarakhand is the name commonly given to the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh (UP), comprising the districts of Dehradun, Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Pauri, Tehri (Gharwal

region), and Nainital, Almora and Pithoragarh (Kumaon region). It is a land of many critical and exciting movements including the Chipko movement to save forests, a movement to fight displacement and other adverse affects of mega projects (especially large dams), and movements against liquor and liquor mafias. All of these are concerned very closely with the livelihood of these hill people and their struggle for sheer survival against heavy odds.

For example, if all the large dams planned in the region are actually built, it is likely that nearly one million people will be displaced. The threat increases with the fact that this region and/or its neighborhood faces a high probability of destructive earthquakes, according to several experts.

Hence the region of Uttarakhand undoubtedly deserves very careful attention and planning. If creating a separate state of Uttarakhand could lead to more attention to the real needs of its inhabitants, as well as trying to realize the aims of the relevant movements mentioned earlier, it would be worth supporting. However, the movement for a separate state that has been making news in recent months does not appear to be moving in this direction.

Although the demand for a separate Uttarakhand has been in the air for quite some time, the current movement suddenly gained strength as a result of the state government's decision to implement 27.5 percent reservations for other backward classes (OBC's) in Uttarakhand (as recommended in the Mandal commission report). Because the percentage of OBC's is very small in Uttarakhand, this decision will lead to throwing open local jobs and educational opportunities to a large number of outsiders. However, as the reservation



is only 27.5 percent and at least some of the OBC's will have come from within, or nearby Uttarakhand, the fear of a large-scale job loss to outsiders is exaggerated.

After all, there has been so much work-related migration to neighboring regions by the people of Uttarakhand that the economy is sometimes called a money order economy. The term refers to the practice of sending money orders home to help families, which bolsters the local economy. If large-scale outside employment is justified for the people of Uttarakhand, it follows that people from other parts of UP should have the right to work in Uttarakhand. While a movement that protects basic livelihood deserves support, such as Chipko, the present movement smacks of narrow regionalism.

The anti-reservation aspect of the movement also has had two particularly ugly manifestations. Firstly, there were a number of sporadic attacks and threats of attack on dalits and OBC's who were contemptuously called "reservation wallahs." Secondly, in the early stage of the movement some highly objectional slogans, including some that were obscene,

were raised against dalit/OBC leaders of UP.

Other ugly aspects include the looting of liquor shops (in a land known for its anti-liquor movements), looting of dynamite (in a land with a rich tradition of Ghandian movements), and threats to cut down trees on a large-scale (in Chipko land).

Of course there is much more to the movement than merely these ugly aspects, as there are some good people involved who have been true to the initially relevant issues. The wider movement appears to move simultaneously in many directions and to speak in several voices. However, when evaluating the overall movement one must look not only at the fact that there are some good intentions within it, but also at what is happening on a wider scale.

At present there are many movements to create smaller states. In fact, even within UP there were four at last count: East UP, West UP, Bundelkhand, and Uttarakhand. Various types of vested interests, including small-time politicians who envision becoming a member of a

legislative assembly or a minister in the new state, are at work in these movements along with some well-intentioned people who have hopes that it will be easier to solve the region's problems if a smaller state is created. So the questions that are arising in Uttarakhand are likely to arise in other cases as well. In terms of the question of big crowds, especially of women, who have been seen in some (but not all) phases of this movement, it must be remembered that one cannot judge a movement on this basis; (remember the crowds assembled by the anti-Babri Masjid movement of the BJP). Still, it is possible that many women who gathered for the Uttarakhand movement were driven by very genuine hopes of badly needed change in their lives. But, as stated earlier, we need to assess these movements on the basis of how true they are to the real needs of the people, especially the weaker sections. The Uttarakhand movement will have to change significantly before it can be worthy of support.

Bharat Dogra, New Delhi

Converting to Islam

My uncle's middle daughter, Baba, who lives in Hounslow West, London, is gentler and more "feminine" than her sisters. She performs more household chores than them, and spends more time at home. She is also more deeply attached to her parents.

On the very first day I spent in her room, when I opened her cupboard to put some of my clothes inside, I was startled to find Islamic inscriptions neatly written out on the rear side of the *almirah* door. I didn't mention this discovery to anybody, especially not to Baba, and tucked the observation away in the back of my mind.

A few days later, she came into

the room one evening to take some of her clothes from the cupboard. After she had opened it, she caught me staring at the inscriptions and said accusingly: "You have seen the inscriptions."

"Well, yes. Naturally," I replied.

"I have written those down. They are verses from the Koran," she said in a so-what kind of fashion. Looking at me, she then realised that I was not trying to judge her and, in a more normal voice she added: "A year ago I even thought of converting to Islam." She then swept out of the room carrying her dresses, leaving me wondering about her parting statement. I was shocked. What were the inner compulsions that made a 20-year-old Hindu girl, who had been brought up in a progressive environment in England, seriously consider converting to Islam? I could not figure it out. Women like Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh and elsewhere were fighting against restrictions imposed on women by Islam and here was a Hindu girl who obviously believed that it was the right path.

The next day, in the morning, the opportunity presented itself for me to question Baba about her impressions of Islam. My uncle, aunt and Aarti, the eldest daughter, had gone off to work early that morning. Pooja, the youngest, was at home because it was her day off. Baba was also home and I was drinking tea when Pooja announced that she was going to the club for a swim.

"Why don't you go as well?" I suggested to Baba.

"No." Baba made a face.

"She won't go, *bhaiya*," Pooja told me and then said a quick "bye" and left.

"Why didn't you go?" I asked Baba. "It's excellent exercise."

"I don't mind the exercise," she

replied. "It's the dress I don't like. It's too revealing."

"You could wear a single piece swim suit and use a towel if necessary." I said.

"It's all the same. I don't even wear sarees."

"Because they expose the midriff?" I guessed.

"Yes," she said. "I think it's demeaning for women to be treated as sexual objects in this country - and they are themselves responsible for this since they behave in a cheap manner. I have enormous respect for how Muslims view these matters."

"Don't you think Hindus, too, are conservative on these issues?" I asked her.

"No" she replied. "I think Hindu girls are too fast."

"Over here or in India?" I asked, trying not to laugh and trying to see her point of view.

She mulled over my question. "The Hindu girls in London are probably not as fast as the ones in India," she said after a while..

I tried to disabuse her of this belief, but couldn't bring her around to my point of view. In fact she didn't want to discuss the subject any more with me, since it was now clear to her that while I wasn't judging her, I myself held an entirely different view on the question of sexual permissiveness. We began talking of other things.

Back in India I have often thought of Baba and wondered what could be the incidents in her life that triggered off the mental process bringing her to revere Islam and seriously contemplate conversion. On the basis of a mere month-long acquaintance, it was impossible to come to any definite conclusions. All the same, I regard three factors to be of primary

importance. Firstly, there is the fact that many of Baba's friends are Iranians and Pakistanis. Secondly, there is the rootlessness and lack of identity experienced by the younger generation of Indians who have been brought up in the West. Islam provides a stronger identity, perhaps, in comparison to Hinduism. Finally, Islam is much more strikingly counterposed against the sexual permissiveness and promiscuity of the West, in a way in which Hinduism is not. This may explain Baba's supposition that Hindu girls are fast, could be faster and even outstrip their western counterparts in sexual permissiveness.

Rajesh Talwar, New Delhi

Population Is People

In cities, overcrowded as they are, millions of people provide essential services like washing, cleaning, carrying, repairing, vending; in fact, anything they are needed to do. But when it comes to having to share living space and resources with them, then much cursing is instantly heard regarding their sheer numbers and "encroachments", their chawls and pavement dwellings. They have become an eyesore to those who want green lawns, roses and empty streets. The bitter complaint is that there are too many people, too much poverty.

The connection between pollution and the poor is the most easy fallacy to up-end, mainly because of the motives of its proponents. Those who complain of overpopulation causing environmental damage in cities and villages want poor people around only when they need them. This "worry" about the multiplication of the masses is articulated by many eminent citizens - rich industrialists, company executives, eugenic-minded doctors, upper class professionals, and other

award-winning luminaries who cover their scorn with talk of concern about this problem. A cynical official once said at a United Nations seminar that there are only two types of people: the affluent and the effluent. Worldwide, people subscribe to this idea. Even our very own Indira Gandhi once declared: "Poverty is the worst polluter." For the rulers, the problem is no longer discovering what can be done for the masses of people living in poverty, but only how to get rid of them. The hypocrisy becomes obvious when we consider who are the main users of most petrochemical products and plastics, as well as the greatest generators of garbage and paper waste. Affluence, then, is perhaps the greatest pollutant. So why is the obvious underconsumer being blamed?

Of all the people around us, who can be said to be surplus? We ourselves? No one thinks of themselves, or their near and dear ones, as extraneous to society. So who is implied by this enigmatic term "over-population"? It isn't you or me, or the next door neighbour; it is the slum dwellers that are the target. Lowest in the social hierarchy, they are the least likely to resist.

The size of a family depends on a very personal decision based on a family's needs and wants. Few families decide on the number of children to have according to their country's population statistics. Our conscious decision to have small families, aided by the choice of family planning, is as deliberate and conservative a decision as the one made by couples in developed countries who decide on one child or none, even with their "falling" population rates. The poor, as well, make conscious decisions on these matters for reasons as personal as ours. Global considerations are the farthest from everyone's minds and personal ones the closest.

We have to talk about women, real women: the poor, thin, undernourished, disenfranchised women that are on everyone's agenda as far as birth control and reproduction are concerned. No one consulted these women. If poor women, however traditional we may think them to be, were approached for answers in a context where their views did not endanger their lives, they might ask these honest questions: What other choice have you given me but marriage? Do I have to be a mother, who decided this? What choice do most females have other than to be wives? What role can I play other than being a sexual object or a mother? And if I do choose marriage and motherhood, is it ever on my terms? Why are you afraid of what I would do if you gave me a choice?

What, then, should be the approach to the population "problem"? Our conception will necessarily change as slowly or as quickly as our ability to understand the real meaning of justice and equality, of giving everyone the chance to live with basic human rights instead of wishing there were fewer people so that we could have more resources. Population is made up of individuals - we have to understand and endorse this. Each and every person is worthy of being here along with us. The greedy possibility of more money in our coffers, more food in our personal store-rooms, or more power for the few who can attain it, is no qualification for a special passport for bonafide residence on planet earth.

Susan Dhavle, Pune, MS

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