

Letters to Manushi

Bhakti Issue

I have just had a quick flip through the tenth anniversary issue of *Manushi*. May I congratulate you on the truly magnificent job. I am an old admirer of Ramanujan, and the Tamil *bhakti* movement is familiar territory to me. Reading these parts was recalled pleasure, most welcome amidst quotidian preoccupation with political trivia and junk reading. But the whole issue promises rare intellectual stimulation...

The *bhakti* movement as a protest movement and the women saint mystics as a special category within the movement have been tangentially mentioned as a throwaway insight by many but this is the first time that a more or less structural statement has been made, at least to my knowledge. In that sense, it is a collector's item to those interested in the interface of *bhakti* and social emancipation as a theme that conventional historians have ignored and orthodox panditry suppressed.

It is entirely appropriate that *Manushi* should have brought up this important aspect of what it is fashionable these days to call "subaltern history." I do hope subsequent issues will carry forward the debate. I am also delighted with the illustrations, though I would have wished for better reproduction.

In the Tamil tradition at least, there are women mystic saints belonging to the folk religious tradition and popular poetry among the *siddhas* (the realised ones.). You should get someone to do a piece on the lines of the ones on Andal and Karaikkalammaiyar, both of whom have, in the characteristic fashion of Hindu osmosis, been absorbed in the mainstream religion. The *siddhas* are opters out of the formal Hindu structure and often radical in their social attitudes. Women *siddhas* are sure to be doubly so.

N.S. Jagannathan, Delhi



World View

... As every Tamilian knows, the Nayanmars, the great devotees of Shiva, achieved a principal aim of the *bhakti* movement which was to release the population from the spell cast by the *kshamanas* or the Jain and Buddha *gurus*. Moving the whole population away from the world view and praxis of these sects demanded very great courage on the part of individuals. ...

In our own times, Mahatma Gandhi was an outstanding example of the courage that the *bhakta* is the embodiment of. Gandhiji endowed the population with the inspiration to wake up and dispel the magic that the Western conquerors had cast on India under the names of civilisation, politics, freedom, democracy, science, technology and the like. I know of traditions similar to *bhakti* appearing in Japan in recent times, particularly when the Japanese faced the threat of wholesale occupation by Western invaders.

... You seem to imply that the family is an impediment to woman, as evidenced in the lives of Karaikkalammaiyar or Mirabai. This is true in an equal measure of men saints as well. Sri Ramanuja was the greatest theoretician of *bhakti* and a great devotee too. His sudden renunciation is attributed to the attitude of his wife who

did not share his benevolent attitude towards *bhaktas* irrespective of caste ranking. Practice of meditation or *bhakti* along with a normal family life was always difficult...

V. Balaji, Madras

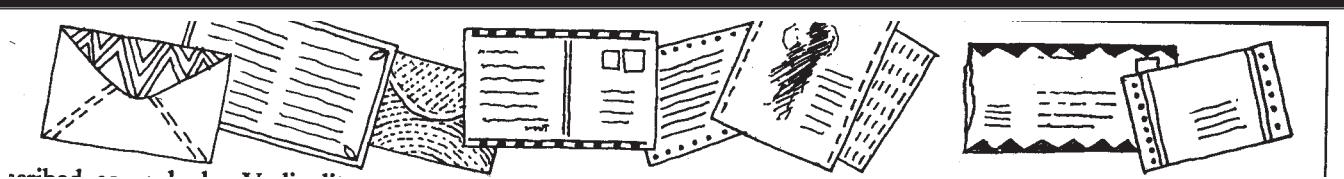
Social Revolution

...It has been correctly pointed out by the writers that the revolt of the women saints was against sexual inequality, patriarchal marriage and married life, and the caste system. But the class outlook, Marxist or otherwise, pervades the writing. Vijaya Dabbe and Robert Zydenbos make a sweeping statement that the Virashaiva movement was against all castes and classes. Do any of the women saints use a word denoting class? My study of the Marathi and Hindi women saint poets has not yielded any such word. The word *varga* used to denote class since the British period, never denoted this earlier. ...

Your writers do not differentiate between women saints who opposed the caste system spiritually and those who opposed it materially. The Virashaiva and Sikh movements were material revolts against the caste system. ...

The *srauta* and *smarta* religions considered women as a group to be Sudras, unfit for initiation, education and freedom. ... Though women saints drawn from high castes soar to greater philosophical heights, the outpourings of a slave woman like Janabai are far more spontaneous and searing. ...

Nudity in male ascetics was convenient and evoked spontaneously popular devotion as is evident from the accounts of Buddhaghosa and Purana Kassapa who were contemporaries of Buddha. But with women ascetics, it was more than that. All mother goddesses are described as nude (*nagni*). The primal mother goddess and the first queen of the Rti tribe of the Indus civilisation, Nirrti and



her daughter Nairrti Durga are described as nude by Vedic literature. Nirrti is one of the names of the earth mother and she, being the “great nude one” (*mahanagni*), her high priestesses were bound to be nude.

Uma Chakravarti misses the social revolutionary aspect when she makes the observation that “An important aspect of social movements in India has been seeking solutions to social problems in the religious sphere.” ... Buddha ushers in an anti *varna* slavery feudal revolution. The *bhikkhunis* of Buddha’s time were not ordinary nuns or saints, but full time revolutionaries. Those problems that were not solved in a social revolution - which itself assumed the form of a religious revolution - were solved on the ideological or religious plane. In the *varna* tribal society, *metta* and *karuna* were limited to a *gana* or tribe, and Buddha transformed it into universal *metta* and *karuna*. Buddha became the supreme symbol of this universal love. With the Brahmanical counterrevolution engineered by Pushyamitra, the antecastee Buddha was ousted in favour of the caste creating Krishna, but the *bhakti* current transformed him into an egalitarian one.

But this Krishna *bhakti* did not go beyond spiritual dissent. It is for material dissent that Shaivism and Tantrism appear on the Indian scene....

Sharad Patil, Dhule

Drawing Inspiration

I am writing on behalf of Satyashodhak, an informal collective of Catholic women here, to express our appreciation of your tenth anniversary issue on women *bhakta* poets. **Manushi** has been the originator of many a seminal analysis of women’s lives. This issue, while being of this genre, is arresting because it widens women’s horizons....

We in Satyashodhak are keenly aware that religion can be for women a source of inspiration, strength and liberation. It is also a source of women’s oppression. We have written several articles in church magazines as well as the regular press, critiquing structures of oppression in our church and proposing changes. Through your issue on the struggles of women *bhakta* poets, we discovered one more source of knowledge, strength and inspiration for ourselves....

Rita Monteiro, Bombay

Of Manes and Meaning

I read the tenth anniversary issue of **Manushi** with considerable interest.

There is one thing that I wish to bring to your notice. It concerns the quotation from Nizamuddin Auliya which is printed on the front page of the issue. I think the word “lion” is inapt. Perhaps, the correct word would have been “tiger” as a translation of the Hindi word “*sher*”. In fact, one cannot mistake a lion for a lioness and vice-versa because the male of the species has a prominent mane. One can, however, commit this mistake as regards a tiger. Hence, in the context it does appear that there is some error in the translation.

V.A. Bobde, Delhi

The word has been translated as “lion” in two separate translations sent to us by two historians, one of whom is an authority on Sufism.

Metaphors work on a suggestive, not on a literal level. The point of this metaphor is not at all that the female may be mistaken for the male, but that the gender difference is an irrelevant detail. The lion’s “lion-ness” is more important than its maleness or femaleness. Despite some evident differences in physical detail between the male and the female, people do not

wait around to take note of these; they run.

The lion, as a symbol of majesty and power, has a significance in many traditions which the tiger does not generally have (with a few exceptions like Blake’s poem which is built on the paradox of the tiger’s exclusion from such significance).

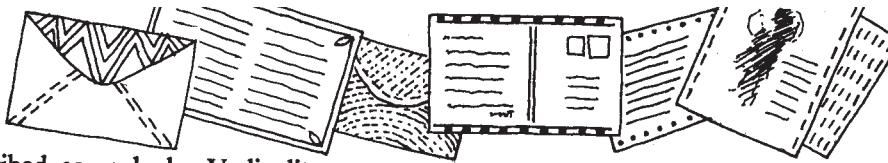
Manushi

Cultural Complexities

The *bhakti* issue of **Manushi** reached me several days ago. I have gone through almost all the articles. ... I have found the articles on Avvaiyar, Andal, Akka and Mira extremely informative, enlightening at places. That the women poets of the south were more assertive of their autonomy has been thoroughly brought out in these articles. But the cultural factors which impelled this assertion have not been brought out as convincingly.

Likewise, the cultural factors which rendered women poets of Maharashtra and Gujarat dependent in comparison, are difficult to grasp from the articles about them. The article “Poison to Nectar”, on Mirabai, brings out the existential factors which marked the complicated personality of Mira. Maybe it is my male bias that I find her personality complicated and not complex though you have assiduously tried (should I say on account of your female bias?) to show her as complex. The excellence of translation draws my appreciation....

What has disenchanted me in Uma Chakravarti’s article is the mention of Bhaktin in the title with no effort to bring his categories into play for explicating her subject. I am a very avid student of Bhaktin and my admiration for him is immense, slightly less than that I have for Antonio Gramsci, for example. The

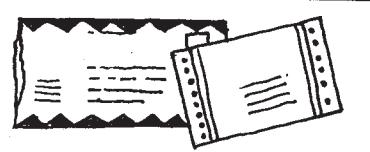


way he advances carnival, laughter, body, its lower portion with all its protuberances, convexities and apertures as ideological categories is unparalleled. The imprint of these ideological categories is nowhere to be found in this article....

Tejwant Singh Gill, Amritsar

Uma Chakravarti used the word "bhaktin" as the feminine form of "bhakta." You have perhaps confused it with the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. No reference to him was intended.

- Manushi



to wake up to do something to stop this slaughtering.

Nidhi Arora, Jammu-Tawi

Your account is very distressing. It would be good if you made an attempt to ascertain the details and publicised them in the local press, to induce public protest.

- Manushi

Dowry and Marriage

I have been following your articles on dowry and the various responses from people criticising your stand, in newspapers and magazines. I have found your stand logical and consistent with facts, but would like clarification of some points.

A pledge was taken by you and other individuals through **Manushi** No.5 to boycott all marriages in which dowry was given in any form and in which the girl had no active choice in deciding whether she wants to marry, and whom. Given your understanding today, this pledge cannot hold good. But is the pledge replaced by some different pledge or have you decided to attend any marriage and not make an issue of it?

My own understanding is that the prevalent form of marriage is a blatant show of patriarchy designed to reiterate to a woman her inferior status in society mainly through wasteful means. My present understanding has urged me to boycott not only these marriages but also "no dowry" marriages in which all other factors remain the same, including disinheritance of the daughter and her subordinate status reaffirmed through rituals and gimmicks.

Another subject you have not touched is the role of parents in so-called

dowry harassment. I know, in my own family, at my sister's marriage, my father did not give her what was promised to her in-laws. This was not for lack of means because he purchased a scooter for his son and built a house soon after. My sister had to face harassment, supposedly due to this breach of promise. I am not justifying the harassment because the son-in-law has no business to be promised or to demand anything and it is the daughter who should claim her share. In my sister's case, whenever she raised the issue she was shouted down, and her husband was criticised for being greedy for dowry. It is in this context that I feel that the ant dowry campaign is probably an anti women rather than a pro women campaign.

J.P Jain, Delhi

I still do not attend dowry weddings. I clarify my position in the article on pp. 2-9 of this issue.

Madhu Kishwar

Stop this Slaughter

I was shocked to hear of the death of a young girl of our acquaintance. Someone said it was a suicide, another said it was an accident as a young boy by mistake put his hand on the trigger and shot her. Later, it was learnt that her father killed her because she was a tomboy and used to tease the boys of that locality. At first I would not believe it, but later it was learnt that the last version was correct. I don't know the exact details as I did not go deep into the matter. But could you explain to me the phenomenon of killing a daughter because she used to tease guys? If that is the case, all the guys in the world should be shot dead.

Jammu is becoming awful. Rapes, dowry deaths, bride burnings, murders, suicides, are becoming as common as the water we drink. Yet, there are no investigations or arrests. Everyone has

Combating Racism

I am an African American student. I have read your magazine for some months now in the college library. Your magazine does an excellent job in its examination of women's issues. Despite the geographical restrictions that the magazine recognises, it encompasses absolutely all the issues pertaining to the international movement for women's liberation.

As a Muslim, I am particularly grateful for your candid discussions on issues concerning women within this context and other religious contexts which contribute to the further oppression and denial of women's rights as human beings....

There are many of my Muslim sisters here who, in spite of their awareness of how organised religions act to oppress us, continue to ignore and not challenge these constructs. Many of them follow the strictest of orthodox traditions which, consequently, culturally do not fit our sociocultural circumstances. They do this in spite of knowing that it was this same type of religiopolitical construct, which in that case was European and Christian, that facilitated our being stolen from Africa and made to become chattel slaves....

The mere existence of **Manushi** breaks down the colonialist, imperialist stereotypes about Eastern, Asian society in general and about women in that society in particular. Racist and classist assessments of societies in your part of the world have presented them as

backward, brutal and licentious. This helped maintain barriers, particularly between people of colour and women across the world. Your magazine which transmits cultural information in the articles and letters dispels these myths.....

Tahiri'h A. Pleasant, USA

For Easier Divorce

...Studies suggest that many Indian marriages virtually founder in the early acclimatisation phase, not infrequently within days of marriage. It is common to see matrimonial advertisements: "divorcee after one month of marriage" or "respectfully and legally divorced after few days of marriage." The partners may have been fed information which they discover is less than true. Or characteristics, which went unnoticed in a perfunctory premarital encounter, surface.

Initial sexual maladjustment or sexual shock can mar a marriage, but more often there are other contributory causes,-and the missing cement or mutual sexual pull exacerbates the situation. An early breakdown can be traumatic to the new bride. But her troubles may be just beginning.

Indian law does not allow a divorce on the basis of "irreconcilable differences" as many other countries do. Many countries recognise non-adversarial divorce, where neither party is at fault but both or one feels they are incompatible.

Our law does not envisage a divorce before three years of marriage, whereas marriages sometimes break in three months. These provisions should be modified. Unless the divorce is by mutual consent, the proceedings take unduly long. Even uncontested cases simply linger on. The law requires the court to try its hand at reconciliation. Where the parties and their relatives and friends have failed, what can an impersonal, busy court do except some sermonising? Conciliation attempts even by full fledged divorce courts, assisted by professional counselling, have generally failed in other countries. It will probably be best to scrap this provision

or see that no delay is caused by it.

When divorce provisions were incorporated in the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, lawmakers had a tough time carrying conservative opinion along. Dr Rajendra Prasad, president of India, threatened to resign on this issue. But we have reached a stage when the matter merits a new look. High marital happiness does not necessarily reside in a rigid framework of marital indissolubility. That marriages of the past were happier may well be a myth. Whether we like it or not, many more women today will seek to opt out of bad marriages.

But this escape route is no escape if it is not coupled with better opportunities. The law should provide for lump sum or substantial short term



alimony grants to women, enabling them to survive while preparing to enter the job market...

Mohinder Singh, New Delhi

Women Labourers

"The high rise mansions, finest homes

The poor man builds them.
Who will live in them?
Who else but the fat rich men?
The poor man lives in a hut
The walls are wet and damp
He sleeps and wakes
With pain in his arms and legs
And groans and huddles in a cramp."

This is no award winning poem but the lullaby sung by female construction workers to their babies. I heard 'it' on a

site of Chandigarh Housing Board flats. I visited four such sites, and talked to the contractors and workers.

Hailing from UP, MP, Rajasthan, Bihar and Kerala, the labourers of one village tend to live in one cluster. Women labourers work from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. on the site and at home. When I asked if men help at home, they say: "This is not the *dharma* of the male. We may be tired or sick, still we have to drag ourselves to do these things."

The contractors say that women form 40 percent of the labour force at construction sites in Chandigarh. Women are mostly employed as unskilled labour for carrying headloads, pounding stones and plying handpumps. The wage varies from Rs 13 to 15 a day, from which the contractor deducts his share. The women said they are paid less than men for the same work, on the ground that they are less productive than men. Construction is one of the employments covered under the Minimum Wages Act of Punjab state. Under this Act the minimum wage for unskilled labour is Rs 15.08 for nonagricultural jobs. This is claimed as the highest rate in the country.

The Maternity Benefit Act is also flouted, as the women are not given any maternity or sick leave, no matter how long their service. If she breaks a limb, she is not given any medical help. Nor is childcare provided on the site. The women said that in the village older women look after infants, but here they are left under trees and often get injured. Old women are generally not brought along from the village with the family.

When I asked the women if they would leave their jobs if their husband or son got a job of Rs 1,000 a month, Jethi, an emaciated woman, pounced on me: "What do you think? To slog at home and then carry stones or crush them is a hell of a life." But a few seemed keen to keep their jobs which helped them buy milk for their children when their men drank and gambled away their money and refused to give them any....

Kamlesh Mohan, Chandigarh