

# Letters



## Practical Value

I was greatly interested to read Srilatha Batliwala's article "Fields of Rice : Health Hazards For Women And Unborn Children" in Manushi No. 46, wherein she has produced strong evidence indicating that hard manual labour involving several hours of squatting could be responsible for a high incidence of premature delivery, stillbirths and neonatal mortality among the off-spring of agricultural labourers in the rice planting season. This is an observation of considerable practical value and I write to congratulate her on the article which, I am sure, will stimulate a lot of interest.

You may be aware that about five years ago, Betty Cowan in Ludhiana had also made somewhat similar observations, but not with respect to rice plantation.

However, Batliwala's observations do not still explain the sex differential with respect to infant mortality. Neonatal mortality consequent on stress during pregnancy should affect male and female infants equally. If the bulk of infant mortality is accounted for by neonatal mortality, then we have perhaps to take it that the overwhelming majority of deaths of infants after the first month take place in female children. I am, however, not sure that this is the case. Though there are still some questions which remain to be elucidated, her observations are undoubtedly important, and I hope that there will be a national debate on it.

**C. Gopalan, Delhi**

## Unjustified ?

"God was so conveniently available to..."—a quote from the short story "To Be Myself" in Manushi (No. 46) seems to be so appropriate 'in the recent times. We see it being exploited at all times and stages possible.

But it has pained me a lot to see an advertisement in Manushi No. 46: "A New Way To Greet Your Sisters At Id-Ul-Zuha." Isn't it ironic that both these have appeared in the same issue. I can

## To Manushi

understand the need to increase the subscription but is Manushi going to stoop to such a level too. Is Manushi fighting issues like Dowry, Secularism, Status of Women from the same platform as any other political party in the country? How then is Manushi different ?

The article by Romila Thapar in one of the issues of Manushi clearly stated how religion had been interpreted to suit a particular section of society at different times. How is this advertisement in Manushi justified. If Manushi's future is going to be linked to the wider human rights movement of which it is a part, is it to be assumed that Manushi will be playing on the religious sentiments of the people ? Why then do we express our outrage at issues of riots, dowry, prostitution, each of which have been given some sort of justification in the garb of religion ?

I think this letter is harsh but then after coming to like Manushi so much and taking inspiration from you and the magazine I could not help write all this. This might not be published in any of the issues, which is not important at all, but I would like a reply anyway. Do you think it is possible ? Are there any people who feel the same way as I do ?

**Seema Dayal, Chandigarh**

*It is disturbing that, as a regular reader of Manushi, you have never reacted against the numerous advertisements for gift subscriptions that appeared for years on occasions like Diwali and Raksha Bandhan, but take violent objection the first time a Muslim festival is mentioned. In most countries, the majority community tends to see its own religion as the norm, and its observances as almost "secular", while minority practices are labelled religious obscurantism. In our country, the Muslim community is the victim of severe discrimination of various kinds. Those of us non Muslims who are part of the human rights movement owe it to ourselves to combat the anti Muslim, prejudices which we have internalised.*

*Regardless of our personal attitudes to religion, Manushi has never taken the stand that people's right to practise their religions is incompatible with their human rights. Even those of us who are not religious tend to take part in our community's festivals because these are an integral part of the culture of any community. If celebrating Diwali with your family and friends does not make you communal, we do not see why a suggestion that Muslim readers give gift subscriptions on Id, or that non Muslim readers give gifts to Muslim friends on this occasion, should become a case of playing on the religious sentiments of the people.*

*The most important point made by Romila Thapar in the interview to which you refer is that religions and traditions are manifold and diverse—there are humane as well as inhuman, liberating as well as oppressive, traditions. One humane tradition in parts of our country has been for people of different communities to partake of each others' festivals and greet one another on these occasions.*

—**Manushi**

## Search For Freedom

I got Manushi No. 46. Deepa Shah's

story "To Be Myself" was one of the most inspiring stories I have read. The beginning "How often for the sake of a surface quiescence or because of pusillanimity we live a lie in our relationships with others.—" enticed me to read it at once. Pratibha's rebellion against her stifling, oppressive family, her transformation, her search for freedom and an alternative lifestyle beyond the prescribed female role, is one with which every woman will empathise. I would love to see more of Deepa's stories in Manushi.

Reading Sonal's "Remembering Mother" and Deepak Mehta's "While Sleeping in Mother's Heart", brought back a lot of memories of my maternal grandmother Kashiba, who also happens to be the mother of a famous Gujarati poet, Snehrashmi. I am writing her biography. It is the story of a widow who, at the age of 24, in 1915, defied the society by walking out of her husband's house within a year of his death, and brought up her four children by doing business. She was tall, fair, with a magnificent personality and a generous heart...

**Usha Desai, Bombay**

### Reconciled To Death

On May 26, Vanita Khera, a Gujarati lawyer, aged 31, died of 95 percent burns incurred in her husband's house. The police declared her death an accident. Only after a campaign was organised by the local Gujarati community, women's groups and lawyers, did the police register murder cases against her husband, Kishore Khera, brother-in-law, advocate Bharat Khera, mother-in-law, Shantabai and father-in-law, Harijiwan Khera. The accused have been granted bail.

Vanita was married in 1976 and was verbally and physically abused right from the start. She spent a total of six months in the Khera house, having repeatedly to seek refuge with her parents. In 1977 she was finally evicted by the Kheras who seized all her valuables, including gold and clothes. She spent the next eight years with her parents. She continued her education, and began to practise as a lawyer at Jabalpur.

Hers could have been a success story.

But elderly members of the community prevailed on her father to consider a reconciliation between Vanita and her husband. In 1986, Vanita discontinued her practice and returned to her husband's home after he signed a statement saying she would not be abused in any way. The harassment, however, resumed and continued unabated. The last time Vanita met her father, she told him: "No need to worry about me; now only my dead body



**Vanita Khera**

will leave this house." The next news she received about her was the news of her death.

According to the Kheras, Vanita got burnt while heating water for her bath on a kerosene stove in the bathroom. This sounds absurd, since it was the height of summer, and secondly, the Kheras have a gas stove in their kitchen. The Kheras are an influential business family, which probably accounts for the police having delayed investigation by two days, giving them plenty of time to tamper with evidence.

Which way the case will go is to be seen. But one can say that Vanita's death is a direct result of our society's notion that a woman's existence is vindicated only if she is a wife.

**Susan Abraham, Nishtba Desai,  
Maharashtra**

### Another Murder

On the morning of June 13, my cousin, Sudha Srivastav, and her two daughters were mercilessly murdered by her husband, Virendra-nath Srivastav, who is a ticket collector at Gorakhpur railway station. He is being prosecuted, and is in jail at the moment.

This is a dowry murder. Her having given birth to two girls in the two and a half years of her married life also became a source of misery for her. Her husband is a postgraduate, yet he committed three murders because of his backward thinking. One trembles at the thought. I want this human demon to be socially boycotted for his in-human action.

**Sunil Kumar Sinha, Bihar  
(translated from Hindi)**

### Demanding Action

...On July 5, a demonstration was held in Rewa, in which 150 women participated. The demonstrators marched around the town, and then presented a memorandum to the commissioner, along with a letter to the prime minister. They demanded the reopening of 15 cases which the police had closed. One case was that of the murder by Jayaram Shukla, a journalist, of his wife. He allegedly burnt her to death but the police took no action. After the demonstration, cases under sections 304 and 306 of the Penal Code have been registered against him.

Another case was that of the police officer in charge of a police station who confined a young girl to the police station for five days and raped her repeatedly. The girl's father refused to accept her, and she was forced to seek shelter in an orphanage. A third case was that of a man in Rewa who married and allegedly killed three women one after the other, and has now married a fourth time.

...In my village too, there is a woman who is starving because her husband has remarried and refuses to support her. He has a job while she has no means of maintenance. She has filed a petition for maintenance in the Satna court, but no decision has been taken yet...

**Brijkishore Dwivedi, Satna  
(translated from Hindi)**

## Rajasthan Drought

...At the moment, the drought conditions are very bad and women and children are the worst affected. I have started *balwadis* in two re-mote tribal areas and through these, I am trying to approach the problems of the women.

At the moment, we are trying to draw the attention of the women towards health problems, as the children are not vaccinated although there are supposed to be health centres in each area. Already, a two year old girl is a victim of polio in Kheda village in Bagrunda. This is one village where the *balwadi* is working well and about 50 children, under five, who used to be left on their own when their parents went for drought relief work, are now being cared for. Midday snacks are given to these children. This *balwadi* has been going for two months now and the children come regularly. Now all the children have been vaccinated for polio.

This area, which comes in Gogunda district, is very badly hit by drought. People have nothing to eat except millet bread. Already, many adults and children are affected by night blindness. I have been able to do something for this area with the cooperation of Ukeshwar Vikas Mandal which has programmes in this area. The women in particular have no awareness of their rights and at the moment they are facing a battle for survival.

**Sudesh Saint, Udaipur**

## Not Enjoyment ?

I was surprised to see in your letter "We hope you enjoy reading Manushi ..." I think Manushi is not a magazine to be enjoyed. If it is just for enjoyment there are thousands of others for that purpose. This magazine should be for serious reading and should become a guide for young men and women of India and abroad.

**KM Ravishankar, Baroda**

## Television Trial

We always talk about media images of women. We forget that this kind of thing can become a cliché. A case in point is the Doordarshan programme on the Kanpur suicides, shown on July 23.

Now the suicide by the three girls at Kanpur is not only a ghastly tragedy but a shocking revelation of the underside of Indian bourgeois *parampara*. All this is both obvious and worth further factual and nuanced investigation. But Doordarshan turned the tragedy into an equally ghastly sensation. This is the first Doordarshan programme of this kind I have seen... inquisitorial, torturous, insensitive to a citizen's right to privacy.

Let's take the father of the girls. Most likely his traditionalism and his refusal to take a stand on the dowry issues (he was prepared to pay Rs 100,000 but could not afford Rs 300,000 for three girls) contributed to the tragedy. He is like millions of fathers in this country. But Doordarshan chose to make an example of him. He was asked brutally hurtful questions: "How do you feel when you think of it? Society may hold you responsible." The unfortunate father's apologia was undercut by a voice-over commentary which satirised his answers. This is a usual TV trick.

The father was put in the dock. He was sentenced, so to say, without benefit of counsel. Was it ethical on the part of Doordarshan to do so? No. Because no TV trial can be a fair trial. This is the difference between the image and the word. This magazine, for instance, after investigation, might allocate part of the blame to the father. But it would do so in a qualified, objective fashion. Doordarshan's approach was that of the guillotine—raise up the blade, send it crashing down.

The Doordarshan crew also examined a local youth leader, Santosh Kumar. Kumar said that the girls were "good girls" and the camera went berserk. It cut off the sound and left Kumar gesturing like a monkey.

The worst case was that of Seema, a friend of one of the suicides. She was pilloried right from the start. She was described as 5,018 years of age—5,000 years of tradition and 18 years of biological age. Seema looked innocent, immature, traditional. These qualities were made to look scarlet sins. Her desire to accept her parents' choice of a husband

for her was mocked and an admission was extracted from her that she would prefer her first child to be a girl.

I do not think the cause of women's gains by such vicious crusades. Such programmes offend basic principles of human dignity, the right to privacy, the right to hold opinions obnoxious to others. If you destroy those rights you destroy "feminism" too, which after all is an assertion of human dignity. Programmes like the one on Kanpur are basically fascist programmes, as much as the tirades after the Shahano case which turned from being anti-Muslim personal law to being anti-Muslim crusades.

**Iqbal Masud, Bombay**

## Clarification

This is with reference to my letter published in Manushi No. 46, 1988 on page 22. There are some inaccuracies in the letter printed. I was in fact working in the Rajasthan National Archives in Bikaner, not Bihar. I can see, though, that this could have been due to the inability to read my handwriting, which everyone tells me is atrocious.

The sentence that bothered me is "My work has less to do with Mira's own songs...different classes in Rajasthan and Saurashtra around the Deorala region." I am certain I did not say anything about Deorala. I have never visited Deorala and was careful to avoid this area for my own work. In fact, the field-work on Mira's popularity was completed before the Roop Kanwar incident arose, so I was able to capture the force of Mira and lose her from the whole debate on Satu. It might be a weakness of the work too, but I do not think the quality I was able to capture would have been possible in the atmosphere of the murder.

I have spent the most time around the villages of Chittor Udaipur, Jodhpur and Dwarka—places associated with Mira's own life, and that of the ruling families.

**Parita Mukta, Gujarat**

*We regret the errors, caused by a misreading of the handwritten words, "Bikaner" as "Bihar" and of "Dwarka region" as "Deorala region."*—**Manushi**