

Readers' Forum

Gender Equality

Karl Marx rightly recognised that different human beings have different capabilities and different needs and thus the concept of equality did not find much favour with him — mark his communist adage, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”.

Connected to the concept of equality is the notion of equal opportunity. In gender equality, equal opportunity is sought for both genders. But, though the concept of equal opportunity appears attractively simple, it is inherently conservative. Simple versions of it can presume, reproduce and signify inequality in society, for if we make unlike human beings (human beings, including the two genders, are always unlike) submit to a single pattern of achievement, it may handicap some in gaining some benefits from the society. The competition is inherently and always unequal. There is neither equality nor opportunity for a person who knows that to enter the competition is to reproduce a prevalent hierarchy. John Schaar has remarked that the doctrine of equality of opportunity is the product of a competitive and fragmented and a divided society, a society in which individualism is the reigning ethical principle. In other words, much of the demand for equality, and virtually all of the demand for equal experience in the equality of opportunity principle, including gender equality, is really a demand for an equal right and

opportunity to become unequal. To provide equal opportunity to even a minimal extent in a true sense requires a complete overhauling of inequitable social structures as a precondition.

Another pertinent point that needs to be highlighted in relation to the concept of gender equality is that it seems to assume that women are a homogeneous group, whereas in actual fact there is great diversity among women. They belong to different classes, castes, religions, ethnic groups and so on. The question, therefore, that arises is whether gender equality means the same thing for the different sub-groups of women. Another related question that needs answering is that since gender equality at present implies equality with males, with which males is gender equality being sought? For among men there also

are wide disparities and inequalities. Men are a diverse lot belonging to different classes, castes, religions, ethnic groups etc, with different privileges, handicaps, and deprivations. So which men are the women supposed to aspire to be equal to?

First of all the task of liberating women has to be viewed not relative to a flawed male model as it is in the concept of gender equality but in setting goals for itself which are women's goals in their own right as human beings and as women, not related to whatever be the achievement of men or the scope provided for development of men, by men. It is not necessary that what men consider achievement, or the parameters for it, are in quality, what best achievement and its parameters should be for all human beings.



Rather, it seems that men in an overarching almost universal male supremacist patriarchal order have made a mess of the world and have created in it situations rife with all kinds of inequalities, subordination, exploitation, violence and oppression. In fact men have not allowed even their own gender to be able to attain its parameters nor have they founded orders where all of their own kind, leave alone women, have equal scope for development. Men in a socio-political-economic set up rigged up by men are also unequal in many respects within their own groups.

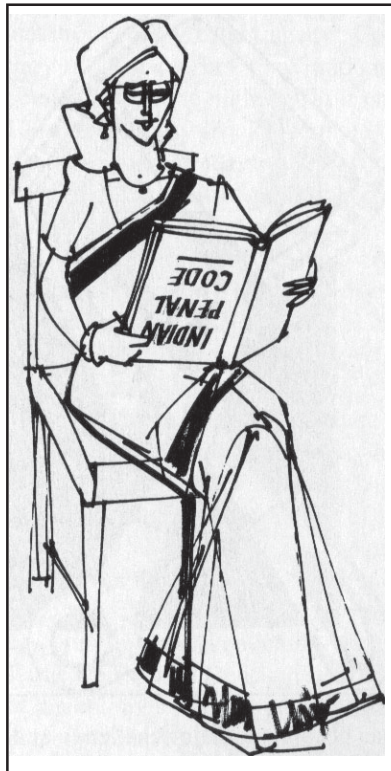
The focus of the women's movement, therefore, should not be gender equality, which should be done away with but the demand for human rights first of all as human beings and for those oppressed and exploited whether they be men or women and secondly, the demand for women's rights as women. This struggle at two levels has to be waged in partnership and in harmony with males. For, both women and men have a stake in a more dignified, richer, fuller and more humane life and in the deconstruction of the dehumanising patriarchal order and a construction of a democratic order which would hopefully result in the emergence of new kinds of women and men and a more integrating, cooperative, meaningful, cementing and egalitarian relationship between men and women.

Saraswati Haider, New Delhi

Legal Lacunae

We would like to share with **Manushi** readers the results of a study we conducted to find out the sources of information of first year home science students about laws pertaining to women, options of legal education for girls and their level of legal awareness.

A questionnaire was used for collection of data which was given to



60 first year students from the Faculty of Home Science, M.S. University, Baroda. Most of the respondents were aged between 18 and 19 years. Less than 50 per cent of the respondents had obtained second class in the 12th standard.

The largest section of respondents knew about their legal rights through informal sources. Formal sources of legal information such as radio, magazines and newspapers have played a secondary role in comparison to the television which is the most popular source of legal information among the respondents. Schools and voluntary agencies have played a negligible role in imparting legal education to students.

The majority of the respondents believed that society would progress when men and women are given equal status and legal education would help women in solving their problems faster. Similarly, majority of the respondents preferred to continue the

present trend of equality between husband and wife and believed that legal education was important for female students because mere enactment of social legislation would not better their condition unless they are given legal education.

44.9 per cent respondents were aware about the laws which enable sons as well as daughters to legally inherit the property of their parents and enable wives to claim alimony for their children and themselves in case of divorce from their husbands. The rest of the respondents had no knowledge that a man cannot legally have more than one wife. Surprisingly, the majority of respondents were not aware of the fact that an eve-teaser can be legally punished. Only 46.6 per cent of the respondents knew about the existence of the law against rape.

The educational background or the medium of instruction of the respondents had no bearing on their awareness regarding laws related to women.

Although the mother's employment status had a significant relationship with the legal awareness of the students, this assumption does not seem to hold true in the case of the fathers' occupation.

This study gives us an idea of the areas of ignorance of women related laws amongst students which should be taken into consideration while planning a course about women and law.

Rameshwari Pandya, Baroda, Gujarat

Debatable Depiction

Today censorship of vulgarity and obscenity in films is a much debated issue among various women's and concerned citizen's groups. In this context, the Tamil Nadu unit of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) has made concerted efforts to focus sharply on the increasing trend in

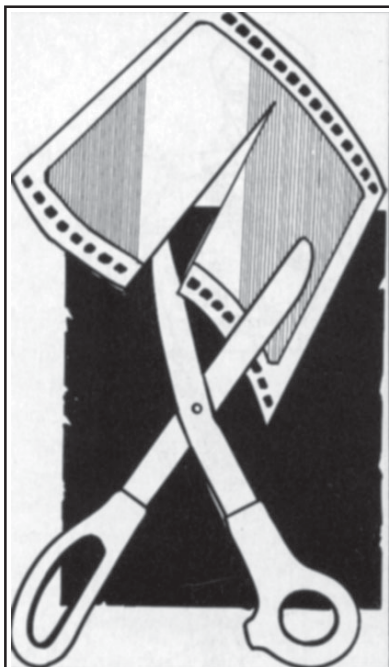
vulgar and obscene imagery of women in recent Tamil films.

Recently, there has been a spate of films which seek to legitimise bigamy, increasing obscenity in film songs and dialogues loaded with lewd and double meanings against women which are gaining notoriety and acceptance amongst the viewing public. The film industry abuses and misuses human and social values to the detriment of women in many ways. This is seen in the commodification of women in scenes depicting eve-teasing, physical abuse of women, and display of parts of female anatomy at particular angles. These are violative of women's human rights to live with dignity. Film industry circles and the public in general believe that sex sells and treat the issue of vulgarity in films with derisive amusement and disdain. They are sceptical about changing deeply entrenched, accepted and successful formulae in films.

An umbrella group of eleven women's organisations in Madras was formed in Jan'95. It is called VIZHIPPU — an all women's organisation for media watch. The twin objectives of the group are: To welcome and appreciate the positive portrayal of women in films, and deride the negative portrayal of women.

The first objective was realised on the day of the group's formation. A public meeting was organised to discuss *Karuthamma*, an award winning film, which focusses on changing the evil practice of female infanticide. Recently, the Tamil Nadu government, on recommendation from the State Women's Commission, instituted an award of Rs 1.25 lakh for any film which portrays women in a positive light. This may have been the result of a discussion initiated by the member secretary of the State Women's Commission with the representatives of AIDWA.

Working with the censor board



has become a major challenge and a strategy in stepping up the media monitoring campaigns of AIDWA. A few of the AIDWA demands were met with which included the nomination of 10 AIDWA members to the censor board panel for a period of 2 years from January 1, 1995. There has also been an increase in the interaction of AIDWA with the censor board, which has helped keep the issue of vulgarity and violence alive. Similarly, a regional workshop held by the censor board in Tamil Nadu resulted in the formulation of censorship guidelines on :

- portrayal of pelvic thrusts in song and dance movements
- close up shots, especially of cleavage, navel, thighs or parts of a woman's body

But the dilemma that we face today is: where does one draw the line between censorship and freedom of expression? While the government utilises the censorship issue to its advantage by censoring the portrayal of certain controversial issues in films, film industry personnel utilise the freedom of expression plank to churn out more crude, vulgar and violent

imagery in their films. The general perception is that film as an 'entertainment' industry has little impact on public life. In the already existing consumerist and criminalised society, commodification of women in films constitutes a blatant violation of women's human right to freedom and to live in dignity. Such trends in films have only served to increase violence against women in various forms and at various levels. The research studies and media reportage of violence against women is largely ignored. Eve teasing, which is a form of sexual harassment of women in college campuses and public places, is one such example.

The strategy and approach of AIDWA to censorship in films is an issue-based one. It is not a moral stand, as some would like to believe. The group seeks to place issues in the proper gender-just perspective. It seeks to find a balance between censorship and the freedom of expression. The focus of our strategies is not on censorship alone, but also to promote genuine freedom of expression in films.

V. Janaki, Chennai, T.N.

Massacre in Mumbai

The dawn of July 11, 1997 arrived with blood and darkness in the bylanes of the huge Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar at Ghatkapor, adjacent to the Eastern Express Highway in north-east Mumbai. The impending sense of disaster was unpredictable, but what followed was gruesome and violent - the unprovoked killing of poor Dalits.

What was immediately shocking was the utter disregard for objectivity by the mainline news-media, especially a section of the Marathi press. Obviously, newspaper reporters and their editors relied too heavily on the police and official version of the Shiv-Sena-BJP led government, which quickly defended

the indiscriminate firing which led to the killing of 11 people and causing injury to more than 35 people.

The *Times of India* had a predictable headline : '10 shot dead as police quell rioting mob in Ghatkapor - Dalits go on the rampage over desecration of statue'. A section of the Marathi press, especially the Shiv Sena mouthpiece *Saamna*, squarely blamed the 'violent' Dalit inhabitants of the slum colony for the tragic aftermath, soon after the Ambedkar bust was found to be desecrated. One section of the press named local leaders as having committed the foul act.

The police theory, that they had to open fire because the 'mob' was actually going to set fire to a couple of LPG tankers, which would have blasted away residential localities in the neighbourhood, was conveniently substantiated by newspaper reports. Most reporters did not give the 'other' side of the story, or do an in-depth analytical report on the rationale behind this particular outrage.

The Mumbai media-construct was soon showing signs of cracking up as some reporters and analysts started questioning the sequence of events, the tanker theory and the immediate necessity of police firing. The police itself was at a loss to explain the series of events and the necessity of this kind of direct action.

The fact-finding team of the Bombay-based Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights and the Lokshahi Hakk Sanghathana categorically questioned the media and police version. It visited the spot on April 13 and stated - "Eye witnesses to the firing claim that most accounts of the incident are an attempt by the police to exonerate themselves. According to police reports, the SRP had to open fire immediately to quell a mob near LPG tankers on the highway and thereby avert a 'greater

tragedy'. Contrary to these reports, they randomly opened fire on the highway, at least a 100 meters away from the statue, at solitary workers leaving for work, people looking out of their windows and doors and children defecating early in the morning on the highway."

The chronology of events, as investigated by this reporter, proves the police and media version wrong. What had actually happened was that at around 5.30 a.m. a woman-resident of the colony, who had come to pay her homage at the bust of Babasaheb Dr B.R. Ambedkar, found a garland of old chappals, tied with a string, hanging around his neck. Word spread soon after and a slow assembly of angry early morning risers collected near the statue which is situated at the entrance of the colony in a small public square adjacent to a road which leads to the nearby police station.

As word of the desecration spread, anger began to crystallise. People were still not too sure as to the political purpose and motivation behind this venal act. Signs of the first outburst of violence were seen as buses and private vehicles were stoned by residents of the slum colony. Groups of people squatted on the highway. But things were still within reasonable control.

Between 7 a.m. and 7.30. a.m., a posse of Special Reserve Police (SRP) squad arrived under the leadership of Sub Inspector Kadam (who, as testified by a senior Dalit police officer who has resigned in protest against the firing, has an official history of being anti-Dalit) near the highway adjacent to the Bodh Park of the colony. This geographical point is crucial because there is a considerable distance between the bust of Dr Ambedkar and this location where the massacre actually happened.

The unanimous opinion of the people of the colony, cutting across a wide spectrum of the old and young,

including women, is that the police opened indiscriminate firing, without provocation, on people who were still not involved with the initial protest at the other end of the highway and near the chowk where the statue is installed. Apparently, the police van stopped at the highway and the SRP started shooting right away and straight from there, even though the colony was still slightly far away. I saw a gun shot at the Sri Krishna Clinic right opposite the park. A young boy who was brushing his teeth had a narrow escape. Others had several gory tales to tell.

Almost all the people killed were not protestors and were situated far away from the initial scene of protests. Most had just got up, were going for their daily chores or leaving for work. Kausalyabai Pathare, 40, was apparently shot seven times even as she lifted her hands in surrender and was actually trying to help another wounded person. Mahesh Shivcharan, a 13-year-old school boy was shot dead, reportedly when he was defecating in the open. Locals say a 12-year-old girl has disappeared. A young man's head was split open. Almost all those who were killed were young, and had been shot above the waist - in the abdomen, stomach, chest, hands and neck. 11 people died soon after this firing and more than 40 were admitted to the Rajawadi hospital which is at a considerable distance from the slum.

Most of the injured in the hospital had similar stories to tell. A lorry driver was leaning on his lorry near the park when three bullets hit him in his right hand and one passed through his abdomen. He ran inside the colony for help and with a friend ran onto the highway. The first police check post - 'naka' - refused help. The second one too refused help. And this (around 50-year-old) man was running on the highway with blood dripping from his body. He was later taken to the

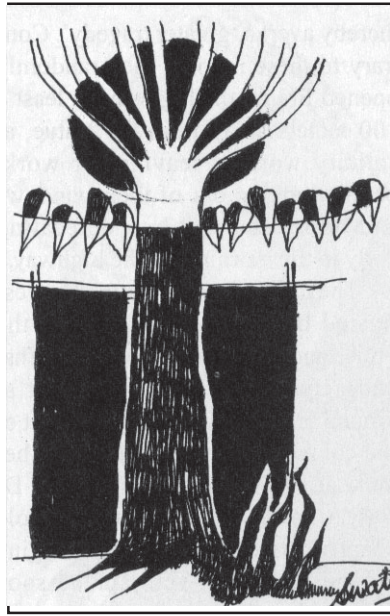
hospital by a scooter-rickshaw and he has survived this brutal assault to tell his tale.

Another injured person told us that he had arrived in the colony three days earlier from Sholapur district to visit his in-laws. He had come out to spit when a bullet hit him and passed through his abdomen. Another person had a bullet through his neck. One person got shot in his right hand as he moved to go for work.

It is beyond doubt that the police opened fire indiscriminately and with an intention to kill. There was no lathi charge, no tear gas, no water canon, no firing in the air, no warning on loud-speakers, no shot fired actually on the ground, near the feet or on the legs. Most shots were above the waist. And the majority of the crowd was neither violent nor indulging in anti-police violence. In fact, people told us that tear gas was fired 'after' the police firing and the police entered the houses after the killings and actually beat up the residents.

Surprisingly, in this police-media version of the so-called mob-violence, not a single police man was actually hurt or admitted to the hospital.

The 'tanker theory' has no takers within the colony, and now outside the colony as well, especially amongst a section of the English media. The 'tanker theory' also does not hold since the LPG tankers were actually situated far away from the scene of the firing, the public square near the Ambedkar bust; they were parked on the other side of the highway which is geographically much beyond the colony. Locals say the tankers are parked on the highway every night and they were empty, as they usually are. The drivers more often than not sleep in the colony itself. And if the tankers would have burst in a cloud of fire, would not the colony itself be the first victim? "Are we fools that after so many deaths, we actually



would go ahead and burn our own houses?" was a common refrain.

But Maharashtra has a strong, militant Dalit movement and its history of political unrest has also had its aesthetic impact on the vast spectrum of Dalit literature and creative expression. And despite the faction ridden Republican Party of India (RPI) leadership, the uprising against this massacre, moved from the suburbs of Bombay into spontaneous protests across entire Maharashtra - Poona, Nagpur, Nashik, Sholapur, Aurangabad and beyond to Ahmedabad and other parts of Gujarat. It is obvious that the militant, restless young generation of this neo-Buddhist collective, is disillusioned with the RPI leadership, which has vacillated and colluded with different power structures, in what is presumed by the masses as a clear betrayal of the Dalit agenda for opportunistic career options.

On July 13 itself, Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of Dr Ambedkar, narrowly missed being lynched. Of late, his tilt towards the Hindutva forces had become too pronounced. R.S. Gawai and Ram Das Athwale, President and General Secretary of the

RPI, were badly beaten up, and Athwale was so severely bashed up that he had to run for his life under police protection. Athwale is an erstwhile militant who became a soft minister in the Sharad Pawar regime. He was playing his cards so close to his chest that it took him two days to reach the colony to express his sorrow and concern.

Since the controversy of the renaming of the Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar, which was opposed by the Shiv Sena, the polarisation between the Dalits and Shiv Sena had sharpened. Recently, the Shiv-Sena government had cracked down on slums of Dalits and minorities during the monsoon months, bringing intense hardship to these communities and strengthening the belief that this is an upper caste establishment pitted against the poor and Dalits.

Only Dalits can come out in the open against the powerful Shiv Sena with a tenacity and courage, which no other collective can, in a city where a maverick tinpot dictator like Bal Thackeray is king, and his luxurious and vast network of goons in the overground and underground mafia, the parasites of a corrupt and unethical social and political order. The coming days will stand testimony to this struggle; because the meek shall also, one day, inherit the headlines.

Amit Sengupta, New Delhi



APOLOGY

We sincerely regret that we forgot to acknowledge that in issue No. 99 the pictures of a painting by A.R. Chugtai (p. 9) and another one by G.R. Santosh (p. 11) were very kindly provided to *Manushi* courtesy the National Museum of Modern Art.