



Readers' Forum



Search for Meanings

I enjoyed the first issue of MANUSHI (108) I received. In particular, I thought highly of the article on *When Women Retell the Ramayana*, by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, I shared the issue with my sister-in-law. I consider it a privilege to have become a member of the Manushi family and I hope to be able to gift subscriptions to those who I feel will appreciate the contents.

I am 45, with two daughters. Kavita (22) has cleared her CA finals and Kritana (16) is a first year commerce student. I was a Probationary Bank Officer in the 1980s but opted for homemaking when I did not get a suitable posting after two years of hostel life with a child in one city and husband in another. Thereafter I have been uprooted often, following Shri Hubby who is a peripatetic job hopper.

My thoughts now turn towards a 'search for meanings,' in my personal life, choices due in part to the inherent lack of choices that pervade women's lives in India. In my personal life I have had no overt cause for gender complaints. My father treats all his children (two daughters, one son) equally and my husband is supportive and indulgent. But I feel for those women, who, due to lack of economic independence and social pressures, are forced to conform. I feel terrible for these women who lead harrowing lives, dying a little every day because they have no viable options. It is easy to tell my maid, 'Oh why don't you leave your drunken husband,' but where will she go? I have stayed in the south, in Rajasthan, in Indore, in Pune, in Mumbai and everywhere the story is the same.

Not only is the poor maid slaving to keep the home fires burning, she has to give her drunkard husband money to get himself sizzled, or else be beaten up. She comes to work, he sells off utensils at home to pay for his drink. And, to add insult to injury, he says 'God knows what *dhandha* you are doing, coming home so late...' If she opts to stay alone, she falls prey to the local lechers.

And it is even worse in the middle class, for the 'pretence' has to be maintained at all costs. The other day, I was appalled to learn that a second cousin of

mine who I presumed was a happily married woman (an RBI officer, no less), was in reality a chattel at home, being put down and verbally humiliated day in and day out by a self-centred husband. At his urging, she took voluntary retirement a few years back and now she regrets it bitterly.

And, as for women's own concern for other women—an image comes to mind. There is this rather poor lady walking in front of me, holding her son by the hand. He wears shoes. Her little daughter is dragging herself behind them, with an overlong torn frock and bare feet. The girl is hardly a year or so older than the boy. The boy cries and the mother stops and buys him a *gola* (an ice candy). The little girl looks longingly but keeps quiet. She has learnt early enough what her 'place' in life is! And she is the one who is going to help mother with her chores later in life. When the spoilt son has failed school and dropped out, she will work, to supplement the family income. Why then do women still crave for sons? Again society says, 'What, no son? You must try and have one.' This after three or four daughters!

Sometimes I wonder whether 'going to work' is 'liberation', after all, or more bondage! One of my friends calls herself a 'yoked bullock' going round and round the *chakki*. The family is happy with all the goodies her money provides; but demand she should also be physically attending to all to their whims, be there with 'nasta coffee' for the man of the house who plunks himself in front of the TV, get up early on festival days and do ritualistic cooking to please the parents-in-law, and continue working so that the youngest sister-in-law can be provided with a good dowry. Supervise the children's homework. Take an off day from work when someone falls ill, and so on...

I could go on and on! Frankly I could do with a mentor who will help me:

- locate suitable resource material that address women's issues.
- advise me on women's organisations that quietly go about changing women's lives.
- guide me in my desire to chronicle the average everywoman's life in India.

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