

Undeserved Self Praise

I have been an old and avid reader of MANUSHI since I was a teenager. It has played a very important role in shaping my ideas and ways of looking at issues and relating to the world. However, I lost contact with it for a while due to certain family circumstances.

A few days ago I chanced upon issue No.121 of MANUSHI containing a long interview with Sushma Swaraj. I must say I was both surprised and disappointed. I am puzzled as to why MANUSHI thought it fit to give such prominent and glowing coverage to Ms. Swaraj when she has hardly any worthwhile accomplishment to her credit.

We are based in Ambala from where Ms. Swaraj fought and won her first election. If you look at the state of that constituency, you will realise how phoney her claims about development work in that area are. She makes it seem as if she is greatly loved by people in Ambala. Why then did she move away from that constituency and fight her next election from Delhi? Ambala launched her political career and had great hopes from her. But all she delivered was pious rhetoric. I am almost certain that if she fought an election from here, she will not win.

As a minister, she is at best average. She has destroyed whatever there was to Doordarshan autonomy through the Prasar Bharati Act. Today, with its dull and uninspiring format, it functions solely as a government mouthpiece.

She may not have been caught accepting bribes herself. But like Benazir Bhutto, it is believed that she allows her husband to accept bribes and commissions. Even BJP circles openly talk about her sophisticated modes of corruption as opposed to some others who may be more blatant and crude about it.

Responses to MANUSHI



Her stand on the Babri *m a s j i d* demolition wasn't any different from that of her *m e n t o r* Advani's. She hasn't

spoken a word of criticism against the government sponsored communal riots in Gujarat nor has she expressed regret about the gang rapes of Muslim women.

Her only plus point is that she appears very "reasonable" and "competent". She is also very good at self-promotion and manages to project the image of a very proficient and thoughtful person. But politicians must be judged by what they do, not what they say.

MANUSHI ought not to give so much space and coverage to insincere politicians, even if they happen to be women.

Rita Arora, Ambala, Haryana.

We had clarified in the introductory paragraph to the interview that the new column "Politics as Politicians See it" is not to give MANUSHI's view of that person but to let politicians give us their view of things, including their self view and how they see the role they play. We do publish a good deal of critical writing on politicians. But if we take our democracy seriously,

we must also make the effort to understand how politicians view politics and their own role in it. We hope to carry more such interviews in the forthcoming issues. -Editor

Politically Incorrect ?

I was very disappointed to read Mohinder Singh's article "Women in Politics: the Biology Factor" in MANUSHI No.127. I felt the implications of Mr. Singh's article contradicts the values and beliefs that MANUSHI espouses. I will address three here.

First, Mr. Singh asserts that differences in political achievement, and engagement in "risky ventures", are due to "biology". Does he really believe that women's achievements are limited merely by their physical make-up? Does he deliberately discount the cultural norms, social limitations and economic disadvantages that prevent women from occupying public offices?

Second, he justifies men's behaviour, physique, mood and temper on basis of their testosterone levels. We should be challenging the fact that the political process and the distorted legislative system are currently shaped by these traits. Democracy is supposed to be a secular, representative system of government that advances public good, not a boys' club. In any case, these so-called 'testosterone'-based male traits are often portrayed as facets of 'masculinity', which is as much socially constructed (and not biologically-

based) and therefore problematic as the projected ideals of “femininity”. Mr. Singh portrays women’s physical make-up as their problem; he goes so far as to state that low testosterone levels make women “handicapped biologically”. Third, Mr Singh seems to hold contempt for women anyway. He says the stakes are too high in parliament and state assemblies for women to start replacing men. It makes affirmative action sound tokenistic and suggests women cannot be really trusted to act prudently in serious decision-making positions anyway.

Political processes should not be based on “dominance, power, aggression, ego and conflict” (none of which are necessarily male characteristics, as Mr. Singh implies). Reserving a fixed percentage of tickets for women is a positive step in the right direction - that’s why it is called ‘affirmative action’. The idea is to establish women’s presence within parliament and let changes ensue. This would allow the structures of governance to be dynamic rather than static, and be responsive to social change.

We will not achieve gender equality in society, let alone liberation, if women seek to “match men in this sort of game”. Nor will we achieve it if women who are successful in various arenas be it politics or sports, are expected to engender “sympathy, co-operation, conciliation and risk aversion” just because they are women. In essentialising women, Mr. Singh is cynically implying that these cannot be common human traits.

Perhaps women will face fewer barriers to meaningful participation when men stop defining politics, or better still, when men stop defining women.

Renee Imbesi, Melbourne, Australia

Unfair Generalisation?

I would like to respond to Uma Iyer’s letter to MANUSHI, issue No. 128, especially since I too have been a post-doctoral fellow in an Indian research institute - Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai. While it is true that there are very few Dalit scientists in research, I wouldn’t say the same about Muslims.

Firstly, I’d like to say that having a science research career is not just a question of opportunity, it is also a matter of choice. Everybody knows that there are very few Sikhs in Physics and Mathematics, at the research level. The culture of the community is such that Sikhs find business more lucrative, and they are undoubtedly good at it. This obviously does not mean that a Sikh student cannot get interested in a science career. On the other hand, it is widely accepted that Bengalis outnumber any other community in India in the field of Physics. So, just the fact that a community does not have representation in research institutes, does not, by itself, prove anything.

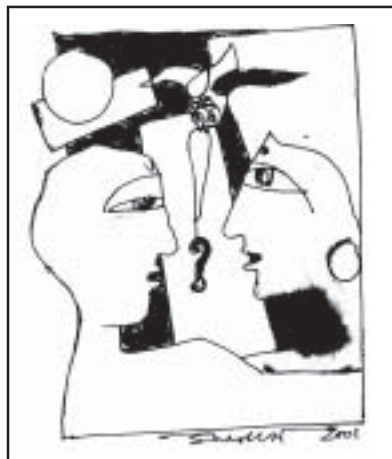
As a case in point, I would like to cite the example of Muslims in Delhi. An institute like Jamia Millia Islamia offers them the opportunity for good education in a home-like environment. But despite this, I am sorry to say, we get a lot of unmotivated students, many

of whom drop out in the course of the three years of graduation. As a result, when we have the entrance examination for M.Sc. in the Physics Department in Jamia, we hardly see any of the students we taught at the B.Sc level.

A lot of the students here are actually the sons of the academicians in Jamia. But even that is not enough motivation for them (I specifically mentioned sons, because, I find that girls tend to be more motivated than boys at Jamia). In such a situation, who is to be blamed for the low representation of Muslims in academic studies? Granted there are Muslim students in places like Bihar, who do not have such opportunities, but one should think twice before generalising the issue.

Regarding the point Uma raised about motivating Dalit students, one must understand what the right platform for motivating Dalits, or for that matter, any weak section of students is. When we send students from our Department to research institutes for summer training programmes, we ensure that only good and serious students go to such programmes, if they are to gain any benefit from the training. Trying to impart advanced training to a student who has not even been able to grasp the basics of the subject, would be a pointless exercise for both parties concerned.

According to me, the right place to motivate Dalit students is in undergraduate courses (like B.Sc) offered by most colleges and universities in India. And I speak from personal experience when I say that many of the Dalit students who join undergraduate courses, are much more motivated than most students from the privileged classes. They only need a little more care from the teachers to gain more confidence. I recall, a student from Bihar who joined our M.Sc. programme last year, and we were scandalised to



discover that he couldn't even distinguish between an ammeter and a voltmeter. He meekly said that his teachers at B.Sc. never took him inside a lab. But two years of careful nurturing, and he was on par with other students. And yet, I would not recommend him for an advanced summer training program at an institute, as that requires a much stronger base.

One should remember that weak students have to be supported from below, and not pulled from above. So, if Uma is seriously concerned about doing something for students from weaker sections of the society who are not getting into research, I would urge her to come and join a university in India, and she would have ample opportunities to help them.

Let me next comment on Uma's point about the practice of contracting away the lowest paid jobs, like those of sweepers, drivers and others. In principle, I agree that they should have all the benefits of a permanent employee.

However, all institutions treat things like sweeping and cleaning as essential services. And those with any experience in these things in India, would vouch for the fact that it can be very difficult to get work done by permanently employed sweepers and drivers. This obviously does not mean that all sweepers or cooks are idlers, and one can cite numerous examples of some excellent sweepers who do their job with great care.

At my university, I can see a marked difference between workers who are hired on contract and those hired on a permanent basis. If you choose to have sweepers or cleaners as permanent employees, you will be constantly faced with stinking toilets and un-swept rooms. This, unfortunately, is a reality in our country. In places like the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, there are lots of people who are



sensitive about such issues, and are personally involved in voluntary social work of various kinds, but even they are reluctant to do away with the contract system for the lowest paid jobs.

About Uma's comment on having scientists' jobs on contract: any researcher would know that scientific research cannot be carried out or hastened by threats of sacking.

As regards cleaning and mopping your place yourself, most people, especially in cities, like to employ someone else to do it, not because they like exploiting people, but in order to conserve their energy for other things. And here the caste of the hired help, Dalit or Brahmin, is insignificant. Most people would choose to hire the cheapest labour available, caste not withstanding. Of course, there is some merit in cleaning and maintaining your place all by yourself (I do it), but try doing that in a dusty place like Delhi with two children and a husband, and a job that demands you leave home at 8:30 a.m. and return at 7:00 p.m. You would soon discover the "need" to hire domestic help.

Lastly, I would like to say that the issue of nuclear weapons and that of introducing astrology as science, are a bit different. While there is a lot of debate in the scientist fraternity about

India owning nuclear weapons, there is much more agreement on the issue of not teaching astrology as a science (though most wouldn't object to astrology being taught as a part of religious studies.) Being part of the Indian Scientists against Nuclear Weapons organisation, I would like to inform Uma that by and large, it is the same set of scientists that oppose nuclear weapons who also oppose astrology being taught as a science.

Tabish Qureshi, New Delhi

Fearless Reportage

I have admired your work tremendously. I am most familiar with MANUSHI's reporting and commentary on the anti-Sikh programs in Delhi (Issue No. 25, 1984). MANUSHI was fearless where a lot of the press was almost complicit with the perpetrators, perhaps not even consciously, through their timid reporting. I would like to thank you, not as a Sikh, but as a fellow human being, for being intrepid in calling the organised massacre what it was, rather than a 'riot'. I was inspired by the writing in MANUSHI and a few other publications to express my emotions through stories and poems. At some point in time, if it's not too much of an imposition, I would love to send you some of those writings as well.

Sarbpreet Singh, Boston, USA. □