

The Ripple Effect

MANUSHI's report on the plight of street vendors evoked a creative response in Pondicherry. On receipt of the issue in which you reported on Manushi's Model Market Project for street hawkers of Sewa Nagar, I met Mr. Anbarasan, the Collector of Pondicherry cum Secretary to the Govt. of Pondicherry and discussed with him the possibility of undertaking a similar project in our area. He heartily congratulated Manushi for its endeavours. Enthused by Manushi's initiative, he thought of a similar plan to help women hawkers, who are the most harassed lot even among street vendors. He even got new vendor carts designed based on the model prepared by MANUSHI and displayed on the cover of issue No 135.

He gathered local women street vendors and encouraged them to form themselves into groups (comprising not more than 7 per group) and register the body as a Self Help Group. With a token contribution women vendors can avail of the help of local government credit and thrift schemes for the poor. The scheme was publicised in an article in *The Hindu* on August 30, 2003.

Some extracts from the report:

"In an effort to woo customers to mobile food stalls run by women self help groups, the Pondicherry Municipality has designed modern push-cart.... Groups and societies are formed under the Central Government's Swarnajayanthi Gramin Swarozgar Yojana programme. The society runs the stall at the beach and sells kanji (a health drink) and tea in the morning and soup and pori urundais (sweet puffed rice balls) in the evenings.



Responses to MANUSHI



On an average, the women make Rs. 400 per day and take home a salary of Rs. 1200, which is a handsome contribution towards their monthly budget. They take turns to prepare food items in a hygienic manner at their homes. The municipality also keeps a constant watch on them.

Fifteen other groups have evinced interest in similar carts, that will cost them Rs. 8000 each, which too can be financed through other government agencies. The first trial was to check the public response to these cart. During mass production, the cart will come in a range of colours and improved designs which may even include advertising panels in front, says Mr. Anbarasu."

It is agonising to observe the nexus between male street vendors and corrupt law enforcing authorities. They 'adjust' themselves to

degrading urbanization but women resist, protest and slowly become more assertive. There is awareness....they are willing to join the struggle against indignities and are ready for sacrifices.

Mr. Anbarasu is devoted to ordinary people and sensitive to the sufferings of poor and voiceless women. He asks them not to submit meekly. His spontaneity, simplicity and honesty are a legend here. As expected, the ruling mafia didn't

relish his pro-people activism and finally succeeded in getting him transferred to the Andamans. The political class in Pondicherry, ruling as well as opposition, are totally corrupt, more corrupt than Jayalalithaa!

Gnanavadivelan, Pondicherry

Need Real Life Durgas

Issue No. 136 was excellent, as MANUSHI usually is. I took everything positively, but the recent rape of a young girl by the jawans of the most elite force of the army—the President's Guard in Delhi provoked me to write and compare some of your very positive statements in the article, "Of Humans and Divines: Female Moral Exemplars in the Hindu Tradition" to today's situation in Delhi. I think:

- It would be better if the Hindu deities made moral demands and retaliated in the way the gods of semitic

religions threaten to do, if any of us did anything brutal or inhuman. In my opinion, the 'myths' of *gram devis* have to become real if some evil male seeks to ravage them.

- The examples of Indira Gandhi and Kiran Bedi are that of exceptional women. They also suffered because of this male dominated environment. In spite of being modern day Durgas, they could not be supreme. I speak from personal experience, that outperforming males and being fearless is not always fruitful.

- Only male gods turn for more energy towards Shakti because these inadequate earthly 'DOGS' invariably misuse the energy given by God.

- 'Men making amends' are a drop in the ocean, as the percentage of Sitas among Indian women is much higher than of Durgas.

- Gandhiji thought that every man could be made to listen to reason. That is why he spoke of mutual co-operation and consultation rather than imposition of rules of social conduct. What he did not foresee was that even in the 21st century, social attitudes would be the same as the mindset he had tried to combat.

- Even cities and towns need Lakshmi Mukti campaigns as our working Sitas suffer equally here. However, such efforts will succeed only if they have no political overtones.

- We need women like Mirabai who was devoted and single minded about her goal in spite of all opposition and went on relentlessly to live her life as she thought fit.

- Lastly, I think women need to be united, depending only on themselves, accountable to themselves, coming out stronger after every good or bad experience, negating every move which degrades, demeans and undermines them, and standing by one another, come what may.

Suman Sharma, New Delhi

Victimised by Laws

This is in response to an article I just read by Madhu Kishwar titled "Laws Against Domestic Violence: Underused or Abused?"

My husband, his elderly parents, and his scholarly siblings have all been subjected to the misuse and abuse of Article 498A by my husband's ex-wife. A few of the highlights of this case include:

1. The ex-wife filed a dowry case a month after she and her family learned that my husband had remarried. They had already been separated for two years and legally divorced for one year. Had her memory failed her all that time, and had she suddenly remembered that she was a victim of dowry abuse?

2. The ex's father produced "evidence" of abuse going on while she was in my in-law's home, which consisted of a letter she allegedly wrote to him about her misery. The letter was dated 1998, the envelope was post-marked 2000, yet somehow it was permissible in court. The judge and the police inspectors were all bribed.

3. The ex and her father claimed that my in-laws kept her jewelry and other items she had brought with her at the time of the wedding. If, in fact, she and her father considered these things to be "dowry", then they are equally punishable under Indian law because, as you wrote in your article, "two amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, enacted in 1984 and 1986, made dowry *giving* and *receiving* a cognizable offence." Her personal belongings were offered to her several times before and after the divorce, but she refused to take them, since her father did not accept that she and my husband were legally divorced and hoped she would return to her marital home some day. Or, perhaps it was all part of the false dowry scheme from the beginning.

4. The case was filed against my husband, his parents, his three elder brothers, and one sister-in-law. Including myself, there are three daughters-in-law in this family. Why is it that the three of us were never harrassed for dowry? My father was a businessman in the USA. Wouldn't we have been perfect candidates, to demand a fatter dowry from? Yet, there were no such discussions at the time of my marriage, as was the case with the other daughters-in-law in the house.

5. A "compromise" was eventually reached after a two and a half year struggle to be rid of this horrific roller-coaster ride (although the case isn't officially closed yet). The total sum of money spent on the ex's wedding by her father was approximately 3-4 lakh rupees, including her jewelry and other possessions (my father-in-law himself offered to give that amount back). But the total sum of money agreed upon in the compromise, under threats of further legal action, was 8.5 lakh rupees, even though she took back her belongings from our home. (And let's not forget the money spent on traveling repeatedly to/from court, lawyers' fees, and bail.)

My disappointment with the handicapped Indian legal system is unimaginable! I can only hope and pray that organizations such as yours are able to voice these opinions audibly and make the Indian government aware of these goings-on. Laws need to be reviewed and reformed to be kept effective. But it seems that justice truly is blind, when it comes to the issue of dowry. We are finally at the end (I hope) of this nightmarish ordeal, but I fear for other innocent men who are just beginning the losing battle with their ex-wives. Someone needs to intervene, someone needs to stop this unfairness, someone needs to help!

Ruchi S, Boston, USA. □